

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: Kochimo

VOLUME
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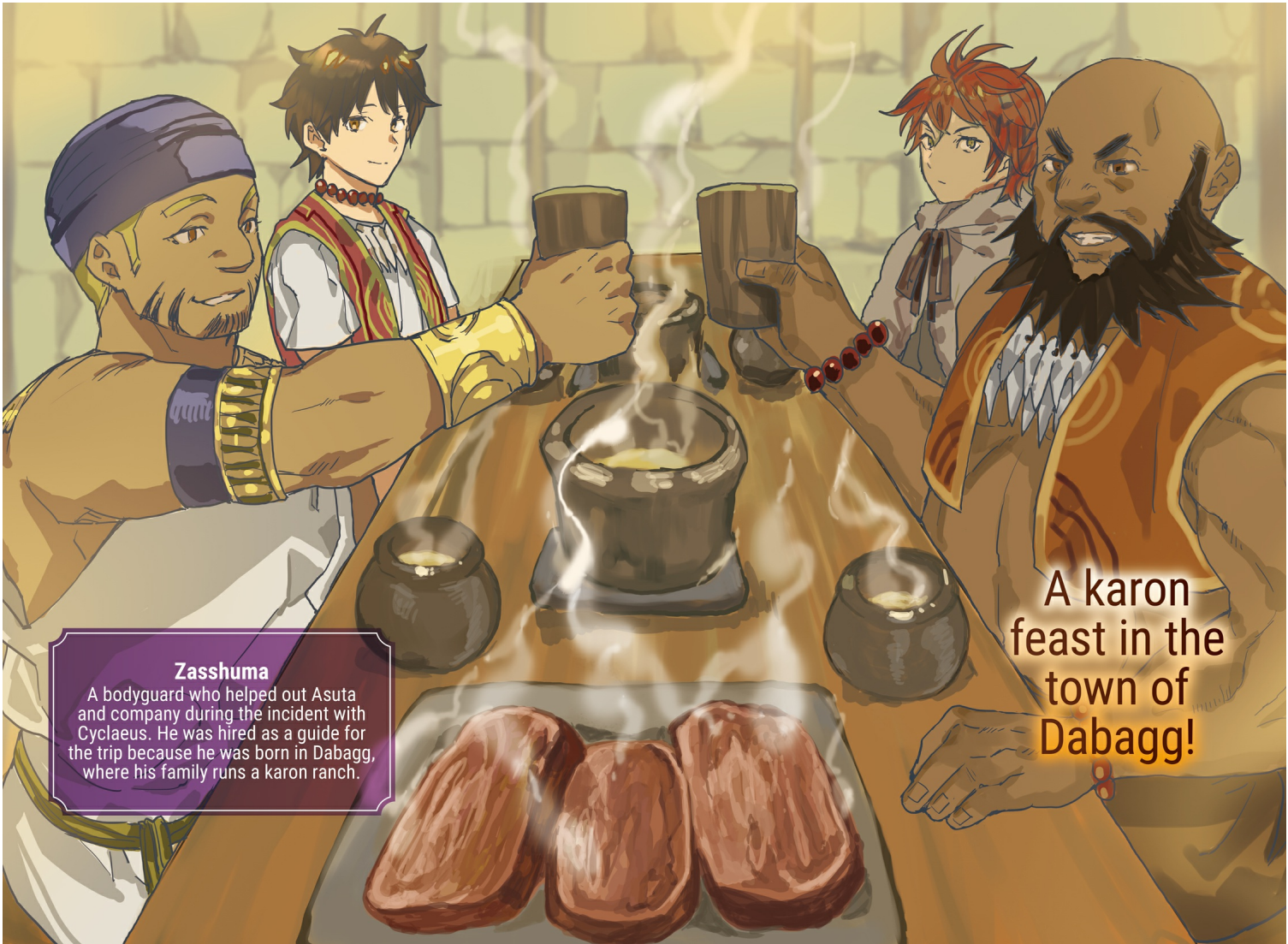
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“Asuta, I shall await, your return. I am certain, your journey will go well.”

“Thank you. You take care too, okay?”





Zasshuma

A bodyguard who helped out Asuta and company during the incident with Cyclaeus. He was hired as a guide for the trip because he was born in Dabagg, where his family runs a karon ranch.

A karon
feast in the
town of
Dabagg!



"I wanted
you to enjoy
this trip too."

"I *am*
enjoying
myself."

Ai Fa spoke bluntly as I
stared at her, dumbfounded.

MENU

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Chapter 1: The Agriculture of the Daleim Lands

1

It was now the eleventh of the indigo month, the day after I had manned a kitchen alongside Varkas.

We were in a wagon heading south. Normally, we would be doing business at our stalls off to the side of the road in the post town, surrounded by densely packed buildings, but instead we were following the highway south, heading for the vast fields of the Daleim lands.

“Are we almost there? I’m so excited!” Rimee Ruu energetically exclaimed from inside the wagon.

“Soon,” I replied with a smile, feeling soothed by her earnest and innocent nature.

The plan for today was to visit Dora, the man who we always bought vegetables from, to see his home and the fields he tended. Considering how well his youngest daughter Tara got along with Rimee Ruu, it was no surprise that the young Ruu girl was so enthusiastic.

Naturally, everyone else’s eyes were sparkling with anticipation too. After all, it was a chance to observe how they grew the vegetables we used. Of course those studious girls would get excited about it. Heck, I had been truly looking forward to this field trip too.

We had a group of six for the trip, which included me, Reina, Rimee, and Sheera Ruu, Toor Deen, and Yun Sudra. Gilulu was pulling our wagon, and alongside us was another totos being ridden by our guards, Dan and Deem Rutim, who had protected us yesterday as well. Since they were taking time off their giba hunting due to their injuries, they had volunteered to act as bodyguards again today.

“Ah, take that road to the right,” Reina Ruu instructed.

“Got it,” I said back as I tugged on the reins. The second Ruu daughter had visited the Daleim lands once before as part of the search when I was abducted by Lefreya.

The Daleim lands were part of the overall Genos territory. The house of Genos ruled the castle town, the house of Saturas governed the post town, the house of Turan handled the lands to the north, and the house of Daleim was in charge of the lands to the south. Add to that the forest of Mount Morga and the settlement at its edge, and you had the region known as Genos. Normally we only ever had business with the post town, so even heading to the Daleim lands was a fresh, fun experience for us.

However, we had an even bigger trip waiting for us ten days from now. The plan for our overnight visit to the neighboring town of Dabagg, which was half a day away and had vast karon ranches, was finally coming together. In a way, this field trip to the Daleim lands was like a dry run of sorts.

After we continued a bit farther west down the path and made it past the southern tip of the post town, our field of view suddenly opened wide.

“Whoa, so much space! It’s totally different from the forest’s edge and the post town!” Rimee Ruu shouted energetically.

She wasn’t wrong. It really was a lot of wide-open space. Since they had removed any excess trees, we had a shockingly clear view of the whole region. I could spy a short grove of trees far off in the distance, kilometers away, but there was nothing except vast fields before that. All along the well-trodden, twisting path between fields, there were wooden houses scattered about. It was such a peaceful, idyllic sight that I almost felt like sighing.

“I’ve never seen such a vast land before! It feels completely different here than in the forest’s edge, the post town, or the castle town,” Dan Rutim said from over on the Rutim tolos Mim Cha, sounding like he was greatly enjoying himself. “Well then, let’s hurry on over! We can just keep on following this path for now, right, Asuta?”

“Yeah, that should be right.”

We proceeded down the path that ran through the middle of the fields at a nice, relaxed pace. Since there didn’t seem to be any people out and about

working nearby, we didn't have anyone gawking at the arrival of hunters from the forest's edge.

It sure is tranquil... I love it when things are so peaceful.

Genos was far removed from the enemy nation of Mahyudra, so there was no risk of war finding its way here. Thanks to the guards patrolling day and night, the town was well protected from bandits and the like too. All the folks on the Daleim lands had to fear was the occasional giba appearing from the forest.

"Hey, Asuta, over here!" an excited voice called out from our left after we had proceeded down the path for a bit. It was Tara, who lived here in the Daleim lands. She was wearing an orange dress and was running over from one of the branching paths.

"Yaaay, Tara! Long time no see!"

"Yeah! It's been a while, Rimee Ruu! You really did come here to the Daleim lands!"

As Rimee Ruu leaned out from the wagon, the two young girls grinned at one another. Though Rimee Ruu came to the post town once every three days, they usually greeted one another with a "Long time no see." Maybe they were just so close that those two days in between felt long to them. After enjoying that charming sight for a while, I held out a hand toward Tara.

"Thanks for coming to meet us. Could you guide us to your house, Tara?"

"Yeah!"

Once Tara had climbed up into the wagon, she pointed us south down a narrow side path.

No matter how far we went, it was still all just fields around us. However, now I could see people here and there hard at work on their harvesting, and a fair number of them stopped and stared dumbfounded at us. We people of the forest's edge normally only ever showed up in the post town, but here we were, driving a topos wagon through the Daleim lands. I was sure it made for a strange, normally unthinkable sight.

Naturally, we had gotten permission from the house of Daleim before today's

trip. Polarth actually wanted to accompany us and seemed quite disappointed that he was too busy entertaining the envoys from Banarm to do so.

“Ah, there it is! That’s my house!” Tara exclaimed as she stood beside the driver’s seat along with Rimee Ruu.

The home we were heading toward that she pointed to was far larger than I had expected. Well, part of that was surely adjoining storage for the harvested vegetables, though. It definitely looked much too big for a single family. It looked like there was a structure with one floor built right up against another with two floors. The single-story building made of logs was the larger one.

“Hey there, Asuta! And all the rest of you from the forest’s edge! Welcome!” a voice called out from beside us before we reached the building. Looking that way, I found Dora approaching from the fields with a large basket on his back. “You sure are early. I haven’t even prepared tea.”

“Ah, sorry for interrupting you while you’re busy. Please, don’t mind us. You can take care of whatever you need to first.”

“Aw, it’s just a bit of an early break. And I can’t just ignore my special guests.”

Dora had swapped work shifts in the post town with his son just so he could be here for our visit. As he wiped the sweat from his brow with a dirt-coated hand, he shot me a grin.

“For now, you can go ahead and leave the wagon in front of the house. Then I’ll show you all around my prized fields.”

“Right. Thanks.”

After that, we left him there and moved the wagon over to where he had directed us.

The building appeared to be empty, so everyone must have been out taking care of their various jobs. Tending vegetables, harvesting them, and then selling them... It must have kept the folks in the Daleim just as busy as everyone at the forest’s edge.

After parking the wagon along the wall so it wouldn’t get in the way, we tied Gilulu and Mim Cha to a nearby tree, then returned down the path on foot,

where we found Dora waiting for us with his basket set down next to his feet.

“This is the tarapa field. They came out pretty well, don’t you think?”

Sure enough, that basket was filled to the brim with some pretty nice-looking tarapa. Though the color and taste of tarapa was just like tomatoes, they were closer to pumpkins in terms of size. Though they were a bit dirty right now, they looked seriously tasty.

“Hmm, the ones sold in the castle town are smaller, right?”

“Yeah, though we only grow a few of those ourselves. But you can go ahead and see with your own eyes.”

Leaving his basket packed with tarapa at the side of the path, Dora guided us down into the fields. They sat lower than the path by about forty to fifty centimeters, where the ground was composed of a really soft-looking brown dirt. Between the rows of huge green leaves that came up to around my knees there was just enough open space left for people to pass through.

Dora turned over one of those leaves to reveal a tarapa growing underneath. The plants seemed to grow one fruit per stalk, and it was a thick stalk at that, to support all the weight.

“These are the ones for selling in the post town. The ones for the castle town are farther in.”

We all moved forward, taking care not to trample any of the tarapa. Once we had traveled across roughly a fourth of the large field, Dora stopped and once again lifted up a nearby leaf.

What was revealed underneath was a tarapa around the size of a human fist, of the sort I had seen in the pantry in the castle town. This variety was closer in size to the tomatoes I knew, but it was all shriveled like a dried persimmon.

“It doesn’t look all that great, but when it gets shriveled like this it becomes a whole lot sweeter. It takes a lot more growing time to get them to this point, so these little guys cost a lot more too. There just isn’t anyone able to buy them outside the castle town.”

“Seems so. The ones I saw in the castle town were more than good enough to

eat by themselves. Plus, they're just as juicy on the inside as the big ones." I had used them yesterday in my dishes for the welcome banquet. "But the big tarapa taste great too when you boil them with aria, so I prefer purchasing those when cost is a factor."

"Yeah, it's become totally natural for us to eat them boiled with some aria that we've sliced up and grilled." Dora smiled at me, turning back down the path. "Well then, what should I show you next? Aria and poitan, do you think?"

"Yeah. I'm interested in seeing everything, but those two especially."

"The aria are around the back of the house. Once I get those tarapa carried back, I'll show you."

As we walked along, I looked around to check on everyone. At the very least, nobody seemed to be bored. Rimee Ruu and Dan Rutim seemed to really be enjoying themselves, while Toor Deen's and Sheera Ruu's eyes sparkled with curiosity. However, Reina Ruu looked like she was worrying about something. It was the same expression she had been wearing ever since eating Varkas's cooking last night.

"This way," Dora instructed, guiding us around to the rear of the house.

Contrary to my expectations, what awaited us there were rows of trees. I was just starting to think that maybe the fields were on the other side of these woods when Dora patted a nearby trunk with his hand.

"This is an aria tree. They're coming in nicely, aren't they?"

"Huh? Aria grow on *trees*?" When I looked around in shock, I saw that sure enough there were familiar bulbs dangling from the tree branches. Aria were just like onions, and yet they were growing from those high branches as if they were apples or something. I really hadn't imagined this at all. "Huh... I thought for sure they would grow in the ground."

Aria had green skins rather than brown, so from a distance they would just look like fruits. Now that I thought about it, there was a means of classifying fruits as growing on trees back in my old world, but what exactly differentiated fruits and vegetables here in this land?

"It sure is something, right? We need to use a ladder to get the ones growing

on the high branches. These are still developing, and I'd say they've got half a month or so left till harvest time. It's not that you can't eat them when they're this little, but if we harvested them too early we'd end up running out of stock."

"It just occurred to me that it's been around half a year since I came to this land, but I've never seen any vegetables run out."

Thinking about it further, that must have meant pretty much all the vegetables were perennials, not just the aria. Maybe there wasn't much point in trying to judge them based on my past understanding of plants. Still, if I was able to enjoy those same delicious vegetables all year round, I certainly had nothing to complain about.

"Back in my home country, the types of vegetables that could be raised changed based on the time of year. But here in Genos the climate is fixed, so I guess you don't have to deal with that inconvenience."

"That's true. Well, except for tarapa and pula."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. Once the rainy season comes and the ground gets all mushy, you can't grow tarapa and pula and the like any longer, so we grow other vegetables that handle the rain better during that period."

"So Genos has a rainy season, huh?" I questioned in surprise, and Dora looked even more caught off guard than I was.

"Of course it does. For two months out of each year, we get rain day in and day out. We don't see much sun at all until the season ends. That means the aria and poitan can't grow very big either."

"This is the first time I've heard anything about that. By the way, when will the next rainy season be?"

"The rainy season starts in the brown month, so it's still a while off. Roughly four months, I suppose." In that case, I had ended up coming to this world shortly after the end of the last rainy season. It certainly was an unexpected bit of information I had received there. "Still, it's not like the vegetables during the rainy season are anything to sneeze at. I'll definitely be looking forward to seeing what sorts of dishes you can make with them too," Dora said with a

blissful grin. “Well then, I suppose the poitan’s up next? They’re on the other side of this aria field.”

That aria field or orchard or whatever was even more vast than the one for tarapa. That was no surprise, considering we were using over a hundred a day in our business. Though I had heard aria didn’t see much use in the castle town due to how cheap they were, considering how many were eaten in the post town and at the forest’s edge, it made sense that a huge number of them needed to be grown. It was even possible that the grove I had spied from far off when we first arrived was an aria field belonging to some other house.

“These are the poitan fields.”

Beyond that vast aria orchard were similarly huge poitan fields. But this time there were a good number of people harvesting them. Though they were spaced all out over the vast expanse, there had to be dozens of them hard at work.

“Wow, this one’s on a whole other level.”

It wasn’t all flat ground, but rather seemed to rise and fall. Atop those waves of earth were densely packed light-green shriveled leaves. The farmhands seemed to be checking those leaves and then pulling up the poitan one after another.

“Those ones farther out were cleared in just the past few months. I told you about the nobles ordering us to expand the poitan fields, right? Well, we’re finally able to harvest those new plots too.”

Fuwano had been a staple food in the post town up until recently, but the number of homes and shops handling poitan instead had grown by quite a bit. Dora’s earnings had supposedly gone up significantly thanks to that.

“Still, it’s been decided that the poitan to be sold in town needs to first be boiled once and then turned into powder. The nobles provided a facility and tools to boil them, but we’ve had to provide the personnel to carry out the work, so it sort of evened out. In order to increase our profits, we’ll need to keep on expanding the fields more and more.”

“I see. So your farming business is becoming even more of a low cost, high

volume venture, huh?”

“That’s right. Still, it’s definitely not an issue considering how we can sell them right after they’re finished growing. Right now, everyone’s in the middle of scrambling to expand their poitan fields first.”

And the more popular poitan became, the more difficult the financial situation of the house of Turan would become, since they sold fuwano instead. When I thought about how Torst, who managed the house of Turan, had been looking so exhausted lately, I didn’t think I could be unreservedly happy about how things had turned out.

Still, you need fuwano too for making pasta and udon and the like. If they become popular in town, that should help balance things out a bit.

At any rate, I still didn’t have much of a relationship with Torst yet, so in the balance I was more than happy to see Dora’s smiling face. And I felt like it was a good thing that some of the excess wealth that had been going to the house of Turan was now making its way to the people of the Daleim lands instead.

“Little Ruu lady, your name’s Rimee Ruu, right? You wanna try pulling up a poitan?” Dora asked.

“Can I?” Rimee Ruu replied, her eyes sparkling.

“There isn’t much point in coming to see them when you’re just looking at them from above ground. Let’s see... How about you give this one a try?”

“Yeah, okay!”

With that, Rimee Ruu grabbed onto the light-green leafy stalk Dora had pointed toward. However, it seemed to have taken root pretty deep, as the poitan just wasn’t coming up.

“I’ll help too!” Tara called out, reaching in from the side. Then, with a “Heave-ho!” the two pulled together, and a fair number of poitan were dragged up from the earth. There had to be at least ten of the potato-looking things strung together there. When the last one was dragged out of the dirt, the force they were pulling with caused the two young girls to fall back onto the ground.



“Ooh, those are some fine poitan! Looks like you got the whole plant, all the way to the tips of the roots,” Dora said with a smile as he helped Rimee Ruu and Tara up. “That means after we harvest the poitan we can bury the remaining roots again. Then several months from now, new poitan will grow.”

“That’s so interesting! This is how you grow poitan?!” Rimee Ruu said with a smile as she brushed the dirt off her harvest.

Then, Dan Rutim stared at her hands and said, “Hmm... Interesting is right. By the way, do giba eat these poitan too?”

“Yeah, giba seem to love aria and poitan. With the aria, they’re real nasty with how they ram into the trees to get the ones growing on the branches to fall. But, well, they’ll make a mess of the tino and tarapa fields too...”

This was the first time I had heard Dora and Dan Rutim talk to one another, but the farmer didn’t seem timid in the least. Instead, he wore the same carefree smile as always.

As Dan Rutim stroked his beard, he smiled back. “I see. It’s our job to protect the bounty of Genos, but we eat the vegetables from these fields too. Thinking about it like that, it’s like the giba would be snatching our share as well.”

“Yeah, it’s thanks to you guys hunting giba that we can carry out our own work in peace. And now that you mention it, the damage from giba seems to be on the decline these past several months...”

“Indeed! Thanks to those folks in the Suun clan now hunting giba like they should, we’ve gained even more strength to devote to the task than before! Of course, I haven’t been able to hunt for this past month, myself...” Dan Rutim explained, scratching his bald head with the grip of his cane. As he looked up at the huge man, Dora narrowed his eyes and smiled.

“That’s an injury from your work as a hunter, isn’t it? Let me just say how grateful I am to all of you.”

“Hey, it’s our job to hunt giba, while yours is to grow vegetables. As long as we all do our jobs properly, the end result is a delicious meal! It’s a wonderful system, isn’t it?”

Dora nodded back with a smile, and then he turned my way.

“Well then, on to the next set of fields. If we’re not careful, the sun will hit its peak before you know it, so let’s try to wrap up our sightseeing before that happens.”

After that, we went around to the tino, pula, and nenon fields, completing our full tour around Dora’s farm.

However, the main event for today’s field trip still remained: the kimyuus hut.

“We’re just vegetable sellers in the end, so we only raise kimyuus to produce eggs for our own families,” Dora explained as he guided us around to the rear of the house. Sandwiched between the two-story home and one-story storage facility was a small hut, only around five meters square or so.

Dora opened the door, and the dimly lit interior came into view. Inside, there were some little white things flapping about.

“Those are kimyuus.”

Not far from the entrance, there was a fence that came up to around my waist. Something like dried straw was spread out on the ground beyond that, and then...there were the kimyuus.

“Those...are kimyuus...?” I parroted back without thinking. They certainly didn’t look like what I had imagined.

Just as I had been told, they didn’t seem capable of flight. A couple were hopping around within the smallish space, though. However, it took a good bit of time for me to recognize them as being a sort of bird.

Like I had heard, they had wings at the base of their necks. Their bodies and legs were similar to those of chickens, and they had short, tight plumage all over their bodies, like ducks, with just their tails and the big wings on their necks having voluminous feathers.

Their necks were short and stout, and their round heads were a suitable size. Then, they had flat, smooshed yellow beaks sticking out of their faces. They were truly strange animals that felt like a mix between a chicken, a rabbit, and a

platypus.

“What is it? You look rather surprised.”

“Well...this is actually my first time seeing a bird here aside from a totos. These kimyuus have an awfully strange appearance.”

“Strange, huh? Well, it’s true that it’s a bit difficult to tell if they’re birds or some sort of land beast.”

Dora grabbed a handful of cream-colored granulated feed from the jar at his feet, then tossed it inside the pen. The kimyuus that had been flapping all about hopped on over in quite the humorous display.

“This feed is made by mixing together imperfect poitan and aria with crushed-up dried maru. They lay big eggs if you feed them lots of poitan,” Dora explained as he reached out and grabbed one of the kimyuus. While he held on to it at the base of its neck, right under its wings, the kimyuus started squeaking.

“Whoa, it’s actually sort of cute, isn’t it!” Yun Sudra said excitedly.

“Is it?” Dora questioned, his eyes opening wide, and then he held out the kimyuus. With a smile, Yun Sudra accepted it.

If you asked me if it was cute...well, I guess I would have to say it was. Those wings made me think of the two long ears of a rabbit, while the face really did seem similar to that of a platypus. However, it had surprisingly round and cute eyes, and I couldn’t help but feel like that smooshed beak was wearing a smile.

“I could see myself getting attached to something this cute. But the townsfolk eat kimyuus meat, don’t they?”

“That’s right. But these kimyuus are for egg laying, so they won’t be eaten until they’re old enough that they can’t produce any more.”

“I see. Well, I could never see myself eating these little birdies,” Yun Sudra said as she affectionately hugged the kimyuus. It seemed as if she might start rubbing her cheek against it at any moment.

“Hmm, well, it’s only natural to find small animals cute. Even giiz have surprisingly adorable faces when they aren’t coated in dirt. And have you ever

seen a young giba, Sudra girl...?” Dan Rutim asked, causing Yun Sudra to turn his way with a look of confusion.

“I haven’t, but why do you ask, Dan Rutim?”

“Well, I’ve seen them plenty of times when out hunting, and those little roly-poly critters sure are cute. If you don’t believe me, should I catch one for you sometime?”

“Huh?! Please don’t! If I start feeling for giba, then I won’t be able to keep on living as a person of the forest’s edge!” Yun Sudra replied with a sorrowful look, making several of us break out in laughter, starting with Dan Rutim.

But behind the laughter, I thought I heard a little “Tch!” or something, so I turned around to look. There I found Reina Ruu standing separate from everyone else and wearing a sour look. When she noticed me staring, her face went pale so fast I could almost hear the blood rush from it, and then she swiftly grabbed my arm.

“D-Did you hear that just now?”

“What do you mean? I just got the feeling I heard some sort of sound.”

At that, Reina Ruu’s face went even more pale.

“N-No, you see, my body just reacted on its own... I swear, I didn’t do it on purpose,” she swiftly mumbled. From how flustered she looked, I was able to grasp what was really going on.

“Huh? So then, did you actually click your tongue just now?”

Still grasping the sleeve of my T-shirt, Reina Ruu hung her head with a look full of grief. Then her face shifted from pale to scarlet.

“Th-That’s kinda surprising. Were you really that annoyed by what Yun Sudra was doing?”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly... It’s just, it’s been weighing on my mind from the very start, wondering what that girl was doing here in the first place...”

“I mean, she’s here because she’s passionate about manning the stove, right?”

“Is she truly that passionate?” Reina Ruu grumbled back, her cheeks still flushed.

Well, it was true that Yun Sudra didn’t seem to have as much passion as Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, or Toor Deen. I figured she half saw it as a bit of a pleasure jaunt, like Rimee Ruu.

“I wanted to accompany you in order to grow more skilled at cooking, even if only just a little. But I can’t sense that sort of sincerity from her.”

“Yeah, but forming deeper bonds with the folks from the Daleim lands is also part of the goal here. I don’t think you need to be so strict with your thinking, okay?”

“But...”

“Right, I haven’t forgotten your warning from before. I’ve tried to avoid talking to her as much as possible today, you know.”

Yun Sudra seemed to possess romantic feelings toward me. Reina Ruu had told me a few days ago that if I wasn’t planning on marrying anyone, I should maintain an appropriate distance from her.

“But still, even putting that aside, you’ve seemed depressed since yesterday. Are you still feeling the shock from Varkas’s cooking?”

Reina Ruu remained silent, biting her lip.

I went ahead and patted her on the shoulder, making sure I only touched her shawl so as not to be impolite.

“Like I told you before, don’t worry about it too much. I was surprised by Varkas’s cooking too, and it got me worked up as a chef, but it’s not exactly something you can do anything about overnight. The only path forward is to do whatever you can step by step.”

“Right... I know that,” Reina Ruu replied, but her expression hadn’t changed.

Then, there was a voice from overhead. “What are you two whispering about? I’m getting pretty hungry over here, Asuta!”

“Ah, right. Then I guess it’s about time for a snack, huh?”

We had agreed to prepare a snack at Dora's house for today. Hopefully, eating something delicious would improve Reina Ruu's mood a bit. So, with one more pat on the second Ruu daughter's shoulder, I exited the kimyuus hut.

2

Dora's house seemed to be built a bit different from the ones in the post town. They were similar in how they had a wooden structure built atop a stone foundation, but whether it was due to the way the logs and planks came together, the straw thatched roof, or the overall shape and distribution of the pillars, everything felt different. I had heard most of the buildings in the post town were made in the style of Jagar, so perhaps this was more the standard style in the western kingdom.

At any rate, there was no real difference when it came to the stone-built stove. The four women and I placed the pot we had prepared in advance over the flame, then sliced up a big pile of vegetables.

The dish we were making was giba soup prepared with tau oil. It was easy to make lots of soup in a short period of time, and townsfolk normally couldn't have giba soup without heading to the inns. Since Dora and Tara didn't have many chances to visit the inns despite being regulars at the stalls, I thought it would be nice to let them try this staple dish from the forest's edge.

However, this wasn't quite the same as the soups offered at the inns. First off, we had used spare ribs for the meat, after boiling them slowly over the course of an hour in the morning.

You could make a richer stock by using meat on the bone. Proper giba bone soup was actually still a dish I needed to work on more, but using rib meat on the bone in this soup made a really striking difference all on its own. Plus, we had someone obsessed with ribs along with us, which made it even more fitting.

For the vegetables, I went with just aria, chatchi, and nenon, then since I felt it needed some carbohydrates, I also added a paste made from a blend of fuwano and poitan. I was aiming for something similar to flour dumplings in soup. Since I used more fuwano than with the pasta, it ended up nice and

doughy.

To season the soup, I just used salt, pico leaves, and tau oil, not touching any of the ingredients I had procured from the castle town. Since folks in the Daleim lands lived even more modestly than the residents of the post town from what I had heard, I had wanted to use ingredients that were as ordinary as possible for the snack.

“Aah, what a lovely smell. I started using tau oil too based on your suggestion, and I found that adding some to a bunch of different dishes makes them a whole lot better.”

“That’s true. It really is a wonderful thing, being able to get ahold of tau oil easily.”

Thinking back, even tau oil used to be a rare ingredient that you needed connections with merchants from Jagar to obtain. But now, you could get all sorts of stuff from other nations as long as you had the coins. Thanks to that, there was definitely a good bit of upheaval in the post town at present. Would those waves eventually reach here to the peaceful Daleim lands?

“Well then, it’s just about ready. Have your family and the workers made it back yet?”

“Yeah. They’re waiting out front with empty bellies. Though I’d imagine the majority of them are worrying about just what exactly you’re going to feed them,” Dora said with a mischievous smile. Aside from those who went to the post town for business like him, the folks in the Daleim lands hadn’t eaten giba meat. Dora had proposed we do this in order to introduce them to just how delicious giba really was.

“Well, not that we’re forcing them or anything. I just spread it around that anyone interested should gather up, and it seems around eighty percent of them came,” Dora said, leading us outside as we carried the pot.

By my estimate, there had to be nearly forty people gathered there. They included Dora’s family and the members of the houses that helped manage the fields as his partners, as well as the workers they hired. All these people, and Dora was their boss.

“Well then, thanks for waiting. Our guests from the forest’s edge prepared a meal for us, made with the giba meat that’s been gaining a really good reputation in the post town. Go ahead and see for yourselves just how delicious it is.”

At that, the crowd started lining up in front of the pot while holding the wooden plates they had brought along. Though they wore doubtful expressions, a few months back they never would have even considered eating giba meat in the first place. After all, the people of this land would be the ones who feared giba most as living disasters.

Looking around, there didn’t seem to be any people who were all that old in the group, which was no surprise, as the older crowd would be even more afraid of giba and the people of the forest’s edge. I mean, when we first met Granny Mishil in the post town, she was openly hostile to us.

“Long time no see, Asuta,” a young man with a homely face called out from the line with a smile. He was Dora’s oldest son, whom I had met a number of times in the post town.

“Yeah, it’s been a while. I thought for sure you had gone to the post town today.”

“No, my younger brother went instead. That’s the advantage of being an older brother, you know.”

The young man was the only familiar face in the crowd. Though Dora’s wife must have been there too, I wasn’t able to pick her out.

“Ooh, delicious! Giba’s real tasty in soup too!” Tara eagerly announced as she sat along the wall with Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen. That seemed to give folks the courage to start trying the soup, one after another.

“Yeah, it’s definitely good. And it feels kinda trendy, eating soup outside.” Dora looked completely satisfied too. Everyone’s expressions were full of joy and surprise.

“Yes, this is tasty! So ribs go well with soup too, huh?! I’ll have to pass that along to the Rutim women as soon as we get back!”

Naturally, Dan Rutim was wearing a wide jolly grin. Though the folks of the

Daleim lands had seemed rather intimidated by the presence of the hunters from the forest's edge, that smile would likely help a lot to alleviate their fear.

It might be bad to put it this way, but Dan Rutim couldn't have picked a better time to get injured...

Normally, it would have been really difficult to have him join us as a guard unless he was on a break period. And yet, he was able to take the job yesterday in the castle town, today in the Daleim lands, and ten days from now for our trip to Dabagg.

Though he was a large man over 180 centimeters tall and looked frightening at a glance, he was exceptionally earnest and honorable, and while he was certainly a unique fellow, he amply embodied the idiosyncrasies of the hunters of the forest's edge as well. I felt he was actually pretty perfect for showing folks what hunters were really like.

"This dish really is delicious. Why is your cooking so much better despite using the same ingredients, Asuta?" Yun Sudra questioned, her eyes narrowing ecstatically.

I tried to maintain a formal expression on my face as I turned her way. "You say that, but everyone made this dish together, right? So I wouldn't exactly call it my own personal achievement."

"But this taste is still completely different. I never could have made such a dish on my own."

"You think? Well, Reina and Sheera Ruu have gotten incredibly good at making soup. If you keep working on it, I'm sure you'll manage to make dishes you can feel satisfied with."

"Really? But I..." Yun Sudra started to say, only for someone else to approach and interrupt us. It was Sheera Ruu, who was just as skilled as a chef as Reina Ruu.

"Yun Sudra, you're still a bit awkward when it comes to cutting vegetables, aren't you? How you cut meat and vegetables impacts the taste."

"Is that it? You're probably right. You cut your vegetables so quickly and cleanly, Sheera Ruu. I'm really jealous of that," Yun Sudra replied with a smile.

As I was thinking it was unusual for Sheera Ruu to call out to Yun Sudra like that, the girl from the Ruu branch houses glanced over my way, and then turned her gaze somewhere else entirely. Following her eyes, I found that Reina Ruu had once again stepped away from the group and was standing all by herself.

“I’m sure Asuta has already taught you this, but meat and vegetables have fibers running through them. Just the choice of cutting along them or across them can give a dish quite a different feel,” Sheera Ruu said, turning back toward Yun Sudra and giving the girl cooking advice. Watching them out of the corner of my eye, I went ahead and stepped away.

“What’s the matter? Do you have something on your mind again, Reina Ruu?”

“Ah, Asuta... Yes, I was a bit absorbed in my own thoughts.”

It wasn’t as if she looked depressed or anything. Actually, it felt more like she was wearing a nice, clear expression. Those blue eyes of hers were watching the folks happily slurping giba soup.

“Asuta, you said before that if we could prepare food for the townsfolk as if we were making it for family, that would bring even greater satisfaction, and also cause us to grow skilled quicker as chefs.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Even if you’re doing business, having feelings like that is important.”

“I feel like I understand that a bit now...”

Naturally, I felt glad at the sight of those smiling folks from the Daleim lands too.

Ultimately, this was just forty or so of the hundreds or even thousands of people living in these lands. But still, not so long ago they wanted nothing to do with giba or the people of the forest’s edge, and now they were eating giba cooking we had prepared with satisfied smiles. I was sure Reina Ruu and the others sensed the significance of that even more keenly than an outsider like me.

“You definitely can’t say the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk have reached a point of understanding one another yet. In truth, folks like that

Dora man who have opened up to us are still rare.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“But they’re eating the same food and tasting the same delicious flavor. I’m sure we share that feeling now, at least,” Reina Ruu said as she turned my way. For the first time in a while, she was showing me an innocent smile that really suited her. “And Asuta, you said the Ruu clan should sell our own style of cooking. I feel like I’m starting to get some kind of idea about what sort of cooking that should be.”

“Oh? Just what sort of dish do you have in mind?”

“That’s a secret. I need to consult with Sheera Ruu, after all,” Reina Ruu replied with an even more cheerful grin. She had always had such a charming smile.

With a real sense of satisfaction, I nodded back. “I see.”

Not long after that, we left the Daleim lands.

Dora and his people still had plenty of work left to handle after that snack was over. He and Tara saw us off with smiles, and we headed back down the path toward the forest’s edge.

The normally reserved Toor Deen spoke up from right behind the driver’s seat. “What an odd experience. It’s hard to believe it only lasted a couple hours.”

“Yesterday was the castle town, and today it was the Daleim lands. I’m sure you must be feeling a bit tired out, right?”

“No. I think that both yesterday and today were really rewarding...though it may be too much for someone like me to say so...”

“That’s not true at all. You’re one of the foremost chefs at the forest’s edge, Toor Deen.” Since we were on an unfamiliar path, I couldn’t turn around, but I could easily sense the young girl’s face going red even so. “What have you been thinking about lately? You were real surprised by Varkas’s cooking, right?”

“Yes... But yesterday I clearly felt that I don’t want to make dishes like his.”

“Ah, really?”

“Yeah. It’s true that he makes incredibly mysterious dishes, and I got worked up eating them...but I don’t think they would make my family at the forest’s edge happy.”

It really was just as she said. That main fish course alone was unquestionably delicious, but like Ai Fa and Dan Rutim had said, it wasn’t something that the people of the forest’s edge would grow attached to. Still, just what would the result be if Varkas were to use giba meat? Just thinking about it was enough to get me excited.

“Personally...that girl is weighing a lot more on my mind.”

“That girl?”

“Myme of Turan.”

“Ah... I see.”

It was true that Myme was certainly someone we couldn’t overlook. Especially not Toor Deen, as unlike the difficult-to-understand Varkas, Myme was someone close to her age, and who had actually handled giba meat.

How people impacted each other really varied. Varkas had left an incredibly deep impression on Reina Ruu, while it was Myme who had done so instead for Toor Deen. For me personally, both of them weighed heavily on my mind.

“Ten days from now, we’ll be heading to that Dabagg town with her, right? I really don’t know how to say how grateful I am to you for granting someone like me this chance...”

“It’s fine. It was your skill that made me want to bring you along.”

Now that I thought about it, the only one in this wagon who wouldn’t be going to Dabagg was Yun Sudra. I hadn’t included her in my initial count of people to bring, and later when she passionately pleaded to come along, her clan head Raielfam Sudra swiftly turned her down.

“I cannot let you take two days off from your work at the house without any pressing reason. And if the Ruu and Rutim women are going, they should have no need for your help,” the Sudra clan head had declared. And I had no

objection to his statement.

It's only natural for Reina Ruu to be suspicious. I mean, just what sort of feelings were driving Yun Sudra's passion there? It's not like I'd change my stance based on her skill as a chef or lack thereof, I thought to myself as the wagon arrived at the Ruu settlement. We were around two hours earlier than we would have been on a business day. Just like always, we were now going to prepare for tomorrow and have a study session.

"Oh, you guys are back early."

We found two girls waiting for us there as we pulled the wagon around to the rear of the house: Lala Ruu and Morun Rutim.

"Yeah, since it wouldn't be fair to the people in the Daleim lands if we overstayed our welcome. Did you come to help with the prep work, Morun Rutim?"

"No, I was waiting for my father, Dan. Dad, soon after everyone left, we received word from the northern settlement."

"What? Are they finally ready to welcome you all?"

The answer was apparently yes.

The northern settlement was set to welcome women from the Ruu and Rutim clans who would provide cooking lessons. In preparation for that, they had needed to take steps to ward away giba. Since their break period had ended five days ago and they didn't have time to spare, they left the remaining work to their women. Apparently, the job had finally been finished yesterday.

