

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**

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MENU

Chapter 1: A Hunter's Pride

Intermission: The Castle
Town's Star Reader

Chapter 2: The Genos
Swordsmanship Tournament

Chapter 3: A Festival of the
Hunt for the Small Clans




Intermezzo: Celebration at the
Genos Castle

Group Performance:
A Descendant of Old Blood





Character Introductions

~ People of the Forest's Edge ~

	Asuta Tsurumi A chef-in-training born in Japan. Though he remembers losing his life in a fire, some strange power has taken him to another world.		Ai Fa The only female hunter at the forest's edge. She seems calm and composed at a glance, but hides strong emotions inside. She has made the decision to welcome Asuta into the Fa clan.
	Donda Ruu The head of the Ruu clan, and one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. An exceedingly skilled hunter. He injured his right shoulder in the battle with the lord of the forest.		Jiza Ruu The eldest son of the main Ruu house. He has a strict personality and highly values the laws of the forest's edge. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Darmu Ruu The second son of the main Ruu house. He can be curt and rough at times, and is emotional in general. He's slowly opening up to Asuta and company.		Ludo Ruu The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Reina Ruu The second daughter of the main Ruu house. An excellent chef. She also runs the Ruu clan's stalls alongside Sheera Ruu.		Lala Ruu The third daughter of the main Ruu house. A frank girl who has feelings for Shin Ruu.
	Rimee Ruu The youngest Ruu daughter. An earnest, innocent child who specializes in making sweets. She adores Ai Fa and Tara.		Shin Ruu The young head of a Ruu branch house. He blames himself for failing to prevent Asuta's kidnapping, and after much training in the aftermath, he became one of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Sheera Ruu The eldest daughter of a Ruu branch house, and Shin Ruu's older sister. She has a mild-mannered personality and has hidden feelings for Darmu Ruu.		Toor Deen Originally belonged to a Suun branch house. She is introverted by nature, but she gives her all to assist Asuta with his business. Her skills at making sweets are blossoming.
	Yamiru Lea The former eldest daughter of the main Suun house. Currently a member of the Lea clan. She possesses both bewitching beauty and a strong intellect.		Tsuuai The youngest daughter of the former main Suun house. Currently a member of the Rutim clan. Short tempered and has quite a mouth on her, but thanks to her excellent calculation skills, she is able to assist the Ruu clan with their business.

	<p>Lem Dom</p> <p>The younger sister of the head of the Dom clan. Because she wishes to be a hunter, she has left home and is currently living in a vacant house near the Fa clan.</p>		<p>Deek Dom</p> <p>The head of the main Dom house. An exceedingly skilled hunter despite his young age. Quiet and single-minded by nature.</p>
	<p>Yun Sudra</p> <p>A member of the small Sudra clan. Greatly adores Asuta.</p>	<p>Raielfam Sudra</p> <p>The Sudra clan head. He has a short, skinny build and a wrinkly face. An intellectual and loyal man who voiced his support for the Fa clan's actions at an early stage.</p>	
		<p>Saris Ran Fou</p> <p>A member of the Fou clan, which is located near the Fa house. Ai Fa's childhood friend, and the mother of a single child.</p>	
	<p>Sufira Zaza</p> <p>The youngest daughter of the main Zaza house, with a strict personality. She is staying at the Ruu settlement in order to oversee the actions of the Fa and Ruu clans.</p>	<p>Morun Rutim</p> <p>The youngest daughter of the main Rutim house. She possesses a plump build like her father. A cheerful and good-natured girl who secretly has feelings for Deek Dom.</p>	

~ Townsfolk ~

	<p>Yumi</p> <p>The daughter of the owners of an inn called The Westerly Wind. Friendly and cheerful. Seventeen years old. She acts as a bridge between Asuta and her father, who dislikes the people of the forest's edge.</p>		<p>Arishuna Zi Mafraluda</p> <p>A fortune teller of eastern heritage. Currently, she is staying in the castle town as a guest of Duke Genos.</p>
	<p>Melfried</p> <p>The first son of Duke Genos, who arbitrates matters involving the people of the forest's edge. A cool-headed man who values law and order above all else.</p>		<p>Zasshuma</p> <p>A bodyguard who formed ties with Asuta and company due to the incidents surrounding the house of Turan. A frank man and a wanderer.</p>
	<p>Polarth</p> <p>The second son of the house of Daleim, who collaborates closely with the people of the forest's edge. He has been trying to popularize delicious food throughout Genos.</p>	<p>Leiriss</p> <p>A young knight of Saturas. He grew obsessed with Shin Ruu after the incident with his father, the former head of the knights.</p>	
	<p>Yang</p> <p>The head chef of the house of Daleim. Currently, he is working hard to promote the flow of new ingredients into the post town.</p>	<p>Sheila</p> <p>A maid employed by the house of Daleim. Aside from assisting Yang with his cooking, she has often been used to deliver messages to Asuta and the others, getting to know them better in</p>	

~ Group Performance ~

	<p>Shilly Rou</p> <p>An apprentice of the master chef, Varkas. A strong-willed girl with a powerful sense of rivalry toward Asuta.</p>		<p>Roy</p> <p>A young chef from the castle town. After being shocked by the quality of Reina Ruu's and Myme's cooking, he asked to become Varkas's apprentice.</p>
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Chapter 1: A Hunter's Pride

1

The day after the friendship banquet was held at the Ruu settlement, the Gamley Troupe departed from Genos, and we returned to our everyday lives.

Half a month had passed since the sun god's revival festival at this point, and though the post town had mostly quieted down long ago, there had been some lingering energy still hanging in the air for a while longer. The biggest reasons were probably the friendship banquet that we had been looking forward to so much, and the fact that the Gamley Troupe had been staying at the settlement at the forest's edge.

The Gamley Troupe in particular was a real embodiment of the festival atmosphere, in my mind. It kind of felt like they had brought the lively atmosphere of the revival festival with them when they arrived in Genos.

"We enjoyed ourselves very much too. If at all possible, I'd like to stop by Genos again for the next revival festival." Those were Pino's last words before she departed from Genos with the rest of her company. Though I hadn't had much of a chance to talk to the other troupe members, as I watched their seven wagons leave the settlement at the forest's edge, I was struck by a strange sense of loneliness.

Even so, I couldn't keep letting my emotions overwhelm me. We would be taking the day after the banquet off so we would be well rested and ready for whatever life threw at us when we returned to our normal work. After the opening of the outdoor restaurant, we had started selling eight hundred meals a day, and we were doing everything we could to make sure we stayed at or above that level.

Along the way, Ama Min Rutim had yielded her spot to her sister-in-law, Morun Rutim, after having helped out with the Ruu clan's stalls all this time. She had finally announced her pregnancy to everyone, and was now taking a break

from working in the post town.

Even when heavy with child, women of the forest's edge helped out with work around the house as much as possible. But riding in a wagon that rocked as much and as roughly as ours did and then working around such a large crowd could easily lead to complications, so she stepped down at an early stage just as Li Sudra had done.

Ama Min Rutim and Li Sudra actually had a lot in common, being calm, gentle, and rather unshakable. Having both of them bow out of their work in the post town definitely hit hard, but everyone who remained was doing a good job, and I didn't have any concerns about Morun Rutim or Yun Sudra, who had been swapped in. The rest of us simply had to offer our congratulations to the two departing women for being blessed with children, and keep on working harder than ever.

Dan Rutim had apparently shed some manly tears when this all came out. The second son of the main Rutim house already had a child, but Gazraan Rutim was his eldest and had gotten married rather late by the standards of the forest's edge, which probably made Dan Rutim even happier to hear this news than he otherwise would have been. And really, just hearing about his reaction through the grapevine was enough to make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

At any rate, the friendship banquet had passed, and it was now the seventeenth of the silver month.

After finishing up in the post town, I set to work on preparations for the next day with a number of women from near the Fa house. Actually, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and I were handling most of the tasks, while the other women were just producing curry base and dried pasta. Giba curry and carbonara remained part of the regular menu even after the revival festival, so their assistance was absolutely indispensable.

Once that was done, I was planning to use dinner at the Fa house to give several of our helpers a cooking lesson. The revival festival had been terribly hectic for the Gaaz, the Ratsu, and their subordinate clans, but things had finally settled down for them, so now they had the leeway to engage in this kind of activity again.

The study sessions at the Ruu settlement and doing business in the post town were both incredibly important duties, but the same went for teaching the small clans just how wonderful delicious food could be. Therefore, I had decided to alternate between study sessions at the Ruu settlement and cooking lessons at the Fa house every other day.

In addition to the five who had helped me out with business in the post town today, there were six women from clans like the Fou, Ran, and Liddo in attendance, all working on their own tasks. There were now four new stone stoves installed behind the Fa house, with a leather canopy three times the size of the previous one, creating an outdoor kitchen with a setup similar to our outdoor restaurant.

An unexpected cheer rose from the area of the outdoor kitchen, just as the prep work was about to wrap up. Ai Fa, who had resumed her work as a hunter only yesterday, had returned carrying a massive giba.

“Wow. That’s quite a catch, Ai Fa,” Saris Ran Fou called out, her beloved child clinging to her leg.

Ai Fa replied with a somewhat strained “Indeed.” It was no surprise that she was struggling a bit. The giba looked like it weighed around a hundred kilos. There were fibaha vines tied around the beast’s rear legs, and Ai Fa was coated in sweat all over as she carried it on her back.

“If you took down such a ridiculously massive giba, you should have called for our men to come get it. You’re always giving us those pelts, so feel free to ask for our help every now and again,” an older Ran woman chimed in.

Ai Fa breathed a sigh as she lowered the massive giba to the ground by the base of a tree, then turned to speak to the woman “But there’s no guarantee that giiz or mundt wouldn’t come creeping over while I was away trying to summon people. I wasn’t all that far from here when I killed it, so I decided to carry it myself.”

“That’s really something. To think that you can catch such a massive beast all on your own...”

The other women were also staring at Ai Fa with looks of admiration. She had been seriously injured taking down the lord of the forest, and yet she had

managed to bring back a sizable kill right after returning to her hunting work. On top of that, Ai Fa was a woman, and she hunted all on her own, so it was impossible to not be impressed with her.

The only person who looked worried was Toor Deen, who stepped forward in front of Ai Fa and said, “Um... Does this mean that you have your full strength as a hunter back? So then...”

“Yes, it’s finally time to fulfill my promise to Lem Dom,” Ai Fa said calmly while wiping the sweat from her brow. As soon as Ai Fa was back to one hundred percent, she was to have a contest of strength with Lem Dom in order to determine the latter’s fate. It had been nearly a month now since that promise had been made. Would Lem Dom be permitted to live as a female hunter like Ai Fa? That question was finally about to be answered.

“I see...” Toor Deen said, staring at the ground with a worried look. But then her aunt, Jas Deen, stepped forward beside her.

“Well then, we’ll run a tolos up to the northern settlement once we finish assisting Asuta. Would you be able to do the contest of strength with Lem Dom tomorrow?”

“Yes. Lem and Deek Dom have waited quite a while for this day to arrive, after all.”

Toor Deen and I were the only people in our group who looked concerned about what was to come. The other women, even the members of the Deen and the Liddo who had ties to the Dom clan, all seemed to think that whatever the outcome was, it would simply be the will of the forest. And that went even more so for those without blood ties, like the Fou and Ran.

“I’ll personally inform Sufira Zaza over at the Ruu settlement. But first, I need to take care of this giba...” Ai Fa said, hanging her hunter’s cloak on another tree branch and pulling out a knife that she was carrying on her waist. She didn’t usually go without her cloak like this—outside and with visitors around—but perhaps she was feeling particularly satisfied at having fulfilled her duty as a hunter for the first time in a while. At any rate, she silently skinned the beast, and then pulled out and stacked up the innards.

“Regardless of how it turns out, Lem Dom’s going to return to the northern

settlement, isn't she?" Toor Deen whispered while burying some slices of meat in pico leaves that were held in a wooden box.

Next to her, Yun Sudra replied, "That's right. Lem Dom has helped the Sudra clan with our work many times, and the house where she's been living is nearby, so I'll be sad to see her go... I'm sure that's even more true for a blood relative like you, Toor Deen."

"Yes," Toor Deen answered with a little sigh. They only tended to see each other during morning prep work, but the young girl got along with Lem Dom better than anyone. Maybe she just had a talent for charming obstinate and strong-willed women, as Yamiru Lea and Sufira Zaza had also taken a shine to her.

"Still, who do you think is going to win? It's hard to imagine Ai Fa losing, but something's been different about Lem Dom recently. And Lem Dom's got an amazing body, which makes it even harder to judge," Yun Sudra said, and I felt similarly.

In any event, everything would be decided tomorrow. No matter how much of a fuss we onlookers made, it wouldn't do a thing to change Lem Dom's fate. All we could do was pray for a result that wouldn't make anyone sad or angry.

Ai Fa hurriedly finished carving up the giba, then washed her filthy body inside and took off on Gilulu toward the Ruu house. Sufira Zaza was staying at the Ruu settlement, and she was probably going to serve as a witness for tomorrow's contest of strength. After discussing the matter thoroughly with Donda Ruu as well, Ai Fa returned once I had finished preparing dinner.

"So, it's hamburger steak today?" she asked with a deadly serious look as she took a seat.

"Yeah, with dried milk for the first time in a while too. It's a fitting meal to celebrate your first catch in a month and a half, right?"

Ai Fa absolutely adored hamburger steak to begin with, but when I added the camembert-like gyama dried milk to the center, her enjoyment of it went through the roof. I could tell that she was desperately trying to hold back a big goofy grin as she nodded and said, "Indeed." Though we had promised not to hide our feelings from one another, she was still acting the same as she always

did in these situations.

At any rate, we went ahead and ate dinner. Yun Sudra had taken Lem Dom's dinner with her, so we weren't expecting any visitors. But somehow, even though it was just a normal dinner like so many others we'd had before, there was a very different feeling in the air.

"By the way, about the contest of strength with Lem Dom... Like you said before, it's not an absolute guarantee that you'll win, right?" I asked while serving up a sauté of various vegetables and mushrooms.

As she gulped down a mouthful of hamburger steak and dried milk, Ai Fa nodded and replied, "Indeed. If it were just a single match, I wouldn't lose even if the whole world were turned on its head. However, with the rules of this contest saying that she only needs to win once over the course of a day, the final result will be up to the forest's whims."

"So if she exceeds you in stamina or energy, she could win right at the end... Hmm. I still can't imagine you losing, though."

"Right. I agree."

"But if Lem Dom keeps fighting until her stamina is completely gone, maybe she'll still feel satisfied."

As Ai Fa reached for a thick slice of tongue grilled with salt, she repeated, "I agree." She also seemed to be suppressing her emotions and trusting that the will of the forest would determine Lem Dom's fate.

If Lem Dom qualified to become a hunter, she would be the second woman at the forest's edge to do so, after Ai Fa. If that happened, my clan head would find it easier to live the life she had chosen with her head held high, but, well, for someone like her, that alone wasn't going to affect her performance.

Of course, the neighboring clans and the Ruu have all acknowledged Ai Fa's strength, but the clans who don't interact with her very often probably still think of her as a heretic who has turned her back on the ways of the forest's edge... But Lem Dom's clan is directly subordinate to one of the leading clans, so if she's recognized as a female hunter, the way people see Ai Fa might change quite a bit, I thought to myself. But those were just my own personal, selfish feelings.

Hunting was a dangerous job where you never knew when you might die out in the forest, so I couldn't wish for Lem Dom to be victorious just because it would have a positive effect on us. *For Deek Dom, this is a crucial moment that will decide whether his one and only family member will live her life as a woman or as a hunter. It feels crass to even think about that kind of thing.*

Ai Fa suspiciously narrowed her eyes and leaned forward. "Why do you look so dejected? You haven't even eaten anything."

"Oh, it's nothing... How's the hamburger steak with dried milk?"

"It's hamburger steak made by you, with dried milk on top of that. As if it could ever taste bad." Ai Fa looked irritated and turned away from me. She had broken her ribs a month and a half ago, but after half a month of rehabilitation, she seemed to finally be back to her old self.

While she had been taking a break from her work, I had sensed her subtly growing more feminine over time, with her going on about how she was putting on excess fat in particular. To be honest, I hadn't really noticed her appearance actually changing in any significant way, but now that she had resumed hunting, I'd say she seemed about twenty percent more awe-inspiring. Her eyes were shining brighter, and her expression felt somehow firmer. It was difficult to explain, but it really reconfirmed to me that this was who she truly was.

At any rate, it doesn't do anything to diminish how incredibly charming she is, I thought while taking care not to let it show. No matter how close two people are, it's still good to keep some things private, after all. Not hiding your feelings and spewing out everything you thought were conceptually similar, but very different approaches.

While my thoughts were wandering off on that little tangent, we both finished our dinner. The utensils we had used all went into a pot, and then it was time for our pre-bedtime chat.

Ai Fa had her hair down and was sitting up against the wall as she said, "Asuta," and beckoned me over to her under the candlelight. "Tonight's dinner was even more satisfying than usual."

"I'm glad to hear it. Thank you."

It felt rather unlike her to just come out and say that, so I made sure to give her a natural smile in return. However, I could sense some conflicting emotions in my clan head's expression.

"This is somewhat difficult for me to talk about... Are you willing to listen?"

"What is it? It's not like you to preface things like that."

"There's no helping it. As I said, it's difficult for me to talk about this," Ai Fa said with a frown, leaning forward. We hadn't been quite this close to each other in some time. "Well...I have finally regained my strength as a hunter. And this has been my longest time off since I welcomed you as a member of my house."

"That's true. I'm pretty sure you were back in action less than a month after you dislocated your left elbow."

"Indeed. There's a big difference between injuring your arm and your ribs. After a whole month of not exerting myself properly, it took me half a month to regain my strength."

"Normally, you would need to train for around twice as long as your recovery time in order to get back to full strength, if I remember correctly. You hunters of the forest's edge really are something else."

"I have the invigorating food you've always provided me with to thank for that. And I'm especially happy that you prepared a meal I enjoy so much on a day like this." But if that was true, why did she look so sulky? Since we were closer than usual, my heart rate was slightly elevated at the moment.

"Personally, I'm incredibly glad that I've regained my strength as a hunter now."

"Well, I can certainly understand that."

She fell silent for a moment. "And I believe that my clan member should be just as happy about it."

"Yeah, you've got that right. Wait... Do you think I'm *not* happy about it?"

"That's not it. It's just, you seem to be quite concerned about the matter with Lem Dom."

She was right. Saris Ran Fou and the others had all been so impressed with Ai

Fa earlier, but Toor Deen and I had immediately started thinking about the upcoming contest of strength instead.

“Er, are you saying I put you in a bad mood, then?”

“I am hardly so petty that I would let something like that ruin my mood. But it does leave me feeling somewhat unsatisfied.”

“Th-Then, what should I do?”

Ai Fa hung her head with her eyes glaring up at me. She was still frowning, but her expression was so adorable it felt almost unfair.

“I believe my father Gil would have given me an affectionate pat on my head...”

“Y-Your head?”

“Indeed. Unfortunately, while you are a member of my house, you are not older than I am, and besides...I realize we do not have the kind of relationship where we should be touching one another so freely. That is why I wanted to have a debate with you about what should be done.”

This was a debate, huh?

My clan head’s adorable sulking face was throwing me seriously out of sorts.

“There’s no need to make this seem more complicated than it is. I just need to show you how happy I am more openly, right?” I asked.

“Are you able to do that...?”

“Yaaay!” I replied, throwing both my arms up into the air. I was trying to channel Rimee Ruu, and be as earnest as I possibly could. However, Ai Fa’s eyes were still boring into me with the sharp glare of a hunter.

“This might be the angriest I’ve ever been since before I welcomed you into my clan...”

“Well, I appreciate that you didn’t slug me.”

“I’m restraining myself from doing so with everything I have, as I fear I might forget to hold back.”

I was getting more and more flustered, and I was even starting to break out in

a cold sweat. “Th-Then why don’t you think of a way to solve this? I’ll go along with whatever my clan head decides.”

“This is a problem for the entire Fa clan, and yet you intend to foist it all off on me?”

“I don’t have enough experience with these things to come up with a solution. Could you please suggest what your poor, pathetic clan member should do, dear clan head?”

What kind of face would someone make if they had been eavesdropping and heard my reply? And yet, Ai Fa and I were deadly serious.

Ai Fa remained silent, her gaze falling to the rug at her feet for a while, and then she said, “Try patting my head...”

“Okay.”

With that, I placed my hand atop Ai Fa’s head, feeling a pleasant warmth gradually flowing into me. And then, I gave her blonde hair a thorough patting.

“How was that, clan head?”

“I found myself wondering if you were going along with it reluctantly, which lessened the pleasure I got from it.”

“I wasn’t exactly reluctant. Just a bit flustered.”

“Ah, I see. You can stop patting now.”

I swiftly pulled my hand back, and Ai Fa sidled up beside me with that intense look still on her face.

“We can’t truly understand one another’s feelings when we act so formally with each other.”

“That’s true. I’m in agreement there.”

“Of course... But I should be spending this precious moment in celebration of what I accomplished earlier. It would be sad to fall asleep in a gloomy mood on such a joyous day.”

“If you’re sad, it makes me sad too.”

“Then, would it be all right for me to follow my emotions just for tonight?”

“I guess that works...” I timidly replied, and Ai Fa grabbed hold of me with the swiftness of a wildcat. If my heart had been just a bit more delicate, the shock that gave me would probably have brought it to a halt. Ai Fa was hugging me around my chest, and as if that wasn’t enough, she was also rubbing her head up against my cheek.

“This is how happy I am, Asuta.”

“R-Right, that’s only natural, considering what you’ve had to put up with for the past month and a half.”

“Are you really just as happy as I am?”

“Yeah, your joy is my joy.”

A break period was coming up soon, so the number of giba around the Fa house was on the decline. Because of that, Ai Fa was using giba summoning fruit in her traps, and their sweet aroma was still clinging to her hair and clothing. It was really tickling my nose. My emotions were making me shake like I was being buffeted by a turbulent wind, and I was starting to get a little dizzy.

“I know that I shouldn’t touch you for no good reason. But this is a special night.”

“Yeah, I get it. I’m the one who gave you the okay to do what you want.”

I put my left hand on Ai Fa’s back, and cradled her head in my right. Then I patted her soft hair affectionately, and Ai Fa hugged me all the tighter as I felt her warm breath on my chest.

“I’m sure it would be absolutely hellish for me if I couldn’t cook for a month and a half, so I should have been more mindful of just how happy you must be to finally be released from your suffering.”

Ai Fa silently rubbed her cheek against my own.

At this point, my heart felt like it was on the verge of bursting. But even so, I was happy. Of course I was, seeing Ai Fa like this.

And so, we shared in each other’s warmth and joy, until we finally drifted off to sleep.



2

The next day, the eighteenth of the silver month, had arrived.

I rose at the break of dawn, and after washing the dishes and gathering firewood, I returned home, where I discovered that we had a visitor—Lem Dom, looking the same as always.

“I’ve been waiting, Ai Fa. But should we save our showdown till after our morning work is done?”

“Indeed. Asuta will be leaving the house at the fifth hour. That shouldn’t be too late of a starting time.”

“Yeah. If we start before the sun hits its peak and go till sunset, it should give us a full half day.”

It had become part of Lem Dom’s daily routine to help with prep work for our business in the morning. But that was work she did to earn her dinner, and since she was set to return to the northern settlement after the contest of strength today, I had no right to ask for her help.

Still, as she herself said, there would still be plenty of time left afterward. Even if they took breaks, there was no way they’d be able to keep fighting almost continuously from morning until evening, so even going from the upper fifth hour till sunset would surely be more than enough for them to settle the matter.

“All right, let’s get started. Asuta, this is the last time I’ll be working with you, but I’m still looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, me too.”

With her usual bold grin firmly in place, it didn’t seem like Lem Dom was feeling overly anxious this morning. She was probably around 180 centimeters in height, taller than Ai Fa, and even me. Though she had a surprisingly womanly profile, her arms and shoulders were quite muscular, and her abs were clearly visible. She had a robust build that was bulkier than not just Ai Fa’s, but also some of the smaller male hunters like Ludo and Shin Ruu as well.

Over the course of these past few months, she had honed her physique more and more. Nobody from town would have doubted it if they were told that she was a female hunter. She had big, sharp eyes, a high-bridged nose, and plump lips. Her black hair was tied up high on her head, and her slightly dark skin was amazingly smooth. She had more than enough womanly beauty about her, and yet the expression on her pretty face was tense and severe. She looked so fierce that it was hard to believe she was only fifteen years old.

During her training, Lem Dom had gradually developed a calm and composed demeanor. The change had probably started around the time she began helping Jeeda and Bartha hunt wild birds. They hunted early in the morning, so there was no danger of them running into dangerous giba. However, catching birds out in the woods still required a lot of concentration and the ability to hide your presence. Frankly, in my eyes, she was already a perfectly fine female hunter.

Of course, she was still unpolished compared to Ai Fa, but when I compared her to a thirteen-year-old hunter in training like Deem Rutim, I couldn't imagine her coming up short. Not that the opinion of a nonhunter like me was worth much, but that was how I felt about her growth.

At any rate, it just goes to show how serious Lem Dom has been about her training, I thought as I set about handling the prep work.

The other women had already started gathering. Around this time of day, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and the other three women who would be working alongside me in the post town all came over to help out. Today, Fei Beim and the Dagora and Gaaz women were on duty.

Lem Dom went ahead and got to work alongside Fei Beim, cooking a large number of poitan. She was actually the one who had taught the Beim woman the process for preparing them in the first place. She hadn't branched out all that much, but Lem Dom was now skilled enough at making baked poitan to act as an instructor.

I guess we're gonna be saying goodbye to her today.

Though we only saw one another during this part of the day, we had been acquainted for quite some time now. She had first come to the Ruu settlement in the last third of the black month, so it had been around three months by this

point.

She had come to stay at the Fa house shortly after that, and when Deek Dom had abandoned her, she had moved into a nearby vacant house. Following Donda Ruu's advice, she had then temporarily returned to the Dom house to discuss things with her brother before returning here. It really had been a turbulent three months.

At first, Lem Dom had seemed like an out-of-control ruffian, but I soon started to recognize her charm. There was the way she got along with Toor Deen, and her complex relationship with Sufira Zaza, which I thought was really heartwarming. Also, no matter how much the people around her tried to talk her down, Lem Dom never wavered when it came to her dream of becoming a hunter. I couldn't help but see something of Ai Fa in her.

Lem Dom wants to live the way she desires, even if it means casting aside all norms... Well, I guess it's all down to the whims of the forest, huh? I thought while taking care not to sigh, and completing one bit of prep work after another. The women assisting me had grown quite skilled as well, so it felt like things were going nice and easy now compared to the revival festival. We were able to finish up after around two hours, and loaded the prepared ingredients into the wagon, just in time for Sufira Zaza to show up.

"Oh, you came all this way to observe, Sufira Zaza?" Lem Dom asked.

"Of course. That's why I was staying in the Ruu settlement to begin with."

Sufira Zaza shot a worried glare at Lem Dom, who was grinning fearlessly. They had grown up in the northern settlement together, so she was deeply concerned about Lem Dom's fate. I could still clearly remember the way that she had sobbed like a child when they had finally reunited at the Ruu settlement.

While I was reminiscing about that, Sufira Zaza's tough gaze turned my way too. "Asuta, thank you for all your help so far. I will be sure to fully inform the leading clan heads about how you and Ai Fa have conducted yourselves."

"I appreciate that. The assistance we've been getting has been a big help with our work in the post town and with the restaurant."

We would be saying farewell to Sufira Zaza today as well. She had maintained her harsh attitude toward us all the way to the end, but I had seen the surprising ups and downs of her emotions, as well as the fact that she had a major sweet tooth. In the end, I had come to like her as another one of our important comrades here at the forest's edge.

"Well then, we'll be heading out for the post town..." I started to declare, but then I spotted someone else coming our way. Sufira Zaza had arrived on foot, but this time we were seeing a totos-drawn cart. The vehicle had no roof, and it had appeared from the north.

The totos had blackish plumage, and its reins were held by a hunter from the northern settlement wearing a pelt with the skin of the animal's head still attached. The driver was a younger hunter, not the leading clan head Gulaf Zaza, and riding in the cart was Deek Dom, who wore a giba skull on his head.

"Ah, so the contest of strength hasn't started yet? Looks like driving the totos hard to make sure we arrived quickly was worth it," the man whose name I didn't know remarked with a hearty laugh as he stepped down to the ground.

Deek Dom also silently descended. Even though this was his first encounter with his sister in a very long time, neither of them was doing anything except silently staring at one another. But while they were having that poignant reunion, Sufira Zaza was glaring at the other man.

"Geol... Why are you here?"

"Why? Well, this is incredibly important for us too. After all, the marriage of the next leading clan head is at stake!"

For a hunter of the northern settlement, he came across as being strangely brash. Thanks to the headed giba pelt he wore, around half of his face was hidden from view, but his black eyes had a blazing light in them, and he was grinning viciously. He still looked rather young, though, due to a lack of any facial hair. He also had a large scar above his right eye. He seemed to be a bit smaller than Deek Dom overall, but he still had to be around 180 centimeters in height and was really muscular all over. I guessed that he was about as burly as Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim.



“What are you talking about? I don’t remember ever pledging myself to you, Geol Zaza,” Lem Dom said, her gaze shifting away from her elder brother. Then she turned toward me and Ai fa with a derisive grin. “This little clod is Geol Zaza, the youngest son of the main Zaza house. He looks pretty imposing, doesn’t he? But he’s actually Sufira Zaza’s younger brother.”

“Hmph! There’s no older or younger when it comes to those born on the same day! And even if I am the youngest son, I’m still set to be the next leading clan head!”

Shockingly, it seemed he was Sufira Zaza’s twin brother. That meant he must have also been sixteen, and yet he had just as much presence about him as Deek Dom. Apparently, he was the heir because his eldest and second brothers’ souls had already returned to the forest, leaving him the oldest surviving son of the main house.

“As if any man besides me could ever handle a violent woman like you. Just hurry up and bring this farce to an end, then prepare yourself to be my bride!”

“I don’t need you to tell us to begin. But this match might not be settled until sunset... Asuta, you don’t need to pay this any mind. Just go handle your own work.”

Geol Zaza’s black eyes shot me a doubtful look. “I see. So you’re the outsider living at the Fa house, eh? You’re just as pale as the rumors said.”

Since he was officially the next clan head, he must have had to remain at the northern settlement whenever Gulaf Zaza was away from home on business. That was why Ai Fa and I were only meeting him for the very first time now.

“And you’re the female clan head of the Fa, aren’t you? Hmm... Seems you really aren’t just a hunter in name alone. It’s such a shame, though, seeing how beautiful you are.”

With her eyes half closed, Ai Fa glared back at Geol Zaza. My clan head was especially averse to rude folks who made pointless comments about her appearance.

“Ah, and you’re the Deen clan’s chef. The food you prepared for that banquet before was amazing! I’m looking forward to having you put those skills to use

when I get married too!”

Toor Deen bowed, looking a bit uneasy. Recently, she had taken a single day off work in the post town to handle some sort of celebratory banquet in the northern settlement.

“All right, we’ll be leaving now. It really is time for us to be heading to the Ruu settlement.” I decided to speak to Geol Zaza politely, since that’s what I did with Sufira Zaza and I had a hard time seeing him as younger than me.

However, Geol Zaza then shouted out, “Ah, hold on! I’ve got a message for the Ruu clan head. Let him know we’ve decided that I’m going to take part in that tournament or whatever that’s being held by the castle town.”

“Huh? Wasn’t Shin Ruu supposed to do that?”

“The nobles said something about having one more of us join in, and it ended up being me! After all, it could bring shame on us hunters if we only sent a single man from a Ruu branch house!”

This guy seemed to be a lot less dignified than Deek Dom. But it occurred to me just then that if he was sixteen years old, that meant he was the same age as Shin Ruu. I couldn’t help but secretly wonder which of the two was stronger.

“I’ll pass the message along. And I’ll see you all later,” I replied. Then I glanced over at Ai Fa and Lem Dom, who both had sour looks on their faces. “We’re leaving now. You take care too, Lem Dom.”

“My, that’s a quick farewell,” Lem Dom said. “You’ll be back before the sun sets, won’t you? I’ll be waiting here for you when you return, whether we’ve managed to settle this before then or not.”

“Really? In that case, I’ll come straight back here instead of stopping by the Ruu settlement.”

“Of course I’ll wait. I’ve been in your debt for so long, I’d like to at least say a proper goodbye at the end,” she remarked, showing me the whites of her teeth. “That goes for you too, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra. I hope you’re looking forward to seeing just how much strength I can bring to bear against Ai Fa.”

And so, we set about our work in the post town for the day.

Things were completely back to normal in town, but there was still an awful lot of traffic passing by. Even bringing eight hundred servings, we were able to sell the whole lot of them without issue, so it seemed we had no need to bring those numbers down yet.

“I see... So Lem Dom will finally be returning to the northern settlement as well,” Yamiru Lea whispered while setting a fresh steaming basket in place, having been put in charge of giba manju and myamuu giba. “Well, she’s been doing as she pleases for three months now, so I’m sure she won’t have any regrets. She’ll simply have to go back to doing her proper work in her own house tomorrow.”

“Ah, so you also think it’ll be difficult for Lem Dom to win, Yamiru Lea?”

“Not just difficult. Impossible. No matter what the challenge may be, there’s no chance of her beating someone who made it into the top eight in a Ruu clan contest of strength like Ai Fa.”

I kind of felt the same way, but it sounded a lot more convincing coming from Yamiru Lea’s mouth.

“It sounded like that Geol Zaza man has asked Lem Dom to marry him too. What sort of person is he?”

“I can’t say. Heirs don’t attend clan head meetings, and the Suun clan avoided inviting their subordinates over as much as possible, so for the most part, I only know their names.”

“I see. Apparently, he and Sufira Zaza are twins.”

Yamiru Lea’s eyebrows shifted a bit when I said that. “Ah, Geol Zaza is that rude boy? I see. He’s been a ruffian since he was young. I believe Diga and Doddodo tried to avoid him as much as possible at banquets.”

I could certainly see how Diga and Doddodo would have been completely unable to stand up to someone that intense. And he didn’t seem like the sort to respect members of his parent clan either.

“By the way, Diga and Doddodo are staying at the Dom settlement now, aren’t they? I know they’re having a tough time, but I’m glad that they’re working hard as hunters in training.”

Yamiru Lea offered no reply aside from a shrug. Occasionally, I heard reports from Toor Deen after her visits to the northern settlement about how Diga, Doddo, and the folks at the Suun settlement were doing. Though Gulaf Zaza's original position had been that there was no need for anyone to think about people with whom their blood ties had been severed, Toor Deen had persisted in her efforts to stay connected to her old clanmates and had been permitted to share how things were going for each of them. Was knowing how their former relatives were doing important for their own efforts to live a proper life? I couldn't help but feel that it was, especially when I saw Yamiru Lea and Tsuvai interacting with each other, and it seemed Gulaf Zaza had eventually accepted that.

Toor Deen really is amazing, especially for someone so little.

I turned to my other side where the young girl in question was boiling pasta, sweat forming on her brow.

"Why don't we switch once that's done, Toor Deen?"

"Okay, understood."

Toor Deen had already mastered making carbonara, so I sometimes had her rotate in on the daily specials. And when the special was a simpler dish, I would instead teach Yamiru Lea how to prepare it while having Fei Beim or one of the other women handle the giba manju stall. We had more time to spare now that the revival festival was over, so I wanted to focus on improving everyone's skills when it came to our business in the post town.

And so, several minutes later Toor Deen and I swapped positions. Also, just as we were doing that, a familiar face happened to show up. It was Sheila, a maid employed by the house of Daleim who was serving as Yang's assistant.

"It's been some time, Sir Asuta. I have a message for you from Sir Polarth. May I convey it?"

"Of course, but I can't step away from my cooking right now, so you'll have to tell it to me while I work. If you don't mind, could you come over to this side of the stall?"

"My apologies for interrupting while you are busy," Sheila said with a polite

bow, and then she did as I had suggested. “It’s actually in regard to the tournament to be held seven days from now. Are you already familiar with that matter, Sir Asuta?”

“Yeah, I am. I’ve heard that a bunch of people will be running stalls around the tournament grounds, but I haven’t been told where they are yet.”

“The tournament grounds are located to the north, up the highway. They are beyond the Turan lands and take roughly half an hour to reach by tolos-drawn wagon.” If they were farther north than the Turan lands, that meant they were in unfamiliar territory for us. And if it would take thirty to forty minutes to reach them, that was quite a distance. “It’s a facility that is also frequently used as a parade ground. The location can accommodate two thousand people, so it will be possible to earn more than usual by doing business there.”

“Right, and the post town will be left emptier as a result. We’ve been discussing whether or not we should set up shop there.”

“Polarth has said he would very much like to have you participate. However, there will be a great many people from outside of Genos present, and no shortage of thugs who pride themselves on their strength, so you might need a number of guards.”

“Hmm. That’s something to keep in mind as well. Asking men to go on guard duty means asking them to take time off from their work as hunters.”

The Ruu clan’s break period had already ended, and it would still be some time before the Fa and the neighboring clans entered our own. The timing would have been perfect if the tournament’s date had been set just ten days to half a month later.

“Well, the militia will be patrolling the grounds, and it isn’t as if the other stalls will be hiring bodyguards. The tournament will be finished before sunset, so I can’t imagine there would be any actual danger,” Sheila said.

“Is Polarth being especially insistent about wanting us to participate this time?” I asked, turning to face Sheila directly after adding fresh pasta to the pot and flipping over the hourglass. Unsurprisingly, her eyes seemed to be pleading with me despite her smile.

“Yes. He said it would be the perfect opportunity to introduce the delicious flavor of giba cooking to the world, and that a number of distinguished guests have requested your cooking as well...”

“By ‘distinguished guests,’ do you mean nobles? Folks like that would eat a snack from a stall?”

“Naturally, we’ll be preparing special meals, but some have asked for giba cooking instead. They likely include the star reader, Lady Arishuna, and the metalworker’s daughter, Lady Diel.”

“Oh, so Arishuna and Diel were invited too?”

Neither of them seemed like they would have much interest in the tournament, but they must have gotten dragged into it because of some castle town custom or another.

“I see. Well, I can’t make any promises, but I’ll be sure to take that into consideration. We’ll need permission from the leading clan heads, though.”

“Thank you. I shall inform Sir Polarth of your answer.” And with that, Sheila left.

Then Toor Deen, who was now working on the deep-fried giba, called out, “Um... If you’re looking for guards, the Deen and Liddo may accept. The number of giba in our area has dropped off quite a bit lately.”

“Yeah, that’s true for the Fa hunting grounds too. That’s why we’ve been planning to have a joint festival of the hunt, after all.”

“Right,” Toor Deen replied with a bashful smile. However, a pensive look soon reappeared on her tiny face. “But that Leiriss noble will be fighting in the tournament, won’t he? I’m a little worried that there might end up being a quarrel between him and that hunter from the Ruu.”

“Honestly, I’m more concerned about Geol Zaza participating.”

“Geol Zaza...? I’ve only met him a couple times. He’s much wilder than the Ruu hunters,” Toor Deen remarked with a pained sigh. A kindhearted girl like her probably wouldn’t have much taste for the kind of tournament we were discussing. And that was only natural, considering what had happened during

and after the brutal battle between Shin Ruu and Geimalos.

“Well, I’m pretty sure that at its core, it’ll basically be similar to the contests of strength held at the forest’s edge. I mean, they’re ultimately just testing their skill with a sword against one another.”

Geimalos had only ended up so seriously injured because he had forced Shin Ruu into a situation where the hunter had been unable to hold back. Even if Geol Zaza did forget to restrain himself and injured his opponent, I was sure that no one on our side would be in any danger.

“Right,” Toor Deen replied as she picked up some fried giba meat with a metallic mesh scoop. The sand in the hourglass had just run out, so I took the pasta off the heat and mixed it with the other ingredients in a different pot.

“I’m pretty timid, so I don’t like watching contests of strength between hunters either,” I admitted. “I wonder how Lem Dom and Ai Fa are doing.”

“Yeah... I imagine it’s still too soon for them to have settled things.”

The sun was just about to hit its peak. Roughly two hours had passed since we had departed from the Fa house. Normally, it wouldn’t be possible for people to grapple with each other at full strength for that long, but I couldn’t imagine Lem Dom giving up on her dream of becoming a hunter so quickly.

What kind of result would we find when we returned to the Fa house? That was the question on both our minds as we carried on with the day’s work.

3

After that, we returned to the Ruu settlement right on time, at half past the lower second hour.

Normally, our schedule would have had us doing a study session at the Ruu house at this point, but I had already informed them this morning of my intention to shift that to tomorrow. And so, after dropping off Yamiru Lea, we immediately headed over to the path that would take us back to the Fa house, only for Barthia to call out to us as she was walking over from across the plaza.

“Hey there, Asuta. I’m planning on following after you in the Ruu clan’s

wagon.”

“Oh, are you planning on saying farewell to Lem Dom too?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ve been going out into the forest with that girl for quite a while now. Jeeda still isn’t back yet, so I’ll be saying bye on my own,” Bartha replied.

Still seated in the driver’s seat of Ruuruu’s wagon, Rimee Ruu loudly called out, “Sounds good! I wanna say bye to Lem Dom too! I’ll go ask Papa Donda, so just wait for a bit, okay?”

“I don’t mind,” I said, “but did you have much of a relationship with Lem Dom, Rimee Ruu?”

“No, not really. But she’s cool and nice, and I really like her.”

Since Rimee Ruu had been close to Ai Fa for a long time, it was no surprise to hear that she had no problem with what Lem Dom was doing. Also, the fact that she said Lem Dom was nice despite hardly having interacted with her really went to show how innocent and yet oddly perceptive she was.

“Okay, I’ll be right back! Oh, wait. What are you gonna do, Reina?”

“Well...Asuta, you’re going to give the women from the area around your house a cooking lesson today, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, that was the plan.”

“In that case, I’d like to observe. I’d appreciate the chance to see how you go about teaching women who lack experience with cooking.”

With that, Reina and Rimee Ruu took off toward the main house, and as she watched them go, Morun Rutim said, “Um... I was planning on attending lessons at the Ruu settlement today, so I don’t have any work. If you don’t mind, could I come along to the Fa house as well?”

“Of course. I have no issues with that.”

“Thank you,” Morun Rutim replied with a bow of her head, though judging from the look on her face, she was feeling more upset than any of us. Now that I thought about it, she had been rather concerned about the future of the Dom clan at the friendship banquet the other day. It was only natural that she

wouldn't want to head straight back home.

"In that case, I'd like to accompany you as well. What about you, Tsuvai?" Yamiru Lea chimed in.

"Hmph. Well, I guess I'd sort of like to see that hooligan from the Dom clan break down crying."

Ultimately, the only ones to go back to their own homes were the Min and Muufa women who helped out with the Ruu clan's stalls. Since it was taking a bit for Reina and Rimee Ruu to return, I decided to chat a little with Bartha. "Lem Dom seems to have changed quite a bit since you and Jeeda started instructing her on how to be a hunter. Do you still think that she can't beat Ai Fa?"

"Hmm. I'm not so sure. She'll be able to make a hundred or even two hundred attempts, so it wouldn't be surprising for her to win at least once. But still, she's up against Ai Fa of all people..."

"Ai Fa being her opponent makes her odds of winning worse?"

"Yeah. I've never seen Ai Fa compete in a contest of strength, but she was able to defeat Darmu Ruu and Rau Lea, and fought evenly against Dan Rutim, right? It'll be pretty difficult for another woman like Lem Dom to beat her."

It seemed that pretty much no one expected Lem Dom to win.

Thinking back, she had been completely ineffective against the traveling performer Rolo, and Ai Fa had even defeated the guy who had taken that performer down, Rau Lea.

If she has even a sliver of hope, it's going to come from her stamina and perseverance... Ai Fa said she was waiting until she was back in peak condition before accepting the challenge, though, so I'm guessing she'll still be tough to overcome...

In a contest of strength between hunters, it was taboo to injure your opponent. However, I had seen stuff like the top of Darmu Ruu's head being slammed into the ground before. The damage from losing again and again would steadily add up and drain her stamina. And Ai Fa used her opponent's strength against them in combat, which seemed like a pretty efficient way to

fight.

I guess that just leaves the possibility of Ai Fa losing by slipping up and injuring Lem Dom... But it's hard to imagine her making such a careless mistake, and Geol Zaza would probably object to such an outcome anyway.

We had spent a little over three hours working, but that went up to more than five hours when you added in the time used for prep work and transit, so I figured they must have settled things by now. Even though I would be finding out the results after just another twenty minutes or so of riding in the wagon, I couldn't stop my thoughts from racing.

"Sorry for the wait!" an energetic voice called out, and when I turned in that direction I found three people standing there: Rimee and Reina Ruu, accompanied by their father.

"Huh? Why are you here, Donda Ruu?"

"I figured if the heir to the Zaza clan is still at the Fa house, I should have a bit of a talk with him. We can't have him causing trouble with the nobles at that tournament, after all," Donda Ruu replied, his blue eyes glaring our way. "Is it somehow inconvenient for you, having me come along? If so, I'd like you to explain how."

"Uh, no, that's not it... It's just pretty rare for you to come over to the Fa house, so it makes me really happy to have you along," I answered earnestly.

The grouchy leading clan head just gave a displeased snort in response. Donda Ruu was still recovering from his injuries, even after a month and a half. The lord of the forest had inflicted a really severe wound on him, but at least he was no longer wearing a sling, just some bandages wrapped around his right shoulder.

"Well then, let's get going. I'll take the lead."

With that, I gripped Gilulu's reins and the wagon lurched into motion, while Yun Sudra said to me from inside, "I never expected Donda Ruu to ask to come along. Is the leading clan head concerned with Lem Dom's fate as well?"

"Well, if we're about to have a new female hunter, that's not exactly something he can ignore. Though as a rule, he generally tries not to interfere

with the affairs of other clans.”

“I see... Ah, I’m getting all worked up, for some reason. How did things turn out, I wonder?”

It was all down to the will of the forest. Still, I could feel my pulse steadily speeding up as we approached the Fa house.

We headed north down the path through the forest’s edge for twenty minutes, then turned onto a path that went off to the side. The Zaza clan’s tolos and wagon were there beside the house, but I didn’t see Ai Fa or Lem Dom. Were they waiting inside the house for us to return? After parking the wagon in its usual spot and tying Gilulu’s reins to a nearby tree, I knocked on the door to the house.

“I’m home, Ai Fa, and I’ve got a lot of guests with me, so could you come out here?”

No response. I opened the door, only to find that nobody was inside.

“What are you doing?” Donda Ruu asked, getting down from Ruuruu’s wagon and approaching.

“Well, I didn’t see them anywhere. But Lem Dom should still be here...”

“Of course she is. They’re on the other side of the house. Are you saying you can’t sense that turbulent presence?”

“A turbulent presence? They can’t still be doing their contest of strength, can they?”

“If they aren’t, they must be fighting for some other reason.”

I didn’t even want to imagine something so frightening. Feeling rather flustered, I hurried around to the rear of the house, with our twelve guests following after me.

My heart pounded in my chest as the rear of the house came into view, and I found a truly shocking sight awaiting me there: Ai Fa and Lem Dom were still doing their contest of strength even now.

“Ah, so you’re back? Now I’ve finally got someone to talk to,” Geol Zaza said in an easygoing tone with a yawn mixed in as he relaxed under the leather

canopy. When his eyes caught sight of Donda Ruu, though, they quickly narrowed. “It seems you’ve brought a rather impressive hunter back with you. And with those wounds, could you be...?”

“I’m the Ruu clan head, Donda Ruu. And you’re the Zaza clan heir, Geol Zaza?” Donda Ruu asked, stepping forward.

Geol Zaza casually rose in turn. His eyes took on an even brighter gleam, and his stern face broke out in a fearless grin. “Well, well... I never expected to lay eyes on you in a place like this. You’ve got even more presence than I had heard. Your reputation is just as impressive as my old man and Deek Dom’s, and it looks like it’s not just gossip.”

“So, you’re in a position where you can neglect your hunting work? Well, I suppose I can’t exactly call you out for it.” Donda Ruu looked Geol Zaza up and down, but then his gaze turned away, to what was going on beyond our outdoor kitchen.

Ai Fa and Lem Dom looked downright awe-inspiring as they faced off against one another over there. Both of them were breathing heavily and coated in sweat all over, while Lem Dom was covered in dirt as well. She must have fallen to the ground countless times over the past five hours. The two of them were slouching forward, and their predatory eyes were fixed on their opponent. It was like looking at two wounded carnivorous beasts fighting to the death.

Deek Dom and Sufira Zaza were watching over the proceedings from a short distance away. While Deek Dom remained expressionless, Sufira Zaza had tears in her eyes as she tightly gripped the giba necklace Lem Dom had entrusted to her. When Morun Rutim noticed Deek Dom, she started worriedly wringing her hands but showed no signs of calling out to him.

