

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

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MENU

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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.



Darmu Ruu

The second son of the main Ruu house. He can be curt and rough at times, and is emotional in general. He's slowly opening up to Asuta and company.



Ludo Ruu

The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.



Vina Ruu

The eldest daughter of the main Ruu house. A peerless seductive beauty. The easterner Shumiral asked her to marry him.



Reina Ruu

The second daughter of the main Ruu house. An excellent chef. She also runs the Ruu clan's stalls alongside Sheera Ruu.



Rimee Ruu

The youngest Ruu daughter. An earnest, innocent child who specializes in making sweets. She adores Ai Fa and Tara.



Sheera Ruu

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.



Mia Lea Ruu

Donda Ruu's wife, and the mother of the seven siblings. She is cheerful and big-hearted.



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.




Yun Sudra

A member of the small Sudra clan. Greatly adores Asuta.











Geol Zaza

The youngest son of the main Zaza house. He has a rough yet cheerful nature. Because his older brothers have passed away, he's next in line to become a leading clan head.

Raielfam Sudra The head of the Sudra clan. He has a short, skinny build and a wrinkly face. An intelligent and loyal man who voiced his support for the Fa clan's actions early on.	Sufira Zaza The youngest daughter of the main Zaza house, with a strict personality. She stayed at the Ruu settlement in order to oversee the actions of the Fa and Ruu clans. A childhood friend of the Dom siblings.
 Dari Sauti The head of the Sauti clan, and one of the three leading clan heads. Though he is young, he is calm, composed, and broad-minded.	Giran Ririn The head of the Ririn clan, which is subordinate to the Ruu. He has a cheerful personality, and is unusually curious about the townsfolk and their way of life. Mil Fei Sauti Dari Sauti's wife. She has a calm and strict personality, but she started to warm up to Asuta when he stayed at the settlement during the battle against the lord of the forest.

~ Townsfolk ~

	Mikel A former chef from the castle town. Due to a crippling injury inflicted on his right hand, he lost his ability to cook professionally. Currently, he lives as a charcoal seller in the Turan lands.		Myme Mikel's daughter. Following in her father's footsteps, she has put a great deal of effort into improving her cooking skills. Deeply moved by Asuta's cooking, she is experimenting with giba meat on her own.
	Arishuna Zi Mafraluda A fortune teller of eastern heritage. Currently, she is staying in the castle town as a guest of Duke Genos.		Diel The daughter of a metalwork seller from Jagar. She has a boyish appearance and an earnest, direct personality. Currently, she lives in the castle town, seeking to secure business deals in Genos.
	Melfried The first son of Duke Genos, who arbitrates matters involving the people of the forest's edge. A coolheaded man who values law and order above all else.		Odifia Eulifia's young daughter. Like an expressionless doll, she doesn't allow her emotions to show, but is exceedingly fond of Toor Deen's sweets.
Eulifia The wife of Duke Genos's eldest son. A noblewoman who gives off an impression of elegance, though she is actually quite exuberant and unrestrained.		Polarth 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.	
Yang The head chef of the house of Daleim. Currently, he is working hard to promote the flow of new ingredients into the post town.		Sheila 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	
	Shumiral The head of the merchant group known as the Silver Vase. He has feelings for Vina Ruu and has asked her to marry him.		Bartha The wife of the head of the bandit group known as the Red Beards. Her crimes have been forgiven, and she is staying at the Ruu settlement as a guest.
Radajid Gi Nafassiar An easterner who is the second-in-command of the merchant group known as the Silver Vase. Shumiral's right-hand man. He is over 190 centimeters tall.		Dora A citizen of the Daleim part of the Genos domain. He sells produce in the post town. He has been deepening his ties with Asuta as they do business together.	

~ Group Performance ~

Diga The former oldest son of the main Suun house. A weak-willed man. To pay for his past crimes, he is training as a hunter under the Dom clan.	Doddo The former second son of the main Suun house. He's even more weak-willed than Diga when he can't drink wine. Currently, he's paying for his past crimes alongside Diga.
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Chapter 1: Restless Days

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In the aftermath of the festival of the hunt, the six clans, including the Fa, entered a break period. Normally, the hunters would use this time to rest. However, there was work that needed to be done during this period, so we had been sure to make arrangements for that ahead of time. One such task was spreading knowledge of how to bloodlet and carve up hunted giba to as many of the clans that had missed out so far as possible.