"So could you see us to the northern settlement in the Ruu clan's wagon? And then it would be good if you could bring the women from up north back here when you return."

"Yes, that's no problem! Totos love to run with someone riding them, but they seem to enjoy pulling wagons too!"

There would be two women from both the Ruu and Rutim clans heading out, while the same number would be coming over from the Zaza and Jeen clans. That way, the women of the northern settlement could finally learn how to

prepare delicious meals as well.

“Huh? Are you not going too, Lala Ruu?” I asked.

“Of course not,” she replied with a shrug of her shoulders. “The women from the Ruu clan are all coming from the branch houses. Or are you saying you don’t mind if I stop helping out with the stalls?”

“No, that’s obviously not what I meant, but still...are you in a bad mood today or something?”

“Not especially!” Lala Ruu shot back, turning away in a huff. “It’s just, you left Vina and me behind for the trip to the castle town yesterday and the Daleim lands today, and you’re going to do it again when you go to Dabagg in ten days. It doesn’t feel fair.”

“I mean, I felt awkward about borrowing too many of you from the Ruu main house all at once...”

“Ludo was totally sulking too, you know. He wanted to know why you’re doing all this interesting stuff now when there will be a break period in another month!”

Right, the Ruu clan had another break period approaching soon.

There were three break periods each year, though the schedule wasn’t fixed since they were based on how active the giba were, but they came roughly once every four months. It had already been nearly three months since their last one.

“I see. I was trying to make the trip as soon as possible to match up with Mikel and Myme’s schedule... So you’re interested in Dabagg too, Lala Ruu?”

“It’s more that we never have any opportunity to leave Genos unless there’s a special reason, like this one. But, well, I guess Rimee’s better at manning the stove than I am, huh?”

“Don’t sulk so much, Lala,” Rimee Ruu called out after getting down from the wagon, throwing her arms around her older sister’s chest with a smile.

“Hmph!” Lala Ruu snorted, turning the other way.

Still, Lala Ruu’s feelings would probably be soothed much more effectively by her adorable little sister’s smile than by anything I could say, so while they were

doing that, I said farewell to Morun Rutim instead.

“Take care, Morun Rutim. Make sure to feed everyone up north some delicious food.”

“I will. But I really am sorry for abandoning my work in the post town.”

“We’ve got Ama Min Rutim, so no worries there. And good luck with Deek Dom too.”

“Huh?” Morun Rutim squeaked, her eyes shooting wide open and her plump face turning red. “Wh-What’s that about Deek Dom? Why are you bringing him up?”

“Huh? Because of that whole issue with Lem Dom. I’m just hoping that it can be settled as peacefully as possible.”

“A-Ah, so that’s what you meant! I’m sorry! I jumped to the wrong conclusion!”

Just what sort of conclusion had she jumped to that made her blush so deeply?

As I pondered that question, Dan Rutim went “Hmm...” with a tilt of his head. “So that Dom woman still hasn’t returned to her clan, eh? No matter how much she trains her body, it won’t give rise to a hunter’s spirit in her.”

“A woman being a hunter is just foolish,” Deem Rutim chimed in for the first time in a good long while. He seemed to be rather quiet by nature to start with, and he was really tense while on guard duty too, which led to him not opening his mouth.

When he heard the boy’s words, Dan Rutim turned to look at him. “It may well be ridiculous, but if there are women out there like Ai Fa, then they can’t be disregarded. After all, Ai Fa is just as strong of a hunter as I am, if not more so.”

“I find that rather hard to believe. After all, didn’t that female hunter lose to you in a contest of strength?”

“Back then, Ai Fa had just healed from a serious injury. It will be the other way around at the festival of the hunt next month, so I could be the one to hit the

ground instead.”

“That can’t possibly be true...” Deem Rutim replied, but then he sulkily held his tongue. It seemed that as a Rutim clan member, he really admired his former clan head.

“Well then, shall we get going?! Where are the other women?”

“In the house, talking to Mia Lea Ruu. They should be ready to leave soon.”

“Then, we’ll be off! What will you do, Deem Rutim?”

“I’ll accompany you, of course. After all, the northern settlement was enemy territory not that long ago,” Deem Rutim replied, still wearing a displeased look.

“Well then, I’ll see you around, Asuta! And I’ll be looking forward to the trip ten days from now!”

“Right. You take care, Dan Rutim.”

With that, the members of the Rutim clan left, and we finally got to work.

The people of the northern settlement had been firmly opposed to the actions of the Fa clan, but now they were finally adopting delicious food into their lives. Even if they were still against us doing business in the post town, I could sense that things were moving forward, slowly but surely.

3

Thanks to Yamiru Lea and the others being absent, we were shorthanded compared to usual, but since we had plenty of time to spare, we had no issue fitting in the prep work and study session.

At half past the lower fourth hour, I said my farewells to the members of the Ruu clan, then hurried north along the path through the forest’s edge. Once I saw Toor Deen and Yun Sudra home, my work for the day would be finished.

“Today was really wonderful. Thanks for letting me come along, Asuta,” Yun Sudra cheerfully called out.

When I looked back into the wagon, I saw Toor Deen curled up atop a rug. She must have been exhausted from these past few days. After all, no matter how

skilled of a chef she might be, she was still just ten years old.

Yun Sudra, meanwhile, had come over to me and was now leaning forward, sticking her head out next to the driver's seat. Her gray-brown ponytail worn off to the side was swaying, and her blue eyes looked passionate and moist.

"Nah, you shouldn't be thanking me. Raielfam Sudra was the one who gave you permission."

"But even still, I have to thank you for letting someone as inexperienced as me accompany you. I'm a little upset that I don't get to go with you to Dabagg, though..."

"Well, unlike a half-day trip, I'd imagine it'd be a bit tricky to take two whole days off. And it's not like I'd be able to pay you, so I figure the Sudra clan head's decision was only natural."

"But the Deen clan has a similar number of people, yet Toor Deen was permitted to come along. Is my clan head Raielfam just not as sensible as the Deen clan head?"

"I don't think that's it at all. His wisdom and decisiveness have saved the Fa clan a number of times now."

"Then it must be something about me, the reason he won't let me go. Right?" Yun Sudra asked back, instantly looking downhearted.

Her earnestness was a big part of this girl's charm, but I had trouble figuring out how to handle her at times like this. On top of that, Reina Ruu had warned me not to be too lenient with her. More and more, I was starting to feel like I was about to fall into a trap of my own design.

"Umm... I don't think anyone's at fault here. Everyone has their own work to handle, and we just have to do our best to take care of it, right?"

"Have I caused you trouble, Asuta?"

"No, that's not really what I meant."

"I'm sorry. I let my emotions get the better of me and showed you something ugly," Yun Sudra said with a little snuffle. "I was just thinking how happy it would make me if I could go with you... But it was wrong of me to think that my

feelings were all that mattered and to speak ill of my clan head... I'm ashamed of myself..."

"Ah, no, umm..."

"An awful woman like me isn't good enough to help you with your work, right?" Yun Sudra questioned, leaning farther forward with tears in her eyes.



As I manipulated Gilulu's reins, a small sigh escaped me.

"It's not like you need to be incredibly well qualified to help me out. But if you're sorry for what you said, then all you have to do is decide not to make the same mistake again."

"Right. I'll keep that in mind, and try not to forget," Yun Sudra said, looking completely earnest. It seemed she was trying to take the lesson to heart. While some parts of her were a little out of the norm for a woman of the forest's edge, at her core she was a wonderful, unrestrained person. And that's exactly what gave me so much trouble handling her.

"Ah, I can see the Sudra house. A-Are those the Sudra men?"

"Looks like it. They all returned safely again today. I give my thanks to the great kindness of our mother forest..."

As Yun Sudra offered her prayer, we arrived at the Sudra house. There were two giba with their limbs tied to grigee poles being carried by four men. The smallest of them left the group and approached our wagon.

"I see you've made it back, Yun. And Asuta. I'm glad to see you looking well."

"It's been a while, Raielfam Sudra. Seems like you all made it back early too."

"Indeed. I believe we succeeded at bloodletting both of them, so it was a great hunt. We'll be having offal and head stew for dinner again tonight."

The Sudra clan only had ten or so members, so the innards, brains, and eyeballs from the two giba would be more than enough for a dinner. The Fa clan was always ending up with an excess of innards ourselves, so I had been pondering if I could use them in sausages.

"Well then, I'll be excusing myself. I look forward to working with you again tomorrow, Asuta," Yun Sudra said with a polite bow, and then she swiftly departed. She must have been feeling pretty embarrassed about calling her clan head unsensible earlier.

"By the way, how is Li Sudra doing? Ah, I'm not asking because there's an issue with Yun Sudra or anything like that."

Raielfam Sudra's wife Li Sudra was pregnant, so Yun Sudra had taken over her

job at the stalls. The younger girl had reached the point where she could handle the work on her own a couple days ago, so I hadn't seen Li Sudra since then.

"Well, she's been complaining about food tasting different now, but other than that she hasn't had any serious issues."

"Oh, right. I've heard that some people will get nauseous just from smelling certain things when they're pregnant. It sounds pretty difficult, suddenly having trouble eating right when you need all the stamina you can get."

"Indeed. But in Li's case, she only seems to be having trouble with the smell of grilling meat and the taste of sugar. She doesn't have any difficulty eating giba stew without any sugar in it, so I'd say she has it relatively easy," Raielfam Sudra replied, the wrinkles on his face growing even deeper as his expression shifted. "Asuta, you've shown concern for Li day in and day out. I'm truly grateful that you've taken such an interest in our Sudra clan despite lacking any ties of blood."

"I'd say that's only natural, considering how much I owe your clan."

"You are a kind, just man, Asuta. I feel proud to call someone like you my friend," he said, though the look on his wrinkled face seemed to be turning a little harsher. He was earnest and especially eloquent for a man of the forest's edge, but at times like this it could be difficult to tell what he was feeling. "Well then, I hope you take good care of Yun again tomorrow," he finished, starting to turn away.

"Hold on," I called out, hopping down from the driver's seat.

I didn't see anyone else around, and Toor Deen was sleeping soundly in the wagon. I figured this was the best chance to speak openly with the Sudra clan head.

"I'd actually like to talk about Yun Sudra with you. She's doing well with her work in the post town...but why exactly is she so enthusiastic about cooking?"

"Why, you ask? Are you yourself not the one who explained how delicious cooking can bring greater strength to us people of the forest's edge, Asuta?"

"Yes, that's certainly true, but by now Yun Sudra is already skilled enough to make delicious meals for her clan and the post town, and yet she still doesn't

seem content.”

Naturally, Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and Toor Deen were passionate about their work and aimed for ever greater heights despite the wonderful skill they already possessed. However, that definitely wasn't the norm when it came to women of the forest's edge. That was precisely why they were the ones most shaken by Myme and Varkas's cooking, I figured. If I was right about that, then I'd guess that Yun Sudra had turned the special feelings she had toward me into passion for her work...though I still wasn't completely sure that was the whole story.

If her enthusiasm for cooking was free of any ulterior motive, then I would like to help her along as much as I did the others. In order to find out for sure, I needed to hear Raielfam Sudra's opinion, as someone who knew her better than I ever could.

Starting to look more and more doubtful, the Sudra clan head replied, “Hmm... If you're asking where her passion comes from, I would have to say it's out of a desire to have you acknowledge her.”

“But why me? She doesn't gain anything from my acknowledgment, right?”

“When a woman falls for a man, it doesn't have anything to do with what there is to be gained.”

“Huh...?”

“She wants to grow to a suitable level of skill to be your bride, I'd say. From that perspective, her passion makes perfect sense.”

For several seconds, I was left at a complete loss for words.

“You really think it's possible that Yun Sudra wants to marry me?”

“It's more than just possible. I can't see it as anything else,” Raielfam Sudra stated, furrowing his brow. “Did you truly not realize, Asuta? That's...shocking to hear.”

“Y-You managed to notice how she felt, Raielfam Sudra?”

“I did. Actually, I would say that's why she wanted to help you with your work in the post town to begin with,” he replied with a stern, half-astounded look.

“Well, bonds between men and women come down to the forest’s guidance. It would bring our Sudra clan closer to falling if we were to let one of our few unwed women marry into another clan, but I wouldn’t have any issues at all if it were to help save the Fa clan, which we owe a great debt. The Sudra would be very proud to form ties of blood with the Fa.”

“H-Hold on! I don’t have any intention of...”

“Naturally, the final decision rests with you. Let me say here and now that even if you turn down her marriage proposal, it will do nothing to change the friendship shared between our clans,” Raielfam Sudra formally stated with a nod.

However, I was still left feeling all out of sorts.

“Th-Then I shouldn’t keep asking Yun Sudra to help out with work, right? If I have no intention of taking her as a wife...”

“Yun has yet to bring up the matter with me. Until she does and we make the marriage request official, you have nothing to worry about.”

“No, but...”

“Yun only just turned fifteen. You should take your time to carefully decide whether or not she would make a proper bride.”

His words were what I’d expect from the earnest people of the forest’s edge. It seemed that I needed to express myself just as clearly.

“Raielfam Sudra, my decision has already been made. I’m terribly sorry, but I can’t take her as a bride. If that’s what she’s aiming for, wouldn’t it be best to distance ourselves now?”

“I see,” the Sudra clan head replied, his expression shifting. “So you’ve already fallen for another woman, Asuta? Then you should go ahead and let Yun know that.”

“N-No, that’s not it! I don’t intend to marry *anyone*.”

“What are you saying...? If you won’t take a bride, doesn’t that mean your bloodline will end with you?” Raielfam Sudra’s small eyes were filled with pure doubt and confusion.

As I met his gaze head on, I strengthened my resolve. “That’s the reason I’m not going to get married. I don’t think I should take a bride and leave behind kids here in this land.”

“I understand even less now... You’re prepared to live out your life at the forest’s edge, correct? Otherwise, you never would have been permitted to become one of our people.”

“That’s what I want to do, yes. But there are issues that I can’t do anything about.”

After that, I ended up telling Raielfam Sudra everything, all about my true background, as ridiculous as it was. About how I had lived in a world where the four great kingdoms didn’t exist. And how I’d died, only to wake up on the ground somewhere in the Morga forest’s edge, where Ai Fa had rescued me.

Even I had no clue how my life had taken such an incomprehensible turn. It was possible I could disappear from this world too, without any warning. Because of that, it seemed irresponsible for me to take a wife and have children...

Raielfam Sudra listened to my whole crazy confession, not interjecting even once.

“It’s hard to believe, isn’t it? That’s why I haven’t told anyone but Ai Fa.”

“Hmm...” Raielfam Sudra pondered. “That certainly is a shocking tale... It’s difficult for me to wrap my head around it.”

“Well, I don’t even understand it at all myself, so that’s only natural.”

“But even so, you decided to live as a person of the forest’s edge, didn’t you, Asuta? If nothing else, considering you died in your old world, I can’t imagine you would be able to return there.”

“Right. That’s what I thought, and that’s why I resolved to live as a man of the forest’s edge.”

“Then you really are one of us, and the rest of it doesn’t matter,” Raielfam Sudra said in a firm tone, taking a step closer to me. “If you were a citizen of Sym, or Jagar, or even Mahyudra, or if you were from overseas, none of that

would be important. You decided to live as a person of the forest's edge, and earned the acknowledgment of Ai Fa and the leading clan heads. We have no reason to be dissatisfied with you, or to consider your presence inconvenient."

"Then you believe my story?"

"At the very least, you're not the sort of person to lie to me. Perhaps you hit your head and confused some dream or illusion for reality, but that doesn't matter either way," Raielfam Sudra answered, with a look that almost made him seem angry. However, he definitely wasn't mad. This was him directly confronting me in all aspects of who I am. "No matter what your background may be, to those of us who live here at the forest's edge, you're a comrade. You feel that way and so do we, so there's no issue to be had."

"Thank you, Raielfam Sudra..." I said, feeling like I was about to start tearing up.

As the Sudra clan head stared back at me, he added, "However, there is one matter I cannot accept."

"Huh?"

"You should leave behind children in this land, Asuta. If you are going to live as a person of the forest's edge, then you should know this is a responsibility and a joy granted equally to all of us," he declared in a perfectly level tone. "The possibility that you may vanish at some point is no excuse at all. A great many of us would mourn your disappearance, but the wife and children you left behind would never be treated poorly. You brought our people such great strength and joy. Your relatives would be just as precious to everyone here. So I don't believe you need to worry about that."

"O-Of course. But when I think about how the wife and kids I leave behind would feel..."

"If you don't want to suffer the pain of loss, then your only option would be to spend your whole life with no attachments at all. We could perish out in the forest at any time. But even so, or perhaps for that very reason, it's all the more important to take a partner and leave behind children, wouldn't you agree?" Raielfam Sudra's body, which was noticeably smaller than mine, was brimming with the spirit of a hunter of the forest's edge. It was as if he was gearing up to

fight back against fate itself. “If that is your fear, then you never should have formed bonds with anyone to begin with. After all, your relatives are not the only ones who would suffer if you were to disappear. Our Sudra clan, the Ruu, the Fou, and countless others would be stricken with grief. With that in mind, do you feel you shouldn’t have formed bonds with us to start with, Asuta?”

“No, of course I don’t think that.”

“Indeed. And we would never regret having met you because we fear such pain. As long as we exist in this world, everyone should live the lives granted to them to their fullest,” Raielfam Sudra stated, giving me a hearty jab to the chest. However, his fist didn’t seem to be full of anger, but rather a strong desire to reprimand me. “So stop worrying about it and start thinking about taking a wife here at the forest’s edge and having some children. Whether that’s Yun or not, it would be a joyous occasion for our Sudra clan.”

“Thank you. Just hearing you say that makes me so happy that I find it hard to express.”

That was how I truly felt, from the depths of my heart. But now that things had come this far, there was still one more matter I had to open up about. The other half of why I couldn’t take a bride.

“What, there’s still something else you need to confess?”

“Yeah, well, this is a bit complicated too, but...even setting aside the fact that I could disappear at any moment, I can’t see myself falling for any woman,” I said as I felt heat rush to my cheeks. I had never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would ever be bringing this matter up to anyone else. Now, however, I needed to explain myself. This wasn’t like with Vina and Reina Ruu. At this rate, I would eventually be facing an official marriage proposal from the Sudra clan. I couldn’t just keep waiting for that day to arrive without saying anything about how I really felt.

“Then is there someone you have feelings for after all? But if you don’t intend to marry anyone, that sounds like it must be rather troublesome.”

“To be honest, it’s more that we’ve got an agreement of sorts to keep it from being a problem...”

“I don’t understand what you mean at all. If you have someone you love, then you should go ahead and propose to her. I can’t imagine many women at the forest’s edge would refuse nowadays.”

“No, it’s that she has no intention of marrying anyone either.”

Raielfam Sudra had been wearing a rather serious look, but suddenly his eyes shot open wide. My face went so red that he couldn’t possibly miss it. I seriously wanted to curl up and die.

“There’s only one woman here at the forest’s edge with no intent to marry... Well, no, there actually seems to be a second one who thinks that way now, but I can’t imagine you would have those feelings for a girl you only met recently, right?”

“Ah, yeah, it’s not her.”

“In that case...I’d say you’ve fallen for the trickiest target possible here at the forest’s edge.” Raielfam Sudra’s already deeply wrinkled face scrunched up even further. And yet, he seemed to be a much more decisive person than I was. “As I see it, you have just two paths forward to choose from. Either you change how she feels, or you give up.”

“Right... But I also want to respect her feelings above all else.”

“Then you have no option but to give up.” He certainly cut right to the chase. “At any rate, the Fa clan consists of only you and your clan head. If Ai Fa has decided to live as a hunter, the only option left is for you to take a bride. Then the Fa clan could continue on, leaving its bloodline behind.”

“Ah, but...”

“Despite being a woman, the Fa clan head is an outstanding hunter. Being as skilled as she is, it is permissible for her to cast aside her life as a woman. But you man the stove, Asuta. It would be a simple matter for you to marry and have children while still carrying out your work; thus, you should leave behind your bloodline here at the forest’s edge,” Raielfam Sudra stated, finally taking a step back. “There’s no need to rush. But you should think anew about where your proper path forward lies, and make a decision. Until then, I ask that you keep using Yun’s services as you have up till now.”

I couldn't think of a way to object to that. After all, he was surely in the right as a person of the forest's edge.

After observing the look on my face for a bit, Raielfam Sudra turned away. "Well then, I'll be praying that your heart will find its answer as soon as possible, Asuta."

"Thank you..."

With a crunching sound as he went, Raielfam Sudra walked off toward the house. But his small figure only made it a few steps before he came to a sudden stop.

"Now that I think about it, you said before that I was the only one other than the Fa clan head you've told that strange story to, didn't you?"

"Huh? Yeah, that's right. You and Ai Fa are the only ones I've given the complete story to, with all the details."

"You haven't even told Donda Ruu or Gazraan Rutim?"

"No, I haven't. Should I open up to everyone after all?"

"I don't think so. Hearing it won't change anyone's mind about you. And what's important isn't the past, but the present and future. So there's no need to answer questions that are not being asked," Raielfam Sudra said, glancing back my way. "But with that said...I'm incredibly honored to have heard your tale before the Ruu and Rutim, whom you have such deep ties to. I am glad that you opened up to me, Asuta."

"Yeah..." was all I could think of to reply. Personally, I had felt that I needed to meet Raielfam Sudra's earnestness and sincerity in kind.

"And I would find great joy if you were to take a bride, regardless of who it may be. Those words were no lie. Even if it is not Yun, but some woman from the Ruu, Rutim, or Fou clans...or even a stubborn female hunter who refuses to take a husband."

"Huh?"

"I truly wish for you to have the best bride possible for you. Please don't forget that, if nothing else... But, well, at the rate you're going, I'd imagine you'll

end up marrying rather late,” the Sudra clan head stated with his typical bluntness, showing a bashful smile right at the end.

4

“Are you all right, Asuta...? You’ve got a real gloomy look on your face,” Toor Deen said as we were parting, looking rather concerned.

“I’m fine. Just a bit tired... And you’re pretty tired out yourself, aren’t you, Toor Deen? Be sure to get plenty of rest.”

“Right. I’m so embarrassed about falling asleep like that,” the girl replied with a bow, her cheeks clearly red. “I look forward to working with you again tomorrow.”

“Yeah, right back at you. See you then.”

After giving Gilulu a quick smack with the leather whip, I left the Deen house and started back down the path through the forest’s edge. All the while, what Raielfam Sudra had said to me was swirling about in my head. He was right: there was no need to fixate on where I came from. There was no real difference between not knowing when I might disappear and not knowing when I might die, so my situation was hardly unique or special. I’d thought it over again and again by now, and I could see it was true.

As for the question of whether an outsider like me would be permitted to leave behind children... Well, I had meddled so thoroughly with the affairs of the forest’s edge and Genos as a whole by this point that there was certainly no point in worrying about that now. If I did happen to have children, they’d be hard pressed to match my ability to cause trouble.

Still, I can’t even imagine having kids...

Back in my home country, I hadn’t been at an age to worry about that yet. But this was the settlement at the forest’s edge, where you could get married at the age of fifteen. I had to follow the customs here and give the matter some serious thought.

With that in mind, though, my concern was focused on one point in particular.

There's no way I could ever take a bride from some other clan. Even if I'm going to stop worrying about my potential fate, that's something I just can't do.

As I gave Gilulu another smack with the whip, I breathed a deep sigh. While I was worrying about everything, the Fa house had come into view. That was no surprise, though, as the Fa and Deen houses were only a few minutes apart when using a tolos.

I hopped down from the driver's seat, wondering whether or not Ai Fa was back yet, and reached out for the door to the house. As I nervously strengthened my grip...there was a sudden rustling sound from overhead.

"Oh, Asuta, you're back early today."

As I placed a hand over my pounding heart, I turned toward the voice. From atop a tree right next to the house, I could see the face of a familiar woman peeking out.

"A-Ah, it's you, Lem Dom. You surprised me. What are you doing up there?"

"I'm training in moving from tree to tree. It's a necessary skill for chasing giba or scouting," she replied as she hopped down from the tree, dropping farther than her full height to the ground. It was like the elegant movement of a wild leopard or something. "What's with the long face? Did something happen in the Daleim lands?"

"No, nothing like that. I've just got a lot I need to think about."

"Hmm?" Lem Dom questioned with a tilt of her head.

Lem Dom had a rather wild appearance to start with, but over the past several days she had seemingly gotten even tougher. Her nearly 180-centimeter-tall frame was brimming with power, and the look in her eyes was growing sharper too. "There's actually something I'd like to consult you about, but it seems like it'd be better to save that for another day."

"With me? Is it about work in the morning?"

"No. It's a little more complicated than that."

"It's fine. I want to give my head a bit of a chance to cool off by thinking about something else anyway, so go ahead, we can discuss whatever."

“Really?” Lem Dom asked back, then she approached me with a firm stride. Was it something she didn’t want anyone else overhearing? Her plump lips came in close to my ear. “Well then, I’ll take you up on that offer...but it’s a bit crazy, so try not to be too shocked, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Would it be possible to have you take me as a bride?”

I was so shocked that I stumbled backward, banging the rear of my head against the door.

As I silently cradled my head, Lem Dom once again came right up next to me.

“What are you, a fool? That’s why I told you not to be shocked. Are you all right? You weren’t injured, were you?”

“D-D-Don’t just say that out of nowhere! Are you teasing me?!”

“Considering all I owe you, I would never tease you. Do I really seem like such a dishonest person?” she asked, sounding upset as she crossed her robust arms in front of her chest. “I’m serious. Naturally, I’m hoping such a future won’t come, but it’s important to prepare for the worst, right?”

“Just what sort of situation are you preparing for that you’d ask to marry me?”

“One in which Deek and I never come to an understanding, of course.” With her arms still crossed, Lem Dom shrugged her hearty shoulders. “I don’t have any desire to abandon the Dom clan. But I also refuse to cast aside my desire to be a hunter. Though I have every intention to try as hard as I can to reach an understanding with Deek, I still don’t know whether or not he’ll come to accept my wish.”

“Uh-huh, I have no problem with what you’ve laid out so far.”

“And if I’m not able to return to the Dom clan for years, what will become of me? If I keep building up my skills but I’m never permitted to head out into the forest, I’ll just die a pointless death, so my only option would be to join some other clan.”

“I can understand that much. But I can’t understand why you would need to

be my bride.”

“The Dom are one of the closest clans to the leading Zaza. Because of that, I would imagine the Fa are just about the only ones at the forest’s edge who would take me in after I earned the anger of the Dom clan head,” Lem Dom stated with perfect calmness. “And if I simply become a clan member, isn’t it possible the Fa clan could earn Deek’s fury as well? But if it were as a bride, that would be something that all people of the forest’s edge would have to accept. After all, it is an important duty for women to take a husband and have children.”

“But don’t you want to become a hunter? You can’t do that and have kids, can you?”

“And with that in mind, you’re the only one I could take as a husband, Asuta. After all, you don’t intend to marry anyone, right?”

“Wh-Who did you hear that from?”

“It was just a rumor that caught my ear while I was over in the Ruu settlement. That’s why you turned down the Ruu women, right?”

I gulped at the thought of such rumors flying about. It wasn’t like I had received any official marriage proposals, and I didn’t think Vina or Reina Ruu would spread that information around on their own, so where exactly had they come from?

“Oh, it’s not like it was being openly discussed or anything. To be more accurate, I just happened to overhear a private discussion.”

“For reference, just who exactly was that discussion between?”

“I don’t know their names, but that red-haired girl from the main house, and a young man from the branch houses.”

She might have meant Lala and Shin Ruu. Lala Ruu had picked up on our complicated relationship with her formidable insight, and if the other person was Shin Ruu, I could see her sharing something that was embarrassing to her family.

“So, was that the truth? You really don’t intend to marry anyone?”

“Yeah, well... It’d be difficult to explain it all briefly, but there shouldn’t be any misunderstandings if you think of it like that. I can’t marry you either, Lem Dom...”

“Don’t worry. For my part, I would just be asking for a marriage in name only. Then everyone else will stop pestering both of us to get married, right?”

So Lem Dom had come up with the idea of a sham marriage with me. For a person of the forest’s edge, it was an absurd and outrageous plan.

“That’s a pretty crazy idea you came up with, Lem Dom...”

“You think? I figured it was a clever ploy that wouldn’t hurt anyone, myself.” As she spoke, Lem Dom uncrossed her arms and came in close to me again. Her big eyes that were slightly upturned seemed to have a bit of a suspicious glint in them. “Plus, this isn’t something to be speaking about too loudly, but...there are plenty of methods out there for having fun while taking care not to have children. There are even people who make a business of it in the post town...”

“Th-That certainly is a shock to hear.”

“Really? Well, it’s a firm taboo here at the forest’s edge for people to share in such pleasure without being married...but I could teach you those methods if you want, Asuta.”

“I don’t! It’s not good to go around breaking taboos!”

Lem Dom was taller than I was, and burlier too. If she got an improper thought in her head and tried to act on it, with my strength, I would never be able to stop her. My back was pressed firmly against the door, so all I could do was gesture to her to show my surrender.

Looking very much like a carnivore, she licked her lips and with a throaty voice said, “Oh really? How unfortunate. I owe you so much, and I’d love to return the favor...”

“I’m asking you to please respect my feelings about this! I can’t marry you!”

“You’re being pretty loud there, Asuta...” Lem Dom said, pulling back with a look of disappointment.

In the same moment, I heard the sound of footsteps on dirt and gravel.

Completely flustered, I turned my eyes toward the direction of that sound, where I found exactly who I expected coming over from the rear of the house.

“What exactly are you two doing? If you’re done with your work, shouldn’t you unhook Gilulu from the wagon?”

“Y-You were here, Ai Fa?”

“I was in the rear of the house, skinning the pelt from a giba. You didn’t notice?”

Ai Fa strode straight toward us, her eyes half closed with a look of displeasure. Lem Dom must have noticed my clan head’s presence from the start, since she shot her a smile without any hesitation.

“Don’t scold Asuta for that, Ai Fa. I was the one who called out to him and distracted him from what he was doing.”

“That’s still Asuta’s responsibility. He should be able to carry out his work just fine while talking,” Ai Fa said as she released the clasp for the wagon and set Gilulu free. She kept glaring my way, even as she was tying the tolos’s reins to a tree branch. “So, what were you discussing? I thought I heard something about marriage.”

“I asked Asuta if he would marry me, if worse came to worst.”

“H-Hey, Lem Dom!”

“What? If I wish to be taken in as a bride then I need the clan head’s approval, so we couldn’t move forward without Ai Fa knowing about it anyway, right?” Lem Dom started telling Ai Fa everything she had said to me. All the while, my clan head remained silent, her expression unchanging. “And in the end, Asuta turned me down. I thought it was a pretty clever plan, myself.”

“I can’t say how clever it might have been, but Asuta has his own thoughts and feelings. Rather than preparing for some off chance, you should be thinking first and foremost about how to get through to your clan head, Lem Dom.”

“Of course I’ve been thinking about that. Each and every day, until it feels like my head’s going to split open. But I can’t see any way to make Deek accept my actions,” Lem Dom said with a sigh. “The only way I can come up with to prove

I'm right is to demonstrate my strength as a hunter like you, Ai Fa. But I can't work as a hunter without my clan head's permission. And if I can't even go out into the forest to confront giba face to face, I'll never be able to foster the soul of a hunter. It's just like the three-way deadlock of Morga..."

"It's true that you cannot develop the soul of a hunter without entering the forest. But you can at least gain the knowledge needed to hunt even without chasing giba."

"But how? Women are only permitted to enter the forest between dawn and when the sun hits its peak, when the giba are still sleeping, right? What can be learned from a forest without any giba?"

"I already told you the answer. Not that I expected things to go the way they have when I said it."

Lem Dom suspiciously furrowed her brow, and then she quietly murmured, "You mean Barthia, right? She and her son head into the forest in the morning to hunt wild birds. That's it, isn't it, Ai Fa?"

"Whether you're after birds or giba, you cannot accomplish anything as a hunter without becoming one with the forest."

Lem Dom gave a big nod and moved closer to my clan head, but when faced with a piercing, intimidating glare, she wrapped her arms around herself instead.

"I understand, Ai Fa... It's not like it'll solve everything, but I'll start by trying to gain the knowledge needed to be a hunter. Then I'll talk to Deek after that," Lem Dom said, shooting a seductive smile at my silent clan head. "Thanks, Ai Fa. If you were a man, I might have forgotten all about my desire to be a hunter and fallen for you instead."

"Don't speak such nonsense, you fool."

"I'm going to go run over to the Ruu settlement. If I go now, I should be able to make it back before the sun sets... Ai Fa, Asuta, thanks so much for the talk," Lem Dom said, and then she took off like a bullet.

Feeling completely dumbfounded, I turned toward Ai Fa, my feelings still not in order.

“Um, Ai Fa...”

“If your business is done here, then you should get to work. You still have to prepare dinner, don’t you?” she snapped at me, turning away in a huff and then moving back to the rear of the house.

“Hold on,” I called out to her from behind. “There’s actually something I want to talk to you about... Well, it’s actually a bit complicated, so maybe it would be better to take our time discussing it after dinner...”

“Then you should wait till then to call out to me. Don’t stop me without good reason.”

“Yeah, sorry. I just wanted to let you know beforehand.”

At that, Ai Fa turned around and shot me a firm, suspicious stare. “It certainly sounds complicated. Did *another* woman ask to be your bride?”

“I-I’m surprised you figured it out. But, well, it wasn’t actually an official request...”

“If you cannot make a decision on your own, then I shall give my judgment as clan head...” Ai Fa responded coldly before disappearing.

Thinking to myself that this was going to be a long night, I gave another sigh.



“Well, it’s not like I confirmed Yun Sudra’s feelings directly, and it wasn’t an official marriage request or anything either,” I confided under the candlelight after cleaning up dinner.

Her golden hair now down, Ai Fa snorted. “Hmph. Wasn’t it clear how that girl felt about you from the very first day she showed up alongside Lem Dom?”

“Y-You think? I couldn’t tell at all, not that early...”

“That’s because you may as well be blind,” Ai Fa retorted without the slightest mercy. But as she did, her piercing gaze softened somewhat. “So? If your feelings are set in stone, then I don’t see any need for me to step in. But seeing the way you’re fretting about it...could it be that you actually wish to take Yun Sudra for a bride?”

“No, that’s not it. I feel bad for her, but I’ve got no intention of marrying anybody.”

“I see,” Ai Fa said, closing her eyes.

Normally, that would be the end of the conversation. However, today I had to push on just a bit further. I gathered up my resolve before my emotions could sweep me away and continued, “But I believe what Raielfam Sudra said was perfectly logical for a person of the forest’s edge. I’m sure it wouldn’t be acceptable for me not to carry out my duty just because of some intangible fear about how I may disappear at any time.”

“You mean the duty for us people of the forest’s edge to birth and raise children?” Ai Fa emotionlessly asked back, her eyes still closed. “It’s only natural, though I hardly have any right to talk about it, considering I’ve cast it aside as well.”

“It’s fine in your case. I mean, according to Raielfam Sudra, you do more than enough as a hunter for it to be permitted. And Deek Dom said it too, didn’t he? You’re a special case.”

“But you’re a chef rather than a hunter... I see. So regardless, you are expected to have children and raise them?” Ai Fa stated, brushing up her long hair. Even still, her eyes remained closed. “Right... I once said my feelings about the possibility of the clan growing further were complicated. But if that caused you concern and made you feel a need to take a wife...”

“That’s not it. I told you if you suddenly said you were taking a husband, I might just lose all hope then and there, didn’t I? And those feelings haven’t changed at all...even now.”

As I stared at Ai Fa’s calm face, I could feel my heart start pounding like a jackhammer. I couldn’t afford the slightest mistake. It was important I didn’t muddy my words either. After all, this was probably the most delicate, precarious thing to discuss for the two of us.

“It hasn’t been any kind of issue so far, but if the Sudra and the other clans get involved, it wouldn’t be just an internal Fa clan matter any longer... Or at least, that’s how I see it.”

Ai Fa remained silent.

“You’re the Fa clan head. With that in mind, even if you say you have no room to talk, you’re still in a position where you have to take responsibility for the actions of your clan member. So if I turn down a marriage proposal from another clan, it’s important for you to at least know the reason why, right? That’s why...as a person of the forest’s edge, and as a member of the Fa clan, I feel the need to properly explain my thoughts and feelings to you.”

“A rather grandiose way to put it... Just what exactly is it that you intend to explain to me that you haven’t before?”

“The reason that I won’t take a bride.”

It felt like my heart was going to leap right out of my chest. However, I had to come out and say it... My true feelings that Raielfam Sudra and Vina Ruu had sensed, and likely Reina and Lala Ruu as well.

“You see, Ai Fa, I have no intention of taking anyone as a bride.”

“How many times are you going to repeat that...?”

“My background has nothing to do with it. Even putting aside the fact that I’m some mysterious weirdo who came here from another world, I still don’t plan on getting married.”

My clan head offered no response.

“Because...you may get mad hearing me say it, but...” I took a deep breath, trying to keep my heart from leaping out of my chest, and then I came out with it. “It’s impossible for me to think that there’s a more amazing woman out there than you, Ai Fa.”

Even still, Ai Fa’s expression didn’t shift.

As I stared at her face lit by the orange light of the candle, I pressed on. “I can’t imagine marrying anyone but you. That’s why I don’t feel like taking any other woman as a bride, and I don’t want to picture you taking some other man as a husband. That’s...how I truly feel.”

“So...you’re saying you wish to marry me, then?”

“No, that’s not it. Well, actually yes, but still... I mean, I would be incredibly

happy if I were able to marry you.”

I was almost overwhelmed by the feeling of blood rushing to my face. I thought the veins in my temples might literally burst. It was a stroke of luck that Ai Fa’s eyes remained closed even now.

“However, I want to respect your feelings above all else. It’s just like I told you before, and that hasn’t changed in the least.”

Still, silence.

“Though I’m still inexperienced, I’m a chef. I’ve decided to keep on cooking till I die, and that’s the one thing I won’t give up for anyone. So...I figure you feel every bit as strongly about being a hunter.”

Even now, Ai Fa just kept on quietly listening.

“If I was told I had to cast aside my life as a chef in order to get married, I wouldn’t be able to bring myself to obey, so I can’t ask you to stop being a hunter in order to marry me either... That’s how I truly feel.”

At last I had said my piece, and silence fell over the room. All I could hear was the sound of the animal fat candle burning. It felt as if each and every second was a hundred times as long. My heart was pounding so fast that it was causing my chest to ache. With my fists clenched, I could feel the sweat coating my palms. The air was so heavy that I felt an impulse to start making random noises, just to break the silence.