Since Geol Zaza was closest, I went ahead and asked him, “Er, have the two of them really been doing contests of strength this whole time, ever since morning?”

“Yeah,” Geol Zaza muttered back, his eyes remaining fixed on Donda Ruu. “They’ve taken a number of breaks, though, and they had some jerky when the sun hit its peak. But they haven’t been getting anywhere, so they’ve been going at it for a while now without any rest. She sure doesn’t know when to give up.”

Lem Dom didn't seem to have heard what he had said. She grabbed at Ai Fa once more, but her movements seemed sluggish, even from my point of view. However, when Ai Fa countered Lem Dom, it looked like she had lost just as much speed. With unstable footing, she twisted her body and grabbed Lem Dom's arm. In turn, Lem Dom grabbed Ai Fa's shoulder with her other arm. If she could just push my clan head down, she would win, but Ai Fa was able to brush off her opponent's hand and weakly stepped forward with her right leg. Lem Dom then stumbled over that leg and fell to the ground, all on her own.

Ai Fa leaned up against a nearby tree and stared up at the sky, taking a short break. "Asuta... You're back...?" she asked, eyes like a pair of blue infernos glancing my way. "As you can see...I'm still in the middle of our contests of strength... Never mind us. You go carry out your own work..." It seemed to require quite a bit of effort for her to even say that much, and Lem Dom was breathing just as heavily down at her feet. "Or have you...exhausted your strength, Lem Dom...?"

"Don't joke around, Ai Fa..." Lem Dom placed both hands on the ground and shot Ai Fa a beastly glare. "You gave me until sunset, didn't you...? And look how high the sun is up in the sky..."

"Then hurry and get up already..."

With her whole body trembling, Lem Dom rose to her feet. At the same time, Ai Fa pushed off from the tree she had been leaning on. "We'll get in the way of Asuta's group here... We don't want to kick up dirt, so let's move over in that direction a little more..."

"Heh heh... I'm amazed you can still think about that stuff in this situation... I really can't beat you, can I...?"

The two of them then distanced themselves from the kitchen space, dragging their legs as they went. That alone was enough to make a lump form in my throat.

"It's astounding, isn't it? They've been like that for an entire hour now. At this point, it would've been better for me to just do my own work before coming here," Geol Zaza said with a grin. "Becoming a hunter through persistence alone is an utterly ridiculous idea."

Donda Ruu was silently watching over the proceedings, but then he turned my way. “Didn’t you hear what your clan head said? You should go do what you need to do.”

“No, but...”

“This isn’t likely to be settled for a while yet. Do you intend to just waste time until then? In that case, the rest of you should all head back home.” That last sentence was directed at his daughters, who were standing there beside me.

Rimee Ruu placed her hands on her slender hips and glared up at her father, who really looked nothing like her. “Jeez. You’re always so quick to say mean stuff like that, Papa Donda! There’s no way we’re heading back!”

“Then you should see to your work instead.”

“I know! Let’s go, Asuta. We’ll help you out.”

“R-Right... But is it really okay to just leave them?”

“It’s fine. Just let Ai Fa do what she has to; there won’t be anything to worry about,” Rimee Ruu said with an earnest grin. I couldn’t help but admire how tough she was.

“Right, I’ll work my hardest too, so my clan head doesn’t chew me out later. Reina Ruu, would you mind helping out with the curry base and pasta? I was planning to hold a study session at the Ruu settlement today, so I didn’t call for any of the other women.”

“Of course. I’d be glad to help out,” Reina Ruu replied, suddenly turning my way. She had been completely enthralled with the fight occurring in front of us.

“Thanks. I’ll pay you for the work, of course. And I’d like to call on you two as well if that’s okay, Yamiru Lea and Tsuvai... Could I ask you to take charge on that front, Toor Deen? There might be some small differences in the amount of each ingredient in the Fa clan’s recipe compared to the Ruu’s, so make sure you check that too.”

“Yes, I understand.”

After I assigned tasks to all eleven of our personnel present, Bartha included, we got started right away. And all the while, the contests of strength between

Ai Fa and Lem Dom continued. Toor Deen looked quite worried, but she didn't neglect her job in the least.

The spices that we had lightly toasted yesterday were heated up again, filling the air with an alluring aroma that seriously stimulated the appetite. I was a little worried that it might distract Ai Fa and Lem Dom, but it wouldn't be right for us to slack off.

Reina Ruu, Rimee Ruu, and Morun Rutim were all quite experienced, so production went even smoother than usual. We were able to more or less finish up our preparations for business the next day around when the sundial was at half past the lower fourth hour. But then I heard Sufira Zaza's voice loudly exclaim, "Ah!"

I turned in a hurry, and found Lem Dom sprawled out on the ground. Ai Fa must have used some kind of flashy throw, as she was on her knees with her back heaving up and down.

"That's enough! Can't you see that nothing will change even if you keep going?! Please, just end it here, Lem Dom!" Sufira Zaza shouted, half sobbing.

And yet, Lem Dom rose again with her indomitable fighting spirit blazing bright. Her hair, which was normally pulled up tight, had partially come loose, and her wavy black locks hung down around face, which made her appearance even more ghastly. She might not have even had enough strength left to reply to Sufira Zaza's words, or do much of anything besides breathing heavily as she faced Ai Fa. My clan head swept aside the bangs dangling in her own face, and then just barely managed to rise.

"This next match will be the end of it..." Donda Ruu muttered, at which point Lem Dom kicked off the ground. She showed an animallike nimbleness that made me wonder how she still had so much strength left. Her fingers were bent like claws as she grabbed at Ai Fa's shoulders from directly in front.

It was a frantic, desperate charge, and Ai Fa didn't seem to be capable of handling it at the moment. Lem Dom crashed into her with a ton of momentum, and my clan head started toppling over. But at the last possible moment, Ai Fa stopped her fall. She shifted one leg forward and the other way back, grabbed Lem Dom's right wrist, and twisted her body while forcing the fingers digging

into her shoulders to turn loose. Then she forcefully tugged on Lem Dom's right arm, lifting up her opponent with what looked like a one-armed judo shoulder throw.

Lem Dom's body did a full flip through the air, and then her back slammed into the ground. However, Ai Fa's momentum was sending her back hurtling toward the ground too.

"Lem Dom!" Sufira Zaza shouted as she raced over.

"What is it...? This fight isn't over yet..." Lem Dom forced out almost in gasps, but she didn't look capable of rising.

Ai Fa sluggishly stood up, then fully undid the string holding back her golden hair so that it flowed down her back. "Lem Dom... This contest of strength is finished..."

"What are you saying...? I still have strength left..." Lem Dom replied as she brushed off Sufira Zaza's clinging hands, then rolled so that she was lying face down. Placing both hands on the ground, she started to push herself up with her whole body twitching as she rose.

"Even if that were true, it's still over... You broke a taboo, after all..." Ai Fa said in a hoarse voice as she pulled up her long hair. As she did, beads of red started dripping down.

Lem Dom's nails had left scratches on my clan head's left shoulder, and they were deep enough to bleed. The blood had already formed rivulets that went all the way down to her elbow.

"I can no longer fight to my fullest after suffering such an injury... While there is still time left, since you broke a taboo, this match cannot be continued..."

"But...!"

"You also lost control of your strength before I did... Even if we were to keep going, the result would remain unchanged... We should end things here, Lem Dom..."

Lem Dom hung her head in disappointment, then she lowered her forehead to the ground and started sobbing, overwhelmed with sorrow. Even when

Sufira Zaza hugged her from behind, her wailing didn't stop.

As I stood there dumbfounded, Rimee Ruu tugged on my vest.

"Asuta, shouldn't you go treat Ai Fa's wounds?"

"O-Of course. Thanks for reminding me."

With that, I hurried back to the house and pulled out the medicine and bandages we had prepared in advance. The medicine in question was an expensive salve we had gotten from town. Then I transferred some water from a jug into a wooden bucket and grabbed a ladle, after which I took off running back to Ai Fa.

Deek Dom, Geol Zaza, and Donda Ruu were gathered there around Ai Fa and Lem Dom. The latter was still prostrating herself on the ground, sobbing like a child, while my clan head was sitting cross-legged next to her.

"Let me treat your wounds, Ai Fa. It would be really bad if you got some kind of serious infection."

"Indeed... Thank you for your consideration, Asuta..."

"Rimee Ruu's the considerate one. Let's wash your wounds first. This'll sting, but just try to bear with it."

I soaked a brand new hand towel in the bucket of water I had brought, then gently wiped the wounds on her left shoulder. There were five fresh streaks there, as if she had been scratched by a wild beast. Her other shoulder had similarly shaped bruises. That was some incredible grip strength, considering Lem Dom had only managed to hold on to Ai Fa's shoulder for a brief moment.

After rubbing the pale yellow salve on her right shoulder, I placed some soft cloth over it in place of gauze and wrapped it in bandages. However, blood quickly started seeping through them. The cuts were deep enough that a doctor would have had no choice but to stop the match.

As I treated her wounds, Ai Fa drank some water with the ladle and wiped away her sweat with a cloth as her breathing finally started to calm back down. Meanwhile, Lem Dom kept on sobbing away with no signs of slowing down.

"That took quite a while, but it was a fine match," Geol Zaza said with a bit of

pity in his voice. “You should be satisfied now that you’ve given it your all to the bitter end, right? So stop crying already, Lem Dom. Do you hate the thought of becoming my wife that much?”

Lem Dom shook her head, still sobbing uncontrollably. After looking down at her for a while, Ai Fa turned to face Deek Dom.

“Deek Dom, I have a proposal for you.”

“What is it, Ai Fa of the Fa clan?”

“Could you recognize Lem Dom as a hunter in training?”

Deek Dom narrowed his eyes suspiciously, and the eyes of the Zaza siblings started burning into her, both pairs gleaming in a similarly hostile way. It was Geol Zaza who spoke next, interjecting before the Dom clan head could say anything.

“What are you saying, female hunter of the Fa? You won this match, did you not?”

“Indeed, I was the victor. But had Lem Dom not lost control of herself when she did, it’s possible that our battle would not have been settled before the sun set.”

“But you still won. There’s no changing that fact.”

“I understand that. But how many hunters of the forest’s edge have this much strength?” Ai Fa replied, calmly staring up at Geol Zaza’s face as she sat cross-legged on the ground. “I doubt that there are many of us who could keep fighting this long without giving up on the match. And in addition to how physically formidable she is, she knows how to hide her presence so her moves cannot be sensed, and she has a strong heart that gives her good control over herself. Given that, I cannot help but feel that she has what she needs to be a hunter.”

“Hmph. In other words, you intended to have your way from the start, regardless of how the match played out. What a joke.”

“Not at all. I myself was unable to measure Lem Dom’s strength before actually facing her. This is what I have come to believe after fighting with her for

so long.” Ai Fa’s gaze remained perfectly calm. “Furthermore, I did not hold back in the least. I took care not to injure her, but a normal hunter would have been left unable to move after the first ten or so rounds. And yet Lem Dom endured that pain and proved her strength.”

“Do you really think we’ll simply accept your words at face value?! You just want to drag Lem Dom down the same path you chose!”

“You say you cannot trust my words?” Ai Fa said, sighing and brushing aside her long bangs with her right hand. “Then, would you like to experience what I mean personally, with your own body? Some other day, have a contest of strength with me, and then you shall see the truth. If you can still stand after ten rounds, perhaps that will give some credence to your position.”

“In other words...you’re confident that you can defeat me ten times in a row, female hunter of the Fa?” Geol Zaza asked, his eyes like black infernos.

Ai Fa furrowed her brow. “It seems that judging the strength of others is not your specialty, youngest son of the Zaza. That would mean you cannot judge Lem Dom’s strength either.”

Geol Zaza silently reached his arm out toward Ai Fa, only for Deek Dom to grab hold of it from the side.

“Ai Fa of the Fa clan, is it not simply your wish that Lem Dom should be recognized as a hunter?” the Dom clan head asked.

“No. I am only asking you to allow her to work as a hunter in training, so that you can determine whether or not she is truly qualified. A contest of strength alone isn’t enough to judge everything, so I believe that her proper path will not become clear until she is allowed to go into the forest.” Ai Fa placed a hand on my shoulder and shakily got to her feet, then dauntlessly stared up at Deek Dom, who was a whole head taller than her. “At the very least, Lem Dom is stronger now than I was when I first entered the forest at the age of thirteen. It takes roughly two years for hunters in training to fully learn how to do their work, so I would like you to give Lem Dom two years before you decide what path she must take.”

Deek Dom remained silent.

“Lem Dom is currently fifteen, is she not? In that case, two years from now she will still only be seventeen years old. Even if her path to living as a hunter is closed off at that point, she would still be young enough to go back to living as a woman. I know you can see how strong Lem Dom’s desire to be a hunter is, so I would like you to at least give her that much of an extension.”

“But if she were to perish in the forest during those two years, she wouldn’t be able to pass down her blood.”

“I understand that. That’s why you are the one who must ultimately make the decision as her clan head, Deek Dom,” Ai Fa said, smiling. It was rare for her to show her emotions so openly in front of such a large crowd. “I am simply expressing my own feelings as the hunter you put your trust in. From here on out, it is up to you to figure out what you and your sister must do so that you can live without regrets. I am truly honored that a hunter as fine as you entrusted me with such an important role.”

With that, Ai Fa turned her back to Deek Dom. Then her body started to slump, so I hurriedly put a hand around her back to support her.

“Hold on, Ai Fa...” Lem Dom called out, lifting her teary face. It almost looked like the face of a small child. “Thank you for everything you’ve done... I’m grateful to you from the depths of my heart for how you looked after an outcast like me...”

“All you need to do is live a proper life alongside your brother and your relatives...” Ai Fa told her with a gentle smile, and then she started walking away unsteadily.

Rimee Ruu and Morun Rutim immediately came running over.

“Good work, Ai Fa!” Rimee Ruu called out.

“Thank you so much, Ai Fa!” Morun Rutim said with a deep bow. Then she headed over to where Deek Dom was standing.

Ai Fa kept walking while half leaning on my body, patting Rimee Ruu’s reddish-brown hair with her hand all the while. “I would like to wash my body in the house. If you are not busy with work, could I have you assist me, Rimee Ruu?”

“Yeah, of course! We just reached a good stopping point!” Rimee Ruu replied with a big grin, clinging to Ai Fa’s right arm. After nodding to everyone in the outdoor kitchen, we circled around the side of the house, and my clan head glanced at me.

“What? You look like you have something to say, Asuta.”

“Yeah... You were really cool back there, Ai Fa.”

Ai Fa narrowed her eyes as if she were staring at something bright, then leaned her head up against my cheek.

“Can’t you come up with something better to say than that to show your clan head how much you appreciate her?”

“Your clan member is sorry for being so tactless, dear clan head,” I replied. I gently placed a hand on top of Ai Fa’s head from an angle where Rimee Ruu wouldn’t notice.

And so, the curtain closed on the three-monthlong argument over Lem Dom’s future, for now.

Intermission: The Castle Town's Star Reader

Arishuna Zi Mafraluda awoke that morning hearing the solemn sound of a bell.

The bell rang three times, leaving behind trailing reverberations. That was the sign that it was now the upper third hour, three hours since sunrise. The sound of the bell was always more restrained at this hour, so as not to interfere with the sleep of noble personages.

Arishuna was currently in a manor in the castle town reserved for noble visitors, which used to be the private residence of Count Turan. The morning sunlight gently streamed in through the windows, illuminating the brick-built room, and she could feel the cool morning air coming in from outside as she lay atop her bed.

Arishuna had been granted usage of this room shortly before the start of the sun god's revival festival. A great many nobles and merchants from other lands had been invited to this manor, and she had been moved here from her previous residence so that she could perform star readings for them. Not that it particularly mattered where she slept. It didn't change anything about her lifestyle.

As she sat up atop the soft kimyuus-down bedding and placed her feet down on the thick carpet, a knock sounded from her door as if it had been waiting for that very moment.

"Are you awake, Lady Arishuna?"

"Yes," Arishuna replied, and the older maid assigned to her entered the room carrying a large basket. Inside the container was a set of Arishuna's clothing, freshly cleaned. The maid placed the basket on a table, and then stood there as if waiting for Arishuna to say something.

"I don't need, assistance changing. Please, be on your way."

"Very well, Lady Arishuna."

The old maid respectfully bowed her head and exited the room. Arishuna hadn't asked for assistance changing even once, but the woman was unable to leave the room until given permission. That was the maid's duty.

She had been living like this, as a sort of quasi-noble, for over a year now. Though Arishuna didn't consider that to be a negative, she also didn't feel especially blessed. But this was the only life available to her, so all she could do was accept it and entrust herself to the whims of fate.

While she was reflecting on her circumstances once again, Arishuna got up and began changing. After removing her silky night clothes and waist cloth, she stood for a moment just as she was when she was born, then put on the clothing that had been prepared for her—a new waist cloth and a long robe made from silk from Sym.

Then she moved farther into the room and began putting on various accessories stored in a jewelry box one by one. These included a set of ten thin silver wrist rings that together made a sort of bracelet, a necklace with the crest of Sym on it, and rings, earrings, and ankle bracelets adorned with stones of all sorts of colors. Then she braided her long black hair beside her neck, threading countless prayer strings through it. After a full half hour, Arishuna had completed her morning preparations. Each and every step of the process held meaning to her as a woman of Sym, and none of them could be neglected.

Once that was finished, Arishuna picked up a small jar that had been left on the dresser. It was made of copper, and around the size of a human fist. Inside, it held gray sand and the burnt remains of herbs. She lit some fresh herbs with a lana leaf and tossed them into the jar. Then, after a moment, a faintly purple, sweet-smelling smoke began filling the room.

As she cleansed her body with the smoke, she chanted scriptures from Sym. The god Sym was the wind incarnate and remained with his people even in other nations. Arishuna knelt on the carpet covering the floor, brought her fingers together in front of her chest, and prayed.

Have I really been praying alone like this for more than a year?

Arishuna was the last survivor of the Mafraluda clan, who had been exiled from Sym twenty years ago. She had been born three years after their

banishment, and hadn't set foot in Sym even once, despite being a woman of that nation. However, she didn't feel particularly unhappy about that fact. Whether she would ever be able to go there in the future would all come down to the whims of Sym. If she was fated to return to her homeland, that path would eventually open up for her, but otherwise, she would live out her days here in this foreign land. The greatest taboo for star readers was to read their own fate, so she simply had to entrust herself to the will of her god.

Besides, the citizens of Selva generally treated the people of Sym well. Back when she had lived a life of travel, she had encountered countless bandits and outlaws, but even those kinds of people were hesitant to bother easterners. Of course, that wasn't because of any sense of friendship or goodwill, but rather because it was well-known that the citizens of Sym were skilled at using poison and quite dangerous to attack. And at any rate, Arishuna had no reason to dislike westerners to begin with.

That was especially true of Marstein, the ruler of this land of Genos, who had become her patron and granted her this carefree life. Her grandfather, who had also been a star reader, had thought it was dangerous to get close to those in power, but fortunately Marstein placed no real weight on star reading and hadn't inquired into his own fate even once. Instead, he seemed to treat Arishuna like an expensive curio, to be used to entertain important guests visiting Genos, akin to a clown or a musician.

Sym is the wind, while Selva is the flame... Wind can strengthen flame, but can also blow it out. As long as neither of us lose our way, Marstein and I should be able to continue this cooperative association without any issues arising between us.

Arishuna placed a lid on the herb jar, and there was once again a knock on the door.

"Lady Arishuna, a guest is here to see you."

"A guest? But my work, is not supposed to begin, until the sun hits, its peak."

"This is not a guest seeking a star reading. It is the second son of the house of Daleim."

"Polarth? Please, let him in."

Arishuna put on a shawl meant to be worn indoors, then headed to the reception room. She took a seat and waited, and a moment later, the maid guided Polarth into the room.

“Hello there. My apologies for bothering you so early in the morning. I didn’t interrupt your morning prayers, did I?”

“No, you did not. Please, prepare some tea for us.” Naturally, the back half of that statement had been directed at the maid. The older woman bowed her head and disappeared into another room as Polarth sat down on another wooden chair.

“I had business today with a guest staying here at this manor, but I arrived a bit earlier than the agreed upon time, so I decided to stop by and say hello. I haven’t had many chances to meet with you as of late, after all.” Polarth had quite a healthy complexion today. Though he had a good bit of excess fat on his build, it didn’t seem to have a negative impact on his health. His vital force was gentle but strong, and seemed to come in waves as it pulsed throughout his rotund figure.

“You are always so busy, are you not, Lady Arishuna? Several days have passed now since the conclusion of the revival festival, and yet the rooms in this manor still seem to be as full as ever.”

“Yes. It is rare, that I ever stop receiving customers, for my star reading, between the sun hitting its peak, and setting.”

“Of course, of course. I’ve also heard that even guests staying at the other manors in the castle town are coming to you now, and that more and more people who live here in Genos are making use of your services as well, is that not so? Your fame seems to be growing by the day, Lady Arishuna,” Polarth said. Just like Marstein, he didn’t place any value in star reading. Perhaps that was why he didn’t excessively venerate or fear Arishuna, and instead simply acted friendly toward her. “Still, it’s about time for the guests here to start feeling homesick, so you just need to put up with this busy period for a little longer.”

“Indeed... You are busy, as well, are you not, Polarth?”

“So I am. About half of the guests are representatives from various merchant

groups visiting for business reasons, after all. In fact, I came here today to discuss the purchase of ingredients from some merchants from Jagar. If we are not careful, our reserves of sugar and tau oil could run out.”

Most nobles would leave such negotiations up to delegates. For the old house of Turan, there were probably certain matters that couldn’t be left up to others, but in Polarth’s case, this kind of work just seemed to suit his personality.

Polarth will undoubtedly be quite successful someday. Even without reading his star, that was clear just from looking at him. However, it wouldn’t be proper to say so without being asked. There were some things that seemed obvious to her, but others couldn’t see them at all. In her youth, Arishuna had erred with her words many times, so she always felt the need to be cautious about making such observations these days.

“By the way, have you heard about the tournament yet, Lady Arishuna?”

“The tournament? Ah, the swordsmanship, competition?”

“That’s right. It will be a grand event held at the end of the silver month, where a great many swordsmen gather. I was considering advising you to refrain from reading the stars to see what the outcome will be, but what are your thoughts on the matter?”

Arishuna tilted her head a bit, not quite understanding what he meant.

It was then that the maid brought the tea that Arishuna had requested on a tray. It was arow tea, and gave off a bittersweet aroma.

“You see, a great deal of betting will be taking place there. There will be many in the audience placing bets on which swordsman will emerge victorious, so it would be rather tasteless to involve star reading in such matters, wouldn’t you say?” Polarth explained as he added sugar to his tea with a silver spoon. Westerners tended to prefer their tea sweet.

As for Arishuna, she drank her hot arow tea as it had been delivered and nodded back. “Yes. Using star reading, in betting, is both tasteless, and dangerous. If it is read, that someone’s fate, is to lose, that could lead, to them blaming, the star reader. People sometimes believe, we fortune tellers, bring about, their unfortunate fates.”

“Yes, that certainly is a concern. That’s why I try to avoid relying on the power of star reading as much as possible. I wish to believe that whether I succeed or fail, it is all the result of my own judgment,” Polarth replied with a smile, and then he took a sip of his hot red arrow tea. “In that case, you would not mind if the topic were banned? Then I shall go ahead and raise the matter with Duke Genos.”

“Thank you. I am most grateful, for your consideration.”

“Not at all. We’re the ones who would be left to deal with any needless complaints that might arise. It is all for the sake of maintaining the peace here in Genos.”

Those seemed to be his honest feelings on the matter. Polarth was a man who was incredibly skilled at calculating profits and losses. He would never balk at putting in a little effort in the present if it would prevent a great commotion yet to come. He really was more like a quick-witted merchant than a noble. Arishuna thought to herself that this rare trait of his was likely the reason behind many of his great successes as she silently sipped her arrow tea.

“By the way, it was apparently decided that a small number of hunters from the forest’s edge will be participating in the tournament.”

“Hunters from, the forest’s edge...? But why?”

“In order to settle a matter that arose from the match that was held before that dinner party. You watched it along with that young lady from Jagar, did you not?”

It seemed he was referring to the swordsmanship contest held between a hunter from the forest’s edge and a knight of Genos at the end of the previous year. Though it had only been a bit of entertainment to accompany the dinner, the knight of Genos had arranged for his opponent to be given heavy cavalry armor in an attempt to win through cheating.

“The other day, the house of Saturas hosted a peace banquet with the people of the forest’s edge. It was supposed to lead to reconciliation, but one of the outcomes was that a hunter of the forest’s edge was invited to the tournament. Would you like to come with me to watch it together, Lady Arishuna?”

“Will Asuta, be attending, on that day?”

“Sir Asuta? I’m not certain. The leading clan heads will surely be invited, but would Sir Asuta have any interest in such a competition? Actually, I *would* like to ask the people of the forest’s edge to operate a stall at the arena.”

“Is that so?” Arishuna asked with a small sigh, and then Polarth laughed.

“Does that disappoint you? You really have been quite charmed by Sir Asuta’s cooking, haven’t you?”

It was rather embarrassing for a child of Sym to have someone see through to their inner thoughts in such a manner, so Arishuna took extra care not to shame herself further by letting her embarrassment show as she replied in her usual tone. “Yes. Asuta is, a wonderful chef. It would make me, very happy, if I were summoned, the next time, he is invited here.”

“Yes, of course. We cannot summon Sir Asuta to the castle town too frequently, but I shall definitely reach out to you whenever one of those precious opportunities arise, just as I do with that lady from Jagar.”

Returning her clay cup to its plate, Arishuna once again tilted her head. “You will, invite her, to the tournament?”

“You mean Lady Diel of Jagar? Yes, the sword to be presented to the victor will be one specially made by her metalworking group, and so she will be invited as an important guest.”

“I see. In that case, I would also, like to attend.”

“Oh? Have you befriended her as well, Lady Arishuna?”

“It is not, quite friendship. Diel shuns, the people of Sym. But I do not, have many chances, to interact, with southerners. And so, I would like, to befriend her.”

“Yes, I see. In that case, I shall prepare a seat for you as well.”

After enjoying a bit more trivial conversation, Polarth departed from the room just before the bell signaling the fourth hour rang out. It seemed that it had been his intention from the start to use this small amount of free time he happened to have to inform Arishuna of a number of matters regarding the

tournament, but because he was Polarth, he did it in a way that made it seem like it was no trouble on his part.

Still, it doesn't change the fact that Polarth is a good-natured, gentle man.

If that hadn't been the case, he never would have been able to earn the trust of the people of the forest's edge. She knew he had a deep desire to see Genos prosper, and was truly grateful that they had ended up helping him so much in that endeavor. His relationship with the people of the forest's edge had proved to be quite profitable for him. Or to put it in a way more fitting for a star reader, they had served to aid his fate and fortune.

If she were to read Polarth's star, she would surely see movement that implied his encounter with the people of the forest's edge had caused a positive shift in his fate. Polarth had been truly glad to find that they were not the unreasonable barbarians they had been rumored to be. And the fate of the people of the forest's edge had undoubtedly improved because they had encountered him as well. Arishuna could see that quite clearly without needing to read any stars.

Countless stars, assisted by the great lion star signifying the people of the forest's edge, are shining brightly. Polarth's star must be one of them. As she thought that to herself, Arishuna returned to her everyday routine.

There were three hours left now until her work began when the sun hit its peak. She used the bathhouse at night before going to bed, so she was always able to devote this remaining time to reading and researching instead.

Her grandfather had left her a mountain of books, and she was able to borrow many precious documents from the castle with Marstein's permission. Some contained the history of Sym and Selva, while others recounted the innumerable legends, fairy tales, and bits of folklore that had been left behind by people from throughout the continent. The time she was able to spend studying such topics was incredibly precious to Arishuna.

Arishuna had inherited her grandfather's star reading abilities. However, at times that power was beyond her control. She needed to properly understand the meaning of what she saw and be able to convey it to others. No matter how much she studied, it was never enough.

This world is full of a great many mysteries.

Arishuna asked her maid for some fresh tea while she examined a scroll left behind by her grandfather. Written on it were legends of ancient heroes and great figures. As she continued reading it, Arishuna's eyes stopped on one section in particular, regarding the tale of Misha the White Sage, who had brought great prosperity to Sym.

Misha the White Sage... A foreigner who brought peace and prosperity to Sym using his unparalleled wisdom. It was an established theory among star readers that he had been a starless one.

Whether she wanted to or not, Arishuna could not help but think of Asuta. *A black abyss of unreadable fate, a star that does not exist... Asuta is undoubtedly a starless one.* That much was an indisputable fact in Arishuna's mind. Though his appearance was fairly typical of a westerner, Arishuna was unable to read his star. She had heard that ancient conjurers knew techniques for hiding their own stars, but rather than anything like that, Asuta lacked a star to begin with.

Asuta certainly existed, but she could only see pitch-black where his star should be. The sky simply opened wide in a black abyss. So, Asuta's star was there, and yet it wasn't.

As it lacked any light whatsoever, a star reader was unable to determine where it was heading. Such a presence shifted the fates of those around it, and it was impossible to tell where that abyss would end up, how large it would become, or how long it would continue to exist.

However, there are many records regarding the fates that befell past starless ones.

By comparing them, Arishuna had managed to determine Asuta's fate to a certain degree. However, she could not speak it. After all, she had already spoken without being asked to in the past and upset Asuta in the process. Such actions were not permitted of star readers, and besides, Arishuna herself did not want to cause Asuta to suffer. People could live perfectly healthy lives knowing nothing of their fate, while some who learned of a future they could not escape ended up being driven to despair, just like what had happened with the Zi sovereign whose downfall Arishuna's grandfather had once foretold.

Starless ones are followed by great hope and great hardship. I pray that the hope that surrounds Asuta will be enough to overcome the hardship that comes with it.

Arishuna prayed with all her heart, bringing her fingers together. Though she didn't know how much impact a prayer would have on a foreigner like Asuta, praying to Sym was all that Arishuna could do.

After having a quick snack at the upper sixth hour, Arishuna rested for a bit and then returned to the reception room. She would remain there until sunset as she carried out the task given to her by Duke Genos. As the bell rang out to indicate the sun had hit its peak, a familiar face was led into the room by the maid.

"It's been some time, Lady Arishuna. I'm grateful that you were able to make time for me, despite how busy you have been."

It was Welhide of the house of Banarm. He was in charge of the envoys who were developing the new trading relationship between their domain and Genos, and he had stayed in the castle town for quite a while as a result.

"Indeed, it has been, a while. This is, the first time, you have come, for a star reading."

"Yes. We will soon be returning to Banarm at long last, so I would like to have you inform me of an auspicious day for our departure." Though he was a noble, the young man always took care to be polite to Arishuna. He was a westerner with black hair, which wasn't a very common sight in Genos, and he wore dazzling red attire. Red was probably considered to be a noble color in Banarm. "We are set to depart during the upcoming golden month. Normally, halfway through the month, on the fifteenth, would be seen as an auspicious day, but is there a more fitting option we may choose?"

"Please wait, for a moment." Arishuna pulled out a tool of her trade from inside her outfit: a young gyama's skull. As she traced a fingertip over the black cracks running through it, she concentrated her gaze on an otherworldly space. "Banarm is to, the northwest of Genos, is it not?"



“Yes. It’s only two days away by tolos, but considering what happened ten years ago, I want to do everything I can to make sure this trip is safe.”

“Do you know, which month, you were born in? I will also, need your age.”

“I’m nineteen years old, and I believe I was most likely born in the black month.”

Westerners only tended to vaguely remember the month in which they were born, but that was no issue when it came to such a basic reading.

“The fifteenth, is an auspicious day. But you will be under, a more fortunate star, from the tenth, of the gold month, through the thirteenth.”

“The tenth through the thirteenth... So it would be best to leave on the tenth or eleventh and arrive on the twelfth or thirteenth?”

“No. Those are just, auspicious dates, for departing. No matter when, you leave, during those four days, your fate, will not change.”

Above all else, though, there were no signs of ill luck hanging about this young man. He wouldn’t meet any misfortune during the gold month, and as long as he was the leader of his group, they had nothing to worry about on their journey.

“Thank you very much. Ten years ago, my father lost his life while making this short trip, so I want to be as certain as possible. And I myself ended up getting delayed out on the road before when my tolos was done in by a venomous insect.”

“As long as, you were indeed, born in, the black month, you will not, meet with misfortune. A bright future, awaits you.”

“I see,” Welhide replied with a smile, his gaze wandering a bit. He seemed to be looking around for anyone else hiding in the room, but the maid was waiting in the antechamber, so he and Arishuna were alone together. “And, well...there’s actually something personal I’d like foretold as well... Would it be possible to ask you to do so?”

“Yes, as long as, it is nothing, too difficult.”

“I’m not certain if it’s difficult or not... You see, it’s about the person I am to

marry,” Welhide explained, his cheeks flushing red. He had paler skin than the people of Genos, so the shift was incredibly obvious.

“I see. Do you know, the person’s name, age, and month, when they were born?”

“Ah no, I’m not asking about anyone in particular, but rather what sort of person I will marry.”

That was what Arishuna would call a difficult task. Without knowing the exact date of his birth, it wouldn’t be possible to pick up on the fine movements of his star. Instead, she went back to the flow of stars from her previous reading and once again traced it with her fingers.

“It is difficult, to read precisely... Your happiness, lies with, your hometown. You will be happiest, marrying someone, from Banarm.”

“Ah, I knew it...” Welhide remarked with a bittersweet smile. “I had a feeling that was the case. It just isn’t my fate to be bound to someone I met here in Genos, is it?”

“Correct. As long as, you were born, in the black month.”

“Very well. Now I can return to Banarm without any regrets. Though I’m sure I’ll be returning to Genos often enough as the head of subsequent envoy groups.”

Arishuna had nothing to say in response, so she simply lowered her chin in a small bow.

Welhide shook his head as if trying to clear something out of it, then rose to his feet. “Well then, please excuse me. I hope that we’ll be able to meet again at some future banquet, Lady Arishuna.”

“Indeed. May a fine wind, blow your way.”

That concluded her first job of the day.

The guests who visited after that also asked Arishuna for an auspicious day to depart. That was no surprise, as the majority of the guests staying at this manor had come here to enjoy the revival festival in Genos. A good number of them had come for business dealings as well, so they discussed those matters with

her too.

Westerners tended not to think too highly of star reading, but when they were feeling lost and uneasy, they would still wish for something to show them the way. Thankfully, Arishuna was fortunate enough to be in a position where she didn't need to hesitate to deliver her prophecies. In terms of her business, no one considered her words to be completely definitive. All they wanted was a bit of advice.

However, just before the lower fourth hour, after Arishuna had taken a number of breaks, a customer with a somewhat ominous presence about him showed up. He was a young fellow clad in the white attire of a military man, who introduced himself as Leiriss. He seemed to be brooding over something as he took his seat.

"A great disaster has visited my house. I wish to have you read my future, to see whether I can avert this calamity through my own strength."

"Could you, give me, your age, and the month, you were born?"

"I am seventeen, and I was born in the blue month." His face looked a lot more mature than Welhide's, and he was also rather tall for a westerner, but he was actually the same age as Arishuna.

Putting such thoughts aside, she suppressed the exhaustion she was feeling and began stroking the gyama skull. "A great disaster... It visited, your father, did it not?"

"Yes, that's right," Leiriss replied in a firm tone. It seemed that the fate of his house was fast approaching a turning point. But it wasn't a matter of disaster or misfortune. Instead, the cause of this great change was likely the incident where his father strayed from the proper path. In fact, the stars seemed to say that his father was the one who had brought this disaster upon his own child.

His life would have never been thrown out of order had his father not strayed.

However, this turning point was too large and could only have been averted by the influence of an extremely strong star. Arishuna had not asked his father's name or the day of his birth, so she could not say for certain, but she was confident that the fate that had befallen him was something that was always

meant to happen, one way or another.

A number of stars had shifted significantly because of the disgrace this young man's father had suffered, but her reading indicated that this was actually an exceptionally good omen. His father's fall had brought about this beautiful movement in the stars. The world was moving properly. However, she couldn't just say that.

His father had strayed from his path due to the weakness of his star, but as a result, the world as a whole was shining brighter. In a way, his father was a sacrifice for the sake of fate. It was hard to imagine anyone being happy with being given such a tragic reading.

However...

That was his father's fate, not his own.

Arishuna's eyes searched, and arrived at Leiriss's own star.

"Your house faces, a great turning point. You have suffered, great distress... It is your star, that shall carve out, a path forward..."

"What do you mean?"

"Your star possesses, great strength... Enough strength, to overcome the change, that defeated your father. As long as, you do not, repeat his mistake, a bright future, will open wide, before you."

"You're telling me not to fall prey to the same weakness my father did... To not repeat his mistake?" Leiriss asked, a steady light shining in his eyes as he smiled. "Your name is Arishuna, correct? Were you aware that I am the son of Geimalos?"

"Geimalos?" Arishuna got the sense that she had heard that name somewhere before.

"Yes, that's right," Leiriss said as the light in his eyes grew even stronger. "You saw the crime my father committed with your own eyes, did you not? On that day, I was in another town serving as an envoy, so I was unfortunately absent."

"Are you, perhaps referring, to that contest, of swordsmanship, with a hunter from, the forest's edge?"

“Indeed. My father Geimalos set an underhanded trap for that hunter... Are you saying that you weren’t aware of all this when you made your prophecy?” Naturally, Arishuna had no way of knowing that he was the son of the knight who had lost to the hunter from the forest’s edge. She hadn’t even seen the knight’s face. “Well, no matter. I would never repeat my father’s crimes. No matter how formidable my opponent may be, I intend to face the hunters from the forest’s edge with my own strength alone.”

“There are, no enemies, before you...” Arishuna stated, her tone unchanged. “A shift in fate, is waiting, in your path. But fate, is not, an enemy. It is dangerous, to become obsessed,” Arishuna said as she reeled in his delicate star with all her might. She sensed intuitively that this was no time to spare any effort. “You should respect, your own pride. You must face, not an enemy, but rather yourself. The flames, of obsession, shall dull, your blade... You should hold, your pride firmly, in your chest.”

“I always do. And I swore to do battle with a great enemy in order to protect it.”

“No, not an enemy. You should believe, in your own star. You possess...a stronger star, than your father,” Arishuna stated after some hesitation.

The smile on Leiriss’s face vanished, and he stared off into empty space for a while as if searching for something. “Right... They are not my enemies. Ultimately, my father is the one who made a mistake. I should wield my sword properly as a knight, free from the taint of wicked thoughts.”

“Yes. Anger and resentment, will only reduce, your strength.”

“Indeed... So a bright future awaits me if I act as you have suggested?”

“Correct. If you, act properly, you may clear away, the misfortune faced, by your house. And then, your star shall shine, all the brighter.”

“I see,” Leiriss replied, closing his eyes for a moment. And then, the young knight suddenly rose. “I am most certainly not one to place too much value in star reading, but my mother recommended you so highly that I could not refuse, which is how I ended up here... Surprisingly, though, my heart feels rather light now.”

“I see.”

“It seems I cannot make light of your abilities. If you have truly directed me down the proper path, then I would like to come once again to thank you.”

“It is your strength, that will carve out, your fate. There is no need, to thank me.”

With an even more earnest smile than before, Leiriss departed from the room.

Arishuna gave a sigh and leaned back against her chair. But before she could request another break, her next visitor entered, and this one was completely different from the last. She now found herself facing a noblewoman with a lovely appearance, someone with whom Arishuna was already acquainted: Lady Selanju.

“It has been a while, Arishuna. I am so grateful that you made time for me today.”

Though she was dressed for going out, the noble lady’s attire was made from fine silk and wool. Arishuna could not recall which house she came from precisely, but she was the young daughter of a viscount. They had met twice, at the banquet where the swordsmanship match was held, and at the noblewomen’s tea party.

“I just don’t know what I should do... You are quite famed for your star reading, so I would like you to tell me what path I should take going forward,” Lady Selanju said passionately as she took a seat. “Um, could I ask that you keep what we discuss here a secret?”

“Yes. I always keep such things, in confidence.”

“Thank you... You see, I have actually fallen for a certain gentleman...” As she said that, Lady Selanju’s white cheeks grew ever so slightly red. This was the sort of concern young noblewomen often brought before Arishuna. “But my father and Count Saturas have interfered, telling me I must let go of my feelings... And of course, I understand the position I find myself in. I was born to the house of a viscount, so it is not permitted for me to fall for a commoner who is not even a resident of the castle town.”

“I see.”

“However, I seem to be utterly incapable of holding these feelings back. Each night, they well up inside me, growing stronger and stronger, to the point that they make me wish I could cast aside my family name... Then I would be able to have feelings for whomever I pleased, and there would be nobody to tell me otherwise.”

“Could you tell me, the month you were born, and your age?”

“I was born in the red month, and I am twenty years old.”

As Arishuna thought to herself that it was rare for a noblewoman to reach the age of twenty without getting married, she sought out Lady Selanju’s star.

Just as she had expected, there were no signs anywhere that something major was about to change for this woman. The noble lady was clearly going to live a reasonably blessed life here in this land, and no matter where Arishuna looked, she couldn’t see any potential shifts that would overturn that fate, like taking on a lover of a different status.

Even so, Arishuna contemplated the matter. No matter how she phrased it, the noblewoman was unlikely to be satisfied. Lady Selanju had surely thought about this quite a bit, in her own way. It was even possible that her feelings had been strengthened by her father and Count Saturas attempting to deny her. If Arishuna were to give a negative opinion now, it would only add fuel to the fire.

That could twist her fate quite severely... And even if her own fate did not change, this star arrangement tells me that such a disturbance would certainly throw other stars out of order. This noblewoman had no power of her own, but she *was* the daughter of a viscount. If she made an attempt to run away from home, it would cause quite a commotion in the castle town.

Arishuna also thought back on the girl’s words and actions during the tea party and the banquet. The one she had feelings for was most likely that young hunter from the forest’s edge who felt rather similar to a citizen of Sym... That young man, Shin Ruu, who had defeated Leiriss’s father, Geimalos.

If she slipped out of the castle town and went barging into the settlement at the forest’s edge, what would that lead to? Would it cause yet another needless

rift to form between the nobles of Genos and the people of the forest's edge?

But still, I am a star reader. I am not allowed to lie about the fates I read.

Arishuna stroked her gyama skull, worrying to herself about what to say, but not showing any signs of it. Eventually, she decided on an approach, and spoke to the pensive young Lady Selanju. "Lady Selanju, your feelings, are very strong. Similar to, a blazing fire."

"Very much so."

"Large fires, can be dangerous, at times. A strong flame, can burn the fates of, not only yourself, but others as well."

Lady Selanju's star would certainly never be able to have any kind of negative impact on the young hunter's. Though Arishuna had not read his star, she could sense great strength just from looking at him. However, that wasn't something she could tell the young lady. It was a crime to lie, but concealing things was perfectly fine. In fact, it was an important duty of star readers to choose their words so as not to obstruct the proper flow of the stars.

"There is a risk, your actions could disrupt, the fates of others. Your feelings, are just too intense."

In all likelihood, the fates she would disturb belonged to her father and Count Saturas. The fates of the people of the forest's edge were like a meteor swarm governed by the great lion star, and wouldn't be thrown out of alignment so easily. Rather, the swirling of those stars would instead threaten the fates of those surrounding Lady Selanju... Or at least, that was the concern Arishuna had.

"It is painful, to stifle such feelings. But your tears will, bring salvation to others. That is what, your star told me."

"My..." Lady Selanju remarked, bringing her hands up to her cheeks. And in no time at all, her light brown eyes began tearing up. "The flames of my feelings could burn him? Yes, that makes sense. If a noble and a commoner fall in love, it is only natural that it will end in tragedy. That was what caused the house of Viscount Alphan to fall apart..."

Arishuna offered no response.

“If I simply endure this, will that man’s fate be preserved? Aah! I must stifle my own feelings for the sake of the one I love! Why must the western god force me to face such a trial?”

“Humans cannot understand, the hearts of the gods...” Arishuna solemnly stated.

Lady Selanju was staring off into space with an almost intoxicated look. “Very well. If I must endure these feelings in order to protect him...then endure I shall, no matter how painful it may be.”

“A good, answer.”

“Thank you, Arishuna. I am in your debt. Please allow me to invite you to a dinner at my house in the near future.”

“Very well. You have, my gratitude.”

After watching Lady Selanju exit the room, Arishuna hung her head. The mental fatigue of dealing with that last customer had left her exhausted. She couldn’t help but wonder if it was truly a star reader’s job to worry about such matters.

But now, her father’s and Count Saturas’s stars will not be threatened. Weak stars should not get too close to strong ones.

Then there was a knock on the door, and Arishuna hurriedly called out, “My apologies, but could I ask, for a short break?”

“That noblewoman was the final visitor requesting a star reading. This guest is here for a different reason. Will you receive her?”

“If my work, is finished, I shall rest, for today. I am tired.”

“But the guest is Lady Sheila from the house of Daleim.”

Arishuna sat up with a start. “Please, let her through.”

“Very well. Hold on for just a moment.”

Arishuna sat up straight and waited for Sheila to come in. Before long, the young woman employed by the house of Daleim as a maid, quite familiar to Arishuna by now, entered the room.

“Good day, Lady Arishuna. I’ve come to deliver Sir Asuta’s cooking.”

“Of course. Thank you, very much.”

Sheila was holding a rectangular container wrapped in cloth, but even with the second layer the food was packed in, the wonderful aroma was impossible to miss. It was a delivery of giba curry, which Asuta had been sending to Arishuna every two days or so for nearly a month now.

“I am, deeply grateful, Sheila. You truly, need no payment?”

“I don’t. If I were to let you pay me, Sir Yang would chew me out for it.” As Sheila stepped in front of Arishuna, she set the package down on the table with a smile. “You are friends with Sir Polarth, are you not, Lady Arishuna? That is even more of a reason not to. I am a maid of the house of Daleim, so your concerns are completely unnecessary.”

“But I have added, to your work. I am sorry, for that.”

“Delivering this to you takes nothing more than a short ride in a tolos carriage, and this manor is on the way back to the count’s residence anyway, so it’s nothing to worry about. Farewell,” Sheila said with a warm smile before swiftly departing.

The maid then entered in her place. “Pardon me. If you wish to eat as soon as possible, I shall have that food heated up.”

“Thank you. But it is only, the fifth hour. The other parts of the meal, will not be ready, in time.”

She had only asked Asuta for giba curry, so she had the chefs in the kitchen provide fuwano and a vegetable dish for her dinner as well, but they had previously asked her to give them until the sixth hour each afternoon to prepare everything, which had left her waiting in disappointment before.

However, the old maid shook her head and said, “Actually, the other dish has already been prepared. They only need to bake the fuwano now, and that can be ready for delivery in just a quarter of an hour.”

“Really? I was, told before, it wouldn’t, be possible.”

“Yes, but I went to the chefs and requested that they have your food

prepared in time for the fifth hour, because that is usually when Lady Sheila arrives,” the maid replied with a faint smile. Just like an easterner, she tended not to let her emotions show, so it was incredibly rare to see her make such an expression. “My apologies for acting so forwardly. You just seemed so terribly disappointed when you were refused an early meal before, I simply couldn’t leave the matter be.”

The people of Sym considered it embarrassing to have someone notice their emotions. Of course, the resulting embarrassment was also supposed to be kept hidden. And yet, Arishuna could feel heat spreading across her cheeks, and she was completely unable to stop it. The old maid saw that and smiled at her kindly.

Chapter 2: The Genos Swordsmanship Tournament

1

It was now the twenty-fifth of the silver month, seven days after the contests of strength between Ai Fa and Lem Dom concluded. The castle's swordsmanship tournament would take place today.

After discussing the matter, we had ultimately decided that we should indeed go to the tournament grounds and do business there. We had been told to expect more customers than usual for the day, so we prepared roughly a thousand meals—similar to the amount we had made for the day of dawn at the beginning of the sun god's revival festival. The tournament grounds were much farther away than the area where we usually worked, so we needed to leave home more than two hours earlier than normal in order to arrive by half past the upper fourth hour.

Still, it seemed we would finish up work in three hours or so like usual, so it wasn't all that much of a burden. We also planned to stay and watch to see how Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza did after we wrapped things up, and then return to the forest's edge.

After all our preparations were finished, we headed to the Ruu settlement, where things seemed even more restless than usual. After stopping our wagon at the entrance to the plaza, I tilted my head and hurried over to the main house, where a crowd had gathered in front, including many women, children, and older folks from the branch houses.

"Good morning... Wow, you look really pretty today, Lala Ruu!"

"Oh, be quiet! I'm not putting on a show here!" Lala Ruu retorted, her face bright red as she stamped her feet with the crowd surrounding her.