During our last break period, the other clans had put in a lot of effort on this front in order to make certain that we would have meat to use for our business. Thanks to Ai Fa instructing them on the basic procedures, the Gaaz and Ratsu—as well as their subordinate clans, the Matua, Meem, and Auro—were now all thoroughly acquainted with how to process meat.

Then the northern clans, the Beim, and the Dagora had all learned the techniques, leaving only six clans out of the thirty-seven at the forest's edge who were unfamiliar with them. Teaching bloodletting and carving techniques to those remaining six clans was our goal for this break period.

“If we divide ourselves up into groups, we shouldn't have any difficulty teaching those clans the techniques with half a month at our disposal,” Raielfam Sudra suggested.

We all agreed to his plan, with him and Baadu Fou taking the lead on getting things organized. The Deen and Liddo officially fell under the Zaza, so they couldn't provide much help, which meant we only had the hunters of the Fa, Sudra, Fou, and Ran to handle the task. Bloodletting in particular had to be done soon after a giba was taken down, so they would need to accompany the other hunters into the forest, despite it being their break period.

I was deeply grateful to them, but Raielfam Sudra simply waved off my gratitude and told me, “No thanks are needed. This is no longer a task being

carried out for the sake of the Fa clan alone. Are delicious cooking, your business in the post town, and the prosperity we now enjoy a medicine or a poison for us people of the forest's edge? It is my belief that we all need to be on equal footing when deciding the answer to that question."

Our actions would be judged at the clan head meeting roughly half a year from now. Raielfam Sudra was asserting that when that time came, all of the people of the forest's edge had to be fully equipped to make that judgment.

I was being saddled with more work as a chef too. Just learning proper bloodletting and carving techniques made giba meat taste so much better, but that alone wasn't enough. I was going to travel all over the forest teaching the women of those clans how to make baked poitan and some other basic cooking techniques. As part of that, I ended up purchasing three new wagons. Since our hunters and chefs would be visiting all these distant clans, Gilulu's and Fafa's wagons would no longer cut it on their own. After this job was done, the three new totes and wagons would be made available to be used freely for going shopping or visiting other clans, like Fafa already was. Gilulu alone would remain permanently with the Fa clan.

With all that in mind, I decided to temporarily cancel the study sessions at the Ruu settlement during this period. Reina Ruu and the others seemed rather disappointed about that, but they said they would also work hard at instructing their more distant subordinate clans, like the Ririn and Muufa, in the meantime.

The first clans we would be working with were the Dai and Ren, who were located south of the Ruu clan. The Dai and Ren shared blood ties, with the Dai being the parent clan. I had heard they were similar in size to the Fou and Ran as a result of merging with some of the clans under them that had collapsed.

Our business in the post town didn't shut down during break periods, so we had to wait till after work to provide lessons. That meant that our schedule during this period had us teaching the other clans for two hours each day and then hurriedly returning home to take care of the prep work for the next day, as well as throwing together dinner for ourselves. And since Ai Fa would be heading out to hunt with some other clan every day as well, this was such a hectic time for both of us that it was hard to tell it was a break period.

The hunters were also putting together plans for another job: constructing a kitchen hut for the Fa house.

“The rainy season will be here soon. When it arrives, it will be difficult for you to do your work with the amount of cover you have, so we should build you a proper hut, with a roof and walls,” Baadu Fou proposed, with the Deen and Liddo clan heads offering to help out.

“Since we can’t accept the task of running around to hunt with the other clans, at least let us help out with this,” the Liddo clan head, Radd Liddo—who I remembered from the festival of the hunt—remarked with a hearty grin. “There’s no need for a floor with a kitchen hut, so it should only take a few days for us to set it up.”

Still, it would require them to cut a fair amount of lumber, so it was a pretty large job—one that all of the Deen and Liddo men would be involved in during the hours that we were away. Since it was her house, Ai Fa seemed to want to help out too, but she ultimately ended up leaving it to them, having concluded that as the clan head of the Fa giving lessons to the other clans was more important.

Days passed, and we eventually arrived at the tenth of the gold month, the eighth day of our break period. We were working hard in the post town like always when the vegetable seller Dora and his daughter Tara visited our shop.