Just how much time had passed...?

But eventually, Ai Fa’s pink lips slowly started moving.

“I...”

“Yes?”

“I’ve always thought how wonderful things would be if I were a man and you were a woman.”

“...Yeah.”

“Then I would have gained a beloved partner to marry, and the Fa bloodline would carry on. For a long time, I have felt that such a life would bring so much

happiness, it would be almost blinding..." Ai Fa stated, finally opening her eyes.

There were powerful emotions that I found somehow hard to place in those blue eyes as she stared straight at me.

"I have never had someone so precious to me before. I find you absolutely irreplaceable, Asuta. If I were to lose you, I would surely never be able to smile from the bottom of my heart again."

"I feel the same way, Ai Fa..." I replied, my voice growing unintentionally hoarse.

My clan head firmly closed her eyes once more, only to open them a moment later to pin me with her gaze.

"But I am a woman, and you are a man. If I were to marry you, I would no longer be able to keep on living as a hunter. So..."

"I know, Ai Fa. You're more precious than anything to me, just as you are now."

And I was sure it was because I accepted her as she was, as a hunter, that Ai Fa found me to be so precious too. She must have felt that I was irreplaceable because I cared so much about her and yet didn't ask her to be my bride.

I intently stared back at Ai Fa's face, my heart bursting with both joy and bittersweet sorrow. At some point, my clan head had broken out in a smile, and in it I could see the full range of my emotions reflected back at me.

"Sadly, the world doesn't go along with our wishes, Asuta..."

"Yeah, isn't that the truth."

"But even so, I'm truly glad to have met you."

"And I feel exactly the same way."

Without me realizing it, my knees had moved closer to Ai Fa, and though she had been resting against the wall earlier, at some point she had leaned forward toward me instead. However, neither of us reached out to touch the other. If we did, something would break, and all that we were holding back would burst forth... I didn't know how Ai Fa felt, but at the very least it seemed that way to me.



“Still, what an eccentric man you are, Asuta. The thought that you wouldn’t want to take a bride because of someone like me...it’s downright laughable,” Ai Fa murmured from less than a meter away.

As I watched her smile without restraint, I said back, “You think? There doesn’t seem to be anything strange about it to me. I mean, you had Darmu Ruu, Diga Suun, and even men from the Gaaz and Ratsu clans ask you to be their bride, right?”

“Well, you had those Ruu sisters, Lem Dom, and Yun Sudra wanting to marry you, didn’t you?”

“Lem Dom clearly doesn’t count. I don’t think Vina Ruu had actual romantic feelings for me either.”

“Hmph. And you have plenty of women pining for you in town too,” Ai Fa murmured, but her eyes were still smiling. It was possible that she was laughing at me inside.

“That’s a false accusation. Everyone in town just enjoys my cooking.”

“I’m not so certain about that. But, well, I suppose it’s true that your skills are enough to move anyone’s heart.”

“That’s the greatest praise I could imagine. Still...what makes me happiest of all is when I move *your* heart.”

Ai Fa fell silent for just a bit. The smile soon disappeared from her face, and was replaced by a very calm yet strained expression. “I can’t imagine there being a more excellent chef than you in all the world. It is a strength that has made so many people happy. I am truly proud to have you as a member of my Fa clan.”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“However...that is not the only reason I find you so precious. Even if you were to lose the ability to cook like that Mikel man...you would still be more important to me than anyone, Asuta.”

I felt a joyful tingle run through the back of my mind. “Thanks. Still, kind of an ominous thing to say. I plan to keep cooking as the Fa clan’s chef for the rest of

my life, Ai Fa.”

My clan head seemed hesitant to speak.

“What is it? If you’ve got something to say, then go ahead, don’t hold back.”

Ai Fa’s eyes seemed to be tearing up just a bit. Or was that just the light from the candle? Either way, there was no doubt that she was being wracked by some powerful feelings. “Asuta, if...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“If I were to someday lose the strength to hunt...would you still think of me as the most precious person in your life...?”

My heart brimming with emotion, I answered back, “Of course.”

Ai Fa’s eyes narrowed, and she gave her happiest smile yet.

Intermission: Roaring Business

I thought that night would never come to an end, but eventually it did, bringing us to the dawn of a new day.

My thoughts had been filled with nothing but Ai Fa both before and after I fell asleep, so I felt like my mind and body had no time to rest. My emotions had been stirred up far too much... No, actually I was even more out of sorts than that, as if wild passions were racing around inside of me with nowhere to go.

Nothing had been resolved. Looking at it objectively, it probably seemed as if no progress had been made at all. But we had both learned how the other felt, that we wanted to marry one another. That if the circumstances simply allowed, we would do so in a heartbeat.

Still, Ai Fa sure was looking at things from more of a masculine point of view... It really was like her to think that if I were a woman, she'd want to marry me. I loved that side of her too.

But the end result was that I was left unable to look Ai Fa in the eyes the following morning. Since I was in such a state, I wasn't able to tell exactly how she was doing. We just carried out our morning work as usual in silence, burying ourselves in our everyday routines.

No matter what we were feeling, the world around us kept on turning the same as always. We needed to grapple with our feelings while living our normal lives. But even so, there was something I felt the need to ask Ai Fa before we separated.

"So should I keep asking Yun Sudra to help with work like I have up till now?" I asked while we were picking pico leaves on the outskirts of the forest.

With her back to me, Ai Fa calmly replied, "As long as the Sudra clan head wishes to keep things that way, then I see no issue. It isn't as if you received an official marriage request, so there is no reason to drive Yun Sudra away."

"I see. If that's what the customs at the forest's edge say, then I'll go along

with them...but is it really okay?"

"It isn't a matter of it being okay or not. If the Sudra clan head issues a marriage request, then I shall reply as the head of the Fa. That is the only path forward."

I really wanted to ask how she would respond in that case. But in the end, I didn't actually raise the question. I had already told Ai Fa how I felt, and heard her feelings in turn, so regardless of what answer she might provide, I just had to follow my heart.

With both of us holding all sorts of feelings inside, we returned to our everyday lives.

With my mind still pretty well occupied, I set about handling my business in the post town.

By this point, we were heading into our thirteenth cycle of business. In terms of the dates, it stretched from the twelfth of the indigo month to the twenty-first. If we could make it through the next ten days without issue, we would finally be able to set off for Dabagg.

Those ten days, though, ended up being especially busy. Sure, it was a good thing that business was thriving, but somehow it seemed like we got even more unusual visitors than we normally did.

The first surprising customer came before the sun hit its peak on day one of that business period.

"You look like you're doing well, Asuta."

The man had on a long traveler's cloak, under which he wore leather armor and cloth attire. He had both a rugged, bearded face and a large frame, and was a bodyguard who had helped us out big-time in the past. Which is to say, it was Zasshuma.

"Ah, Zasshuma. It's been a while. When did you make it back to Genos?"

"Two days ago. I was actually charged with guarding the envoys from Banarm."

Two months back, after that whole commotion with Cyclaeus was settled, he had left to escort Welhide to Banarm alongside Kamyua Yoshu.

“After that, I used Banarm as a base and earned some coins here and there. When the ducal house of Banarm was recruiting bodyguards for the envoy group, I volunteered, figuring I’d check out how Genos was doing.”

“Oh, I see. I’m glad to see you looking well too.”

“Yep. At the very least, my days weren’t as hectic as they were for you all, I’d say,” Zasshuma said with a grin as he looked out over the crowd around the stalls. “From what I can see, seems like you’ve got a lot more customers from the west than you used to. Guess that’s the result of you putting your life on the line to stand up against the nobles.”

“Yeah. I figure it’s given us a chance to forge a better relationship with the people of Genos... Now that I think about it, what’s Kamyua up to? Has he been in contact with you at all?”

“Nah. I haven’t heard from him since he left Banarm, saying he might head for Aboof or wherever for the first time in a while. But, well, as long as he’s still alive and kicking I’m sure he’ll show his face in Genos again at some point,” Zasshuma said, and then he gestured with his finger for me to come in closer. “By the way, I heard from Lord Polarth that you’re planning a trip to Dabagg, right?”

“Ah, yes. We’ve never seen live karon before, so we’re heading there to broaden our knowledge a bit.”

“That’s some admirable spirit there. If you want some good booze with your karon, there’s no better place to be than Dabagg,” he said, seeming like he was somehow enjoying himself, and then he brought his face in even closer. “With that in mind, do you have any interest in hiring me as a guide?”

“A guide? But don’t you specialize in combat?”

“You can leave all that to the hunters from the forest’s edge. But, well, it’s just half a day from Genos to Dabagg, and there aren’t any bandit groups with hideouts in the area, so I can’t imagine anything happening that would require drawing a sword.”

“In that case, I see even less purpose in hiring you.”

“That’s why I’m saying to hire me as a guide, not a bodyguard. I’d need to charge a standard rate as a bodyguard, but it shouldn’t hurt your wallets much to have me along to guide you.”

Just like Kamyua Yoshu, Zasshuma was an official bodyguard recognized by the western kingdom. Unlike unlicensed bodyguards, he wouldn’t ever betray his clients and possessed great skill. It was said that only well-off merchants and nobles would ever be able to hire official bodyguards.

“I mean, yes, I’ve heard that guides are essential when heading to unfamiliar lands...but why are you going out of your way to bring it up like this?”

“Well you see, I was born in Dabagg. Without work as an excuse, I’m pretty much never able to head back home.”

“Ah, you’re from there...? Now that I think back on it, Melfried used to present himself as Haan of Dabagg, didn’t he?”

“Ooh, you’ve got quite the memory. Yeah, he was falsely borrowing my background there.”

Melfried had once taken up an alias and pretended to be a bodyguard for a supposed merchant group led by Zasshuma. That whole incident certainly felt nostalgic to think back on now.

“My family runs a karon farm too. Of course, I cast them aside and went off on my own, so my old man still won’t talk to me. But, well, my mom should be fairly welcoming.”

“That sounds like a pretty charming story, somehow...”

“Quiet, you,” Zasshuma shot back, looking embarrassed.

“All right, understood. We already asked a man named Mikel of Turan to guide us, so I’ll have to consult with him.”

“Right, thanks. And I don’t mind if you just pay me the market rate,” Zasshuma said before walking off south, rather than toward the castle town.



The next unusual guest came several days later, once again a bit before the sun hit its peak.

A splendid tolos-drawn box carriage approached from the castle town, parking at the entrance to the street. I had thought it was Polarth stopping by for the first time in a while, but the crest belonged to the house of Genos rather than the house of Daleim, and it was Welhide from Banarm who appeared from inside.

“You have my gratitude for the wonderful meal the other day, Sir Asuta. Thanks to your performance, I was able to open the eyes of my stubborn comrades.”

The young noble, slightly older than me, had black hair, pale skin, and an air of elegance. He was dressed more plainly than he had been at the banquet, but even so, he drew more attention than even Polarth with his deep-crimson silken attire and the fact that he brought several imposing ducal guards along with him. The townsfolk, who still weren’t used to seeing nobles, greeted him with quiet stares as they tugged on one another’s sleeves.

“My apologies for causing a commotion while you are conducting business. There is a matter I wish to discuss, so would it be at all possible for you to make the time to hear me out?”

“Sure. If it’s something within my power, then I’d be glad to help.”

“I am grateful to hear it. Then, could I trouble you to accompany me over to the carriage?”

After thinking it over for a moment, I decided to ask Vina Ruu to accompany me. I figured if I had a noble making a request, it made sense to have a member of the leading Ruu clan there to hear the exchange.

“This is what I wished to discuss.”

Two attendants were waiting inside the carriage with a large cloth bag and a wooden box, which they reverently handed over. In the bag was a fine dark-gray powder I didn’t recognize, while the box contained six white containers of two different types, three of each.

“This is fuwano, mamaria wine, and vinegar from Banarm. I would appreciate

it if you could find a proper use for them, Sir Asuta.”

“Fuwano, fruit wine, and vinegar? Wouldn’t chefs from the castle town be better suited to using them properly?”

“That may be so in regards to the vinegar. However, it is becoming more common to use poitan rather than fuwano here in Genos, is it not? Though, that is not the case when it comes to the castle town.”

“Right. The folks in the castle town don’t like cheap ingredients, so I guess they’re not really taking to poitan.”

“But you were able to create such a delicious dish by mixing poitan and fuwano, Sir Asuta, so it occurred to me that you might be able to find a new use for fuwano from Banarm.”

I still didn’t really grasp what he was getting at, so I asked for more details, and found out that this fuwano was sold at a price that made it affordable even here in the post town. However, it was well known that poitan was becoming the mainstream choice among the people who lived here. Since it needed to still turn a profit after factoring in the cost of transporting it from Banarm, they had planned to sell their fuwano for a bit more than the local variety, but as things stood it seemed unlikely to be very popular.

“That being the case, the only option would be to sell it to the citizens of the castle town, but the fuwano from Genos and Banarm doesn’t taste all that different. I do not believe we will be able to reach our initial goal based on novelty alone.”

“I see... But is that really such a big problem for you? If it doesn’t seem like it will sell, then can’t you just lower your expectations for sales around here?”

“No, Duke Genos insisted that we should try to sell the amount we agreed on. He surely feels indebted due to my father’s death ten years ago, so he felt that he had to make the trade offer despite the disadvantageous conditions.”

But with the way things were working out, it left Welhide feeling awkward about the matter. After all, the young noble was a serious and passionate man.

“I understand. So, what about this fruit wine and vinegar? They cost enough that they could only be sold in the castle town, right?”

“Yes, this is ultimately just in addition to the fuwano. Since you use fruit wine in your cooking, I figured you might be able to find a new use for them as well.”

Now that I thought about it, Mikel had said there was no custom of using fruit wine as a cooking ingredient here in Genos. I got the feeling that even Varkas just used it to soften up meat. The only exception I could think of was how Timalo had used it to flavor his dessert.

“I’ll go ahead and give it a taste.”

Picking up the containers from the box, I went ahead and confirmed the contents. But when I did, I was taken more than a little off guard. The fruit wine and vinegar you could get ahold of in Genos tasted similar to red wine and balsamic vinegar respectively, but these were closer to white wine and wine vinegar.

“Ah, I think I could use these in cooking right away if I needed to.” Red and white wine could be considered different sorts of ingredients entirely. And this sort of vinegar would likely be closer to the ideal as an ingredient for mayonnaise and the like. “I’ll go ahead and take them back to the forest’s edge to try a couple things with them. But we’re set to leave Genos in a few days, so I’m not sure how much time I’ll be able to spend on them before that...”

“That is no concern. I realize I am the one asking an unreasonable favor here, after all,” Welhide nodded, looking dead serious. “And there is one other entirely unrelated matter I would like to discuss.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Has Sir Leeheim caused you all any further trouble?” Welhide asked, the look in his eyes growing even more serious. “Ever since he was turned down by that woman of the forest’s edge, his attitude seems to have abruptly changed. It really is inexcusable for a noble to act in such a way, as we are supposed to lead our people.”

“Ah, that. There haven’t been any issues on our end. I believe Duke Genos put a stop to him trying to cause the people of the forest’s edge any trouble.”

“Though I am not in a position to opine about how Genos is governed, if such a thing were to happen in Banarm, I would not be able to bring myself to

remain silent. When one is born as a noble, self discipline is crucial above all else... It is absolutely unacceptable to fall for someone of a different social standing,” Welhide said with a bit of a pained sigh. “Well then, please excuse me. I shall make arrangements so that I can pay you appropriately, Sir Asuta.”

“All right. I’ll try my best to live up to your expectations.”

Welhide got back in the tolos-drawn carriage and disappeared to the north. After he was gone, Vina Ruu turned my way while holding the wooden box and said, “Hey... Is that perhaps one of the nobles who fell for Reina?”

“Huh? How do you know about that, Vina Ruu?”

“Ludo and Rau Lea were discussing it. They seemed to be rather excited... Naturally, Reina was terribly troubled over what happened...”

I felt bad for Reina Ruu, but it seemed things had reached a point where it couldn’t be considered private anymore. Vina Ruu was one thing, but if Donda Ruu didn’t know about it, that could definitely lead to trouble down the line.

“And it wasn’t just nobles. There was also that young chef who...” Vina Ruu started to say, but then she suddenly stopped.

Following her gaze, I saw a figure hiding his face under the hood of a cloak approaching from the same direction where the carriage had left.

“Ah, is that you, Roy?”

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

Speak of the devil, it was the young chef from the castle town, Roy. He hadn’t shown himself at all since the time he tasted Myme’s cooking a month ago. He was looking rather worn out, plus he seemed to have an even more serious look in his eyes than before.

“I was a bit worried since I hadn’t heard from you at all. Were you unwell or something?”

“I wasn’t having any issues with my health, no. I’ve just been spending all my time in the kitchen lately,” Roy murmured as he scanned us and the load Vina Ruu was carrying with his eyes. “That was a carriage from the house of Genos earlier, wasn’t it? Do you have some sort of new achievement to your name

again?”

“No, this is fuwano, fruit wine, and vinegar from Banarm. I was asked to think up new ways to use these ingredients.”

“Hmph, sounds like a good deal.”

Roy’s expression was hidden under his hood. He went ahead and moved over toward the stalls. Once we got everything stored away we came back over ourselves, just in time to see Reina Ruu handing Roy a giba burger.

After moving aside for the next customer, Roy took a bite of the giba burger and gave a deep sigh.

“Hey, this dish was prepared by you women of the forest’s edge, not Asuta, right?”

As Reina Ruu prepared a fresh giba burger, she turned and shot him a quizzical look.

“Yes. It was originally Asuta’s dish, but now we make them.”

“Didn’t your people not even know you needed to bloodlet meat not so long ago? So how is it that you’re able to prepare such a high-quality dish?”

In the past, Roy seemed to have difficulty acting normally toward Reina Ruu, but today he was talking to her just fine. Actually, it was possible he wasn’t even able to recognize who he was talking to.

“I don’t really know how to answer that, but, well...Asuta’s cooking left a deep impression on us, so we ended up with a strong desire to make delicious food.”

“But just because you really wish for something, doesn’t mean it will come true.”

“Yes. But I believe that if you wish for it and strive hard, it’s a lot more likely that you’ll see it through,” Reina Ruu calmly responded while handing over a completed giba burger to a customer from Jagar. “You’re a chef from the castle town, correct?”

“Yeah. What does that matter?”

“Then are you also aiming to make dishes like that chef Varkas?”

Roy stared back at Reina Ruu in astonishment. “Hold on. How exactly do you know Varkas’s name?”

“Just recently...” Reina Ruu started to reply, only to be interrupted by a customer from Sym holding out coins for her. Seemingly no longer able to just keep watching, Vina Ruu approached from the myamuu giba stall she had been manning alongside Tsuvai.

“Reina...if you want to talk, shall I trade places with you? Ama Min Rutim should be here soon enough...”

“Okay,” Reina Ruu nodded back, then finished up what she was doing before stepping away from the stall along with Roy.

After receiving a look from Vina Ruu, I once again left the stall myself.

“On the tenth of the indigo month, we manned a kitchen alongside Varkas in the castle town. I assume you hadn’t heard about that,” Reina Ruu explained in the grove located a short distance away from the stalls. I went ahead and also added the details regarding the envoys from Banarm.

“I see. Something that interesting was happening in the world outside my home, huh? Well, unlike Timalo, Varkas would never invite someone like me,” Roy stated in a self-deprecating tone.

Meanwhile, Reina Ruu was staring at the side of his face, taking note of how his cheeks had really thinned out.

“Well then, allow me to ask once again... Do you wish to make dishes like that chef Varkas?”

“Varkas’s cooking, huh? Right. Matching him is the only goal imaginable for anyone who calls themselves a chef in the castle town. No other chef can use such a great many ingredients as freely as he can,” Roy replied, flicking back his hood and rustling his ungroomed dark-brown hair. “But for me...the most delicious cooking I ever had was made by Mikel at The Maiden in White.”

“Ah right, you worked in the same restaurant as Mikel.”

“Yeah. He couldn’t use as many different ingredients as Varkas and The Maiden in White was just a tiny little shop compared to Varkas’s restaurant or

the Turan manor... But for me, I always found his cooking the greatest.”

“So that’s why you haven’t shown yourself since eating that Myme girl’s cooking? It must have been quite a shock tasting cooking like Mikel’s, when you thought you would never experience it again,” Reina Ruu said. Roy shot her a blazing glare, but the second Ruu daughter just calmly met his gaze. “Wouldn’t it be wise to ask Mikel to teach you, then? Though he cannot use one of his arms properly, he’s still been able to instruct his own daughter on how to cook.”

“What would be the point? That little girl already inherited Mikel’s techniques. Even if he took someone like me as a student...I still couldn’t become Mikel.”

“There’s no need for you to become him. Just like I won’t ever be Asuta. But can you really overcome Mikel without knowing his techniques?”

Roy just stood there, looking completely overwhelmed.

But even now as she stood there facing him, Reina Ruu’s face remained perfectly calm. “That Myme girl may start selling her cooking at a stall soon. If that happens, you’ll be able to taste Mikel’s cooking again... Only your heart can tell you just what you might gain from that.”

Roy fell silent for a bit, offering no response. And after that, he turned around without saying a word.

As she watched him walk away, Reina Ruu breathed a sigh. “He and I don’t have any kind of connection, yet I still tried to give him advice he didn’t ask for. Just what was I thinking?”

“You surprised me. What exactly made you want to say something like that to Roy?”

“So that chef’s name is Roy? We weren’t even close enough for me to remember his name,” Reina Ruu mused, placing her hand on her cheek as she contemplated. “Why was it, I wonder? I’ve also spent this past month fretting so much that at times it felt like more than I could bear... Perhaps I felt some overlap between my distress and his...”

“I can’t really say. But I’ve had plenty of worries myself.”

“Your position is totally different from ours, Asuta. You’re closer to Myme and Varkas, for one thing,” Reina Ruu said, suddenly breaking out in a smile. “Still, my heart feels a bit lighter after visiting the Daleim lands. It must be because I found something I can work on. I’m making a new dish along with Sheera Ruu now, so once it’s done I’d like to have you give it a taste.”

“Gladly. I look forward to the day it’s ready.”



The following day, Yang also stopped by for the first time in a while.

“Lord Polarth told me how the welcome banquet went, Sir Asuta. I hear your skills were equally praised to those of Sir Varkas.”

“That’s an exaggeration. Personally, I’d say what happened was I learned how inexperienced I am and how amazing Varkas really is.”

“And yet half of those present judged you to be the superior chef, from what I was told. I could never hope to receive such praise,” Yang stated, his mouth stiffening up. “I feel as if I’ve gone back to being a chef in training, and it’s spurring me on to work even harder.”

After Yang left, Diel suddenly popped up.

“Man, it was really crazy after you left. We ended up chattering on and on about whose dishes were better! I couldn’t leave before the nobles, so by the end of it I felt like I would fall asleep on the spot.”

“Sounds like it was a real pain... So what were your impressions, Diel?”

“Hmm. I couldn’t really tell which one of you was more skilled...but I don’t really like herbs all that much, so for my personal tastes your dishes were way better!”

“Thanks, I’m glad to hear it.”

“Sure! Still, I couldn’t help but notice that both of you made really western-styled dishes... We don’t really use karon milk or dried milk much in Jagar. I might have enjoyed it even more if you had gone heavier on the tau oil and sugar,” Diel said, closing her eyes ecstatically. “My favorite dish of all is the

cubed giba meat stew served at that one inn. If I could, I'd love to have it every single day."

"I see. But you're forbidden from being outside of the castle town at night, aren't you?" I asked quietly back, worried her companion Labis might overhear.

"That's true," Diel disappointedly replied. "Thanks to that, I've only been able to eat it twice, even after being here in Genos for months. And since I had to be back before sunset, I couldn't even take my time and savor it!"

"Still, I'm really glad that you come here to the stalls when you can find the time."

At that, Diel's mood quickly recovered. She chuckled and said, "I'd like to have your cooking for dinner too, though. Make sure you let me know whenever you're invited to the castle town, okay?"

"I mean, I'm not exactly expecting to be invited there all that often in the future..."

"What are you saying?! At the very least, I'm sure a bunch of the nobles who were at that banquet would love to invite you to their own houses. There was so much murmuring about it that Duke Genos had to warn everyone not to disturb your everyday life if they didn't have a good reason."

I definitely felt honored to hear that...and also seriously grateful for Marstein's consideration.

"Still, I'm sure someone will summon you eventually. Especially that... What was her name? The lady from the house of Genos. You know, the wife of the duke's first son?"

"Ah, you mean Eulifia?"

"Right! Eulifia! She's sure to give it a try. It didn't seem like either the duke or his son had very much control over her."

Was Melfried's wife really that taken with my cooking? Well, I just had to pray that I wouldn't end up regretting that I'd come to her attention.

"So when she does, you make sure to let me know, okay? I've got all kinds of tricks and excuses I can use to slip into the next banquet too!" Diel said, smiling

like an angel.



My unusual guest for the following day turned out to be Arishuna, the star reader with Sym heritage, of all people.

“H-Huh? Ah, welcome.” I was shaken because I had a hard time even recognizing her. She wasn’t accompanied by Polarth or any guards this time around, instead appearing before me on her own wearing an old leather traveler’s cloak.

“Is my visit here, troublesome...?”

“N-No, of course not... But what’s with the outfit?”

“If I wore, my normal attire, it would attract attention, so I brought out, my old clothing.”

From what I had been told, she had lived a life of wandering about with her family before settling here in Genos. Dressed up like that, she looked just like any traveler from Sym. It was just that she was a bit smaller.

“Polarth, is busy. So I came, on my own,” Arishuna explained, anticipating the question I had.

“Well, thanks for coming. Um, were you wanting something from the stalls...?”

“Yes. I could not hold back, my desire for your cooking, any longer, Asuta,” Arishuna replied with a small nod, her face remaining completely expressionless. She reached around in her cloak, only to eventually stop and return her gaze to me. “The situation has taken, a dire turn...”

“Huh? What is it?”

“I forgot, my coins.”

For a moment, I was left at a loss for words.

Arishuna expressionlessly gave me a bow. “I will leave. My apologies, but I shall visit again, some other time.”

“H-Hold on! Are you planning on going back to the castle town to get your

coins?”

“No. I do not have, much strength for walking. It would be difficult, to return again today. It is regrettable, but I will wait, for the next opportunity.”

“In that case, I’ll put it on your tab. Next time you stop by, you can pay for two.”

Arishuna’s black eyes, as still as a moonlit lake, stared straight at me.

“You would place, such trust in me? But we are only, just barely acquainted, at present.”

“Yeah. But I can’t imagine someone living in the castle town would shirk a bill of just one or two red coins,” I replied, breaking out in a smile without thinking. “If you don’t show up in the next month, I guess I could bill Duke Genos. You’re his guest, after all.”

“I firmly wish, to live up, to your trust...” Arishuna brought her hands together in a complex sign, then gave a deep bow. Her fingers were adorned with rings, and were shockingly slender.

“So, what dish do you want? There’s two types from my stalls and two others from the Ruu clan’s, and then there’s the special dish.”

“The special dish?”

“That’s right. It’s a unique item only sold to customers who pull a winning lot. It’s called a giba cutlet sandwich, and it’s really popular.”

Arishuna slowly shook her head.

“I am, a star reader. I am not permitted, to test my own fate.”

“I see,” I replied, once again shooting her a smile. This girl seemed even harder to read than most folks from Sym, and perhaps because of that she came across as more stiff and formal. But right now, it was making her seem all the more charming. “So then, which dish do you want? You can give any dish but these giba manju a taste test, so shall I set out a plate?”

“No, I do not wish, to trouble you unnecessarily. I shall take, that dish.”

“A giba manju, right? Got it,” I replied, grabbing a piping hot giba manju from

the wooden steaming basket. "It's hot, so please take care not to burn yourself. This dish costs two red coins, okay?"

"I swear, to come pay you back, in the future," Arishuna said with another nod, holding out her hands. I handed over the giba manju to her dark-skinned, slender fingers.

Still fully expressionless, the star reader took a bite, and then she glanced my way.

"What do you think? The lack of herbs doesn't make it too bland, does it?"

"No, it is delicious... Truly delicious."

"I see. Thank you."

However, her expression still hadn't shifted, sure enough. Holding the white giba manju in both hands, she continued to bite into it.

"That inn is now selling the dish with the herbs that we discussed before. Once Polarth is less busy, I hope that you'll go give it a try."

"Right. I shall, be looking forward to it." Having finished eating the giba manju, Arishuna once again brought her fingers together and bowed. "Asuta, I hear that you, are traveling to Dabagg. Are you, departing soon?"

"Ah, yeah. I'm surprised you heard about that. We're set to leave on the twenty-second of the indigo month."

"I see... You do not need, your stars read, correct?"

"Yeah. We don't exactly put much stock in fortune-telling... Ah, sorry. I didn't mean to be rude, saying that to a star reader."

"No. Star reading, grants hope and despair, equally. I believe it, only proper, not to rely on it, needlessly," Arishuna replied, reaching around inside her cloak again as she did so. Then, she held her left arm out toward me. "Here, Asuta."

"Huh? What's this?"

Atop her slender, long-fingered hand sat a small purple stone. It was a beautiful gem around the size of a thumb, and was shaped a bit like a magatama.

“It is a lapista stone, which governs, safe travels.”

“Ah, sorry, but I can’t accept such a gift...”

“It is not, a gift. I am simply, entrusting it to you, until your journey, is over,” Arishuna stated in a low, clear voice. “It is said that, a lapista stone, will always return, to its owner. If you leave on a journey, while carrying this, you will surely, make it back.”

“Ah, so it’s like one of those amulets you bring back to the shrine you bought it from after a year, huh...?” I murmured to myself. After a bit of hesitation, I decided to accept. “Got it. So I just need to give it back to you once I return from my trip, right? In that case, how about I return it to you in exchange for those two red coins?”

“That would be fine,” Arishuna said, her dazzling eyes narrowing under her hood. “Asuta, I shall await, your return. I am certain, your journey will go well.”

“Thank you. You take care too, okay?”

“Right.”

With that, Arishuna departed. Had she gone out of her way to visit the stalls just to deliver the stone? Feeling faintly content somehow, I went ahead and carefully stored the lapista stone in the cloth bag at my hip.

Pretty much just like that, our ten days of business, busy as they were, came to a peaceful close.

Chapter 2: Departing on a Journey

1

It was now the twenty-second of the indigo month. Just as planned, we were about to depart on our trip to Dabagg.

After finishing up the bare minimum tasks like handling our washing at the break of dawn, we went ahead and got the wagon ready. For his part, Gilulu kept tilting his head at the fact that we were heading out several hours earlier than usual.

“Well then, I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about with Ai Fa coming along, but do try not to get careless just to be safe,” Lem Dom said, seeing us off. Since it was necessary to stir the meat buried in pico leaves once a day, we were having her look after the Fa house. After saying farewell to this girl who seemed to be growing more and more wild each time we met, we departed from our home.

After picking up Toor Deen, we passed through the Ruu settlement, then headed into town, where we met up with Mikel and Myme. Though we only had sundials to rely on for keeping to our schedule, not a single person was late.

Our group heading for Dabagg numbered thirteen, which was big enough to fill two wagons.

Ai Fa was handling the reins of the Fa clan wagon, and riding within it were me, Jeeda, Mikel, Myme, and Zasshuma, for a total of six. Meanwhile, Dan Rutim was the one driving the Ruu clan’s wagon, with Deem Rutim, Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, Rimee Ruu, Toor Deen, and Bartha inside, making for a group of seven. I had heard that six or seven was the maximum capacity for a single-totos-drawn wagon, so we had the smaller Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen ride together in order to lighten the load on the huge birds pulling us along.



From the main highway running north to south through the post town, we turned onto the road to the west that the gates of the castle town opened onto, then we just kept on going. Thanks to how early in the morning it was, there weren't many other travelers around. Once our wagons passed by the stone walls of Genos, for a while all we saw was the path in front of us, sandwiched between dense thickets.

"Genos is a frontier town that was only just settled two hundred years back. The highway's real nice, but you step off the beaten path at all and this is what you get," our guide Zasshuma explained as the wagon swayed along.

Since nobody else was speaking up, I called out from the seat across from him, "Oh, really? It's hard to imagine that Genos only has a history of two hundred or so years. Seeing how the people of the forest's edge were treated as heretics when they moved here eighty years ago, I figured this was a much older town."

"Yeah. At first it was just a piddly settlement for wandering westerners located in the free territories near the border, but then they discovered the huge Tanto river, and in no time at all the house of Count Genos was dispatched from the capital and took over. That was when that fine castle town was built."

"Then what happened to the people who were living there to begin with?"

"Hmm? Naturally, the folks who seemed useful were welcomed as citizens of Genos, and those who didn't were driven off. That inn owner you're so close to probably has indigenous blood flowing in his veins, right?"

"Huh? You mean Milano Mas?"

"Yeah, that's right. The majority of westerners don't have family names, after all. The ones that do, maybe it's because a bit of Sym culture got carried over in those days, but I don't really know the details. At any rate, anyone living in Genos with a family name is from a bloodline that runs back to those frontier settlement days."

I see, I thought to myself, feeling impressed. Out of all the westerners I had met up till now, the only ones I could recall having last names were Milano Mas's family and Shilly Rou.

“Then folks from nearby regions started moving in one after another, forming the foundation for the current Genos. As they started doing business with folks from Sym and Jaguar, the town kept on developing, and within a hundred years it had become the greatest city on the frontier.”

Then the house of Genos was granted the rank of duke, and the houses of Daleim, Turan, and Saturas were conferred the rank of count. Not long after, they accepted the people of the forest’s edge as citizens to deal with the significant losses they were suffering from giba attacks.

“When you lay it out like that, I guess Genos has really changed a lot over time.”

“That’s true. And it’s in the midst of another big change right now,” Zasshuma said amusedly, then he suddenly brought his face close to mine. “Still, it’s just been the two of us talking for a while now. Kinda makes for a gloomy trip, don’t you think?”

There were three reasons for that.

First up, Ai Fa was even more serious than usual as she focused on driving the wagon. Then you had the fact that Jeeda was just untalkative by nature. And lastly...Mikel and Myme were in the middle of a father-daughter fight.

“My dad won’t let me open a stall in the post town!” Myme had told me when I saw her several days back in the post town. “He keeps on saying that since there are so many outlaws around the post town, it’s too dangerous for a child like me to open a shop. Right when I was ready to reveal my completed dish to everyone... It’s just awful.”

“Yeah, but supposedly there’s a lot of crime in the post town. From what I’ve heard, we people of the forest’s edge have been able to stay out of danger because so many people are afraid of us.”

“I understand that. But if that’s the problem, why can’t I just hire a bodyguard? When I try to talk to dad about it, he just says you can’t trust anyone you can hire for cheap.”

In that case, it could make sense to discuss the matter with Zasshuma and have him introduce her to someone trustworthy. At least, that’s what I thought,

but if I moved forward with my idea and didn't consult Mikel, it could turn into an even bigger problem. To avoid that, I had been looking for a chance to propose the idea to the eternally displeased-looking Mikel all morning. But right now, Mikel and Myme weren't talking at all, and were facing away from each other. After a brief comment to Zasshuma, I went ahead and moved up toward the driver's seat.

"How are you doing, Ai Fa?"

"I'm having no issues. The path just keeps on stretching onward, with the woods all around us."

The firm stone path continued west with a gentle curve. Since Dabagg was half a day from Genos, if you left at the break of dawn you would arrive around when the sun hit its peak. Since the route was just a single path, there was no worry of getting lost.

"Hey, if you've got the leeway for it, why don't you join in the conversation too? It's not really an issue for me personally, but it would be nice to clear away this tension in the air before we reach Dabagg."

"I have no such leeway. If I let my guard down, who knows what danger may appear before us."

Ai Fa was being so watchful because she had heard how the envoys from Banarm had lost several totems to an assault by poisonous insects. She was gripping the reins with the full strength of a hunter, as if to say she wouldn't ever let her precious Gilulu meet such a tragic fate.

"But don't poisonous insects creep up on you from the ground? So we should be on guard when we take a break rather than while we're moving, right?"

"The safest option is to remain constantly on guard. But you don't need to worry yourself. Just get some rest."

She didn't even glance my way when she said that. Her profile looked dead serious too. As the wind rustled her blonde bangs, her wonderful forehead was in plain view. Her nose was high and her lips thin, and her face was quite elegant as a whole. There wasn't so much as a single wrinkle on her smooth cheek, and her eyes with their piercing gaze were adorned with long golden

eyelashes.



I ended up thinking to myself once again about what a beautiful face she had. But it wasn't *just* pretty, as the sharpness of a hunter blended with the gentleness of a woman, giving her an elegance all her own.

"Do you have some sort of further business with me...?"

"Ah, no, not really."

"Then go take it easy back in the wagon... I can't help but be distracted when you stare at me like that."

I went ahead and followed my clan head's instructions before my face could turn beet red. There had been no great changes in Ai Fa following that night ten days back. However, there might have been some small ones. Like, there had been more cases lately where she seemed somehow out of sorts, at times acting kindly or coldly with no pattern I could make sense of. However, the same might have been true for me too; I didn't think I had been this captivated by the sight of Ai Fa during one of our conversations for months.

"I see. So things have been going well for you at the forest's edge, huh? Well, glad to hear it. I've never been near Masara before, since there aren't any big towns around there. But the gaaje leopards that live in the area are supposed to be just as nasty as giba, aren't they?" Zasshuma was saying to Jeeda as I returned to my seat.

The small fourteen-year-old boy with red hair, yellow eyes, and just as much intensity as the hunters of the forest's edge was only offering brief replies with his usual sour look. "Yeah. They're real dangerous."

"But the barobaro birds you can catch there are exquisite, from what I hear. A work buddy told me once how pricey their meat is."

"Yeah. They're real tasty."

"I see. I'd like to give it a try myself sometime... So, you two intend to keep staying at the forest's edge for the time being?"

"Yeah. That's the plan."

"Gotcha. I always say, regardless of where you live, your hometown's still your hometown. But as long as it's not causing you any issues, it's not like

there's any need to hurry back," Zasshuma rambled, putting an end to the conversation before moving his face close to mine again. "That hunter from Masara seems just as unfriendly as the ones from the forest's edge. Though that big fellow driving the other wagon seems pretty pleasant."

"His name's Dan Rutim. You've met his son already, Gazraan Rutim."

"Gazraan Rutim...? Ah, that extra serious hunter from the forest's edge, right? They don't seem very much alike," Zasshuma replied, a cheerful grin crossing his unshaven face. "I remember thinking I'd like to have a drink with that guy someday, but I never imagined I'd have the chance to do so with his old man. I'll be looking forward to tonight."