She looked so beautiful, but I couldn't help thinking that the way she was

acting felt really at odds with her appearance. Her clothes were the kind of banquet attire that I had only seen once before, at Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim's wedding. She was wearing an iridescent shawl that was even finer than the one she wore during business hours, and her body was adorned with all sorts of accessories, including metal and stone ones bought in town, as well as flowers and berries gathered from the forest's edge. What stood out most of all, though, was the hair ornament above her ear, made from a large yellow flower.

"Oh, is that the one Shin Ruu gave you for your birthday?"

"Jeez! I told you to be quiet already!" Lala Ruu shot back with a slap that I just barely managed to dodge.

Mia Lea Ruu was standing beside her with a kind smile on her face. "Even when dressing up, you never seem to be able to act ladylike in the least... But it really does suit you well, Lala."

Lala Ruu hung her head, still blushing. Her face was as red as her hair, which was hanging naturally rather than being put up in a ponytail. Her normal style made her seem kind of boyish, but now she looked a lot more feminine, fittingly so for a girl her age.

Apparently, the castle of Genos had sent out a suggestion that if a young woman was planning to attend, she should dress appropriately, in banquet attire. Lala Ruu had already had such attire, so here she was, all decked out in this gorgeous ensemble for the first time in a long while.

Looking at it in the light of day, it really was a splendid outfit. It was, of course, also lovely when illuminated by the light of a bonfire, but it possessed an entirely different sort of beauty when the sun was up. Perhaps that was why the people gathered around all seemed so pleased and impressed with her.

Maybe it wasn't as elegant as the dresses noblewomen in the castle town wore. However, nobody would be able to wear this banquet attire better than the women of the forest's edge did. And even if a silk dress *would* look great on her too, I was confident that this outfit wouldn't come up short in the least.

"You're all being too loud. Are you ready yet?" Donda Ruu asked as he slowly emerged from the house. Sluggishly following behind him was Ludo Ruu, who

was holding back a yawn.

“Oh, it’s Asuta. Guess it’s time for us to head out, huh? I’ll drive, so let’s get going.”

Shin Ruu was the only person from the Ruu settlement participating in the swordsmanship tournament, but Marstein had invited Donda, Ludo, and Lala Ruu to attend as guests of honor. Donda Ruu was going in his capacity as a leading clan head, with Ludo Ruu as his attendant, and Lala Ruu... She was attending because Shin Ruu had insisted that he wouldn’t participate if she wasn’t watching.

I looked around, wondering where exactly Shin Ruu was, only to find that he was right there next to me. His gallant face was blushing ever so slightly as he glared at me.

“Asuta, could you please keep it down about how I gifted her that flower? It isn’t exactly normal at the Ruu settlement to give a flower to someone outside of your home.”

“Ah, sorry. Give it your all today, Shin Ruu.”

“I will.” The young hunter nodded at me, having shaken off my unnecessary comment and returned to his normal expression. Men of the forest’s edge only ever dressed up when they were grooms at their own weddings, so Donda and Ludo Ruu were still clad in their usual hunter’s cloaks.

“Well then, shall we head out?” a voice suddenly said from behind me.

I gave a start and let out a shriek. “Gyah! Y-You followed us over here too, Ai Fa? I thought for sure you would have remained with the wagon.”

“You are still just as careless as always...” she replied while kicking me in the leg, seeming a bit offended.

My beloved clan head would be accompanying us to help guard our stalls. In addition to her, we had four Sudra hunters waiting in the two wagons parked in front of the settlement. Though at some point there had been plans to bring guards from the Deen and Liddo as well, we had eventually decided that anyone we could get from the nearby clans would do. And since trying to get hunters from the Deen and Liddo to work in the post town meant asking Gulaf Zaza’s

permission, as they fell under his clan, this was who we had ended up with. The Sudra men had already worked for us as guards back during Tei and Zattsu Suun's attack, and the other members of their clan such as Yun Sudra had seemed quite proud that they had been given this task.

There were also going to be members of the other leading clans, the Zaza and Sauti, gathering at the tournament grounds. The fact that their fellow people of the forest's edge would be participating in the tournament helped them make up their minds to accept the invitation from the nobles.

However, since the Zaza heir, Geol Zaza, was taking part in the tournament as a swordsman, Gulaf Zaza would not be able to attend. Instead, Sufira Zaza and another man from their clan would be going in his place. Also, since the Ruu and Sauti clan heads would be going personally—as they both happened to be injured and were currently taking time off work—they had decided that there was no need for all three of the leading clan heads to be there for an event that was mainly meant for entertainment.

From what we had heard, Dari Sauti would also be accompanied by another hunter. Excluding the two tournament participants, that would make for a group of seven in total. I didn't know how the VIP seating in the arena was set up, but a crowd like that was going to create one hell of an intense atmosphere for the people around them.

"Just make sure you leave enough food for us to eat, okay?" Ludo Ruu remarked, leading the group as they loaded themselves into Jidura's wagon. Sheera and Rimee Ruu were on duty today, and they were already standing by beside Ruuruu's wagon.

"Good morning. Have you guys finished up all your preparations?"

"Yes. Reina Ruu's group will be taking care of the cooking for the inns later, so there won't be any issues with that. Once they're done, they'll wait for us to return, and then we'll take care of delivering the meals."

"Oh right, since all the wagons are already in use for today."

Sheera Ruu bowed her head, looking rather apologetic. "Normally, we would be using Jidura's wagon for that today. But because Shin Ruu's group will be using it instead, we've created a bit of a problem for our business."

“Oh no, that’s nothing to worry about. It’s just one day, so it’s really no big deal.”

Each day, we had thirteen chefs working in the post town, which required three wagons. That meant we were constantly making use of Gilulu and Ruuruu for transportation, while we alternated between using Jidura and Fafa each day as well.

Jidura and Fafa were totos that had been purchased for making shopping trips. If we borrowed both of them every day, they could only be used for shopping in the morning and around sunset. We had decided on this alternating schedule for the sake of fairness, but personally, I was starting to consider purchasing a new totos.

We ended up using all four wagons for our business in the post town during the revival festival too. The Fa and the Ruu both have way more money than we need now, so it wouldn’t hurt for us to each buy a new totos and wagon.

While I was thinking about that, I headed back to Gilulu’s wagon, accompanied by Ai Fa and Yamiru Lea.

“Asuta, will there be any space for me today, with the Sudra men riding along?”

“Yeah. We’re bringing along thirteen chefs and five guards, so if we squeeze six people in each wagon, we should just barely be okay.”

The five members of the Sudra clan and Toor Deen were packed into Fafa’s wagon, while in ours we had Ai Fa, Yamiru Lea, Fei Beim, the Gaaz and Ratsu women, and me. In Ruuruu’s wagon were Sheera Ruu, Rimee Ruu, Morun Rutim, Tsvai, and...it should have been the Lea and Min women on duty for today.

“All right, let’s get going.”

With that, the four wagons departed from the Ruu settlement, heading for the tournament grounds. First we headed to the post town like always, where our drivers got down from their seats temporarily. That was because we weren’t allowed to run totos through town.

Though it was still early in the morning, the streets of the post town were

already fairly crowded. There were more wagons than usual as well, undoubtedly all heading to the tournament grounds. As we passed by our outdoor restaurant, I checked and saw that it was undisturbed, with the ropes surrounding it still in place.

We then left the stall area and the territory of the post town in general, at which point we started our totes running again. Though there were a fair number of people out and about, the highway was ten meters wide, so driving our wagons quickly down the road was no issue.

Those who were traveling by foot walked along the center, while wagons drove on the left, and naturally that included our own. Even after we had traveled north for a while, I had still seen so few wagons coming south down the opposite lane that I could have counted them on one hand.

A few minutes later, we came to a T-shaped junction in the path. There was a side road heading west, connected to the main highway that ran from north to south. If we went down that way, we would reach the gates to the castle town, and traveling even farther in that direction would bring us to the familiar Daleim lands.

We passed it by, though, and just kept on heading north. There was a dense thicket on our right, while the stone walls protecting the castle town were on our left. The majestic sight of Mount Morga was visible beyond the thicket, which gradually grew denser as it stretched away from the road, eventually transitioning into full-on forest. I didn't know its exact location, but the path that the Suun settlement and those around them used to reach town was supposed to be somewhere around here.

Before long, the stone wall took on a gentle curve that arced away from us, and in its place, a wooden fence came into view. It protected the Turan territory and was meant to ward off giba, but honestly, it was a lot cruder than I had been expecting. Well, it must have been pretty tough if it could stop a giba's charge, but it looked quite old and had been damaged here and there. Since giba were unable to jump higher vertically than they were tall, it was actually shorter than a person. My angle of vision was higher than usual since I was up in the driver's seat, so I took a peek beyond the fence to see how things looked.

For some reason, the town looked quite run-down. Honestly, it might have been more accurate to just call it a village instead. The houses were built more like the ones in the Daleim lands than the ones in the post town, and they were packed so densely that I couldn't see any gaps between them. It almost looked as if the houses were holding each other up so that they didn't collapse.

Mikel and Myme lived somewhere in that town. Myme had been devoting herself entirely to her cooking studies ever since the revival festival, and she still hadn't resumed running her stall. I occasionally spotted her in the post town as a customer, but I couldn't help but feel that I wanted to see the fruits of her research as soon as possible.

"It's been some time. I last saw the Turan town several months ago," Ai Fa said, leaning forward from behind me.

"Oh right, you've been here before. I'm sorry I made you worry so much that time."

"Hmph," my clan head snorted. Back when I had been abducted by Sanjura and Mussel, she had come here to search for me. It was possible that the reason she had come along as a guard today—even though she was able to hunt now—was because of the trauma from that event.

"In the Turan lands, there's a large field in the center surrounded by these houses. It was as if they were built in order to protect it."

"I see. That's pretty different from how things are in the Daleim lands."

"Indeed. And they had a large number of northerners working the field. I only saw them from a distance, but they were all men who were as massive as Ji Maam."

Hearing her mention northerners, I thought back on my encounter with Eleo Chel right before the revival festival. Would he also be dispatched to clear a path through the forest's edge during the rainy season? Incidentally, I had asked Diel to confirm if his message had been properly conveyed to Chiffon Chel, but I had yet to hear back.

Fate sure is a mysterious thing... I thought as I drove the wagon down the road.

After passing by the Turan lands, we were next greeted by a barren expanse spreading out far and wide in front of us. We had seen this before when we were traveling to Dabagg. However, this time the dense thicket remained there to our right for the whole trip, which felt kind of strange to me. The stone highway continued straight onward, with the thicket to the right and the barren land to the left, creating a very clear divide in coloration.

There was hardly any vegetation growing in that open expanse. The ground was yellow like a desert, and all there really was to see were some large rocks scattered around here and there. This was a fairly rainy region, yet the ground looked completely parched.

It was undoubtedly the result of cutting down trees for lumber in order to construct buildings all over Genos. But since the thicket on our right was connected to Mount Morga, they couldn't lay a hand on it. So on one side I saw people's greed and desire to build a wealthy society, and on the other I saw their fearfulness in the face of the threat posed by nature.

Tightly holding on to the emotions I felt in my chest, I drove the wagon onward, and after roughly thirty minutes more, our destination finally came into view: the tournament grounds, which were normally used as a training area.

It appeared before us suddenly in the barren land off to the left—a yellowing stone wall with a large crowd gathered in front. There were a lot more passersby around too, now that we were getting close to it.

“What a massive structure. Why did they build something like this so far from town?”

“Well, it seems to be quite old. This barren wasteland might have still been full of green back then.”

The stone wall was steadily growing nearer as I was speaking with Ai Fa. Once we had closed the gap to just about fifty meters, the wagons in the front came to a stop. There were a large number of guards in front of the building, stopping the wagons from advancing. It seemed they were holding inspections there, and sending people in different directions based on why they had come. There were around twenty wagons in line at the moment.

Some of those wagons simply dropped off the people they were carrying inside and then did a U-turn to head back south down the road. They must have been something like taxi cabs. The trip out here only took around thirty minutes in a wagon, but that would be an hour on foot. If someone had a bit of money to spare, it was only natural that they would want to use it to make the journey a little easier. Half of the remaining wagons continued onward, while the other half turned their totos toward the wasteland off to the left.

There were already dozens of wagons stopped over that way. That must have been a parking area for those who came in their own wagons to watch the event. Some of the wagons had people sitting in their driver's seats stifling yawns, and in various places there were small groups standing around next to a wagon chatting with each other, so I figured they were responsible for managing their own vehicles.

Those wagons that continued onward down the highway passed alongside the massive arena, then disappeared off into the barren expanse to the left. That must have been where the spaces for selling snacks were located.

While I was observing everything that was going on, our turn rolled around. Gilulu's wagon was the one in the front of the line, so I turned to face the guard running the inspections.

"Okay, step down from the driver's seat... Ah, so you lot decided to show up after all." The guard awaiting me there was Marth. He was a young guard we frequently saw patrolling around the post town, and if I remembered correctly, he held the rank of platoon commander.

"Hey. So, you're on duty here today?"

"Hmph. Things are more lively here than in the post town today, so there's no helping it." For events like this, they were required to work even harder than usual to keep the peace. I felt a little bad for him, but at the same time, I had to wonder if some people thought the same thing about us. "How many spaces will you need? Each space costs five red coins."

"Okay. Well, in that case, we'd like to take five."

I went ahead and paid the amount for the Ruu clan as well, and was handed five wooden tags in exchange.

“Hang those on the front of your stalls. Once you’re done working, you can just throw them away.”

There wasn’t anything special about the wooden tags, but the crest of Genos was clearly engraved in the center, and there were comparatively simple characters branded carefully underneath it. Maybe they had written today’s date on them, so that they couldn’t be reused next year.

“Oh, and we have a participant in the tournament and some guests of honor in one of our wagons, so where should they go?”

“Ah, the wagons for honored guests are lined up inside under our care. Hey, we’ve got some guests of honor here!”

With that shout from Marth, another guard came running forward.

“See ya,” Ludo Ruu remarked with a wink, and then Jidura’s wagon started moving off in a different direction as we continued down the highway.

The giant arena was now about ten meters to our left. However, I still didn’t have much of a sense of how it was set up, even at this distance. From here, all I could see was the yellowed stone wall, which was around five meters tall.

The wall stretched around the arena in a circle, and it probably had a diameter of over a hundred meters. Did they really need that much space when they were using it as a training ground? It was so big that it looked like you could easily fit a whole baseball stadium inside.

As we went along the side of the arena, an incredible sight soon came into view. Behind the structure, I saw what looked like over a thousand people already gathered there. It was almost as if all of the lively energy of the post town had been transplanted there.

And as if to break up the endless expanse of empty wilderness, there were a ton of brick workstations for selling snacks arranged in a line stretching off to the west, perpendicular to the highway. A number of them were already open for business. It wouldn’t have been possible to drag our stalls all the way out here, so we would be doing business out of these spaces as well.

The setup was quite extravagant, considering they were only used once a year. To start with, they had leather canopies overhead supported by wooden

pillars, just like in our outdoor restaurant space. They were probably the only part of the setup that had to be installed for the tournament. After all, if they were left out here the whole year round, they'd definitely end up getting stolen.

Under the canopies were workstations made of brick. Looking at them from the front, I couldn't see any gaps between them as they stretched out endlessly off to the side of the road, and they came up to around waist height. People were placing metal pots and trays on top of the work surfaces, so it must have been possible to light a fire inside them.

In a way, these were like stationary stalls. Or perhaps you could call it one huge kitchen constructed in a line. Personally, it made me think of a bunch of barbecues all lined up.

"This is quite a sight. For now, let's go ahead and look for some open spaces."

We moved around to the rear of the workstations and drove our wagons off the highway and onto the barren land. Naturally, there were quite a few wagons already parked back there, and I could see one or two totos attached to each wagon stretching their long necks upward.

With the totos watching us, we continued to the west. Already, almost thirty of the workstations were set up and selling food. Along the way, we saw an especially fine carriage with the crest of the house of Daleim on it. Naturally, Yang was also here doing business.

However, Yang and his assistants seemed to have their hands full dealing with customers. I decided it would be best to wait till after we were done with work to greet him, and we continued onward. Each workstation was around one and a half meters wide, so by the time we finally found our spots, we had walked roughly fifty meters.

"Okay, let's go with these ones here." I called out.

But then I heard someone shout, "Asuta!" in the distance. My gaze darted about, until I spotted some girls ten or so empty spaces down the line. They were pretty isolated and were only getting a handful of customers, but that was only natural when they had so much space between themselves and everyone else.

I tilted my head as we approached. “Hey there, Yumi. Why did you set up in such a deserted spot?”

“For you all, of course! You couldn’t even figure that out?” Yumi, daughter of the owners of The Westerly Wind, and her friend Luia were running an okonomiyaki stall there. They had run a stall during the revival festival as well. They were close to the end of the long line of workstations, with only five spaces left beyond them. “You’re planning on selling five types of dishes today, right? In that case, go ahead and use these workstations!”

“Ah. Normally, we’re at the northern extreme, but today we’re going to be at the westernmost point? Why should we set up so far out of the way on a day like this?”

“You really don’t get it? You’re surprisingly dense, Asuta!” Yumi said with a hearty grin as she flipped over the batter that was cooking on her tray. “There’s no seating today, right? If you open up shop in the middle of that crowd, your plates and spoons could end up running away on you. But with all this open space right beside you, you’ll have a much easier time keeping an eye on things.”

“Oh, I see. I hadn’t thought about that. I really should have come here before now and given this place a preliminary inspection.”

“Heh heh. Well, now you can do business without any issues, so it should be just fine,” Yumi said, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“And it’s all because of you, Yumi. Thanks so much,” I replied. It was completely heartfelt too.

“No problem!” she shot back with a real look of satisfaction.

With that, we were ready for business. We parked our wagons and temporarily released Gilulu and the other tolos before using their reins to tie them back up to their vehicles. There weren’t any trees in the area, so we’d have to bring them some food after work.

There were round holes in the top of the workstations, so we started by placing our pots and trays over them. Like I figured, the inside was hollow and designed for lighting a fire within. With a setup like this, I would be able to

manage the flames the same way I did with the stoves back home or at the stalls. While I was adding firewood and charcoal to our workstations, Yun Sudra and the others brought over the water jugs for washing our used tableware.

“Asuta, what would you like us to do as your guards?” the Sudra clan head, Raielfam Sudra, approached me and asked while watching over us as we worked.

“Well, just having one or two of you around the stalls should be plenty. Once we open for business, there’s gonna be a lot going on over there with the customers, though, so if you could keep an eye on the women collecting the tableware, that would be a huge help.”

“I see. In that case, we shall leave two back here and have the other three head out front. Where do you plan to be, Ai Fa?”

“If at all possible, I would like to remain with the stalls.”

“Then I’ll leave Cheem here. Do you think you could tell him what to do, Ai Fa? Cheem is small and only fifteen years old, but he does his work as a hunter very well even so.”

Raielfam Sudra was a little guy himself, less than 150 centimeters tall. He had a deeply wrinkled face, and a slender torso and limbs. He was the smallest adult hunter that I knew of. However, he was one of the first people to have endorsed the Fa clan’s actions, and I also owed him my life. He had been the one to cut down Tei Suun in the post town when the old criminal had gone into a frenzy, so to Ai Fa and me, he was the person we trusted most out of all the members of the nearby clans.

The hunters of the Sudra all seemed to be small and slender, which could probably be attributed to the impoverished lives they had lived for so long. Raielfam Sudra introduced us to Cheem Sudra, a young hunter who came in at less than 160 centimeters tall. Despite his short stature, he had a very earnest look in his eyes that really left an impression on me.

“Yun Sudra and two chefs from the Ruu will be working out front. If you have any questions about the work the members of the Ruu clan are doing, Sheera Ruu over there will be able to give you an answer,” Ai Fa explained.

“Understood. All right, we’ll be counting on you, Cheem,” Raielfam Sudra said.

The three Sudra hunters aside from Cheem Sudra all approached Sheera Ruu. It seemed she would be gathering and washing the plates personally, along with a Lea woman.

Today, the Ruu clan had prepared giba offal stew and myamuu giba. As for the Fa, we had made giba curry, poitan wraps, and a brand new daily special: giba and beans.

Giba and beans utilized our newly acquired tau beans in place of white kidney beans, and was made with tarapa sauce. The sauce was sweet and mellow, and didn’t use any myamuu.

My usual tarapa sauce was modeled after an Italian style, but giba and beans was based on pork and beans, which was an American dish. It had left a strong impression on me during my elementary school days, so I had recreated it, aiming to make something a little cheaper.

The stocks of ketchup and Worcestershire sauce I had prepared seemed like they would go bad soon, so I made full use of them here. For the giba meat, I had picked rib and thigh meat, and the vegetables were our usual combination of aria, nenon, and chatchi.

As we heated the food up in our pots, we found ourselves attracting a crowd even though we weren’t even open yet. Toor Deen was in charge of the giba curry, which had started to give off a powerful aroma that was really getting people interested. In the slot next to ours, Yumi had a great big grin on her face.

I see. That’s why Yumi asked about our menu yesterday. Her business skills are as sharp as ever. Of course, that was a big part of her charm, in my opinion.

As we continued with our preparations, around half of the ten remaining open slots filled up. That still left seven or eight meters of open space, but the aroma of the giba curry could cross that distance no problem.

“Asuta, isn’t it about time I started making my dish too?” Yamiru Lea called out from the space on my other side. For today, we had given up on the giba manju, which took a while to prepare, and devoted our efforts to cooking meat for the poitan wraps.

“Yeah, I’m almost ready, so go ahead. Could you let Tsvai know too?”

Tsvai was in charge of the myamuu giba. The giba curry, giba offal stew, and giba and beans were all just about heated up.

“So you guys did decide to come out here? But you still aren’t done getting ready yet?” a familiar young western boy called out, stepping forward from the crowd along with another boy. They were Yumi’s friends and were well-known for getting up to mischief.

“We’ll be ready shortly. Did you all come to watch the tournament?”

“Yeah. We don’t get to see exciting shows like this very often.”

“We borrowed my family’s wagon without asking to get here, so I’m gonna get chewed out real bad when I get back home.”

They both laughed in a pretty crude way. Still, they had been at the party in the Daleim lands on the day of the downfall, so I felt like I knew them fairly well at this point.

“By the way, there are a ton of folks from out of town here, and they were real shocked when they heard what sort of food this is.”

“You mean the giba curry, right? Now that you mention it, it looks like there’s a lot of customers from the west gathered around.”

“Yeah. Guys from Sym don’t seem too interested in the tournament. I mean, the stories say they use poison instead of swords.”

It was true that not only were there a lot of westerners, but there also seemed to be remarkably few easterners. Running the numbers in my head, I estimated that the crowd was around eighty percent westerners and twenty percent southerners, with only a few easterners here and there.

“Well, we would need two separate flames to make pasta, so we went with curry today. But if we aren’t going to see many customers from the east, then maybe that was a bit of a mistake.”

“Nah, that’s not it at all. Everyone’s surprised by the smell of that dish. And you don’t have a sign up today, so some folks might buy it without even knowing it’s giba meat,” one of the boys remarked with a chuckle and a

mischievous grin. “Still, as long as it tastes good, I can’t see how anyone could complain. But we can’t stick around for too long, ’cuz the tournament’s gonna start, so could you hurry up and open for business?”

“Right,” I said, and looked down the line of workstations toward Morun Rutim, who was located the farthest away. She was in charge of the giba offal stew, and she waved back to me with a smile.

“Okay, we’re going to go ahead and open now.”

After we handed over some food to those boys, more customers came pouring in. Some of them started subjecting Toor Deen to a barrage of questions about the curry, and when she explained that it was a giba dish using herbs from Sym, every last one of them looked really surprised.

We sure are getting a lot of first-time customers. This might be a good opportunity to let more people know about giba cooking.

We were selling meals just as quickly as we usually did first thing in the morning. And perhaps because they all were eagerly awaiting the start of the tournament, our customers didn’t linger for long. Even when they bought dishes that required plates, most of them swiftly ate their food while standing and then immediately returned their tableware to the stall.

“It’s starting to look like keeping up with the dishwashing is going to be a bit of a problem. Could you go help out with that, Fei Beim?”

“Understood.”

Apparently having the same idea I’d had, Rimee Ruu also switched from helping Morun Rutim to assisting out front.



The customers kept on crowding around. This was now beyond the normal morning rush. It was more like the kind of traffic we saw at the height of the revival festival. Even though we had prepared a thousand meals, it was possible that we might sell out before the sun hit its peak. But right when I was starting to get concerned about that a thunderous noise rose up in the distance.

It had come from the south, from the direction of the arena, and seemed to be the sound of drums or something being banged. As soon as they heard that sound, the entire crowd started rushing over in that direction.

The tournament was starting. The customers who were still using our plates began frantically wolfing down the rest of their meals, and everyone else took off running toward the arena with poitan wraps and myamuu giba gripped in their hands. With that, the crowd, which had been packed in so tightly that there was nowhere left to stand, just straight-up vanished, leaving only the guards who were on patrol in the area.

“What a giant racket. Do they really all like this tournament that much?” Toor Deen muttered, looking dumbfounded.

“Well, that is why they came here... I wonder what’s going on over there.”

The preliminary qualifiers came first and would last for the rest of the morning. From now until the sun hit its peak, dozens or even hundreds of swordsmen would be demonstrating their skills as the audience watched. How were things going to go for Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza once the competition began? I couldn’t help but wonder about that as we all just stood there behind our workstations.

2

Only two hours later, our second peak period arrived.

We didn’t have a sun dial set up for today, but the sun was now almost directly overhead, and the schedule for the event in the arena included a short break when the sun hit its peak. And so, over a thousand people were now pouring out of the stone structure, rushing toward the workstations where we were selling food.

The crowd was lining up in front of the food sellers even faster than they had in the morning. That was probably because there were just more people wanting to get a snack at this time of day. Thinking back, we had opened for business around half past the fourth hour, which was a bit too early for brunch, so now the customers were coming at us like a tidal wave.

Our cooking was selling so quickly, it was practically flying out of our pots. I guesstimated that we still had around seven hundred meals' worth left, but it was vanishing at an almost alarming speed. Unlike during the revival festival, people weren't able to take their time enjoying their meal today.

Perhaps because of the tremendous smell of the curry, our section farthest to the west seemed to be the liveliest. However, some of our would-be customers did end up leaving when our lines got too long because they didn't want to wait. It looked like every stall had a line in front of it today. The food area was so lively that it was practically a battlefield.

From what I could see, there seemed to be a lot of rough customers about. But they were fixated on talking about the tournament, and the nature of the food we were serving didn't seem to even enter their minds.

I was keeping my focus solely on doing business. I took coins from the customers, served up some giba and beans on a wooden plate, added a wooden spoon and a bit of baked poitan, and then presented it to them. Just that, again and again and again. Even the questions my customers asked were purely businesslike, about stuff like the price or whether we sold fruit wine.

"Hey there. Looks like business is booming," I heard Zasshuma's voice call out as he approached us for the first time in a while. He was a bodyguard, as well as an acquaintance of Kamyua Yoshu's.

"Ah, hello. So you're back in Genos too, Zasshuma?"

"Yeah. I came back for the tournament. I'm someone who makes a living by the blade, more or less, so it's not an event I can just skip."

After the revival festival, Zasshuma had left Genos again for a while. It had to have been over twenty days now since I had last seen him.

Zasshuma ordered some giba and beans and then seemed to almost shove his

way through the crowd surrounding us, working his way around to the back of the stall with his plate still in hand.

“Ooh, this is good. These are those tau bean things from Jagar, right? They’re all crumbly and have a real interesting texture to them.”

“Right. You can’t really get any proper beans around here, can you?” I replied while handling the customers lined up in front of me. Fei Beim had been dispatched to the customer seating again, so there was no way for me to take any kind of break from my work.

“You look like you’re shorthanded there. I figured I’d tell you the results now that the preliminary matches are done, but it’ll be tough to do that like this.”

“Ah, no! I’d really appreciate hearing about it!” I replied. However, I couldn’t treat the customers in front of me as secondary.

So Ai Fa said next to me, “I’ll ask, then. Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza have been victorious thus far, correct? I cannot imagine hunters of the forest’s edge being defeated so easily.”

“Yeah. Those two won, and are moving on. I made quite a bit of money thanks to them too.”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“They’re holding bets in the arena on who’ll win. It isn’t all that exciting, though, because all I have to do is bet on the hunters from the forest’s edge, and the money just comes rolling on in,” I heard Zasshuma remark with a laugh from behind me. “Still, the folks in the stadium know just how crazy strong those hunters are now, so the payout’s sure to plummet. And the hunters’ll be running up against folks who can put up a better fight against them soon enough too.”

“So there are indeed such people in town, then?”

“Yeah, though not many of them, of course. From what I’ve seen the only ones who could put up an even fight... Well, you’ve got Lord Melfried, who you’re familiar with; Login, the vice captain of the ducal guard; Devias, the battalion commander of the militia; and Don, the head of the Red Fangs mercenary company. There were one or two others who looked pretty talented,

but it was my first time hearing their names, so I've already forgotten them."

I thought about Geimalos's son, Leiriss, at that point. It seemed Ai Fa had the same question I did, as she then asked Zasshuma about the young noble.

Zasshuma answered, "Hrmm... I think a young fellow from the Knights of Saturas is still in it, so maybe that's him? The preliminaries were held with eight groups going all at once, so I wasn't able to watch all the fights."

"I see. Regardless, it's quite a surprise to hear that there are four who can fight on even footing with Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza."

"Hmm. By the way, how strong of a hunter is that Shin Ruu kid by the standards of the forest's edge?"

"That is difficult for me to answer, but he was strong enough to make it to the top eight in a contest of strength held by the Ruu clan."

"That sounds pretty amazing in and of itself. You hunters are all incredibly strong. The shorter guy was able to knock every single one of his opponents' swords away, and the big guy... He just ran wild like some kind of ferocious beast," Zasshuma said with a low chuckle. "Back when I was younger, I entered this tournament myself, but I never could've beaten Login or Devias, much less those hunters from the forest's edge or Lord Melfried. Even trying to fight them would've hurt my reputation instead of improving it, so I'm perfectly happy to just watch."

"Hmm... You seem rather skilled for a man from town yourself, though."

"Well, I *have* been certified by the capital to work as a bodyguard. Not just anyone can get the better of me. However, all of those folks I mentioned before are even more skilled than I am. For Don, that makes sense. He hails from the northern part of the country. But it's pretty amazing that those knights of Genos managed to become as strong as they are, living in a land as peaceful as this one."

It was definitely a surprise to hear that there were four people participating who could fight on even footing with Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza. Then again, Genos *did* have thousands of soldiers. Maybe as many as ten thousand. But even still, only a few of them could compete with the hunters of the forest's

edge.

Furthermore, even though Shin Ruu had made it into the top eight of the Ruu clan, he was still only a boy of sixteen. Just off the top of my head, I could think of quite a few people who could compete with him, such as the four hunters from the main Ruu house, Gazraan Rutim, Rau Lea, Giran Ririn, Ai Fa, and Mida. And then there were all the strong hunters from the north as well, such as Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom.

If all of them were to enter this tournament, it'd cause an unbelievable upset. Of course, Donda Ruu and the others would never do such a thing, I thought to myself as I continued serving up food.

Then a new bit of excitement started to come our way. A huge tolos-drawn carriage protected by roughly ten guards was pushing through the crowd toward us. It had the emblem of the ducal house of Genos on it. It came to a stop beside our stall, and six people exited the vehicle holding large, deep clay dishes. They were clearly dressed in garb from the castle town, but they looked more like servants than nobles. All of them were middle-aged men.

The servants split into groups of two and lined up before our stalls, drawing tons of attention. They each purchased a huge amount of food, and then went to retrieve a new set of dishes before lining up again. It was all very mechanical.

“This contains giba as well, correct? Could I ask you to serve up enough for ten in this dish?” a servant of Duke Genos asked in a fine baritone as he finally reached me.

“Thank you for your purchase. You’re buying ten of each dish? That’s quite a large amount.”

“Yes, since we will also be serving the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge from this spread.”

That explained it. It took around three servings of our dishes to fill someone up, so with ten servings of five dishes, it would be enough to feed sixteen to seventeen people. There were seven in Donda Ruu’s group, which would go up to nine when Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza were included. If the noble visitors pecked at the rest, they would probably be able to eat everything with no leftovers.

As I thought that through, Yumi called out from the neighboring workstation, “Hey, what about my giba cooking? This is a giba dish Asuta, the chef of the forest’s edge, personally taught me how to make.”

One of the servants turned a very polite gaze Yumi’s way. “Is that so? In that case, could we get ten of that dish as well?”

“Ten? Got it. Coming right up,” Yumi replied with a smile, spreading okonomiyaki batter atop a metal tray.

As the servants took the ten servings of giba and beans back to the wagon, I whispered to Yumi, “Don’t you hate folks from the castle town? Well, I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, but it’s pretty funny, right? Thinking about that lot eating food cooked by someone like me? When my folks hear about this, it’ll probably knock them right on their asses.”

That definitely sounded like Yumi’s way of thinking. And okonomiyaki with giba meat had already been served at a dinner party in the castle town, so the nobles probably wouldn’t have any issue with it.

The servants then steadily retreated, and the crowd rushed back in at the same rate as before. And just when our thousand servings were finally starting to run out, a loud noise came from the arena. The tournament must have been about to restart. Around forty to fifty minutes seemed to have passed. That was right in line with the schedule I had been told in advance.

Then, just as quickly as they had in the morning, the crowd lost interest in us and returned to the stadium. They were all gone in under five minutes, and before long, a distant sound of thundering cheers sounded out from the stadium.

“Okay, that should be all! That was really wild!” Rimee Ruu said while passing by with an armful of empty plates. While it had been more than three hours since we opened for business, we had actually been dealing with customers for less than half of that time. It felt like we had sold our food at nearly double the normal rate while we had been working, with plenty of break time in between.

“How did sales go for you all?” I asked.

“We sold all of the curry.”

“The offal stew has less than twenty left.”

“We only have seven servings left of this dish.”

Adding all the dishes together, we only had thirty-six servings remaining. We had prepared a thousand meals, like we had during the revival festival, and this was what we were left with. For normal business hours, we only prepared eight hundred, so our sales had been really good for the amount of time we had worked. There were twenty leftover servings of the giba offal stew, but that was because we had prepared 350 portions. Besides, those thirty-six servings were only enough food for twelve people. There were eighteen of us including our guards, so we were able to finish them all off and they didn’t even fill everyone present.

“Man, we made a killing! I think I sold even more than during the revival festival!” Yumi said, also looking delighted. She could bring her leftover batter back with her, so it seemed she had brought more than she needed. We traded some offal stew for her okonomiyaki, and everyone ended up reasonably full in the end.

“It looks like you did well, Asuta,” Yang, the head chef of the house of Daleim, called out to us around when we were finishing up our lunch. His helpers Sheila and Nicola were there behind him, as well as the guards they had watching over them.

“Yeah. How about you?”

“Well, I’m satisfied with our sales. Ah, and greetings to you as well, Lady Toor Deen and Lady Rimee Ruu.”

“You too!” Rimee Ruu energetically replied, while Toor Deen gave a polite bow.

“Lady Eulifia of the house of Genos has apparently said that she wishes to invite you chefs of the forest’s edge to another tea party next month. Will you participate once again, Lady Toor Deen and Lady Rimee Ruu?”

“Yeah, since Lady Odifia won’t be happy if Toor Deen isn’t there. By the way, is she here today?” Rimee Ruu asked.

“No, such a young noblewoman would not be invited to an event like this one. While the matches are safe, there is still occasional bloodshed.” In that case, there was no need to worry about the young lady demanding Toor Deen’s sweets today. That was good news for all of us. “I have been invited to Lady Eulifia’s tea party myself, so I’ll be looking forward to being able to enjoy your delicious sweets once more,” Yang politely stated, and then he returned to his own wagon. Sheila had been talking to Ai Fa in the meantime, but seeing him leave, she gave a hurried bow and departed with a reluctant look.

“That Sheila girl always seems to really focus on you, Ai Fa. What was she so eager to talk to you about today?”

“Well, she was inviting me to attend an event—a combat tournament, I think—held by the house of Daleim. I’m not certain why she was making such a request, however.”

“Ooh, so they have different kinds of tournaments beyond just this swordsmanship competition?”

“Yes, though she said it was a minor event held only for people related to their house... And I am not sure why she wanted to invite Sheera Ruu as well.”

I turned toward Sheera Ruu and found her wearing a troubled smile.

“Um, I believe that’s because she was actually talking about a dance party...”

Ai Fa stared blankly at Sheera Ruu. “A dance party? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“I haven’t either, but the townsfolk seem to enjoy dancing, so I could imagine them holding an event just for that.”

“But dancing is simply a way for women in search of a husband to show off, is it not...?”

“Yes, but the townsfolk dance at banquets just to enjoy themselves, right? I guess a dance party must be something similar...”

“I would never participate in such a thing,” Ai Fa grumbled like a spoiled child, glaring at the blameless Sheera Ruu, who simply offered her an even kindlier smile.

“I’m not the best at dancing myself, so I would like to decline as well, if I can... But you told her that you would have no objections as long as the leading clan heads gave their approval, so eventually the house of Daleim is going to make an official request about it, right?”

Ai Fa furrowed her brow, then turned her glare my way. However, this wasn’t the sort of problem that could be solved by glaring at anyone who was here at the moment.

“If there *is* an official request, then all you have to do is officially refuse it, right? It’s not like our relationship with the nobles will fall apart just because you refused to go to a dance party.”

“But I said that I had no objections... If I refuse now, won’t I be going back on an agreement for no good reason?”

“If that’s what you think, then you can just go. That Sheila girl probably just wants to see you in banquet attire.”

Ai Fa ground her teeth, glaring at me even more harshly. Apparently, it was my abduction by Sanjura that had led to her forming a bond with Sheila. Did that mean I shared some responsibility here?

At any rate, thanks to that whole thing with Reina Ruu and Leeheim, we had already had a discussion with the nobles about how our values concerning relationships between men and women differed from theirs, so no matter how beautiful Ai Fa would look all dressed up in banquet clothes, we could be sure that no more problematic conflicts would arise as a result. There was no reason for me to get all flustered, no matter how things played out, so I tried to soothe Ai Fa’s anger as I moved on to my next task.

“Okay, that seems like enough of a meal break, so why don’t we go take a look at the tournament? We’ll need to leave some folks behind to keep an eye on the wagons, though.”

That task went to Toor Deen, Yamiru Lea, and Tsvai, who volunteered.

“Okay, and it would probably be good to leave a pair of guards here too. With this much money around, we can’t be sure there aren’t any bad actors here.”

And so, the remaining chefs and three guards, including Ai Fa, headed toward

the stadium with me, accompanied by Yumi and Luia.

The entrance to the stadium was big enough for ten people to pass through at once, but the doors were firmly shut at the moment. There were also four guards lined up to both the left and right of the door, eight in total.

“If you wish to enter, please allow us to inspect the inside of your overcoats,” one of the guards emotionlessly stated.

“By ‘overcoats,’ do you mean our hunter’s cloaks? Why must we do such a thing?” Raielfam Sudra asked from the head of our group.

“No one is allowed inside with bows and arrows. If you do not wish to remove them, you can simply expose the interiors.”

No doubt, that was for the sake of protecting the VIPs. Raielfam Sudra replied, “Understood,” as he spread his cloak open with both arms. Ai Fa and Cheem Sudra both did the same.

“All right. You’re fine to bring your swords in with you, but keep in mind that if you disobey the orders of the guards inside, you’ll be considered guilty of treason on the spot.”

Two of the guards pulled the doors open, just wide enough for one person to pass through, allowing us to enter the stadium single file.

The sound of raucous cheering hit us the moment they opened those doors. The powerful voices of the audience, which had been blocked by the stone walls, were now reaching us clearly. The noise was so intense that I could feel my skin trembling.

Before us was a dimly lit passageway. Once everyone was inside and the door was shut, we started walking forward. Everything around us was constructed from yellow stone, and though the passage was wide, the ceiling was low—low enough that Mida and Ji Maam would surely have had to duck down. It continued for roughly ten meters or so, and once we reached the end, our field of view suddenly opened wide, revealing a space with no roof that reminded me of a baseball stadium.

I spied two knights standing in the center of the arena and crossing blades, probably forty to fifty meters away from us. I squinted and tried to figure out if I

recognized either of them, only for a voice to call out, “Hey. You shouldn’t stand here. Go up the stairs and watch from there.”

That had unsurprisingly come from a guard. He was pointing diagonally behind him with the tip of his spear, and sure enough, I saw a wide stone staircase that way. There was seating for the audience built into the interior of the stone wall surrounding the stadium.

The stairs were built of stone too, and grew steadily taller the farther up they went. There were eight levels of seating in total, and nearly all of them were full. It was just like the kind of coliseum I had seen from time to time in movies and so on.

There were a thousand or even two thousand audience members enthusiastically watching the clash between the swordsmen. There weren’t many women or children among them. Most were gruff men. A low wooden fence divided the audience seating and the field, and a large number of guards were lined up along it.

What really caught my eye, though, was one spot off to my right where dozens of guards were gathered. That had to be the VIP seating. It was separated from the ordinary seats with walls, and those walls had guards along them too. The area within the extra walls had plenty of space for people to make themselves comfortable in, and was not only carpeted, but also had a leather awning overhead. However, my vision wasn’t good enough to make out who was sitting where over there. And it was the same for the armored swordsmen too.

At the urging of the guards, we moved all the way up to the seats on the top level. We were farther away from the action now, but even at this distance, I could tell how fierce the battle was. I felt like I could almost hear the clang of their weapons.

Amid all the mad cheering, I caught sight of one of the swordsmen’s blades crashing heavily into the torso of his opponent. They were wearing armor and their swords lacked edges, so there was no spurt of blood. And yet, the swordsman who had been struck was left writhing on the ground, and he showed no signs of rising.

With that, a topos-riding soldier appeared from the western entrance, shouting, “The west! Devias is victorious! Devias is victorious!” while circling the arena, prompting the crowd to cheer even louder.

“What an awful furor. It’s as if we’ve leaped into a thundercloud,” Ai Fa whispered to me with a rather displeased look on her face.

Then a large figure pushed past the crowd in the standing room area and approached us. “Hey there. That was surprisingly quick. There are thirteen swordsmen left now.” It was Zasshuma, who we had just said farewell to not so long ago.

“Thanks. Are the hunters from the forest’s edge still in it?”

“They haven’t popped back up since the break. The match that ended just now was only the third.”

I didn’t really get it, so I asked for clarification, and was informed that the swordsmen drew lots to decide match order, and once they lost, they were out. In other words, after the preliminary matches, it shifted into a huge single-elimination tournament. The matches were being held between the sixteen contestants who made it through the prelims, and what we had just seen was the third one.

“The victor, Devias, will face off against whichever swordsman wins the next match. I figure it’s about time for one of your hunters from the forest’s edge to show up.”

As we were loudly conversing, some fresh commotion arose among the audience. Some among the crowd had stood up and erected several large banners, which people were now shoving their way toward. Having multiple banners set up throughout the stadium meant there wouldn’t be a single massive logjam from hundreds of people trying to move to the same area. Instead, there were smaller clusters of traffic all over.

“The folks who won their bets on that match just now and those who want to bet on the next one are gathering around the bookmakers. The nobles have fun betting among themselves, and the same is true of commoners too.”

Before long, the topos knight was circling around again, shouting out a new

announcement, “The next match! To the west, Shin Ruu of the forest’s edge! To the east, Don of the Red Fangs!”

“Oh, so that Shin Ruu guy’s up against Don, huh? That means he’ll be up against Devias next. He got awfully unlucky with the pairings.”

The mercenary swordsman, Don, was wearing a really striking suit of crimson armor. He looked to be a size bigger than Shin Ruu, who was clad in silver.

“What do you think? Considering he’s up against Don, I imagine you’d earn quite a bit by betting on your pal down there.”

“Nah, betting isn’t in my nature.” I said. “Besides, I’ll get chewed out if I go and waste money on something like that.”

Naturally, Ai Fa and the others had no interest in betting, and I didn’t feel like explaining it to them either. No matter how much leeway they had in their wallets, the people of the forest’s edge would never live anything but honorably modest lives.

“Guess I’ll just use this match to check things out, myself. If he can take down Don, then I’ll bet on your buddy in the next match,” Zasshuma said, only for the results to make themselves clear almost immediately. Shin Ruu’s blade flashed, and Don’s sword was sent flying five meters back, where it stabbed into the ground.

The crimson swordsman took off running in the direction of his weapon, but Shin Ruu moved in front of him even quicker. With a sword now pointed at his throat, Don raised both arms, looking deeply frustrated. And then, the biggest cheer yet exploded from the crowd.

“I’m astounded. Even an opponent like Don went down *that* quickly. I imagine only Lord Melfried and your other comrade stand a chance against him now.”

I felt relieved when I heard Zasshuma say that. I just wasn’t good with this sort of violent stuff. I had hurried over here out of concern for Shin Ruu, but I normally would have preferred to stay behind with Toor Deen’s group instead.

The rules of this tournament were far more brutal than the ones for the contests of strength held by the hunters of the forest’s edge. They might have been using dull swords, but nothing was prohibited beyond that. Even sending

your opponent flying was totally legal.

As for how you won, you either had to force your opponent to a point where they could no longer fight, or otherwise get them to admit defeat. There were no penalties for injuring your opponent, and on the off chance someone died, it would just lead to a disqualification.

Participants were required to wear heavy armor, but there was still a chance of taking a fatal blow if a strike landed in the wrong place. Shin Ruu's previous opponent, Geimalos, had suffered heavy injuries including bone fractures, for example.

At any rate, the most important thing is that he doesn't get injured. Of course, if one of his opponents dies, that would be awful too.

While I was thinking to myself, the matches rolled on.

In the next bout, Melfried defeated a foreign swordsman, and the following two matches involved knights of Genos and swordsmen from other towns who gripped their blades tight in sweaty hands as they switched back and forth between offense and defense.

Geol Zaza eventually appeared in the final match that would decide the top eight, and his opponent was a strong one: the vice captain of the ducal guard, Login.

"That guy's every bit as skilled as Don and Devias, so who knows how it'll turn out."

The two seemed to be similar in terms of build, and since they were both wearing silver armor, it was difficult to tell them apart from a distance. But once the match kicked off, I had a much better idea of who was who. One of the swordsmen fought just like a wild beast. He was swinging his huge longsword about willy-nilly with one arm, and their blades clashed with such force that it seemed like they would both snap. His opponent seemed to be having a bit of trouble dealing with the assault, but was still managing to dodge his fierce attacks with deft movements. Really, the match was starting to look more like a fight between a matador and a bull than a contest of swordsmanship.

However, that back and forth didn't last long. The bull-like fighter's excess

momentum was throwing off his balance, and his opponent would not let the chance to strike slip by. The other's blade swung down, but the slash was deflected. Despite his unstable posture, the bull-like swordsman had managed to swing his right leg upward, kicking away his opponent's blade from the side. His opponent stumbled really badly, to the point that the vice captain's upper body seemed to be swimming in the air. Still on one leg, the bull-like fighter did a spin and smashed his longsword into the side of his opponent's face.

The swordsman was sent flying, his crushed helmet and blade flying off in separate directions. It was a sight that brought Geimalos's pitiful defeat to mind, and there were about as many shrieks as there were cheers in response.

"The east! Geol Zaza is victorious! Geol Zaza is victorious!" the tolos knight shouted while riding about.

Geol Zaza rested his sword on his shoulder and calmly exited the stadium. Login was then swiftly carried away on a tolos-drawn cart.

"He is terribly lacking in experience... While it is not a taboo, one should always avoid unnecessarily injuring an opponent in a contest of strength," Ai Fa commented with a scowl.

Thanks to the cheers coming from all around us, Zasshuma wasn't able to hear her on my other side.

"What sort of technique is that, kicking away a slash? That guy was astoundingly strong too. But with the vice captain getting taken out like that, Lord Melfried is sure to get really fired up."

If they each won once more, Geol Zaza and Melfried would face off in the semifinals. It used to be that Melfried was as strong as Jiza Ruu, and now he was about on par with Shin Ruu, so what would the result be if they were to clash? I wasn't a hunter, so I hadn't the slightest clue.

Amid all the commotion Geol Zaza had stirred up, the quarterfinals among the top eight kicked off. Before long, I heard a call of "To the west! Leiriss of the Knights of Saturas!"

"So he's won his matches thus far too..." Ai Fa muttered with a sharp look in her eyes. With her eyesight, she was surely able to see the movements of the

swordsmen in fine detail.

Leiriss was also an exceptionally skilled swordsman. His opponent was a big guy introduced as a warrior from Jagar who lightly swung around his longsword as if it were a stick, but after just a few clashes, Leiriss repelled one of his opponent's swings and brought his blade down on the man's left shoulder.

His swordsmanship called to mind an elegant dance. Whether it was down to his speed or his timing, he seemed to be really skilled at warding off his opponent's attacks. Apparently, the outcome was quite an upset, as I could hear folks lamenting it all throughout the stadium.