“Hey there, Asuta. Seems business is booming again today.”

“Welcome. Thanks for your continued patronage.”

He shot me his usual smile, and I returned it. A month and ten days had passed since the revival festival, so it was back to business as usual at his shop. However, he had brought us some rather unexpected information today.

“Asuta, the rainy season is set to arrive just twenty days from now, so I figure it’s about time for us to talk business. What do you say?”

From what I had been told, during the rainy season a number of vegetables would become unavailable, while others were *only* available at that time of year. Obviously, that was no small problem for us... However, today Dora had a slightly different issue that he wanted to raise with me.

“You see, the price of poitan, fuwano, and aria is going to go way up during the rainy season.”

Poitan and fuwano were wheat-like grains, while aria was a highly nutritious vegetable similar to an onion. The less well-off clans at the forest’s edge were forced to subsist on nothing *but* poitan and aria, so this was a matter that demanded my full attention.

To sum up what Dora had to tell me, apparently the aria and poitan sold during the rainy season only grew to a small size due to the limited sunlight. And in Genos, prices were set by quantity rather than by weight. In other words, the price of produce remained the same, while the size of the produce shrunk to two-thirds at best or barely half the size at worst.

“The fact is, we’re only borrowing our land from the nobles. The taxes levied on us don’t decrease, which is why pricing works the way it does. It means that we can still earn the same amount of money, but only at the expense of anyone who has to purchase vegetables during the season. It’s such a problem that people say the rain is the Saturas county crying.”

The Saturas county was the official designation of the domain that contained the post town. As the post town consumed a huge amount of vegetables produced by the Daleim lands, its people were the ones left to suffer during the rainy season.

“So, let’s get to the main topic at hand. Even though we’ve expanded our poitan fields significantly, the amount we harvest during the rainy season is going to decrease by a lot. Until recently, only the people of the forest’s edge and travelers ever bought them, so it wasn’t a serious issue. But now, people from all over are using poitan. I think there’s a real risk that we’re going to sell out.”

“That’s pretty serious. And the price of fuwano is going to go up too, isn’t it?”

“Right. Fuwano doesn’t just grow smaller, it becomes unharvestable. That means whatever we can grow before the season starts needs to last the whole two months, so the price pretty much doubles.”

So, that was the situation. It certainly explained why the northerners from the Turan lands were going to be available to be used to clear a path through the

forest's edge—they didn't have much other work to do.

“With fuwano so expensive, poitan are sure to sell extremely well. That's why I'm worried about running out of them.”

“That certainly is concerning. The people of the forest's edge have eaten poitan for so long, it'll be a real problem if they can't buy them anymore.”

The poorer clans in particular lacked the leeway to purchase expensive fuwano. And the reason poitan were such a popular item in the first place was purely because I had come up with a way to make them delicious. I couldn't stand the thought of that possibly causing my comrades to starve.

“For our business, I don't especially mind if we have to use fuwano,” I continued. “But if there isn't enough for everyone at the forest's edge to eat...”

“Right, which is why I wanted to discuss this now. In the Daleim lands, we sometimes do these things called purchasing agreements, so I thought I could make one with you.”

Apparently, they involved paying in advance in exchange for a promise that goods would be supplied long-term.

“To sum it up, it's an agreement to provide what is paid for no matter what. There are...five hundred people of the forest's edge in total, right?”

“Ah, lately I've been thinking that it might actually be six hundred or so.”

“I see. In that case, assuming each person eats two a day at a minimum, and with two months being sixty days... Umm...?”

“Two times six hundred times sixty would be seventy-two thousand.”

“That was some quick calculating! Then you can buy four poitan for a red coin, so...”

“It would be eighteen thousand coins. Or converting that to silver coins, it would be just eighteen,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. “My clan can cover that amount. If I give you eighteen silver coins as an advance payment, can you provide that many poitan for us?”

“Yes, but eighteen silver coins is quite a fortune. Are you sure you can manage that?”

The Fa clan's stalls alone earned around eight hundred red coins in profit each day. Even when we had to buy all of our giba meat from other clans, it still left us with five hundred red coins of pure profit, so earning eighteen silver coins wouldn't take me much more than a month. And since I would just be covering for the other clans temporarily, I saw no reason to hesitate.