"Yeah, I'm sure you and Dan Rutim will get along just fine."

"Hmm. Then in that case, guess I really would have been better off in the other wagon. They've got a pair of beautiful women over there too." When I shot him a surprised look, Zasshuma broke out in an even brighter grin. "I have no intention of getting into trouble with the people of the forest's edge, so you don't have to look so worried. It's just, it puts you more at ease, sitting with beautiful young women rather than dour hunters or old folks, you know?"

Now that he had brought it up, Zasshuma had said something about paying to spend a night with Vina Ruu back when they first met. I had figured that had been part of his act, pretending to be the unrestrained leader of a group of merchants, but surprisingly, it might have actually been how he really felt.

"Seems like you're in a pretty good mood, Zasshuma. Are you excited about heading back home for the first time in a while?"

"Yeah. Well, I'm at least happy at the thought of getting to eat delicious karon meat."

"And I'm looking forward to seeing just what sort of town Dabagg is." I realized that once again it was just me and Zasshuma excitedly chatting away. Still, there was no real helping that. After all, despite the fact that we were finally off on our little trip, the two of us were the only ones in the wagon who were actually excited about it.

As that thought ran through my head, I heard Myme, who had been cradling

her knees in the corner, let out an “Ooh” of admiration.

Both Zasshuma and I looked her way. Since we had the canopy up in the rear, we could see the surrounding scenery.

As we passed out of the thicket, a desolate landscape came into view. The sandy earth looked utterly devoid of moisture, with rocks sticking up here and there. It was a stark sight, with the land stretching out so wide it seemed as if you could see the entire horizon. Something about it made the heart tremble.

“Amazing! This is my first time seeing such open scenery outside of the Daleim lands!” Myme said with a smile, turning my way.

I was simply glad to see her smile, but Zasshuma gave a “Hmm” and rubbed his chin with a doubtful look. “However, all of this is just useless wastelands. There aren’t any watering holes and you can’t grow crops here, so as you can see, it’s abandoned. The only things that can live in a place like this are poisonous insects and sand lizards.”

“Even so, I still can’t help but find it somehow exciting! I mean, this is my first time away from Genos.”

“Well, most folks never set foot outside of the place they were born, living out their whole lives there. I guess it’s only natural to be curious,” Zasshuma said with a grin, leaning forward and staring out to the north. “The western territory is vast, but the areas where folks can live are pretty limited. And they’re spilling blood to snatch land back and forth along the border with Mahyudra even now. You should all be grateful to have been born somewhere as peaceful as Genos.”

“Yeah. It’s all down to the judgment of the western god,” Myme said.

After that, we took a break every two hours as we continued to head west.

A large merchant caravan we passed along the way must have been heading to Genos to sell karon meat. As the sun rose higher in the sky, we passed a traveler from Sym riding alone atop a tolos, and some unidentifiable wagon. Each time, Ai Fa grew tense, but fortunately we didn’t end up getting attacked by any bandits pretending to be travelers.

During the break periods, we burned some leaves to keep away poisonous

insects, and then let our tired bodies get some rest. Even if the suspension was working to some degree, the swaying of the wagon was still enough to wear you down. As the drivers, Ai Fa and Dan Rutim in particular had to deal with a lot more fatigue, but they were tough hunters of the forest's edge, so neither of them ended up yielding the reins of their totos to anyone else.

After six hours of riding in wagons with two breaks in the middle...Dabagg finally came into view.

"Look, that's the town border," Zasshuma said, gesturing toward the wooden fence stretching north and south in the distance. It was as if the barrier made of logs was cleaving the ground from the sky. Well, realistically, the fence was still just a fence. I could tell how sturdy it was despite the distance, but it seemed to be shorter than a person was tall.

"You see, that fence is to keep the karon from getting out. I mean, there's no way they could build a stone wall stretching all the way around Dabagg's ranches. Just like with Genos's post town and the Daleim lands, it's people who protect the land, not some fortification."

Zasshuma's expression had grown brighter and brighter as we approached the place he was born.

With just another half hour or so, we finally arrived at Dabagg. The stone road came to a sudden end right before the town's entrance, giving way to a square plaza that was around ten meters wide. After crossing it, we arrived at the fence, where two guards with spears were standing.

Looking closely, the fence was built to open and close in just that one spot, and on the other side I could make out a wooden building and some totos tied to trees. Apparently, that was the rear entrance to town and they were the gatekeepers. That building behind them served as their barracks.

Ai Fa and Dan Rutim stopped the wagons before the fence, and the younger of the guards rather casually called out, "Looks like we've got a load of unfamiliar faces here. What business do you have in Dabagg?"

These men in their leather armor didn't look all that different from the guards I was used to seeing around the Genos post town, but their behavior was a lot less formal, and when they looked at us they seemed totally unconcerned.

“We’re from Genos, and we came here to Dabagg to do business,” our guide Zasshuma said with a smile, hopping down from the wagon and approaching the guards. “By the way, I was born here in Dabagg. I’m from the Malotta ranch to the north, but now I work as a bodyguard. Look, here’s the necklace that proves I’m officially certified.”

“Ooh, I didn’t know old man Malotta had such a fine son. And you’re a proper bodyguard. Impressive,” the man replied, seeming to open up even further. Then he glanced over toward the wagons. “They must be quite the merchant group to hire an official bodyguard...but their carts are awfully small...”

“They may not look like much, but they’re some fine folks. There isn’t a single person in the Genos post town who doesn’t know them by now, I’d say.”

“I see. Well then, could we go ahead and look everyone over to start with?”

At their prompting, all of us descended from the wagons. As it happened, entering into Dabagg required one inspection that Genos didn’t.

“Now then, could you show me your right shoulders?”

The hunters brushed aside their cloaks and I rolled up the sleeve on my t-shirt. The women’s shoulders were only covered by their transparent veils, so they didn’t need to do anything further. Bartha was wearing leather armor today, which meant she just had to roll up her sleeve like me.

There was a custom in the western kingdom that criminals were given tattoos. This was an inspection to confirm we hadn’t committed any serious crimes in the past, or had any wanted criminals in our midst.

Though it was just a cursory inspection, it still likely helped to keep the peace in town. Supposedly, Genos had so many outlaws gather there precisely because they didn’t do so.

“Well, while Genos may skip that whole hassle, they’ve got a lot of guards out protecting the town. It’s all down to how the lord of the land decides to handle things,” Zasshuma had said.

At any rate, we awaited their inspection. All it involved was those soldiers with spears coming and checking us one by one from the left and right.

Eventually, one of them stopped right in front of Jeeda. It was the guard with some years on him who hadn't talked to Zasshuma. As he peered at Jeeda's face he tilted his head and went "Hmm?"

"What's the matter? We shouldn't have any criminals mixed in with the group," Zasshuma called out, sounding suspicious.

"Right," the guard dubiously replied. "It's not as if I suspect him of being a criminal or anything... I was just a bit surprised since he looks just like this one outlaw they stopped searching for ten years ago."

Jeeda silently stared back at the guard's face. From just a short distance away, Bartha chuckled and called out, "Yeah, there aren't exactly many westerners out there with red hair and yellow eyes. But he's not the one you're thinking of. He's not exactly tall enough to be that guy, right?"

"I know. After all, that man was supposedly executed in Genos back then...and from what I hear, he had nothing to do with half the crimes he was charged with anyway."

The man was undoubtedly referring to Goram Redbeard, who was executed thanks to Cycloeus and Ciluel's plot. And it seemed the name of the Red Beards that he led had reached out here too.

Still, the man surely never thought in his wildest dreams that he was looking at Goram Redbeard's wife and son. Regardless, he went ahead and inspected the rest of the group, looking a bit nostalgic all the while.

"All right, there don't seem to be any issues here... Once again, we welcome you to Dabagg. I wish you good luck with your business."

"Right. We'll be passing through again midday tomorrow," Zasshuma replied, and with that we returned to the wagons. After passing by the small barracks, we found a path paved with dirt rather than stone continuing onward. "Now we're finally entering into Dabagg. Just go ahead and follow the path for now."

Small wooden structures lined either side of the road, blocking the fields from view. Since I wasn't able to spy any karon earlier when we were at a distance, now the anticipation was starting to make my heart pound faster.

"Hmph, even though it's been years now, nothing's changed here at all..."

Asuta, do you mind if we head to my place first rather than the inn?"

"Okay. Since we have limited time, I'd love the chance to see a karon ranch first."

"Then in that case, let's turn onto that path to the right."

"Understood," Ai Fa replied with a nod from up in the driver's seat.

My clan head directed Gilulu as instructed, and suddenly our field of view opened wide. We were now on a small path between wooden fences. Just beyond those fences were fields filled with dense green grass.

I could hear oohs and ahhs filled with surprise coming from the wagon following behind us. They must have been seeing the same things we were: huge beasts wandering slowly around the ranches.

"So those are karon, huh?" I questioned as I leaned forward next to the driver's seat.

They certainly were big. In terms of animals I was familiar with, they were at least as big as Holstein cattle if not larger. However, they didn't look like cattle exactly. How to describe their appearance...

In addition to their large bodies they also had similarly thick necks and legs. At the ends of their thick necks were large heads with protruding snouts. I couldn't spy any horns or tusks, but little elliptical ears popped up at the tops of their heads. The fur coating their bodies was brown with white spots, and since it wasn't very long, the general shape of their short and stout bodies was easy to distinguish.

If I had to say...they probably looked most similar to tapirs. That's just what they reminded me of, somehow, with their long snouts, sluggish-looking figures, and the vague aura of being relaxed that hung about them.

However, they certainly were bigger than the tapirs I was familiar with. The biggest one I could spy looked like it had to be two meters or so long. The only thing they did was just move slowly along and graze on the grass at their feet. Just like with the kimyuus, this was my first time seeing a karon despite having had a good number of opportunities to cook them.

“These also seem to be rather carefree animals...” Ai Fa suddenly said from the driver’s seat. “But they’re huge. If they were to attack us, they could be just as threatening as giba.”

“That’s true. You’d better watch out so you don’t get trampled by them, okay?” I teased.

“This is no joke. We should listen carefully to the people accustomed to handling them and take care not to invite any danger upon ourselves.”

“I know, I know. You don’t need to worry,” I replied with a smile, only for Ai Fa to shoot me a glare out of the corner of her eye.

At any rate, our educational field trip was off to an incredibly relaxed start.

2

“Hey there, ma. You’re looking well,” Zasshuma called out, and the eyes of the older woman milking a karon opened wide.

“Oh, my!” she loudly exclaimed. “Oh me, oh my, could that be you, Zasshuma? I hardly recognize you!”

“What’s that mean? It can’t be more than two years since the last time we saw each other.”

“So you say, but you’ve gone and grown that ugly mustache since then...”

“Well, that can’t be the reason...because I’m sure I remember you saying that exact thing to me before I left,” Zasshuma said with a strained grin, while the woman shot him back a bright smile.

“Glad to have you back! And you seem to be doing well yourself!”

Though she wasn’t all that tall, she was a robust, strong-looking lady. Her hair and eyes were dark brown, and her skin was a tanned shade. Supposedly, as you went farther north to places like Banarm, a lot of folks had ivory-white skin, but we just kept going west to reach Dabagg, so it was no surprise that her tanned color was more common here.

“So, looks like you brought along quite a crowd this time. I see some young

women in the mix, but I can't imagine you bringing home a bride like this."

"These people hired me. They came here from Genos to do business, but they said they wanted to see a karon ranch first, so I brought them here."

"Hmm? What an odd request. But if you're after karon meat, we've got plenty prepared," the woman said, offering us a bright smile.

We were currently at a karon barn. After leaving our wagons and tolos near the house, Zasshuma had led us here. It was a big building with a high ceiling and a wide-open entrance, and there were some bad smells floating around here and there. Though the inside of the barn was sectioned off with fences, there weren't any other karon in sight.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Asuta of the Fa clan, and I run some food stalls in the Genos post town. I suppose I'm technically in charge of this group."

"What a polite young man. The name's Miza. I'm Zasshuma's ma. My husband's looking after the karon out front," the woman said as she looked us over with great curiosity. "Still, you don't look much like merchants, especially the people wearing the fur cloaks. Are you some sort of hunters?"

"Ah, they hunt giba, and these two are gaaje hunters."

"Giba and gaaje?! They don't sound like anything fit for eating, no matter how you boil or grill them!" Miza said, but then she tilted her head. "Hmm? But I've heard only the people of the forest's edge hunt giba, so could it be..."

"They're people of the forest's edge, yeah. Makes for some unusual guests, right?" Zasshuma responded.

"Oh, my!" Miza loudly proclaimed. "That certainly is something. People of the forest's edge, huh...? Now that you mention it, they do have dark skin like folks from Sym..."

"It's not like you're any more familiar with people from Sym than you are with people of the forest's edge. Easterners have even darker skin, you know."

"Hmm... This certainly is a surprise. Then are you all people of the forest's edge too...?"

"Yes. I'm Reina Ruu of the Ruu clan. This is my youngest sister Rimee Ruu,

Sheera Ruu from one of our branch houses, and Toor Deen of the Deen clan,” Reina Ruu replied with a polite bow, looking just as calm and composed as always. Seeing that, Miza once again broke out in a broad grin.

“You women of the forest’s edge sure are lookers! Guess there’s no way beauties like you would ever be marrying my Zasshuma. Sorry for the rude comment there earlier.”

“Do you *have* to keep on insulting me at every turn? Jeez...” Zasshuma grumbled, but his eyes were smiling. It seemed he really did have a great relationship with his mother, just like I had heard.

This was a warm welcome of a sort that would be entirely unimaginable in Genos. It seemed there actually was less fear toward the people of the forest’s edge out here. Maybe it was only natural that hunters of giba and gaaje would be treated no differently from each other, aside from the issues arising from the fact that one of those groups lacked faith in the four great gods.

Still, that didn’t change the fact that hunters were characteristically intimidating. Though Miza wasn’t on guard in the least around Reina Ruu and the other women, she still seemed rather timid toward Ai Fa, Dan Rutim, and Jeeda.

“Um, this is just a little gift. Please accept it, for letting us observe your ranch,” I said, holding out a large bundle. It was packed with smoked giba meat and sausages.

“Oh, my,” Miza replied, her eyes narrowing as she smiled. “Thanks for being so considerate. How about I treat you to lunch in return? The sun must already be past its peak, right?”

“Yeah, let’s go ahead and eat before looking around the ranch. Couldn’t say if it will be good enough to satisfy such famed chefs from Genos like you lot, though,” Zasshuma agreed.

With that, we headed back to the house that we had passed by before. Rather than the big main structure, though, we were led to a log cabin constructed beside it.

“Hmm? Who are they?”

As we stepped inside, we were met with astonished looks from all around. There had to be fifteen men and women of all ages crowded inside. Miza looked around at them with a smile.

“These are guests visiting the ranch. They came all the way here from Genos to check the place out.”

“Ooh, from Genos? Hmm...? You’re Zasshuma, aren’t you?!” one of the men loudly questioned.

Turning his way, Zasshuma grinned and said, “Hey there.”

“It sure has been a while! Have you finally made up your mind to move back in?”

“Cut that out. You really think I’d go bowing my head and chasing around karon at this point?”

“It would be real welcome if you would! Though if you went around acting all pompous about being the boss’s son, I’d kick you out myself!”

Apparently, that man wasn’t his father, but was some sort of relative regardless.

The other folks spread around the room were holding steaming plates in their hands, murmuring as they watched over our actions. They didn’t seem to be avoiding us, but they were definitely curious about the unfamiliar sight of hunters from the forest’s edge and Masara.

“Is there still broth left? Ah, that should be plenty. Sorry, but could you prepare enough meat for the guests too?”

“Got it,” a number of the women replied before heading to the rear of the building. Apparently, this was a dining room and rest area for the people who worked the ranch.

The dirt ground was exposed at our feet, and there were two large stoves set in the corner of the room. There were metal pots set atop them, which were giving off a wonderful aroma.

Before long the women reappeared with a wooden plank, atop which sat thin cuts of meat. A brilliantly red mountain of the stuff, which had naturally come

from karon. It was all dropped into a pot, alongside a token amount of aria.

“It’ll be cooked and ready in just a bit... By the way, where exactly did my husband get to?”

“He ate in a hurry and then left. Seemed he was worried about that karon with the hurt leg.”

“Hmm, then we’ll stop by and say hi when you’re leaving the ranch. Well, I guess you may not want to see him, though...”

“Hardly. He’s the one who doesn’t want to see me,” Zasshuma replied with a strained chuckle.

Homesickness really did have a big impact on people. Even though he was wearing a traveler’s cloak with a sword hanging from his belt underneath, right now he seemed less like a professional bodyguard and more like someone who just belonged here at the ranch.

“You’re quite the beauty. How about marrying into my house?” the man who had first called out to Zasshuma said to Reina Ruu with a grin.

“I’m sorry,” Reina Ruu replied with a courteous smile of her own. “I would not be permitted to marry into an outside family. But I appreciate the sentiment.”

“That’s a shame! Are you a princess from Sym or something?”

“No, I’m a person of the forest’s edge...”

“A person of the forest’s edge? Ooh! Weren’t they all supposed to have horns and tusks like giba? Well, not that I’ve ever even seen a giba to begin with.”

It wasn’t just Reina Ruu, as the other women and even Dan Rutim were also getting pelted with questions. Just as I was thinking to myself how friendly they all were, Zasshuma explained with a strained grin, “Sorry we’ve got so many folks here who don’t know their manners. They don’t get to head into town very often, so most of them are ignorant to the ways of the world. I was the same, up until I left home. I had barely even heard of the people of the forest’s edge before that.”

“I see. Well, it sounds like the others are having fun talking to them.”

It was then that Ai Fa called out to me from behind. “Hey. You’re the one who

asked Toor Deen to accompany us, aren't you? She was left feeling lonely on the wagon ride here, so at least pay a little attention to her now."

Ai Fa had a sour look on her face, while Toor Deen stood there beside her, timidly ducking her head.

"Ah, sorry about that. But hasn't she opened up to the folks from the Ruu clan? I mean, Rimee Ruu was there with her."

"Even if everyone else was making an effort, Toor Deen would still not feel able to speak freely. After all, the Ruu are one of the leading clans."

"Got it. Sorry, Toor Deen."

"A-Ah, no! You don't need to worry about someone like me," Toor Deen said, but she looked quite relieved as she walked over to my side.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa turned away with a "Hmph."

Still, it really was quite considerate and attentive of my clan head to notice that Toor Deen was feeling left out so quickly and send her over to me.

Well, Ai Fa's always been like that...

As I felt a bit of warmth stirring in the depths of my heart, I went ahead and looked over the remaining members of the group.

Bartha and Jeeda were off on their own, watching over the proceedings. Deem Rutim stood protectively behind Dan Rutim with a shine in his eyes as the former clan head broke out in laughter. Though Mikel had remained silent all this time, he was now quietly talking about something with one of the men from the ranch, and as for Myme...she was in front of the stoves, having a friendly chat with the women.

Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves... It sure is nice, seeing people of the forest's edge talking to outsiders so naturally, I thought to myself.

Then, one of the women shouted out, "The meat's cooked! If you let karon meat boil too long, it gets tough, so go ahead and dig in while it's just right."

They started to fill up the plates that had been brought in alongside the meat with karon soup one after another. When one of those plates reached my hands, I stared into it with great curiosity.

It was a translucent soup with a bit of whiteness to it. Heaps of the dark-brown boiled meat sank down in the soup, and were layered with chunks of aria. There really wasn't much to say about the appearance, but it had an absolutely wonderful aroma, with the smell of the boiled meat and garlic-like myamuu. With great anticipation pushing me onward, I picked up my wooden spoon.

"What do you think? I'm sorry it's such a crude dish, but we did make sure to add plenty of meat."

"Ah, it's delicious," I earnestly replied.

It was far better than the soup dishes that I had tasted in the Genos post town. They got a really effective stock from the karon, and the myamuu's aroma helped it stand out even further. In terms of dishes I was familiar with, it reminded me of oxtail soup.

The meat was boiled just the right amount, making it wonderfully tender and yet still pleasingly chewy. Red meat formed a solid core for the dish, and it had a vibrant flavor. Karon meat really did seem to be similar to beef.

"Ah, it sure is tasty. What cut of meat did you use?"

"It's hard to say exactly where the meat came from. After all, that was a pile of scraps shaved off the bones."

"I see. Still, it was way more delicious than the karon meat I've had in Genos."

"If that weren't the case, we wouldn't be able to proudly call ourselves a karon town. But, well, it's only natural for fresh meat to be tastier than stuff pickled in salt," Miza replied with a bright smile, then sipped down some of her own soup.

Toor Deen also whispered to me, "It's really good."

At the same time, I spotted Myme hurrying over. "Asuta, they said they didn't use anything but salt and myamuu in this dish! And yet it's so shockingly good!"

"Yeah, it's delicious. It must have taken quite a bit of time to get such a solid stock, right?"

"Yup, we keep the fires going from morning till night to boil down the karon

fat. While we're doing that, we also carry out the preparations for the next day's meals. This soup was made by just boiling karon bones."

"You use lilo leaves to get rid of the smell, right? And aria were the only vegetable you used?" Myme asked.

"That's right," Miza replied with an easygoing nod. "Vegetables are considered a luxury around these parts, so for midday meals we only use aria. I really am sorry for serving you such a crude lunch."

"Not at all! I think it's truly wonderful how you were able to make such a delicious dish using just karon meat and bones, lilo leaves, aria, salt, and myamuu for ingredients!"

Faced with Myme's brilliant smile, Miza broke out in a grin of her own. "Thank you for saying so. Are you staying at an inn for the night? You should be able to taste even higher quality karon cooking there."

"Really? Still, I love this dish!"

I felt the same way as Myme. Though they only used a meager variety of ingredients, the dish really showed the results of all the time they put into it. It gave me a look into an entirely different culinary culture than that of Genos, which was currently overflowing with so many different ingredients that they didn't know what to do with them.

And somehow, I feel like the cuisine in Genos is lacking something else too. But, well, it's not like I can speak so definitively when I only know about the food in the port town and the castle town. I couldn't help but think to myself that the next time I visited the Daleim lands, I would very much like to sample some local cooking.

Around then, a voice loudly called out from the door, "Well, if it isn't Zasshuma!" Turning that way, I found a man with a robust build who looked just a bit younger than our guide stepping into the room.

"Hey there, Alma. Glad to see you looking well."

"Right back at you! You seem to get more and more impressive each time I see you!" that Alma man replied, smiling and patting Zasshuma on the shoulder. At least for now, everyone seemed to be quite welcoming toward the

bodyguard.

“Allow me to introduce you, Asuta. This guy’s my little sister’s husband, Alma.”

When Zasshuma called me over, I walked over to join him, along with Toor Deen.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Asuta of the Fa clan, and thanks to Zasshuma being willing to introduce us to you guys, we’ll be touring the ranch today.”

“Asuta here is a chef who sells his cooking in the Genos post town. Since he handles giba meat, you might think of him as a business rival of sorts, but I hope we can still all be friends here,” Zasshuma said, causing Alma’s eyes to shoot open wide.

“Giba meat? So, wait, are you a person of the forest’s edge too? And you there, I’d say you look like a very impressive hunter.”

I turned around, wondering just who he was talking to, only to find Ai Fa right beside me, causing me to let out an unwitting “Gyah! H-How long have you been there? You really surprised me.”

“Don’t speak such nonsense... It is my job to guard you, is it not?” she whispered back, bringing her mouth in close to my ear. The feel of her warm breath on my skin was making me seriously flustered. I tried to keep my calm, but it had been a long time since we’d had one of these whispered conversations.

“I see. So all of you are people of the forest’s edge, huh? I’ve heard rumors about you folks in town. Supposedly, you can get some incredibly delicious giba cooking in Genos,” Alma said with a carefree smile. It made him look so much more gentle, despite his fairly stern face.

“It’s true that because of you karon leg meat may not be selling quite as well, but it’s not such a big deal. The nobles of Genos trying to strike a hard bargain on the price of torso meat is a much bigger issue.”

“The nobles of Genos? Are you having some sort of issue with them?” Zasshuma questioned.

“Well, yeah,” Alma said with a shrug of his shoulders. “There was some sort of big quarrel in Genos recently, right? Well, we were dragged into all that and got the short end of the stick. After all, the majority of our karon are sold to Genos through the firm.”

“It’s true that there was some major upheaval, but what’s all this about you guys getting the short end of the stick? Is it tied to the fall of Count Turan?”

“I don’t know all the details. But, well, it’s us common folk who always suffer the brunt of the losses, while the nobles just get to have it easy.”

This seemed like a worrying situation. If Cyclaeus’s downfall had some negative side effects on the people of Dabagg, then we would be partially responsible. Zasshuma was clearly thinking hard about it, stroking his mustache.

“Then the guys at the firm should know all the details, right? These folks wanted to talk business with the bigwigs here in Dabagg, so I was thinking of setting up a meeting with them tomorrow.”

“Yeah, they should know everything since they’re in charge of dealing with the nobles. Still, I can’t imagine the nobles changing their minds no matter what sort of fuss we might raise.”

“That’s not necessarily true. Either way, though, I’ll be looking forward to hearing what they have to say,” Zasshuma said with a daring grin and the courage of a bodyguard shining in his eyes.

3

“Alma here married my little sister and ended up being the one who will take over the ranch in my place, ever since I left home,” Zasshuma explained as we walked along the path toward the fields. “Becoming the ranch’s owner means having to deal with those folks from the firm, whose heads are filled with nothing but money calculations. If my stubborn old man would just step down already and leave everything to Alma, things would probably be nice and secure here at the ranch.”

“Don’t make me laugh. As if I’m even close to being the smooth talker you are.”

“Just some worldly wisdom I picked up after abandoning my hometown. Who knows what’d become of this place if I inherited it.”

From what I could see, there didn’t seem to be any discord between Zasshuma and Alma in the least. These two coarse men around forty were having a nice, friendly conversation. It was all so wholesome.

“This here is the entrance to the pasture. Go ahead and soak in the sight of our prized karon for as long as you want,” our guide Alma said to our group of thirteen.

Alma reached out for the gate in the log fence, only for Ai Fa to call out to him from beside me.

“Before you do that, there is just one more matter I wish to confirm. These karon animals really do not present any danger, even when getting close to them?”

“That’s right. Karon are docile creatures. Since they’re not in their breeding season, there shouldn’t be anything to worry about at all. Even if you slap them full force on the rear, they’ll just try to get away from you, and not even very fast,” Alma said with a friendly smile, and then he swung open the gate. “But if the karon are injured, that lowers the value of their pelts and meat, so it’s no trouble if you want to touch the karon, but please promise not to get rough with them.”

“Naturally. I swear that we will observe your rules with care.”

As Alma broke out in an even broader grin in response to Ai Fa’s overblown statement, he went ahead and invited us into the pasture. It was a really wide-open space. At our feet there was a type of grass I hadn’t seen in Genos, like the sort you would grow on a lawn, coming up to around my ankles. Inside the pasture were a number of karon wandering about and idly grazing.

“Our job is to water the grass and get the karon to walk about. As you can see, if you leave them be they’ll just spend the whole day eating. Without exercise, the quality of their meat worsens.”

As Alma said that, he gave a nearby karon a smack on the rear with a leather crop.

Perhaps so as not to damage the karon's pelt, there was cloth wrapped around the end of the crop. When its behind was hit, the karon let out a displeased sound and sluggishly started walking.

Man, they sure were big. They looked to be between 170 to 200 centimeters long, and were anywhere from 130 to 150 centimeters tall. As for their weight...I didn't have the easiest time eyeballing it, but I would guess they couldn't be lighter than Holstein cattle, which weighed around six hundred to seven hundred kilos. They were just that huge, and had a real sluggish look about them. Their four legs in particular appeared to be unusually thick, with the front and back pairs being roughly even in girth. In fact, they looked so thick and heavy that they made me think more of elephants than tapirs.

Now that we had gotten this close, I could also confirm that those wide legs had toenails rather than hooves. Considering their meat was like beef and their milk was probably akin to that of a water buffalo, I really just couldn't classify them. They truly did seem to be creatures unique to this world.

"When they're sick, these guys won't show that they're suffering at all until they collapse, so we have to keep an eye on that too. To an outsider it may look like just casually strolling alongside the karon, but it's actually a pretty stressful job."

Alma kept on walking, giving the karon a few more smacks on the rear as he went. Rimee Ruu and Myme had become pure bundles of curiosity just by being near a karon, while the other women and Dan Rutim all watched intently as the beast moved. The only ones who looked no different than normal were Jeeda and Bartha.

"Have you two seen karon before somewhere else?"

"Hmm? Well, this is our first time setting foot in such an impressive ranch, but plenty of farm villages out there have houses that raise karon, so it's not like we're going to be surprised by how big they are or anything."

Bartha had once wandered around the western kingdom as a member of the Red Beards, and even Jeeda had made a trip of several days from Masara to Genos. This apparently wasn't an especially unusual sight for them.

"Still, they sure are big! If there were giba this large out there, we'd have

some serious trouble with it!” Dan Rutim exclaimed while leaning on his cane and letting out a hearty chuckle. His right ankle was apparently doing a lot better, as he was no longer holding his foot in the air, and his stride was now about as steady as it was before he got injured.

“Of course, no giba is anywhere near this big. But it would be an incredible threat if such a thing existed,” Deem Rutim solemnly chimed in, only for Dan Rutim to turn his way with a grin.

“Well, I figure a giba that big probably shows up once every few decades. Unfortunately, I’ve never had a chance to lay eyes on one myself, but that skull that was hanging in the Suun ritual hall sure was splendid. If you attached a body to it, it’d probably end up the same size as one of these karon.”

“You think so? In that case, I’ll have to train even harder.”

At that, Alma turned toward the hunters with a look of great interest from up at the head of our group. “I’ve been eating nothing but karon my whole life, so just what exactly does giba taste like? It’s earned quite a reputation in the Genos post town, right?”

“Giba is delicious! And thanks to Asuta, it’s only gotten all the more tasty!”

“Yeah, it’s really good. I gave you all some smoked meat earlier as thanks for letting us come observe the place, so you should give it a try tonight,” I said.

Of course, that was like having someone who had only ever eaten beef try out boar meat, so who knew if he would like it or not.

Whichever it would turn out to be, right now Alma was saying, “I’ll be looking forward to it,” with a friendly grin. “By the way, are you planning to offer your giba meat in Dabagg? I’d imagine that would make for a pretty hard sell.”

“True. I mean, you can eat such delicious karon meat in Dabagg. To be honest, I don’t expect that we’ll be able to set up any serious business here... But just being able to hear the people of Dabagg’s impressions would be valuable enough in and of itself.”

“Hmm? Then you spent half a day coming here to Dabagg without even the aim of earning coins in mind?”

“That’s right. If I had to say, the main goal is to expand our knowledge as chefs.”

The secondary point was to see what people in other towns thought of giba and the people of the forest’s edge.

It certainly would be quite difficult to sell giba meat in a karon-producing town like Dabagg of all places. But the folks here were sure to have discerning palates when it came to meat, so I would be plenty satisfied with just hearing how they would evaluate giba meat.

“Well, the heads of the firm are shrewd ones, and they take care to make sure they don’t suffer any losses. After all, their heads are filled with nothing but thoughts about their own profits.”

“Is Digola from down south still in charge of the firm?” Zasshuma asked.

“Yep, sure enough,” Alma said with a shrug of his shoulders. “And if old man Digola steps down, his son will take his place. They’ve been real close to the lord of Dabagg since the previous generation. Honestly, they’re pretty much nobles now.”

“So they leave running the ranches to others and just focus on calculating money, huh? Well, I guess that may be more efficient if you’re only thinking about earning coins.”

“That’s for sure. But, well, if they’ll keep taking care of the annoying details like negotiations and calculations, then I’ll gladly hold my tongue and just keep chasing karon around,” Alma said with a smile, not sounding especially displeased with the situation. He must have meant that working with karon out in the sun suited him much more than calculating money. “Ah, there’s Malotta, finally. You ready to face some verbal abuse, Zasshuma?”

“Hmph, as long as he doesn’t say anything rude to the guests, I don’t mind.”

There was an especially huge karon lying down in the direction we were heading, with a short and stout man kneeling next to it. From the way his hair had gone partially white, he seemed to be entering old age. Just like with Alma, his skin was well tanned, and he was currently staring intently at the karon’s leg.

“Malotta, I brought some guests. They came here from Genos to check out the ranch.”

After Alma said that, the man turned our way with a displeased look. His gaze passed right over Zasshuma as he scanned the rest of our group, all standing in a line.

“Guests from Genos...? Are they looking to purchase karon without going through the firm?”

“No, they supposedly just want to see the ranch. They brought us quite the fine gift, so I’ve been showing them around.”

“Hmph...” Malotta replied with a disinterested snort, then he turned his gaze back to the karon.

“How is it doing?” Alma asked, stooping down next to him.

“Not good. Seems like it hurt its leg even more after just a bit of walking. At this rate, it won’t put on anything but fat.”

“Then don’t you figure it’s about time? I’d say raising it up till this point is good enough.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. In just two more months, it’ll become an even better specimen.”

Thinking nothing of the conversation between its owners, the karon just kept on lying there on its side and munching grass. It looked about as long as Dan Rutim was tall, so sitting there, its huge body was like a little mountain.

“Let’s try mixing nenon leaves in with its morning feed. Next time you head into town, have the vegetable seller give you some.”

“Nenon leaves, huh? But I just went there two days ago, so it’ll be a while till next time,” Alma replied, at which point Zasshuma took a single step forward.

“We’re planning to stay in town at an inn tonight. If you like, we could buy some and drop them off on our way back tomorrow?”

Malotta turned and shot Zasshuma a harsh look.

“We can’t ask guests to run errands like that for us... It would be absolutely

preposterous.”

“Aw, we don’t mind. It’s the least we can do to repay you for letting us see the ranch. And we wouldn’t be asking for anything in return, so you can set your mind at ease about this.”

“I’ve never felt at ease around you. *Ever...*” Malotta retorted, turning away from his son.

Shrugging his shoulders, Zasshuma stepped back. “Well then, how about we continue with the tour? You’ve been a big help, Alma.”

“Right. When you’re ready to leave the ranch, just call out to me,” Alma replied with a strained smile, raising his hand a bit.

After giving the man a nod, Zasshuma turned our way. “Well, let’s get back to it. We’ll check out the karon shed over there next.”

He was quite familiar with the place. After all, this was where he was born. Alma returned to his work, and we headed back down the path we had come from.

“My old man is always like that. Well, the fact that he talked to me at all means today went pretty well.”

“He seems like a difficult person to get along with. Too obstinate, too passionate about his work.”

“He’s nothing all that grandiose. He’s just a narrow-minded old man who’s better at dealing with karon than people.”

At that, Dan Rutim interjected from behind. “Still, what a surprise, to hear that man was your father. Didn’t you say that you last returned here two years ago?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“All that time, and yet your conversation barely lasted a moment? Such a thing would be unthinkable at the forest’s edge.”

“Well, I mean, I did cast aside my home town,” Zasshuma replied, scratching his head as he looked up at Dan Rutim. “As an example, how would you feel if that heir of yours cast aside his work as a hunter and left the settlement at the

forest's edge? Even if he did a fine job at some other job elsewhere, would you really be able to celebrate that?"

"Gazraan, leave the settlement...? Ah, it's almost unthinkable. Just imagining it is enough to make me sad!"

"Right? So in the end, it's only natural I wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms," Zasshuma replied with a dauntless grin.

Dan Rutim fell into deep thought and then replied, "Hmm... But if Gazraan were to make that decision... It might leave me sad and frustrated, but in the end I'd have to accept it. For Gazraan to go so far as to cast aside the law of forest's edge, he would need to have a great deal of resolve and determination, after all..."

"You don't have to think that hard about it. I can't imagine any hunters of the forest's edge would cast aside their homeland for any reason as half-assed as mine."

"Did you really cast your homeland aside so lightly?!"

"It was important to me, but it probably didn't seem that way to my family," Zasshuma said with a grin as his eyes narrowed and he stared off into the distance. "I just wanted to see the world outside."

After that, Miza showed us around, taking us to see various buildings on the ranch.

The first place we were led to was a stable for young karon attached to the place where Miza had been milking before.

"Until they're ready to eat grass, young karon only spend half their day out in the pasture. After the sun hits its peak, they stay here for the rest of the day, drinking milk."

Each mother karon had four or five young, all gathered around to suckle. Even though karon were such large creatures, it seemed they birthed multiple children at once.

The young karon were a good bit slimmer than the adults, but even so, they

were undeniably adorable. It even made me a little emotional, watching the little karon trying their hardest to stretch out their snouts for milk.



“We mix aria into the feed of the milk-producing karon. Even if they’ve gone a little bad, the karon will still happily chow down on them.”

Now that I thought about it, I could remember Dora saying something way back about how he sold leftover aria to Dabagg as karon feed. Of course, thanks to us starting up our business, he no longer had any extra aria left over. But there shouldn’t have been that great of a change in the overall aria consumption around Genos, so other fields must have still been selling their leftover aria to Dabagg.

“The next shed over is for sick karon who are resting. They need to take it easy, so do you mind if we skip that one?”

“Of course not.”

“Well then, next up is the skinning shed.”

The building was far removed from both the barn and the pasture. It gave us some serious emotional whiplash, going from the heartwarming sight of a mother and child to a shed where karon were skinned and butchered.

“We finish the skinning in the morning, so nobody is in there now. Do you still want to take a look?”

“Yes, please.”

The inside of the shed was still filled with the vivid stench of blood and innards. There were large work stations situated here and there throughout the room, and a number of ropes connected to pulleys dangled from the sturdy-looking beams. Along the wall there were knives in various sizes, as well as a small stove and a metal pot.

“Hmm, those look like some fine tools, but otherwise it doesn’t seem all that different from what we’ve got at the forest’s edge,” Dan Rutim mumbled as he stared into the room with great curiosity.

“The next room is the meat storehouse. We preserve the meat in salt as soon as it’s prepared, then it’s carried to relay stations and nearby towns. What’s left behind here are the excess innards and leg meat.”

“So because of sales dropping in Genos, you have more leg meat than you can

sell?”

“That’s right. But most folks have always been happier with meat from karon torsos than legs. And we can turn the excess leg meat into jerky, so it’s not really a significant loss.”

Currently, around 130 kilos of giba meat were being distributed throughout the Genos post town each day. The kimyuus and karon leg meat sales must have fallen by a similar amount, but apparently it wasn’t at a stage where the ranches were really feeling the hit just yet.