"Hmph, what appropriately fancy swordsmanship for a noble. None of the ruffians around here thought much of him and assumed his skills just amounted to a bunch of party tricks, but he might actually be pretty tricky to handle," Zasshuma said.

In the next match, Shin Ruu took Devias down in a single blow, and Melfried and Geol Zaza also scored wins, deciding the final four for the tournament.

3

"To the west! Leiriss of the Knights of Saturas! To the east! Shin Ruu of the forest's edge!"

The tournament continued smoothly.

I had only intended to take a peek at the proceedings, but now that we'd stuck around for this long, I couldn't look away. I felt bad for Toor Deen's group, who'd been left behind to watch over everything, but at this point, we couldn't head back to the forest's edge until both Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza were eliminated.

What are Lala Ruu and the others feeling, watching these fights? Shin Ruu's been able to secure easy wins so far, so I guess they haven't had much to be concerned about on that front.

However, Leiriss turned out to be quite a difficult opponent. Having been observing Shin Ruu's tactics since the morning, he was avoiding crossing blades at all costs.

Shin Ruu was aiming for Leiriss's blade with the agility of a hunter. However, Leiriss was utilizing careful footwork that made him difficult to pursue, making sure Shin Ruu's blade sliced through thin air instead. He also kept boldly challenging the hunter, thrusting his own blade forward whenever there was an opening. Shin Ruu wasn't in any danger yet, but it seemed like his ability to move around was being restricted.

It was a quiet battle, as the two were cutting through nothing but air, but the audience was watching the back and forth with bated breath. That just went to show how much tension there was in the air coming from the two of them.

"That Ruu hunter's fighting style is somewhat odd. If he aimed for the torso rather than the blade, I believe he would have landed a number of hits," Raielfam Sudra remarked.

Ai Fa nodded, watching the fight with crossed arms. "Right. In the previous contest of strength, Shin Ruu heavily injured his opponent. And his opponent then was the father of the man he is currently facing, which might be why his skills seem dull."

"Oh? I have to say, changing how he fights for a reason like that seems like the worst slight he could possibly make against his opponent."

"It isn't that he's changing how he fights on purpose. Rather, it's something that is happening naturally. That Shin Ruu is kind to his core," Ai Fa explained. I turned toward her with a look of surprise, only for her to shoot me a sidelong glare and ask, "What?"

"Oh, I just thought it was unusual to hear you assessing someone else's character... But, well, I guess we've known Shin Ruu for quite a while now."

Shin Ruu had been acting as one of our bodyguards for a long time at this point. When Sanjura had abducted me, he'd taken his inability to keep me safe really hard and had spent a lot of time training intensively with Rau Lea afterward. I was pretty attached to him and considered him an important friend.

Still, that Leiriss guy is frustratingly calm. Especially considering how he kept glaring at Shin Ruu at the dinner party.

I couldn't help but want to cheer loudly for Shin Ruu.

Sheera Ruu also looked like she was praying as she watched her younger brother's fight. We had shifted the schedule so she could be here for him. Normally, Reina Ruu would have been on duty today.

"Give it all you've got, Shin Ruu!" a voice suddenly shouted from down low near me, catching me off guard. When I looked, I saw that Rimee Ruu had her hands beside her mouth as she called out to her cousin. The folks seated in front of us finally noticed the large crowd of people of the forest's edge behind them, and their eyes shot open wide.

While that was happening, the state of the battle was gradually shifting. Shin Ruu's movements were starting to grow less precise. Perhaps his stamina was running out, after all the matches he had participated in since this morning. At least this time he hadn't been given any unfair equipment, but wearing armor in battle wasn't really how things were done at the forest's edge.

Even I had put on protective equipment for kendo class before, and for a weak modern-day guy like me, that was already more of a burden than I could deal with easily. It wasn't just heavy, it was also hard to move in and restricted your vision, and above all else, it was sweltering underneath. Trying to fight in armor that had a leather base under metal plates must've been even worse.

On top of that, the hunters of the forest's edge hardly ever had a reason to swing their blades at a fellow human being here in this peaceful land. And yet, Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza had shown that they could fight incredibly well with just their outstanding physical capabilities and willpower.

"Keep going! Don't give up till it's over!" I shouted without thinking.

Ai Fa turned my way with a bewildered look, but I just couldn't restrain my emotions. I started cheering for Shin Ruu as loud as I could, just like Rimee Ruu.

But a moment later, Leiriss swept out Shin Ruu's legs with his own, causing the hunter's back to slam into the ground. Rather than rushing ahead, though, the noble thrust his blade at Shin Ruu's chest with an efficient motion.

I shouted, "Gyah!" and almost closed my eyes. However, Shin Ruu twisted his body and Leiriss's blade stabbed into the ground instead.

Then, Shin Ruu made a swipe straight from the side with his sword, but Leiriss used both his hands to pull his blade free and dodged.

The noble then swung his weapon once more, and Shin Ruu slashed back from a lying position. The crowd went silent throughout the stadium as the sound of steel resounded through the air.

A few seconds later, a deflected blade fell to the ground. It was Leiriss who had been disarmed.

Shin Ruu rose as nimbly as he could and moved to get between Leiriss and his weapon. However, the young noble just fell to his knees.

Even from this distance, I could see his back heaving up and down under the armor. It seemed he had run out of stamina after such a long match against a hunter from the forest's edge.

With that, everyone came back to their senses and started cheering once again.

Shin Ruu was probably breathing heavily too, as he had lifted his visor and was staring up at the sky.

A short while later, the young hunter reached a hand out toward Leiriss. Was he saying something as he did? I couldn't quite tell from this distance.

After a moment, the noble took Shin Ruu's hand and rose to his feet. Then he staggered over to his blade to pick it up and hold it in a vertical position in front of his chest. I figured that was probably how the knights of Genos saluted in gratitude.

Shin Ruu gave a single nod and then turned back toward the eastern exit, while Leiriss walked off in the opposite direction. A thunderous round of cheers and applause showered down upon them as they went.

"A narrow victory, hmm? The next match may prove tricky," Raielfam Sudra muttered as the cheering trailed off.

The following round was between Geol Zaza and Melfried, and once again it was a match that could only be described as incredible. Geol Zaza fought like a wild beast, as before, but Melfried's true strength became all the more obvious

when he was facing a difficult opponent.

The duke's son was even more graceful than Leiriss, but when he swung his blade, it also had a lot of strength behind it. His body was larger than the younger noble's by a good amount too, and though he wasn't as broad-shouldered or barrel-chested as Geol Zaza, they were around the same height.

The head of the ducal guard was as precise as a machine. Whether he was attacking or defending, he didn't move any more than was necessary. Even when the tip of his opponent's blade skimmed his cheek, he didn't budge. He just elegantly swung his blade again and again, looking totally unconcerned.

Sometimes he was like a gentle breeze, and at other times a whirlwind. Every movement was perfect, whether it was fast or slow. His opponent was very much like a storm too, but Melfried was successfully warding off Geol Zaza's momentum and striking back with his blade. It was a carefully calculated dance, put together by one who excelled at fighting other human opponents.

"That's no good. He's playing into his opponent's hands and getting trifled with," Raielfam Sudra remarked, right before Melfried's blade struck Geol Zaza's right wrist. The hunter's weapon fell to the ground with a dull thud, and he let out an angry roar.

Geol Zaza charged at Melfried barehanded. In response, the noble swung his blade up from down low. The tip of the weapon hit Geol Zaza right in the chin from underneath, sending his huge frame flying. The hunter's back struck the ground hard, and a moment later, the tip of Melfried's blade was pointed at his fallen opponent's throat.

Another tremendous cheer filled the arena, and Melfried's victory was declared.

"The wrist, chin, and throat... He was cut three times," Raielfam Sudra commented.

"Indeed. If not for that armor, he would have taken that blow to the chin full force. And if this were a contest of strength, that blow to the wrist would have settled things," Ai Fa added, calmly assessing the match.

The blow to the chin might have caused a concussion, as Geol Zaza wasn't

getting up. Still writhing about, he tore off his helmet and pounded the ground with both fists, letting out a furious roar.

“Our blades are meant for hunting giba, while theirs are for cutting other people... It was easy to see the difference between the two in that match.”

“Yes. However, Geol Zaza might have won if he hadn’t had that armor on, as that would have allowed him to move more nimbly.”

“Still, it’s amazing that Melfried was able to beat a hunter from the forest’s edge! That’s the nobleman with the gray eyes, right? Will Shin Ruu be able to win?” Rimee Ruu asked innocently. However, the two hunters didn’t offer an answer to her question.

In the meantime, the matches to determine third place and under kicked off. According to Zasshuma, the top eight places were rewarded prize money in accordance with their ranking. Geol Zaza’s opponent from the quarterfinals was left too injured to participate, though, so the bottom three places would be determined round-robin style.

We must have been watching for over an hour at this point. While the unfamiliar swordsmen were facing off to determine their rankings, I sent Morun Rutim and Cheem Sudra off to tell the group waiting by the wagons to hold on a little longer.

The deciding matches for the lower ranks ended with the battalion commander from the militia whom Shin Ruu had defeated taking fifth place, and then the battle for third place was held, pitting Geol Zaza against Leiriss.

Geol Zaza hadn’t fully recovered from his concussion, and Leiriss’s stamina was exhausted. The two faced off with less than half of the strength they had shown before, and shockingly it was Leiriss who seized victory. Had he observed and analyzed the hunter’s match with Melfried? His success had most likely come from aiming for a blind spot caused by the helmet and thrusting up with his blade diagonally from below, leaving Geol Zaza writhing on the ground again.

Now that I thought about it, my boxing-loving old man had once explained to me that once you take damage to your head, even an attack with only half as much power will be enough to knock you down again. At any rate, Leiriss had

taken third place, putting Geol Zaza in fourth.

“Now it’s finally time for the finals...” I muttered to no one in particular.

This wasn’t a fight with the pride of the people of the forest’s edge on the line anymore. The hunters had already done enough to fulfill our goals of improving our relationship with the house of Saturas and showing the world at large how strong the hunters of the forest’s edge truly were. Even so, I wanted to see Shin Ruu win this thing. Like with Geimalos, I just couldn’t help feeling that way. No matter how hard and painful of a struggle it might be for him, if Shin Ruu could win this match, it would be a great confidence booster for him...

If Ai Fa’s judgment isn’t mistaken, Melfried is stronger than Sanjura, so if he can beat Melfried...won’t that mean Shin Ruu has obtained the strength he’s been seeking? I recalled how Shin Ruu had wept like a child when I was rescued from Cycloaeus’s manor after Sanjura had abducted me. *I just hope you won’t be left with any regrets... Give it all you’ve got, Shin Ruu...* I prayed in my head, just as Shin Ruu and Melfried were making their entrance into the arena.

4

“To the west! Head of the ducal guard of Genos, Melfried! To the east! Shin Ruu of the forest’s edge!” the judge shouted.

Shin Ruu was focusing as hard as he could. His limbs felt heavy, as if they belonged to someone else. He had defeated numerous swordsmen over the course of the morning, and his body was hitting its limit.

He had already long been forced to endure the suit of armor he was wearing, and which he wasn’t at all accustomed to. Of course, its weight was nothing compared to the cavalry armor that had been given to him before as part of Geimalos’s plot... Or at least, that was how he had felt this morning. But now it felt like it was dragging his entire body down to the ground. Furthermore, the armor limited the mobility of his joints and seriously restricted his vision. He only had a narrow rectangular gap in the front of his helmet to see his opponent through.

Is he not tired? But he just faced off against Geol Zaza... Shin Ruu wondered

to himself, but then he brushed the idle thought aside. Whether or not his opponent was exhausted, it didn't change what he had to do. He needed to dredge up all of his strength as a hunter of the forest's edge and fight until his body gave out.

"Begin!" the judge shouted, and Melfried took a sharp step forward. Shin Ruu leaped to the side in order to dodge, preparing to swing his own blade...only for a silver flash to fly his way from an unexpected angle.

What?!

Shin Ruu had managed to stop himself just in time, but a weighty blow rushed right past his chest. As he was unable to fully dodge it, his opponent's blade scratched the surface of his chestplate. It was such a sharp slash that it gave off sparks.

What was that? Even if my movements are dulled, his blade never should have reached me... Shin Ruu thought, trying to get some distance while suppressing his confusion and attempting to catch his breath inside his helmet. Melfried's longsword had started off in his right hand for his first strike, but now it had moved to his left. That was how that attack had come from such a strange direction. *I see... When we first met in the post town, he was carrying two swords. And when he was hiding his identity to lure out the criminals from the Suun clan, he went by the nickname "Twin Fangs."*

Melfried was most likely capable of fighting with two blades at once. In which case, even though he only had one blade now, he could still attack freely with either arm.

He beat Geol Zaza without using that technique?

Melfried took another big step forward. Shin Ruu took a swing to try to snap the nobleman's blade, but it was lightly brushed aside. Just like Leiriss, Melfried was skilled at redirecting power. While he was larger than the younger noble and brimming with strength, his swordsmanship was still like a beautiful dance.

The sword, now in Melfried's right hand again, scraped against Shin Ruu's helmet. The young hunter was desperately trying to look for an opening to counterattack while dodging his opponent's blows, but with each step he took, his body felt heavier, and his breathing grew rougher.

The sweat running down to the bottom of his helmet was unpleasant, but he couldn't wipe it away. The armor covering his body was steadily stealing away his freedom of movement, making it feel as if he was stuck in a swamp.

It would be so refreshing if he could just cast the armor aside here and now. He wanted to feel the breeze on his skin. To sense the whole world around him with his eyes, nose, and ears exposed, rather than having to peer through that tiny opening. Shin Ruu had hunted more giba than he could count that way. He would never be able to bring his full strength to bear trapped in this stiff, cramped attire.

No... That's nothing but whining. If I was going to waste time on such feeble complaints, then I never should have come here, Shin Ruu thought, getting himself back on track. But just as he did, an especially powerful impact struck his temple. Melfried had landed a clean blow on Shin Ruu's helmet from the side.

His consciousness stuttered in that moment, but Shin Ruu's hunter's instincts caused him to leap backward. He could no longer see straight, and there were flashing lights dancing in front of his vision. He wouldn't be able to offer any resistance to a follow-up attack, but for some reason, Melfried didn't move. Perhaps he was thrown by the fact that the young hunter hadn't fallen.

I'll never yield the fight of my own volition. If you want to call yourself the victor, you'll have to show me more of your strength.

Shin Ruu narrowed his eyes, trying to get them to focus on Melfried.

It was then that he faintly heard a familiar voice among the cheers that were being muffled by the helmet.

"Give it your all, Shin Ruu! I know you can win! You've gotten so strong!" It sounded like he had lost all control of himself and started shouting like a young child...but it was undoubtedly Asuta's voice.

Without thinking, Shin Ruu broke out in a smile under his helmet. *Right. I can't go showing Asuta and Lala Ruu such a pathetic display.*

Shin Ruu took a deep breath, and focused his shaken consciousness. It was then that he finally noticed that something was off. His field of vision, which

had been cut down into a rectangle until just a moment ago, was now wide open. The previous slash had sent the visor of his helmet flying.

I can see... I can see just like normal.

If he got slashed in the face again, he would undoubtedly suffer wounds that would never heal. But even with that kind of danger now in play, it didn't feel like an issue at all, now that he could see properly.

Melfried changed his strategy, thrusting out with the tip of his sword from a distance. Shin Ruu's limbs were heavy with exhaustion, but thanks to his vision being restored, he was able to dodge. He was out of breath, his lungs were aching, and it felt as if his heart was about to give out on him, yet even so, Shin Ruu gathered up his strength to bring the fight to an end.

I'll only be able to manage one or two more proper swings at most, so I have to pour everything I've got into them.

Melfried struck with his blade, looking as cold as a snake. His gray eyes could be seen through the gap in his helmet, but they seemed to be completely devoid of emotion. Still, was it possible that he was finally growing impatient? He was swinging his blade with more force than before, stretching his left arm out as far as it would go.

Now!

Shin Ruu leaped around toward Melfried's side, bringing his blade straight down on top of his opponent's outthrust sword. A metallic sound rang out, and a snapped blade danced through the air. However, it was *Shin Ruu's* blade that had broken. It had hit its limit after the repeated battles it had been used in since the morning.

Melfried immediately pulled his sword back, and then swung it sideways. Shin Ruu, instantly concluding that his broken weapon couldn't possibly stop his opponent's attack, stooped down without even thinking about it. With his armor still hampering his movements, he only just managed to get out of the way, with Melfried's attack barely missing his head. The young hunter then thrust the remains of his blade at the nobleman's side, which was right in front of his eyes. However, Melfried had already started dodging, and so the weapon missed its mark.

In that case...

Shin Ruu swung both his arms up over his head, expecting Melfried's left arm to still be right above him.

He grabbed ahold of Melfried's wrist, sword hilt and all, twisted his waist, and then bent his body so hard that his own head slammed into the ground. Shin Ruu could feel the bones in the nobleman's arm creaking through the gauntlet covering it. But in the same moment, Melfried's weight suddenly vanished. He had kicked off the ground so that his arm wouldn't break.

Shin Ruu mustered the last of his strength in order to twist his body even further. Melfried lost his balance in the air, and his back slammed into the ground. Without even thinking, Shin Ruu thrust his broken blade at Melfried while holding down the noble's left arm with his own.

The noble's chilly gray eyes stared at the cross section of the hunter's snapped sword aimed directly at his face...and in a perfectly calm voice he said, "I surrender."

"Th-The east! Shin Ruu is victorious!" the judge shouted, but his voice was drowned out by the roaring cheers of the audience.

Shin Ruu sunk to the ground, dropping his broken blade. Melfried, on the other hand, rose to his feet as if nothing had happened.

"That was splendid. You are this year's sword king, Shin Ruu."

"Sword king...?"

"A title that is given to the victor of this tournament, whose name will be written into the history books of Genos. That is how impressive the feat you have accomplished today is."

His fingers were weak, but Shin Ruu managed to remove the clasp on his helmet and cast it aside. The cool breeze felt amazing on his sweaty forehead.

Melfried lifted his visor, narrowing his eyes as he looked down at Shin Ruu. Unsurprisingly, his face remained expressionless as a mask. "The strength you hunters of the forest's edge possess has truly impressed me. I look forward to the celebration tonight."

With that, Melfried started to reach his hand out toward Shin Ruu, but pulled it back midway.

“What’s wrong?” Shin Ruu asked, right before a seven-colored light appeared in the corner of his vision. The moment he turned in that direction, he found himself enveloped in a warm and gentle embrace.

“Jeez! Don’t scare me like that! You’re not hurt anywhere, are you? Is your head okay?”

It was Lala Ruu, who was supposed to have been watching the match from far away with the nobles.

She was clad in the beautiful banquet attire of the forest’s edge, and was staring at Shin Ruu from right up close, looking as if she was about to cry.

“I’m fine... I’m sorry I worried you.”

Hearing Shin Ruu’s words, Lala Ruu’s expression crumpled and she wrapped her arms around him tightly, armor and all.



Only able to feel her warmth on his exposed neck and head, Shin Ruu stared upward. The sky was bright and clear, as if it was offering him its congratulations.

5

It was now the day after the swordsmanship tournament and Shin Ruu's amazing victory.

We arrived at the Ruu settlement right on schedule on our way to the post town, where an unexpected commotion awaited us, though this time it was in front of Shin Ruu's home rather than the main house. Since we hadn't had a chance to get together yesterday, I had wanted to head over to his place to say hello, and unsurprisingly, I found Shin Ruu surrounded by his family and other relatives there.

"Good morning, everyone... Great work yesterday, Shin Ruu."

The people surrounding Shin Ruu all greeted me with smiles, and then the man himself said, "Ah, Asuta," and approached me. "It seems like you had quite a day yesterday too. Sheera told me all about it."

"Oh, that was nothing compared to you fighting for half a day. Is that the sword you won?"

Shin Ruu was holding a truly splendid long sword in his hand. It was around a meter long and had delicate engravings along the guard and scabbard. We had seen it before as it was being presented to him yesterday at the closing ceremony, after which we had returned to the settlement at the forest's edge.

"It's a real fine blade, but a touch heavy for giba hunting. It might be just about right for someone with a build like my old man's, though," Ludo Ruu chimed in, popping up at the edge of the crowd.

Shin Ruu turned toward him and replied, "Yeah. And double-edged blades are difficult to handle too. It would apparently be quite rude toward Duke Genos to sell it, though, so I suppose I'll just have to put it into storage."

That was pretty much the conclusion I expected a person of the forest's edge

to reach. I gave a strained chuckle and greeted Ludo Ruu as well.

“Hello to you too, Ludo Ruu. There was a celebration in the castle town yesterday, right? What was it like, visiting the main castle?”

“Hmm? I guess it was a pretty huge building, but I don’t really know what to say other than that. And there were so many people there that it made my head spin.” After the tournament, they had been invited to the castle for a celebratory party—as was customary for all of the top-ranking participants—where they had been given a congratulatory address and coins. “Still, the food wasn’t all that good. Varkas and Shilly Rou make way better stuff than that. Right, Shin Ruu?”

“True. Still, that’s probably because we aren’t accustomed to the food nobles enjoy. I at least didn’t feel like I had to force myself to eat it.” Shin Ruu looked the same as always, with no visible scars. He was just his usual calm and composed self.

“By the way, that Leiriss guy was there too, right? Did you settle things with him?”

“Yes. Judging from his expression, he seemed quite refreshed. However, he did tell me that I would have to participate in next year’s tournament as well.”

“Hmm? Well, I guess that’s fine as long as it’s not because of a grudge or anything.”

“Right. I’m sure it’s the same as how I challenge Ludo Ruu at every festival of the hunt.”

“Yep,” Ludo Ruu chirped. “And Geol Zaza was shouting about how he’s gonna win for sure next year. I’ve got no interest in being part of such a rigid contest of strength myself, though.”

“Yes, I’m sure I would have lost that last match if my helmet hadn’t broken, since I couldn’t see my opponent properly with it on. Still, even setting that aside, Melfried was quite strong.”

“Oh yeah, he specializes in using two swords, right? And that huge southerner was saying he would have put up a better fight if he could have used an axe.” Apparently, Ludo Ruu had talked with all sorts of people at the celebratory

party. He turned toward me and said, “Oh yeah, that girl from the south asked me to tell you that she got your message to that northern woman, Chiffon Chel.”

“Oh, Diel was there? Got it, thanks.”

“And a girl from the east said something too. Umm... It was something like, ‘Thanks for always sending that delicious food.’”

“That must have been Arishuna. I heard that the two of them were invited to sit in the VIP section, so I guess they went along to the celebratory party too. Still, they’re both probably older than you, so I’m not sure you should be calling them ‘girls.’”

“Eh, whatever. Girls are girls,” Ludo Ruu said, sticking out his tongue and turning away. “It *was* a pretty interesting show to watch, though. Lala practically flew over to Shin Ruu at the end, totally ignoring my old man trying to stop her.”

“Ah, that’s...” Shin Ruu started, his cheeks going red.

“What was that about me?” a harsh voice interjected from the side. It was Lala Ruu, standing off to the side away from the crowd with her arms crossed, her hair up in its usual ponytail, and her face bright red. “How long are you all going to keep talking? Reina and the others have been ready to go for a while now, Asuta. They’re waiting for you over by our wagons.”

“Ah, sorry. Oh, and good work yesterday to you too, Lala Ruu.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Lala Ruu angrily snapped back, her face going all the redder.

Glancing over at her out of the corner of his eye, Ludo Ruu gave a snort and said, “She ignored our old man’s orders, so he chewed her out afterward till she cried. We promised the nobles we wouldn’t leave our seats, but you just had to get all selfish over Shin Ruu.”

“Oh, shut it.”

“And Shin Ruu beat every single one of his opponents without getting any serious injuries, so what were you even worried about? Every time he went out

there, you prayed to the forest and looked like you were about to cry.”

“I said shut it, Ludo! You idiot!” Lala Ruu shouted. She grabbed at Ludo Ruu, boiling over with rage, but being such an excellent hunter, her brother was able to swiftly take hold of both of her wrists.

“And at the castle, she just wouldn’t stop clinging to Shin Ruu for a single moment. After all, she had to make sure those noble girls couldn’t approach him. And Melfried’s wife said something like, ‘What a young wife you have.’”

“Ack!” Lala Ruu wailed as her teasing brother chuckled away. I felt worse for Shin Ruu, though, having to listen to that with so much of his family surrounding him. His face had turned as red as Lala Ruu’s.

“W-Well then, it’s about time we get going. You all have morning chores too, don’t you? I’ll be holding a study session after work, so I’ll see anyone who isn’t busy then.” I took it upon myself to get the situation under control for Shin Ruu’s sake. The branch family members dispersed to return to their various tasks, while Shin Ruu’s mother, Tari Ruu, offered a smile and a slight bow before heading back inside. That just left those noisy siblings and Shin Ruu himself.

“Reina and Vina Ruu are on for today, right? We’ll wait by the entrance, so could you send them out to us?”

With a “Hmph!” Lala Ruu shook off her brother’s hands, then glanced at Shin Ruu’s face and took off running toward the main house.

“I feel bad for Lala Ruu when you go overboard with your teasing like that, Ludo Ruu.”

“Hmm? Everyone knows what’s going on between Lala and Shin Ruu, so why bother hiding it? It’s not like Shin Ruu’s gonna fall for any other woman at this point.”

“Even so, it still isn’t good to poke fun at your family,” Shin Ruu scolded Ludo Ruu, which was rather unusual for him.

Ludo Ruu chuckled and said, “Well, you’ve just got to hold out till Lala turns fifteen. Once you’re married, nobody will tease you anymore.”

“There’s still a year and a half left before she turns fifteen, and besides, you’re the only one who teases us in the first place, Ludo Ruu.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to tease you or anything, Shin Ruu. It’s just funny to see how quickly you turn red.”

“That’s called teasing.”

“Whatever. It’s a good thing that the girl you like is so fond of you too,” Ludo Ruu retorted, joining his hands together behind his head and turning away. “I’m hungry, so I guess I’ll get some meat and poitan, or whatever’s cooked up. Good luck with your work, Asuta.”

That just left me and the red-faced Shin Ruu there.

The young hunter glared at Ludo Ruu’s back as he vanished into the distance, and then he heaved a sigh.

“I’m glad you didn’t suffer any bad injuries, Shin Ruu. Yesterday really was quite a day,” I called out, feeling like I hadn’t spoken with him enough yet.

As he idly stroked the scabbard of his fine long sword, Shin Ruu nodded back at me. “Indeed. Still, I’m glad I was able to carry out my task. Honestly, I didn’t think I was going to win the whole thing.”

“Your armor looked really heavy, and that helmet must have restricted your vision a lot. Do you think you would’ve had an easier time winning if you were able to dress like normal?”

“I’m not sure. It’s not as if I have human opponents in mind when I practice with my blade.”

Ai Fa and many others had said something like that quite a few times by now.

“If Geol Zaza hadn’t been wearing a helmet, it’s possible that he could have beaten Melfried. But then again, if not for his armor, he might have taken a cut to his right wrist. Plus, Melfried himself would have been more difficult to handle with two blades. I don’t believe there’s much purpose in indulging in such hypotheticals.”

“Right. Having a fixed set of rules is what makes it a proper match, and there’s no point in complaining about that. Still, I’m really glad that you managed to

win all your fights.”

Shin Ruu looked up at me with grateful eyes, having finally shaken off the red from his cheeks. “You and Rimee Ruu calling out to me so loudly helped me muster up my strength to its fullest.”

“Huh? You were able to hear us even with all that noise?”

“Faintly. Hunters need to be able to distinguish all kinds of sounds,” Shin Ruu replied, now turning his whole body my way. “I’m glad I was able to defeat Melfried. I’m told he was once considered as skilled as Jiza Ruu.”

“Right. We were told that Sanjura was about as strong as Ludo Ruu, but Melfried was an even better fighter than them. And Jiza Ruu’s stronger than Ludo Ruu, both then and now,” I resolutely stated. “But now, you’ve managed to beat Melfried, which means that in the last few months, you’ve grown to be as strong as Jiza Ruu used to be. So somewhere along the line, you grew stronger than Sanjura too.”

Shin Ruu narrowed his eyes in thought. “I’m not so sure. That Sanjura man might have continued to improve, just like Ludo Ruu, Jiza Ruu, and myself have done. In that case, I could still fail to match up to him.”

“No, I don’t think so. You’d beat him for sure in any kind of contest of strength now. I’m certain of it.” As I heard the sound of the wagon with Reina Ruu and everyone else in it rolling up from behind me, I shot the young hunter a smile. “You’re still only sixteen, Shin Ruu. You’re much younger than Sanjura and Melfried, so I figure you’ve still got plenty of room for growth.”

“Right...”

“And now that I think about it, I haven’t congratulated you directly yet, have I? Congratulations on your victory, Shin Ruu. I’m really proud of you, with how you were able to keep on winning all the way to the end.”

At that, Shin Ruu broke out in an unusually bright smile. “Thanks,” he said quietly.

It was a wonderfully open and honest smile, just right for someone who was just sixteen years old like him.

Chapter 3: A Festival of the Hunt for the Small Clans

1

It was now the third day of the gold month.

Eight days had passed since Shin Ruu's victory at the Genos swordsmanship tournament, and we were at last holding our festival of the hunt, of the sort that were held by each clan roughly three times a year. This was the second time I had done one at the Fa house.

It was unusual to hold such an event with those who weren't blood relatives. Therefore, the last festival of the hunt we'd held was just me and Ai Fa enjoying a slightly more elaborate dinner than usual. With just one chef and one hunter, there had been no contests of strength or dances in search of a marriage partner. But it had taken place right after the whole matter with the house of Turan had come to a close, so we had wanted to just have a private celebration of our efforts anyway.

This festival of the hunt would be a different story. I had been the one to make the proposal that we hold it together with the nearby clans, even if they weren't related to us, for the simple reason that those clans would naturally be entering break periods at the same time as we did.

When giba found an area that was abundant with fruit, they would settle down and make that their territory. Then, once they had eaten all the food that was available to them, they would move on to the north or south. Afterward, the giba wouldn't come around again for a while, which meant that the local hunters could take a break to rest up from their usual harsh workload. And on the first day of such a break period, a festival of the hunt was held.

At such events, the men would fight in contests of strength in order to display their skill as hunters to the forest and their relatives. And the women would

dance, seeking marriage partners, though that part wasn't taken as seriously as it was at a marriage banquet. Furthermore, a luxurious meal made with giba meat would be prepared, and everyone would deepen their bonds with their relatives and share their happiness with one another. That was a joy I wanted to share with the other clans that were near us.

There were five clans that lived close enough to the Fa clan to share a break period with us: the Fou, Ran, Sudra, Deen, and Liddo—all clans who helped out with our business in the post town. Among them, only Toor Deen and Yun Sudra actually came to town, but the rest helped out with prep work and procuring the necessary giba meat. Plus, I also gave all the women from those clans cooking lessons, and I had them help with stuff like the time-intensive production of jerky and sausage, as well as with giba soup experiments.

Between my lessons and the assistance they provided us, the women visited the Fa house on a daily basis. They were important comrades to me, just as much as the Ruu clan was, so it felt only natural to share in a festival of the hunt together, and the various clan heads all readily agreed.

The one unfortunate part of all this was that the clans we had been trying to get closer to before the revival festival—the Gaaz, the Ratsu, the Beim, and the clans under them—didn't have the same break period. Their settlements were closer to the Suun to the north or the Ruu to the south, so their breaks came at completely different points.

Thanks to our totos and wagons, we had ended up having a lot more interaction with them. And during this time when the six clans near us were going on break, they were our lifeline that ensured we would always have a supply of giba meat available. The Gaaz, Ratsu, Beim, and Dagora also provided workers to help with our business in the post town, so I felt quite close to them. But they would never accept shifting their break periods just for the sake of having some fun with us, and if they did, it would make it quite difficult for us to secure giba meat. Although the Gaaz and Ratsu clan heads had looked quite disappointed about how things had to be, there was just no helping it.

Those were the circumstances that had led us to the present festival of the hunt.

We were also going to be receiving guests from some of the other clans—specifically, a few members of the three leading clans and the Beim. It was against the customs of the forest’s edge to hold a festival of the hunt with unrelated clans, so they were coming to determine whether or not our actions were acceptable.

That was even more of a concern considering that the Deen and Liddo fell under the Zaza. The Beim clan head had nominated himself as well because he already watched over the meetings between the three leading clan heads and the nobles, alongside the Fou clan head, Baadu Fou.

It felt a bit overblown to me, but as the one who’d come up with the whole idea, I wasn’t in any position to tell them what they should think about it. I decided I would just have to hold my head up high and be sure not to do anything that would make us look bad to the observers.

At any rate, the day of the festival was already here.

When the sun hit its peak on the third of the gold month, chefs from six clans gathered at the Fou settlement, adding up to thirty-five in total. That was every single chef we had in our clans. However, infants and children under the age of ten weren’t part of that count. While the eight-year-old Rimee Ruu from the Ruu clan did work as a chef, the general custom among the smaller clans was not to let such young children take on jobs involving flames and blades.

Of course, since kids that young couldn’t be left at home alone, the chefs had brought them along when they came here. The boys under thirteen who weren’t yet hunters had already gathered, and with these other kids added in, we had roughly thirty youngsters running around. There were hardly any old folks, though, so the average age of those present felt quite low.

“Welcome to the Fou settlement. We’re looking forward to working with all of you today,” Baadu Fou’s wife said with a smile. Then her eyes narrowed as she looked over the small children. “Children under five will be looked after in that branch house over there. The men will move to a different house, so you can all play with each other as much as you like.”

At that, five of the women started moving in that direction along with the young children. They would be taking turns looking after the kids for the next

while.

There were a number of folks who weren't chefs still around: the girls between the ages of five and ten, and the boys between the ages of five and thirteen. They were the ones old enough to participate in a banquet, but not yet old enough to help out as chefs or take part in a contest of strength. After taking the children under five out of the equation, there were still sixteen of them. We ended up having that group handle odd jobs such as splitting the firewood needed for the ceremony, and building simple stoves and bonfires around the plaza. As their jobs were being explained to them, I went ahead and bowed to Baadu Fou's wife.

"Thank you for everything today. It seems like you've done quite a bit of preparation with the plaza."

"Yes, we got some work done here and there whenever we had time on our hands. It would have been quite difficult to get it all done today."

The Fou settlement had a plaza about half the size of the Ruu's, but it was still the largest that any of our six local clans had, so we had decided the joint festival of the hunt would be held here.

There was already a huge mountain of firewood in the center of the plaza to be used in the ritual flame. Then in front of the pile was a flat stage constructed of logs and planks. It didn't even reach a full meter high, had a fur rug stretched atop it, and was adorned with flowers here and there.

"That's the seat prepared for the winners of the contest of strength, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right. Normally, it's much smaller, but we're set to have five contests of strength today, so we had to make it bigger in a hurry." The contests of strength today would be a little different from how the Ruu clan did them. A few days ago, the heads of the six clans had gathered at the Fa house to decide on the format.

"They only do a combat contest at the Ruu settlement, correct? The Sudra add tree climbing and archery on top of that."

"The Fou and Ran compete in archery too, as well as combat and pole tugging. What about the Deen and Liddo?"

“Combat, pole tugging, and weight pulling. For the Fa... Ah right, you only have one hunter, so I suppose you don’t have contests of strength.”

“Indeed. But when my father was alive, we did combat, pole tugging, and tree climbing,” Ai Fa explained.

Apparently, the way they all ran their contests was the result of them having a wildly different number of people than some other clans did. The Ruu clan had around fifty hunters under them in total. That was why they had preliminaries where you needed to win three matches in order to advance, which meant that their combat contests basically lasted all day.

However, the smaller clans didn’t have enough people for that. Clans like the Fa and Sudra that had no branch houses or subordinate clans were extreme examples, but the Fou and Ran combined only had thirteen members, and the Deen and Liddo had just fifteen hunters between them. With numbers that small, a combat contest would be over in a flash. That was why the smaller clans generally tended to do three different types of contests.

“Perhaps the Ruu and Suun came to prioritize combat matches so highly because of the fierce enmity between them. But I think archery and tree climbing are just as important as combat for a hunter.”

“Yes, but it isn’t like they neglect everything except combat contests. The Ruu clan holds various kinds of contests regularly. Ludo Ruu once did an archery competition against a guest of the Ruu, Jeeda, and both were quite skilled,” Ai Fa said.

“I see. At any rate, what do you think of competing in other contests for our festival of the hunt?”

None of the clan heads that were present had any objections, Ai Fa included. And so, the end result was that they would be organizing contests of all five types that the six clans engaged in: combat, pole tugging, tree climbing, weight pulling, and archery. Each of the contests would be held as single-elimination tournaments.

That was going to have an impact on us chefs too, though. For the young men, the contests were a great chance for them to show off their strength to the women, meaning it was important that the women not miss out on

watching.

Up until recently, cooking for banquets hadn't taken all that long. The women could just throw ingredients into a pot and then go watch the competing men for a while. Their workflow had been really relaxed, to say the least. But now everyone knew about the joy of eating delicious food, so we had to show off our skills too. That was why we had gathered here in the Fou settlement early, when the sun was still high in the sky.

The sun was currently at its peak, while the men were going to be gathering at around the lower first hour. We would be finishing up the minimum necessary preparations for the meal within the next sixty to seventy minutes, and then we were going to take an early afternoon break. It would be evening by the time all the contests of strength were finished, at which point we would split up into three groups and prepare all the cooking.

"Well then, let's get right to it. I'm counting on you, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra."

There were thirty-five chefs—or thirty when you subtracted the five who were watching the young children—which I divided up into teams of ten, assigning Toor Deen and Yun Sudra as team leaders.

My team was in charge of the soup. With nine women accompanying me, I headed to the kitchen of the main Fou house, where there were already three large pots heating up on the stoves. They each had a metal lid on top, which of course meant that they had come from the Fa house. Naturally, we had ordered the lids from Diel. When I uncovered them, a rather powerful aroma filled the kitchen. It was giba bone soup, which had been boiling since morning.

"No matter how much work you've put into it, the smell it has at this stage hasn't improved. And to be honest, I have a bit of trouble dealing with it," said Saris Ran Fou, Ai Fa's childhood friend.

Turning her way with a chuckle, I said, "Yeah. But the stock we get from all that boiling is fantastic, isn't it? Thanks to all the work everyone's put in, we've come pretty far in figuring out how to handle this recipe." Whenever I had the nearby clans work together to produce smoked meat and sausages, I also had them help with my giba bone soup research. It was something we had been

working on for about three months now, ever since the day I had first invited Mikel to give a lecture on making smoked meat.

I had my work with the stalls to attend to, so I had been paying them to help me out with this. Every day, they experimented with various things like the amount of bone and water, the intensity of the flames, the heating time, and what ingredients they could use to remove the stench, which finally resulted in a stock I was satisfied with.

These pots boiling at the main Fou house were ones I had put in place three hours ago. We were using thigh bone and spine, which had been parboiled in simmering water to wash them off. Once all the bloody bits had been cleared away, we cut open the round bits at the ends of the thigh bones, added fresh water, and continued to boil.

For the past three hours, we had been stirring the ingredients to ensure they wouldn't burn and removing the scum from the surface, and now we had a huge amount of stock to work with. No doubt, it would have been just as hard to make if we had used the bones of pigs and boars from back in my home country, but this giba bone stock was definitely worth putting in the effort.

"All right, the stock should be good now, so let's add the ingredients that are for counteracting the stench." Said ingredients were aria, myamuu, nenon, and ramam. Swapping in the equivalent ingredients from my home country, that would be onions, garlic, carrots, and apples, respectively.

The bones had been parboiled and then boiled for three hours. Now we were adding ingredients meant to remove the stench, and next they would be boiled for another six hours while we continued to add fresh water. As for the strength of the flames, they were kept to a midpoint between high and medium. I had considered trying other ingredients or using different bones, but this was the best we could manage at present.

For this recipe, I was utilizing techniques I had learned back in my home country. I liked tonkotsu ramen so much that I had wanted to add it to the Tsurumi Restaurant's menu, so even back home, I had experimented with how to make pork bone soup when I had the time. And now I was able to put the knowledge I had gained back then to use here in this land.

“I’m seriously grateful to all of you. I never could have taken on such time-consuming work all on my own,” I called out to everyone present. I had tried to equally distribute the members of the five clans aside from the Fa across the various teams, and all of the women had some experience with experimenting on the giba bone soup.

Back in my home country, you could use a pressure cooker to drastically cut down the boiling time, but such things weren’t possible here at the forest’s edge. And so, their assistance had been completely indispensable.

“You’ve been letting us take the finished broth back home with us, so we should be thanking you, Asuta.”

“That’s right. Many of the men have been absolutely elated with the broth.”

I was truly grateful to hear everyone say such kind words. “Well then, let’s go ahead and cut up the necessary ingredients now. Could I have two of you help me get them from the wagon?”

With that, I exited the kitchen, Saris Ran Fou accompanying me with a smile.

“It feels kind of strange, having you and so many women from other clans cooking in the Fou kitchen.” Saris Ran Fou was a neat and tidy young woman who maybe looked a little fragile, but she had a strong heart at her core. She was already the mother of a young child, even though she was the same age as me and Ai Fa.

“I’ve been visiting the Ruu settlement almost daily for a long time now, so it just feels natural to me, but that’s not exactly the norm, is it?”

“No. However, I wouldn’t say I dislike having you all here, even if it is a little embarrassing, perhaps.”

“I agree. I’ve been working with the others at the Fa house or in the smoking hut so often lately that it doesn’t feel strange to me in the least anymore,” a young Ran woman chimed in. Saris Ran Fou had originally come from the Ran clan, so they must have known each other since childhood. They had been happily smiling back and forth at one another for a while now.

“Still, there are only around eighty of us between our six clans, aren’t there? It’s pretty impressive that the Ruu clan has over a hundred.”

“Yeah, but that’s because the Ruu have seven clans under them, so it’s only natural for them to be so much bigger,” I said. “But the Fa only have two members and the Sudra just nine, so the other four clans must all have a fair number to compensate, right? There are roughly five hundred people of the forest’s edge and thirty-seven clans, so on average, each clan should have around thirteen or fourteen members.”

“Thirteen or fourteen, you say? Excluding the children under five, the Fou have eighteen members.”

“The Ran have fifteen. The Deen and Fou took in a number of people from the Suun, so I believe their numbers are higher.”

It was true that Toor Deen and her father had belonged to the Suun clan before being taken in by the Deen. However, there was something else that caught my attention. “When I heard the six clans had eighty-four members in total, I thought that seemed like quite a lot. But mostly it makes me realize how amazing the Ruu clan is to have forty members without even counting their subordinate clans.”

“Yes, it’s truly incredible for a single clan to have forty members.”

“The subordinate Rutim clan also has over twenty members and the Lea have nearly twenty themselves, so in total, the Ruu actually have something like 110 to 120 members or so. The first time I was asked to man the stove for a Ruu banquet, I thought it was pretty weird how quickly the hundred meals I prepared just disappeared into thin air,” I said.

Saris Ran Fou tilted her head and remarked, “Oh? That’s quite a large amount. But what of it?”

“Well, since I’ve been told that the Ruu have a little over a hundred members and they turned out to really have around a hundred and twenty, when folks say there’s a little over five hundred people of the forest’s edge, I have to wonder if the real number isn’t actually much higher. If it’s something closer to six hundred, the difference would be more than just ‘a little.’”

The numbers for the Deen and Liddo under the Zaza also pointed me toward that conclusion. At the previous clan head meeting, Gulaf Zaza had said there were around seventy people under his clan, and even after they had accepted

ten members of the Suun branch houses, they couldn't have more than ninety now. If the Deen and Liddo each had twenty members, that would only allow for an average of seven members each for the remaining five clans.

It was true that some of their subordinate clans might only have a few members to their name, like the Ririn under the Ruu. Still, considering how feared the northern clans were throughout the forest's edge, it was hard to imagine them only being composed of a small number of elites. In which case, it might have been the method of calculation that was the issue.

For example, the Ruu and the small clans didn't count children under five. The northern clans might have also had a custom of not counting children below a certain age. For example, perhaps they excluded those under fifteen who weren't allowed to marry, or those under thirteen who couldn't yet be trained to work, or those in the age range of ten and below, before boys and girls were treated differently... But whatever standard they used, I definitely suspected that they had a higher cutoff age for who they counted than the Ruu and the smaller clans.

While I was theorizing without sharing the details of what I was thinking, Saris Ran Fou eventually spoke again, looking a bit puzzled. "Yes, I can't imagine how the northern clans could be so small. But I'm sure that if you include their younger children in their total, that would make their numbers larger than the Deen and Liddo. Then the Zaza would have over a hundred to their name."

"So then, the actual number of people of the forest's edge really could be closer to six hundred than five hundred."

"Yes, I wouldn't find it particularly surprising if that were the case. After all, whether there are five hundred of us or six hundred, it makes no real difference in our daily lives," Saris Ran Fou said, answering in a way that was pretty true to the nature of the people of the forest's edge. Well, perhaps calling it their nature was going too far, but they did tend to not worry too much about the fine details. Personally, I thought the difference between there being five hundred or six hundred people of the forest's edge was a pretty big one.

There's also the fact that they tend to not concern themselves with the affairs of other clans. Plus, they might think that saying something is more than it

actually is would be dishonorable, so perhaps they prefer to round their population number down rather than rounding it up. Their lack of interest could change in the future, but I thought that their preference to not inflate things was a virtue. Still, I did feel that it was important to have an accurate tally of their true numbers. *I should consult with Gazraan Rutim or Raielfam Sudra about that. They should be able to understand my concerns,* I thought as I started cutting up the vegetables we had retrieved.

Time passed by smoothly, with hunters steadily starting to trickle into the Fou settlement. And perhaps it was only natural, but my beloved clan head was the first one to show up.

“Ah, Ai Fa. Welcome to the Fou settlement,” the sharp-eyed Saris Ran Fou called out, and Ai Fa gave her a solemn nod from the entrance to the kitchen. “I think this might be the first time you’ve been invited here since I joined the Fou clan. For some reason, that makes me feel really happy.”

“Hnn...”

“You’ve been dropping off extra giba pelts here for some time now, but you’ve never come inside the house.”

“I have no memory of doing any such thing,” Ai Fa stubbornly insisted, turning away in a huff. She had allegedly been helping the Fou out in secret by leaving pelts for them, even before their relationship had been repaired, but she still hadn’t acknowledged that fact.

Not that the lack of acknowledgment did anything to dampen Saris Ran Fou’s happy smile. Being around Ai Fa always made her act more childlike. “Please come inside, Ai Fa. I welcome you into our kitchen as a member of the Fou clan.”

“Me coming inside would just make it more cramped. Besides, it is almost time for the contests of strength.” With that, Ai Fa sent a glance in my direction before turning around. “I’ll be waiting in the plaza. You can gather there once your work reaches a stopping point.”

“Right. Good luck with the contests of strength,” Saris Ran Fou replied with a smile, seeing her off. Ai Fa departed without making a sound. “Ai Fa is an excellent hunter, but I still have to wonder how today’s contests of strength will

go. I feel like the larger hunters are going to have a big advantage in the contests that require arm strength.”

“That’s true. She’s told me before that there’s no way she’ll be able to defeat the men in events like weight pulling,” I said.

Saris Ran Fou narrowed her eyes and said, “I see. But I’m still looking forward to it. Ai Fa competing with the Fou and Ran men, almost like they’re relatives... I feel overcome with emotion just imagining it.” Circumstances had led to Saris Ran Fou and Ai Fa growing estranged for some time, so this was undoubtedly a deeply poignant moment for her. “I truly am grateful to you, Asuta. It’s all thanks to you that the bonds between the Fa and Fou were repaired, and that we are able to celebrate the hunt together now.”

“It wasn’t just me who did that. Like I said before, it was your clan head, Baadu Fou, who decided to reforge those ties without fearing the Suun,” I replied with a smile. “And the same goes for this festival banquet. I just brought it up, but Ai Fa and the other five clan heads were the ones who made the decision.”

“Yes. I’d like to offer my thanks to both you and the clan heads.” Saris Ran Fou set down her cooking knife and brought her fingers together in front of her chest. All the other women broke out in gentle smiles as well.

Meanwhile, all of the hunters had now gathered out in the plaza. It was finally time for the contests of strength to be held.

2

Eighty-four people had gathered at the Fou settlement in total.

The women and young folk crowded around the edges of the plaza as best they could, while the men were standing in the center. With the amount of space on offer compared to the number of people around, it felt like we were dealing with an even denser crowd than when a hundred people gathered at the Ruu settlement.

“The fact that we are here to see this day arrive is something for us all to celebrate. Never before have clans unrelated by blood come together to feast

like this, but we are all children of the forest and comrades here at the forest's edge. As the Fou clan head, I greatly hope this event shall further strengthen the bonds between the Fa, Deen, Liddo, Sudra, Fou, and Ran," Baadu Fou, the head of the Fou clan, said to welcome us. The older hunter was slim, bony, and nearly 180 centimeters tall. He was calm and composed by nature and deeply loyal, which made him well suited for managing everything. "And to oversee this momentous day, we also have visitors from the leading clans and the Beim in attendance. However, they are only guests and will not be participating in the contests of strength or dinner, but they will be watching over us as fellow people of the forest's edge all the same."