"It won't be an issue. Oh, but if the poitan are going to get smaller, I guess we'll end up needing more of them. After all, the clans with coins to spare won't want to cut down on their portion sizes in order to save money."

"In that case, you might need as much as twice that amount. That would mean doubling the advanced payment, though..."

"That's fine. I can make it work."

Buying three new sets of tolos and wagons only cost me around fifty-two hundred red coins. Considering that the Fa clan had been doing business in the post town for half a year now, we still had plenty of savings to spare.

"That's reassuring to hear! Oh, I suppose I shouldn't talk about this kind of thing so loudly..." Dora remarked while hurriedly lowering his voice. Then he brought his face close to mine. "There are still twenty days left until the rainy season, so I don't think there are many folks thinking about buying poitan yet. And even if they are, I doubt they'd be able to spend such a fortune just like that. So assuming you trust me, of course, I believe it would be good to form a contract now. What do you say?"

"Of course I want to. I'm really grateful that you've been thinking about the needs of the people of the forest's edge."

"Stop acting so distant. We're friends, aren't we?" Dora said with a joyful smile. Then Tara's little hand tugged on his arm.

"Are you done talking? I'm getting hungry."

"Ah, sorry about that. Well then, why don't we eat? Once you settle things with the leading clan heads, go ahead and stop by my shop whenever."

"Got it. Thank you."

After buying today's daily specials of giba-meat egg-drop soup and giba curry,

along with some myamuu giba from the Ruu clan, the pair headed over to the restaurant space. As I watched the father and daughter leave, Fei Beim shot me an astounded look.

“Asuta, can the Fa clan truly spend such a large amount of money that easily?”

“Well, yeah, since we earned so much more than usual during the revival festival. It might have been a little more difficult to manage this before the violet month rolled around, though.”

“Oh really...? If you’re that well-off, I don’t see any reason for the Fa clan to fixate on poitan.”

“That’s true. Still, if the people of the forest’s edge couldn’t buy poitan anymore, that would mean my actions caused a serious tragedy, so the way I see it, it’s crucial for the Fa clan to step in here.”

If Dora hadn’t made that proposal, I would have ended up having to scramble to fix this at the last moment. I really was incredibly grateful to him.

Still, thinking about it carefully, two poitan a day probably wouldn’t be enough for the men of the Ruu clan and other guys like them. I’m sure the clans of the north eat just as much too.

At any rate, this was my first rainy season, so I was totally fumbling about. It would be best to discuss matters with the leading clan heads and carefully calculate how many poitan would be necessary before entering into a contract with Dora. With that in mind, I brought it up with the members of the Ruu clan after we finished with our work. Reina and Vina Ruu were the ones on duty today.

“I see. It’s true that aria and poitan get smaller during the rainy season. I know our clan usually ends up spending about twice as much as usual during this time of year,” Reina Ruu said.

“So you don’t decrease the amount you eat?”

“Of course not. The Ruu clan has plenty of money to spare, so we’ve never had to cut back because of the rainy season. Right, Vina?”

“Hmm...? What were we talking about?” Vina Ruu listlessly replied as she packed up the stalls.



“We’re talking about how much food we eat. Haven’t you been listening to Asuta?”

“Sorry, I was spacing out a bit, so I can’t quite recall...” Vina Ruu said with a deep sigh before heading over to the wagon.

“Is Vina Ruu feeling ill or something?”

“No. She’s just been like that recently. All the time. Our mother, Mia Lea, has had to chew her out a ton for spacing out or getting snappish.”

“Huh? It’s hard for me to picture Vina Ruu getting chewed out. Despite how she seems sometimes, she normally has her act together really well.”

“That’s true. Maybe it’s because of that easterner, Shumiral?”

Reina Ruu’s words caught me off guard. Shumiral’s merchant group, the Silver Vase, had departed from Genos on the first of the white month. Then the gray, black, indigo, violet, and silver months had passed, so that had been six months ago, as it was now the tenth of the gold month. His promise to be back in half a year had reached its deadline, but he still hadn’t returned to Genos yet.

“But Shumiral’s final destination was the capital, which is over a month away from Genos by wagon. A ten-day delay should be no big deal, right?”