“If you want, how about giving some a taste?”

“Huh? A taste?”

As I stood there taken aback, Miza pulled out a block of meat coated in salt from one of several jars sitting in a line. Then she pulled a knife out of her pocket and cut off some chunks.

“This leg meat was prepared just this morning, so there shouldn’t be any problem with it. You don’t get many opportunities to eat raw karon outside of Dabagg, do you?”

“That’s true. Thank you.”

After I took the first, Mikel, Myme, and the chefs from the forest’s edge all accepted cuts of meat. After a little urging, Barthia and Jeeda did the same, but Dan Rutim was the only hunter of the forest’s edge to reach out.

“That raw fish had a real odd flavor, but I have to know what this raw karon will taste like,” Dan Rutim said before popping the chunk of meat into his mouth without the slightest hesitation.

As I watched him out of the corner of my eye, I gave it a try myself, and found it didn’t taste as bloody as I expected. Plus, since it had rock salt sprinkled over it, it wasn’t at all hard to eat. But since it was leg meat, it was unsurprisingly sinewy, and I figured it would be a whole lot tastier if the surface were grilled.

“This is...quite the unusual taste,” Reina Ruu muttered with a serious look on her face. “It has an entirely different flavor and texture than cooked meat. I can’t help but think it would go down easier if paired with a strong-smelling

ingredient like myamuu...”

“Yeah. If we had minced myamuu and tau oil to go with it, it would feel like a proper dish.”

Still, with beef, even when you sliced it thinly, you still needed to sear the surface to kill off the bacteria, so this was quite a valuable experience for me. After all, the only meat besides fish that I could ever recall eating raw was just liver and horse-meat sashimi.

Incidentally, while Reina and Sheera Ruu were calmly and composedly evaluating the taste, Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen were standing next to them tearing up a little.

“Asuta... No matter how much I chew this, I can’t get it down...”

“Ah ha ha, is the taste a bit too tough for you little ladies to handle?” Miza chimed in with an amused chuckle.

Then Mikel finally spoke up after hardly saying a word all morning.

“It’s good, firm-textured meat. The karon meat you can buy in Genos is hit-and-miss, but the stuff from this ranch seems to fall in the ‘hit’ category.”

“Thanks for saying so. But the meat brought to Genos is handled by a transporter that the firm employs, so we don’t know anything about how it’s sold.”

“Hmm, the meat from the first-class and shabby ranches is all sold together. So meat both good and poor has to be purchased for the same price. I find that hard to swallow.”

“That’s for sure! But outside of small personal dealings, everything’s gotta be passed through the firm.”

Even so, Malotta’s ranch wasn’t cutting any corners when it came to raising karon. Since Mikel had bothered to speak up despite being in a bad mood, I was certain of that. I also noticed Zasshuma turning away when he bit into the meat, his eyes narrowed with joy.

“Well then, let’s wrap up with the kitchen... Though I guess you technically already saw it.”

Under Miza's guidance, we were led around to the rear of the meat storehouse, where we found quite the spectacle awaiting us. There were a vast number of karon rawhides drying out in the shade of the wide roof.

"We handle these all at once every couple of days, and then the leatherworkers come purchase them. The cloaks and bags they make out of them are sold in Genos too, right?"

"That's true. I get a lot of use out of those leather bags for carrying my ingredients."

Apparently, kimyuus skins were used more often to make leather goods than as an ingredient, but the bigger, sturdier stuff was of course made with karon leather instead. The traveler's cloaks Zasshuma and Bartha had on were surely made out of the stuff too.

"Now that I think about it, you were milking a karon when we first saw you, Miza. You didn't seem to have a shed for storing the stuff, so do you not process it into milk fat and dried milk here?"

"That's right. We sell it to a dairyman, and we only milk as much as is ordered from us. But, well, since milk goes bad so quickly, we never sell a lot of it at once."

"I see. But the Genos post town has been using milk fat for a while now. Have sales still not picked up enough to be noticeable yet?"

"Hmm? This is the first I've heard of anything like that. Well, if the other ranches aren't able to keep up with demand, then a bit of extra earnings may end up coming our way."

As I pondered the matter by myself, I felt a light tug on my arm from behind. When I turned to look, I found Zasshuma giving me a strained grin.

"The folks with power in the firm end up taking all the sweet deals like that for themselves. Any milk sold in Genos's post town probably comes solely from Digola's ranch."

"Oh really...? Then what about putting in a good word with Polarth to purchase milk from this ranch too?" I whispered to him, but Zasshuma just shrugged his shoulders with the same look still on his face.

“That would be mixing my private and professional affairs. And if I tried to turn a profit using my ties with the nobility, that’d be the exact same thing old man Digola has been doing, right?”

“Ah, so that’s how you see it?”

“Yeah, it is. And besides...if my stubborn old man found out about it, he’d definitely yell at me for sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong.”

It seemed like that last bit might have been Zasshuma’s primary reason for not doing so. As I was considering that, Miza energetically called out, “Now then! It’s about time we head to the kitchen for real. If you’re prepared to work up a serious sweat, come on and follow me.”

That statement turned out to be no exaggeration. The building was every bit as big as the others, and there were numerous stoves inside boiling a huge amount of karon fat and bones.

“The fat is used both as food and as an ingredient for making candles. As I said before, the bones are part of the prep work for the food that we eat.”

The women there were coated all over in sweat as they stirred the pots frequently with huge poles. The pots were massive as well, and the interior of the room was filled with dense white smoke that made me feel like my whole body would get coated in fat just from standing there.

On top of that, there was a shed constructed next to the kitchen for smoking meat. Apparently, this was where the leg meat they couldn’t find a buyer for was eventually turned into jerky. We did a little taste test of their smoked karon, and its incredible saltiness reminded me of beef jerky. It tasted no different than the stuff that was sold in the post town too.

“Well, that’s more or less everything. Was it enough to satisfy your curiosity, dears?” Miza asked with a cheerful grin, bringing the first half of our field trip to Dabagg to a close.

Chapter 3: Dinner in a Distant Land

1

Having spent several hours getting an in-depth tour of the Malotta ranch, we then headed to the south end of town to seek lodgings for the night.

With its rows and rows of buildings and the people coming and going, it seemed just as lively as the Genos post town. However, it was supposedly only around half the size.

“That’s because Genos is a trade hub, while Dabagg is nothing but a stepping stone on the road there. It’s just a place to rest for a night along the way for folks from Genos heading west or people coming east toward Genos.”

“I see... But up until Genos was established two hundred years ago, Dabagg was the easternmost town in Selva, right? So was this town a trade hub too, back in those days?”

“No, it wasn’t. Up till Genos was built up, there was no highway east from Dabagg. And there aren’t any roads to the south or the north even now. With no roads, you certainly won’t be having any trade. Plus, Dabagg has nothing to sell but karon meat, so it’s not like folks from Sym or Jagar would come here by choice.”

In other words, up until Genos had become a central town for trade, Dabagg really was nothing but a place out in the sticks where they raised karon. There weren’t any highways connecting them to Sym or Jagar, so they had just sold their karon to towns farther west. Then, when Genos started prospering, it had gained value as a post town along the way.

“Thanks to that, Dabagg was built up into a post town even quicker than Genos was. We always have a lot of folks passing through, coming and going from Genos, so there’re plenty of inns to choose from,” Zasshuma said with a chuckle as we stood in the middle of the disorderly town. “Even with this many people around, there’s no need to worry about finding a place to sleep. You

want an inn where the women and children can sleep securely, even if the price is a bit high, right?”

“Yeah. We want to prioritize safety above all else.”

“And the second priority is to find a place that has something good to eat. Okay then, just go ahead and follow me. I know an inn that offers some pretty high-quality food.”

Just like with the Genos post town, you weren’t allowed to drive toots through the place, so Ai Fa and Deem Rutim were each holding onto one of the birds’ reins as they followed on foot behind Zasshuma. After all the traveling we’d done, I was in the mood to walk too, but when I got down from the wagon Ai Fa shot me a glare.

“There shouldn’t be any danger here, so please don’t give me that look. I’m already used to crowds like this from the Genos post town, you know.”

“But for better or worse, the people of this town are not particularly wary of us hunters of the forest’s edge. If you wish to walk, then make sure to be more careful of your surroundings than you usually would.”

“Right, got it.”

Still, here in Dabagg there were gatekeepers who screened any visitors at the entrance to the town. Though it would probably be easy to climb over the wooden fence, there still seemed to be fewer ruffians around than in Genos.

The majority of the passersby were westerners, with many of them appearing to be merchants, while only a very few people in the crowd had swords. And while there were some easterners with hooded cloaks here and there, I had yet to see any southerners at all.

“Easterners are able to defend themselves, but westerners and southerners need to hire bodyguards and guides for every little trip, so southerners visiting Genos never go out of their way to stop by Dabagg, instead heading straight back to their home country.”

“Oh. Are a lot of easterners skilled with swords?” I asked while thinking of Sanjura.

However, Zasshuma replied, “No. Easterners are famous for being skilled at using poisonous herbs, so there aren’t many bandits out there who would try to attack them in the first place. A lot of superstitious old folks even fear them as shamans and sorcerers.”

That made sense to me. After all, now that I thought about it, Shumiral’s Silver Vase didn’t seem to bring any bodyguards or anything along with them, and both on the road to Dabagg and in the Genos post town, it wasn’t rare at all to find folks from Sym traveling all on their own.

As I enjoyed the idle chatter with Zasshuma, we continued walking along the stone-paved road, until an item at a certain stall caught my attention out of the corner of my eye.

“Ah, hold on a moment! Is it okay if I check out that shop?”

“What for? If you’re looking for something to eat, can’t you hold off till we reach the inn?”

“I’m not talking about food. I meant that leatherwork shop.” I pointed, while Ai Fa once again silently glared at me from behind. “There’s something I’ve been trying to find for a while now, but nothing I’ve found in Genos has been exactly right. Is it okay if I take a look?”

Ai Fa remained silent as she handed Gilulu’s reins to Zasshuma and stood protectively behind me while I approached the stall in question.

The leatherwork stall had all sorts of goods laid out atop a cloth. Just as you would expect from a karon-ranching town, the variety on offer was far beyond what you could find in the Genos post town.

From among those various goods, I went ahead and picked up the one I had my eye on: a rectangular leather case.

In terms of its dimensions, it was twenty-five centimeters tall, forty wide, and fifteen deep. It had a sturdy build with leather stretched over wooden boards, and it could be latched shut with a belt and a metal buckle. It had a handle and a shoulder strap that was attached on either end, so it would be no issue at all to carry it around.

“Excuse me, but is it okay if I take a quick look at the inside?”

The woman with a plump face running the place smiled back and said, “Go right ahead,” at which I excitedly undid the buckle. Naturally, the inside was completely empty, but it was fully lined with karon leather too. Plus, there didn’t seem to be any issue with the buckle or hinges, so it should have been able to close up quite well.



“This is nice. How much is it?”

“That one is six white coins.”

Six white coins... From how I figured it, that was the equivalent of around twelve thousand yen.

I hadn't had many opportunities to purchase leatherwork, but considering a large leather bag was 1.5 white coins, a leather whip meant for totos was 2, and a set of a saddle, bellyband, and reins were 2.5, it didn't seem to be overly expensive. Especially considering how pricey leather goods were back in my home country.

“Is it all right if I buy this, Ai Fa?” I asked, only for my clan head to narrow her eyes and look displeased.

“How many times do you need me to say that you should feel free to use the coins earned with your own strength however you please?”

“Even so, the earnings from the post town still belong to the Fa clan, right? So isn't it only natural to ask my clan head's permission?”

“Just go ahead and do as you wish. Still...just what exactly do you intend to use such a thing for?”

“For transporting my cooking tools, of course. I've wanted a case for my knives for a while now.”

When she heard that, Ai Fa's expression suddenly softened.

“That includes your father's knife, correct?”

“Huh? Yeah, of course.”

“Then do not hesitate to purchase it. It is something that you need.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Retrieving the correct number of coins from the bag at my hip, I went ahead and purchased the leather case. Then I swiftly slung it over my shoulder and returned to the rest of the group.

“Oh, a luggage case? You found something really nice there, didn't you?” Myme called over with a bright smile as she peeked out of the wagon.

Turning her way, I said, “Really?” as I held up the leather case. “I’ve been looking for one of these ever since I saw your case. Now I won’t have to worry so much about carrying around my knives.”

“Right. Quality knives are like a chef’s life.”

After another five minutes of walking, around when twilight started to descend, Zasshuma stopped and said, “This is the place.” It was a rather well-kept three-story inn. It looked to be about the same size as Tanto’s Blessing, where Yang manned the kitchen. Its name was The Ramam Droplet.

Since they had vacancies available, we went ahead and decided to stay there for the night. First, the place’s owner led us around back. That was where we found a stable for tolos and a storehouse for stowing our wagons.

“Oh, are these tolos not branded?” the innkeeper asked.

“They aren’t,” I replied. “We have necklaces on the tolos instead to identify them, but is that not enough?”

Gilulu and Ruuruu each wore giba horn and tusk necklaces. This was the solution to Ai Fa firmly refusing to have Gilulu branded.

“Ah, no, we don’t have any other unbranded tolos, so there shouldn’t be any danger of mixing them up with those of other guests. You can rest easy about leaving them in our care,” the innkeeper said with a smile, having already received our payment in advance.

Then, after stowing our wagons in the locked storehouse, we returned to the inn. We had been allotted four rooms on the second floor.

“These rooms are each meant for four guests. You can bolt the door from the inside when you’re ready to retire for the night,” the innkeeper told us before heading back downstairs.

As he watched the man depart, Zasshuma stroked his jaw and said, “Now then, fortunately we have almost the same number of men and women, so how about we split into two rooms for each? And then we can spread the bodyguards around however we need to.”

However, that caused a bit of trouble. Ai Fa didn’t approve of splitting the

rooms between men and women.

“There’s nothing to worry about. We’ll be sure to do a good job protecting Asuta!” Dan Rutim said with a smile.

“But...” Ai Fa muttered, furrowing her brow.

Seeing that, Zasshuma whispered into my ear, “Hey, are you two married? If you are, we can have them prepare another room...”

“N-No, that’s not exactly it. I think Ai Fa’s just nervous about having her clan member sleep separately from her.”

“I see. I still don’t really know anything about the customs at the forest’s edge.”

As we whispered back and forth, Deem Rutim spoke up. “Hey, it’s not like I don’t understand your concerns about your clan member, but our job is to protect everyone here. Dan Rutim and I can’t sleep in the same room as the women, so you need to do your part.”

“That’s true, but still...”

“Besides, Dan Rutim said he will protect Asuta. Do you doubt his words?” Deem Rutim pressed, irritation clearly showing on his young face. When Ai Fa held her tongue in response, Dan Rutim let out a chuckle.

“If you’re that worried about Asuta, then why not sleep in the room next door?! If there’s just a single wall between you, that should put you at least somewhat at ease, right?”

And so the corner room went to me and the two Rutim men. The next room had Ai Fa and the younger crowd of Rimee Ruu, Toor Deen, and Myme. After that was Barthia, Reina Ruu, and Sheera Ruu. The fourth room was for Zasshuma, Jeeda, and Mikel.

As everyone dispersed to their respective rooms, Ai Fa remained standing there with a look of regret, only to eventually start to turn away in silence. But then, I called out, “Ai Fa,” and grabbed her wrist.

She slapped away my hand with shocking force.

“A-Ai Fa?” I questioned as I stood there dumbfounded.

My clan head spun around to face me, aghast. “M-My apologies! I was just...caught off guard by having my hand suddenly grabbed from behind!”

“R-Really?”

Ai Fa grabbed hold of both my wrists, biting her lip hard.

“That’s right. It’s not that I was trying to avoid contact with you. Not at all. I really was just taken a bit off guard.”

“G-Got it. I wasn’t doubting you or anything.” But even as I said that, I couldn’t stop my heart rate from picking up. Now that I thought about it, it had been over ten days since Ai Fa and I had had direct contact like this. It wasn’t as if I had been avoiding touching her or anything. It was just that even if we lived in the same house, there weren’t exactly many opportunities for that sort of contact.

Really...ever since I was abducted by Lefreya, Ai Fa had usually been right there nestled up with me in the morning, even if we fell asleep in separate places. But for the past ten days, those mornings had completely stopped happening. That’s all there was to it.

“You haven’t been avoiding contact with me either, have you...?”

“O-Of course not. I would never.” Ai Fa frowned, and then she tightened her grip on my wrists. “But you seem a little distressed. And the flow of your blood has sped up significantly.”

“P-Please don’t just measure my pulse like that!”

As I was whining, I heard a door open some distance away. Instantly, Ai Fa removed her fingers from my wrists, and Zasshuma called out to us as he approached.

“What, you’re still not in your rooms yet? I was planning to head to the town hall to say hi to the folks from the firm. If they’re available, you wanted to meet with them as early in the morning as possible, yeah?”

“Y-Yeah! Since we have to head out by the time the sun hits its peak!”

“Got it. Well then, go ahead and get at least a little rest in your rooms. We’ll be eating dinner later,” Zasshuma cheerfully said as he headed down the stairs.

After a few more moments of silence, Ai Fa once again turned about face.

“I will see you later. Don’t cause Dan and Deem Rutim any trouble, all right?”

“Y-Yeah, I won’t.”

With that, Ai Fa disappeared from sight beyond the door. She had been hanging her head a bit, so her expression had been hidden behind the collar of her cloak.

With a big sigh, I gave the beating of my heart a chance to slow down, then headed for the room where Dan and Deem Rutim were waiting.

Half an hour later, we all finally headed to the dining hall downstairs after hearing the news that Zasshuma had successfully set up a meeting tomorrow.

The dining hall was unsurprisingly large and splendid. Since it was around sunset, there were also plenty of customers coming in, but by squeezing our seats together a bit, we were able to fit our full party of thirteen at two large tables. Though we hadn’t planned on it in advance, the tables ended up being split between the men and women.

From the seat next to me, Dan Rutim excitedly said, “I wonder what sort of stuff they’ll be serving us!”

Zasshuma addressed the group. “Somehow I doubt that karon dishes will fit the tastes of someone from the forest’s edge. What about you, Mikel? Is there anything in particular you want?”

“No,” Mikel replied with a shake of his head. “Since we actually have someone born in Dabagg in our party, I don’t see any need to add my opinion.”

“Oh, really? In that case, just leave it to me.”

Zasshuma signaled the girl working the dining hall with a smile. The plump and healthy-looking girl called out, “Coming!” and then weaved her way through the seating toward us. It occurred to me then that I hadn’t really seen anybody here in Dabagg who was especially skinny.

“Could you get us two large platters each of grilled karon back and haunch steak, one big plate of boiled leg meat, and a few orders of fuwano? Oh, and

I'm pretty sure you serve vegetables soaked in milk here, right?"

"That's right. Today's vegetables are aria, nenon, and tino."

"Then get us a big platter of that too, and some dried milk pot melt, enough for everyone."

"My, you must be quite the hungry customers."

After glancing at the girl's amused smile out of the corner of his eye, Zasshuma turned our way. "By the way, how much booze will you be wanting? From what I can tell, there don't seem to be many of you here who enjoy the stuff."

Out of the group, only Dan Rutim and Bartha expressed interest.

With a big grin, Bartha lightly jabbed Sheera Ruu in the shoulder from the seat next to her. "You're a drinker too, aren't you? The taste of wine tends to differ from town to town, so I can't see any harm in seeing what it's like."

"Oh really? In that case, I'll have some too."

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't really seen women partaking in alcohol very often. So Sheera Ruu was a drinker?

"Huh? You aren't having any, Mikel?" I asked, only for him to shoot me a glare from across the table.

When she noticed that, Myme called over from the other table, "Dad hasn't had a single sip of wine since meeting you, Asuta. Before that, though, he got drunk every day while it was still light out."

At that, Mikel's glare shifted toward his daughter. However, Myme just turned away with a mischievous smile.

"In that case, we'll take four bottles of fruit wine. And chilled zozo tea for the rest, if you don't mind."

"Got it. Please hold on for just a moment."

After disappearing for just a short while, the girl soon returned holding a large tray. Atop it were four bottles and serving cups, as well as nine chilled zozo teas, which the girl set about distributing to us.

“Ooh, so zozo tea can be served cold too?”

“That’s right. Grilled meat and chilled tea go well together, right? But, well, I’m much more into this stuff,” Zasshuma said as he and Bartha poured out the contents of the wine bottles and offered cups to both Dan Rutim and Sheera Ruu. Dan Rutim brought his nose in close to the serving cup as he suspiciously raised an eyebrow.

“So you go to the trouble of splitting a bottle of wine like this in town? This stuff seems to have an unusual smell to it too.”

“That’s because if all you wanted was to drink fruit wine, it’d be cheaper to buy it on your own. So inns have their own clever ways of doing things. And you’ve got to give it a try first before you can decide if you like it or not, right?” Zasshuma said as he held up his own cup. “Well then, how about we toast in hopes that this journey finishes up without any trouble?”

“Hold on a moment. At a meal like this, just who exactly should we be offering gratitude to?” Reina Ruu questioned.

Now that she mentioned it, it was definitely against the customs of the forest’s edge to eat a dinner prepared by someone who wasn’t one of their comrades. Though they had previously eaten cooking prepared by chefs in the castle town, it was under the pretense that it was only ever a taste test, but this would be the first time they had eaten a proper dinner prepared by complete strangers.

“Hmm...” I murmured as I thought to myself, and then I went ahead and offered my opinion. “How about you say it to the chef of The Ramam Droplet?”

“Right... But just what should we be saying thanks for, then?”

“Ah, you mean the part about giving your thanks for the blessings of the forest...? Hmm, well this food was paid for using coins from selling our giba cooking, so wouldn’t it still be correct to give thanks to the forest for bringing us the giba?”

Zasshuma watched us with wide eyes, still holding up his cup for the toast. “You sure do like to complicate things when we’re just trying to eat dinner.”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “It’s just that this is kinda unprecedented for the people

of the forest's edge."

Even so, we were here now with permission from Donda Ruu, one of the leading clan heads. Nobody would have seen this coming just a few months ago, so I wanted to celebrate it from the depths of my heart.

Once the people of the forest's edge finished their premeal chant, we at last all held up our cups.

2

"Sorry for the wait. Here is your grilled back and haunch steak."

With that, two large platters giving off white steam were placed on each of the tables. Atop them sat freshly grilled karon meat, which was giving off a truly wonderful aroma. It really was quite the display, with each thirty-centimeter-diameter plate having a two-centimeter-thick slab of meat on it that was just about spilling out over the edges.

Which one was back meat and which was from the haunches? There didn't seem to be any big differences visually. They must have been grilled on some sort of metal mesh rather than a tray, seeing how they had a lattice-like pattern on the surface.

As wooden plates and spoons were being distributed to everyone, Zasshuma said, "Now then..." as he picked up the provided knife. "You people of the forest's edge are forbidden from eating food off the same plate as someone who isn't a member of your house, yeah? So just hold on while I get some sliced off for all of you."

"Ah, do you want me to take your place there?"

"Nah, it's karon meat, so just leave it to me."

Zasshuma seemed to really be enjoying himself, so I instead took on the role of passing out the meat that he sliced off.

As he held the huge steaks in place with wooden skewers, Zasshuma cut them up into pieces about two centimeters wide. Perhaps it went without saying, but he was quite skilled with the knife. His Dabagg heritage counted for more than

just being born here.

I went around to each seat one after another, laying out the slices of meat in front of them. Just as I was finishing that up, the girl approached with another large plate.

“Here’s the fuwano you ordered. They’re still piping hot, so take care, all right?”

There was a heaping helping of baked fuwano on the plate. They looked like circular pizza crusts with nothing on them. The smell of the karon milk and milk fat that must have been kneaded into them before cooking stirred up my appetite even further.

“Well then, how about we dig in?”

With that signal from Zasshuma, we all picked up our wooden skewers. However, Dan Rutim looked rather disappointed.

“This meat was only half-cooked, wasn’t it?”

“Hmm? Ah, that’s proof that they used fresh meat. You tasted raw meat earlier in the day, right?”

“Hmm. You cannot eat giba meat unless it is thoroughly cooked. Still, wouldn’t this karon creature’s meat be tastier when fully grilled?” Even as he grumbled, Dan Rutim went ahead and popped the big chunk of meat into his mouth. When he started to chew, his thick eyebrows slowly unknitted themselves. “Hmm! This half-cooked meat does seem quite tasty, though.”

What Dan Rutim was calling half-cooked I would describe as medium rare. But at any rate, I went ahead and brought the meat up to my mouth with great anticipation.

Since the whole thing would be too big for my mouth, I bit off just around a third of it or so, and found that it was tender enough to chew through easily. The grilled surface had a nice and savory smell, and the meat was juicy on the inside. I had no complaints at all about the amount of meat juices, and the fat gave it a thick sweetness.

In terms of taste, it was a bit salty. But aside from that, I was getting a very

direct meaty flavor. The taste overall reminded me of a rather high-quality sirloin steak.

“If you don’t think it’s got enough flavor to it, go ahead and spread this on it,” Zasshuma said, passing around a small jar. Packed inside was a bunch of raw minced myamuu.

I went ahead and added just a sprinkle atop the meat, and the flavor improved dramatically. If I were in a mood to be extravagant, I’d say I wanted to try it with the steak sauce I frequently made, but this alone was already plenty tasty.

When I bit into the other meat, I found this one didn’t have much fat, but in exchange it had a shockingly fine texture. Despite being nearly all red meat, it was every bit as tender as the prior cut. It was nice and refreshing, yet also bursting with flavor, and it reminded me of rump meat.

“Is this cut with less fat perhaps the haunch meat?”

“Yeah, it’s the haunches, or perhaps I should call it round steak. If you don’t smack them properly with a leather whip day in and day out, you can’t get meat this tender from their rears, right?”

Regardless of whether that statement was true or not, it sure was tasty. From the next table over, Myme loudly proclaimed, “It’s delicious! I’ve only ever had karon leg meat, so I had no idea the back and haunch meat was this tasty!”

“Yeah, you can’t get anything but leg meat in the Genos post town. But it’s good enough to make you want to eat it even if it costs twice as much, wouldn’t you say?” Zasshuma replied.

“That’s certainly true. I’m jealous of everyone living in the castle town!”

However, only Myme and Bartha were wearing such satisfied looks over at that table. In other words, the women of the forest’s edge were all chewing on the meat while looking indifferent.

“Hmm, you all look somehow unsatisfied. Are you missing giba meat after all?” Zasshuma asked.

Reina Ruu was the one to ultimately speak up for the group. “No, it isn’t as if

we're dissatisfied, exactly... It's more that it seems like a shame that they only used salt and myamuu. If they sprinkled pico leaves over it early on and added a simple sauce, I think it would make quite a difference."

"Oh, right, you people of the forest's edge pickle your meat in pico leaves rather than salt. It's true that they go real well with karon meat too, yeah."

"Right. So while it may be tasty, that one point keeps coming to mind... And of course, we are indeed accustomed to eating giba meat, so I believe it better suits our tastes."

"You don't need to look so apologetic. I'm sure I'd feel the same way if I were to eat giba meat without any salt," Zasshuma said with a hearty grin before gulping down some fruit wine. "Still, you really don't feel anything, even after eating such fine karon? I have to say, that makes me a little curious about giba meat."

Yes, even though he had visited our stalls countless times as both a bodyguard and a point of contact, Zasshuma had yet to take even a single bite of giba cooking. At first I figured it was because he had a strong aversion to giba meat as a westerner, but perhaps he was just a little too fond of karon.

"It's true that if you asked me whether this or a giba steak was tastier, I'd choose the giba without any hesitation. That's only natural, since we people of the forest's edge are meant to eat the blessings of the forest," Dan Rutim said, drinking down a cup of fruit wine in a single go. "And the same's true for this fruit wine. It's strangely sweet, and it seems pretty weak too. Just what sort of taste even is this, exactly?"

"It's made by cutting it with ramam fruit juice and karon milk serum. If it's not to your liking, how about trying out a different flavor for the next one?"

"Ooh, if there are different flavors, then I'd definitely like to give them a try!"

"I'm astounded. Have you already emptied a bottle? It may be thinned down, but it's still around seventy percent wine, you know," Bartha called out with a grin as she filled her own cup. Having noticed Sheera Ruu's cup was also dry, she lifted up the girl's bottle only for her eyes to shoot open wide. "Huh? You finished off your bottle already too?"

“Yes. It has less alcohol in it than the fruit wine we drink at the forest’s edge. No wonder it was so easy to get down.”

So she said, but mamaria fruit wine likely had the same alcohol content as wine from back in my world. Even if it was cut with fruit juice, it was still shocking that Sheera Ruu had the same gentle smile on her face as always after emptying out an entire liter-sized container of the stuff.

“Then I guess we’ll be getting three more bottles. Hey, could we get three bottles of fruit wine cut with arow?!”

As Zasshuma went ahead and placed a new order, I helped myself to a fuwano. It was puffier than poitan bread, and since it was prepared using karon milk and milk fat rather than water, it had a real milky flavor. Honestly, it felt somewhat like a dessert, as if they had made pancakes without any sugar or eggs.

“Here are the bottles of fruit wine cut with arow you ordered. Plus the vegetables soaked in milk and the dried milk pot melt.”

With that, new bottles and a large plate were laid out, along with one small pot for each of us. Atop the plate were vegetables coated in some sort of viscous white substance. And the milk fat pot melt seemed to be pretty much just what the name suggested.

“Pot melt is made by tossing steamed vegetables into this little pot. As for the vegetables in milk, well...I figure it would be quicker to have you eat it rather than trying to explain.”

I was put in charge of distributing the vegetables soaked in milk for my table, while Rimee Ruu did the same for the women. The vegetables used were aria, tino, and nenon, and the white substance on top had a texture similar to yogurt.

When I gave it a sniff, I found it had a faintly sour smell. As it was an ingredient I hadn’t seen even in the Genos castle town, I went ahead and took a bite of the tino with great curiosity.

Sure enough, the sourness really did cause yogurt to come to mind. There was a saltiness too, but the sweetness and mellow flavor provided by the karon milk

was stronger. On top of that, there was something refreshing about the taste that completely cleansed my palate of the fat from the grilled meat.

As for the all-important vegetables, they were pleasantly soft, and the sourness, sweetness, and saltiness of the yogurt-like stuff had soaked into them. This was undoubtedly a fermented food. Though the smell wasn't all that strong, it had a pretty similar feel about it to vegetables pickled in fermented rice bran. Overall, though, the taste probably had the closest resemblance to something lightly pickled in yogurt.

"It's nothing fancy, but this is also technically a specialty of Dabagg. I know plenty of folks out there aren't too fond of it, but it goes well with karon meat, doesn't it?"

"It's good. Or at least, I like it well enough. Just what did you do to prepare karon milk like this, though?"

The answer to that question didn't come from Zasshuma, but rather Mikel.

"They squeeze the karon milk into a sausage casing. Sausaged milk picks up sourness and stickiness, and becomes less likely to spoil. Once that's done, they take salted vegetables and soak them in the stuff."

"Ooh, you can use karon milk to do that?" Myme questioned with a greatly interested smile, only to hold her tongue with a look that seemed to say "Whoops." But after staring at her father's displeased face for a bit, she timidly continued on, "They're all tasty, aren't they...?"

"That's true," Mikel quietly replied, at which Myme broke out in a relieved smile. It looked like they might have been reaching a ceasefire in their father/daughter fight, even without me awkwardly interjecting.

"Make sure to eat the pot melt before it gets cold, okay? If you lollygag, the dried milk will turn solid again," Zasshuma loudly called out, as if to mediate.

I was just as interested in the dried milk pot melt as I had been with the vegetables soaked in milk. The pot it came in was just big enough to fit a whole fist inside, and was filled to the brim with gooey dried milk. Though it wasn't as expensive as gyama, karon dried milk was still supposed to be a high-class ingredient, so the food served here would have to be considered top quality

too. But in the end, it turned out the dish really was just melted dried milk with steamed vegetables tossed into it. It used aria, nenon, and tino, the same three vegetables that had been served in the yogurt dish, and at least at a glance the pot melt seemed similar to a cheese fondue with the stuff you'd dip in it already added.

There were no issues when it came to the taste. Since it was still in a nice gooey melted state after all this time, I had to figure they used at least a bit of something else in addition to dried milk. But when I asked, Zasshuma tilted his head while taking a bite and said, "I'm not sure. I believe they normally use fuwano flour and milk serum, but I don't really know all that much about it. It's not like they ever make something this extravagant on the ranch."

"What is this milk serum you're mentioning? I believe you mentioned before that it was mixed in with the fruit wine too."

"Milk serum's the liquid left over when you make dried milk. Apparently, noble ladies rub the stuff onto their skin, along with milk fat."

It sounded like whey. I wasn't all that familiar with cheese production, but if I wasn't mistaken, it was the same sort of liquid that was separated from yogurt.

"Karon milk seems to have a lot of different uses. It's interesting stuff," Reina Ruu chimed in.

Sheera Ruu and Toor Deen also seemed very intrigued, while Rimee Ruu pecked away at the two dishes while looking real cheerful. It seemed the chefs from the forest's edge were much more interested in these dishes than the simple karon steaks.

As the meal continued, the boiled leg meat was delivered. The karon meat had been cut into bite-sized cubes, and boiled in white milk. Though it was a boiled dish, it wasn't really a soup, though it didn't seem all that different from the leg meat milk soup I had proposed for The Kimyuus's Tail.

When I went ahead and gave it a try, I found that it was good too. The leg meat was sinewy and didn't have much fat, but it had gotten nice and soft after being thoroughly boiled. It was as tender as what was in the leg meat soup dish I made, so they most likely had let the meat marinate in the milk for a while as part of the preparations, just like I did.

Plenty of juices from the leg meat seeped out into the dish, and blended well with the sweetness and mellowness of the milk. Aside from that, I could also detect salt, and also a faint umami taste from the vegetables.

“Seems they used aria and nenon in this,” Mikel mumbled from across the table. “There isn’t anything solid left of them, so they must have been finely minced and boiled until they dissolved. It’s a good dish that didn’t cut any corners.”

“I agree. If I had to say, though, I think it could be perfected with a few more flavors layered in the dish,” I chimed in, at which point Mikel looked straight at me with a firm look in his eyes.

“Asuta, what would you add to this dish, then?”

“Me? I would go with pico leaves to start with.”

“Pico leaves, huh?” Mikel repeated, stroking his angular jaw as he thought. “You use pico leaves in a lot of your dishes. That seems to be how you do things, rather than just being because you have them close at hand.”

“Right. Back in my home country, we had a spice similar to pico leaves that was just as important as salt when it came to crafting flavors.” Pico leaves were an ingredient that was similar to black pepper, so it went without saying that it was a cornerstone of many of my dishes.

“Hmm. I’d certainly agree that it would help firm up the taste of this dish just by adding pico leaves. Submerging a single fresh leaf in it alone may be plenty.”

“So if it were you, Mikel, then what would you add?” I asked back, only for Mikel to hold his tongue with his usual sour look as he turned his gaze toward his daughter, who was having a friendly chat over at the other table. Getting the gist of what he was thinking, I went ahead and threw that same question Myme’s way.

“One more flavor to add to this dish? Let’s see... If it were me, I think I would boil it with kimyuus bones.”

“Kimyuus bones? I see. I really need to make more use of bones myself, rather than relying entirely on expensive dried fish and seaweed.”

“Asuta, I’ve actually had a thought about that,” Sheera Ruu called out from quite a few seats away. “We’ve been following Mikel’s teachings and spending a long time making jerky at the Ruu settlement too. What about using that time to also try boiling giba bones?”

“I see. So you’re thinking if you have to stay there and watch the flames anyway, you can take care of both at the same time, huh? That’s a good idea.”

In that case, it was possible I could tackle the giba bone soup I had wanted to experiment with for a while now. When you didn’t have a pressure cooker to work with, making a genuine bone soup required that you keep boiling for a long, long time. I was never able to make the time for it, but if the Sudra and Fou clans who had taken up smoking meat could handle the task, then there was still hope.

“Yeah, that’s great. I’ll try bringing it up to the folks from the nearby clans too.”

“Right,” Sheera Ruu replied with a gentle smile. No matter how much alcohol she drank, her wisdom didn’t seem clouded in the least.

“That’s a gathering of chefs for you. And man, I’m getting more and more interested in the cooking you all make,” Zasshuma jovially chimed in, his face rather red. “Now then, we’ve more or less cleaned our plates, but our bellies are still far from full, right? So what sort of dish do you want to try out next?”

“Zasshuma, if it’s possible to get karon ribs, then I’d like to try those!” Dan Rutim responded.

“And I would like to try whatever dish uses the greatest number of ingredients,” Reina Ruu added.

“Hmm...” Zasshuma pondered in response to their requests. “Then how about I request flame-broiled rib meat and a soup or something? It sure is great, being able to order without needing to worry about how many coins you’re spending.”

The rib meat that was brought out had been cooked together with myamuu that still had their stems attached and milk fat, and the karon milk soup was made using offal.

The ribs were just plain tasty, while the soup was fairly intricate. The vegetables, of course, were still just aria, tino, and nenon, and the base was the karon milk we were now familiar with, but it had kimyuus egg and maru pickled in salt and the like added in, creating quite the extraordinary taste.

As far as seasonings went, they only used salt, and they hadn't employed any herbs aside from myamuu. Perhaps it was the karon stock that helped to bring it all together even so, or maybe they used whey here too. At any rate, even though the people of the forest's edge had plenty of complaints during the taste testing in the castle town, they were having no such trouble with tonight's dinner.

Though none of them were all that complex, everyone seemed fairly satisfied with all the various karon dishes we didn't have in Genos. Even Ai Fa and Deem Rutim, who had been silent and expressionless the whole time they were eating, seemed perfectly willing to clear their plates.

"Well, are you all feeling satisfied?" Zasshuma asked.

"Yes," Reina Ruu calmly replied with a nod. "There are more people who can make delicious meals even in the Genos post town lately, but I believe that's due to all the various ingredients they can now use. I'm sure it's no small feat to be able to make dishes this good without using tau oil or herbs."

"Right, I had heard that they were using all sorts of ingredients in the Genos post town lately like they do in the castle town... Still, I'm not fond of how folks from Genos use way too many herbs and seasonings. It ruins the karon meat."

"Yes, I feel the same way... Aside from the dishes made by that Varkas chef, that is."

In other words, this cooking from Dabagg suited Reina Ruu's tastes better than the stuff Yang and Timalo made. On top of that, she was saying that Naudis and Nail were able to unveil such tasty dishes lately because of ingredients from Jagar and Sym... I had no major objections to her conclusion.