At that, five people standing at a bit of a distance silently nodded. Dari Sauti was the only man among them, since the rest of the hunters were all busy with work at this time of day. The other four were women: Reina Ruu, Sufira Zaza, Fei Beim, and a Sauti woman.

"Well then, time is moving onward, so I would like to begin our ritual contests of strength. The first contest shall be archery."

With those words from Baadu Fou, the crowd moved farther into the settlement. The archery contest was to be held at the outskirts of the forest.

There were thirty-three hunters taking part. With thirty-five chefs, sixteen young folk, and five guests watching them, the hunters lined up along the edge of the forest. Some young boys who looked fairly close to thirteen years old stepped out in front of them, cradling a large number of bows and arrows.

"Excuse me, I would like to make a request," Ai Fa suddenly interjected. "I'm terribly sorry to ask, but could I get in a bit of practice with the bow before the contest?"

"Bow practice?" several of the hunters questioned dubiously.

"Indeed. I have not handled a bow since losing my father. I felt there was no need for such a thing when hunting on my own, and since my bow was lost along with my father, I have not had a chance to touch one again until today."

"Oh...? But it has been years since your father's passing, has it not?"

"I lost my father two and a half years ago."

“After two and a half years without touching a bow, I cannot imagine how a little practice would make any difference.”

“If you could just allow me to fire two or three arrows, that would be plenty. That should be enough to regain the feel for drawing a bow.”

Baadu Fou gave a small nod, then signaled one of the boys with his eyes.

“You have my thanks,” Ai Fa replied, bowing, then swiftly nocked an arrow.

Her form was so beautiful that it was hard to believe it had been such a long time since she’d done this. Still, the arrow she fired toward the forest disappeared into the brush without hitting any target.

Remaining in place, Ai Fa nocked her second arrow. This time around, it stuck right in the center of a large tree’s trunk. She then immediately fired a third, which landed right alongside the second one.

“My apologies for making you all wait. That should be plenty.”

Ai Fa returned the bow and quiver to the youth, while another boy took off running over to the edge of the forest to retrieve the arrows.

“Well then, let us begin the archery contest. The wooden boards dangling there shall be your targets.”

Looking in the direction Baadu Fou had pointed, I saw that sure enough, there were wooden boards dangling from the branches of some small trees on vines roughly thirty centimeters long. They were square, about ten centimeters on a side, with a black mark drawn in their center. Three targets hung from each branch, and four sets had been prepared, spaced roughly two meters apart.

“We are short on time, so we set things up so that four hunters could compete at once. Once the targets are swinging, I will give a signal, after which you are to shoot three arrows within a count of ten. The winner will be whoever manages to score the most hits on the black marks. If multiple people score the same number of hits on both the marks and the target boards as a whole, the contest will go on to a second round.”

He then indicated a line drawn on the ground ten meters away from where we were standing. They would be firing three arrows at moving targets from

that distance. Considering that they had to do it in about ten seconds, it would be quite a difficult task.

“It would be best to have those who are not related compete together as much as possible to begin with. Could we have one each from the Deen, Liddo, Fou, and Ran go first, as they have larger numbers?”

The contests of strength were finally getting started, and a stir of excitement started running through the crowd of women around me. Any of them who had feelings for one of the men must have had their hearts beating pretty quickly by now.

The four hunters shouldered their quivers, took a bow in hand, and stood before the line. Two boys with long grigee poles were standing by between the four trees.

“These youths will make the targets twist and swing with their poles. After they move to a safe distance, I shall shout out a signal, at which point you may begin shooting arrows. Are all of you ready too?”

Multiple energetic voices called out, “Yeah!” from the ground next to Baadu Fou’s feet. At some point, several little children had gathered around him. It looked like they were all less than ten years old, judging from the one-shouldered attire they were wearing.

“All right. Strike the targets!”

The boys split off to the left and right and used their grigee poles to get the targets swinging about while running out of the line of fire. Once they had hit the final targets and made it five meters away, Baadu Fou shouted out, “Begin!”

The four hunters reached for their quivers, and at the same time the young children started counting, “One! Two!” Apparently, they were acting as timekeepers. They were really adorable, loudly calling out numbers with huge grins on their faces.

The hunters looked deadly serious. Having to fire off three arrows within ten seconds meant you only got around three seconds to fire each one. It seemed like a really tight time limit, considering they had to draw the arrows, nock their bows, take aim, and then fire.

On top of all that, the targets were moving, and since they'd been set into motion by just whacking them with a pole, the targets could end up completely sideways if the hunters' timing was poor. It would take extraordinary skill to hit the center under these conditions.

With a fwoosh, the arrows tore through the air. Some of them hit the targets, while others vanished into the thicket.

"Nine! Ten!"

With that, the kids stopped chanting, and the boys and girls over ten went to check the targets and collect the arrows.

"This one had one arrow hit the mark!"

"This one didn't hit any!"

"One over here too!"

Apparently, only arrows that landed on the marks mattered. Just hitting the board didn't count unless two people hit the marks the same number of times. Based on those rules, a Fou man was the one to be declared the winner of the first group. Apparently, the Fou and Ran always held archery contests like this one, so perhaps they had something of an advantage over the Deen and Liddo hunters.

"That was amazing. There's no way I'd even be able to scratch one of those targets. But then, it's not like I've ever handled a bow before..." I said.

Toor Deen broke out in a bashful smile beside me. "You're a chef, so that's only natural. I've never touched a bow before either."

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

Still, I was the only male chef here watching. Even the younger boys were helping out here and there with the contest, so all the observers surrounding me were women. *Well, I guess it's the same for Ai Fa. At times like these, it becomes real clear just how unusual a female hunter and a male chef are, here at the forest's edge.* Still, there was no point in worrying about that now. As a member of the Fa clan, I just had to keep wishing Ai Fa good luck.

From there, the archery contest steadily continued on, with the Sudra hunters

repeatedly achieving the best results. Cheem Sudra in particular was able to land three arrows, with two of them hitting the small mark. Many of the hunters who were doing the best seemed to be on the small side. Thinking about it more, Ludo Ruu and Jeeda were both smaller than average, and they also excelled with bows. Perhaps smaller men were more often tasked with handling bows and arrows.

And then, Ai Fa's turn finally rolled around. She was up against men from the Fou, Deen, and Liddo clans. Astonishingly, all three of her arrows hit the targets, with one striking the center of the mark. One of the men also hit the mark, but none of the others had hit the targets with all three, so Ai Fa secured her victory. A number of hunters made sounds of admiration, and many of the women got all excited. Now that I thought about it, Ai Fa was pretty popular among the young women. When Gilulu first came to our house and she had started gallantly riding the tolos around, they had all greeted her with high-pitched cheers.

"That was amazing. Ai Fa won the match, even though she hasn't touched a bow in more than two years," Yun Sudra remarked, looking a bit excited.

"Yeah, but the Sudra men all won too. Cheem Sudra was especially amazing."

"Yup. At the Sudra contests of strength, Cheem always wins the archery contests. I don't think he's lost even once in the past two years."

From what I could remember, Cheem Sudra was fifteen years old, so that meant he had never lost since he started participating in contests of strength as a hunter in training at the age of thirteen. Even if the Sudra clan only had four hunters, those were still results to be proud of.

I'm sure if Ludo Ruu heard that, he'd probably want to challenge Cheem Sudra to a match. That sounds pretty amusing, actually.

While I was thinking that, the first round came to a close. There were thirty-three hunters participating in total, so there had been seven matches with four each, and then one with three and one with two, meaning nine of them continued on to the semifinals. They included four from the Sudra, two from the Ran, and one each from the Fa, Fou, and Deen. The only clan heads among them were Ai Fa and Raielfam Sudra. Baadu Fou had a very strong presence to

him, and the Liddo clan head was a very experienced hunter, but neither specialized in the bow. And again, those who won the initial matches seemed to generally be on the small side.

“We have nine hunters remaining, so we will do the rest in groups of three.”

The first group of three included Ai Fa and a Sudra and Ran man. It ended up being a fierce fight, with all three hitting the targets with three arrows. They also all hit a center mark once, which led to a rematch.

Ai Fa and the Ran man got the same results once again, leading to another go with just the two of them. The six arrows they unleashed once again all hit the targets.

“One hit the mark on this side!”

“Two hit over here!”

That caused a light stir to arise. It was the Ran man who had proved victorious. It seemed there had been a general feeling that Ai Fa was going to pull off a win. The young man she had gone up against had a medium build, and had a rather soft-looking face for a hunter of the forest’s edge.

“Looks like I lost. You’re quite skilled with a bow,” Ai Fa called out.

The Ran man offered her a kind smile. “I’m not very good at handling a blade, so I put a lot of effort into mastering the bow. Still, I feel quite honored to have won against a hunter as skilled as you.”

“I haven’t touched a bow in over two years. If you wish to be proud of your skills, then you should win the next match,” Ai Fa said, turning away and heading back toward the crowd.

Something about the way she was acting caught my attention, so I called out to her. “Good work, Ai Fa. Do you know that Ran man?”

Ai Fa shot me a frightening glare for some reason. “My ties with the Fou and Ran might have been severed over two years ago, but we interacted normally before that. With our houses so close, it should hardly be surprising that I would have an acquaintance or two.”

“Well, I guess that’s true. I just thought it was unusual to see you talk to

another man like that.”

“Hmph!” Ai Fa snorted, and then she left. As I stood there, not understanding what had happened, Saris Ran Fou called out to me from behind.

“Asuta, that was Masa Fou Ran just now. He’s a childhood friend of mine, and of Ai Fa’s.”

“Oh, I see. He’s a Fou man who married into the Ran family, then?”

So it was the opposite of Saris Ran Fou, who had married into the Fou clan from the Ran clan. She looked somewhat nostalgic as she narrowed her eyes and smiled.

“I’ve mentioned this before, but...Masa Fou Ran was the man I originally agreed to marry. However, since he fell for Ai Fa, I ended up marrying his younger brother instead.” As I was left at a loss for words, she smiled at me once more. “In order to take responsibility for breaking his word, Masa Fou Ran then married another Ran woman. This all happened over two years ago...but I’m sure Ai Fa and Masa Fou Ran haven’t spoken to each other even once in all that time.”

The Fou and Ran had severed ties with the Fa because they had feared the Suun. However, Saris Ran Fou had been estranged from Ai Fa even before that, and the cause had been none other than that man.

“And considering Ai Fa’s position, she likely still has no desire to talk to him.”

As far as I knew, Ai Fa was closest to Saris Ran Fou out of everyone living nearby. Having the man who had promised to marry her friend fall for her instead and ruin their relationship must have hurt her greatly.

“Still, I’m happy with things as they are now. The youngest son of the Fou who became my husband loves me dearly, and now I have been blessed with Aimu as well. Plus, I was able to mend my bond with Ai Fa, so I have been given all the happiness I could possibly ask for.”

“I see...”

All of that had happened before I had come here to the forest’s edge, and any negative feelings that had cropped up between Ai Fa and Saris Ran Fou were

gone now, so there was no point in me getting angry at that Masa Fou Ran guy now. *There's no way to stop yourself from liking someone. And in the end, his feelings toward Ai Fa never amounted to anything.*

Eventually, I was able to set aside the ambiguous feelings I had in my chest to be sorted out later.

In the meantime, the second match of the semifinals wrapped up, with Cheem Sudra beating a Sudra and Fou man to continue on. The last match was between Raielfam Sudra and one man each from the Ran and Deen. Next to me, Toor Deen was staring at them as if she were praying.

"So, someone from the Deen clan made it this far? The Sudra clan head's going to be a tough opponent, but I hope he gives it his all."

"Yes... That's actually my dad."

"Oh, really? In that case, we've got to cheer him on even harder."

This was the first time I had been able to get a good look at Toor Deen's father. He was a slim man and not especially tall, around the age of thirty. His face made him look tough and composed, a lot like Ryada Ruu's.

Meanwhile, Raielfam Sudra was a little guy who had a really unusual, heavily wrinkled face with sunken cheeks. He was less than 150 centimeters tall, and his limbs looked just as thin as always.

As for the third participant, the Ran man, his appearance didn't really stand out in any particular way. He appeared to be rather young, perhaps even younger than I was. Still, he was fairly tall, with a toned body, and had long dark-brown hair. The expression on his face made him look unflappable, and he seemed to be quite a man.

What's up with this guy? He's got a really dignified air about him, kind of like the hunters from the Ruu clan. Is it the way he seems abnormally confident...? He doesn't seem to be just any old hunter.

Naturally, I didn't have much skill at evaluating a hunter's abilities. However, my intuition had hit the mark for once here. He actually beat Raielfam Sudra and Toor Deen's father in the match, and a number of the women started cheering for him.

“He seems to be quite popular. Is he the eldest son of the main Ran house or something?” I asked Saris Ran Fou.

However, her answer was, “No. That’s Jou Ran, the eldest son of a Ran branch house. He’s the child of my mother’s younger brother.” Meaning he was Saris Ran Fou’s cousin. She tilted her head a bit. “I haven’t had much interaction with him since marrying into the Fou family...but he seems to have gained quite a bit of strength as a hunter. I don’t believe he did nearly this well in archery at the previous festival of the hunt.”

“I see. How old is he?”

“I believe he just turned sixteen.”

Which meant he was still in the process of growing up. Growing boys, and all that.

If he’s sixteen, that makes him the same age as Shin Ruu and Geol Zaza. I’ve been getting acquainted with a lot of folks that age lately.

At any rate, the archery contest was now entering its final rounds. The participants would be Cheem Sudra, Masa Fou Ran, and Jou Ran.

The first round once again ended in a three-way tie. Then in the next one, Masa Fou Ran dropped out as one of his arrows missed the targets. For the third round, neither participant missed a single shot, and both even managed to land two arrows on the center marks. And in the fourth round, both amazingly hit their marks with all three arrows.

Not just the women, but even the men were voicing their admiration now. To be sure, it was no easy feat to hit the marks every time under such conditions.

In the fifth round, both of them hit the mark twice, and neither of their third arrows missed the targets. As for the sixth round...Jou Ran missed the targets for the first time. He ultimately hit the targets twice, while Cheem Sudra hit them three times. The youths who went to check the results turned toward us in excitement.

“Two of Jou Ran’s arrows hit the mark!”

“Two of Cheem Sudra’s arrows hit the mark!”

Cheem Sudra had claimed victory by a narrow margin. The small 160-centimeter-tall youth wiped the sweat from his brow and looked up at the sky. Meanwhile, Jou Ran walked over to him with a cool and unruffled smile.

“Splendidly done. It’s vexing, but it seems I’ve lost.”

“No, the swaying of the targets determined the match. It wouldn’t have been surprising if it had gone the other way instead.”

“Then the results come down to the forest’s guidance.”

Everyone cheered and applauded the fierce battle between the youths.

Once we finally settled down, Baadu Fou stepped forward.

“The winner of the archery contest is Cheem Sudra of the Sudra clan. Next up, we shall hold the weight-pulling contest.”

Weight pulling was a competition that emphasized arm strength. It required one to move something heavy using the pulling boards we transported water jugs with.

Pulling boards were big and sturdy, and had protective fur stretched along their undersides. They were around a meter square and had a number of fibaha vines attached to them. Those vines in turn had a handle attached to them, allowing you to pull the boards along to transport things.

In this case, the weights they were using were the young children of the clans. Two or three kids got on each pulling board, and each contestant had to try to run and pull them about fifty meters. This event also had four hunters competing at a time.

“Even if the number of children is different, their total weight ought to be about the same, so this should be fair regardless of who is chosen.”

Naturally, there weren’t any scales at the forest’s edge, but a seesaw-like tool was used to divide them into even lots. Among them was a large twelve-year-old boy holding a five-year-old. When there was a group of three kids around seven or eight years old, the one in front held on to the base of the fibaha vines, while the other two grabbed the waist of the kid in front of them. It was adorable.

Still, even kids who are that small should weigh around twenty-five kilos or so. With three of them, that'd be seventy-five kilos. It'll be pretty tough running fifty meters pulling a weight like that.

Even so, we were talking hunters of the forest's edge here. Once the match kicked off, they started moving across the plaza incredibly fast. Even though they were essentially pulling a large fully grown man behind them, they were still going faster than I could have if I were running at full speed unencumbered. The hunters of the forest's edge really did possess extraordinary muscle strength.

It'll be tough for Ai Fa to win like this.

Ai Fa was a skilled enough hunter to make it into the top eight of a contest of strength held by the Ruu clan. However, that had been a combat competition. She would be at a clear disadvantage in a fight based purely on muscular strength.

Even so, luck and determination were enough to earn her a narrow victory in the first round. She was up against a bunch of smaller hunters like Cheem Sudra and a young Fou man, so she won by the skin of her teeth. However, most of those who made it to the semifinals were unsurprisingly the more burly hunters.

Among the smaller clans, there weren't many hunters who really stood out in terms of having exceptionally large builds. Most of them were skinny even if they were tall, or short even if they were wide. That was proof of the harsh conditions they had lived under for generations. Those who were comparatively well-built within that framework were the ones who found victory this time. It was like the exact opposite of the archery competition.

The finals came down to Baadu Fou, the Liddo clan head, and the Deen clan head. Among the three of them, the Liddo clan head was particularly eye-catching, being around 180 centimeters tall and looking to weigh around a hundred kilos or so. Plus, he seemed to be an exceptionally skilled runner in spite of his large frame. It reminded me of how surprisingly swift Dan Rutim was despite his potbelly.

"The Liddo clan head was widely known for his exceptional skill back when

the Suun were still the leading clan. That strength was what allowed them to become a subordinate clan of the Suun,” Toor Deen explained.

There were no upsets here at the end, and the Liddo clan head was crowned the victor. Baadu Fou, meanwhile, took second.

“These matches have all been amazing. Honestly, it’s a lot easier for me to relax and watch competitions like these than the combat ones.”

“Yes, I feel the same way,” Toor Deen replied with a happy smile.

Her father had been defeated by the Liddo clan head in the second round, but even if victory was seen as a point of pride in contests between hunters, losing was not anything to be ashamed of. They had all shown exceptional skill in both the archery and weight pulling contests, so I figured that was the right way to think about it.

“Looks like you’ve had two tough competitions in a row today, Ai Fa. Just make sure to keep giving it your all in the back half,” I casually called out to my clan head as she passed by, only to be met with another frightening glare. Then she beckoned to me with her hand, pulling me away from the crowd.

“You seem to be rather enjoying yourself, Asuta.”

“Huh? Well, to be honest, I guess I am.”

That seemed to make Ai Fa even angrier, and she whispered to me, “It’s one thing to enjoy a banquet, but doesn’t it irritate you at least a little to see me lose again and again?”

“Huh? They were competitions you weren’t well suited for, so I don’t think it’s anything to feel that frustrated over,” I started to say, but then I thought back. When she had narrowly lost to Dan Rutim at the Ruu contest of strength, she had looked incredibly frustrated. “I see. I guess you hate losing more than I thought, huh? You must have a lot of jealousy in you, feeling that way over competitions like archery and weight pulling.”

“You cannot grow without feeling frustration. You get upset about losing in cooking competitions, don’t you?”

“Hmm. I’m sure you already know this, but when it comes to something I’m

not good at, like making sweets, losing doesn't actually frustrate me," I replied honestly, as it would have been taboo to speak a falsehood. Unfortunately, my words ended up putting Ai Fa into a major sulk. If not for all the people around us, she might well have started rubbing her head up against me.

"Your attitude is quite different from how out of sorts you were at the swordsmanship tournament."

"Huh? At the tournament?"

"You shouted out to cheer for Shin Ruu, so it's strange that you won't do the same for me," Ai Fa quietly grumbled, breaking out in a frown that was as deep as any I could possibly imagine. She looked so sad that I would have started patting her head if people weren't looking.

"Sorry about that. I got all worked up then because those were combat matches. But cut me some slack. I was cheering for you as loud as I could inside my head."

My clan head just kept on frowning.

"Maybe you didn't notice it, but I ended up shouting without thinking during your match with Dan Rutim too."

Ai Fa deeply furrowed her brow. Then, she finally lost control and gave me a single headbutt to the cheek. "As if I could ever fail to hear your voice, you fool." And then she started moving away from me without turning around.

Scratching my head, I walked back over to Toor Deen and the others. When I got there, I found something truly unexpected waiting for me: beside Saris Ran Fou was the young hunter, Jou Ran.

"This is our first proper meeting, isn't it? I am Jou Ran of the Ran clan, Asuta of the Fa clan."

"Ah, it's my pleasure. You did really well with that archery competition earlier."

"Thank you... But you don't have to be so polite to someone as young as me. Please, speak freely," Jou Ran replied with a smile. He looked to be around five centimeters taller than I was, and his drooping eyes made him look like a really

kind person.

“It looked like Ai Fa shoved you. Did you have some sort of quarrel?”

“Ah, no, not really... It’s always like that, so there’s no need to worry about it,” I replied, intentionally shifting my tone away from the polite one I usually used when first meeting someone. It was incredibly embarrassing that he had seen that exchange, though.

“I’m glad to hear that. The Fa clan is extremely important to us, so it would make me sad if you two were to quarrel.” He really seemed to be as kind and gentle as he appeared, and he was also the politest man I had spoken to, aside from Gazraan Rutim. “Well then, I’ll be heading back. I’m looking forward to enjoying the food you all prepare.”

With that, Jou Ran headed back to Baadu Fou. It seemed they were getting preparations underway for the third competition over there.

“He seemed a little odd to me. Did you talk with him, Saris Ran Fou?”

“Yes. Since we haven’t seen each other in a while, he came over to greet me,” Saris Ran Fou said, her expression looking kind of complicated. “I’m not completely certain of this, but...it seems to me that Jou Ran is rather fixated on Ai Fa.”

“On Ai Fa? What do you mean?”

“Well, how should I put it...? He said he wasn’t proud of beating Ai Fa at something she wasn’t skilled at, but that he was looking forward to seeing how the remaining three contests would go, as they seem to be her specialties.”

I didn’t really understand, but, well, it did seem to be true that he was paying a lot of attention to Ai Fa.

“What’s that about? Ai Fa’s strength should be well-known throughout the neighboring clans, so maybe he sees her as a goal to try to beat?”

“Perhaps so. At the very least, he didn’t seem to have any ill will toward Ai Fa.”

In that case, I felt like there was no need to worry. Saris Ran Fou’s calm nature seemed to be rubbing off on me, honestly. The young man’s hard-to-grasp aura

might have been contributing to that impression too.

Well, there are all sorts of folks out there, even among the people of the forest's edge. So long as we get along, I'll be able to find out what kind of guy he is naturally.

At any rate, there were three competitions left. Under Baadu Fou's orders, we went ahead and moved toward the arena for the next one.

3

The next competition was tree climbing.

It was an event in which each contestant climbed a tree that was around ten meters tall and then returned, making it a very simple event that focused on speed.

"The height and number of branches on these four trees are roughly equal. A cloth has been tied near the top of each one. You simply need to touch that and return."

Since it was a competition based on agility, it seemed like the smaller folks might once again have had an advantage. But muscles were important too, so it wasn't like the big guys were going to be in trouble or anything. A longer reach would be advantageous for tree climbing too.

Dan Rutim seems like he'd be able to climb super quickly...but if I actually saw that, I'd probably laugh without thinking, I rather rudely thought to myself as the tree climbing competition solemnly kicked off.

Sure enough, all of the hunters were abnormally fast. Even larger folks like Baadu Fou and the Liddo clan head moved up the trees so nimbly that it was like they were ignoring gravity. It called to mind a certain hero from American comics with spider powers.

Unsurprisingly, the Sudra men once again stood out. Raielfam Sudra in particular was abnormally nimble, as if he were an actual monkey, and with such a small build, he had an advantage in how he could slip through the tangle of branches. He went so fast that it was practically like he was running on flat ground. When he was five meters up on his way back, he jumped down the rest

of the way, and the other hunters did the same when they reached that height. Each time they did, the women cheered for them.

Then it came time for my clan head, Ai Fa, to compete. She won the first round without any difficulty. While the Sudra man she was up against was extraordinarily fast, she still won by over two whole seconds.

Apparently, tree climbing was an incredibly important skill when it came to hunting giba. Ai Fa focused on it quite a bit when training during her break periods or rehabilitating after recovering from her injuries.

Once again, nine of them moved on to the semifinals. All of the noteworthy hunters had made it in, with six of them being the clan heads. The remaining three were Cheem Sudra, Jou Ran, and Toor Deen's father.

"Your father is really amazing to stay in the running alongside a group like that, Toor Deen."

Toor Deen's father had also won against a Sudra man.

As she hung her head a bit, the young girl replied, "Yes. My father has trained so hard in order to live properly as a hunter of the forest's edge once more that it's been kind of worrying to watch. I'm glad that the results of all his work have been starting to show, bit by bit."

Toor Deen's mother had been of Deen blood, but her father had been a member of the Suun clan. He only seemed to be around thirty or so, which meant that he would have started plundering the fruits of the forest just a few years after becoming a hunter, and had then spent over ten years living like a walking corpse. Even so, Toor Deen's father definitely didn't fall short in that lineup of nine. He had the sort of masculine and commanding presence I had come to expect of hunters. Just looking at them was enough to get me fired up too.

"Well then, we will split into groups of three again. The order will be according to who finished their previous match sooner."

Nodding at Baadu Fou's words, three hunters stepped forward: Toor Deen's father, the Liddo clan head, and Cheem Sudra. Cheem Sudra then won overall, but Toor Deen's dad managed to beat the Liddo clan head.

The bulky clan head let out a sigh, then poked Toor Deen's father in the chest. "To think you were this skilled at tree climbing. I still doubt that I'd lose to you in a combat competition, but that was quite a surprise."

The Deen and the Liddo were related, so they had held festivals of the hunt together even before now. With a bit of a bashful smile, Toor Deen's father nodded. "Indeed."

"He sort of resembles you when he smiles, doesn't he, Toor Deen?" I whispered to the young girl, though my comment only made her turn her head down in embarrassment. She probably would have gone flying over to her exhausted father if people weren't looking. Instead, she just adorably tracked him with her faintly teary eyes.

After that, the second match of the semifinals kicked off. This time, Raielfam Sudra won against Baadu Fou and the Ran clan head, who finished in that order.

The third match was between Ai Fa, Jou Ran, and the Deen clan head. This one caused a bit of a commotion, though, when Ai Fa and Jou Ran reached the ground at virtually the same time, resulting in a tie. Even the hunters with their extraordinary dynamic vision couldn't determine which one of them had touched down first, so the Deen clan head stepped back, since he had been defeated, and Ai Fa and Jou Ran gave it another go...only for things to still remain undecided.

"It's hard to believe such a thing could happen. I think this might be the first time we've had no winner in this competition after two matches," Raielfam Sudra remarked in astonishment. "But having you compete again might just wear you down. There are four trees, so why not simply have four competitors in the final round?"

As per his proposal, the final round was held between the four of them: Raielfam Sudra, Cheem Sudra, Ai Fa, and Jou Ran.

When Baadu Fou gave the signal, the four of them leaped at their respective trees. Just as you'd expect from the finalists, all of them moved with incredible speed. I clenched my sweaty fists tight, while the women cheered louder than ever before. And in the end, four figures descended and touched the ground at nearly the same time. My eyes couldn't see it as anything but a four-way tie.

After a bit of silence, Baadu Fou lifted a long arm into the air.

“The victor is Raielfam Sudra! Does anyone have any objections?” The other hunters all shook their heads. And so, without any objection, Raielfam Sudra was declared the winner of the tree climbing competition. “Still, they really did reach the ground at almost the same time. I’d love to declare them all winners.”

Everyone nodded along with those words. It really had been an incredibly close match.

When he heard Baadu Fou’s proclamation, Jou Ran sat up in the spot where he had landed and asked, “By the way, what were the rest of the rankings? Did we have a tie again after all?”

“No. From what I saw, the order went Ai Fa, Jou Ran, and then Cheem Sudra.”

“To me, it looked like Ai Fa, Cheem Sudra, and then Jou Ran. Actually, Cheem Sudra and Jou Ran might have landed at the same time...”

The men had started debating. It was almost as if they were competing with each other over who had better dynamic vision.

“It seems I just couldn’t get the better of you, Ai Fa,” Jou Ran said with another breezy smile. “How unfortunate. Looks like I used up my strength in the first two competitions. But the ones that are still coming up are pole tugging and combat, so I’ll be able to show off more of my strength then.”

Ai Fa turned toward Jou Ran with a doubtful look. “Are you speaking to me? I don’t have any strong recollection of us ever exchanging words before.”

“Yes. I believe we just met a few months ago when we were instructed on how to bloodlet and carve giba. We didn’t have much of a conversation, though.”

“I see,” Ai Fa briefly replied, before heading back toward the crowd.

Baadu Fou’s voice sounded out. “Well then, let’s go ahead and have a short break now. I’ll have Asuta of the Fa clan speak on that.”

“Right. I want to make some progress on our cooking, so I’d like this break to be a bit longer than usual. Can we all head back to the plaza? I’ll explain how much time we need then.”

In the center of the plaza, I had placed a sundial next to the mountain of firewood that was meant for the ritual flame. The angle wasn't quite right, but it would still do okay for measuring the passage of time.

"I'd like to have an hour-long break, until the shadow reaches this mark. It's about one-sixth as long as it takes the sun to set after reaching its peak."

I was surprised to see how quickly we had gotten through those three events; only a little over an hour had passed. That meant that the break would last until sometime between two and half past two. According to my calculations, the contests of strength would have to resume by half past three at the latest so that they could wrap up by half past five, in order for us to have an hour and a half to finish cooking before sunset.

"You all must be thirsty, right? We've prepared something called chatchi tea, so go ahead and give it a try if you'd like."

A Fou woman was bringing over a water jug on a pulling board. It was full of chatchi skin tea that we had made in the morning, now cooled down to room temperature. The tea had a citrusy aroma and a bit of astringency to it, and it did its job well even at that temperature.

We had also prepared a light snack to go along with it. Of course, everyone had already gotten their nutrition from eating jerky before coming here, so it was really just a little something to peck at. We had just added some ketchup to giba bacon, and then sandwiched it between pieces of baked poitan.

The men came over one after another and got their snacks and tea poured into wooden dishes, then sat down on the ground to enjoy them. Everyone was in high spirits, and we were already starting to get a little of that banquet feel in the air.

After watching the scene for a bit, I went to head back to the kitchen, only to stop in place when I noticed some new figures entering the plaza. There was a large silhouette leading a totos by its reins, and a smaller one alongside him. It was the eldest son and youngest daughter of the Ruu clan: Jiza and Rimee Ruu.

"Ah, you're rather early. Are you already finished with your hunting work, eldest son of the Ruu?" Baadu Fou greeted.

“Yes,” Jiza Ruu replied with a composed nod. “We have already hunted down all the giba we need to. I was planning to go back into the forest for a little longer, but I eventually decided to leave that to my younger brothers instead, so that I might watch your hunters as they compete in your contests of strength.”

Donda Ruu was still recovering, so he was free to do whatever he pleased, but Jiza Ruu had been chosen to act as an observer today. Just like for the banquet held by the house of Saturas, Donda Ruu had decided this was a task best left to his successor as leading clan head.

“It seems you’re in the middle of a break. I would appreciate it if you could tell me the results of the competitions you’ve already completed.”

“Right. Go ahead and have a seat there. The break will last for a good while yet, so we can take our time discussing what’s happened so far.”

With that, Jiza Ruu was led into the center of the plaza, where Dari Sauti was talking with the other men. After entrusting Jidura’s reins to a Fou woman, Rimee Ruu came running over to me with a bright smile.

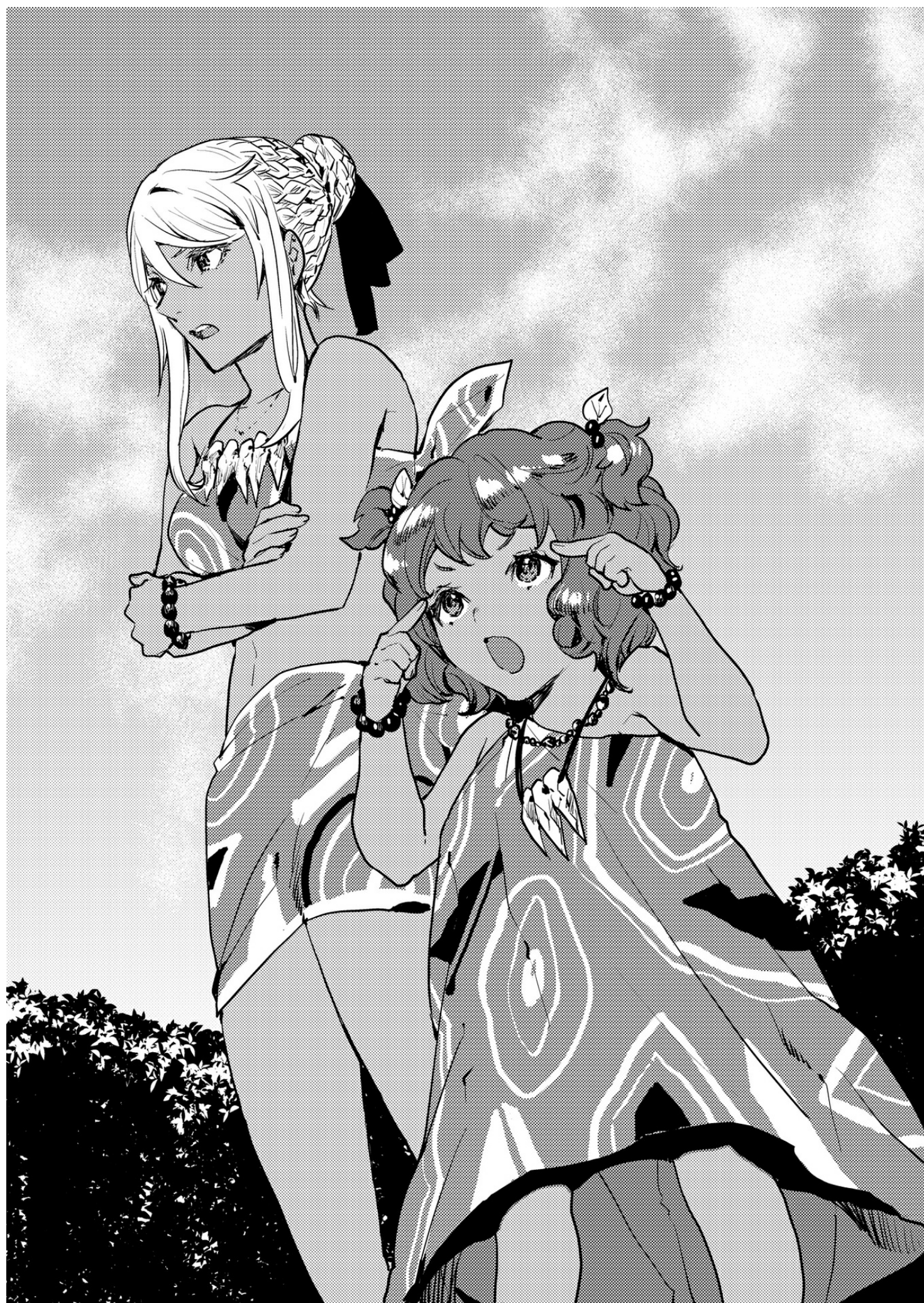
“Hee hee, I finished my work in a hurry too, so I got to come along! Hi, Asuta! Hi, Ai Fa!”

I turned around and found that at some point, my clan head had ended up right behind me as she ate her snack.

“Huh? Are you mad about something, Ai Fa?” Rimee Ruu asked.

“Not exactly.”

“Really? But your eyebrows are all scrunched up.”



I wasn't as perceptive as Rimee Ruu, but even I could clearly tell that Ai Fa was in a bad mood. And I could more or less guess why that was. Even though tree climbing was a competition more up her alley, she still hadn't been able to win, which was really bringing down her mood.

"Well then, we've got to get back to work. Ai Fa, Rimee Ruu, what are you two planning on doing?"

"I wanna come along! Will you come too, Ai Fa?"

"Indeed."

And so, we returned to the main Fou house's kitchen with Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu in tow. Awaiting us there were the other female observers: Reina Ruu and Sufira Zaza.

"We've been waiting for you, Asuta. The Sauti and Beim women went with Toor Deen's group."

"Ah, got it. Er, long time no see, Sufira Zaza..."

"Quite so." Sufira Zaza nodded at me, looking dejected. She seemed downhearted, like she didn't even have enough willpower to glare at me or Ai Fa. It's not like I couldn't understand what she was thinking, though.

"I've heard about what's happening with Lem Dom. She's training to become a hunter at the Dom house now, right?" I said.

"Yes. It seems she'll be going into the forest as a hunter in training as soon as she learns the methods of the Dom clan."

Deek Dom had finally made his decision. Of course, it had come after a lot of debate with Gulaf Zaza and the Jeen clan head. Apparently, Lem Dom had also done contests of strength with several hunters in training under the age of fifteen and been victorious, proving her competency to her relatives.

"Her skill with a bow and ability to hide her presence were equal to those of a full-fledged hunter, well beyond what a hunter in training is expected to be capable of. It seems your judgment was correct, Ai Fa."

"My judgment was nothing but an estimation. The strength Lem Dom has gained is her achievement alone," Ai Fa stated, looking at Sufira Zaza with a

deadly serious stare. “You seem to have a strong attachment to Lem Dom, youngest daughter of the Zaza, but since Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom have acknowledged her, it is now certain that she has just as much strength as the other young hunters to be. As a woman of the forest’s edge, the only thing you can do is pray for her to always return home safe.”

“I know that much...” Sufira Zaza replied with a deep sigh. She was normally so confident and dauntless. It was difficult to see her being so down over this.

However, I still had work I needed to do today, so I got myself back on track and returned to the meal prep.

During the contests of strength, we had taken turns minding the giba bone pot. If it wasn’t stirred every thirty minutes, the ingredients would burn, and firewood needed to be added frequently in order to maintain the proper level of heat. Fortunately, there didn’t seem to be any issues with the contents of the pot or the heat level when I checked them.

“All right, let’s go ahead and start the preparations for the other dish.”

The ten of us got to work cutting up giba meat and vegetables. When it came to chopping things up finely, everyone was equally skilled. The members of the small clans still didn’t have all the skills they needed to make some of the more excessively elaborate dishes, but teaching them how to make meatballs had been quick and easy, so they were well accustomed to mincing meat and precisely chopping vegetables.

They’re used to working together now, since I’m always having them help with the prep work for our business. Nobody else stands out like Toor Deen does, but it’s easy to see how much they’re all improving.

Many members of the nearby clans helped the Fa with work and sold us meat in exchange for coins, but they didn’t use their earnings as luxuriously as the Ruu did. It took quite a bit of money to purchase the everyday items they had been short on, and they also must have wanted to save up for unexpected circumstances. Injuries, illness, and childbirth all required money to deal with, and not many people at the forest’s edge would fail to take that into consideration.

Therefore, most of them weren’t interested in purchasing high-class

ingredients. They mostly only bought the kinds of things that had always been available in the post town, except for tau oil and sugar, which they added to their shopping regularly since just a small amount could drastically improve the quality of a dish. But few of them were very familiar with the expensive ingredients that could be found in the castle town.

That had forced us to work hard to figure out the menu for tonight's banquet. It was the type of event that only happened once every few months, so we all wanted to go for something more elaborate than usual, and I also wanted to show that it was possible to make delicious food even with limited ingredients. We had put a lot of effort into today's meal with those goals in mind.

"All right, I guess that should just about do it here. We'll leave two behind to man the flames, and everyone else will move to the empty house next door."

There were five houses in the Fou settlement, but two of them had been left vacant. If we hadn't been able to use those kitchens, we never would have finished in time.

As we were starting to head out, Reina Ruu sighed in admiration. "It's amazing how busy you all look when I'm watching you work as an outsider. It doesn't feel that way when I'm in the thick of things, but seeing you all running around now is almost making me dizzy."

"Yeah, I could see that. But things are going as planned on our end, so there's no reason for us to feel flustered."

After moving to one of the vacant houses and working for another half an hour, we managed to finish all the preparations we needed to without a hitch.

When I returned to the plaza, I found Yun Sudra and Toor Deen's groups had already gathered there. Baadu Fou had been talking to Jiza Ruu and Dari Sauti, but when he saw us he said, "Hmm? Have you finished your work, Asuta? It's still well before the time we agreed on."

"Yes. We should have no problem finishing the rest after the contests of strength wrap up."

"Well then, why don't we resume the competitions? The pole tugging and combat contests are going to take a while, after all."

It seemed that the hunters all around us had been eagerly waiting to hear those words, since they immediately rose to their feet when Baadu Fou made that declaration. Apparently, they had gotten their energy back just fine.

“The next competition will be pole tugging. Everyone, give it your all and aim for victory!”

A stirring cheer rang out. Everything they did seemed so well synchronized that it almost felt like they actually were all related.

The hunters of the six clans were getting really fired up, and now Jiza Ruu was here as well, to watch them as an additional observer.

4

The fourth event was pole tugging. I had seen this kind of competition done before in the post town, between Ji Maam and the massive Doga of the Gamley Troupe, but it seemed the rules were quite different this time, since that had been just a bit of entertainment for the townsfolk. To start with, the competitors would be holding on to their poles with only one arm each. Furthermore, they had to stand on top of boards that were only around thirty centimeters wide. They could win by either snatching the pole away or by pulling their opponent off that board.

The pole was about a meter long, and the distance between opponents would be roughly the same. Since their footing was going to be so narrow, they wouldn't be able to widen their stance to brace themselves effectively. They would simply have to grip the end of the pole and try to knock their opponent off-balance by pushing or pulling it. This competition tested not only the obvious things like one's grip strength and sense of balance, but also instantaneous strength and reflexes, as well as the ability to read an opponent's breathing.

“All right. It's time to determine the pairings, so everyone grab the end of a single vine.”

A pelt had been laid out on the ground, with the ends of several vines snaking out from underneath it. It was a way of drawing lots for matches.

Each of the thirty-three hunters grabbed a single vine end, and then the pelt was removed. When they followed their vine to its other end, the one holding it was to be their opponent. That determined the first sixteen pairings, while Masa Fou Ran got a victory by default in the first round.

“We will begin with those holding the shortest vines first. The victor of the first match will go up against Masa Fou Ran next.”

The first match was a clash between clan heads, with Ai Fa on one side and the head of the Deen on the other.

The Deen clan head’s gaze was fixed on Ai Fa. He was a middle-aged man with a very sturdy-looking build who didn’t really let his emotions show on his face, and though he wasn’t all that tall, he *was* muscular. Because I was so close with Toor Deen, I was fairly familiar with him as well.

He scolded Toor Deen once because her sweets weren’t to his taste, but he doesn’t seem to be a bad guy or anything, I thought to myself as the match kicked off in silence. It was an intense fight. Both of them were right-handed, so the pole was at an angle between them. As they read one another’s breath, they pulled and pushed the pole, sometimes twisting their wrists or shaking it up or down.

That continued for around fifteen seconds before the end of the match suddenly arrived. The Deen clan head thrust his arm out, and at the same time Ai Fa twisted her body while pulling, causing the former to lose his balance, and one of his knees to hit the ground.

“Ai Fa is victorious!” Baadu Fou declared, which was met with cheers and applause.

“That was amazing. The Deen clan head made it all the way to the end in the last contest of strength,” Toor Deen remarked, clapping her hands with a look of admiration. The Suun clan didn’t hold festivals of the hunt or contests of strength at their own settlement, so this was only the second time in her life that she had ever seen one.

From there, the matches steadily continued. All the clan heads except for the head of the Deen made it through the first round, as did all the other men whose names I knew.

The second round kicked off with seventeen competitors still in it. First up was Ai Fa versus Masa Fou Ran, a match that my clan head swiftly won. The hunter fell powerlessly to his knees after having the pole stolen from him just a few moments after it started.

“Looks like there’s no way I can beat you when it comes to pole tugging,” Masa Fou Ran said with a calm smile, while Ai Fa just silently nodded back.

After that, Baadu Fou and the Ran clan head won their matches, after which we ended up with another clash between clan heads, this time between the Liddo clan head and Raielfam Sudra. In other words, it was a match between the largest and the smallest of the six clan heads who were present.

This seemed to be a competition where a difference in size didn’t seem to offer any particularly big advantages or disadvantages. If I had to say, though, the increased reach and muscular strength of the bigger hunters probably gave them a bit of an edge. The smaller hunters might have been able to leverage their lower center of gravity, but reach allowed for a lot more mobility in terms of both pulling and pushing, which would be really useful for throwing someone off-balance.

However, it was Raielfam Sudra who claimed victory in the end. When his opponent pulled on the pole, he thrust out his arm with all his might, causing the other clan head to tumble backward.

Yun Sudra cheered and threw her arms around another woman. Even among the members of the other clans, men and women alike started freely voicing surprise and admiration.

“Damn! I lost! You’re quite a hunter, clan head of the Sudra!” the Liddo clan head said, sitting cross-legged on the ground and scratching his head in frustration. He kind of reminded me of Dan Rutim, possibly because of his goggle eyes, beard, and big-bellied body. “Seems like you’ll be a real capable competitor in the combat competition too. I’d very much like to face you then!”

“It all comes down to the forest’s guidance.” Rather than acting all proud of his victory, Raielfam Sudra just carefully placed the pole on the ground.

Before long, eight matches had ended, leaving nine competitors. They included the four clan heads except for those of the Deen and the Liddo, one

man each from the Ran, Sudra, and Liddo, and two from the Deen. Cheem Sudra, Jou Ran, and Toor Deen's father still remained in the competition.

Ai Fa's next opponent ended up being none other than Cheem Sudra, and their match proved to be a fierce one. Cheem Sudra's quick movements seemed to be giving Ai Fa difficulty. On top of that, the Sudra hunter had his waist lowered super far down from the start, to the point that he was almost crouching at times, causing my clan head even more trouble.

Now that I think about it, Ai Fa's only competed against her father in this kind of contest of strength. Does she have trouble with opponents who are smaller than her?

Even if he wasn't as little as Raielfam Sudra, Cheem Sudra was still a small man. He must've been nearly ten whole centimeters shorter than Ai Fa. However, though he was slender for a man, he wasn't thinner than Ai Fa. He had narrowly lost to Ai Fa at the weight pulling, but he didn't seem to fall significantly behind her in terms of instantaneous power.

Their intense battle continued for nearly two minutes, until Ai Fa finally made a big move. While pulling on the pole, she turned her body on top of her board. Holding his arm out as far as he could, Cheem Sudra somehow managed to brace himself. However, Ai Fa immediately rotated the opposite way and pushed on the pole, sending the hunter falling on his rear.

A loud cheer erupted, accompanied by the loudest applause yet. Ai Fa sighed, and wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

"That was amazing! Do you think Ai Fa will be able to keep winning all the way to the end?" Yun Sudra excitedly asked. She looked just as happy as when Raielfam Sudra had won. Apparently, one of her relatives losing wasn't enough to sully her mood.

"I'm not sure. I definitely want her to do her best, but Raielfam Sudra's going to be a tough opponent," Toor Deen said.

"Our clan head is even better at pole tugging than Cheem. Wouldn't it really be something to be proud of if both our clan heads made it to the final round?" Yun Sudra whispered to me with a smile, acting as if she hadn't heard the other girl. She had some complicated feelings about Ai Fa, but she wasn't the sort to

bring them into a situation like this. And that wasn't because she was suppressing her feelings or anything, but because she honestly adored Ai Fa as a fellow person of the forest's edge. It was a testament to the days they had spent together at the Sauti settlement.

At any rate, the contest was still ongoing.

Jou Ran beat the Ran clan head, Toor Deen's father defeated the Liddo man, and Raielfam Sudra won over the Deen man. Adding in Ai Fa, who won the first match, and Baadu Fou, who got the bye, we had the five hunters moving on to the fourth round.

The first match was between Ai Fa and Baadu Fou. For the second, it was Jou Ran versus Toor Deen's father. Raielfam Sudra got the bye for the round, and would face the victor of the first match in the semifinals. For Jou Ran and Toor Deen's father, though, this already was the semifinals.

Huh. Ai Fa ended up in the first match again, which means she'll have to win one more match than everyone else to make it to the end. Still, luck with drawing lots came down to the forest's guidance too, and since the amount of stamina you had after facing your opponents depended on the level skill they had, there was no point in lamenting a bad draw.

At any rate, the match between Ai Fa and Baadu Fou kicked off. It was yet another tough one, but going up against tall opponents really did seem to be Ai Fa's specialty, as she didn't show any of the hesitation she had when facing Cheem Sudra. Rather than relying on brute strength, the two of them measured each other's breathing as they pushed and pulled on the pole, fighting in a calm and measured way.