“I agree, but I can understand why Vina might be worried,” Reina Ruu said with a worried sigh of her own. “I haven’t mentioned this to you before, but...lately, Vina’s been focused entirely on learning how to make curry.”

“Ah, I’ve been thinking a lot about how to make it tastier myself. So, she’s been working hard on it in the background?”

“Yes. It’s bad enough that Ludo’s been teasing her about how she always makes curry when it’s her day to cook. Regardless of whether she’ll accept that merchant’s marriage proposal, she wants to show her appreciation for his feelings and effort in her own way.”

I was so happy to hear that, I could feel a lump forming in my throat. But at the same time, my heart was heavy at the thought of what this situation must’ve been like for Vina Ruu.

“On the off chance that man doesn’t return...Vina will be crushed...”

“Th-There’s no way that’ll happen. They have ten easterners in their group, so bandits or whatever should be no problem for them.”

“But long journeys are dangerous, aren’t they? We heard that countless times while we were traveling to Dabagg.”

I had heard that plenty of times myself, but I didn’t even want to think about the possibility of Shumiral having an unexpected accident during his trip.

“At any rate, all I can do is pray to the forest that no misfortune befalls Vina, because I can’t imagine praying for the safety of a foreigner who is nowhere near the forest would accomplish anything.”

Without thinking, I looked up at the clear blue sky. I had to believe that Shumiral was still okay, somewhere out there under the same sky.

2

After business was done for the day, we once again headed to the Dai settlement.

We eventually arrived a little past the lower third hour. It would take forty minutes to return to the Fa house from here, so I only had about an hour allotted for cooking lessons. However, I had already been teaching the women here for six days, so I had more or less covered the techniques I wanted to. Baking poitan, how to properly cut meat and vegetables, how to heat the stove in order to grill meat and cook soup, the most effective way to flavor with salt, pico leaves, and myamuu... And one day when the hunters had returned early with their prey, I had also explained how to prepare offal. That was good enough for their initial training. I figured they’d had enough of a culture shock already, considering they had just been boiling raw poitan with giba meat that hadn’t been bloodlet until now.

“We are so grateful to you for everything you’ve done, Asuta of the Fa clan. Now we can finally share in the surprise our clan heads felt at that meeting all those months ago.”

The Dai and Ren had supported the Fa clan’s actions from the start, so they had been very kind to me whenever we spoke during my visits.

“There don’t seem to be any issues with your bloodletting and carving skills, so I believe we should be able to purchase meat from the Dai and Ren in the future. I hope I can count on you for that.”

“Yes, of course.”

“When that time comes, you’ll need to be able to handle a totos and wagon. I’m planning on entrusting you with one of each when this break period is over.”

“Huh?”

“You’re offering a totos and wagon to the Dai clan?”

“Yeah. It would be difficult for you to deliver meat to the Fa house otherwise, right? Plus, a wagon would help you cut down on the time you need for shopping, so I’d like to have you use that time on something meaningful instead.”

A round trip to the post town would have taken them around three hours on foot. If they used a wagon, that could be brought down to around an hour, and it would even let them transport a great deal more cargo with just one or two people to boot. The cooking techniques I had taught them required more time and firewood than the ones they had used before, so if they couldn’t free up some labor, it would be difficult for them to keep using these new methods. Besides, their situation was similar to that of the clans that lived near us, like the Gaaz and Ratsu, so it only felt natural for me to offer them the use of a wagon too.

“Thank you... We’ll never forget our debt to you, Asuta of the Fa clan.” the Dai clan head’s wife said with teary eyes.

“That concludes our cooking lessons, but if you have time in the future, you can feel free to stop by the Fa house if you want to. If you do, I can teach you all sorts of other things.”

“Yes, thank you. We most certainly will.”

With that, we said farewell to the Dai and Ren clan members, hopping back in our wagon. Since the Ruu clan were using Jidura to visit the post town today, we only had Gilulu’s wagon available to us at the moment, but that was enough

to get me and five of my comrades home.

“That finally wraps up the lessons for the Dai clan. Yun Sudra and Toor Deen seemed to be on top of things, but I feel like the rest of us were being instructed as well,” Fei Beim said as we went. She was on rotation today, along with the Dagora and Ratsu women.