"I'm sure that here in Dabagg, they've focused solely on figuring out how to use karon. When you have access to so much high-class meat, it may just make sense not to seek out complicated flavors."

“Right. They just use karon meat and milk, and not many vegetables at all, much less seasonings. Trying to use limited ingredients to make the most delicious dish you can... That’s what you do, isn’t it, Mikel and Myme?” Reina Ruu said, turning her gaze toward the grumpy former chef as he silently chewed his karon meat.

Instead, Myme energetically replied from right across from her. “You can only buy torso meat in the castle town in Genos, but it’s easy to get ahold of as much karon milk as you please, so when I get back home, I’d love to try using it!”

“Right. It may be about time for the Ruu clan to start buying karon milk too.”

It was rare to see Reina Ruu and Myme talking directly to one another like that. But naturally, I didn’t sense any competitive spirit between them. Instead, it was Toor Deen who was staring intently at the face of her similarly aged rival seated beside her.

Rimee Ruu wore her usual carefree smile as she sat there next to Ai Fa, and Sheera Ruu had quite the serious look on her face as she slurped the soup. It seemed that all the other chefs were also fully absorbing the cuisine of Dabagg.

It really was worth it to come all the way out here to Dabagg. I’ll have to make sure to thank Donda Ruu again when we get back to the forest’s edge, I thought to myself.

Just then, Dan Rutim loudly proclaimed with a grin from next to me, “You sure do like to talk about all sorts of tricky little matters, don’t you?! Personally, just having tasty food and wine is plenty! Speaking of which, Zasshuma, it looks like the wine’ll be gone before much longer...”

“Well then, how about trying out a kiki juice wine next?” With a smile, Zasshuma called out to the girl working the dining hall. But when he did, a new group came walking on over. They were five men who had just come in and were now seated at a table next to ours.

“Oooh, check out all the beauties at the next table over. Looks like we got some good seats,” one of the men loudly announced, sounding like he had already had some drinks.

They had swords hanging from their hips and seemed like a pretty disgusting

lot. It wasn't rare to see folks like them in the Genos post town, but groups of ruffians like this didn't seem common in Dabagg.

The girl working the floor seemed rather intimidated, as she darted off as soon as she took Zasshuma's order. After watching her go out of the corner of his eye, one of the men approached the table of women.

"What, is it just you girls drinking and having some fun? We just happen to be a group of all men, so we're really lacking that nice sensual feel over there. What do you say to sharing a drink with us?"

"Sorry, but these ladies are with us," Zasshuma cheerfully called out, exercising some restraint.

One of the men, an especially nasty-looking specimen, went "Eh?" and furrowed his brow. "What are you, a group of hunters? As if you could sell any meat other than karon here in Dabagg."

"They are here not as hunters, but as bodyguards for the trip, so if you make too much of a fuss, you're not going to like how things turn out." Since Zasshuma was taking such a relaxed tone, perhaps he was trying to de-escalate the situation. However, that unfortunately did nothing to quell the disquieting aura lingering about the men.

"I don't know where out in the sticks you crawled out of, but hunters should stick to their mountains where they can wallow in the dirt. Dried milk pot melt is way too nice of a meal for guys like you."

"Oh? I was born here in Dabagg, but this place is about as remote as you can get, wouldn't you say? Why don't you fellows just settle down and enjoy some of this town's famed karon cooking?"

"Wait a second, they're people of the forest's edge, aren't they...?" a small man with a scar on the cheek of his rodent-like face chimed in, his voice dripping with ill will. "Look, those are giba pelts they've got on, and their skin is weirdly dark. So they've finally started showing their faces even outside of Genos?"

"Oooh, so they're giba eaters? I'd heard the people of the forest's edge were half-beast savages, but these women sure are sexy."

Finally, that disquieting feel in the air reached a peak, but the only ones out of our group who were visibly shaken were me and Myme. Rimee Ruu was staring blankly, but the rest of the women just calmly kept on eating. That was no surprise, as the women of the forest's edge were accustomed to dealing with ruffians.

However, that only served to stoke the men's aggression. The little man with the scar on his cheek in particular rose from his seat and started moving over toward the women.

"Hey, weren't you all caught acting like bandits not that long ago? I'm amazed criminals like you are allowed to travel to other towns."

"The criminals from the forest's edge have all been judged. I believe the Genos castle should have sent out an official notification saying as much," Reina Ruu calmly replied without even glancing his way. Instantly, the small man's face went red for a reason entirely unrelated to alcohol.

"You've got quite the tongue, don't you, little lady? If you're looking to earn some coins, then how about we show you a real nice way to do it?"

"U-Um, is something the matter out here?" the inn's owner asked, clearly flustered. It seemed the waitress had gone and fetched him, sensing trouble in the air.

The large man reclining in his chair behind the small fellow angrily retorted, "Aw, shut it. Just bring us some booze already. I mean, just how long are you gonna keep your customers waiting, exactly?"

"O-Of course, but you seem to be causing trouble for the other customers, so..."

"What trouble?! Just shut your mouth and go get our booze!" the large man shouted as he kicked over an empty chair, causing the innkeeper to yelp and shrink backward. It seemed he wasn't any more skilled at handling ruffians than I was. And now, the customers who had been enjoying their meals at the other tables were all murmuring and staring our way.

"To our people, dinner is a sacred act in which we gain the vital energy needed to live another day. What else would we call disrupting such an act,

besides trouble?" A voice as cold and sharp as steel cut through the danger lingering in the air. It had come from Ai Fa, who was sitting diagonally across from Reina Ruu. With a nasty look in his eyes, the little man swiftly turned her way.

"What's this, a woman playing at being a hunter? And you're a real looker too."

Ai Fa did not dignify his statement with a response.

"How about you keep me company, then? If you just take off that dirty pelt, I —" the little man started saying as he reached out toward Ai Fa.

The second the tip of his finger brushed against Ai Fa's shoulder, though, he suddenly disappeared from my field of view. Ai Fa had grabbed hold of his wrist, then pulled him swiftly down to the floor.

"You bitch!" the big man shouted, shooting up from his chair. When my clan head saw him reach for the blade at his hip, she swiftly kicked up high with her right leg while remaining seated. Having taken the blow right on his solar plexus, the large fellow also collapsed to the floor.

At the same time, the sound of something shattering rang through the air. It came from a fruit wine bottle Bartha had thrown, which hit another man right smack in the middle of his forehead. As the man fell beside the table, I spied that his hand was gripping a drawn dagger.

"What a class act you guys are, drawing a weapon in the middle of a dining hall. And isn't it against the law to pull a blade here in Dabagg?" Bartha challenged. The remaining two men's faces went from red to pale as a sheet as they started trembling. "Now then, you wanna continue till every last one of you hits the floor? Personally, we just want to keep eating our dinner in peace."

"Good grief. Cloddish lump heads like you guys don't belong in Dabagg at all," Zasshuma chimed in with a daring grin. "You entered town after a proper examination, right? Otherwise, it'll be serious trouble for you guys if you don't get out of here before the guards come..."

As the small man staggered to his feet, he shot Zasshuma and Ai Fa blazing glares. But then, without any further words, he pushed past the other

customers and fled the dining room. The other men lent their shoulders to their injured allies and followed after him.

“They must have been outlaws who hopped over the fence. Should we have beaten them to a pulp and handed them over to the guards after all?” Zasshuma asked, turning toward the innkeeper.

“Oh, most certainly not!” the man shrieked back. “If they were actually guilty of something, then I’m sure they’ll just flee Dabagg entirely. I’m just glad there wasn’t any bloodshed.”

“You don’t mind if we stay here at the inn as planned, do you?”

“Of course not! I will go ahead and alert the guards about those men to be safe, so please take it easy and relax.”

The innkeeper darted off in a hurry after saying that, and the tension lingering throughout the dining hall finally dispersed.

“Good grief, that was quite the hassle... Still, you hunters of the forest’s edge really are as stoic as the rumors say. I was surprised that you didn’t budge in the least through all that,” Zasshuma said.

“Hmm? You mean us?” Dan Rutim asked back as he scooped out the contents of his pot with a spoon, sounding confused. “Our seats were so far away, though! It would have been over before we could stand up anyway, so it didn’t seem worth the effort.”

“You’re really something. All of you. If that’s how it is, then I won’t have to lift a finger except as a guide for the rest of the trip,” Zasshuma said, cheerfully drinking his wine cup dry.

3

There were no more disturbances after that, so we all went to our respective rooms to retire for the night.

“As long as you bolt the door, you shouldn’t get any thieves sneaking in. Still, let’s be sure to keep our guards up for the night even so.”

With that, my twelve companions started moving into the four rooms. Rimee

Ruu looked to be quite excited to spend her first ever night outside of the settlement, while Toor Deen appeared rather uneasy.

Still, everyone was surely feeling the same physical exhaustion. Personally, even though I was in high spirits, my body was really worn out. I felt as if I would sleep so soundly tonight that I wouldn't even end up dreaming.

"Hold on a moment, Asuta," Ai Fa called out before I could follow Dan Rutim into our room. "There is something I wish to discuss before sleeping... You two go ahead of us and get some rest."

Deem Rutim looked doubtful, but he ultimately disappeared into the room without saying a word.

Soon after, all the doors were closed, leaving just me and Ai Fa out in the hallway. There was only one candle each at the top of the stairs and the far end of the hallway, so the place was dimly lit. Under their dim illumination, Ai Fa was silently staring back at me.

"What's up? Did you want to ask me something?"

"Indeed. This room has places to sleep along both the left and right walls. Is yours the same?"

"Ah, yeah, I figure they probably have the same layout."

"I see. Then you should sleep on the right side, and I will sleep on the left."

I couldn't see what she was getting at in the least. There were indeed double bunk beds alongside both the left and right walls of the rooms, but what did the locations matter?

"Your room is to the left of mine, correct? So if we choose those positions we'll be as close to each other as possible, even if there will still be a wall between us. You can knock on it to let me know if there is any danger."

"Ah, so that's what you meant, huh?" I replied, breaking out in a smile without thinking. "The doors bolt shut, so I don't think you need to worry about that. And even if someone were to try busting down the door, you and Dan Rutim would definitely notice before I would."

"I know all that. But there's no guarantee that something like what happened

at the Suun settlement will not occur again. Back then, you sensed that something was off sooner than I did.”

She was referring to what happened at the clan head meeting way back. It was true that thanks to my sense of smell, I realized something was wrong before anyone else. But with Dan Rutim here, even that concern felt unnecessary. However, I also didn’t exactly feel like arguing the point with Ai Fa further.

“Got it. I’ll be on guard, so no worries.”

“It’s *our* job to guard everyone. You just need to take it easy and rest up.”

“Understood. Well then, see you tomorrow.”

As I stifled a yawn, I went ahead and reached out for the door, but once again, Ai Fa stopped me and called out, “Hold on. Asuta...are you sleepy?”

“Hmm? Well, somewhat. Normally we would have been asleep much earlier than this.”

“I see. Then you can go ahead and turn in,” Ai Fa stated, but she was frowning ever so slightly as she did so.

“What’s the matter? Whatever it is, we can discuss it.”

“It’s nothing. It is simply that talking with you before sleeping has been a daily routine, so the day feels incomplete without it,” Ai Fa replied, deepening her pout. “Besides, we have been together with other people from morning till night today, so we have hardly had a chance to speak at all.”

“Now that you mention it, you’re right...” With a very warm feeling filling me up inside, I went ahead and pulled back my hand that had been reaching for the door. “Then how about we talk for a bit before going to sleep. You’re not tired, are you?”

“Not any more than normal.”

Ai Fa’s lips straightened from their pout, and she leaned against the wall between the doors. I did the same while looking at my clan head.

“Well then, what do you want to discuss? I guess Dabagg, considering where we are?”

“I don’t especially care. Go ahead and talk about whatever you please, just like always.”

My clan head sure was acting curt, considering how she was the one stopping me. With a quick strained grin, I went ahead and searched my thoughts for topics.

“You didn’t say a single word about your impressions at dinnertime, so did you not like it all that much after all?”

“Indeed. As Dan Rutim said, we people of the forest’s edge are meant to eat giba. If you eat too much meat like tonight’s, it could act as a poison.”

“Ah, yeah, karon fat sits a bit heavier than giba fat. Now that you mention it, I think Dan Rutim also ate just a bit less than usual...”

“That’s true. And even though those dishes must have been far more delicious than giba meat that hasn’t been bloodlet, I still couldn’t help but find them unsatisfying, somehow.”

Dan Rutim had seemed fairly well satisfied, but Ai Fa clearly wasn’t. Well, unlike the women who manned the stoves, the hunters of the forest’s edge had no reason to feel grateful for the opportunity to try unfamiliar cooking.

“Hmm, I’m sure Deem Rutim must have been thinking the same thing. I feel sort of guilty now.”

“I assumed that it would be this way before we came here, so it is no serious issue. But if you feel apologetic even still, then use that as motivation to make a delicious meal for tomorrow’s dinner.”

“Right. The sun will probably be setting by the time we make it back to the forest’s edge, but I’ll give it my all,” I said, shooting Ai Fa a smile. She briefly glanced my way, but then turned back to stare straight ahead. “Still, if karon cooking isn’t to your tastes, that pretty much halves the fun of the trip.”

“I am here acting as a bodyguard, work that should be neither fun nor distressing.”

“Really? Dan Rutim looked like he was having a great time, though.”

“That is simply down to his personality. Deem Rutim and Jeeda surely feel the

same way that I do.”

“That’s a shame. I wanted you to enjoy this trip too.”

When she heard that, Ai Fa’s gaze once again turned my way. “This is a trip for the benefit of you chefs, is it not? There is no need whatsoever for us bodyguards to enjoy it.”

“Maybe. But even a short trip like this is so rare for the people of the forest’s edge that it’s practically historic. I was really looking forward to it and I’m definitely enjoying myself now, but I’d feel bad if I was the only one having fun.”

Ai Fa offered no response.

“Well, I guess from your point of view, you needed to put your important giba-hunting work on hold in order to accompany us. Though, that makes me feel even more—”

“It is fun.”

“Huh?”

“I’m enjoying myself,” Ai Fa bluntly stated as I stared at her, dumbfounded. “Perhaps it’s because we hardly talked at all throughout the day, but I’m enjoying our chat very much right now. And when I think of how we will need to sleep separately later, it makes this time feel even more precious.”

“R-Really? You actually look displeased to me...”

“That is because you have a terrible eye for such things.”

Under the light from the candles, I stared directly at Ai Fa’s face. It was a mistake to say she looked displeased. More like entirely expressionless. And her blue eyes were incredibly calm.

“Besides, it also brings me great joy seeing you and Rimee Ruu enjoying yourselves, so the day was a happy one for me. There is no need whatsoever for you to apologize.”

Feeling a lump in my throat, I was only able to wring out, “I see.”

Then, Ai Fa continued, “More importantly, though, there’s something I have to confide in you about, Asuta.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“It’s about what happened before we ate dinner, when I knocked aside your hand.”

“You were surprised when I suddenly grabbed your hand from behind, right? That’s what you said.”

“So I did. I wasn’t trying to deceive you when I told you that...however, I did not convey the full extent of my thoughts and emotions. I’ve been wanting to explain more fully ever since,” Ai Fa stated very quietly, bringing her face just a bit closer to mine. “In all likelihood, I would not have been so surprised in the past. However...there seems to have been a change in my feelings thanks to the discussion we had ten days ago.”

“A change in your feelings...? You mean that you have trouble touching me now?”

“I told you, that wasn’t it. Do you doubt my words?” Ai Fa asked, sounding a bit angry, and then she slowly reached out her right hand toward the left side of my face. When I felt the warmth from her palm on my cheek, my heart started pounding. “As you can see, it is no issue whatsoever as long as I am mentally prepared. But abruptly having my arm grabbed with no warning made me feel as if I was being stabbed by a blade.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll try to take care in the future not to catch you off guard.”

“No, you’ve misunderstood. I am trying to explain that you don’t need to think that way,” Ai Fa replied, frowning again with her hand still up against my cheek. “I may react similarly if the same thing were to happen again, but I don’t want you to stop because of that. Simply do not worry about it, and keep behaving as you have up till now. It may leave me a little flustered, but I would hate the thought of you changing the way you act around me far more.”

“You’re making too big a deal out of this. Peoples’ feelings change over time, but you don’t have to treat it like some kind of critical issue.” Despite feeling so shaken up emotionally, I still managed a smile. “You used to hit me just because I patted you on the head, right? Compared to that, you shrugging off my hand is nothing.”

“Then you swear to continue acting as you have up till now?”

“I do. And no matter what happens, I’ll never start trying to avoid you,” I said, placing my hand over Ai Fa’s, which still rested on my cheek.

Though she trembled for just a moment, my clan head didn’t try to remove her hand. “See...? As long as I prepare myself mentally, I am not shaken by things like this at all,” Ai Fa said with a proud grin.

The moment I saw that smile, which I hadn’t laid eyes on for quite some time, I felt an impulse to reach out and hug her. However, that certainly wouldn’t fall under the category of “how I had acted up till now,” so I somehow managed to restrain myself, instead just staring intently back at her smiling face.

“My apologies for bringing up such a strange topic. But I didn’t wish to hide how I felt from you.”

“Right. I’m glad you were so open with me.”

“If that is how you feel, then I am glad as well.”

As her eyes narrowed in a way that showed me the truth of her words, Ai Fa finally lowered her right hand. Slowly, her warmth slipped away from my cheek.

“Well then, I suppose it is about time to get to sleep. You haven’t forgotten what I said before, have you?”

“Nope. The bed on the right-hand side, yeah? By the way, will you be on the top or the bottom?”

“Rimee Ruu will surely pick the top, so I will be on the bottom.”

“I see. Then I’ll go with the bottom too.”

“Right,” Ai Fa said with a serious nod. “Well then, go ahead and rest up for tomorrow.”

“You too, Ai Fa. Goodnight.” After one last look to etch the sight of my clan head into my mind, I stepped through the door.

Instantly, Deem Rutim called out, “You’re late. What were you talking about for so long? She wasn’t complaining about how the rooms were divided, was she?”

“It was nothing like that. We just went over some stuff.”

The room was about ten square meters with double bunk beds along the left and right walls. In the meager space between them sat a small table and two chairs.

There was a large window with lattice shutters installed on the far wall, which was currently fully open. Deem Rutim was sitting on the windowsill, while Dan Rutim was already snoring away atop the bed on the left.

“Are you watching the outside? You’re not planning to stay on guard duty all night without sleep, are you?”

“I have no intention of going that far. I was simply waiting for you to return,” Deem Rutim replied in a displeased tone, stepping down to the floor and closing the double-leaf window. I figured there would be no harm in leaving it open since we were on the second floor, but the lattice shutters had plenty of openings, so they still allowed for plenty of air flow.

“Well, even if I were to drift off, there would be nothing to worry about since Dan Rutim is here, so take it easy and get some rest.”

“Got it, thanks. You really trust Dan Rutim, don’t you, Deem Rutim?”

“Of course I do. I believe that he is the greatest hunter at the forest’s edge,” he replied in a combative tone while walking over right in front of me. Since his cloak was hanging on the wall, he looked even more slender than usual. “That was why I found the Fa clan head’s remarks before dinner so irritating. Isn’t she making light of Dan Rutim’s strength? Even if one of his legs is impaired, nobody from town would ever be able to get the better of him.”

“I can say that definitely wasn’t Ai Fa’s intention. She faced him in a contest of strength, so she must know how strong he is better than anyone.”

“From what I was told, the Fa clan head was nearly Dan Rutim’s equal in that contest... But having not seen it personally, I find it incredibly hard to believe.”

“Well, I did see it in person. And you weren’t even there, right?”

Deem Rutim suddenly puffed up his cheeks. “I was still only twelve back then, so I wasn’t able to compete in the contest of strength. But at the next festival of

the hunt, I'll show my strength as a hunter, so that I don't disgrace the Rutim name."

"I see. I'm sure it'll be rough to compete like that right after healing, but good luck."

Deem Rutim's cheeks deflated, and the ends of his eyebrows drooped as his gaze turned toward Dan Rutim, who was breathing cutely as he slept. "Still, there's only another month or so left until the next festival of the hunt. Won't it be difficult for Dan Rutim to fully recover before then, when he still needs a cane even now?"

"I'm not so sure about that. And besides, I can't picture Dan Rutim losing to any average opponent even so."

Deem Rutim had a completely childish expression on his face now for some reason. Well, maybe that was only natural considering he was only thirteen, but it was still pretty unbelievable considering how tense he usually looked.

"Dan Rutim was injured due to my failures. And thanks to that, he stepped down as clan head... I can't help but feel regret over what happened."

"Oh really? That must have been tough." Trying to act appropriately as the older of the two of us, I offered Deem Rutim a smile. "But Dan Rutim looked really happy to hand over his seat as clan head to Gazraan Rutim, didn't he? Plus, he said strength as a hunter and as a clan head were separate from each other, so I don't think you need to worry yourself so much over it."

"That's not true at all. Nobody could be a better clan head to lead our people than Dan Rutim," Deem Rutim stubbornly insisted, shaking his head. It was just making him look all the more childish.

"Okay. But Dan Rutim acknowledged his son's strength, so you shouldn't have anything to worry about on that front. The Rutim clan's future should be totally secure, seeing how you've had two wonderful clan heads in a row."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, I do."

After shooting me a pained glare for a moment, eventually he grumbled, "I'm

going to bed,” and turned away. “You get to sleep too. We have to wake up early again tomorrow, right? And don’t leave the room on your own at night.”

“Yeah, got it... Ah, sorry, but could I have the bottom bed?”

Deem Rutim silently changed direction and climbed up the simple wooden ladder. Breathing a sigh of relief, I went ahead and lay down on the lower bunk as planned. Though it was just a set of sheets laid out over a hard wooden frame, I had no complaints, since it actually did have a pillow. You could probably only find soft and fluffy down mattresses in the castle town anyway.

With a thin blanket over me, pulled up to just above my stomach, I turned over on my left side. The wall made of wooden planks looked quite sturdy...and on the other side of it, Ai Fa was surely lying on her side in the same way. Gently placing the palm of my hand up against the wooden wall, I closed my eyes.

Abruptly having her arm grabbed with no warning made her feel as if she was being stabbed by a blade, huh...?

As my consciousness slowly drifted off, I recalled Ai Fa’s words and expression.

It was only natural that even she would be shaken up after hearing how I felt about her, and that I would want to marry her if it were only possible. After all, my own feelings ran wild when she talked about how happy things would have been if only our genders were reversed.

Our feelings for each other were more than strong enough for us to want to marry. That was undoubtedly something to feel happy about. Even if it would be difficult to actually marry... No, in spite of that, our feelings remained unchanged. We would always see our meeting as something to be grateful for.

No matter how pained or worried I might feel, the blessed joy I had gained exceeded those feelings by far, and I believed that Ai Fa felt the same way. Even if she hard-heartedly swept my hand away, I wouldn’t let my thoughts head in a negative direction.

I’m so incredibly lucky to have met you, Ai Fa, I thought while drifting off.

I finally fell asleep. But because of that, what happened next was completely

unknown to me. I wasn't aware of the passage of time. When I came to, I heard Dan Rutim's roaring laughter ringing out in the darkness.

"Bwa ha ha! I thought I heard some sort of commotion, but it was just you outlaws from earlier! Just what exactly were you planning to do after sneaking into our room?"

I sluggishly sat up, feeling as if I was dreaming.

The candle still hadn't gone out, so there was a fleeting orange light throughout the room. I could see Dan Rutim's daunting form standing there illuminated by that light.

"Dan Rutim... What in the world is going on?"

"Ah, did I wake you?! It's nothing! You can go back to sleep, Asuta!"

Despite what he told me, just hearing Dan Rutim's loud voice was enough to shake the drowsiness from my mind. Even so, I was still half asleep until as my gaze turned downward, at which point I shot fully awake. There was a man on the floor, crushed under Dan Rutim's foot.



He had a rodent-like face with a scar on his cheek... In other words, it was the little guy who had come after us at dinner. His face was distorted in anguish, and just a short distance away from him, there was a drawn dagger on the floor.

“Hey, don’t squirm so much. My leg hasn’t fully healed just yet, so it’s hard to hold back with it. If you move too much, I could end up crushing your spine.”

As his limbs flailed about, the little man let out a groan.

Once my eyes got more accustomed to the darkness, I noticed two other figures behind Dan Rutim. Deem Rutim was pinning a similarly familiar large man on the floor while twisting his arm.

“It seems they came down from the roof of the building using some sort of ropes. There’s no bolt on the window.” Even though Deem Rutim had looked so childish before I went to sleep, now the light of a hunter was unmistakably shining in his eyes.

“Let go of me, damn it! Don’t you care what’s happening to your women in the other room?!” the big man desperately wailed. In the next instant, an unsettling sound rang out. Deem Rutim had dislocated the man’s shoulder. The big fellow let out a shriek so high it was barely even audible to humans.

“Hey, Deem Rutim. You shouldn’t injure criminals needlessly.”

“I know. But these men not only entered our sleeping chamber without permission, they even drew blades. They wouldn’t have any grounds to complain even if we sliced off a finger on their right hand, or a toe.”

“This isn’t the forest’s edge, so we should obey the laws set by the capital. Besides, if you injure him like that, his shrieking is gonna be absolutely obnoxious...” Dan Rutim said, then he let out a big yawn. Considering how soundly he had been sleeping thanks to all the wine he had drunk, it seemed that it really was flat out impossible for folks from town to get the better of hunters of the forest’s edge. “Now then, I believe these guys had five in their group. Shall we check in on the other rooms? Asuta, sorry, but could you fetch some leather straps? There should be some in the pockets of my hunter’s cloak.”

“R-Right, got it.”

It went without saying, but I was worried about whether the others were safe above all else. There was surely nothing to be concerned about, since we were being protected by such dependable hunters, but even so, my pounding heart wouldn't calm down until I saw them safe and sound.

After binding the outlaws' limbs with leather straps, we all exited the room together. After a short walk down the now completely dark hallway, Dan Rutim started by knocking on the door of the neighboring room.

"Hey Ai Fa, has anything happened in there?"

After a few moments of silence, I heard the clank of the door being unbolted. It opened a moment later, and Rimee Ruu stood there with a smile. "Hey, you guys are okay too?! Thank goodness! Ai Fa took care of everyone over here!"

As I patted Rimee Ruu on the head, I looked into the room, and spotted Ai Fa elegantly rising after binding the criminals like we had. Since she had also gone to bed, she of course didn't have on her hunter's cloak, and her golden blonde hair was flowing freely. Seeing her standing there with the same elegance and strength as always, I finally managed to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Oh, so all the rest of them came over here?" Dan Rutim called out with a chuckle.

"Hmm?" Ai Fa questioned with a tilt of her head. Astoundingly, there were three outlaws lying at my clan head's feet.

"We had two of the criminals bust in. As long as they don't have any more buddies, that should be all of them."

"Ah, so that is what you meant. You needn't worry any further," Ai Fa said with a nod directed toward a different direction entirely. Following her gaze, I found Myme and Toor Deen huddling together like sisters with their small shoulders trembling, having both gotten out of bed.

"Still, there is no guarantee there aren't more of them. I'll climb up their rope and check how things look on top of the building," Deem Rutim declared, crossing the room and approaching the open window.

"Well then, I'll go check on the other rooms. After all, we'll need to discuss with Zasshuma about what to do with these guys," Dan Rutim said.

As he was about to shut the door, I called out, “Um, is it okay if I stay here? I’m concerned about Toor Deen and Myme.”

“Hmm. Just make sure you don’t leave Ai Fa’s side, okay?”

Dan Rutim walked off down the hallway with the help of his cane, while I went to step into the room. However, Ai Fa swiftly hurried over and pushed me back into the hall. “Hold on. You’re uninjured, right?”

“Yeah, of course. By the time I was awake, Dan and Deem Rutim already had our attackers under control.”

“I see,” Ai Fa nodded, then she reached down and patted Rimee Ruu’s head. “Rimee Ruu, I have to talk with Asuta for a moment. Make sure not to go near the window until Deem Rutim comes back, all right?”

“Yup, got it!”

At that, Rimee Ruu scurried over to the other young girls.

The three criminals all seemed to be fully unconscious, since none of them were moving in any way as they lay there with their limbs bound. After taking one more look at them, Ai Fa stepped outside of the room.

At the same time, Dan Rutim disappeared into Zasshuma’s room, leaving just me and my clan head alone in the hallway again. After half closing the door to block the gazes of the young girls, Ai Fa pulled me over to the wall.

“What’s the matter? Are you angry that I didn’t signal the emergency? I mean, the outlaws were all taken care of without me needing to knock on the wall.”

“That’s not it. Since there were only two of them, it comes as no surprise that they were defeated before you even awoke.”

In that case, why did Ai Fa have such a brooding look in her eyes?

As she bit down firmly on her lip, she stepped directly in front of me. “Asuta, you should prepare yourself mentally. I’ve already done so.”

“Huh? What do you—” I started to ask, but before I could finish, Ai Fa threw both of her arms around me.

For a moment I felt like I was going to be bowled over by shock, but then I gathered myself and grabbed ahold of my clan head's shoulders.

"Wh-What's the matter? I told you, I wasn't in any danger either."

"I know. But still, I was so incredibly worried," Ai Fa whispered, hugging me even tighter. Her warmth and scent made my heart suddenly feel content. I was overwhelmed with such joy that I felt like I was going to start choking up.

"I'm just glad you're all right. It's not that I doubt Dan and Deem Rutim's strength, but the thought that you were in danger in a place where I couldn't see you was so painful it felt like it would tear me apart."

"I wasn't in any danger. But thanks for worrying so much about me." As I said that, I moved one of my hands from Ai Fa's shoulder up to her head. Placing it on her soft blonde hair, I pulled her head in just a bit closer.

Instantly, Ai Fa made a noise like "Ah" and pushed me away. "A-At any rate, I'm glad that you're okay. I can't imagine there will be any more danger tonight, but do keep your guard up as you get some rest, all right?"

"It may be a bit tricky for me to keep my guard up while resting..."

"Oh, quiet. Even if it is difficult, do it anyway," Ai Fa retorted while shooting me a glare with upturned eyes. Her face, which was half hidden behind her long hair, was blushing bright red, which lately I hadn't seen her do very often.

Of course, even without a mirror to check, it was obvious to me that I was in much the same state. After all, it had been some time since Ai Fa and I were this close to one another.

And so, even with that slight disturbance, our night in Dabagg quietly passed on by.

Chapter 4: A Minor Plot

1

“Apparently, they’re wanted bandits. They must have chosen us as their prey after seeing us eating that grand dinner. Of course, I’m sure they wanted to get back at us for what happened in the dining hall too,” Zasshuma said.

It was now the following morning. We were walking down a road in the post town, which wasn’t seeing much foot traffic just yet.

Last night had ended with us calling for the guards and handing the criminals over to them, but Zasshuma was the only one present for that, so he was explaining everything to us now, early in the morning.

“Burglary is a serious crime, and since they were already wanted, even if they avoid death sentences, they’ll be punished in a way that’ll make sure they can never get up to any wrongdoing again. And they certainly won’t have the strength left in them to head to Genos for revenge, so I don’t think there’s anything to worry about on that front.”

“I see. Then that’s good enough for us!” Dan Rutim replied for the group. Currently, we were heading on foot to meet the folks from the firm at the town hall, having left our totos in the care of The Ramam Droplet.

Though I wasn’t all that familiar with the concept, apparently in towns like this, firms existed to manage various business dealings. There was one for butchers’ shops, and another for inns, and representatives from those businesses around town acted as their respective firms’ members. For example, even in the Genos post town, Milano Mas, Naudis, and Nail were all members of a firm, which handled all sorts of business mediation to prevent too much friction from forming.

We had asked for a meeting in order to form ties with the folks from the firm that managed Dabagg’s karon ranches.

“To refresh you on what I explained yesterday, the head of the firm is a guy named Digola who runs a big ranch to the south. These guys spend more time in town obsessing over money calculations than running their ranches, so take care not to end up in any bad business deals, all right?”

“Yeah, understood.”

As our group of thirteen walked along through the post town, eventually a large stone building came into view. That was the residence of the lord of Dabagg. There really wasn't all that much territory in Dabagg aside from the ranches, so rather than constructing a castle town, it seemed they simply had a stone wall around the one manor and a barracks meant to house several hundred soldiers. Those soldiers patrolled Dabagg day and night, the ranches included, and protected the town and its karon from bandits.

“Genos and Banarm are ruled by dukes, but for Dabagg it's a count, correct?”

“Yeah, that's right. It's rare for the title of duke to be granted to anyone so far out in the frontier. And it would normally be unthinkable for lords of territories as small as the Daleim and Turan lands to be made counts.”

Now that I thought about it, I was pretty sure Polarth had said something similar in the past.

“Still, whether they're dukes or counts, they're all still nobles. Even if I've gotten used to dealing with them through my work as a bodyguard, you don't exactly run into many who are worthy of respect. They're all either overly formal or way too haughty.”

“So which category does the lord of Dabagg fall into?”

“No clue. I've got no interest in going anywhere near the guy who rules over my hometown. Even at the town hall we're going to, the most you'll come across is petty officials who run about doing errands.”

We headed north toward the lord's manor, and then Zasshuma turned down a street to the right. The streets were built radially outward from the lord's residence at the center, and the town hall where the firm met was a bit to the east.

The town certainly wasn't very big. After all, it only took a walk of about ten

minutes from The Ramam Droplet before Zasshuma stopped and said, “We’re here.” There was a row of buildings, all bigger and finer than what could be found in the rest of the post town, lined up there. Though the town hall was a one-story building, it was around the size of the community centers I knew from back home.

When Zasshuma knocked on the door, a young man with a sword dangling from his hip appeared. “You are the visitors from Genos, correct? They have been awaiting your arrival.” With the young man guiding us, we proceeded down a hallway. Once he reached a specific door, the man stopped, and then he loudly declared, “Pardon the interruption! I have brought the guests!!”

Inside was what appeared to be an incredibly spacious conference room. There were numerous seats lined up in rows before a wide table, behind which were two men in the center seats.

“Welcome to Dabagg. Go ahead and take whichever seats you please.”

Both of the middle-aged men had appearances that were pretty typical of westerners. One had a stout build, while the other was rather thin in comparison. It was the plump man who had called out to us. He was wearing the cloth attire of a merchant, while the thin fellow wore what looked to be high-quality silk.

“I’m the head of the firm that manages business for the karon ranches, Digola, and this is Sir Meilos, who handles external affairs for Dabagg. Since you came all the way from Genos, I made sure to invite him to this meeting.”

“Thank you for getting up so early for us. I am Asuta of the Fa clan, and I am a person of the forest’s edge who runs a business in the Genos post town,” I said with a bow, acting as the representative for our group.

The plump Digola wore a friendly smile, while Meilos looked us over rather nervously. Just like their physical appearances, their personalities also seemed to be complete opposites.

“Word has made its way out here about how giba cooking has become quite popular in the Genos post town, so we’ve been very much looking forward to meeting you ever since hearing the owner of those stalls was coming here to Dabagg on business.”

“I’m honored. We’re so grateful for how kind everyone has been.”

I figured it would be rather difficult for them to find any profit in bringing giba meat to a karon town like Dabagg, so this friendly reception was more than a little unexpected.

At any rate, we went ahead and took our seats. Just as we had arranged in advance, Ai Fa, Reina Ruu, Zasshuma and I took the front row. Meilos furrowed his brow even further at the sight of Ai Fa sitting there dressed like a hunter, but he ultimately didn’t comment.

“So, just what exactly is it that you wish to discuss? Will we perhaps have an opportunity to taste some of that famed giba meat?”

“Of course. We brought giba jerky and sausages with us today.”

“Ooh, giba sausages?” Digola parroted, leaning forward with a look of great interest.

I held my leather bag out toward him. “As was mentioned yesterday, I would like to borrow your kitchen if I can. It would naturally also be possible to sample them as is, but I believe you would be able to compare their tastes much better if they were fully prepared.”

“Yes, as you wish. Though as I said yesterday, we were only able to prepare a small kitchen meant for preparing light meals.”

“That will be plenty.”

“Then we will have someone lead you there.”

With a smile, Digola looked over toward Meilos, who wordlessly clapped his hands. In response, a soldier dressed similarly to the young man from before appeared.

Though I could only spy Digola and Meilos in the room, they seemed to have prepared a fair number of bodyguards. But, well, that much probably just made sense when dealing with a group like us, whose backgrounds they couldn’t confirm.

As we had planned, the group heading to the kitchen consisted of me, Ai Fa, Reina Ruu, and Myme from the row behind us. My clan head was there to guard

us, Reina Ruu to act as my cooking assistant, and Myme simply accompanied us to spectate.

“This way.”

We were led through a door into another hallway, but not on some meandering journey. Instead, it turned out the door right across from where we exited was the entrance to the kitchen. Since we had asked to use one in advance, they must have chosen the nearest conference room.

When we stepped inside, I found that it was a modest kitchen around ten square meters in size, with a work station in the middle and two stone-built stoves along the right wall, while the opposite wall had a shelf filled with cooking implements.

I chose a pot that looked suitable and filled it with plenty of water from a jug. Then I added three links of sausages from the leather bag, and heated up an empty pan atop the other stove.

“Reina Ruu, could you prepare the wooden plates? Myme’s portion will be ready shortly.”

The second Ruu daughter already knew what was on the menu, so she laid out seven plates atop the work station. Of those, two were meant for Myme.

“These are really simple dishes, so don’t get your hopes up too high, okay?”

“Okay! Still, just the fact that it’s your giba cooking we’re talking about is enough to raise my expectations by itself...”

Myme was staring down at my hands, looking like a puppy wagging her tail. Thinking to myself that today’s recipes weren’t really anything that special, I placed the giba bacon atop a cutting board. While I would be having them try ordinary jerky too, I also wanted the people of Dabagg to taste this giba bacon, which took more effort to create.

With a meat knife, I started cutting off slices as thin as I could manage from the block of bacon. While I was doing that, I noticed Ai Fa glancing over at the soldier stationed by the door, and then whispering to me, “Hey. The smell of that giba meat is making me hungry. You can feed me whatever is left over.”

“Huh? Well, we should have some extra meat and ingredients...” I replied.

Reina Ruu shyly tugged on my sleeve. “Um, in that case, could I have a taste as well? It’s my first time going a full day without eating giba, so it seems as if my heart is craving it.”

“Hmm, guess I should go ahead and make more, then... Um, would you like some too?” I called out to the soldier keeping watch.