In the end, it was Ai Fa who emerged victorious. The moment that Baadu Fou pulled his arm back in a feint, my clan head swiftly twisted with her wrist and snatched the grigee pole out of his hand.

"Hmm. So you read my breathing? You truly are skilled, Ai Fa," Baadu Fou said with a breezy smile.

Ai Fa nodded back at him while wiping more sweat off her brow.

In the next match, Jou Ran beat Toor Deen's father. The young chef's father

seemed to specialize in this event, but Jou Ran had an advantage: he was left-handed.

Now that I thought about it, when he had been drawing his bow, I was pretty sure his body had been facing in the opposite direction that the others were. Apparently, when your opponent was left-handed, it could confuse your senses. That wasn't a problem for Jou Ran, though, since he had always faced right-handed opponents.

As a result, Toor Deen's father was swiftly defeated. Toor Deen let out a sorrowful "Ah..." and lowered her head dejectedly.

"What a shame. Seems like it was a bit of a bad matchup."

Toor Deen wriggled bashfully for a bit, then brought her mouth close to my ear. Because of the extreme height difference between us, though, I had to stoop down. "Isn't it unfair that everyone else is competing with their right arms, while he's the only one using his left? It didn't matter for archery, but now it's making me feel frustrated."

As I recalled, Jou Ran had beaten Toor Deen's father in the archery competition as well.

"Maybe, but it isn't a taboo, so there's nothing that can be done about it. Besides, he's probably only competing like that because he's left-handed."

"That's true, but still..." Toor Deen said, her eyebrows drooping. It was rare for her to be so assertive, so this really must have been upsetting for her.

Meanwhile, the hunters who had already lost were starting another competition over in the plaza. Apparently, it was to give the hunters who had won a chance to rest. At the same time, it also gave the defeated hunters another opportunity to show off. There wasn't any particular order to it, with the hunters volunteering themselves to clash against one another randomly.

After around ten minutes of such matches, the semifinal match of Ai Fa versus Raielfam Sudra kicked off.

Ai Fa might have lost in the tree-climbing competition, but this time she was able to seize victory. Since Raielfam Sudra was even smaller than Cheem Sudra, he caused her some real trouble, but in the end she snatched the pole away just

like she had against Baadu Fou. The match probably lasted around three minutes in total, and once it was over, there was yet another explosion of cheers and applause.

After that, there were some more filler matches, and then at last it was time for the finals between Ai Fa and Jou Ran. Thanks to the break in between, Ai Fa didn't seem to be having any issues in terms of stamina, but considering the fact that my clan head had previously fought Lem Dom for literally hours on end, this competition couldn't have exhausted her anyway. However, she was up against the left-handed Jou Ran. Somehow, it reminded me of Shin Ruu having to fight the ambidextrous Melfried.

"Begin!" Baadu Fou shouted, and both competitors lowered their hips.

Ai Fa had fully taken on her fighting stance right from the start. Did she figure it would be difficult to face him head-on? She tugged the pole with her right hand, turning the left side of her body toward her opponent. Naturally, pushing in that position wouldn't work out too well, so she stuck to mainly pulling on the pole, and when she went to push, she temporarily shifted her body and thrust with incredible force, which made Jou Ran the first to fall into a bad position. Ai Fa possessed astounding instantaneous strength and reflexes. Jou Ran's posture came close to crumbling a number of times, and whenever it did, cheers and shrieks filled the air.

A large number of people were shouting Ai Fa's and Jou Ran's names, and most of those voices belonged to women. About sixty percent of them seemed to be calling out for my clan head. She must've been really popular, considering how many relatives Jou Ran had in the crowd.

"Are you not going to cheer for Ai Fa, Asuta?" Yun Sudra asked, sounding confused.

"Well, it's kinda hard for me to shout like that unless something makes me really lose control of myself."

At the swordsmanship tournament, I had been so worried that Shin Ruu might get injured that it had really thrown me off. But because this was more of a sportsmanlike competition, I had no trouble maintaining my composure.

Still, I feel like I'll regret doing nothing if Ai Fa doesn't end up winning, I

thought, bringing my hands up beside my mouth...only to be cut off by a round of loud cheering. Ai Fa and Jou Ran had both fallen together.

After a bit of silence, Baadu Fou shouted, "Jou Ran is victorious! Does anyone have any objections?!" Once again, no one objected. And so, Baadu Fou nodded and raised his right arm. "Jou Ran is the victor of the pole-tugging competition!"

Congratulatory applause rang out from the crowd. However, I remained frozen there, looking like a fool with my hands up beside my mouth. Unlike the previous competitions, I couldn't believe that Ai Fa had lost this one.

It wasn't as if I had been absolutely certain that she would win, but now that the match was settled, I was so taken off guard that I felt truly shaken. If she had been up against Raielfam Sudra or the Liddo clan head, I might not have been so badly thrown for a loop, but her opponent was a young man, and one who didn't appear especially formidable at that, so I might have subconsciously let my guard down.

"Are you all right, Asuta?" Toor Deen asked, tugging on the sleeve of my T-shirt. That brought me back to my senses, so I lowered my hands and leaned in close to the girl's ear.

"I'm fine. Still, I think I might understand your frustration now."

"Yeah. It really is frustrating, isn't it?" Toor Deen replied, giving me a big nod with a furrowed brow.

In the center of the plaza, Ai Fa stood up like nothing had happened, while Jou Ran faced her with an earnest smile.

"I thought for sure I had lost that one. You really are a fantastic hunter, Ai Fa."

My clan head offered no response.

"If I had been competing with my right arm, I would have lost in an instant, so I don't really feel like I can brag about having beaten you."

"Regardless, you were the one who was declared the victor, man of the Ran clan," Ai Fa said with a bow, and then she left the field of battle.

Now that Jou Ran had been announced as the victor, he was given a great big round of applause.

“All that remains is the combat competition, but Ai Fa and Jou Ran will need a bit of time to rest. Let us take a bit of a break before resuming.”

Everyone then shuffled around a bit, with the clans mingling together as people chatted with one another. For my part, I started looking to see where Ai Fa had gone, and soon spotted her by herself, scooping tea out of a water jug to wet her parched throat.

“You did great, Ai Fa. It was a shame how the last match went, though.”

She just stared at me.

“I’m sure you’re frustrated, but try not to fixate on it too much. And I hope you’ll give the last contest your all too.”

Ai Fa silently nodded back. Since she didn’t even say “Indeed,” I felt even more uneasy.

“Are you really okay, Ai Fa? If you have something you want to say, then you should come out and hit me with it.”

“What has you so out of sorts?” Ai Fa finally said, causing me to breathe a sigh of relief.

“I guess I’d say that I’m feeling kind of frustrated myself, so much so that it’s kind of surprising to me. To be honest, I can’t believe that you lost that match just now.”

“He is skilled with his left hand, which is rare at the forest’s edge. Raielfam Sudra and the Liddo clan head are better hunters than him, but that one factor worked out to his advantage. That’s all there is to it.”

“Yeah, but still. The stuff that happened before this didn’t bother me much, but that match really got to me.”

Ai Fa’s eyes narrowed, and she brought her mouth in close to my ear. Then, with warm breath she whispered, “Do not worry. I’ll win the next one for sure.” Apparently, Ai Fa’s fighting spirit had quietly caught fire.

I gave her a nod and a smile. “Then I’ll believe in your words, and in your strength as a hunter. Anyway, I need to go check on the pots, so I’ll see you later.”

“Right.”

With that, I left Ai Fa behind and hurried to the kitchen to check on the state of the giba bone soup.

I added some firewood to the stove, stirred the contents of the pot, and added some fresh water, then headed back to the plaza. The men had already gathered in the center, and the Beim clan head was over by the guests.

“Well then, let us begin the combat competition! Once again, each of you is to grab hold of a vine in order to determine your opponent!” Baadu Fou declared.

The hunters pulled another set of lots, and once again, Ai Fa ended up in the first match, with her opponent being the Liddo clan head. They were both renowned for being the foremost hunters among the six clans, so the crowd was getting fired up right from the very start.

“I never expected to be facing you right at the very beginning. This must also be the forest’s guidance,” the Liddo clan head remarked with a frank grin. That smile of his kind of resembled Dan Rutim’s as well. “I’ve heard how you defeated the Lea clan head at the Ruu festival of the hunt, and had an even match with the head of the Rutim. As I understand it, those two are as strong as the hunters of the north, so I intend to face you as if I was facing one of them.”

“Hn.” Ai Fa simply replied with a calm nod.

Amid excited cheering, the two of them stepped into the center of the plaza.

I was already well acquainted with this competition. The victor was determined by who knocked their opponent to the ground first. Touching the ground was permitted, but only with the bottoms of your feet and the palms of your hands. There were no real fouls, so you were free to grab your opponent’s hair or clothing, or to hit and kick them.

However, there was one firm, absolute taboo: they weren’t to seriously injure their opponents. Causing bloodshed or breaking bones was forbidden. However, I wasn’t sure how the rule applied to causing muscle injuries or bruises. There was no shortage of people who attacked their opponent with blow after blow, clearly not caring about that kind of minor wound, so maybe the rule allowed them to go that far. After all, that kind of roughness was just

part of the competition.

Just don't get injured...and do everything you can to earn a result you can be happy with, Ai Fa, I prayed as I kept my eyes fixed on my clan head.

Naturally, she looked as calm and composed as always.

There were no elders among the smaller clans, so Baadu Fou took on the role of referee. He stood between the two of them, and then shouted out, "Begin!" signaling the start of the match.

The Liddo clan head grabbed at Ai Fa with the force of a wild beast. However, my clan head twisted her body and grabbed the man's right arm from the side. Once she had done that, she just had to drop her hips to cause the Liddo clan head to float through the air, and then his back slammed into the ground. It was like something out of aikido.

After a moment of silence, resounding cheers erupted from the crowd.

"A-Ai Fa is victorious!" Even Baadu Fou sounded surprised.

Ai Fa, however, just bowed and exited the arena.

"Th-The Liddo clan head went down in no time at all. Doesn't that mean none of the other hunters have any chance of beating Ai Fa either?" Toor Deen asked, unable to hide her surprise.

"Hmm. I'm not sure," I answered with a tilt of my head. "I'm sure compatibility is a part of this competition too. Ai Fa might have trouble facing opponents who are shorter than her."

At any rate, Ai Fa wasn't the sort of person who would get careless in a fight, no matter who she was up against. And as if exemplifying what I had just been thinking, she swiftly took down her second opponent—the head of the Ran—as well. She had been up against two clan heads in a row.

There weren't any big upsets among the other matches. In fact, the results seemed kind of similar to the pole tugging competition. The combat competition wasn't a battle of pure strength, but one that required a broad skill set and tested things like reflexes, concentration, and the ability to read your opponent's breathing.

After the second round finished, there were nine competitors left. Except for the head of the Ran clan being replaced by the head of the Deen, it was otherwise the same lineup as with the pole tugging.

For the third round, Ai Fa was up against a Liddo man. This time, her opponent didn't just rely on his brute strength and try to grab her directly, but Ai Fa still managed to grab him by the arm in a heartbeat and kick his leg out from under him, bringing the fight to an end before he could do anything at all. As for the other matches, Raielfam Sudra was victorious over the Deen clan head, Baadu Fou beat Toor Deen's father, and Jou Ran won versus Cheem Sudra.

In the fourth round, Ai Fa ended up against the Deen man who had previously gotten the bye. He had quite an impressive build too, but he was no match for my clan head.

With that, we headed into the semifinals, where Ai Fa was up against Jou Ran.

The crowd seemed to be even more fired up than normal, probably because Jou Ran had just won the pole tugging competition. Ai Fa had been steadily advancing through the rounds, but they seemed to think that he might be able to stand in her way.

Naturally, I was feeling nervous too. In a competition that involved the use of both arms, like a combat contest, I couldn't imagine how being left-handed would give him any real advantage. The hunters of the forest's edge didn't really fight in a way that would make one's dominant hand all that important. However, there was something about Jou Ran that was difficult to get a grasp on, so I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Please, at least beat Jou Ran this one time. Otherwise, I don't think I'll be able to sincerely get along with him. Despite what I had said to Ai Fa earlier, I really doubted my ability to stay above it all if he won. This was pretty much our first meeting and he was young, but I just couldn't bear the thought of my clan head losing to him in combat. I guess that made me more petty than jealous.

But at any rate, the match only lasted for an instant. The Ran clan head who had taken over from Baadu Fou as judge shouted out, "Begin," and Ai Fa suddenly kicked off the ground hard. It was rare for her to go on the offensive

like that. Having covered the distance in a flash, though, she grabbed hold of her opponent's collar, swept his feet from the outside, and then flipped Jou Ran's body over in a move similar to a major sweeping leg throw from judo.

Ai Fa lifted Jou Ran's swept legs up higher than where his head had been, so if she had slammed him into the ground there would have been some serious damage. However, my clan head would never be so merciless. Instead she used her grip on his collar to slow his fall and gently lowered him to the ground, defeating him without inflicting any damage whatsoever.

Silence once again fell as everyone was taken aback, only for them to then explode with cheers all at once a moment later.

Ai Fa removed her hand from Jou Ran's collar, then rose up as smoothly as a leopard. I could hear Rimee Ruu shouting, "Hooray!" from a distance, and looking down, I found Toor Deen staring up at me with a sparkling smile.

Amid the thunderous applause, Jou Ran stood up, scratching his head.

"You got me. I never imagined the difference in our strength would be that wide."

Ai Fa bowed to him without saying a word, and he bowed back before turning around.

The next semifinal match was between Baadu Fou and Raielfam Sudra. Just like with the pole tugging, Baadu Fou fought calmly without any unnecessary movement. On the other hand, Raielfam Sudra didn't stop moving for even a second, displaying agility and strength similar to that of a real monkey. Their strategies were so different that I couldn't tell which one had the advantage. However, it was Raielfam Sudra who ultimately won the bout. He got under Baadu Fou's long legs and then grabbed his sash from behind to pull him to the ground.

"Raielfam Sudra is victorious!"

The cheers came once more in raging waves. Some of the hunters even shook their heads in admiration. They must not have expected a small man like Raielfam Sudra to be so skilled. It wasn't like everyone had Ai Fa's talent for judging strength, after all.

After facing off with all those other men, Ai Fa and Raielfam Sudra ended up being pitted against one another in the finals. It was a clash between clan heads, though the pair happened to be in charge of the smallest of the six clans, and neither possessed a robust build.

Still, it's no fluke that it came down to the two of them.

I wasn't any good at telling how strong hunters were. However, Ai Fa had once said that Raielfam Sudra was skilled enough to fight off Tei Suun, and according to her, Tei Suun had been dangerous enough that even Ludo and Shin Ruu working together would have had a hard time capturing him alive. I didn't know what exactly that said about their relative ability levels, but it at least gave me the strong impression that Raielfam Sudra was no ordinary hunter in terms of strength. It was fitting that he had made it all the way to the finals of this combat competition.

"Begin!" Baadu Fou shouted, once again acting as judge, and Raielfam Sudra began moving to circle around Ai Fa. If my clan head didn't react, he would be behind her in an instant. Ai Fa shifted to maintain her distance while Raielfam Sudra kept trying to circle around her to both the right and the left.

My clan head continued to adjust her posture to face her opponent, and occasionally reached out with her arm to threaten him. But Raielfam Sudra wasn't striking out at her at all, so Ai Fa was going to have to take the offensive. However, the Sudra clan head just brushed her hand aside and then tried to slip inside her guard. Ai Fa refused to let him get close, though. She was every bit as agile as her opponent.

The crowd roared with excitement. As they did, my clan head took a big step forward. Just when her fingertips grabbed hold of Raielfam Sudra's shoulder, though, he swiftly turned. His hand was now gripping Ai Fa's wrist. His posture was set for the sort of one-armed shoulder throw Ai Fa and Shin Ruu had used in the past.

He lifted Ai Fa's body into the air, just like what had happened to Melfried several days prior. It was the sort of throw where if you tried to forcefully brace yourself against it you would injure your elbow, and it had such momentum to it that it looked to me as if she had kicked off the ground herself.

My clan head flew through the air in an arc, and the young women in the crowd shrieked. However, Ai Fa rolled over in the air and managed to land on her feet. Then, Raielfam Sudra charged at her, his body low to the ground. The Sudra clan head's head crashed into her abdomen, causing her posture to collapse backward. But before her back touched the ground, she grabbed hold of the sash around his waist and pulled hard, despite her bent-over position. Using the head jammed into her abdomen as a fulcrum, Ai Fa sent Raielfam Sudra's body into the air. The clan head had to twist his body like an acrobat in order to land with his feet on the ground.

Ai Fa was unable to avoid having her hands touch the ground as she fell, but she sprung up with incredible speed. At this point, Raielfam Sudra's back was facing Ai Fa. He kicked off the ground in order to close in on her, twisting his body in the process and slamming his shoulder into her. My clan head had only just managed to right herself, but she was once again thrown into an unstable position when Raielfam Sudra's shoulder tackle struck her right on her side.

Ai Fa was starting to fall over again. However, she did manage to wrap her left arm around the man's neck. Then she grabbed her opponent's sash from behind once more with her right arm and bent backward, going into what looked like a brainbuster from pro wrestling. Raielfam Sudra's small body was sent flying. However, it looked like he had his knees bent. If he managed to land his feet on the ground, he would probably be able to regroup.

Perhaps noticing that, Ai Fa rotated her body to the right at the last possible moment, shifting the Sudra clan head so that it was no longer his back that was plunging toward the dirt, but rather his left shoulder. The force of the impact made both of them bounce, with Ai Fa landing on her back, while Raielfam Sudra's body was sent tumbling along the ground multiple times. After slamming into the firewood pile for the ritual flame several meters away, the Sudra clan head finally came to a stop. The pile then collapsed, with a number of pieces falling on his back. But even still, it only took a moment for him to sit up.

"Hmm. It seems you got me." Despite having been slammed into the ground so forcefully, he seemed to be completely uninjured.

Amid deafening cheers, Ai Fa slowly rose.

“The victor of the combat competition is Ai Fa of the Fa clan!” Baadu Fou shouted, at which point I finally released the breath I had been holding in. Apparently, I had forgotten to breathe as my eyes followed their intense movements.

“Congratulations, Asuta,” Toor Deen said with a smile.

“Ai Fa is amazing,” Yun Sudra added from my other side.

Over Toor Deen’s head, I spied Saris Ran Fou staring at my clan head with teary eyes. And as for Raielfam Sudra’s wife, Li Sudra, she was applauding too, with a bright smile on her face.

And with that, the curtain closed on the five contests of strength that had taken the last several hours to complete. As the cheers and applause washed over her, Ai Fa simply closed her eyes and brushed the dirt off of her clothing.

5

It was now the lower sixth hour, sunset. The tower of firewood in the center of the plaza had been reassembled and the ritual flame stoked, signaling the start of the banquet. The eight guests and eighty-four members of the participating clans had all gathered in the plaza, with the unwed women from the six clans wearing banquet attire. The Ruu clan only brought that clothing out for wedding banquets, but small clans with few members didn’t hold weddings all that often, so they wore them at festivals of the hunt as well.

Since they weren’t as well off as the Ruu clan, the majority of them used flowers and berries as accessories. However, all of them wore iridescent veils that created rainbow splashes of color here and there throughout the plaza. They must have been precious bits of attire, passed down from grandmother to mother, and then mother to daughter in turn. As they lived such impoverished lives, they must have needed to scrape together money bit by bit in order to buy them. The young unwed women were all showing off their dazzling smiles from behind their veils.

“Well then, before we begin the banquet, I would like to once again congratulate the five hunters who were victorious in the contests of strength!”

Baadu Fou declared before the ritual flame.

Behind him, five hunters were seated on a stage made from logs.

“The victor in the archery contest, Cheem Sudra!”

When his name was called, the small fifteen-year-old hunter quickly stood up. Everyone clapped, but the boy looked rather sullen and his face was turning red. A young woman from the Fou placed a woven flower crown atop his head.

“The victor in the weight-pulling contest, Radd Liddo!”

The Liddo clan head, who was the most muscular person present, slowly rose. His stern expression gave way to an amused smile, and he looked quite eager to dig into the food and fruit wine.

“The victor in the tree-climbing contest, Raielfam Sudra!”

The Sudra clan head looked just as calm and dour as always. As he stood beside the Liddo clan head, it was clear that there had to be around a thirty centimeter height difference between them, with the larger clan head probably weighing twice as much as he did.

“The victor in the pole-tugging contest, Jou Ran!”

Unsurprisingly, Jou Ran had a smile on his face. Women of the Ran and Fou clans cheered out in shrill voices. If he was still single, he would probably receive a fair number of marriage proposals today.

“And the victor in the combat contest, Ai Fa!”

The women cheered for Ai Fa just as much as they had for Jou Ran. Naturally, my clan head’s expression didn’t budge one bit as she stood there commandingly with her back straight.



Once the crowning ceremony was complete, there was another lively round of applause from the crowd.

“These are the five who claimed victory in today’s contest of strength. The rest of us who could not measure up to them must strive to work even harder as hunters,” Baadu Fou stated, accepting a bottle of fruit wine from his wife. “I am the one speaking to you now because this banquet is being held here at the Fou settlement, but that does not place me above you in any way. Just as we treat the Ran who are our subordinate clan as equals here, I would like each of the six clan heads present to carry out this duty in turn.” The majority of the people in the cheering crowd were holding bottles of fruit wine in their hands by this point. “Well then, let us get this festival of the hunt started! Members of the Fa, Deen, Liddo, Sudra, Fou, and Ran, consume these blessings, make them your strength, and give thanks to the mother forest!”

“Thanks to the mother forest!” voices chanted in unison.

At last, the banquet had begun. I added firewood to a simple stove and placed pasta into a pot. We had already cooked enough pasta to feed dozens of people, but our goal was to prepare enough for a hundred. Meanwhile, the crowd rushed toward the various other stoves that were set up here and there.

I had three stoves lined up next to me, and starting from the right, they had the meat sauce, pasta noodles, and giba bone soup on top of them. Yun Sudra was in charge of the meat sauce, while Saris Ran Fou was handling the giba bone soup.

“Hmm. So this is that pasta stuff I’ve heard so much about, is it? It certainly has a strange shape, just like they said,” one of the hunters remarked, staring as I served up a mountain of pasta onto a large plate.

“You can sample it first if you’d like. It’s really good with either the sauce or the broth we have here as well. The easy way to eat it is to wrap some around one of these segmented spoons.”

The pasta used not only poitan, but also fuwano, egg, and reten oil, so virtually nobody from the small clans had tasted it before. Toor Deen and Yun Sudra were probably the only ones making it in their own homes.

Perhaps because of the novelty, a fair number of men and young children were gathering around us. As we lectured them on how to eat the pasta, we served up one dish after another. The large amount of tableware we were handing out had naturally come from our post town business supplies.

The sauce contained a large amount of ground meat. Even the small clans frequently ate tarapa-based dishes, so they definitely wouldn't be disappointed with it. And then there was the dish I was proudest of: the giba bone soup. After three whole months of experimentation, it was finally ready for its grand debut.

The giba bone soup's stock had taken nine hours of boiling to prepare, so it was naturally quite rich. By the time we had removed the giba bones at the end, all of the marrow had melted off them, leaving nothing but smooth, clean bones.

Still, stock alone wasn't enough. It was just the base that I had used to prepare the best soup that I could come up with. The ingredients I utilized were dried seaweed, rock salt, sugar, pico leaves, tau oil, myamuu, nyatta liquor, and of course, some additional stock from giba meat. The giba bones provided the liquid with incredible richness and flavor, but they were lacking in umami, so I had added giba meat and seaweed stock, as well as a variety of seasonings, to supplement the taste.

Furthermore, with tonkotsu stock, you could choose between a light clear broth and a rich white broth. I had gone with a white one to cater to the tastes of the people of the forest's edge, and the result was a wonderfully rich soup. It was quite viscous, thanks to the number of giba bones we had used, and so cloudy that you couldn't see through it to a depth of even a centimeter. Its aroma was exquisite too. I wanted to try making it with kimyuus bones as well at some point, but I had no issues whatsoever with the way it tasted now, and I figured the people of the forest's edge would prefer it this way regardless.

I had also added lots of other ingredients to the giba bone soup. For vegetables, we had the cabbage-like tino, carrot-like nenon, spinach-like nanaar, and the mushrooms that were similar to cloud ears and common mushrooms. Then, to finish it off, I had made giba char siu too.

We hadn't prepared the char siu using the Chinese roasting method, though. Instead, we had gone with the braising technique Japanese ramen shops used. I had pulled out the stops when making it, taking blocks of rib meat that were tied up into round shapes and slowly simmering them in a specially prepared broth, then seasoning them with tau oil, sugar, myamuu, red mamaria vinegar, nyatta liquor, and keru root.

After they had simmered until they were tender enough for a wooden skewer to easily pass through, we left them to sit so the flavors could seep into them for a while. Then we had cut them into rather thick slices, which could be added on top of something else right before eating. Thanks to the plentiful solid ingredients, I knew the soup would have been fantastic all on its own, but I had thought it would be ideal to go one step further and make it a noodle soup dish instead.

"So this is the giba bone soup?" Rimee Ruu asked as she approached along with Reina Ruu, surrounded by members of the various clans.

"Hey there. Do the two of you want some? I'd like to have Jiza Ruu eat it too, actually."

"Jiza? But why?"

"Well, Jiza Ruu rated the giba cutlets quite highly, didn't he? He seemed to think that dish, which uses giba meat and lard, could be a good one for the people of the forest's edge. This dish is kind of similar, in how it concentrates the delicious flavor of giba meat, so I figured it might be to his tastes."

"I'm sure it will be pleasing not just to Jiza Ruu, but to all the people of the forest's edge. I'd like to experiment with it as well, but it takes quite a while to prepare," Reina Ruu said.

"Just gathering the firewood is a huge undertaking by itself, and it has a horrible stench if you mess it up. But you could use our research as a basis and continue from there if you'd like," I told her.

Reina Ruu smiled with a look that seemed half overjoyed and half apologetic, while Rimee Ruu just got all excited and declared, "I wanna hurry up and eat!" Oh, and since the two of them were guests, they weren't wearing any banquet attire in order to differentiate themselves. "And I wanna talk to Ai Fa too! Does

she still have to sit up there?”

“Yeah. Apparently, the custom is for the victors to stay up on the stage for a while and let everyone congratulate them while they enjoy the banquet. Isn’t that how it is with the Ruu festival of the hunt too?”

Even now, various women were bringing bowls and plates full of food to the victors sitting on the stage, one after another. Men and children were also approaching them constantly, so they always had someone to talk to.

“This is a banquet to deepen the ties between the six clans. You need to exercise a bit of patience, Rimee,” Reina Ruu said.

“Okay,” Rimee Ruu earnestly replied. I knew that it had hurt her really badly when Ai Fa had cut off contact with her, but as the young girl looked up at Ai Fa on the stage in the distance now, it was easy to see the delight shining in her eyes.

With that, the two friendly sisters left with portions for Jiza Ruu and Ai Fa, at which point Baadu Fou and his wife were the next to approach us.

“Asuta, I don’t think you need to prepare all the pasta at once. It’s a special dish, so why not leave some for later?” Baadu Fou’s wife said.

“Ah. You may be right. If at all possible, I’d like to have everyone here try it.”

“Indeed, but you should be sure to enjoy the banquet as well. I can take care of managing the flames for a while,” she kindly offered, and so I was able to step away from the stove.

Apparently, similar exchanges had occurred at the stoves on either side of me as well, so Yun Sudra and Saris Ran Fou had also been set free. Saris Ran Fou’s husband, the youngest son of the main Fou house, had also come to see her.

“Shall we go congratulate the victors, Asuta?” Yun Sudra asked, and we headed over in that direction together.

As Yun Sudra was an unwed woman, she had her hair down and was clad in banquet attire. Her long ash-brown hair flowed down her back, and with the iridescent veil she was wearing, she kind of looked like a different person, with a mature beauty about her.

“Congratulations on your victory today,” Yun Sudra said when we came to a stop in front of the stage, holding her left shoulder and bowing elegantly. I went ahead and gave a bow of my own too.

The five hunters were seated atop the stage, while the people surrounding them were all standing as they all enjoyed the banquet food. Laughter filled the air, earthenware bottles of fruit wine were being poured out into cups and dishes, and everyone was getting really fired up.

“Ooh, Asuta! I had some of that giba bone soup stuff! We make broth at the Liddo clan too, so why does it taste so different?!” the Liddo clan head, Radd Liddo, asked with a hearty laugh, his face especially red.

“Because we used a lot of expensive ingredients for today. It’s a banquet, so we’ve got to make it special.”

“Heh heh. When you’ve got as much money lying around as the Fa clan does, I bet you can eat stuff like this every single day!” he said without a hint of derision. He seemed to be in a good mood, and there was an earnest, almost innocent smile across his usually stern face.

“Clan head, Cheem, congratulations. It makes me so proud to know that two of the victors today came from our clan,” Yun Sudra called out.

The two hunters in question were being rather unsociable, though, only offering brief replies like “Right.”

I wanted to talk with Ai Fa too, but she was currently speaking to Jou Ran, while I was now engaged in conversation with Radd Liddo. And, well, we had already gotten to talk a bit after the contests of strength. It was important to prioritize interacting with other clans right now.

It was around then that I heard a commotion approaching us from behind, and when I turned to look, I let out a “Gah” before I could stop myself. A large man was coming our way with a tolos, parting the crowd as they went.

“Ah, if it isn’t the youngest son of the Zaza! That’s right, you were invited to attend as an observer too!” Radd Liddo jovially called out, only for Geol Zaza to shoot him a glare before turning to scan the plaza with his eyes.

“I’m the youngest son of the Zaza, Geol Zaza. I’ve come here as an observer

under orders from my clan head, Gulaf. Where can I store my tolos?”

“The Fou clan welcomes you. I can take charge of your tolos,” a Fou woman stated, looking a bit nervous as she approached Geol Zaza.

The hunter still looked displeased as he said, “Thanks” and thrust the bird’s reins at her.

“You got here rather late. The other guests all arrived by the time we were midway through the contests of strength,” Radd Liddo commented.

“Hmph,” Geol Zaza snorted. “My sister Sufira got here ahead of me, so it shouldn’t be any issue. I couldn’t exactly go shirking my hunting duty for the sake of a banquet held by some other clans anyway.”

“Oh? But I heard that when the Fa clan head and that Dom woman did their contests of strength, you came running over when the sun was still high in the sky.”

I didn’t know whether it was just his natural personality or the influence of the booze in his system, but Radd Liddo really wasn’t holding back, despite the fact that he was talking to the heir to his parent clan. Geol Zaza sulkily looked over the hunters on the stage, and his eyes narrowed sharply when he caught sight of Ai Fa.

“If you’re seated there, then you must have won a contest of strength, right, woman hunter of the Fa?”

“The Fa clan head was the winner of the combat competition! And she did a fine job of bringing me down, let me tell you!” Radd Liddo said with a chuckle before taking a swig of his fruit wine. However, perhaps due to the disquieting air Geol Zaza was giving off, everyone aside from Radd Liddo looked rather concerned. The Zaza weren’t just the parent clan of the Liddo and Deen; they were also one of the new leading clans of the forest’s edge. That meant that Geol Zaza was the heir to that title, putting him in a similar position to Jiza Ruu.

“You’re the Liddo clan head, aren’t you...? I recall seeing you at that Jeen wedding.”

“Yeah. Guess we didn’t have much of a chance to see one another before that.”

“Right. And we’ve never participated in the same festival of the hunt, so I don’t know anything of your strength. How skilled of a hunter are you?”

The question seemed to perplex Radd Liddo a little. “I don’t really know what to say to that. In contests of strength between the Liddo and Deen, I’m usually able to claim a win or two.”

“I’m asking about your combat skill.”

“That’s my specialty, along with weight pulling.”

“I still can’t be sure without facing you myself...” Geol Zaza muttered, and then his glare turned back to Ai Fa. “How many skilled hunters are gathered here? And just how strong is this woman hunter who defeated all of you? If anyone can answer me, I’d love to hear it.”

“Are you really so lacking in your ability to measure the strength of others? A hunter on your level should be able to more or less see such things,” Raielfam Sudra replied. He was a man who would never flinch, even if he was directly facing a leading clan head, so he looked just like he always did as he stared at Geol Zaza.

“Are you talking about the so-called insight of the weak? I was never weak, so I don’t possess that skill.”

“Yes, I suppose it’s true that large-bodied hunters tend to lack the ability to measure skill. Still, I must say this is quite a surprise,” Raielfam Sudra commented despite not looking surprised in the least as he stroked his wrinkled forehead. “Ai Fa is an outstanding hunter. Even if your insight is lacking, that much should be clear if you’ve heard about how she had an even match with the previous Rutim clan head.”

“I’ve only ever heard rumors about the last Rutim clan head. Is it true that his strength is second only to Donda Ruu out of the hunters under the Ruu clan?”

“I’d say that they’re actually quite even when competing in combat, and from what I’ve been told, sometimes he’s even beaten Donda Ruu.”

When he heard those words, Geol Zaza’s black eyes started blazing brightly. “If she fought evenly with a man who could do the same with Donda Ruu, wouldn’t that mean this woman possesses strength equal to that of one of the

leading clan heads?”

“You’re acquainted with Donda Ruu?”

“I met him for the first time recently, and he’s quite a hunter. Even I can tell that much,” Geol Zaza muttered, the disquieting tone in his voice welling up more and more.

Radd Liddo, meanwhile, questioningly tilted his head. “What are you getting so worked up over, youngest son of the Zaza? What does the Fa clan head’s strength matter?”

“This woman said she could beat me ten times in a row... I can’t exactly overlook such an insult, now can I?”

An even greater sense of unease seemed to spread through the crowd, but Radd Liddo simply laughed once again. “Even so, you can’t ask to do a contest of strength now. The Fa clan head has already had plenty of fruit wine to drink, so you wouldn’t be able to properly compare your strengths anyway.”

“Is there anyone else here who has that ‘insight of the weak’?”

I had learned that hunters like Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu who didn’t have particularly strong bodies developed a certain insight due to a craving for the strength they lacked. But rather than being some sort of mythical power, it was really just a discerning eye fostered by the need to compare yourself to others.

“I believe I’m rather skilled at measuring strength.” Cheem Sudra calmly chimed in from over by the right edge of the stage, and Geol Zaza’s blazing eyes turned his way.

“Am I inferior to this woman hunter?”

“To my eyes, the Fa clan head appears more skilled,” Cheem Sudra immediately replied, causing Geol Zaza to grind his teeth.

“Then what about you? Do you think you can beat me?”

“It would be difficult for me to defeat you.”

“Then how many hunters on this stage surpass me?”

“All of the hunters on this stage, myself aside...though I believe it would be a

close match with the Liddo clan head.”

With that, Radd Liddo uttered, “What?! The Sudra clan head who beat me in pole tugging is one thing, but are you saying the young Ran fellow is more skilled than me too?”

“That’s how it appears to me. Of course, that’s just my personal judgment.”

“Hmm... That means I need more training, then! Even if it is an honor to hear someone say I’m the equal of a leading clan head’s heir!” Radd Liddo said, letting out another jovial chuckle. “Still, everyone here is a victor! They won against more than thirty hunters, so they all must be quite skilled! There’s no shame in being weaker than any of them!”

“You don’t find that disappointing, as a subordinate of one of the leading clans?” Geol Zaza asked in a voice dripping with animosity, but Radd Liddo’s smile didn’t budge in the least.

“Even if we are subordinates of a leading clan, our blood ties with the Suun and the northern clans are weak. We’re not especially big either, even when compared to the Fou and the Ran. And I’ve learned that small clans like the Fa and Sudra have excellent hunters of their own, so I can’t see how regret comes into play here.”

Geol Zaza looked completely unsatisfied with that answer and turned his gaze toward Ai Fa once again. It was a threatening look that made it seem like he was going to challenge her to a contest of strength at any moment, but before he could open his mouth, a large figure approached him from the side. It was Jiza Ruu.

“It’s certainly become noisy over here. This is a banquet to be enjoyed. It is no place for such quarreling.”

Geol Zaza slowly turned to face him. “And who are you?”

“I am the oldest son of the main Ruu house, Jiza Ruu. Are you a hunter of the main Zaza house, perhaps?”

“I’m the youngest son of the main Zaza house, Geol Zaza. So, you’re the Ruu clan’s heir.”

The two of them looked to be about equal in terms of build. Jiza Ruu was just a touch taller, while Geol Zaza was the wider of the two.

The Ruu heir narrowed his eyes, though his smile remained the same as always, while Geol Zaza's black eyes continued to blaze brightly under the giba pelt he wore atop his head. They both seemed to possess a different sort of intensity than their fathers.

"I don't know what you were discussing just now, but we are here as observers. You should take care to act in a way that is appropriate for that role."

"Hmph. I may be the youngest son, but I'm still going to be the next leading clan head. I'm in the same position as you, so I can't see why I should have to put up with you talking down to me."

"Right now, your role as an observer should be more important to you than your position. And if you wish to call yourself the next leading clan head, that makes it all the more important for you to adhere to our laws and customs." Jiza Ruu was perfectly calm and composed, but that just seemed to fan Geol Zaza's animosity further. By this point, his eyes had become a blazing inferno.

It was then that another figure appeared, an adorable little girl in banquet attire: Toor Deen. "I-It's been a long time, Geol Zaza! I brought you food!"

Geol Zaza turned her way suspiciously. The young chef looked really anxious as she held out a plate piled high with giba cutlets.



“I wasn’t able to serve these at the northern settlement, so you’ve never tried them, right, Geol Zaza? It’s a dish we’re very proud of, so please give them a taste.”

“Oh, I was wondering who was approaching... The chef from the Deen, eh? I hardly recognized you today.” Geol Zaza looked her up and down, taking note of how her hair was down and she was wearing an iridescent veil. Then his eyes fell upon the plate she held. “And you’ve brought a strange dish with you to boot. Is that stuff seriously giba meat?”

“Y-Yes! It’s a fried dish like the one I served before at the Jeen and Liddo wedding. It may not look like the meat you’re familiar with, but many people of the forest’s edge have enjoyed it. Please, give it a try.”

Geol Zaza scratched at his square chin. It seemed his momentum had been dampened.

Then yet another person approached.

“What are you up to, Geol? I won’t permit you to sully the Zaza name.” Naturally, that had come from Sufira Zaza. Geol Zaza sighed heavily, and then Jiza Ruu chimed in.

“Dari Sauti and the Deen and Ran clan heads are waiting over that way. Why not talk with them while enjoying the food that the chefs have kindly prepared for us?”

With Jiza Ruu, Sufira Zaza, and Toor Deen all staring at him, Geol Zaza finally relented.

“What a bunch of nags you are... Hey, Fa clan head, I’m not done with you just yet. You better not fall asleep before I’m finished talking to them.”

That was a rather tepid parting line considering the dangerous aura he’d just been giving off. Ai Fa simply tilted her head a bit as she watched Geol Zaza depart, with Jiza Ruu and the others surrounding him.

“What a hot-blooded fellow! Still, I suppose that’s just what you expect to see from someone that young,” Radd Liddo said with a chuckle, holding up his bottle of fruit wine high. “At any rate, we’re all comrades here. Even if we do

quarrel sometimes, it's no big deal! All you have to do is keep beating yourselves against each other until both sides are satisfied, and eventually you'll understand one another!"

That jovial remark was enough to finally clear away the disquiet lingering in the air.

The banquet had only just begun, and as the crowd started smiling along with the Liddo clan head, joy started to fill the air once more.

6

After all that, I ended up leaving the area with Yun Sudra.

Ai Fa and the others were still in the midst of being congratulated for their victories, and Reina Ruu and the other observers were busily talking to anyone and everyone. We still had more work to do to prepare the rest of the pasta, so I figured it was important to enjoy the banquet now while we had the chance.

"Oh, Asuta and Yun Sudra. We just finished grilling some fresh meat!" a Fou woman called out to us as we walked. They were cooking various cuts of giba meat on a tray brought from the Fa house, and there were a large number of sautéed vegetables that had been prepared in advance piled up on top of a plate sitting on a log stand next to the stove.

"Thank you. Would you like to have something to eat now?"

"Yes," Yun Sudra nodded, briskly transferring some veggies onto her own plate. Then she was served some piping hot giba meat to go on top. A dressing made with a variety of ingredients, some of which were reused from the giba bone broth, was also poured over her food. The people of the forest's edge didn't approve of wasting ingredients, so whenever we extracted starch from chatchi or had leftover marinade that had done its job, we always employed them in some sort of other dish. Considering how many things we used to remove the stench of the giba bones during the boiling process, there was no way we could simply throw them away.

And so, the aria, nenon, myamuu, and ramam we had used for that purpose had all been reused in this dressing. But if we had just used them as they were,

the overwhelming aroma of the bones would transfer over, so we had also added broth from when we had made the char siu, as well as some myamuu and chitt seeds. We had mashed up the vegetables and fruit that had already gotten all mushy during the six-hour boiling process, and then mixed the seasonings in. Then we had diced up the seaweed that had been used in the soup. The dark brown dressing really paired quite well with giba meat.

After tasting it, Yun Sudra said, "It's delicious, isn't it?" with a smile. She really did seem more mature than usual with her hair down.

The Fou woman then narrowed her eyes and said, "You know, the two of you would make a lovely couple. You're seventeen, Asuta, and Yun Sudra, you're fifteen, right? It would make us all so happy from the depths of our hearts to see the Fa and Sudra form blood ties."

I was left at a loss for words, while Yun Sudra's face went beet red.

We stepped away still holding our plates, and with her face still glowing, Yun Sudra bowed and said, "I'm so sorry."

"Ah, no, you have nothing to apologize for."

"But the way she misunderstood things was terribly unpleasant for you, wasn't it?" she said, her gaze cast downward as she brought a spoonful of meat to her mouth. "My feelings haven't changed in the time since I told you about them... But I most definitely don't want to do anything that would trouble you, so I hope that you haven't been worried about that."

"I haven't... But I still don't think there's any need for you to look so sorry about it."

Yun Sudra had told me that she intended to hold on to her feelings for me until one of us got married, and she had said that knowing full well how I felt about Ai Fa. She had then said that if Ai Fa and I got married, she would congratulate us with all of her heart...and that she wouldn't ever let anyone but my clan head have me.

Yun Sudra smiled gently, then looked over the crowded plaza. "I feel truly blessed that we were able to hold a banquet like this one... But at the same time, I don't know what I'd do if a Fou or Ran man fell for me."

“Right...”

“Members of the Deen and Liddo are not permitted to marry members of unconnected clans without the permission of the Zaza. And the Fou and Ran have long been relatives, so it seems only natural that their eyes would turn toward the Fa and Sudra now,” she continued, and then she broke out in an earnest smile. “You might get women asking to marry you too, Asuta. The Fou and Ran wouldn’t hesitate to try to form ties with the Fa, after all.”

The Fa and Sudra were bloodlines destined to die out if they didn’t form ties with other clans, and the Fou and Ran only had each other in terms of relatives. They would all dwindle away before long at this rate, so it was only natural that they would seek to make new ties.

Thinking about it like that, the Fa and Sudra are perfect for them.

Forming blood ties wasn’t something that people did carelessly at the forest’s edge. Marriage could never be taken lightly. Such bonds were valued above all else, so creating a new one required having the resolve to link not only your own fates together, but those of both of your clans as well.

Still, the Fa clan only had two members, and the Sudra only nine. With numbers that small, it would be relatively easy to judge whether or not we would make for fitting relatives.

On top of that, the Fa and Sudra had clearly shown them our strength, both in our everyday actions and at this festival of the hunt. Even setting my own clan aside, I hadn’t been at all surprised to hear that Baadu Fou wanted to form blood ties with the Sudra clan.

That’s how clans leave their names behind here at the forest’s edge.

Taking the Fou clan as an example, they had eighteen members. That number wasn’t all that different from the Lea clan, which was second only to the Rutim among the subordinates of the Ruu. They had reached that size after absorbing their own subordinate clans that had collapsed over the past several decades, until only the Ran remained. The rest had all cast aside their clan names in order to join the Fou. In fact, during the previous clan head meeting, they had reported the fall of three of those clans. In just a single year, three whole clans had lost their names.

Meanwhile, according to what I had been told, the Lea had been under the Ruu for quite some time. Rather than needing to absorb other clans, they had been able to maintain their numbers simply through marriage exchanges.

As long as the Ruu, their parent clan, didn't fall into decline, the Lea wouldn't either. But if the Fou didn't form new blood ties, they would have to survive with only the Ran under them. In which case, their blood would eventually grow too concentrated and they would have trouble finding marriage candidates.

That's what makes clans with no subordinates like the Fa and the Sudra the perfect marriage candidates. With the Gaaz, Ratsu, and Beim, there'd be questions about which side would become the parent clan, and they would need to expend a great deal of effort to determine if all of the members of those clans were worthy of becoming their relatives.

At any rate, forming new blood ties would mean their name would live on into later generations. It was the same for the Sudra clan too. They only had a small number of unwed people, but those people could still form new bonds for them. Ultimately, as things stood, the only clan destined to die out was the Fa.

I was starting to feel more and more emotional for some reason. However, that was when folks started calling out to me from all directions.

"Asuta, are you on break? If you want, why not try some of this cooking?"

"This is all the curry we have left, Asuta."

"Asuta, have you seen Toor Deen? We want to fry up some fresh giba cutlets, but we're still not as good at it as she is."

There were over thirty women here, so I hadn't memorized all of their names. However, every one of them were familiar faces, more or less.

I considered them all to be valuable comrades here at the forest's edge. Even if we didn't share any ties of blood, they were still important to me. And if any of them happened to make a marriage proposal...I would feel terrible about having to turn them down.

I've heard that Vina Ruu has turned down countless men. My circumstances are different from hers, but it's definitely gotta be rough, having to brush off someone's affections like that.

Still, I didn't feel like distancing myself from people because I was worried about something that hadn't happened yet. I had been born in a foreign land, was no good at anything but cooking even though I was a man, and had no intention of taking a bride... I just hoped that everyone would keep being this friendly with me, even though I was such an oddball.

But when I thought about Yun Sudra, my heart really did ache. I still felt guilty, even now. She could have been free to pick any husband she wanted if she hadn't gotten involved with me... Or at least, that was how I saw it.

"Is something the matter, Asuta?" Yun Sudra asked, staring at my face curiously. Then she adorably furrowed her brow and said, "Ah, you look like you're terribly sorry about something, but you don't have to be."

"No, but..."

"I'm the one who was being selfish. And I'm at fault for worrying you like this too. It's not right for a person of the forest's edge to fixate on feelings that will never be fulfilled..." Yun Sudra said. But then her smile suddenly returned. "Even if I asked you to marry me now, you would turn me down, right? That would be the end of it, normally. And yet, I still can't cast aside my feelings. I've been clinging to a fleeting hope all this time, which is terribly self-centered of me. If the other women knew about this, they would surely chew me out."

"There's no need for you to put yourself down like that."

"I'm not putting myself down. I'm simply speaking the truth," Yun Sudra replied, taking on a teasing look that was quite unusual for her. "Still, I have to say, you're committing the same mistake I am. Both of us are clinging to feelings that won't be fulfilled. So shouldn't you be worrying about the person you love rather than me?"

I felt like my cheeks might have been going a bit red as my face was illuminated by the bonfires here and there throughout the plaza. Yun Sudra just looked at me with satisfaction, then pointed diagonally ahead.

"Which dish was cooking on that stove, again? Let's go ahead and eat a whole lot before we have to get back to work on the pasta."

"Yeah, you're right," I replied with a nod, getting my thoughts back in order.

I was the one who had proposed this banquet, so I couldn't get all depressed in the middle of it. Letting my emotions get the better of me had to wait until after the banquet was over.

I walked alongside the smiling Yun Sudra toward another stove. So far, we'd had the grilled meat and sautéed vegetables with the dressing, a large number of meatballs, giba curry, and giba cutlets. Now we were faced with the fresh poitan dishes. There was an especially large stand here, atop which was a mountain of cooked poitan. The fully ready baked poitan had been specially prepared with gyama dried milk kneaded into them, and there was also okonomiyaki being cooked on a metal tray nearby.

After taking a slice of each, we turned to face the next stove, where a couple people had separated themselves from the crowd and were arguing about something. When I looked closer, I found that they were Fei Beim and the Beim clan head. Since I still hadn't properly greeted the clan head, I went ahead and approached them.

"It's been a while, clan head of the Beim. Is there some sort of issue?"

"Ah, Asuta. No, it's nothing serious. My clan head here is just being excessively stubborn," Fei Beim said.

"I'm not being stubborn. *You're* being selfish." The Beim clan head was a middle-aged man with a small yet bulky build. The nineteen-year-old Fei Beim was his youngest daughter, so he had to be well over forty, with a face that reminded me of a heike crab. Fei Beim had been tugging on his hand for some reason.

"There are sweets over there, but since there are a lot of women and children in the area, he won't go anywhere near them," she explained with a sour look.