“That’s true. The bits about how to cut vegetables and manage a flame were very informative,” the Dagora woman chimed in.

“I’ll be able to make even more delicious food for my family now,” the Ratsu woman added.

They had been working since this morning, but they didn’t appear tired in the least. We still had preparations for tomorrow awaiting us back at the Fa house, though.

“Asuta, you said we will be taking tomorrow off from the lessons, didn’t you?” the Ratsu woman asked.

As I manipulated Gilulu’s reins, I replied, “Yeah. I’ve been having you all working hard during what should be your break period, so I figured I’d pick a good day for some actual rest. The men are going to take time off tomorrow as well.”

“I see. It *is* important to have time to deepen our bonds with our families too. The Ratsu clan isn’t in a break period, though, so it won’t quite be the same for us.”

We would also be carrying on with our work in the post town, so Toor Deen and Yun Sudra were only going to get around two to three hours of free time. But even a couple hours was precious time they could spend with their families, so I had suggested that we let the men who were working so hard rest a bit too.

“Then the day after tomorrow, we’ll be visiting the Ravitz clan. They don’t approve of the Fa clan’s actions, so there’s no telling what kind of welcome you’ll get from them, Asuta.”

“Who can say. They at least agreed to be instructed on bloodletting and carving, so I figure it should be fine as long as I don’t ask them to sell us meat.”

With the Dai and Ren out of the way, that left four clans: the Ravitz, Naham, Vin, and Suun. The Ravitz and Naham shared blood ties and were opposed to the Fa clan's actions. The Vin, meanwhile, had given us their support, but had become a subordinate clan to the Ravitz in the last several months. Even though they agreed with us, they had no choice but to establish blood ties with the Ravitz for their clan name to live on.

"The Zaza and Beim used to have the same opinion, and they've accepted the value of delicious food, so it should work out somehow. We're all fellow people of the forest's edge, so I want us to get along."

"Then, once we're done with the Ravitz, it'll finally be time for the Suun," Toor Deen timidly interjected. After asking the leading clan heads, we had received permission to give lessons to the remaining members of the branch houses living at the Suun settlement. The leading clan heads had determined that they were no longer criminals and that there was no need to treat them any differently on this front.

"You were originally a member of the Suun clan, weren't you, Toor Deen? Are you worried about going back there?" the Ratsu woman asked, sounding concerned.

"No," Toor Deen replied. "I stopped by for a little while when I headed to the northern settlement recently, and I saw that everyone in the Suun clan was trying really hard to live proper lives. I'd be very happy to help them realize how wonderful delicious food is."

"I see. I'm glad to hear that."

As I was in the driver's seat, I couldn't see Toor Deen's face, but I was certain she was smiling her usual gentle smile. I was also looking forward to heading to the Suun settlement. I hadn't been there since the clan head meeting, after all.

According to Toor Deen, the women whose eyes used to look like they belonged to a dead fish had regained the strength to want to keep on living. It made me really happy to have a chance to offer them cooking lessons again.

"Is something the matter, Yun Sudra? You've been looking down for a while now," I heard someone say.

Yun Sudra replied, “No, it’s nothing. There’s just a lot I need to think about.”

“Hmm? You could talk it through with us if you’d like. I don’t know if we’ll be any help, though.”

“Thank you. It’s enough to just hear you say that.”

The Dagora woman was the one talking with Yun Sudra. They had been working together ever since the revival festival, and their relationship had grown as deep as the one between the Fou and Ran.

I was concerned about Yun Sudra too, though. Just like with Vina Ruu, there seemed to be something worrying her. Thinking back, it seemed like she hadn’t said much since this morning.

Should I try having a bit of a talk with her later?

First, though, was our return to the Fa house. After continuing north up the long and narrow path for roughly forty minutes, we arrived at our destination, where there were already a number of Fou and Ran women handling preparations.

“Thank you. Sorry for always asking you for help,” I told the women.

“What are you saying? You’re paying us for our services, so there’s no reason for you to apologize.”

It was already the lower fifth hour at this point. Normally, everyone would be preparing dinner by now, but instead they were handling prep work for me.

“Oh, Asuta! You’re back!” a voice called out as a man’s face peaked out from behind a wall. It was the Liddo clan head, Radd Liddo—a man with a plump and goggle-eyed face. “Perfect timing! We’ve finally finished the surface work!”