“I’m fine,” he briefly replied. Did he figure it would be inappropriate to eat while on duty or something? Well, at any rate, I figured fulfilling the desires of my companions from the forest’s edge mattered more than all that. Besides, I had planned to let Myme do a taste test from the very start. Leaving someone out would have been rude, regardless of how many people were participating. Hopefully, they would just think of it as testing for poison or something. Satisfied with my reasoning, I cut off five slices of bacon, then added two more sausages to the boiling pot.

We had brought along plenty of ingredients when we set out, in case there were a lot of people from the firm attending. While the pot was heating up, I also pulled out a tino from the leather bag and julienned the amount I needed.

After that was done, I cooked the giba bacon. Since I had used ribs for the cut, there was no need to add any fat to the pan. There was still time left till the sausages would be done boiling, so I added three strips of giba bacon to the large metal pot as well.

A pleasing crackling sound and a tantalizing aroma filled the air. That alone was enough to make my stomach feel like it was about to growl, even though I hadn’t been hungry at all before.

Suppressing my hunger, I flipped over the bacon strips with their crackling fat, then I broke a kimyuus egg over each of them. Though the eggs were a bit small, they were no different in composition or flavor to chicken eggs. Since you could even eat them raw, I went ahead and made them sunny side up, just how I liked them.

Back in my old world, I had heard that many foreign countries considered eating raw eggs unsanitary, so apparently even when making fried eggs, they would thoroughly heat through both sides.

I could recall a scene with raw eggs in a mug from a certain boxing movie from the west, so maybe they used chicken eggs from Japan for it... As such vague musings passed through my mind, I watched the clear part of the eggs go white, and the orange yolks turn just the right shade of yellow.

Now that the eggs were properly heated, the giba bacon and eggs was finished. Since so much salt and pico went into making the bacon in the first place, there was no need to add any further flavoring. Such easy dishes really were a rarity.

With a wooden spatula, I scooped up the completed servings and deposited one on top of each of the plates. Atop each piece of shriveled bacon sat a brilliantly shining fried egg.

Since it wasn't the sort of dish that I had needed to practice making, it had literally been years since I last made it. Even so, when I took in its smell and appearance, it sure did look delicious.

"Ah ha ha. It looks rather interesting, doesn't it?" Myme said with an amused chuckle, her eyes shining with anticipation. She had already tasted bacon on its own, but this would be her first time having it in a completed dish, as far as I was aware.

"Go ahead and dig in. If you find it lacking in flavor, I think it'd be good with this added on top too."

"What is it?"

"It's ketchup. Something I planned to use with the sausages." I had made some at home using the mamaria vinegar from Banarm that Welhide had given me, and brought it along. I took a wooden spoon and adorned each plate with a scoop of the stuff out of my small jar.

Cutting into their bacon with just their spoons and skewers, everyone went ahead and took a bite. The second it entered her mouth, Myme let out a sigh of admiration. "This tender smoked meat is way tastier when it's fried! And it seems to go very well with kimyuus eggs too!"

"Right? Frying it was the idea from the very start. It needs to be heated through to really show its best."

The meager snacks made with just a single slice of bacon and one egg each disappeared into their mouths in no time flat. Seeing their blissful expressions really filled my heart, if not my stomach.

“Still, the salt and herbs are so strong that it makes you want not just the egg, but fuwano bread or vegetables or something to go with it too, right?”

“Well, since I used tino and poitan for the sausage dish, I didn’t use them in this one.”

As we had that exchange, the sausages finished boiling. Though they had shriveled up a good bit in the smoking process, they had now regained a good bit of their original plumpness. Once I pulled them up out of the water and dried off the moisture, I sandwiched them in thick poitan bread along with the julienned tino, then topped it with ketchup and the mustard-like spice sarfaal, which I had dissolved in water.

Perhaps it went without saying, but this dish was something akin to a hot dog.

When Myme took a bite, the look on her face was happier than ever. “Delicious! You can make sausages even tastier by adding water back to them, right?! It has such a smooth texture that it’s hard to believe this is smoked meat!”

“Thanks. I’m just glad you enjoyed it,” I replied with a smile as I fried the bacon for those guys from the firm.

Reina Ruu looked ecstatic, and though Ai Fa remained expressionless, there was an incredibly satisfied look in her eyes. They really must have been dying to taste giba meat.

Meanwhile, the soldier that had been standing there in the doorway carrying out his job had started getting a look on his face that was difficult to describe. Perhaps the aroma of cooked bacon stimulated his hunger, or maybe he was drawn in by Myme and Reina Ruu’s joy... I figured it was probably both. That was just how much they seemed to enjoy my cooking.



“If you sold this in the post town, it would be incredibly popular, don’t you think? I’d say it’s just as tasty as the giba burgers and giba manju!”

“Yeah, but it might displease the elites of Genos if the bacon and sausages are sold at a lower price than jerky. In which case, it won’t be possible to keep the cost down enough to sell it in the post town.”

That was why I wanted to see if it would be possible to sell them in other towns.

There probably weren’t many folks in other towns who would want to pay our higher prices for giba jerky to use as portable rations either. But if we were talking about something that was every bit as tasty as fresh meat, it would be possible to treat it as a high-class ingredient. We’d have a lot of difficulty producing either the bacon or sausages in great quantities anyway, so it would be good enough for me if I could just attract the attention of some casual gormands.

At present, the leading choice for who to make our client was still Welhide and the people of Banarm, as they had already been shown to have a favorable opinion of giba meat, but I intended to also see what kind of reception the folks from Dabagg would give it, seeing as how they were such an influential town in terms of meat.

Besides, since we’re selling giba meat and meals, that makes Dabagg a business rival. I’d like to try to go through the proper channels so as not to cause any grudges to form. As that thought ran through my head, I finished cooking the giba bacon and eggs for Digola and Meilos.

Since Reina Ruu had her hands free, she swiftly put together the pseudo-hot dogs. After that, we laid out the plain jerky, bacon, and sausages on a separate plate, finishing our preparations.

“That took a while, but we’re all done.”

At that, the soldier nodded and opened the door.

We headed back to Digola and Meilos with our giba dishes in hand, prepared to tackle our final task here in Dabagg.

“Sorry for the wait. This is our giba cooking.”

We laid out five plates atop the wide table. That included two plates of giba bacon and eggs, two of the pseudo-hot dogs, and then one with the plain jerky, bacon, and sausages all served up together.

Presented with those plates, Digola narrowed his eyes and uttered, “Oh my,” while Meilos silently knitted his brow.

“The fried meat has a wonderful aroma. Why, it’s every bit as good as karon.”

“I hope that the taste is to your liking as well,” I said with a bow, and then I took my seat along with everyone else.

With seemingly no hesitation whatsoever toward giba meat, Digola started off by biting into the pseudo-hot dog. As he chewed with big movements of his jaw, his eyes shot open wide in surprise. Then, when Meilos had a bit of the giba bacon and eggs, the wrinkles on his furrowed brow grew even deeper as he sat there silently.

For a little while after that, the two just kept on eating without saying a word. While that was going on, Dan Rutim whispered from diagonally behind me, “Asuta.”

“Ah, right. We still have some giba meat leftover, so I’ll check with the inn about borrowing a stove when we get back. And if that doesn’t work out, I was thinking we could stop by the Malotta ranch on our way home. There should be an opportunity for us to eat some giba cooking before we make it back to Genos.”

“My! You’ve read my mind once again, Asuta!”

After shooting Dan Rutim a smile, I went ahead and turned back toward the table, where I saw Digola wearing a dumbfounded look.

“Sir Asuta of the Fa clan... That was shockingly tasty. I never would have guessed giba meat was this delicious...”

“Since you all know how good karon meat is better than anyone, it makes me very happy to hear that.”

“What a shocking taste. Hard to believe it’s this good despite being smoked meat... You didn’t seem to use a particularly different blend of herbs and the like, compared to how karon jerky is made, so how were you able to maintain this much flavor?”

“It’s because I prioritized taste over how well preserved it was. The fatty meat still kept a lot of its juiciness, right? I’m still experimenting with exactly how long it will last, but I’d be happy if it stayed edible for even a month. Also, we used ribs rather than leg meat to make it.”

“I see. But what about these sausages? They seemed just as juicy as the tender jerky.”

“I believe those should last for a bit longer. We used plenty of fatty meat there too, but they were smoked for the same amount of time as ordinary jerky.”

“Hmm. So the tough jerky on this plate is the ordinary sort made from leg meat, correct? It’s no worse than karon jerky either.”

His words alone were satisfying to me, but I was more interested in his facial expressions. For some reason, even as he heaped praise upon the giba meat’s taste, he looked strangely disheartened.

“This is a grave matter...” Meilos stated from beside him, speaking up for the first time. His voice was hoarse and rough, seemingly a perfect fit for his demeanor. “To think, such delicious meat is now being supplied throughout Genos... And you said you wish to sell this meat in Dabagg as well, Asuta of the Fa clan?”

“Ah, yes. But there’s a concern that the price of giba meat may rise in the future, so I won’t ask you to make a deal with us today. Besides, it’s also questionable whether giba meat would even sell in a town like Dabagg, which has access to an endless supply of delicious karon meat.”

“Then, you plan to sell it to towns aside from Dabagg? I’ve heard that just recently Genos reopened trade with Banarm.”

Fittingly for someone in charge of external affairs, he seemed to be well informed about the circumstances.

“Right,” I answered honestly with a nod. “We fortunately happen to have a few developing ties to people from Banarm, so I’ve been thinking perhaps we could do business there.”

“Yes, this certainly is grave... Of course, it’s not like you’re acting out of malice here...”

I was taken aback by hearing a word as strong as “malice” brought up so suddenly. Had they seriously taken this as a declaration of war against Dabagg after all?

Still, Genos was one thing, but Banarm was ultimately a karon-producing town itself, so they couldn’t have had any significant dealing with Dabagg. It was hard to imagine Dabagg suffering any harm from us doing business there.

“Sir Meilos, don’t you agree that we should be frank and open about the matter at this point? This Sir Asuta of the Fa clan seems like a trustworthy fellow,” Digola stated, sitting up a bit straighter. “Sir Asuta, allow me to reveal our hidden shame... Currently, Dabagg is in quite a precarious situation.”

“A precarious situation?”

“That’s right. Since you are citizens of Genos, you must have heard tell of it. About how Count Turan fell in the ashen month. That was the start of it all.” As his plump body swayed, Digola continued on. “You see, Count Turan was entirely in charge of handling the distribution of the foods we produce throughout Genos. The dealings regarding the meat and milk we sold all went through him.”

“Right, I’ve heard about that. We people of the forest’s edge had significant involvement with the previous head of the house of Turan.”

“Yes, I’ve heard some people of the forest’s edge colluded with Count Turan and got up to some sort of wrongdoing. But the count was sincere and just when it came to business dealings. I would even say that to us, he was an ideal business partner.”

Well, perhaps it made sense for Cyclaeus to have gained such a reputation outside of Genos. He must have been an important client for Dabagg in particular, considering how he never spared any coins when it came to

acquiring ingredients.

“However, Count Turan fell. Ever since then, someone else entirely has been in charge of business dealings with Dabagg. That’s how we ended up in this predicament so unexpectedly.”

“And just what predicament is that?”

“To put it simply, that person has been cutting the prices on our goods. I will refrain from giving specific numbers, but the price of karon has been lowered enough that it has become quite difficult to maintain the lifestyles we had up until now.”

“That’s...” I started to say, but was left at a loss for words. It was true that Alma had said something similar, but I hadn’t imagined the circumstances were so pressing.

“In particular, the situation became far more dire after trade started up between Genos and Banarm. The implicit threat seems to be that if we were to complain, they would purchase their karon from Banarm instead in the future...”

“That’s absolutely outrageous. How are they able to get away with forcing such one-sided demands on you?”

“I do not know. But the man who took charge of business dealings in place of Count Turan must be especially vicious. Our closest business partner has always been Genos, so if they cut off trade with us, the owners of several ranches would likely end up hanging themselves.”

Meilos chimed in then. “It’s precisely because he is aware of our situation that he can use such oppressive business practices. Now that they have a new business partner in Banarm, Genos would have no issues casting aside Dabagg whenever they please.”

By this point, I had fallen into a state of utter confusion. *Torst must be the one who took charge of the business dealings in place of Cyclaeus. He seemed like such an earnest person, if a bit weak, so could he actually be going around more or less threatening people like that?*

Despite my impressions, though, it wasn’t as if I was all that well acquainted

with Torst. I had only met him around three times, and talked to him personally for a few minutes at most. On top of that, Torst wasn't solely responsible for the circulation of food like Cyclaeus had been. He must have been relying on Duke Genos's aid to some degree, and I was pretty sure he was splitting the task with subordinates as well.

I knew even less about Duke Marstein Genos than I did Torst. Just like Kamyua Yoshu, he was a really mysterious man, and he appeared to be more calculating than most.

So the people of Dabagg are suffering due to some plot by Torst himself, one of his subordinates, or maybe even Marstein?

I could feel bitter emotions curdling in my gut. As I bit down on my lip, I glanced over at Zasshuma, who was sitting on the other side of Reina Ruu. Since the Malotta ranch sold karon to Genos, they would be one of the groups suffering most from such a predicament.

However, Zasshuma had remained completely composed as he stared at Digola and Meilos, stroking his stubble-coated chin.

"If such delicious giba meat starts circulating throughout Genos and Banarm under these circumstances...we will be left in quite a bind, in a variety of ways," Digola said, looking as if he was about to break down crying. "At present, your giba cooking has grown very popular in the Genos post town, so the sales of karon leg meat have fallen a bit. If karon legs and jerky became something Genos no longer has a need for, Dabagg would have even less value for Genos..."

"B-But there's a limit to how many giba can be hunted, so it shouldn't steal away too many karon meat sales."

Still, the people of the forest's edge hunted down about fifty giba a day. If it became possible to sell the majority of that in town, it would bring us tremendous prosperity. We were currently striving our hardest in order to see that impossible dream through.

That said, even if it didn't entirely cut off the demand for karon meat, there was still a definite chance that it could cause some serious damage. I had believed that I didn't need to feel particularly guilty over that fact, as it was up

to the customers to determine which meat they preferred...but this was a different matter entirely.

“I’m sorry, but do you mind if I discuss this with my group a bit...?” I asked after a moment of hesitation.

Digola’s expression had been brimming with anguish, but at that he looked confused and asked back, “What?”

“There’s a lot I can’t decide on my own when it comes to the sale of giba meat, so I would like to take this opportunity to talk things over with everyone for a while.”

“Ah... We are in no rush, so please go ahead and do as you wish,” Digola said with a sigh. “I might have lost myself a bit there and started complaining to you, but I am still a merchant. Please, proceed however you think is best, and don’t let your emotions sway you, Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“Right. Thank you.”

With that, I took the members of the front row with me, meaning Ai Fa, Reina Ruu, and Zasshuma, and headed to a corner of the spacious room. After seeing a number of the folks from our group who stayed behind striking up a conversation with Digola and Meilos, I whispered to Zasshuma, “So, just what exactly is going on here? The price of karon meat hasn’t changed at all in the Genos post town, so if the people here are being paid so much less, isn’t that a bit odd?”

“Yeah. Karon meals in the castle town have stayed at the same price too. Someone along the way must be pocketing the difference...”

“So that really has to be it, huh? Still, I find it hard to imagine that Torst guy who took over for Cyclopeus being so unscrupulous.”

“I wouldn’t know. After all, I’m not acquainted with that particular noble. Still, in the end he’s part of the same bloodline of the house of Turan, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Still, of the two types of noble you mentioned, I can’t help but find him to be the overly formal sort.”

“Just because someone acts formal doesn’t mean they’re a good person, and

it's not like it's inherently unscrupulous to cause Dabagg to take a loss. He may just be trying his hardest to make a profit for Genos instead," Zasshuma said with a shrug of his shoulders.

As I felt baffled at how he seemed not to care about his precious family falling into such a pinch, I turned my gaze toward the second Ruu daughter.

"What do you think, Reina Ruu? Sorry, but I'd like to hear your opinion as the Ruu clan's representative."

"Well... I can't say I'm all that knowledgeable when it comes to business. However...it seems to fit with what we heard at the ranch, about how only the commoners are suffering losses."

Right, Alma had said something like that. He hadn't painted such a grave picture, but my understanding was that the shortfalls had only started recently.

"So is someone from Genos really trying to entrap the people of Dabagg with a wicked scheme...?"

"Hey, isn't that a bit much, calling it a 'wicked scheme'? The weak obeying the strong is just the way of the world. Even if what we were just told was all true, it just means that Genos is stronger than Dabagg," Zasshuma said with an arrogant grin.

His words finally ignited the embers that had been smoldering in my chest. "Even so, if this is some kind of scheme, I can't just stay silent. If it's one of Torst's underlings or someone threatening Dabagg all on their own for personal profit, then that's not something that can be overlooked, is it?"

"I'm not so sure about that. Couldn't you consider it a well-earned win on their part if they managed to succeed with that scheme?"

"Is that seriously how you feel...? I can't believe you'd say that, after how hard you worked to expose Cyclaeus's plot."

"That was part of an official job. I just did my best for the sake of my employer, Lord Melfried."

I felt a little betrayed. Even though I had built up a sense of trust and friendship with him over the course of this trip...I really didn't want to hear

those words coming out of his mouth.

“All right. Then with your permission, I’ll go ahead and do things my way,” I declared, turning toward Ai Fa.

My clan head calmly stared back at me and said, “I leave all business matters up to you. Just as that man said earlier, you should do what you think is right.”

“Got it. Thanks, Ai Fa.”

Naturally, I had no intention of overstepping my position. Though I had formed a bit of an acquaintance with the nobles of Genos, I wasn’t about to mistake that for my own power. However, I should have been able to at least help bring the truth to light. With that thought in mind, I went ahead and returned to Digola and Meilos.

“Um, I already accomplished my goal of having you sample giba meat. And someday, I would like to be able to talk to you again about properly doing business.”

“Right, I cannot say whether we’ll even be able to purchase meat from other towns anymore when that time comes, but I will be looking forward to your next visit,” Digola said with a listless smile.

Getting my thoughts in order, I went ahead and continued, “Also, about the issue with Genos purchasing your karon, I may be able to help out just a little on that front.”

“You’ll help us out, Sir Asuta?”

“That’s right. If this current state of affairs is the result of a shared agreement in Genos then it won’t be possible to do anything about it, but if it’s the plot of a single person...I think there should definitely be a way to correct the situation.”

Digola’s eyes shot open wide, while Meilos furrowed his brow doubtfully.

“After the fall of the former Count Turan, Duke Genos proposed a plan to restore the proper circulation of ingredients. Even if the previous Count Turan was just and sincere when it came to outside deals, he most certainly wasn’t within Genos. And the man who took over from him was tasked by Duke Genos

to make sure the ingredients flowing in would be used more properly.”

“I see...”

“So if cutting the price of karon from Dabagg was a decision from Duke Genos himself, then nothing can be done, but if it was at the sole discretion of the new head of house Turan or someone close to him, I believe the duke would act to rein them in.”

“But even if it was someone’s personal decision, as long as it profits Genos, would it really earn the duke’s anger?”

That was the same argument Zasshuma had raised.

However, I shook my head, “No. Now that the crimes of the previous Count Turan have been exposed, Duke Genos is very concerned with how things are seen externally. Though Genos is a frontier city, it’s also one of the most prosperous places in all of Selva, so apparently the capital regards it as a potential threat.”

“Right...”

“Normally, it wouldn’t be seen as permissible for Genos to employ such aggressive trade measures toward Dabagg, so if the culprit behind all this was trying to use improper business tactics right under Duke Genos’s nose, wouldn’t it make sense for them to face regulation?”

“What exactly are you trying to say?” Meilos asked, wearing a sour look on his face. Turning toward him, I went ahead and voiced my conclusion.

“It’s not all that complicated. I just want to inform Duke Genos of the current situation. After all, he holds the authority to decide everything.”

“Ah, no, you don’t have any duty to act here, Sir Asuta, so we cannot ask you to do something as dangerous as petitioning the duke to...”

“It wouldn’t be anything as official as a petition. I’ll just have a noble I’m acquainted with inform the duke about this.”

“A noble acquaintance? I myself am from an offshoot of the house of Dabagg, but someone without a rank can’t legitimately call themselves a noble. Relying on someone like that could lead you to ruin,” Meilos stated in his hoarse voice.

It seemed that Dabagg also had a policy that said you needed to be part of a bloodline with ties to nobility to take public office.

In order to put the man at ease, I smiled and said, “Oh, really? But there’s nothing to worry about. The man I’m talking about has a position where he can speak freely to Duke Genos, and he’s acted as a go-between for the people of the forest’s edge and the duke before.”

Digola let out a strange-sounding, “Oh? P-Please hold on. For someone to be able to speak freely to Duke Genos... Just how high-ranking a person are we talking?”

“His name is Polarth, and he’s the second son of the house of Daleim.”

As the second son of the main house, Polarth would have been set to inherit a rank. I figured that would help bring them peace of mind, but unexpectedly, Digola had instead started trembling.

“That can’t be... The second son of a count couldn’t possibly form ties with someone who isn’t even a noble...”

“Well, it’d be too long of a story to get into now, but we just happened to become acquainted by coincidence.”

“Sir Asuta, I think you’ve taken this prank far enough,” Meilos firmly interjected. “It’s possible that you’re suffering some sort of misapprehension. If you go about speaking carelessly to someone in such a position, it could invite as much trouble as petitioning Duke Genos directly.”

“Th-That’s right. Please take more care, Sir Asuta, for your own sake,” Digola added, for some reason now turning pale and looking like he was about to cry while forcing a smile. As I wondered what in the world was bringing about this over-the-top reaction, I suddenly heard a hearty chuckle from beside me.

Straightening up with a start, Meilos and Digola glared at the source of that laughter. As for who it had come from, it was none other than Zasshuma. “Sorry about that. I can see that this is getting nowhere fast, so do you mind if I interject, Asuta?”

“Go ahead...” I replied while staring doubtfully at the bodyguard.

Casting aside his composed expression from before, Zasshuma was now wearing a wicked grin.

“So you folks from Dabagg can’t believe people of the forest’s edge, who are seen as especially low-class even among commoners, would be able to forge ties with an elite noble, eh? But I think if we told you the details, you’d be able to understand.”

“W-We most certainly wouldn’t call the people of the forest’s edge low-class...”

“It was just a figure of speech, so don’t worry so much about it. To cut to the chase, Sir Digola and Sir Meilos, it was the people of the forest’s edge who brought about the downfall of the previous Count Turan, Cyclaeus.” As the pair sat there dead silent, Zasshuma broke out into an even wider grin. “It may sound hard to believe, but that’s the truth. Cyclaeus used some people of the forest’s edge to commit crimes, so in order to redeem themselves for that failure, they ended up taking him down. And in the process, they forged ties with a number of nobles, starting with the second son of the house of Daleim.”

“S-Something so utterly ridiculous couldn’t possibly be true...”

“Even if it is ridiculous, it’s a fact. And I was part of another group that worked to corner Cyclaeus from a different direction. In the end, we joined hands with the people of the forest’s edge to take the count down.” As I held my breath and listened to Zasshuma’s speech, I was left wondering if it was really all right to reveal all that. “So you’ve got no reason to worry. After all, supposedly the second son of the house of Daleim stops by Asuta’s shop at least once every ten days. It would be no trouble at all, asking him to deliver a message to Duke Genos.”

Digola and Meilos just sat there, not uttering a word.

“By the way, Asuta has served as a chef for banquets in the castle town, so he’s personally acquainted with Duke Genos. If he can get permission from the leading clan heads, they wouldn’t even have difficulty going directly to the duke.”

The pair were growing more and more pale.

“Ah, but I suppose it would be the duke’s first son, Lord Melfried, who would speak with the leading clan heads instead. Still, I would imagine that man would listen even more attentively to what they would have to say.”

“D-Duke Genos’s first son...!”

By this point, Digola’s face was as pale as a corpse. Meilos, meanwhile, was gripping his chair’s armrests, his thin face dripping with cold sweat.

“I’m actually acquainted with the man too, and Lord Melfried values the law to an almost frightening degree. If someone out there has enacted some crafty plot to line their own pockets, he’d surely spare no effort to see them brought to justice... Of course, that’s assuming the criminals came from Genos.”

“W-We didn’t do anything wrong!” Digola shouted, knocking over his chair as he shot to his feet.

And with his gaze fixed on the man’s plump figure, Zasshuma grinned and said, “I see. Then I suppose you have nothing to worry about. Duke Genos and his son wouldn’t have any interest in Dabagg’s internal squabbles, after all. No matter how much the people of Dabagg may be suffering, it wouldn’t have anything to do with Genos.”

There was nothing the man could say.

“Just like Asuta said at the start, if any suspicious business deals are part of the lord of the land’s machinations, nobody can countermand them. But if it’s the plot of some single person, then surely the land’s ruler would want to do something about that, right?”

“Just what exactly is it that you’re trying to say, Zasshuma? My stomach’s liable to start grumbling soon.” That comment had come from Dan Rutim, who had been fiddling with his mustache while looking bored the whole time.

When Zasshuma turned to look at the hunter, he was wearing a bold grin. “They said the folks from the ranches have been suffering losses ever since Cyclopeus’s downfall, right? So someone must have been taking those profits. If it were the lords of either Genos or Dabagg who profited, then nobody has any right to complain about it. But if anyone else lines their pockets under their rulers’ noses, they could certainly face judgment as a result.”

“Hmm, I still don’t quite get it,” Dan Rutim said, but I knew what he was implying.

Actually, just looking at Digola and Meilos’s faces was enough to make it painfully clear. It wasn’t Torst or some subordinate under him pocketing that money. No, it was these men, who had falsely reported that Genos was forcing down the price for karon meat.

“The lord of Dabagg will surely be receiving a messenger from Genos Castle soon enough. And if he hears about some false rumors suggesting that threats were being used to force the price down on karon, well, I’m sure he won’t just stay silent about that. No matter what the truth of the matter may be, I’m sure both lords will join together to see it brought to light,” Zasshuma concluded with a wide grin.

The pair of criminals just sat there dumbfounded, unable to offer even a single word in response.

3

“You’re more calculating than I thought, Zasshuma,” I said as we rode along in the swaying wagon.

“What are you talking about?” the bodyguard asked back, turning my way with a doubtful look.

“You were suspicious of Digola and Meilos right from the very start, weren’t you? And you goaded me on to see how they would react, right?”

“You make it sound bad, saying I goaded you on. But no matter how crafty they might have seemed, I couldn’t exactly go calling them criminals without any proof, you know. So I just held myself back from aggravating matters until I was totally confident about it.”

“Then why not tell us that right from the start? It was pretty underhanded of you,” I said. Then a thought suddenly came to mind. “Now that I think about it, that whole thing about pretending to be a merchant group in order to entrap the Suun clan was a plot concocted by you and Melfried, not Kamyua, right? I guess it should have been obvious to me from the very start that you were a

tricky guy.”

“Boy, that’s some ancient history you’re dragging up. Did I really hurt your feelings that badly?” As he rubbed his stubbly cheek, Zasshuma leaned closer to me, looking concerned.

As I stared back at him, I replied with a strained smile, “No. I’m more relieved that you’re not the sort of person who’d put down your family’s ranch like that. Though I have been thinking that you aren’t very upfront about your feelings toward them.”

“Well, it’s not like I went after those criminals for their sake. It was just righteous indignation, that’s all.”

With a shrug of his bulky shoulders, Zasshuma turned his gaze outside of the wagon. We were still within Dabagg territory, heading down a tree-lined street that connected the town and the ranches.

Since the sun was now rather high in the sky, there was sunlight filtering through the trees, creating shadows on the ground. The plan was that we would first stop by the Malotta ranch again, and then head back to Genos.

“What will happen to Digola and Meilos now?”

“No clue. It’ll depend on just how much they’ve angered the lord of Dabagg, but I imagine they at least won’t get their heads lopped off. They’ll probably just need to give up living off their calculations and go back to chasing after karon rears instead.”

The news of their wrongdoings would spread throughout the ranches before long. If Digola earned the wrath of the ranch owners, the resulting outrage would probably reach Count Dabagg and make him hand down judgment before the envoy from Genos could even arrive.

“So even in a peaceful town like this, there are people trying to con their way into riches, huh?”

“That’s right. There’s always going to be crime anywhere that people gather.”

As we were talking, the Malotta ranch came into view. Miza just happened to be carrying a huge wooden barrel out of the barn, and she greeted us with a

smile. “My, are you leaving? Did you at least get to eat some delicious karon in town?”

“Yes, we did. In fact, I might have overeaten a bit,” I said with a smile of my own as I hopped down from the wagon.

Zasshuma also got down and stood next to me. “Are Alma and the others still out in the pasture? We’d like to at least say a brief farewell to them too.”

“The sun’ll hit its peak soon, so they’re probably on their way back. But more importantly...” Miza declared, ignoring her son and turning my way. “That giba meat sure was some fine stuff! It was every bit as tasty as our karon, and all it took was tossing it in the pot for dinner!”

“Ah, you tried it already? Well, I’m glad to hear that it was to your tastes.”

“The flavor was just a bit strong, but the more I ate it, the more I felt like that was the most important part. If they can get their hands on meat this good, I’d imagine the folks from Genos won’t be buying karon much longer.”

“I don’t think that’s necessarily how it’ll turn out. Giba and karon each have a delicious taste all their own. And besides, it wouldn’t be possible to provide enough giba meat for the whole population of Genos in the first place.”

“Oh really? Well, that’s a relief,” Miza said with a smile, still holding that heavy-looking barrel.

It was then that Myme spoke up, having appeared there beside me at some point. “Um, is that karon milk? If you don’t mind, could you sell me some? Just ten bottles would be plenty.”

“Ooh, you want to buy karon milk? We’ve only got barrels like this here, for selling to the dairyman.”

“Oh, I bought bottles in town, so I would love to purchase some if you don’t mind!”

“Sorry, but could we buy twenty bottles as well?” Reina Ruu called out from behind.

“I appreciate it,” Miza said with a grin. “Karon milk spoils so easily that it’s hard to find buyers. Ten bottles would be five red coins, and twenty would cost

ten.”

“Huh? That’s really cheap. If we bought it in Genos, it would cost twice as much.”

“That’s to pay the transporters. After all, it takes a full day to go from Dabagg to Genos and back again.”

That being the case, I decided I would go ahead and buy ten bottles myself. Since we wouldn’t have time to prepare meals for tomorrow, we had planned to take the day off from our business in the post town, and would be using that time to learn a variety of dishes from Mikel.

“Then let’s go ahead and separate this out into bottles. I’ll collect more for the dairyman later after we’ve eaten.”

“Thank you, that’s a big help.”

We headed into the barn with our bottles, just as everyone started coming in from the pasture. Alma was walking at the head of the group, and he greeted us with a smile. “Hey, there. Are those guests of yours heading on back to Genos, Zasshuma?”

“Yeah, but we stopped by for a bit of a chat first.”

Zasshuma lowered his voice and started explaining what happened with Digola and Meilos. After hearing the story, Alma looked utterly astounded.

“What the heck? So Digola was just lying about the nobles of Genos lowering the price for karon?”

“Most likely, yes. A man named Meilos in charge of external affairs was in on it, and they must have been pocketing the coins that were supposed to be going to all of you.”

“Ha ha... That sure is crafty of them. Still, it was a mistake on our part too for leaving all the money calculations up to them.”

“That’s for sure. You’re the one heading to firm meetings instead of my old man now, right? No matter who ends up as Digola’s successor, you should keep a careful eye out to make sure they aren’t causing any harm.”

“Got it. What about everyone from the other ranches?”

“They don’t know yet. I figured I could have you act as a messenger. After all, we’ve got to get back to Genos.”

“All right then. We’ll all go spread the word about Digola tonight.”

With the look on his face remaining bright and cheerful all the while, Alma called over a nearby herdboys.

“Oh, could you also tell everyone that an investigative team will be coming from Genos Castle soon to determine the truth of the matter? Otherwise, those two might keep on trying to insist it was Genos forcing down prices.”

“What? Will they really send people over here?”

“No clue. But it’s important to make sure Digola thinks so.”

“Ha ha, you’ve gotten pretty sneaky, Zasshuma,” Alma said while hitting the bodyguard’s shoulder with the back of his hand. With an identical expression, Zasshuma did the same thing back. “Well, see you around. Just don’t make it another two years before you show your face around here again, okay?”

“We’ll see. I can’t make any promises, but, well, I’ll keep it in mind.”

With that, Alma departed alongside the herdboys. They were probably going to go around to the other ranches on a totes or something to spread the news.

After watching the man leave, Zasshuma lightly knitted his brow when he spotted the last person to return from the pasture. That was because the rather short and stout man was none other than Malotta.

I had only seen him bent over yesterday, so I hadn’t been able to tell, but he was even shorter than I had imagined. At most, he was around 160 centimeters tall. With a sour look on his face, he went to pass right by us without even looking, but then Zasshuma called out, “Hold on.” Malotta turned around with a suspicious look, only for Zasshuma to thrust a large cloth bag he had pulled out of the wagon at the man. “They’re nenon leaves. Take them as our thanks for that meal yesterday.”

“That meal was to show *our* thanks for that giba meat or whatever it was...”

“Then let’s say it’s for Alma and ma showing us around the ranch. We don’t have any use for the stuff, so just take it.” Malotta was glaring up at his son who

was over half a head taller than him while looking clearly displeased. Returning that look, Zasshuma continued on, “Also, it may be none of my business, but let me just say one thing. Right now, this ranch’s customers in Genos are reconsidering all of the ingredients they purchase. Also, Digola’s likely to get dragged down from his position as head of the firm soon, maybe even tonight. So don’t you think you should take the opportunity to reevaluate your own business?”

“Reevaluate our business?”

“Yeah. Right now, the karon you raise at this ranch and the ones that are raised with no real care at all from Digola’s ranch are all sold together, aren’t they? Wouldn’t it make sense to negotiate with Genos, so that first-rate karon is sold for a suitable price, and lower-quality karon is sold for less?”

“I can’t see why I should listen to impertinent remarks from someone like you...”

“That’s true. So hurry up and hand the ranch over to Alma already. He should be capable of at least calculating the potential profits and losses there. A feeble old man’s gotta step back at some point in order to train a successor, y’know?” Zasshuma said with a brazen grin. “You can just keep on raising fine karon like you always have. You’ve got a reliable heir, so let him take care of the rest of the troublesome stuff. He’d handle it a whole lot better than someone like me.”

“Hmph...” Malotta snorted, snatching the bag from Zasshuma. Then he silently turned around and walked toward the house.

As his father departed, the bodyguard called out to the old man’s short yet burly back, “See you around! Don’t go kicking the bucket before we meet again, okay, old man?”

“Worry about yourself before you worry about anyone else...you idiot son of mine.”

With that, Malotta vanished behind the building.

Once he was gone from sight, Dan Rutim happily proclaimed from behind us, “Yes, that’s the way! A father and child should always be able to understand one another like that!”

“Don’t start shouting that kind of nonsense out of nowhere, Dan Rutim.”

“It’s not nonsense! Even if you were speaking rudely, your feelings toward your father came across as clear as day, Zasshuma!”

“Oh, shut it,” Zasshuma retorted with a strained chuckle.

“Ah ha ha,” I laughed, but then I suddenly felt a firm tug on my arm. It was Ai Fa, knitting her brow and bringing her face in real close.

“Hmm? What’s the matter, Ai Fa?”

“That’s my line. Why are you tearing up like that, Asuta?” Ai Fa whispered, taking care that no one else noticed.

“I’m not,” I replied, quickly wiping under my eyes. “It’s just, seeing those two, father and son, talking like that really struck a chord in me. It’s not something you see often at the forest’s edge.”

My clan head just kept silently staring at me.

“It’s nothing serious, so you don’t have to look at me like that.”

In order to hide my embarrassment, I flicked Ai Fa on the nose. Instantly, she went beet red and ground her head up against my cheek.

“Owww. Sorry, I was just messing around, but I shouldn’t have done that.”

“What are you two doing? Look, the rest of the group is already back.”

Just like Dan Rutim had said, the women had returned from the barn, holding a number of bottles.

By this point, the sun was already nearing its peak.

It was then that Dan Rutim looked down at me and Ai Fa and loudly proclaimed, “Now then, how about we head on back to the forest’s edge?! I’m sure the women must be preparing a delicious dinner and waiting for our return!”

“I guess you’re right. Let’s get going,” I replied with a smile.

Her face still red, Ai Fa gave me a light kick in the leg.

And so, our two-day trip to Dabagg finally approached its end.

Intermezzo: A Gentle Night

As it was her first night spent outside of the forest's edge, Toor Deen could feel her heart beating faster, though nobody would guess it by looking at her.

Having stepped outside of not only the forest's edge but even Genos entirely, they were now in a town known as Dabagg, lodging at an inn. After finishing dinner downstairs and enjoying a bit of friendly chatting, the group split up to head back to their own separate bedrooms.

They had arrived in Dabagg around when the sun hit its peak, but even though it was now late at night, Toor Deen still wasn't back in her normal state of mind. Her legs felt oddly light, as if she were walking through a dream.

What is someone as lacking as me doing in a place like this?

It was virtually unheard of for people of the forest's edge to travel to the outside world. It was one thing for Asuta or the members of the leading Ruu clan to do so, but why was she added to the group when she was nothing but a simple member of the Deen? That doubt was still firmly rooted in Toor Deen's chest.

The day really had been filled with surprises and fresh experiences. The unfamiliar world outside of Genos was enough to make Toor Deen's heart tremble. It was such a valuable experience that she couldn't help but wonder, *Why me?*

There were plenty of people out there who had wanted to come along on this trip. Foremost among them were Lala Ruu, who Toor Deen got along with well, and Yun Sudra, who had started helping out around the stalls recently. Was it really all right for her to push ahead of them? She knew that her seat wouldn't be given to them even if she had declined, but she still couldn't stop herself from feeling that way.

"What's the matter, Toor Deen?" Myme asked, walking alongside her. Without her even realizing it, they had finished climbing the stairs and were

now standing in front of the door to their room.

“O-Oh, it’s nothing. I was just spacing out a little,” Toor Deen replied in a fluster.

“I see,” Myme smiled back. That expression was as bright and clear as the morning sun streaming out over the peak of Mount Morga. “Well then, let’s get some rest. It seems like Ai Fa has something to discuss with Asuta.”

The arrangement was for Ai Fa, Myme, Rimee Ruu, and Toor Deen to sleep in this bedroom. Leaving Ai Fa out in the hall, Rimee Ruu closed the door and hurried over to the other two young girls, saying, “Ooh, these look really interesting! I wanna sleep on top. Is that okay?”