"I'm telling you, I have no need to. There's plenty of other food to eat without having to bother with all that."

"But you were really looking forward to the sweets, weren't you? If you miss out on having any because of your stubbornness, it'll leave you in a bad mood later, which will be a real pain to deal with." Fei Beim turned my way, still pouting. The somewhat squarish contours of her face made her resemble her father quite a bit. "Apparently, he ate one of the sweets you served in the castle

town. I've tried adding sugar to poitan and chatchi at home myself, but he's never satisfied with the results."

"Hmm, which sweet could you have had...? It must have been at that first dinner party with Timalo. Ah, that means it was the chatchi mochi. We should have some of that here today."

The Beim clan head's mouth went taut. He turned away with his frown still firmly in place. "Hmph! There are only women and children swarming around those sweets, right? That isn't the sort of thing a hunter should eat."

"That's not true at all. The people who are enjoying fruit wine right now are probably just leaving them for later. If you try to drink fruit wine while also having sweets, the sourness of it will really stand out," Fei Beim said.

The Beim clan head fell silent.

"Even Donda Ruu and the other hunters of the Ruu clan enjoy sweets. Chatchi mochi in particular has a different texture to it than other desserts, so men can enjoy it too," I added, in support of what Fei Beim had said. "If you want, I can come with you. I'm technically a man too, after all. Toor Deen's even better at making sweets than I am, so how about we enjoy what she's prepared for the banquet together?"

As we soothed the hesitant Beim clan head, we went ahead and plunged into the crowd. There certainly did seem to be a lot of women and children around, but I also saw some young hunters here and there. I greeted them as we went, and before long we arrived at a wooden plate sitting on a stand.

The sweets on offer were chatchi mochi and a baked poitan dish. The chatchi mochi came in three varieties: one that was plain with caramel drizzled over the top, one that used cocoa-like gigi leaves, and one that used karon milk. The baked sweet came in both plain and gigi-flavored varieties, and there was fresh cream, custard cream, and gigi cream available as toppings.

"So this is the sweet you call chatchi mochi? It certainly has an unusual shape," Fei Beim remarked as she grabbed one of each type for her clan head and then took a bite herself. When she did, her little eyes shot open wide in surprise. "This is delicious... I feel embarrassed that I just tried to mix chatchi and sugar together."

“There’s a particular method to making chatchi mochi. Why don’t I give you lessons on how to make it sometime?”

When I gave them a try, I found that all of the varieties of chatchi mochi were unsurprisingly fantastic. Their sweetness was relatively restrained, but they didn’t feel lacking in the least. It was a fine, gentle flavor that reflected Toor Deen’s personality perfectly.

When the Beim clan head tried them, he let out a “Hrmm” and made a face that I couldn’t quite read as he turned to look at me. “Asuta, the women prepared this rather than you?”

“Yes. Toor Deen of the Deen clan led the efforts. She’s more skilled at making sweets than I am.”

“Hmm...”

“As you can tell, she’s come pretty far in determining the proper amount of each ingredient to use, but anyone who follows her instructions should be able to prepare something similar. It’s not like it’s difficult to make, after all.”

If you wanted to make a plain one with caramel, all you needed in terms of ingredients were chatchi and sugar. And as for the ones that used karon milk, it wasn’t all that extravagant of an ingredient either, costing the same amount as fruit wine. With just a single lesson, Fei Beim would definitely be able to make delicious chatchi mochi that would bring her family joy too.

“Ah, so this is where you were, Asuta,” a man’s voice called out from down low. It was Raielfam Sudra, who was shorter than even the women around us.

“Ah, hey there. Are you done with the congratulations?”

“Indeed. We were finally set free. Being congratulated is quite an ordeal when you’re dealing with over eighty people,” Raielfam Sudra said, snatching up a baked sweet and popping it into his mouth. Li Sudra was standing there next to him, directing an elegant smile my way.

“You did good work today too, Li Sudra. Are you feeling all right...?”

“Yes, of course. We haven’t reached the point where it will become difficult for me to do my daily work yet.” I had first learned of Li Sudra’s pregnancy at

the end of the black month. Over three months had passed since then, but I couldn't spy any visible changes. Of course, that was partially because married women wore loose single-piece dresses. "But I seem to have become overly sensitive to certain smells, so I was unfortunately unable to try the bone soup."

"That's a real shame. Do you think it'll settle down soon?"

Of course, there was no point in me trying to comfort her with my hazy knowledge. After all, she had already given birth twice.

Li Sudra's face was radiating affection as she gently brought a hand up to her stomach. After glancing at her out of the corner of his eye, Raielfam Sudra turned his eyes toward us once more.

"That talk of soup reminded me that I was supposed to be looking for you, Asuta and Yun. They wanted to know if that pasta dish could just be left to boil on its own."

"I see. Thank you. Well then, I guess it's about time we headed back," I said.

"Yes, of course," Yun Sudra agreed.

After saying farewell to the folks around us, we headed back to our original posts.

The crowd was denser here than at a Ruu banquet, so it took a fair bit of effort to move about. I took care not to bump into any of the men who had gotten drunk as we worked our way through.

When our destination finally came into view, a golden-brown light flashed at the edge of my field of view. Ai Fa was talking to someone, both of them being lit by the glow of one of the bonfires surrounding the plaza.

"That's the pole tugging winner, Jou Ran, isn't it?" Yun Sudra said in a quiet voice, staring in the same direction I was. "That man looked like he was talking to Ai Fa a lot, even up in the victors' seats... Does he have a connection to your clan head like Saris Ran Fou does?"

"No, not that I know of. He might just have some thoughts he wants to share with Ai Fa about her being a hunter, though."

"I see," Yun Sudra replied, looking kind of uneasy for some reason. Actually,

her expression reminded me of the one I had seen on Saris Ran Fou's face earlier in the day. It seemed like both of them had reacted in the same kind of way to Jou Ran approaching Ai Fa, so perhaps they were sensing something I couldn't.

As for my clan head, she looked as commanding as always while she was interacting with him. Jou Ran was simply smiling at her, just like he had been earlier in the day. There didn't seem to be anything suspicious going on, but if I had to find something strange to point out, I would say that it was odd to see Ai Fa talking one-on-one with someone she wasn't close to.

I interact with women a lot, so it'd be pretty small-minded of me to get all out of sorts over something like this... I thought to myself, deciding to focus on the work in front of me as I headed toward one particular stove, where I found a sizable crowd eagerly waiting for more pasta to be made available to them.

7

"Sorry for the wait. Please, go ahead and eat," I said, having transferred the cooked pasta onto a big wooden plate, added a bit of reten oil on top, and then placed it atop a stand. Instantly, hands reached out to scoop up the pasta.

The women were lending a hand to the men who were trying it for the first time and having difficulty. The Sudra and Deen clans had served it for dinner already, and the women from the other clans had sampled it plenty of times, so they were well acquainted with how to eat it.

"Hmm... Dunking it in the broth makes it so slippery it's impossible to keep a hold of it," I heard someone say with a sigh as I added fresh pasta to the pot. Looking in that direction, I found a Liddo man seriously struggling to eat while holding a wooden dish. And so, though it was a little presumptuous of me, I ended up giving him a quick lesson.

"When that happens, you should shovel it up like this. Then you can slurp it down along with the broth."

"Slurp it down...?"

It seemed a lot of folks were having trouble wrapping their heads around the

idea of slurping noodles, so I had Saris Ran Fou handle the fresh giba bone soup for a bit while I provided a demonstration.

Bringing my mouth close to my own wooden dish, I gathered up some pasta using a wooden spoon with three prongs cut into the end and slurped it down. The cuts in the spoon were deep, so it looked more like a rounded fork than anything else.

It might have seemed like a rude, childish way to eat, but for soup and noodle dishes, it was the only option if all you had was a fork. I could sense that I would need to do a lot more to introduce people to chopsticks before I started seriously experimenting with giba bone ramen.

Still, this stuff was already very good. The rich giba bone soup paired well with the springiness of the fresh pasta. It had a powerful flavor, thanks to the giba marrow that had been dissolved in it, and with the savoriness of the giba meat and seaweed stock layered on top, the end result was a really solid dish. Then you had the fatty char siu meat that had been simmered for hours until it became incredibly tender. The tino, nenon, and nanaar also did a fantastic job of adding some color to the whitish soup.

“Ah, this is delicious!” the man remarked with a beaming smile after he had finally succeeded at slurping the soup.

In the meantime, the pasta on the big plate had visibly dwindled away. *Even after we decided to go all out and prepare a full hundred servings, I’m still amazed by how popular it is.* A hundred servings at a hundred grams each meant we had made roughly ten kilos of pasta. We had been preparing it one kilo at a time, and now we only had around three kilos remaining.

“Asuta, do you still have some of that dish left?!” a voice suddenly shouted out, causing me to jump a little in surprise. When I turned to see who had spoken, I found two especially large men standing there: Radd Liddo and Geol Zaza. “The youngest son of the Zaza still hasn’t eaten any, so I brought him over here to have some!”

Looking closely, I noticed that Radd Liddo’s burly arm was wrapped around Geol Zaza’s thick neck. The Zaza hunter was furrowing his brow in annoyance, but he seemed resigned to his fate.

“Yeah. We still have thirty servings left. The next batch will be ready soon, so hold on for just a moment.”

I scooped up a load of pasta with a wire mesh, and once the water had mostly drained off, I dumped it out onto a big plate. Then I added the reten oil to prevent the noodles from sticking before placing the plate on the stand.

“Go ahead. You should start by getting either giba bone broth or tarapa meat sauce.”

“You’ve gotta go with the giba bone broth, naturally! The tarapa’s pretty tasty too, but you absolutely have to try that broth!” Radd Liddo said with a hearty laugh as he dragged Geol Zaza over to the giba bone soup. It was becoming more and more apparent to me that this man was every bit as boisterous as Dan Rutim. Radd Liddo was a subordinate of the Zaza, while Dan Rutim was a subordinate of the Ruu, but if they ever had a chance to drink together, I was sure they’d get along incredibly well.

Ah, but the Ruu and Suun clans were locked in a feud until pretty recently. Still, Dan Rutim seemed friendly enough toward Deek Dom, so I bet the two of them would become great friends now, I thought to myself as I prepared more fresh pasta. But then another group approached us: Jiza, Reina, and Rimee Ruu. Rimee Ruu had a firm grasp on her big brother’s hand, which looked really cute to me.



“I see you’ve been working hard, Asuta. Could we trouble you for another serving of this dish?” Reina Ruu asked.

“Yeah, of course. You only got half a serving before, so take as much as you please,” I replied.

“See?” Reina Ruu remarked as she turned toward Jiza Ruu. “Asuta says so too. There’s no need to hold back.”

“But as guests, we shouldn’t eat too much. After all, this banquet is meant for the members of the six clans who live around here.”

“That’s not true at all! If it wasn’t okay, Asuta would tell you!” Rimee Ruu energetically chimed in as she tugged on her brother’s arm. There was a fifteen-year age gap between them, and he probably weighed around three times as much as she did.

“That’s right. You don’t have to hold back. At the very least, it wouldn’t be overeating to have the same amount you did before.”

Jiza Ruu didn’t have anything to say to that.

“Actually, we planned things out to make sure we prepared enough food to satisfy everyone. If our important guests had to hold back from eating their fill, we’d consider that to be a big failure on our part.”

“It’s not that I’m holding back,” Jiza Ruu said.

But then on each side of him his sisters shouted, “Hey!”

“Jiza, I know you wanted more! You liked it just as much as you like giba cutlets, right?” Rimee Ruu said.

“That’s right. Sheera Ruu and I aren’t able to make giba bone soup yet, so who knows when you’ll be able to have it next,” Reina Ruu added.

Jiza Ruu’s emotions remained hidden behind his narrowed eyes, and he stayed silent. As I stirred the swirling pasta in the pot, I shot a smile at him.

“It would be a shame if Reina and Rimee Ruu weren’t able to have any because you wanted to restrain yourself. And if you really want to completely fulfill your duty as an observer, shouldn’t sampling our food be a part of that?”

It was then that Radd Liddo and Geol Zaza returned from the neighboring stove, where they had been served broth.

“Ah, if it isn’t the eldest son of the Ruu! I was just about to have the youngest son of the Zaza give this stuff a try! Why don’t you two eat together and share in your joy and surprise?!”

Jiza Ruu turned toward them with his head tilted perplexedly. “You seem to have drunk quite a bit in the short time since I last saw you, youngest son of the Zaza.”

“Well, despite his size, he’s a surprisingly weak drinker.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re just a bottomless pit,” Geol Zaza grumbled. I hadn’t picked up on it before, but apparently he was drunk. Now that they mentioned it, his footing did look a bit unsteady. And he was glaring at me from under the hood of his pelt.

“All right, let me try this dish you’re so proud of. I’ve been hearing a lot of big talk about it, so it must be extremely good, right?”

Radd Liddo was the one talking big, but it was no lie that I was proud of the dish. And so, I told him to “Go ahead,” as I indicated the pasta on the large plate.

Geol Zaza snorted and thrust a three-pronged spoon into the mountain of pasta. However, the freshly boiled pasta was slick and slipped right through it.

“Oh, you’re supposed to wrap it around like this,” Rimee Ruu said, helping him to secure the pasta, only for Geol Zaza to regard her suspiciously.

“What’s your deal? You’re being awfully familiar there, kid.”

“Well, you suck at this,” Rimee Ruu shot back with a smile, her hand still over Geol Zaza’s rough fingers. Geol Zaza continued to frown, looking back and forth between her smiling face and the mass of pasta wrapped around the end of the spoon. “Now go ahead and dip it in the broth, and then eat it. It’s way tastier with lots of broth stuck to it!”

Geol Zaza silently did just that.

“Oh, it fell in! When that happens, you have to scoop it back up with the

spoon like this.”

“You’re not just being overly familiar, you’re really loud too!” Then Geol Zaza started slurping down the pasta, looking like it was taking an almost desperate effort to get it into his mouth, but as he assessed the warm broth, an expression of total confusion and wonderment began to spread across his face. “What in the world is this broth...?”

“It’s a soup made by boiling giba bones. We also used some relatively pricey ingredients like tau oil and dried seaweed on top of that.”

“Giba bones...? You can use giba bones in cooking?”

“Yes. We used bones from the legs and back this time. I know the northern clans use skulls and ribs as helmets and accessories, but there shouldn’t be any issue with using leg and back bones in our cooking, right?”

Geol Zaza just kept on silently slurping away at the pasta. Naturally, Radd Liddo looked incredibly satisfied standing there next to him.

After looking up at the two of them for another moment, Rimee Ruu tugged on Jiza Ruu’s hand once more. With a sigh, her older brother relented, causing her to leap into the air and shout, “Yay!” And so, the members of the Ruu clan finally accepted their own helpings of giba bone soup and pasta.

Of course, since the other attendees hadn’t just been sitting and watching while that little discussion had been taking place, the pasta had continued to vanish at the same rate as before. I was finally down to the last ten servings.

“We only have a little of this left! If there’s anyone who hasn’t tried it yet, please give it a shot!” I shouted out, causing another bustling crowd of people to start pushing their way over to us. However, it seemed that everyone had indeed already eaten some, but even so, their eyes were shining with joy and anticipation. It was an incredibly moving sight for me and the other chefs manning the stoves.

“Oh, by the way, where’s Ai Fa?” Rimee Ruu asked me as she finished off her portion.

“I saw her over that way a little while ago. But I haven’t seen her since then.”

“Hmm... Isn't it weird for her not to be near you?”

Her words made my heart skip a beat, but I simply smiled at her and replied, “That's true. Still, there are a lot of people here. She's probably just being kept busy by folks who don't get many chances to talk to her.”

“I see. I guess that's all right, then,” Rimee Ruu said, her eyes narrowing happily as she smiled. If she was this pleased about it, then I figured I could be glad that Ai Fa was forming bonds with so many different people too. The fact that I was still feeling some hesitation deep down even so probably had to be because I had seen her talking with Jou Ran.

Good grief. Am I seriously that small-minded?

It had been kind of a shock for my heart when Ai Fa had called Darmu Ruu cute the other day. I knew what sort of person my clan head was, so I shouldn't have felt so shaken up over something like that... And yet, it still felt like an ill omen.

After that, the members of the Ruu clan, Geol Zaza, and Radd Liddo all disappeared from my view as they were practically shoved out of the way by the crowd pushing its way in.

While I was talking to the people now in front of me and sharing in the joy of the day, I also looked for Ai Fa whenever I had a chance. However, I didn't catch sight of her again before the final ten servings finished cooking.

But with that, my work was now finished. I glanced around, and my eyes met Yun Sudra's, as if she had been waiting for me to look in her direction.

“Good job, Asuta. Once the pasta's all gone, we should move the tarapa and soup pots over to where the poitan is, right?”

“Ah, yeah. They're probably just about out of okonomiyaki batter, so I'm pretty sure that stove will be available for you to use by then.”

“Got it. We can have another woman help us with that when the time comes, so you should go enjoy the banquet, Asuta.”

“Right, thanks.” I bowed my head to Yun Sudra, put out the stove's flame, and stepped away.

I avoided the crowd and started a sweep of the plaza's perimeter, but I didn't spy Ai Fa anywhere, so then I walked over toward the bonfire where I had last seen her, and found a young man and woman talking pretty intimately there. The woman was wearing banquet attire. I had no way of knowing whether they had already been in love before this or if they had fallen for one another tonight, but they were so close to each other that I had to assume they were planning on getting married. I swiftly continued along the outer edge of the plaza, watching them out of the corner of my eye.

My heart was beating oddly fast. I didn't think Ai Fa would receive any marriage proposals tonight, right after she had shown how strong of a hunter she was, and even if she did, she would never accept them. I knew that very well, and yet I still felt really out of sorts.

Once I had walked roughly halfway around the plaza, a voice called out, "Asuta," from the darkness beside me. When I turned to look, I found Ai Fa standing there, looking kind of sad somehow. She was standing just outside of the light from the bonfire, leaning up against the wall of an empty house as she quietly stared at me.

"So this is where you were, Ai Fa," I said as I instantly rushed over to her side, and then I glanced around at the darkness surrounding us.

"What's making you so restless?"

"Oh, I thought there might be someone here with you."

"There is not. The Liddo clan head kept encouraging me to drink, and it's left me a little intoxicated. I'm cooling off over here while it passes."

"I see..." It was true that she looked a bit listless, but nothing seemed off about her otherwise. As she stood there in the darkness, I could see her blue eyes gleaming calmly. "Still, should you really be all the way over here by yourself in the middle of a banquet?" I said.

"I was just talking with the Sudra clan head and Cheem Sudra a short while ago. Before that, I had women chasing me all over the place," Ai Fa said as she slowly sat down. "I'm a little tired from all that talking, so I'm going to rest here a bit longer before I go back out to continue strengthening my ties with the others."

“Got it.” I sat down beside her, turning my head to stare at the side of her face. “Ai Fa, you were talking to Jou Ran earlier, right?”

My clan head looked at me with a puzzled expression.

Staring straight back into her eyes, I said, “To be honest, seeing you two like that made me a little concerned. Not that I noticed anything weird while you were talking to him, but... How should I put it...? I feel like I don’t have a very good grasp of what kind of person Jou Ran is.”

“Neither do I,” Ai Fa said, her chin resting on her hand, and her arm propped up on her knee. She frowned ever so slightly. “Well, the same could be said of most people here. Which is only natural, since I have not spoken much with the majority of them...but out of all of them, Jou Ran might be the most difficult to pin down.”

“Oh, you think so too?” I asked with my heart pounding. “It seemed like you were speaking to him for quite a while. What were you talking about? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Ai Fa furrowed her brow and rustled her hair with her open hand. “He declared that he is fond of me, as a woman.”

“Huh?!”

“However, he said that because he is still the less skilled hunter between us, he would not ask me to marry. But if he ever surpasses me in strength, he intends to do just that. That was the only untoward matter he brought up.”

“S-So how did you reply, Ai Fa?”

My clan head’s frown deepened when I asked her that.

“Do we really need to discuss this?”

“Well, I think I can probably guess...but I’m still curious about exactly what you said.”

Ai Fa rustled her hair once more, then switched from resting her chin on her palm to wrapping her arms around her knees. Half of her face was hidden behind her slender arms, but her gaze was pointed straight ahead. “I said that even if Jou Ran were to grow stronger than me, I had no intention of accepting

any marriage proposal,” she eventually answered quietly. “I have chosen to live my life as a hunter, therefore I am never going to take a husband. And...”

“Hmm?”

“On the off chance...that I do lose my strength as a hunter and am forced to live as a woman...I have already decided who my partner will be.”

I felt as if I had taken a blow directly on my heart. Even here in the dark, I could see a bit of redness around Ai Fa’s eyes.

“That *is* how you answered Yun Sudra’s feelings, correct?” she said.

“Y-Yeah, but...”

“When one side expresses their true feelings, it is only polite to respond in kind. I found your answer to be an appropriate one, and so I decided to respond in kind.”

“I see.”

As I desperately held back the raging emotions I felt inside, my eyes remained fixed on the side of my clan head’s face.

But then she suddenly shouted, “What are you staring for?!”

“Oh... I’m surprised you noticed, considering you’re not looking at me.”

“What hunter wouldn’t notice something staring at them from so close?! Just stop looking at me already!”

“O-Okay, got it.”

I forcefully tore my gaze away from Ai Fa, turning it back toward the plaza. The crowd was still enjoying the banquet, illuminated by the bonfires and ritual flame. At least seventy percent of the food must have been gone at this point, but the event was still in full swing. Everyone was cheerfully chatting, pouring fruit wine for one another, and chowing down on the remaining food.

“The women will begin dancing soon,” Ai Fa said after a while. Listening to her voice now, she seemed to be as calm as usual. “Which might lead to new bonds of blood being forged. Of course, that’s to be expected of Fou and Ran, or the Deen and Liddo, since they’re already related to each other, but it would be

quite natural for the Sudra to join in as well.”

“Yeah. And if that happens, it’ll make this group festival of the hunt all worth it.”

“However, we will not be brought into that circle... At least, not as long as you hold on to your futile feelings and refuse to marry another woman.”

“Yeah. Or you could end up with a man from another clan and— Ow, ow, ow!” Before I could even finish what I was saying, Ai Fa pinched my cheek. “That hurts! What the heck?! We were just speaking hypothetically, right?!”

“There’s no point in musing about hypotheticals that will absolutely never come to pass.”

“Yeah, well, there’s no way I’d marry some other woman either,” I shot back as I rubbed my aching cheek. “Giba will fly before I marry any woman other than— Gah, I get it! Cut me a break already!”

“Hmph! Regardless, we won’t be forming blood ties with any of them.”

“Right. I do feel a little awkward about that, but if you stop and think about it, the Deen and Liddo wouldn’t form blood ties with the Fou or Sudra lightly either, so maybe we don’t need to worry about it too much after all,” I said earnestly. “Besides, I think it’d be good for the people of the forest’s edge to be friendlier with each other, even if they don’t have direct blood ties, which is why I came up with the idea of having a festival of the hunt for everyone to enjoy together.”

“Indeed.”

“We have a whole lot of friends. Too many to even count. And I’m proud to be able to say that they’re all very important to me.”

“Quite so,” Ai Fa said with a satisfied nod. Her precious friends Saris Ran Fou and Rimee Ruu were somewhere over there in the light. We didn’t have any relatives, so we understood better than anyone how valuable such bonds were.

“Well then, should we start heading back? I know Rimee Ruu wanted to talk to you, Ai Fa,” I said, moving to stand.

However, Ai Fa grabbed hold of my wrist and pulled me back down. “Wait. I’m

still tired. Unlike you, I'm not accustomed to interacting with large crowds of people."

"Ah, right. Then, how about we stay here and rest a bit longer?"

"I agree. The night is long, so there is no need to rush."

The hand she was gripping my wrist with started timidly moving down toward my fingers. She was hesitating, perhaps wondering if I would permit her to do what she wanted. I went ahead and gently grabbed her hand, and she squeezed mine back with similar strength, seeming relieved.

"That victor's crown really suits you, Ai Fa."

"Hmm?"

"Again, congratulations. I'm prouder than anyone that you were one of the winners."

"Oh? I believe I already heard something similar earlier in the evening."

"Well, I wanted to apologize for not cheering you on during the final match. It was dizzying, trying to keep up with your movements, so I found myself unable to speak."

Ai Fa broke out in a smile. "I'm not going to criticize you for that, you know."

"Huh? That sounds pretty different from what you were saying when we talked about this before."

"That was a different matter entirely. I could tell just by looking at your face how happy you were that I was crowned the victor of the combat competition."

"I see. I guess it's all good, then."

We continued to stare ahead at the scenery before us, feeling each other's warmth through our hands. There was no problem with us spending just a few more minutes alone together, right? And as for everyone over in the firelight who was important to us, we could share in their happiness later. The warmth we shared was all we needed to confirm for each other just how blessed we felt to have been here to experience this dazzlingly brilliant day.

Intermezzo: Celebration at the Genos Castle

A celebration was being held in Genos Castle in the aftermath of the swordsmanship tournament...and Ludo Ruu was participating in it along with his father, the leading clan head Donda Ruu. It was impossible for him to describe how he felt about that. He had visited the castle town numerous times before this. However, the scale of the event was completely different this time around. The space where it was being held was as big as the Ruu settlement's entire plaza, with members of the nobility constantly coming in and leaving. Currently, there were over a hundred people present.

The walls and ceiling were made of stone, and though night had fully fallen at this point, the large space was illuminated as brightly as midday. And in the middle of it all, the nobles were boisterously carrying on and enjoying the event. Trying to follow everything that was happening made Ludo Ruu feel as if he'd had way too much to drink.

Still, it seems that no one here is looking to harm us in any way, Ludo Ruu thought to himself, glancing over at the people beside him and spying Shin Ruu of the branch houses speaking to the young noble Leiriss. Actually, it might have been only Leiriss who was speaking. His eyes were shining passionately, and had been for a while now, as he took up all the air talking about how excellent of a swordsman Shin Ruu was, and how lacking he felt in comparison.

"I have personally beheld the exceptional strength you hunters of the forest's edge possess. You even defeated Lord Melfried, so there can be no doubt that you are the true sword king of Genos, Sir Shin Ruu. I am so honored to have crossed blades with you."

Shin Ruu maintained his usual relaxed expression as he listened, with Lala Ruu nestled right up against him, clad in the banquet attire of the forest's edge and wearing a rather suspicious look.

"I also believe I can now understand why my father Geimalos feared you hunters of the forest's edge so greatly. Of course, that doesn't mean I forgive

him for the crime he committed. I believe that rather than committing the same mistake he did, I should train and build up my strength so that one day I may defeat you fairly.”

“Do you intend to challenge Shin Ruu to another contest of strength, then?” Lala Ruu interjected without a moment’s hesitation.

“Yes.” Leiriss nodded to her. “If it’s possible, I would of course like to have you appear in next year’s swordsmanship tournament as well... Unless that would be inconvenient for you, Shin Ruu.”

“It wouldn’t, but I can’t make any promises. The leading clan heads decide such matters at the forest’s edge,” Shin Ruu replied, starting to smile faintly. “Still, I’m glad to have formed a proper bond with you, Leiriss. Actually, I should say that I’ve felt happy ever since facing off with you in that arena.”

“How do you mean?”

“I didn’t sense any anger or hatred behind your blade. When I clashed swords with you, it felt as if I was having a contest of strength at the forest’s edge.”

Leiriss started to tear up when he heard those words. “Thank you. Sir Shin Ruu...you are not just a splendid swordsman, but an individual of unimpeachable character as well.”

“I’m nothing special.”

“No, I am certain that you are.” Leiriss stared at Shin Ruu as if he was gazing at the object of his affection. It almost made him look like a different person from the one who had glared at Shin Ruu like a bitter enemy back at the reconciliation banquet the house of Saturas had put on.

Well, I guess it’s fine as long as everything’s good and settled, Ludo Ruu thought as some new figures approached: a large man and a woman in banquet attire. They were the youngest son of the main Zaza house, Geol Zaza, and his sister, Sufira Zaza.

“So this is where you were. I haven’t had a chance to greet you yet.” As the hunter didn’t have his cloak on, it was easy to notice that his face was red from drinking, with the scar above his right eye showing it especially clearly.

“Ah, Sir Geol Zaza... Your injuries aren’t still bothering you, are they?” Leiriss asked, causing the Zaza hunter to raise an eyebrow.

“A little scuffle like that wouldn’t leave any lasting damage. You must be feeling awfully good about having beaten me, though.”

“I didn’t intend to imply anything like that with my question, but if I gave you that mistaken impression, then allow me to apologize,” the noble stated with an elegant bow, only for Geol Zaza’s expression to grow even more threatening.

However, his sister then spoke up as if to hold him back. “As I am a woman, I know nothing of swordsmanship, but you seemed to be exceptionally skilled.”

“Thank you. Ah, you are...?”

“I’m Geol’s elder sister, Sufira Zaza.”

“Sufira Zaza... I’m honored to make your acquaintance. And let me just say, you are a remarkably beautiful woman.”

Sufira Zaza was clad in the banquet attire of the forest’s edge, and just as Ludo Ruu had expected, her eyes narrowed harshly as she shot back. “You don’t appear to have any ill intent, but the forest’s edge does not have a custom of praising the appearance of others lightly. If you wish to form proper bonds with our people, please keep that in mind.”

“Ah, my apologies. I, of course, have no desire to repeat Lord Leeheim’s mistakes,” Leiriss remarked with a soft smile. As Ludo Ruu recalled, this guy was the cousin of that other noble who had caused trouble with his sister, Reina Ruu.

“So, what exactly were you all talking about?” Geol Zaza said, and Leiriss turned toward him with the same expression still on his face.

“Well, I was asking Shin Ruu to please take part in next year’s swordsmanship tournament.”

“Huh? You were talking about stuff like that without me?” Geol Zaza asked, his eyes blazing bright at Shin Ruu and Leiriss. “I see. So you’ve got no use for me now that I’ve been beaten by nobles from Genos twice. If you’re really looking down on me that much...”

“Nobody said anything like that. Cool your head, already,” Ludo Ruu chimed in casually, but his words only made Geol Zaza round on him with incredible speed.

“Who are you? A member of the Ruu clan?”

“Yeah. I’m the youngest son of the main Ruu house, Ludo Ruu. I think this is the first time we’ve properly met.”

“Hmph! What’s a kid like you doing in a place like this? Shouldn’t a *strong* hunter be the one to accompany the clan head?”

“It’s because my older brother, Darmu, is really unsociable, so our clan head figured I was a better fit for bringing along to the castle town.”

Shin Ruu, who had been listening silently up until now, then added, “Indeed. And Ludo Ruu is more than strong enough to accompany our clan head as well. He’s made it into the top eight of a contest of strength held among the clans under the Ruu before.”

“What? This little brat?”

“He may be little, but he’s only one year younger than us. And I still haven’t ever beaten him in a contest of strength.”

Geol Zaza and Leiriss both looked really surprised when they heard that.

Then Sufira Zaza calmly remarked, “Ah, I just remembered. You were indeed in the final eight at the festival of the hunt held in the violet month... Actually, you made it to the final four.”

“Oh yeah, you were staying at the Ruu settlement as a guest back then, weren’t you? I did end up losing to Gazraan Rutim after that, though.”

“I see!” Geol Zaza said, clapping his hands together. “I just remembered as well! I heard that both the clan head, Donda Ruu, and the old Rutim clan head who’s supposed to be just as strong as him were seriously injured at the time. That explains how a kid like you could have gotten that far.”

“No, that’s wrong. Ludo Ruu also made it into the final eight at the previous festival of the hunt. He was able to prove his strength even with Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim participating,” Shin Ruu shot back, growing rather irritated. “If

nothing else, there's no doubt that he's a stronger hunter than I am. And since it is my goal to catch up to him, I find it extremely unpleasant to hear you making light of his abilities."

"So you are skilled enough to serve as Sir Shin Ruu's goal?" Leiriss questioned.

Ludo Ruu chuckled awkwardly. "I'm not that great. I've still never beaten my old man, Jiza, Darmu, Dan Rutim, or Gazraan Rutim. And you all are training so that you won't lose to anyone either, right?"

His comment was met with silence.

"Anyway, it was Shin Ruu who won today's contest of strength, so you should be celebrating him rather than me."

"That is true... It looks like one of your people has made me see my shortcomings once again," Leiriss said, sounding moved as he gave another bow, and when he lifted his face, it had a brilliant smile on it. "I've also seen what earnest spirits all of you from the forest's edge possess. Though my father caused bad blood between us initially, I am truly grateful to have the opportunity to deepen our bonds."

"The way you talk is so stiff, I swear. But I guess that's just how nobles are," Ludo Ruu said with a smile of his own.

It seemed that Leiriss's personality was even more forthright than Ludo Ruu had thought. Watching the swarm of nobles coming and going had made him feel almost sickeningly drunk, but perhaps he could actually find something to like about them if he talked to them personally.

Still, it sure does feel strange to be here deepening our bonds with nobles when Asuta isn't around... Even so, this was yet another path that the chef had carved out for them after he had appeared at the forest's edge. He must have been having dinner with Ai Fa back at the Fa house around now.

Being stuck in this stone building still made Ludo Ruu feel constrained, but for some reason, he was still perfectly content to be there.

Group Performance: A Descendant of Old Blood

Shilly Rou was standing by herself, at a loss for what to do. She was in the middle of a banquet being held at the forest's edge, one of the many people from Genos who had been invited to attend. But the only reason she had decided to come here was so that she could learn more about the techniques and skill levels of the chefs of the forest's edge.

How had things ended up like this...? It had all started with that Yumi girl, who was from the post town. Those traveling musicians had started playing instruments, and Yumi said, "Let's dance!" and had dragged Shilly Rou into the center of the plaza.

Shilly Rou hadn't been mentally prepared to go dancing, so while Yumi had been swaying along elegantly, Shilly Rou had found herself simply being dragged along like a leaf that had fallen into a river. The chef had been completely thrown for a loop, until a voice had called out that the giba meat was done cooking, which sent Yumi swiftly running off in that direction.

Before she had realized it, Shilly Rou found herself alone and helpless in the center of the plaza.

People of the forest's edge were swiftly bustling about all around her. If she moved carelessly, she would probably be sent flying. It felt as if she had been thrust into a shed that was packed with toots, and she had no idea what she should do.

She tried to look around for familiar faces, but that proved difficult as there were too many people blocking her view. How were they able to move around so quickly with only the light of the bonfires to guide them? Surrounded by all those people of the forest's edge with their beastly eyes, Shilly Rou felt as if she wanted to just crouch down and cower.

Shilly Rou was a resident of the castle town. The town was protected by stone

walls, so seeing any kind of outlaw there was almost unheard of. But that was only natural, since nobody who seemed even a little suspicious was allowed to so much as set foot inside. Having been born and raised in such a safe and secure town, this place seemed as terrifying to Shilly Rou as a raging battlefield.

It's also right at the foot of Mount Morga, she thought, feeling as if her knees were about to give out on her. The terror of Morga was especially emphasized in her household. Shilly Rou had been born into a long-established house. Hers was an especially old bloodline here in the western kingdom, and the “Rou” adorning her name served as proof of that.

When the nation of Selva had been established several hundred years prior, its citizens had cast aside their family names. As a result, the only people in the western kingdom who possessed a last name were land-owning nobles and descendants of old blood—those whose ancestors were independent settlers unrelated to the king.

Now that several hundred years had passed, discrimination against those independent settlers had largely vanished. A bit closer to the capital they might have been viewed as barbarians, but at the very least, they were treated no differently from any other citizen here in Genos. After all, it had been independent settlers who had developed this land in the first place. Two hundred years ago, though, Count Genos and those related to him had been given a royal order to take rulership over this land.

A large river flowed through the region, and there were many places here that were well suited for raising crops, which had come to the attention of the kingdom's rulers. Up until then, the settlers in the area had just barely been scraping by. While the Lanto and Tanto rivers were a great boon, there was a limit to how much land a mere couple hundred people could clear, so they had chosen to live modest lives instead of working themselves to death. Since the rivers did not have any fish suitable for consumption, they had instead raised kimyuus, and had only grown the aria, fuwano, and mamaria that they needed to survive. Salt and other necessary goods had been things they had only been able to acquire by purchasing them from merchants who visited occasionally. That was the sort of meager lifestyle they had lived.

Two hundred years ago, though, that peaceful way of living had come to an

end. Count Genos had led thousands of soldiers and even more civilians to this land, and in no time at all they had taken full control of it. As the settlers had only had to deal with bandits who pillaged their fields or targeted their young women up until that point, they had no means of resisting. Their only options were to leave the land or live as citizens of the kingdom, with the majority of them choosing the latter when forced to make the choice. That included the Rou family.

However, the Rou family had been seen as especially cooperative. While they had been settlers, and had therefore been considered lower class, they had later been permitted to live in the castle town. You could count on one hand the number of independent settlers who had been granted that right out of the hundreds who had lived there.

At any rate, Genos had developed greatly over the course of the last two hundred years. People had come flowing in from towns all over, and at present the population was said to be somewhere between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. Count Genos had been granted the rank of duke, while the houses of Turan, Saturas, and Daleim had been elevated from knights to counts. Trade with Sym and Jagar had also thrived, leading to the town becoming one of the most prosperous in all of Selva.

Looking back on it now, the house of Genos had practically been exiled when they had been sent here to this land. In Selva, the houses above the rank of count were supposed to be granted territory. But their land had been taken by the royal house of Selva, and they had been told to go take hold of a new territory on their own. They had undeniably been banished, along with the people under them. But they had turned that anger and regret into strength, and developed the town of Genos into what it was today. Nowadays, the people of the capital had come to fear what Genos had become, granting three houses a rank so that Duke Genos alone would not control all that power and wealth, at least according to rumors.

Shilly Rou was a citizen of the Genos castle town. It wasn't as if her standing was especially high, but she was definitely of good lineage. The Rou had even had several of their members marry into the branch families of count or viscount houses.

The Rou also made a point of passing down certain legends and tales that only the old families knew about. In particular, those relating to Mount Morga. Terrifying beasts lived on the mountain: varb wolves, giant madarama snakes, and red savages. Those who sought to pillage the mountain inevitably met their ends thanks to those beasts, so now the people living here considered attempting to do any such thing to be absolutely taboo. They had made sure to convey that to the new rulers of Genos, which was what had led to the current state of things.

And so, when the people of the forest's edge had moved here eighty years ago, the idea had been met with a great deal of opposition from the older crowd. Only giba, mundt, and giiz lived at the base of the mountain, but if the worst happened and the new arrivals wandered into the territory of the wolves, giant snakes, or savages, it could have led to a calamity that would wipe out Genos itself. And so they had asserted that the barbarians who had come from Jagar should have been swiftly driven from the land.

However, the ruler at the time had accepted the people of the forest's edge instead. This was around the time when the giba had started ravaging the crops grown by the people of Genos, so maybe the noble had believed those barbarians who didn't even have steel weapons would simply die to the beasts out in the forest, unable to properly hunt them.

At any rate, the people of the forest's edge hadn't died out, and they had not pillaged Mount Morga either. They protected the mountain as sacred land and curtailed the threat of giba attacks, leading Genos to even greater prosperity.

Currently, Shilly Rou was standing at the foot of that terrifying mountain, and it was giving her an ever worse feeling of being in danger.

When she turned her eyes to the east, she could see the black shape of Mount Morga standing there imposingly. Just looking at it was enough to cause her heart to freeze up with fear, so she had more or less kept her head down since setting foot in the settlement at the forest's edge.

Oh western god, please save your devoted child... Shilly Rou prayed, closing her eyes tight and grabbing the charm in her breast pocket. But as she did so, a hand clapped down on her shoulder from behind, almost making her shriek.

“Are you all right, Shilly Rou? What are you doing over here by yourself?”

When she turned to look, she found a girl with long blackish-brown hair standing there with a gentle smile. Her name was Sheera Ruu, and she was a resident of this settlement. Shilly Rou was about to breathe a sigh of relief, only to notice a young man with eyes like a beast’s standing there next to her, making the young castle town chef shrink away from the two of them.

“Ah, this is the second son of the main Ruu house, Darmu Ruu. Darmu Ruu, she’s from the castle town, and...”

“She’s that chef from the castle town, right? My old man explained it earlier,” the youth interrupted, rudely cutting off Sheera Ruu and then taking a swig from a bottle of fruit wine. He seemed to be drunk, as his eyes were narrowed sleepily. The state he was in made Shilly Rou even more frightened of him.

“Did you already try the whole roast giba? I was helping to cut it until just a moment ago.”

“N-No, I, um...” She wanted to say she was searching for Roy, who had come along with her, but she found herself unable to get the words out, as if she had bitten into a raw herb that had paralyzed her tongue.

Sheera Ruu smiled kindly. “Well then, I’ll go grab some for you. After all, it won’t be long before it’s gone, at the rate people are eating it. My apologies, Darmu Ruu, but could you keep an eye on Shilly Rou for a bit?”

“Ah, wait, hold on!” Shilly Rou desperately tried to shout, but Sheera Ruu didn’t seem to hear her as she disappeared into the crowd. Shilly Rou felt like she was barely still in the world of the living, trapped alone with a drunkard who had a terrifying look in his eyes. She couldn’t help thinking that someone who drank fruit wine directly from the bottle like he did was clearly a barbarian.

“I’ve heard you made food for my brothers in the castle town, girl?” Darmu Ruu eventually grumbled. “Jiza and Ludo said they never expected to eat food like that in the castle town, and that it was a huge shock for them... Seems you’re quite a skilled chef.”

Shilly Rou didn’t say a word.

“It’s only right for women to man the stove. I’ve got no interest in dishes that

don't use giba meat, but you should be proud of your strength... It's really rare to hear Jiza say something like that."

Still, Shilly Rou remained silent.

"Are you listening to me, girl?"

"I-I am!"

"Hmph..." Darmu Ruu grumbled with another swig of fruit wine. He must have been quite drunk, as his footing seemed unstable. "I figured it was all the same as long as I was able to eat giba meat... I was so ignorant back then, seriously... As if anyone could complain after being fed something this good..."

"Huh...?"

"It's right to make delicious food... It's irritating, but I acknowledge that fact... So she should be more proud of her strength... She's got more energy than before, but it's still not enough..."

"U-Um, what are you talking about...?" Shilly Rou timidly asked, but Darmu Ruu's eyes remained unfocused. He looked like he would collapse at any moment. Before he could, though, Sheera Ruu returned holding a wooden plate.

"Sorry for the wait. Hmm? Did something happen, Darmu Ruu?"

"No, it's nothing... I was talking, so give me a proper answer..."

Sheera Ruu turned toward Shilly Rou with a troubled smile.

"I'm sorry. What were you talking about, exactly?"

"I'm not quite sure..."

Shilly Rou wanted to go and cling to Sheera Ruu. Among the people of the forest's edge, the girl was especially kind, and also seemed to be quite smart to boot. If Shilly Rou couldn't find that unreliable companion of hers or her guide, then Sheera Ruu was the only person left that she could rely on.

"At any rate, here, have some of this. It's whole roast giba, and it took all day for us to cook it," Sheera Ruu said, holding out the plate.

Though she was still feeling out of sorts, Shilly Rou focused her attention on

the meal. Roasted meat with the skin still on it had been cut into thin slices and placed atop the plate. The dark-brown skin had a bit of a shine to it, and the meat was white and moist. The smell of meat and pico leaves was coming off of it.

“You have some too, Darmu Ruu. You should really eat something instead of just drinking.”

Darmu Ruu went ahead and reached out, so Shilly Rou did the same. It was giba meat, which she had sampled numerous times at this point. It really did seem that they had only used salt and pico leaves on it, which let the flavor of the meat come across clearly.

Compared to kimyuus or karon, giba meat was much tougher. It might have even been a bit tougher than gyama. That wasn't to say it was sinewy, though. It had a firm and pleasant chewiness to it from the muscle fibers. There was a wildness to its flavor, very fitting for the beasts it came from. However, she couldn't sense any unpleasant stench from it at all, so the bloodletting must have been done correctly. A lot of fat and moisture had been cooked off over the half day that it had been roasted, but there was still a layer of jiggly fat between the skin and the meat, so it wasn't lacking in umami. There was no end to the flavor, no matter how much she chewed. It was definitely a high-class meat, every bit the equal of karon or gyama.

“Giba meat truly is a wonderful ingredient. Still, there wasn't much technique that went into making this dish. All you used was salt and pico leaves, so the only thing you would have needed to put effort into was managing the flames,” Shilly Rou noted.

“Right. However, Asuta's aim was to draw out the fantastic flavor of giba meat as much as possible by roasting it for a long time. There were no real tricks to it, but that means anyone can make it, which is quite valuable for the chefs of the forest's edge,” Sheera Ruu said, giving yet another smile. “And the fact that it takes so long to make gives it a special meaning for us, because having the leeway to spend so much time on cooking is something worth cherishing for us.”

“I can't quite say I understand... Well, I suppose it's a fitting dish for this kind

of celebration. I've heard that in Sym, they customarily serve a whole roast gyama with the head still attached at events similar to this one." Shilly Rou was only able to remain stouthearted for the moment because she was talking about food. Sheera Ruu, on the other hand, was unrestrained in her joy.

"Well then, allow me to show you another dish. Would you like to try the sweets Rimee Ruu's group made?"

"Ah, no, I was looking for my companion, Roy..."

Sheera Ruu nodded and replied, "Oh, that Roy fellow is with Asuta's group. That's why I'm going to be the one to show you around."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, Asuta was worried because he hadn't seen you. I said I was going to deliver some whole roast giba for you, though, and he thanked me for helping you out."

"Th-Then where did Roy and the others go? Did they just leave me behind?"

"Oh, no, I asked to do so. I wanted to get to know you better...but am I just being a hassle?"

The words Shilly Rou initially wanted to say got caught in her throat. The thought of turning down a request from this girl made her feel awkward, and besides...if she refused and asked to be brought to Roy, it would seem like she was a lost child or something.

Besides, I can hardly expect Roy to save me. That young chef seemed to have gotten back his old brazenness recently, which made him quite difficult for Shilly Rou to handle. He was so young and lacked any backing, but he was skilled enough to catch the eye of the previous head of the house of Turan, so he had a firm foundation as a chef. In the end, though, he had only gotten as far as being charged with making food for the servants, but he had still been invited to work at the Turan manor as an independent chef, rather than as anyone's apprentice. *Even so, that's no excuse for him to be as insolent as he is with Varkas.*

Then Sheera Ruu spoke up again with concern in her voice. "Is something the matter? If you're worried about being on your own..."

“Ah, no, it’s fine. If I just start walking, we’re sure to run into each other eventually, so I would greatly appreciate you showing me around until then.”

“I see,” Sheera Ruu said, her eyes sparkling. She was quite trim and reserved for a person of the forest’s edge, but there were times when she displayed strength and vitality quite different from what one would expect from a townspeople, and this was definitely one such time.

“Thank you. Well then, let’s head over to the sweets. Will you be all right, Darmu Ruu?”

“What are you asking for...? It’s not like I’m drunk...” Darmu Ruu grumbled back, his eyelids drooping more and more. He looked even more frightening now than when they had first met.

With that, Sheera Ruu led Shilly Rou off to one edge of the plaza, where there weren’t any stone stoves set up. Instead, a number of plates were sitting in a line on top of a cloth, illuminated by the light of the bonfire. A large crowd was gathered there, and the majority of them were women.

“Hey! Where did you run off to?” one member of the crowd called out loudly—a girl with a different skin color than the people of the forest’s edge. It was none other than the person responsible for the circumstances Shilly Rou currently found herself in: Yumi.

“You’re the one who dragged me out here and then left me!”

“Hmm? Singing and dancing together is the best way to make friends with someone. You *were* having fun, weren’t you?” Yumi remarked with a giggle. “Still, your dancing was a mess for someone from the castle town. It was like watching a drunken kimyuus flopping about.”

“I-I am merely a chef’s apprentice, not someone in a position to be invited to dances! It isn’t as if everyone who lives in the castle town is an expert dancer, you know.”

“You don’t need to get mad about it. With dancing, all that matters is enjoying yourself.” Strangely, Yumi was acting much friendlier than she had been before. She no longer seemed to be shunning Shilly Rou, and was instead offering her a happy smile. Was that really all it took to make this girl lower her guard?

“It sounds like they’re going to perform again later, so would you like to dance with me some more then?”

“I firmly refuse!” Shilly Rou’s voice had turned a little harsh there, but Yumi didn’t seem to pay it any mind, so the castle town girl was starting to worry that she was going to end up getting abducted again when the music started back up.

“All right, I’ll see you later. We’ve got a bit of business to take care of,” Yumi said, grabbing a large plate and standing up. Apparently, the plate was one she had brought over, and it was now packed with all sorts of colorful treats.

With that, Yumi left the area alongside Telia Mas, so Shilly Rou and Sheera Ruu sat down in the newly opened space. The young women and children who had gotten there before them were all smiling away and stuffing their cheeks with desserts.