“Huh?! Really?!”

I hurried around to the rear of the house, where I found a large building standing tall on the other side of our covered outdoor kitchen. It was the new kitchen hut I had been eagerly waiting for them to finish. It had been pretty close to completion yesterday, but now it was finally done.

“Of course, it’s still empty inside. We’ll set up the stoves and workstations and the like tomorrow, and then you’ll be good to use it whenever.”

“Thank you! Seriously, thank you so much!”

It was a wonderful kitchen, as fine as the one at the main Ruu house. Large enough for ten women to fit inside easily. The room was divided into three parts, with enough space for a dedicated pantry and a butchering area. It was really surprising to me that they could make such an amazing kitchen hut in just a few days.

“It was no trouble at all! Between the Deen and Liddo, we had fifteen men working on this, you know! And if you treat us to some delicious food as thanks, that would make this a pretty good deal for us!” Radd Liddo remarked with roaring laughter. As always, he was being just as frank as Dan Rutim. “Well then, we’ll go gather the stones for the stoves, and that should be it for today. See you later, Asuta!”

“Yeah. Please take care.”

With that, the men who were hanging around all walked off toward the forest. However, Toor Deen grabbed ahold of one of them as he went.

“Good work, father. If you’re going all the way to the riverside, make sure to watch out for giba, okay?”

“Of course. But there aren’t any giba to be found in the area, so you have nothing to worry about.”

He then nodded to me and departed. Each of the other men I was acquainted with also gave me a polite greeting before leaving. Even if I didn’t know their names, I had seen all of them during the contests of strength during the festival of the hunt.

“This is really something. How many stoves are they going to build inside?” the Fou woman asked.

“Four,” I replied.

“Then you’ll have eight in total if you include the ones you have now. You won’t be able to use the ones outside during the rainy season, but it seems like this hut will be quite convenient in all kinds of ways the whole year round.”

“That’s for sure. Ai Fa and I never would have been able to build a hut this

nice on our own, so I'm incredibly grateful to those guys."

"Hee hee. This is going to be an important work space for the rest of us too, so we're just as happy as you are."

I was glad to hear that too, and felt thankful for those words. It was starting to seem like the six clans that lived around here were gaining a sort of solidarity similar to that of the Ruu and Rutim, who were related by blood. Even clans under the Zaza like the Deen and Liddo were freely lending us aid. It looked like our bonds with them really had grown stronger thanks to the festival of the hunt.

"I feel kind of jealous. I wish I could have celebrated the festival of the hunt along with you," the Ratsu woman chimed in. Fei Beim was wearing her usual pout, while the Dagora woman was squirming a bit. Considering their allegiance, they probably couldn't openly agree with the Ratsu woman, but on a personal level, they might have felt the same way.

"Well then, let's get to work. I'm counting on you all today."

I still had more thoughts on the matter, but we had work we needed to take care of. And so, we divided the tasks up like always and got started. Fortunately, quite a few of them had already mastered the art of preparing pasta and the curry base.

While we were doing that, I whispered to Yun Sudra, "Yun Sudra, are you okay? Are you tired after working so hard with the Dai clan?"

"Of course not. I'm proud to have been entrusted with such responsibility." At the Dai settlement, I'd had her and Toor Deen take on the role of instructors. As if to show she wasn't lying, Yun Sudra smiled brightly...but then her eyes turned down to the ground sorrowfully. "However...I guess I really do need to talk to you about this, Asuta. You see, the idea of the Fou and Sudra forming blood ties is being discussed."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. There are only two unmarried men and two unmarried women in the Sudra clan...so naturally, I've been brought into those discussions as well," Yun Sudra said with a sigh, sounding as if she couldn't hold it back. "The clan head

told me directly that I should see if I can find a good partner in order to deepen our ties with the Fou and Ran. I was hoping to have at least another year to do as I please, but it doesn't seem like that's going to work out. I have to gather my resolve to do what needs to be done as a member of the Sudra clan." Yun Sudra smiled as if to encourage herself. "It's all down to the forest's guidance. I'll be searching for a proper path forward that I won't regret, so please do your best too, Asuta."