The beds in this room looked like they were constructed out of lidless boxes and had two levels to them. The top level reached up higher than the heads of the young girls, so they would need to use the ladders to get up there. According to Myme, they were called “bunk beds.”

“I don’t mind if I’m on the top or the bottom. What about you, Toor Deen?”

“A-Ah, I’m fine with either too.”

“Thanks! Then I’ll go ahead and sleep up top!”

Rimee Ruu darted up the ladder like some sort of small forest animal. When she reached the top, she proclaimed, “Wow! This is even higher than when I’m up on Ludo’s shoulders! Goodnight you two!”

“Huh? You’re going to sleep without waiting for Ai Fa? I thought for sure you would want to sleep with her, actually...”

“Yeah. I tried to earlier, but it was too narrow for the two of us to fit, so we have to sleep separately,” Rimee Ruu said, and then she let out a big yawn. “Plus, I’m all sleepy now that I’m full of food. But I’ll be spending all morning with Ai Fa tomorrow, so we can chat as much as we like then!”

“I see. Well, I’m certainly tired too from all that walking around today. Please, go ahead and get some rest.”

“Yeah, you too! Goodnight!” With that, Rimee Ruu’s small figure disappeared from sight into the bed.

Myme turned back toward Toor Deen. “Well then, shall we get to sleep too?”

“Ah, yes. Where do you want to sleep, Myme?”

“I’m fine going anywhere... Um, but if you don’t mind, could we both sleep on the same bed?”

“Huh? You mean with me?”

Her cheeks flushing red from embarrassment, Myme nodded back, “Yes.”

“I-I don’t really mind... But why?”

“I always sleep together with my father, so I feel sort of lonely sleeping on my own... It’s really embarrassing, when I’m ten years old now...”

Hearing those words left Toor Deen feeling even more surprised. “That’s embarrassing? But I usually sleep with my father too.”

“Huh?! Really?”

“Yes. I don’t really know much about how things are in other houses...but I don’t think that’s unusual at the forest’s edge.”

“Th-Then, will you sleep in my bed?”

“Yes, if you’re fine with someone like me...”

Myme’s eyes sparkled and she looked truly happy as she said, “Thank you.”

“B-But are you really all right with me of all people? Rimee Ruu is smaller...”

“It’s fine, I’ve been thinking for a while that it would be nice to sleep together with you, Toor Deen,” Myme excitedly replied, slipping into the bed. “Come on in. I’ll try to stick as close to the wall as I can.”

“O-Okay...”

Though Toor Deen felt a little uneasy, she went ahead and lay down beside Myme.

With the two ten-year-old girls next to one another, they were close enough that their arms were almost touching. That must have been why Rimee Ruu needed to give up on sleeping with Ai Fa. And someone as large as Dan Rutim must have been a tight fit all on his own.

“Umm... Why was it that you wanted to share a bed with someone like me, Myme?” Toor Deen timidly asked.

The other girl turned her head so their gazes met. Once again, she was wearing a smile like the morning sun. “It’s not that, exactly. I just wanted a chance to talk with you more. Even though we were together all day, we didn’t really speak much, did we?”

“B-But why someone like me?” Toor Deen repeated, only for Myme to give a confused blink.



“I mean, you’re the same age as me, right? So, well...I’ve been wanting to get to know you better for a while now.”

“I-Is that so? But Rimee Ruu is only two years younger.”

“Yes. But I talk so much with Rimee Ruu all the time that I think we already get along just fine. I want to be friends with you too, Toor Deen,” Myme replied, her eyes narrowing as she smiled. It was as earnest a smile as Rimee Ruu’s. “There aren’t many kids around in the Turan lands where I live. With the northerners working the fields, there isn’t a lot of work to go around, so apparently the young folks all moved elsewhere. I’d be so happy if I could become close with someone my own age.”

“R-Really...?”

“I’m sure you have lots of friends your age, don’t you, Toor Deen?”

Embracing the emotions whirling about deep in her chest, Toor Deen replied, “No. It’s not that there aren’t any young children around the Deen settlement...but I spend my time surrounded by a lot more adults.”

“Ooh, so they must really trust your cooking skills, right?”

“N-No, that’s not what I meant... I just need to learn how to live a proper life, and the adults look after me to help that happen...”

Myme’s eyes shot open wide, but by all common sense, she wouldn’t be able to understand those words without more of an explanation. Toor Deen hesitated, but spurred on by Myme’s earnest gaze, she went ahead and recounted everything that had happened.

That she was originally a part of the Suun clan... How the Suun hid the fact that they were breaking the taboos of the forest’s edge from everyone... And that the majority of the members of the Suun were sent to other clans in order to learn how to live proper lives, so that they could redeem themselves for those crimes...

Having listened all the way through to the end, Myme passionately nodded.

“I’ve heard of the Suun clan. They committed crimes while working with the previous head of the house of Turan, right? So you were born into that clan,

Toor Deen?”

“Yes. I was nothing more than a member of a branch house...but even so, that doesn’t change the fact that I belonged to the Suun clan. To pay for our crimes, I cast aside my old clan name and was taken in by the Deen.”

This was the first time Toor Deen had ever spoken about her background like that. At the forest’s edge, everyone already knew, so there was no need to explain, and she hadn’t had anyone she needed to open up to about it in the outside world until now.

On top of that, members of the Suun clan had committed terrible acts outside the forest too. They ran wild in the post town, destroying stalls they didn’t care for, and even attacked travelers in secret. As she felt a throbbing pain clearly in her chest, Toor Deen timidly looked up at Myme’s face.

“I’m still working to pay for those crimes. Living a proper life is how we all have to atone for that. Um, if that was too scary, I can move to a different bed now...” Toor Deen said.

“No,” Myme answered with a smile. “There’s nothing for me to feel scared about. Still...I get the feeling that I understand now why you sometimes get that sad look in your eyes.”

“A sad look? I wasn’t trying to look sad or anything...”

“Really? Well, maybe it’s not sadness, exactly. And...it’s not really anxiety either. It’s sort of like you seem really happy, but also worry about if it’s okay for you to feel that way...? I can’t quite put it well, but that’s sort of how it looks sometimes to me.”

Those words seemed to hit on exactly how Toor Deen was feeling at the moment.

Paying no heed to the young Deen girl’s surprise, Myme just kept on smiling.

“You’ve got a lot of painful memories, right, Toor Deen? You should at least become happy enough to make up for them. At least, that’s how I see it.”

“R-Really? But...”

“My dad had some really awful times too, so I want him to be happy enough

to wipe that all away.”

Myme’s dad Mikel had had the muscles in his arm cut by a noble named Cyclaeus and wasn’t able to keep working as a chef. Cyclaeus was also the one who tempted the Suun clan down their wicked path. Looking at it that way, both Myme and Toor Deen had the fates of their parents twisted by the same man.

“My dad changed after meeting Asuta. He used to drink constantly, even in the morning, and when we slept together he stank of booze. I guess you and I have both suffered because of the same noble, and somehow both of us were also saved by the same chef.”

“Yes... I think so too.”

“And then I was able to meet you and everyone else from the forest’s edge, so now I’m so much happier, just like my dad,” Myme said, gripping Toor Deen’s hands under the blanket. “I’m so glad to have met a girl my age who’s also passionate about cooking. Could you tell me more about yourself, Toor Deen?”

“Y-Yes... But, well...I-I’d like to hear about you too, Myme.”

Myme’s eyes shot open wide when she heard that. And then she broke out in her happiest smile yet. “Then let’s take turns. You’re not sleepy yet, are you?”

“N-No. My body is tired out, but I don’t think I’ll drift off for a while.”

“I feel the same way, so let’s keep talking for as long as we like, okay?”

How was she able to give such a warm, gentle smile? It was so brilliant that Toor Deen almost felt like she was about to start crying, until a thought came back to her. *I’m so, so glad I got to come along on this trip.* Toor Deen was absolutely certain about that, down to the deepest depths of her heart.

Group Performance: The Redbeard and The Wanderer

“Hey, you! Where the frick did you come from?!”

The moment that Kamyua Yoshu took a single step into the bar, he was bombarded with malicious glares and shouts from all around.

The bar was in a desolate village along an old road that saw little use, just a bit removed from the main highway running north and south. It most certainly wasn't a classy establishment either. There seemed to be rooms for lodging up on the second floor, but there surely couldn't be many travelers who would want to spend the night in a place as lonely as this.

If you followed the highway north for half a day, you would reach the town of Behett, and half a day south would bring you to Genos, so neither of them were all that close. Travelers with any common sense would push their totes from morning till night in order to sleep in a large safe town.

However, it was quite lively in the bar. Though there wasn't a huge amount of seating, there were a whole fifteen men packed in there, and every single one of them seemed skilled and had wild, intimidating appearances. As he looked around at those men, Kamyua Yoshu tilted his head a little and replied, “Huh? I mean, if you're asking where I came from, I just followed the path.”

“That's impossible! We have lookouts outside keeping watch! Are you...a spy from some noble?”

“Of course not. At least for now, my blade hasn't been promised to the lord of any land,” Kamyua Yoshu answered with a smile from under his deep hood. “You see, I lost my totes partway through a trip. I can't imagine you see many folks passing through a remote area like this without a totes, so your lookouts or whatever probably just missed me.”

“You're quite the fast-talker... How about you pull down your hood.” The large man who stepped forward and said that was especially brawny, even

among this crowd. “You aren’t some weirdo from Sym, so there’s no need to wear something that shady this late at night, now is there? If there’s really nothing fishy about you, then let us see your face.”

“Ah, I don’t mind doing that at all,” Kamyua Yoshu replied, holding out his right arm while his left hand grasped his cloak over his heart. “But before I do so, allow me to swear on my soul that I am a child of the western god Selva.”

“Oh? I can’t imagine anyone would mistake a chatterbox like you for someone from Sym.”

“Right. Not that I’d have any problem with being mistaken for an easterner.”

Having completed his oath to the western god, Kamyua Yoshu pulled back the hood of his leather cloak. Instantly, a stir spread among the men. Even in that dimly candlelit room, there was no mistaking the fact that Kamyua Yoshu had golden hair and purple eyes.

“Are you...a northerner?”

“No, like I said, I’m a westerner. My mother was born in Mahyudra, but I devoted my soul to the western god Selva.”

The men all looked suspicious and started murmuring among themselves. Even so, nobody suddenly tried to cut him down or spat curses at him. It seemed that animosity toward people from Mahyudra really did lighten up when you got this far into the kingdom. From this little village, it would take over a month on tolos to reach the northern border shared with Mahyudra, where the bloody feud between the nations played out.

“I see. I can’t imagine the lord of any land employing someone with mixed blood from the north. So, you’re nothing but a fool of a traveler.”

“That’s right. My tolos got bit by a poisonous lizard. I feel bad for the thing, having to suffer because I didn’t prepare enough.”

“Sorry to hear that. But we’ve reserved this bar for tonight. We can’t have outsiders here, so could we ask you to leave?”

“Huh? That’d be an issue. I was planning on lodging here.”

“Unfortunately for you, the second floor’s all full.”

Kamyua Yoshu looked around the room. There was a wide reception desk at the far end of the shop, and beyond it stood a man who seemed to be the bar's owner, pouring out fruit wine into serving cups. When their eyes met, the owner looked annoyed and shook his head. That seemed to signal that he should hurry up and leave already.

"Hmm, that's a problem. Then, does anybody in the village sell totos for traveling?" Kamyua Yoshu asked, only for the men to break out in vulgar laughs.

"Of course nobody's selling anything that valuable. The only totos you'll find in a backwater place like this are the ones they've got on the farms, but all of those'll be old and worn out."

"If you light a fire, you should be able to make it through the night without any dangerous beasts coming after you. But you'll still have to be careful of poisonous insect bites!"

"Hmm..." Kamyua Yoshu pondered.

As he considered the problem, a short man who had been drinking fruit wine at a table near the entrance started sauntering over, his breath stinking of booze. "Hey, are we really just going to let this guy leave? It's real suspicious how he slipped past our lookouts and made it into the bar, isn't it?"

"That's true. Even if he isn't some kind of soldier pretending to be a traveler, he's definitely up to something if he's approaching us."

"It'd be dangerous to just let him go." Once a third man voiced his opinion, several others moved to surround Kamyua Yoshu.

The traveler carefully raised both arms to show that he meant no harm. "I'm not up to anything. All I want is an inn where I can spend the night."

"Just because you say something, doesn't make it true. If you don't fess up and give us a real answer, you're gonna be in for some pain."

"Hrmm, can't say I'm fond of pain."

The short man grabbed a grigee pole that had been leaning up against the wall, perhaps finally getting fed up with Kamyua Yoshu's manner of speaking. Then the especially intimidating large guy from before quietly muttered, "Don't

kill him.”

“Um, I’m really not...”

“Shut it!”

The short man swung the grigee pole down with enough force that if it landed, it could easily shatter a shoulder. Since he didn’t want that to happen, Kamyua Yoshu took a single step to the side. The grigee pole ended up passing just next to his cloak and smashing into the floor.

“Bastard!”

A man on Kamyua Yoshu’s left grabbed at him. He instantly dropped down, and the man tripped over his shoulder, tumbling headfirst to the floor.

“Ooh, you certainly are cheeky.”

The remaining men crept forward, tightening the ring surrounding him.

Just as Kamyua Yoshu was casually thinking, *Well, what shall I do now...?* there was a laugh and a call of “Hey!” from the far end of the bar. “Don’t you think that’s enough? If he’s in trouble, why not open up a seat for him? We’ll be sleeping poorly too if the guy is bitten by a poisonous lizard and kicks the bucket, right?”

“Ah, but boss...”

“Bring him over to me.”

The men all shared displeased looks. However, they didn’t say anything further, simply moving as one in that direction while still surrounding Kamyua Yoshu. Since the short guy with the pole was behind him, the traveler had no choice but to advance along with them.

The table farthest in the back had been hidden by a huge shelf so it couldn’t be seen from the entrance. A single man was seated there.

“Ooh, so you really do have blond hair, eh? This is the first time I’ve ever seen anyone with mixed blood from Mahyudra.” The man seated at the table happened to have a pretty unusual hair color himself. It was a deep, brilliant crimson, calling to mind a blazing fire. It hung down to neck level, unkempt, and with a bit of curliness to it. “If you don’t mind, go ahead and have a seat. I’ll

treat you to your first cup.”

“Thank you very much.”

Kamyua Yoshu did as instructed and took a seat. The man in front of him had immediately drawn his full attention. With hair like a whirling inferno, yellow eyes that gleamed like those of a wild beast...and a graceful body brimming with strength beyond the norm.

He seems like an impressive person... Kamyua Yoshu thought to himself.

The man didn't appear to be that old, just a bit over twenty at most. He had tanned skin of the sort you often saw with westerners, a nice straight nose, and a face so well proportioned that it even looked a bit feminine.

The body under his shabby cloth attire was on the slender side, if anything, and he had graceful, flexible-looking musculature. It was hard to tell because he was sitting, but he probably wasn't all that tall either. However, his body appeared to be overflowing with a wild vitality.

His tone was bright and cheerful and his attitude was friendly, but he also had a guarded look in his eyes. It was as if one of those gaaje leopards from Mount Masara that Kamyua Yoshu had heard tell of had taken human form, making for a beautiful yet dangerous-looking young man.

“Go on, drink. That's the finest fruit wine this place has to offer.”

“Thank you. Cheers, to all citizens of Selva.”

As Kamyua Yoshu gulped down half of the cup filled to the brim with reddish-brown fruit wine in a single go, he felt the strong alcohol from the drink cause a pleasant burning sensation as it passed down his throat.

In the meantime, the surrounding men all reluctantly returned back to their own seats. It seemed they would no longer hassle him now that he had been accepted as a guest by their boss.

“I'm a citizen of the west, and my name is Kamyua Yoshu. When I was fifteen, I switched gods from Mahyudra to Selva and started traveling around the western territory as a wanderer with no home.”

“I'm... Let's see, everyone calls me Jidura, so could I have you do that too?”

“Jidura? My apologies, but that sounds more like the name of an easterner, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. Apparently, it means ‘red’ in the eastern tongue. A perfect nickname for me, don’t you think?” the man said with a grin that showed the whites of his teeth. That smile made him look all the younger, even childish. “Sorry for how my guys were acting before. As you can imagine, we’re a gathering of folks with plenty of things to give us guilty consciences. We’ve got to keep an eye out for patrolling guards, so we need lookouts even when just out drinking.”

“I see. But the barkeep doesn’t seem scared at all.”

“That’s because we gave him a hefty sum in advance. There isn’t any issue as long as we pay, right? That’s probably enough to make us top-tier customers for a place like this,” he said with a chuckle and a swig of fruit wine.

Kamyua Yoshu clapped his hands together and said, “I see! Then you really are those famed Red Beards I’ve heard so much about?”

Instantly, the air in the bar went from having finally calmed down to being filled with far more danger than ever before.

A number of the men rose to their feet and began reaching for the weapons at their hips. However, the young red-haired man held up his hand and said, “Now, hold on. That’s quite the wild accusation. The Red Beards... That’s the name of the biggest bandit group in the area, isn’t it? It’s true that I may have the hair color, but unfortunately I’m not even capable of growing a full beard.”

“Right. But the Red Beards are supposedly heroic thieves who only steal from nobles and never kill. That would explain why the guy running the place wouldn’t be afraid of you and would gladly serve you booze too. After all, the Red Beards are also known for spreading wealth around to the poor...”

“You sure seem awfully knowledgeable about the area for a wanderer...”

“I may have come from the north, but I’ve heard the name of the Red Beards mentioned constantly around Behett. Among the poor, they’re being hailed as heroes.”

The young red-headed man who called himself Jidura wetted his throat with fruit wine again, then he glared straight at Kamyua Yoshu. Those beastly yellow

eyes were now blazing bright.

“Kamyua Yoshu, just who in the world are you?”

“As I said before, I’m a wanderer without a home. If I had to add anything further, I guess it would be the fact that I make a living as a bodyguard,” he said as he pulled out the necklace he wore and showed it. It was made from agate collected here in Selva that had all sorts of intertwining colors, and served as proof that he was a bodyguard. On the surface, Kamyua Yoshu’s name was engraved in small letters in the writing of the west.

“Ooh. So not an unlicensed bodyguard, but an official one recognized by the kingdom, eh? Just how old are you, exactly?”

“I’ll turn nineteen soon.”

“So despite being that young and having blood from Mahyudra, which I’m sure the folks in the capital were none too happy about, you were acknowledged as a bodyguard? You must be an incredibly skilled swordsman then, eh?”

“Well, considering my background, yeah, I never would’ve survived without polishing my skills with a blade.”

“Hmm... But lots of bodyguards acknowledged by the kingdom take on jobs to protect nobles, don’t they?” the young man asked, the fire in his eyes growing even more intense. “So wouldn’t that make the Red Beards, who target nobles exclusively, your mortal enemies?”

“That may be so. But right now I only need to protect myself, and wiping out bandits is really outside of my field of expertise. After all, a bodyguard’s job is simply to protect their client.”

The young man’s lips showed signs of wavering. The men around him were all holding their breath, just waiting for him to give the signal.

“Why...?”

“Huh? Why what?”

“You suspect us of being the Red Beards, don’t you? So revealing that you’re a bodyguard could only serve to put you at a disadvantage.”

“No. As long as neither of us is on duty, there’s no reason at all for any hostility between us. I figured being honest and open would help build trust. And if you really are the Red Beards, I’d like to be able to talk openly with you...”

“But why? If you’re a bodyguard, the Red Beards should be your enemies, right?”

“If the Red Beards came after a noble I was striving to protect, I suppose we’d have no choice but to cross blades. But I was born poor myself, so hearing about how the Red Beards live has been really moving for me. They never kill, only target nobles, and share their spoils with the poor. That’s just so cool, it’s almost unfair, isn’t it?”

The young man chuckled, unable to hold it in any longer. Then he leaned back and let out a loud laugh.

“You are such a fool! Going around saying what you really think about people like us and openly admitting your lineage!”

“Yep. And I didn’t want to make an enemy of someone like you either. If you really are the head of the Red Beards, I figured I should be careful not to take any jobs in the area with your potential targets.”

The young man just kept on laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of it all. After going on like that for a while, he reached into his chest pocket and pulled out a piece of cloth the same color as his hair. He wrapped it around the lower half of his face, showing a smile with just his eyes.

“Then let me tell you the truth. My real name is Goram. They call me Goram Redbeard, the leader of the notorious Red Beards. This red mask we use as proof of belonging to our group led to my nickname. Are you satisfied now, Kamyua Yoshu the bodyguard...?”

“Yes, I am.”

“B-Boss...”

“Stop whining! This young fellow is a bodyguard recognized by the kingdom! And from what I can tell, he seems to possess the skills to back that up. If we made an enemy of a guy like this, we wouldn’t be able to avoid things ending in

bloodshed and death. So to avoid breaking our rule to never kill, our only option here is to just share some drinks, wouldn't you say?" With that, the red-haired man, Goram Redbeard, brought the cloth around his face down to his neck and turned toward the bar's owner, calling out, "Hey mister, get us some more fruit wine! And bring out the finest food this place serves too!"

"R-Right away!"

"Now then, Kamyua Yoshu, how about we drink together, just like you wanted? And I think it's about time that you fess up... You slipped past our lookouts and came to this place because you knew the Red Beards were lurking around, right?"

"Yeah, well, the fact that I lost my totos is true. For these past several days I've been wandering around aimlessly hoping that I would run into you all."

"Hmm? I'm amazed you ended up here without anything to go on."

"Right. Well, I figured you wouldn't go near Genos or Dabagg with all the soldiers around, so I chose the most desolate roads I could find and searched around the places that weren't patrolled."

"It's fortunate for us that a man as good as you at sniffing these things out didn't join up with the soldiers instead," Goram said, tense wrinkles forming above his nose. "But you're the second person to track us down recently. We may just need to find a better place to hide out."

"Oh? Were the soldiers on your tail?"

"No, though that certainly isn't a rare occurrence. That's why we've got lookouts posted out front and totos ready to flee at a moment's notice. We pay bars up front too because if the soldiers charge in, we won't exactly have time to pay them at that point. This was something different, something that happened five days ago now... It was this noble-looking, rich-seeming guy, and he suddenly approached us like you did tonight."

"A noble? There's no way that a noble would come to a place like this."

"That time, it wasn't a bar. He found us at a roadside inn, one a bit nicer than this place. We were frequent customers there, so we were able to have fun secretly in the back without needing a reservation. And then that noble bastard

with his carrion-eater eyes showed up..." Goram explained, his disgust readily apparent in his voice. "He really did have a vexing gaze. Though he was dressed like a merchant, he was definitely a noble. Or at the very least, someone who lived deep in the city of stone without a care in the world. You can tell easily enough what sort of life someone has had by looking at their eyes and their fingers."

"Hmm? But why would someone like that seek out the Red Beards? Even if it was a grudge over a stolen fortune, there would be no need to approach a bandit group personally, right?"

"That wasn't it. The bastard said he wanted us to attack a merchant caravan."

A man seated nearby interjected, "It wasn't a merchant caravan. It was a group of envoys, Boss."

"Quiet, you. It doesn't make a difference either way! At any rate, he told us he wanted us to attack some envoys or whatever coming from Banarm to Genos...and that we should slaughter them all and loot their treasure."

"Asking heroic bandits who never kill to conduct a massacre, eh? A request like that would never work out."

"Yeah. But he said something about overlooking all the previous crimes of the Red Beards if we did it. Real shady, don't you think?"

"It certainly is! Banarm and Genos are the biggest towns in the region, aren't they? I haven't set foot in either yet myself, but isn't Genos the land with a big old castle ruled by a duke? It all stinks of some kind of scheme."

"Yup. They probably wanted to use a bandit group to crush someone they found inconvenient. Seems like something those dirty nobles would think up... That's why we gave him a nice deep cut, right here," Goram said with a beastly laugh, tracing a line along his forehead from left to right. "Every time he sees that scar that'll never go away, he'll regret running his mouth at Goram Redbeard. And give thanks for his life from the bottom of his filthy mundt soul."

"It's dangerous to go around pointlessly making nobles angry... Wouldn't it have been better to have cleanly taken his life then and there?" Kamyua Yoshu asked, but then he suddenly broke out in a smile. "Well, I guess you couldn't do

that, considering your rule to never kill. You and your men sure do lead honest lives.”

“As if a group of bandits could be called honest, of all things!” Goram Redbeard said with another wild grin.

Just then, the bar’s owner approached Goram, holding a large plate. “Sorry for the wait. Here’s your kimyuus grilled with herbs.”

“Ooh, that sure looks tasty! I never would have figured you could get meat with the skin still on in a remote bar like this!”

The plate was stacked with a tremendous amount of kimyuus meat, cut into chunks and with the skin still attached. There were even a few pieces of wing meat sitting on top of the pile, which was quite unusual to see.

“When she heard you lot had rented out the place for the night, my wife said to prepare a fresh kimyuus. It was an old one that wasn’t laying many eggs anymore, so it might be just a touch stringy, but it still has the skin on, which should make for a fine meal, right?”

“I’m so happy I could cry! Still, wouldn’t you have earned more selling the kimyuus skin to a leatherworker?”

“We’d still have some of your payment leftover even if we bought a new young kimyuus, so it was nothing at all,” the owner said with a bright smile, bringing out several fresh bottles of fruit wine. Kamyua Yoshu was impressed, thinking to himself that the Red Beards really had earned the trust and affection of the poor.

“Now, eat up. A meeting this ridiculous deserves to be celebrated! Go ahead and take some of the wing meat. It’s the best part!” Goram offered.

“Thank you. I’ll go ahead and indulge, then,” Kamyua Yoshu said.

Wings cost even more than ordinary meat with skin. For starters, the feathers from the wings were prized by nobles, and then there was the fact that wing meat tasted better and there was less of it than the other cuts. Even people who raised kimyuus usually sold the wings and feathers.

Kamyua Yoshu grabbed a piece of the thick wing meat with the skin grilled

just right and bit into it. It had probably had crushed rock salt sprinkled over it as well as being grilled with herbs. Unlike pickled meat, which tended to pick up too much salt, this had just the right amount, and was wonderfully juicy as well. Though the browned parts of the surface were crispy, the inside was tender. And even further in, the meat became nice and firm.

Though kimyuus were flightless birds, they had a surprising amount of strength in their wings. The fact that those muscles were so well developed was the source of this delicious flavor. Though it was so tasty that Kamyua Yoshu almost felt like sighing in contentment, there was so little of the stuff that it felt wrong to eat it too quickly.

“Hey, make sure you share that around properly,” Goram said after picking up his own bit of wing meat before passing the plate to a nearby man. As the men all cheered, they reached out for the grilled meat one after another.

It was almost as if he was at a banquet here. Even the guys who had glared so intensely at Kamyua Yoshu before were now smiling like children.

“They’ve been on edge too thanks to that damn noble I mentioned before... But they really are a good-natured lot at heart,” Goram said as he glanced around with a look of satisfaction.

As he bit into a piece of meat still on the bone, Kamyua Yoshu replied, “Yeah. I understand why they’d be on guard when dealing with a shady guy like me. Even so, not one of them drew a blade. I guess that’s just what I should have expected from the Red Beards.”

“What, so you’re aware that you’re shady?”

“Of course I am. If you go a bit farther north, guys like me are hated more than any bandit.”

“Hmm. I was born around here, so I don’t really know much about Mahyudra.”

“I don’t think there’s any need for you to know. And I doubt it’s the sort of place you’d be happy to learn about,” Kamyua Yoshu replied.

Then, a lively voice called out from overhead, “You oafs are making such a ruckus! Seriously, what’s with all the commotion?! I finally got the little guy to

sleep, and you're just going to wake him right up again!"

Kamyua Yoshu's eyes shot open wide as a woman with a rather unusual appearance came down the creaky stairs. She was very tall, her height probably at least matching Kamyua Yoshu's own. And she was definitely wider than he was. Though she did have some womanly curves to her, she looked quite big boned. Her shoulders, chest, and legs were clearly thicker than his too.

Her face was square, rugged, and bony. If you put armor on her, it would probably be difficult to tell her apart from a man. Currently, she was wearing men's pants and a cloth top with a good amount of slack, but not enough that her powerful backside and chest didn't still stand out, so there was no worry of mistaking her gender.

"Hmm? Who are you? I've never seen you before," the woman asked as she confidently strode over toward Goram and Kamyua Yoshu. The leader of the Red Beards gave a cheerful smile and waved his hand.

"So you finally got him to sleep, eh? Then you should have a drink too. This shady fellow is a wanderer by the name of Kamyua Yoshu... Kamyua Yoshu, this is my wife, Bartha of Masara."

"Is it really okay to reveal my name to a wanderer like him?" asked the woman introduced as Bartha as she snatched a bottle from atop the table and gulped it down as heartily as any man.

"No worries. If anything bad comes of it, then it just goes to show that I don't have an eye for judging people after all. And if that's how it turns out, I'll make everything right again, even if it means breaking our rule to never kill."

"If that's what you have to say about it, it sounds bad enough already. But, well, go ahead and do whatever you please," Bartha said, thumping down into the seat beside Goram. With the two of them together, it was clear that she was built a size bigger than her own husband.

"Huh... Now that I think about it, I've heard that Goram Redbeard's wife used to be his right-hand woman until she had his child."

"Are they even spreading rumors about that now? Those townsfolk sure do love their gossip!"

“That’s because it’s rare to find folks like you who oppose nobles head-on in any country. And you’ve gone uncaptured for years now, so you’re becoming something of a legend. If I were a minstrel, I’d compose an epic song about you.”

“Hmph! That all sounds overblown to me. We’re just going around making trouble because we can’t stand nobles... Hey, if there’s any meat left, pass it this way!” In response to Goram’s call, the plate made its way back over. By now, there were few enough meat chunks left atop it that they could be easily counted.

“Seems like you boys were eating some awful fine food while I was getting the little guy to sleep,” Barthia said as she picked up a chunk of what was likely breast meat with skin and popped it into her mouth. It seemed she was a masculine woman in more ways than just her appearance.

“I’ll bring out a soup with boiled bones and offal shortly, so hold on for just a bit please, ma’am.”

“Cut it out with calling me ‘ma’am.’” After shooting the bar’s owner a strained grin, Barthia brought her stern face closer to Kamyua Yoshu’s. “So, what’s your deal exactly? You seem pretty darn skilled. Are you aiming to join the Red Beards?”

“Ah, no. I can’t imagine someone as unfocused as me would be a proper fit.”

“Hmm? If you’ve got a family and home, then you could just help out whenever’s convenient.”

“Ah, you have some members who work like that? Even so, I still don’t think I’m a good fit for the Red Beards.”

“Oh really?” Barthia replied lightly, and then she shot her husband a glare. “In that case, just what were you thinking, telling him who I am and drinking with him?”

“I was thinking I should try to be his friend. If someone would be troublesome to have as an enemy, then becoming pals with them makes things easier, right? Fortunately, he was apparently born into poverty,” Goram answered with a hearty grin and a swig of fruit wine. Barthia also went ahead and had more fruit

wine while looking astounded.

No matter how you looked at them, it was hard to imagine they were married. However, that brief exchange was enough to make it obvious that they shared a strong bond of trust and affection.

As he also picked up his wine cup, Kamyua Yoshu turned back toward Goram. "I just remembered, there's something I really wanted to ask you, Goram Redbeard."

"Oh? What is it now?"

"Why did you make that rule to never kill? That's a real dangerous restriction to have when dealing with soldiers and bodyguards, isn't it?"

"Hmm? That's because killing someone and stealing their wealth are crimes that hold different weight. We're just looking out for our own hides."

"But if you get sticky fingers with a noble's fortune, you won't be able to escape a death sentence, so it seems to me like those crimes are weighted equally."

Goram dubiously furrowed his brow and said, "Yeah," with a wild grin. "I guess I didn't put that quite right. Rather than our hides, I should have said we were looking out for our souls."

"Souls?"

"That's right. According to the laws set by the nobility, stealing from them and killing may well be equally severe crimes. But what about when you're before the great western god? You'd have your soul torn to shreds for murder, but don't you figure he could look the other way when it comes to thievery?"

"Ah, so you're putting your lives on the line for the sake of your souls after death?"

"It's nothing all that grandiose! I just want to be able to loudly declare before the western god, y'know, 'What's wrong with stealing from those dirty nobles?! If you've got an issue with that, then go right ahead and crush my soul to dust!' I've got nothing to feel ashamed for... And that's our strength," Goram said with a daring grin, his yellow eyes blazing bright once more. "I'm sure I'll meet my

end at the hands of a hangman. Even so, when I find myself standing on the gallows, I plan to have a smile on my face. And everyone else here feels the same.”

“Oh really?” Kamyua Yoshu said with a smile.

It seemed these Red Beards really were just the sort of men he had thought. This was exactly what Kamyua Yoshu had wanted to know when he sought them out.

They’re rough like wild animals, but also earnest. I really could see them holding their heads high at the gallows without any regrets.

That was a way of living he couldn’t copy.

He didn’t believe in any gods.

That went for divine judgment, divine providence, and any fate ruled by the gods too.

Making light of the laws crafted by the agents of those gods—the kingdoms—and simply living as they pleased... These men seemed like they had chosen a way of life similar to his own, but fear of the gods still existed at the root of all that.

Or maybe they were trying to oppose the gods in a different way than he was. And in the process, they were putting both their lives and their pride on the line.

“You know, you’ve got a strange way of smiling,” Goram suddenly complained. “Are you really just eighteen? I mean, that’s what I’d say you are after seeing your face, but your eyes look like they belong to an old man.”

“Really? I’m often told that I’m like an elderly dog. Not that I’ve ever seen one of those dog animals myself, though.”

“Hmph. You sure are an odd one,” Goram said, then he suddenly brought his face close. “By the way, I get that I’m being pushy here, but let me just ask once more... You really don’t want to join up with the Red Beards, Kamyua Yoshu?”

“I can’t. Even though your offer *is* a huge honor that’s making my heart tremble,” Kamyua Yoshu replied with a smile. “I just can’t see myself managing

to live the way that you all do. I'm still in the middle of finding rules of my own to follow, so I can't go along with someone else's code."

"Hmph, that's quite the lofty statement there. You sure it's not just that there's no need for a bodyguard recognized by the kingdom, the sort of guy who never needs to worry about missing a meal, to stoop to being a bandit?" Goram asked with a childish pout.

As Kamyua Yoshu thought to himself how wonderful it would be to spend his life alongside such a charming person, he shook his head. "No. I got my qualification as a bodyguard in order to live as free and unfettered as possible. Thanks to my position, I'm able to travel around to all sorts of lands. But if I do find my own rules to live by, and they're not opposed to those of the Red Beards, maybe then I'll decide I want to spend the rest of my days with your crew..."

"That's a fine-sounding way of letting us down easy. Cheers, you aloof wanderer," Goram said with a shrug of his shoulders, picking up a bottle of fruit wine. "Well then, how about we drink up? We'll probably never meet again for as long as we live, so why not guzzle down enough booze tonight for a lifetime?"

"Sounds good to me."

In fact, Kamyua Yoshu and Goram Redbeard *wouldn't* ever have a chance to meet again. The members of the Red Beards who had gathered in the bar didn't have much time left, as they would soon be captured by the militia of Genos and hanged. The only ones to escape that fate would be Goram's wife, Bartha, and their son, Jeeda.

Knowing nothing of that, though, they simply kept on drinking into the morning.

It would be ten years and some change from that night until the gears of fate clicked into place and Kamyua Yoshu met Goram's child, Jeeda.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the 17th volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

Now that the story has gone on so long, there have been stories to develop and characters placed in unexpectedly important positions that even I didn't see coming. And Asuta and company traveling outside of Genos is indeed one of those developments I didn't plan for early on. I certainly hope that you all enjoyed seeing their first overnight vacation.

This time around, I had both an Intermezzo and Group Performance chapter, one each. For the Intermezzo, Toor Deen was the main character, while Kamyua Yoshu was the star of the Group Performance.

Toor Deen was an incredibly quiet presence around this point in the story. I'm sure nobody predicted that from here on out she would grow by leaps and bounds, to the point that she would take second in a character popularity poll. But it's only natural to be surprised by it, as I didn't see it coming either, and I'm the author. As I read back over the manuscript for this part I thought to myself that Toor Deen's presence had seemed clearly lacking, and that was how she was chosen as the protagonist for the Intermezzo. I hope that you'll keep on watching over Toor Deen as the popular yet modest girl continues to grow.

Thanks in part to such unexpected elements, I continue to enjoy writing this long, extensive tale. And I hope that all you readers share in that joy as well.

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!

April 2019,

EDA



Bonus Short Story

Those Left Behind at the Ruu Settlement

“Jeez, Asuta is so cold!” Ludo Ruu suddenly shouted. He was in the Ruu settlement’s central plaza, taking it easy before having to go out hunting.

His attention drawn by his cousin’s outburst, Shin Ruu asked, “Why do you say that?”

“Because he left us behind and went off to that Dabagg place without us! That’s real cold-hearted of him, isn’t it?”

“But wasn’t Donda Ruu the one to decide who from the Ruu clan would accompany them? You can’t really blame Asuta for that.”

“No, I definitely can. If he had just waited another month or so, he could have brought me along instead of Dan Rutim! And Asuta’s the one who decided when the trip would happen, right?”

“From what I heard, the schedule was set with the needs of the people from town in mind. So again, I really don’t think Asuta’s to blame.”

At that, Ludo Ruu’s eyebrows raised as he brought his face close to Shin Ruu’s.

“What the heck?! You wanted to go along too, didn’t you? Don’t go playing at being all mature just because you became the head of your branch house.”

“I-I’m not playing at anything.”

“Then be honest. You wanted to visit that Dabagg place with Asuta too, right?”

It was becoming clear that Ludo Ruu wouldn’t let this go until his cousin agreed. Seeing no other option, Shin Ruu finally nodded and answered, “Yeah...”

“I knew it! But he just left us behind while he’s running off to do something

fun and interesting. What a heartless jerk!”

Ludo Ruu probably did understand that Asuta wasn't truly at fault. He was likely just feeling lonely, and was trying to vent the only way he could, with words he didn't mean.

I really would have liked to go along too, were it possible... Shin Ruu thought to himself with a single sigh as he stared up at the clear blue sky.

The sun was currently nearing its peak, just about the same time Asuta and company would be arriving at the town of Dabagg.

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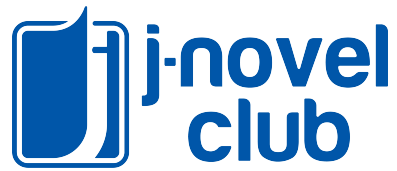
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 17

by EDA

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