The strange sweet that had been served at the tea party and banquet were there, as was a baked sweet. There were also small dishes full of panam honey and fruit juice.

“They all look delicious. Where shall we start, Shilly Rou?”

“Let’s see... I would like to give each of them a try, so I suppose it doesn’t matter which one we start with.”

An older woman with a kindly face promptly served them some sweets. “Please, start with this. I think you’ll find that it pairs well with that pale brown nectar.”

“Thank you...” Shilly Rou replied, accepting the plate. The strange semitransparent confection jiggled as it moved. It was what Asuta had referred to as chatchi mochi.

It seemed that it had been made with karon milk, just like at the tea party, and it had a faint whitish shine to it. The pale brown nectar the woman had indicated seemed to be a mix of sugar and hoboi seeds that had been boiled until they turned black. The fragrant aroma of the hoboi gently tickled her nose.

“These really are delicious. They seem to include different ingredients each time I see them, but rather than it being a case of the ideal ingredients not

being nailed down yet, the intent seems to be to simply enjoy various different flavors,” Shilly Rou commented.

“That’s right. I think the kind that uses gigi leaves and karon milk is just as good as these ones.”

“Still, Asuta was the one who more or less came up with the basic idea for this confection, wasn’t he? It certainly doesn’t seem to me that he created this recipe with a mind to use the ingredients’ flavors to their fullest potential,” Shilly Rou stated, but then she recalled that Sheera Ruu wouldn’t know anything about that.

“What are you talking about?” the girl from the forest’s edge asked, and so Shilly Rou quickly went over what Mikel had told her before.

At the end of the explanation, Sheera Ruu said, “So, Mikel and Asuta try to bring out the flavor of each of their ingredients to the fullest, while Varkas tries to distance himself from their original flavors... I see. Now that you’ve broken it down for me, I think I understand what you mean.”

“Good. But this sweet was made with boiled chatchi powder, wasn’t it? I can’t see it as a dish that utilizes the original flavor of the chatchi.”

“No. But I wouldn’t say that Asuta is solely fixated on sticking to the original flavors of the ingredients. It’s more that he’s always trying to use unfamiliar ingredients to recreate familiar dishes... For example, Asuta came up with the idea to dissolve poitan flour in water and then grill it, but he might not have bothered to put so much thought into how to use it if he had encountered fuwano first.”

“In other words...Asuta’s home nation had an ingredient similar to fuwano, and that’s what led to him using poitan in such a way?”

“Yes. Apparently, poitan is what is known as a grain, so he figured that there should have been a way to do something with it.”

This was starting to make Shilly Rou’s head hurt. Asuta had only encountered aria, poitan, and giba meat after he had first arrived at this settlement, and yet just a few months later, he was able to make dishes like the one they were currently enjoying. But at the same time, he had no idea how to handle

ingredients that had no equivalent in his home country, so there were quite a few herbs and vegetables that he hadn't made use of yet. Shilly Rou was certain that no other chef could possibly be as odd as him.

"Asuta truly is a strange man. He's like a holy being sent to bring happiness to the people of the forest's edge."

"To me, he's an ominous entity leading Varkas astray."

"Leading Varkas astray? It looked to me like he was just honestly enjoying Asuta's skills, and even then, he insisted he had no use for Asuta's techniques himself."

Shilly Rou had no counterargument to that. It seemed she was doomed to lose every argument she had that night.

"Still, you and Varkas are the unusual ones from my point of view."

"Huh? Me?"

"Like I said yesterday, you are just as strange and just as important as Varkas in my mind. You were able to make my comrades happy with your cooking, despite being from the castle town and not even using giba meat. I'm truly glad that you came here to the settlement at the forest's edge," Sheera Ruu said. But then she let out a shriek.

Darmu Ruu had suddenly sat down next to her, and was beginning to tip over in her direction. At first, he was simply leaning against her shoulder a bit, but then he started sinking down toward her legs. And as soon as his head fell into Sheera Ruu's lap, he started peacefully snoring away.

"D-Darmu Ruu, are you asleep? You must have drank too much." Sheera Ruu's face was bright red. She shook Darmu Ruu's shoulders, but the hunter showed no signs of waking. His eyes were fully closed, and he seemed to be quite comfortable in his current position. He looked a lot younger now that he was unconscious.

"E-Er, could you lend me a hand with laying Darmu Ruu down?" Sheera Ruu asked the older woman who had served the two girls earlier.

The old woman just smiled at her. "But don't you think he would sleep so

much easier on your legs than on this thin sheet? Look how happy his face is.”

“B-But Tito Min Ruu, the customs of the forest’s edge say unmarried men and women aren’t supposed to touch each other if it isn’t necessary.”

“It shouldn’t be any issue when it’s you and Darmu. We’ve been overlooking that kind of thing at banquets since forever ago.”

The other women and children around them simply carried on eating and smiling happily at each other. Sheera Ruu, meanwhile, was going ever redder in the face as she desperately turned to Shilly Rou next.

“Don’t worry. I can get the sweets myself.”

“Uh, no, that’s not...”

Shilly Rou ignored what she said after that, reaching for a baked poitan sweet. It wasn’t as if she was trying to be mean or anything. It was just that Sheera Ruu seemed happy somehow, despite the troubled look on her face, so it felt wrong to interfere.

And so, time continued to calmly pass on by, and the end of the long banquet finally approached.



“Huh?! You plan to stay the night here at the settlement?!” Shilly Rou shouted before she could stop herself.

The celebration at the Ruu settlement had come to a close, and the guests had gathered on one side of the plaza. The man who had caused Shilly Rou’s emotional reaction looked perplexed as he replied, “Of course I do. It’s not like the guards will lower the drawbridge for us if we try to return to the castle town this late at night. We’re just chefs, not nobles.”

“B-But...”

“Or do you want to get lodgings in the post town? We don’t have any connections there, though, and neither of us know which inns are safe. And if we get waylaid by outlaws, I wouldn’t even be able to protect myself, much less you,” Roy added.

Asuta, who had been listening to the conversation, then interjected, “That’s

right. The first time I slept in an inn was when we visited Dabagg, and we had bandits break into our rooms. We were okay because we had hunters from the forest's edge with us, but I'd definitely agree that it can be pretty dangerous to stay at an inn if you aren't familiar with the area."

Shilly Rou bit her lip, and looked over the townsfolk standing around them. The young vegetable seller from the Daleim lands—she had forgotten his name—smiled at her. "Normally, we'd be happy to invite you back to our place, but unfortunately, our father drank himself unconscious, and our little sister's really been looking forward to spending the night at the forest's edge... To be honest, we've been looking forward to this too, so we don't have any plans to head back home tonight."

Shilly Rou didn't know how to respond to that.

"There's nothing to worry about! The Daleim and Turan lands may have guards protecting them, but this settlement has the hunters of the forest's edge watching over it! That makes this the safest place there is!" Mikel's daughter, Myme, chimed in. She was still only eleven years old, so she clearly didn't realize how terrifying the people of the forest's edge could be. "They say that giba and mundt don't enter houses, and criminals won't come anywhere near this place either, so there really isn't all that much danger in the first place!"

Even so, Shilly Rou hadn't spent so much as a single night outside of the stone walls before. And on top of that, she wasn't particularly close to anyone here. She had known Roy the longest, but they would be sleeping separately regardless, so she couldn't exactly rely on him.

"Well then, are we good to go...? We have a lot of guests today, so we'd like to divide you up across a number of houses..." a woman of the forest's edge stated, stifling a yawn. The girl had long chestnut-colored hair and an unusually sensual aura about her. "Asuta and the men can use Bartha's house, the women of Dora's family will come to the main house, Myme and Bartha will spend the night at Shin Ruu's house, and the remaining women can stay at Mida's house... Does that work...?"

"Yeah, that shouldn't be a problem."

They were just going ahead with making arrangements, while Shilly Rou's

concerns were simply shoved aside. Without letting anyone see, she gripped her amulet honoring the western god as she tried to decide what to do, until Yumi leaned in close to her from the side.

“You were planning on going back to the castle town, weren’t you? But if you head back this late, you won’t have time to do anything except go to sleep, right? So why not stay and have fun with us for as long as you can instead?”

“But...I have so much early prep work to take care of tomorrow...”

“Oh, we people of the forest’s edge wake up at the break of dawn, so I can take you back in the wagon around that time if you want,” Asuta said, still smiling.

Shilly Rou knew he didn’t hold any ill will, but she couldn’t help how much he irritated her. She glared at him reflexively, but then Yumi poked her in the cheek and said, “Hey, he’s saying he’ll give you a ride in the morning, so why are you looking at him like that? That’s pretty ungrateful of you, isn’t it?”

Shilly Rou remained silent.

“All right then, guess it’s about time we get moving. You guys really don’t need our help cleaning up?” Yumi continued.

“We can’t have our guests doing our work for us. Besides, all we have to do is put out the fires before going to sleep. We’ll clean up properly tomorrow morning,” the black-haired girl, Reina Ruu, replied. Along with Sheera Ruu, she was the person of the forest’s edge Shilly Rou was most familiar with, but that didn’t mean they were friends.

“Are we good now? Let me show you to the houses,” a young man with bright red hair, yellow eyes, and skin lighter than that of the people of the forest’s edge called out.

Asuta turned toward a beautiful girl with blonde hair. “Well then, good night, clan head.”

“Right.”

That girl was always by Asuta’s side when he came to the castle town. Shilly Rou was pretty sure her name was Ai Fa. She normally dressed imposingly, with

a fur cloak and a sword dangling from her hip, but with those removed, she really was incredibly beautiful. And she wasn't just pretty. She possessed a commanding presence as well, like a female knight. Thinking back to that one tea party, Shilly Rou recalled that she had been dressed like a military officer back for the occasion, which had suited her shockingly well.

And so, the guests who had been invited to the forest's edge were led to their respective houses. When Roy left with Asuta, all he said was, "I'll see you tomorrow," before quickly walking away.

All around the plaza, the residents set about extinguishing the fires, causing the surroundings to steadily grow darker. By the time Shilly Rou's group reached their house, the lights had all been put out, leaving Shilly Rou terribly on edge.

"We'll be parting ways here. You can take care of the rest, right, Sheera Ruu?"

"Of course. Good night, Reina and Vina Ruu."

Reina Ruu—the girl with the chestnut-colored hair—and the women from the Daleim lands continued walking farther into the plaza, while Sheera Ruu led Shilly Rou and the others to the nearby house.

When they were right in front of the structure, Sheera Ruu suddenly said, "Oh my," which prompted a young man and woman of the forest's edge who were nearby to turn around and look at her. Had they been talking out here in the dark? The boy had black hair, while the girl's red hair was tied up in a tail at the top of her head.

Despite the darkness, it was easy to see how red the girl's face was when she replied, "Oh, you're back, Sheera Ruu! Where are Vina and Reina?"

"They're leading the rest of our guests to the main house. Rimee Ruu and Tara already headed there a while ago."

"I-I see! Well, talk to you later, Shin Ruu! And I'll see you tomorrow, Sheera Ruu and Ai Fa!"

"Okay." The boy named Shin Ruu calmly nodded back. This was the young hunter who had attended the tea party alongside that Ai Fa woman, and he'd also had a swordsmanship competition with a knight of Genos.

The red-haired girl took off running into the darkness, at which point Shilly Rou noticed a woman with a large build and a rugged face like a man's watching her go. That woman then called out cheerfully, "Hey there, Shin Ruu. I'll be staying with you tonight, since our male guests will be using the house you all loaned us."

"I heard. And that girl will be coming with you, right, Barthia?"

"Yes! I'm Myme of the Turan lands! Thank you!" Myme replied with a deep bow. That just left Shilly Rou, Yumi, and Telia Mas in their group, along with three women of the forest's edge. They weren't members of the Ruu clan, though, so they were also being treated as guests.

"Mida's house is the next one over. He doesn't seem to have made it back yet, though," Sheera Ruu said.

"Oh, Mida went off somewhere in search of bedding earlier," one of the women responded. Her ash-brown hair was in a single braid on the side of her head, and she looked like a simple and energetic girl. She appeared to be two or three years younger than Shilly Rou, but she seemed to be pretty mature already.

Actually, all of these women of the forest's edge seem to be remarkably beautiful. And provocative. Does eating giba help certain parts grow?

As that trivial thought was passing through Shilly Rou's head, the gray-brown-haired girl turned toward the townsfolk. "Um, if we're going to be spending the night together, maybe we should reintroduce ourselves? I'm Yun Sudra of the Sudra clan, this is Toor Deen of the Deen clan, and that's Ai Fa of the Fa clan. I hope we can all get along."

"Yeah, agreed. You know, I've seen you around the stalls, but I think this is the first time I've actually heard your name," Yumi chimed in, as she was apparently not even remotely familiar with the concept of shyness, and Yun Sudra smiled at her in amusement.

That girl named Toor Deen—who was currently trying to shrink into the background next to Yun Sudra—was someone Shilly Rou had seen quite a few times. She had shown such skill at the tea party that she was the first of her people besides Asuta whose name Shilly Rou had made a point to remember.

She was only about as old as Myme and seemed quite timid, and yet she was wonderfully skilled when it came to making sweets.

Honestly, when it comes to confectionery, she's every bit as skilled as most chefs in the castle town. If she continues to build up experience, then she's certain to eventually become quite remarkable, Shilly Rou thought, looking the young girl over, only for Toor Deen to notice and cast her gaze downward as her face went red. She would always try to hide behind Asuta's back at times like this, but since there was no one present who could serve that purpose, she just squirmed in place.

Then Yumi abruptly said, "Oh! That's him, isn't it? Gah, he's like a moving mountain!"

Associating the idea of a moving mountain with Morga, Shilly Rou turned to see what Yumi was looking at in a fluster. And when she did, she saw something that was indeed every bit as shocking as seeing Mount Morga moving would have been. A massive figure was holding multiple sets of bedding in his arms as he staggered toward them.

"It looks like you're having some difficulty there. Allow me to help you, Mida," Ai Fa called out.

A garbled voice called out from beyond the bedding, "No, I'm fine... Could you just open the door...?"

"I would like your permission as the house's resident, then."

"Right... Mida of the Ruu clan says Ai Fa of the Fa clan can open the door to his house..."

After hearing those words, Ai Fa went ahead and opened the sliding door. The huge figure threw the bedding into the house, then turned back to the group with a "Phew..."

Shilly Rou once again felt terrified. He was an exceptionally large hunter of the forest's edge who she had seen at various points throughout the banquet. Indeed, he would have been impossible to miss. Calling him "large" had actually been a serious understatement. He was roughly two heads taller than Shilly Rou, and had to be about twice as wide as your average man. It was as if a

karon's massive frame had suddenly risen to its feet, and he could hardly believe she was actually seeing such a person.

The large man from the traveling performers had also been abnormally big, but this man was both wider and thicker than him. There was a great deal of fat on his face, arms, and legs, making him look like a meatball wearing clothes. If the man wanted to, he could probably crush Shilly Rou with a single arm.

"Ai Fa... You're sleeping in my house, right?"

"Yes. We'll be in your care, Mida."

"I'm glad. This is the first time I've had guests. And it makes me really happy that you're one of them."

"I see. Asuta insisted that he wanted to stay with the other guests tonight," Ai Fa said in a perfectly calm voice, but her eyes seemed to be smiling. "I don't particularly enjoy taking advantage of the hospitality of other clans, but I must say I'm looking forward to spending the night at a house you worked so hard to build yourself."

"Hmm... Your words are kinda hard to understand sometimes, Ai Fa."

"There's no need to think about them too deeply. It truly is a fine house, Mida."

"Right. Thanks."

It went without saying, but the people of the forest's edge didn't seem to fear this huge Mida fellow in the least. That was to be expected, as they were part of the same people, but Yumi and Telia Mas seemed totally fine with him too, as hard as that was to believe.

"Since Mida's back now, I'll be taking my leave. Will you be all right, Shilly Rou?" Sheera Ruu asked, and the chef awkwardly turned her way. Sheera Ruu's eyebrows were drooping apologetically. "My room isn't all that large, so it's already full with just Myme and Barthia there. I would have liked to invite you as well if it were at all possible, but..."

"Ooh, you're that friendly with her, Sheera Ruu?" Yumi interjected from the side. "Well, you can just leave her to us for today. We get even fewer chances

than you people of the forest's edge to interact with folks from the castle town!"

"That's true. I'll talk to you again tomorrow morning. Will you be able to look after our guests, Mida?"

"Yeah. I will."

With that, Sheera Ruu left for her own house before Shilly Rou could work up the willpower to speak to her.

"Okay, come on in," the large fellow named Mida said before disappearing into the darkness inside the house.

Shilly Rou remained motionless for a long moment, until Yumi suddenly grabbed ahold of her arm. "The people of the forest's edge can move around easily in the dark, but we've gotta be careful not to stumble over anything."

While she still hadn't let go of her anger over being forced into dancing, Shilly Rou was unable to reject the warmth of Yumi's grip, so she was forced to walk along with the other girl, despite feeling dejected about all of this.

"Sorry, Mida, but would you mind putting on a light?" Yumi asked.

"Okay. Just hold on a little."

As the guests removed their footwear, a red light started shining from farther inside. He must have lit a candle using lana leaves. Before long, there was a faint light illuminating the room.

It was a perfectly ordinary house built of wood. Though it was about as crude as the sheds made for housing kimyuus in the castle town, it really wasn't all that different from the sorts of buildings you saw in the post town and the Daleim lands. There was a fur rug laid out atop the wooden floor, and there was a cloak and club hanging from the wall. Farther into the main hall were a number of doors, as well as a stone-built stove.

"Ooh, this is a nice place you've got. You live here all on your own?" Yumi said.

"Yeah... Mia Lea and Ryada Ruu told me to build one that's the normal size."

"Hmm? Well, if you end up with a family someday, you'll need one this big, I

suppose. You people of the forest's edge seem to have a lot of kids."

"I can't make any kids though..."

"Of course you can't! Your wife'll be the one giving birth someday!" Yumi said with a laugh.

Mida's little eyes blinked in surprise far up above her. "But I don't have the Ruu name, so I can't get married... And even if I get a clan name, I'm not old enough to marry anyone..."

"Oh, really? It's not rare at all for folks in town to get married when they're fifteen or sixteen."

"But I'm still only fourteen..."

Yumi let out a loud "Huh?!" and Shilly Rou was so taken aback that she felt like her head was spinning.

"You're *that* young, Mida? Well, I figured based on how you act that you might be younger than me, but that's still a shock to hear. Right, Telia Mas?"

"Yes, it is. I thought for certain that you were older."

"By the way, how old are the rest of you?"

"Seventeen," "Eleven," "Fifteen," various voices answered in turn.

"Ack! You're only fifteen, Yun Sudra? You've got such a young-looking face, but you're really attractive too."

"Not as much as you, Yumi. I only just reached the age where I'm able to take a husband," Yun Sudra replied with a bashful smile. "So, how old are the rest of you?"

"Me? I just turned seventeen as of the silver month! Telia Mas is one year older than me, and... Actually, how old are you?"

"I'm eighteen." Shilly Rou said.

Yumi grinned cheerfully. "Ooh, we've got a lot of folks around the same age here! Tonight's going to be fun!"

Shilly Rou gave a stealthy sigh, wondering just what sort of fun she was expecting.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa's gaze had been directed at her feet for some time, but now she called out to Mida, "Hey, you seem to have brought over quite a bit of bedding. Does the Ruu clan have this much to spare?"

"Hmm? Reina Ruu and the others bought them in town..."

"Oh yeah, they bought them on their way back from work. I think that was your last day on guard duty, wasn't it, Ai Fa?" Yun Sudra explained.

"So it was," Ai Fa said with a nod. "Still, they seem to have bought quite a few, considering that they would normally have no use for them."

"Yes, but they could hardly let their guests sleep on the wooden floor, and Reina Ruu said there'll probably be plenty of other occasions when they need this bedding in the future."

"I see. So that's why Donda Ruu agreed to it," Ai Fa replied in a pensive tone, and then she grabbed some of the bedding by her feet. "I'm not very familiar with this kind of bedding. Should I just stack them up and spread them out?"

"Yeah... We should need three for each of us."

It was plain woolen bedding, not stuffed with any feathers or the like. Even piling up three of them only created a pad about as thick as the palm of one's hand, and with nothing but a fur rug covering a wooden floor below them, Shilly Rou certainly didn't expect to get a good night's sleep.

"You can use these too," Mida said once the bedding was all laid out, holding out a number of pieces of long and narrow tree bark in both of his thick hands. Everyone else thanked him and took one, with Shilly Rou alone being perplexed by what they were doing.

"Huh? You're not going to use a chew stick?" Yumi said.

"Ch-Chew stick?"

"You use it to clean your teeth before sleep. Just chew on the end until it gets soft, and then you can use it to scrape your teeth."

In the castle town, they cleaned their teeth using brushes made from karon fur. Shilly Rou felt like she was about to break down sobbing as she chewed on the strange bark. Then she rinsed out her mouth with water from a jug, finally

completing her bedtime preparations.

After that, Ai Fa and Yun Sudra undid their long hair so it hung down over their shoulders, which made them both look astoundingly beautiful. All of the young women of the forest's edge had long hair like the noble ladies from the castle town. And the colors of Ai Fa's and Yun Sudra's hair were especially striking, similar to those of people from the north and east, making the two of them shine all the more brilliantly.

While Shilly Rou's mind was occupied with such thoughts, Mida's thick torso slanted into a bow. "I'm gonna go to sleep. But you can wake me up if you need me."

"We'll be going to sleep soon, so we shouldn't have any issues. You get a good night's sleep too, Mida," Ai Fa said.

"Right..." Mida said, his chubby cheeks trembling, and then he disappeared through one of the doors in the back. After waiting for everyone to be seated atop their bedding, Ai Fa blew out the candle, and darkness surrounded them once more.

As she lay down atop the hard bedding, Shilly Rou sighed heavily while trying to make sure that nobody heard her. The smell from the candle made from animal fat still drifted through the air. As silence fell over the room, the sounds of wild birds and insects could be heard outside the window. After a moment, her eyes started to adjust, allowing her to faintly make out the interior of the room thanks to the light of the moon. Her head still felt clear, so she didn't care to close her eyes just yet. As she sighed once again and wondered if she would be able to work tomorrow, she sensed Yumi squirming closer beside her.

"That sure was fun, wasn't it? It was almost like we were having another revival festival." She wasn't speaking very loudly, but thanks to the surrounding silence, her voice came across clearly through the darkness.

"It was," Telia Mas answered. "I was never able to visit the Daleim lands at night during the revival festival, so that made tonight even more enjoyable. When you work at an inn, the revival festival is an incredibly busy time of year."

"Yeah, that's for sure. I mean, I was able to fool around about as much as I worked, but you didn't get to leave home for so much as an instant, did you?"

“That’s right. After work settled down, I was always so exhausted, I went straight to sleep.”

“You lazybones. Next year, we’ll have to be sure to get away for a bit and have some fun together. We’ve gotta have a chance to enjoy ourselves after we show our guests a good time, after all.” Shilly Rou then sensed Yumi squirming again. “Hey, what did you guys do in the evening on the day of the downfall? They must’ve had some really impressive banquets in the castle town, right?”

“Was that question directed at me?” Shilly Rou asked.

“Of course it was. You’re the only resident of the castle town here, and the rest of us spent that whole night partying in the Daleim lands.”

As she stared up at the ceiling that was shrouded in darkness, Shilly Rou let a third sigh escape her. “I had a job to do that day. I was summoned to the manor where the noble guests of Genos were staying so I could help prepare a banquet for them.”

“Oh? And after that?”

“I returned home and slept.”

“Oh yeah? After I turned ten, I started staying up until the new year arrived before I went to sleep. The people of the forest’s edge don’t celebrate the sun god, right?”

“That’s correct. We don’t have any such custom,” Yun Sudra replied from a short distance away. It was starting to seem like none of them had fallen asleep yet.

“Gotcha. Still, you guys have plenty of celebrations of your own. You celebrate the hunt, and your births too, don’t you?”

“We do. But small clans like ours aren’t able to put on excessively large banquets. Few clans at the forest’s edge have as many members and subordinates as the Ruu,” Yun Sudra said, sounding amused. “We’ll be holding a festival of the hunt with the other clans that live near us soon, though. I’m really looking forward to it.”

“Ooh, that’s good to hear. Ai Fa, Toor Deen, will you be part of that too?”

“Yes. There will be six clans participating, including the Sudra, Fa, and Deen. It won’t be on the same scale as the Ruu clan’s events, but I am looking forward to it as well.”

“I see,” Yumi said with a chuckle. “Young women get proposed to a lot at those festivals, right? That must make them even more exciting.”

“Huh? Ah, yes... I’m surprised you know of such customs.”

“Well, at the party in the Daleim lands, I learned about how you see dancing as a sort of courtship. That’s why you guys didn’t want to dance at first, until we explained that that wasn’t how things worked in town.”

“Oh, I see.”

“You’re still too little, Toor Deen, but Ai Fa and Yun Sudra, you two can already get married, right? Think you’ll find a husband at the next banquet?”

After seeming to hesitate for some reason, Yun Sudra answered, “I’m not sure. I don’t think I’m skilled enough to become a wife yet, though. After all, I only just turned fifteen.”

“Men probably can’t keep themselves away from a girl as cute as you, Yun Sudra. You can worry about building up whatever skills you might need for married life after the ceremony.”

“I suppose...”

“What about you, Ai Fa? You’re so pretty that you probably have the pick of the litter, right?”

That question went unanswered for a long while. Shilly Rou was starting to wonder if she had already fallen asleep, when a voice firmly replied, “I have no intention of marrying. I *am* a hunter, after all.”

“Huh? Women hunters can’t get married? That’s pretty mean of your people, isn’t it?”

“It isn’t a custom, obviously. After all, there were no female hunters before me.”

“Oh, really? Then why hold back? You should just go ahead and get married.”

“I chose to perish out in the forest as a hunter rather than seeking a husband and leaving behind children.”

For some reason, Shilly Rou felt a stirring in her chest. She could sense one of the other women growing tense somewhere in the darkness. She normally couldn't perceive such things, but her head was strangely clear at the moment, and it was as if a spirit or the like was silently whispering to her.

“Aw, that's a shame. I thought for sure that you were gonna get together with Asuta,” Yumi said, seemingly picking up on none of that. “It's so obvious just from looking at the two of you that you've got feelings for each other, and a woman hunter and a guy chef seem like a perfect match. You're already living together too, so do you really not want to?”

“Only because I decided to live as a hunter... And I've already said as much to Asuta.”

“Oh? So what did Asuta say?”

“I cannot speak about his feelings when he himself is not present,” Ai Fa calmly stated.

“I see. That's such a shame. If you and Asuta were to get married, I would come running over to celebrate with you in a heartbeat.”

The Fa clan head remained silent.

“What about you, Telia Mas? You're the oldest one here, aren't you?”

“H-Huh? Haven't we been talking about this for long enough?”

“Eh? We're all girls here. Isn't this a pretty normal thing to get all fired up about at night?”

“I-Is it? I don't sleep with anyone outside of my family very often, so I don't really know much about that.”

Somehow, Shilly Rou sensed that the tension seemed to be loosening. And so, she stealthily wiped the sweat from her brow.

“So, what do you say? You've gotta have a guy out there you have feelings for, right?”

“Well, yes... B-But I can’t just get married at the drop of a hat.”

“Why not? Don’t tell me you’ve got some obnoxious thing going on in your life that you have to deal with too?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it obnoxious... But if I marry into another house instead of it being the other way around, the Mas name will die out.”

That was a whole new surprise. It didn’t seem like any of them would be getting to sleep at this rate.

“All the families related to the Mas have already died out, so only my father and I still carry our name. That means I have to bring a husband into my house if I’m going to get married.”

“Oh, I see. You’re from an independent settler bloodline. Still, I don’t quite get it. Do you really need to leave your name behind? You aren’t settlers anymore. You’re just ordinary citizens of the kingdom, right?”

“Yes. But I still feel uncomfortable about letting a name that has endured for hundreds of years die out with me. Of course, there’s no purpose in leaving it behind, but still...”

“Gotcha. Oh yeah, you’ve got a family name too, don’t you?” Yumi called out, turning her attention back to Shilly Rou as if it was only natural.

Still staring upward, Shilly Rou replied, “That’s right. It’s true that the names associated with the old blood families seem to be dwindling away. They don’t hold any sort of special meaning, so outsiders don’t place any value in them... But I can understand why you might feel like it would be a shame to let them die off.”

“Oh, really? Then you’ll be taking a husband too?”

“I’m in training, so I have no time to think about marrying... Besides, I have an older brother and sister to take care of that responsibility.”

“Ooh, so you really are the youngest in your family, eh? I had a feeling you might be, since you seem a bit pampered.”

“Wh-Who are you calling pampered?! That is an extremely rude thing to say!”

“Oh yeah? But when you were talking to Sheera Ruu earlier, you seemed like

a kid getting spoiled by her big sister.”

Shilly Rou’s cheeks went red in the darkness.

Perhaps sensing that, Telia Mas spoke up once more. “You’ve been asking all the questions, Yumi, but is there any man you have feelings for?”

“Who, me? I’ve been thinking a guy from the forest’s edge might be good.”

“Huh?!” several voices called out in sync.

“A-A person of the forest’s edge?! That’s who you want to get married to, Yumi?!”

“D-Do you have someone particular in mind?”

“Nah, nobody specific, but there’re so many handsome hunters of the forest’s edge to choose from, aren’t there?” Yumi said with a giggle. “But Shin and Ludo Ruu are younger than me, and Ludo Ruu’s older brother is a scary guy. It’s hard to decide which one would be best.”

“I-I see... But I can’t imagine a hunter of the forest’s edge ever marrying into a townswoman’s house, so that would mean you’d need to marry into the forest’s edge, right?” Yun Sudra asked. She must have been at least as surprised as Shilly Rou, if not more so.

However, Yumi remained completely nonchalant. “That’s all the more reason to do it. The lifestyle here at the forest’s edge seems really fun, and I could still come over to the post town every day if I helped out with work at the stalls... Wait, I’m not making you all angry by being so laid-back about it, am I?”

“I-I’m not angry or anything... But a person of the forest’s edge has never married an outsider before...”

“It’s not a taboo or anything, though, right? After all, you did welcome Asuta into one of your clans. And none of this is even that serious. I’m not thinking about trying it anytime soon... I mean, I haven’t even found a partner yet!” Yumi laughed, but then she adjusted her tone a bit before continuing. “Still, it’s something that I’ve been thinking about lately, especially now that I’ve been invited to the forest’s edge. Just a little while ago, I never would have considered marrying someone from the forest’s edge, even as a joke... B-

Besides, I've got a friend who's actually fallen for a hunter of the forest's edge, and even though Asuta warned us against it, it still felt like a wonderful idea to me. I mean, you're all so serious and honest."

"Huh..."

"So, well, I guess it's more like I've fallen for the people of the forest's edge in general. I'm just a silly little girl right now, though, so I'm sure no man of the forest's edge would even have me! But if I meet someone I can love with all of my heart instead of having all these silly feelings about them, I'd like to really give it my all."

"I see..." Yun Sudra muttered in a quiet tone. "It's difficult for me to truly understand the feelings of a townspeople like you... But I do think it would be wonderful if someone from town married into the forest's edge."

"Oh yeah? Hearing you say that makes me feel a lot better about this." Yumi was getting all worked up, though she also sounded embarrassed. "Oh, but let me just say, I'm not after Asuta or anything, Ai Fa!"

"Hmm?"

"I'd be happy if I could become someone more like him, but that doesn't mean I'm interested in marrying the guy. I just want to make sure there're no misunderstandings between us about this."

"I see," Ai Fa calmly replied.

Shilly Rou ducked her head, as it seemed like things were going to get tense again, but Ai Fa's voice remained gentle, though Shilly Rou sensed something different in it now.

"I feel similarly to Yun Sudra. If nothing else, I never expected to hear a townspeople such as yourself say you admired us people of the forest's edge. As we do wish to form proper ties with all of you, those words are incredibly precious."

"Ah, really? I'd imagine there are a lot of folks who would feel that way if they got as close to you as I have," Yumi remarked with another chuckle. "Well, I guess it's about time to get to sleep. You're getting up early tomorrow, right?"

“Was that question just now directed at me...?” Shilly Rou had to ask again.

“Seriously, that should go without saying. Your eyes are open, so why have you just been staring upward this whole time?”

Yumi’s figure suddenly appeared in Shilly Rou’s field of vision, and she was seriously thrown by the sight of the other girl’s face with hair hanging down all around it, just as long as that of a woman of the forest’s edge.



“You haven’t smiled even once. Did you not enjoy the banquet?”

“As I’ve told you, I didn’t come here to have fun.”

“Then, do you regret coming with us?”

As she stared up at Yumi’s face, illuminated by the moonlight, Shilly Rou pondered the question. From start to finish, it had been a truly miserable day. She was utterly exhausted, so going to work tomorrow was sure to be a major ordeal. Just imagining it was enough to make her feel a little depressed. But now that she was being asked if she regretted coming to such a place...her answer seemed to be no.

“I don’t especially regret it...”

“I see. That’s good.” Yumi smiled in the darkness. “I don’t expect you to think of me as a friend after just one day, but would you like to have some fun again sometime?”

“I don’t have that kind of time to spare.”

“Hey! In this situation, you should at least say ‘if the opportunity arises’ to be polite if nothing else! That helps smooth things over, you know.”

Shilly Rou sighed for the umpteenth time. “Well then, if the opportunity arises...”

Yumi was taken aback for a moment, but then she broke out in a joyful smile. After staring up at her for a bit, Shilly Rou closed her eyes.

Genos really does have all sorts of different people living here. Roughly two hundred years had passed since Count Genos’s forces took over this land that had been cleared by the independent settlers... Folks from other towns had moved here, and eventually the people of the forest’s edge had as well, which had led to Genos developing into the place it was today.

With her pale skin, Yumi was surely the descendant of people who had come here from elsewhere. The large number of such people moving here was a big part of what had allowed Genos to become so prosperous.

If Genos had not flourished, the stone highways passing through it wouldn’t have been built. And without those, they wouldn’t have nearly as many

merchants visiting. Only folks from Sym would travel unpaved paths in order to do business in other lands.

Because so many different people lived outside the stone walls and contributed to the town, the people of the castle town were able to enjoy extravagant meals. That much was plainly obvious, but this was the first time such an idea had ever occurred to Shilly Rou.

It may not improve the quality of the food I prepare, but... Perhaps this was why Roy had wanted to brave the dangers outside the stone walls in order to check in on the people of the forest's edge. Shilly Rou felt that she could understand the meaning behind his actions a little bit better now.

If all you knew was the castle town, you could only bring joy to the people living there. Shilly Rou's cooking had been highly praised, but that was only because Roy had understood the tastes of the people of the forest's edge. She had simply followed his advice, and picked out dishes from her repertoire that seemed fitting.

If she was only ever going to deal with residents of the castle town, that would have been just fine. But people from all over the continent gathered here in Genos. Varkas often served guests from far off lands, and Shilly Rou yearned terribly to keep up with her master in that regard as well.

And then you had the people of the forest's edge. With Asuta leading the way, they had been acknowledged by the nobles as outstanding chefs, despite knowing almost nothing about the castle town. Furthermore, they had proved to be extremely successful in the post town as well, even with such an incredibly diverse mixture of people constantly passing through it.

If people were raised in completely different circumstances, their standards for what food was delicious would naturally be different as well. Someone raised in Sym would have tastes influenced by the cuisine of Sym, and the same was true of Jagar.

Shilly Rou had only ever seen the castle town, so when she had to prepare recipes from Sym or Jagar, she did precisely as she was instructed. But if she kept cooking that way, could she truly satisfy any and all customers who came to her as the people of the forest's edge did? Did she even have the skills

necessary to please people hailing from the myriad other towns within the western kingdom, whose cultures were not nearly as distinct as Sym's and Jagar's were from Selva's? The thought made her feel truly uneasy.

Had Tatumai and Bozl understood such things from the beginning, since they hadn't been born in Genos? Was Varkas's genius the reason he could make anyone happy using his knowledge and technique alone, despite being a pure-blooded citizen of Genos?

Shilly Rou hadn't reached either of those states yet. Sheera Ruu had greatly praised her cooking, but that was all thanks to Roy. That warm, gentle smile should have been directed at him instead. If she had cooked as she normally would, she likely would have disappointed the people of the forest's edge just as Timalo had. Sheera Ruu might not have seen so much in her. And that thought made Shilly Rou's heart ache. Her own lack of experience filled her with frustration.

Then...what would Yumi or Telia Mas think if they ate my cooking?

Feeling so helpless that it almost made her start to cry, Shilly Rou finally gave in to the urge to sleep with that final thought floating through her mind.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-third volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

By the time this book makes it to store shelves, 2020 should be coming to a close. This year brought us a disaster of historic proportions, so I pray that everyone can celebrate its end in good health.

Currently, I'm spending my days in the same manner as always. I was more of an indoor person to begin with, so though I was afraid of what a lack of exercise and subconscious stress might do to me, I've been able to avoid any serious issues.

Now then, as for the book itself, when I published this part in the web version, it was under the title *The Season of Competition*. It had a lot of action, with the showdown between Ai Fa and Lem Dom, the Genos swordsmanship tournament, and the contests of strength at the festival of the hunt.

I've always enjoyed battle-focused works, so one of my hobbies is watching martial arts competitions. I've never once gone to an event in person, but the hard disk attached to my TV is filled with recordings of coarse men grappling, which I currently watch every night with dinner. I just hope this hobby of mine has been reflected at least somewhat well in my work.

As I have some pages to spare for this afterword, I'd like to explain a few things and tell you how I referenced the name of a martial artist with a character in this book. As the setting is a whole other world, I try to avoid using real names as much as possible, but I felt it was okay as long as I tweaked them a bit. Names like "Deek" and "Yang" do have some overlap with existing names, but it's just coincidental.

Furthermore, if I borrowed too much from the names of real people, it would come across like a parody, so I tried to be careful about that. But if I borrowed from a martial artist who was active twenty years ago, you'd have to be a real

fanatic to pick up on it. In fact, if anyone out there knew there was a martial artist with a name similar to Gulaf Zaza's, I'd love to shake their hand.

Speaking of naming, a few people made an interesting observation in the comments for the web version some time ago. Yamiru Suun contains the word "yami" (darkness), Mida Suun contains "mida" (disturbance), Tei Suun contains "tei" (stop), and the name of the man who made the Suun clan into what it ultimately became, Zattsu Suun, contains the English word "that's."

Jumping straight down to the bottom line, none of that was intentional on my part. I can't deny the possibility that I subconsciously chose Yamiru's and Mida's names for those reasons, though, as they seem to make sense to me. And I'm glad that people managed to work in Tei Suun and the others later.

Getting back on topic, "Intermission: The Castle Town's Star Reader" was originally a Group Performance story. But since it fit best before the swordsmanship tournament, it was added to the middle of the book instead. It was originally written before volume twenty-two. I tried my best to display the titular character in her starring role.

Meanwhile, the Group Performance this time around, "A Descendant of Old Blood," centers around the young chef from the castle town, Shilly Rou. Despite the ostentatious title, she really is just a minor character. One of the many noisy girls in the main book. But I do hope that you'll look forward to reading about the thoughts and feelings she keeps hidden away inside her.

For the extra chapter, we have a celebration in the castle town. When I was writing the main story, a party set in Genos Castle, which Asuta hasn't been to yet, felt like a big deal, but I never found a good opportunity to make it happen. I only had a small number of pages to work with, but it helped clear up some regrets I've had for a number of years now.

Next volume, we'll finally move into the gold month. If you're wondering why I say "finally," the advertisement at the end of the book should make it obvious. It's when a certain group that departed in volume nine, published all the way back in 2016, is set to return to Genos. It's only been half a year in the story, but it's taken over four years in real time. I hope you'll follow them with kind eyes as you watch to see whether they'll be able to make it back safely or not, and if

things will turn out the way they hope.

Of course, there will be all kinds of other stories packed in there as well. Both this volume and the next one were originally long enough to put me over the page limit, so I had to shave off some excess. I hope that I've compressed the contents in a way that you'll find satisfactory.

Let me finish by thanking everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

See you again in the next volume!

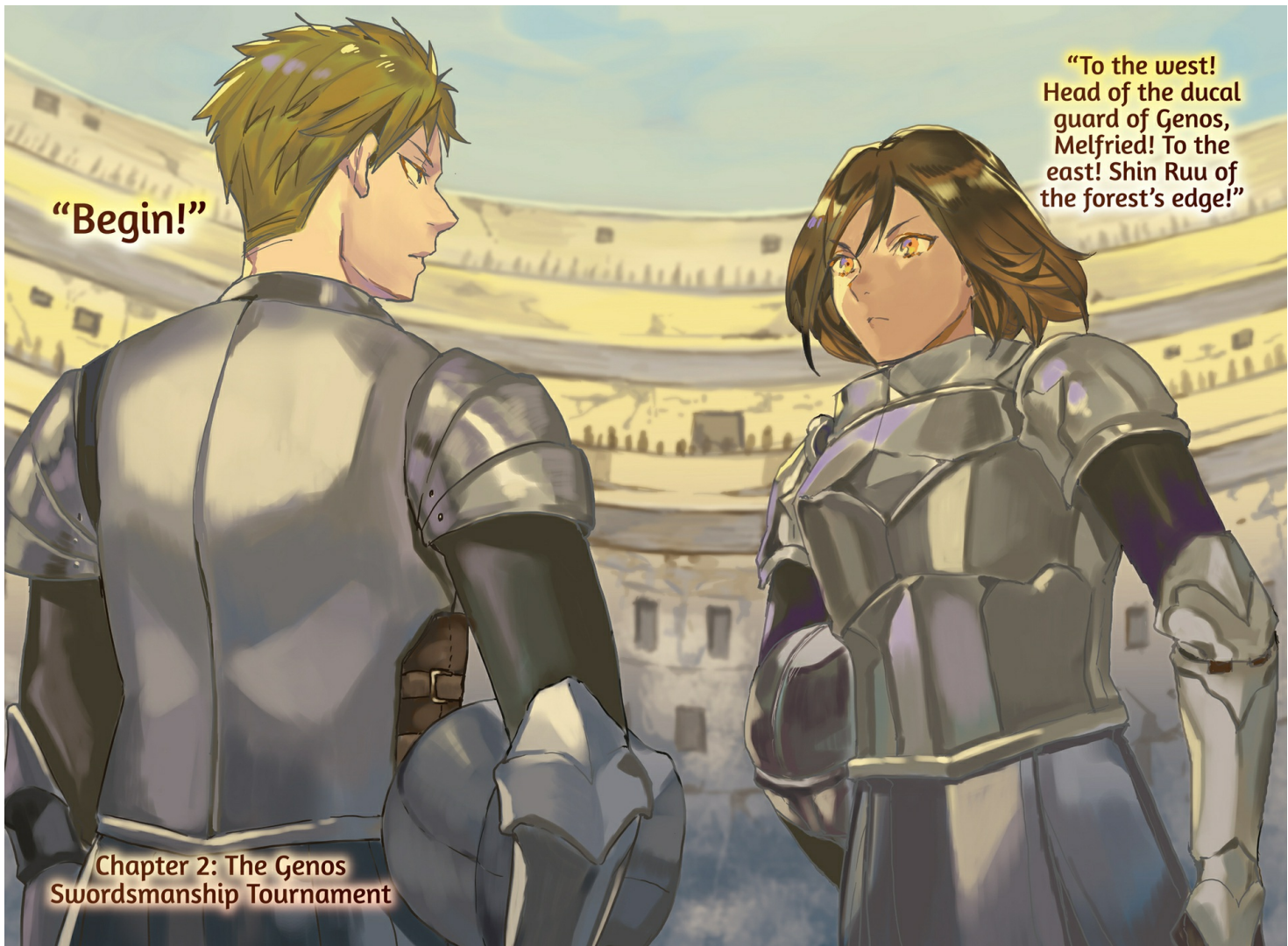
November 2020,

EDA



Lem Dom grinned, showing me the whites of her teeth.

“That goes for you too, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra. I hope you’re looking forward to seeing just how much strength I can bring to bear against Ai Fa.”



“Begin!”

“To the west!
Head of the ducal
guard of Genos,
Melfried! To the
east! Shin Ruu of
the forest’s edge!”

Chapter 2: The Genos
Swordsmanship Tournament

“On the off chance...that I do lose my strength as a hunter and am forced to live as a woman... I have already decided who my partner would be.”

Ai Fa rustled her hair once more, then switched from resting her chin on her palm to wrapping her arms around her knees.

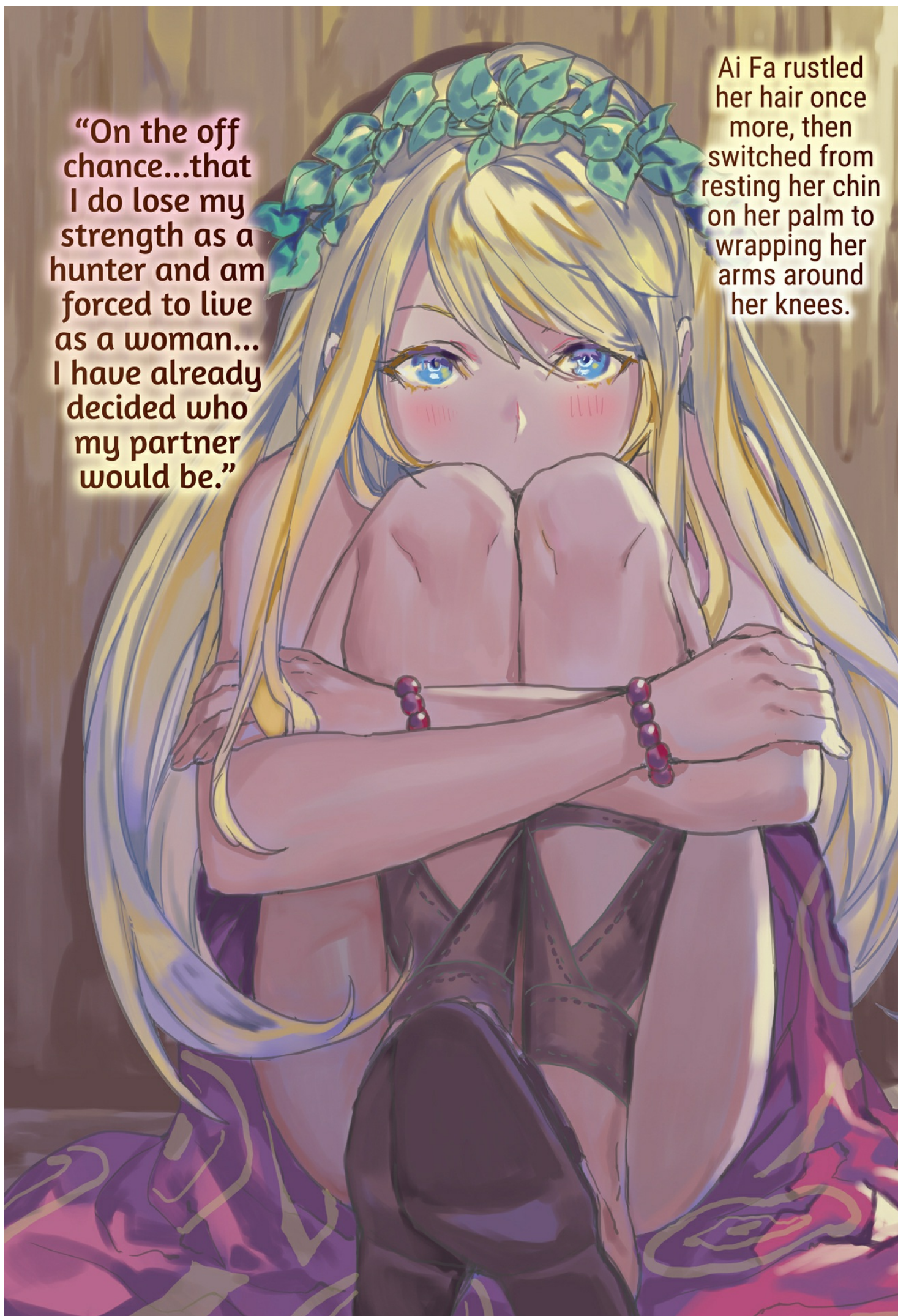


Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Chapter 1: A Hunter's Pride](#)

[Intermission: The Castle Town's Star Reader](#)

[Chapter 2: The Genos Swordsmanship Tournament](#)

[Chapter 3: A Festival of the Hunt for the Small Clans](#)

[Intermezzo: Celebration at the Genos Castle](#)

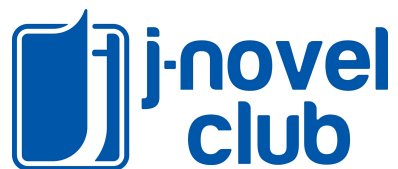
[Group Performance: A Descendant of Old Blood](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 23

by EDA

Translated by Gwendolyn Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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Illust: **Kochimo**

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