"Yeah," I replied, but I didn't really know what I was supposed to be doing my best at here. Fortunately... Actually, it might have been disrespectful to put it like that, but anyway, even now, after several days had passed since the festival of the hunt, we still hadn't gotten any marriage requests at the Fa house. Well, except for an offer from Jou Ran, that is.

It seemed that the Fou, Ran, and Sudra had taken the position that they should simply watch over the Fa clan's actions. Ai Fa was a female hunter and I was a male chef, so what sort of future awaited us? Did we have any intention of forming blood ties with other clans? It did seem like they were actually putting our feelings about those questions above all other considerations, though. That was something Ai Fa and I were incredibly grateful for. But it was also why I felt so apologetic toward Yun Sudra.

Vina Ruu has it tough in her own way too. Ai Fa and I really have been blessed. Even though I was prepared to remain single my whole life, I couldn't help but feel that way. Ai Fa and I understood one another better than anyone, which was more than enough to satisfy me.

Still, now that I was really thinking about it, perhaps the reason we felt so at ease was that we had simply accepted that the Fa clan was fated to die out with Ai Fa's generation.

"You seem kind of tired, Ai Fa."

Time had continued onward, and now it was dinnertime. In response to my comment, Ai Fa, who had been eating silently, gave a weary nod.

"I am... This is our sixth day of going out to visit other clans, is it not? To be honest, doing this may be more tiring than my usual hunts."

"Oh, really? Are those Ravitz folks difficult to handle?"

The hunters had split into three groups in order to carry out this task. The Ran were handling the Dai, the Sudra the Suun, and the Fa and Fou the Ravitz. The Ravitz opposed the Fa clan's actions, so Ai Fa had declared that she wanted to go to them herself.

"It's true that the Ravitz clan head is a rather odd one. But more than that, I'm just not well suited to such work."

"Ah, yeah, when you went to visit the Gaaz and Ratsu clans way back when, that seemed to make you pretty tired too."

Ai Fa had trouble spending time with unfamiliar people, and trying to teach in general. As she bit into a piece of baked poitan dipped in curry, she nodded once more. "Indeed. On top of that, the Ravitz hunters frequently let giba slip away from them. They also won't let me or the Fou hunters lend a hand, so our attempts to teach them aren't going anywhere. It's incredibly vexing."

"I see. That does sound like a troublesome job for you."

"Still, I can't start whining over something like this. And tomorrow we're taking a break from work, so I should be able to recover a bit from my exhaustion."

I found myself at a bit of a loss, since I had been planning on asking Ai Fa for something today. "Er, I'm pretty hesitant to raise this topic after everything you've said, but..."

"What is it? Are you planning on foisting another troublesome burden upon me?"

"Yeah. Well, it shouldn't be *that* troublesome, but I do have a request I want to make." Ai Fa was shooting me a reproachful look, making me feel even more apologetic. "I know I shouldn't be asking you to do something on your day off, but it's really been weighing on my mind. You see, it's about Mikel and Myme."

"Mikel and Myme?" Ai Fa's eyes had been half closed, but now they were wide open. It seemed I had really caught her off guard, but this was as much of a source of concern for me as Shumiral's late return.

"Yeah. I haven't seen either of them at the stall in the post town since the gold month started. Before then, we never went more than five days without

seeing them, but it's been around ten days now."

"Hmm."

"Mikel has his charcoal-making work, while Myme could be busy with her cooking practice, but the last batch of giba meat we gave them should have run out a long time ago... Myme's supposed to be experimenting with giba meat, so how is she supposed to keep practicing if she doesn't have any? That's why I'm so concerned about them."

"So, what is it that you want me to do?"

"Well, I'd like to have you go check on the two of them. You and Ama Min Rutim know where Mikel's house is, right? But Ama Min Rutim is in no state to travel that far, so I figured you were the only one I could ask."

My clan head fell silent.

"But don't worry about it if it's really impossible for you. I can always try to ask someone else in that case, so if you could just more or less explain where they live..."

"What are you talking about? As if I could meaningfully describe that convoluted maze of a town with words alone," Ai Fa shot back solemnly, setting the dish in her hand down on the rug. "You just want me to go to Mikel's house and see if they're all right, correct? It is no great request."

"You really don't mind? I know I'm the one who brought this up, but shouldn't you rest on your day off?"

"Even if I do rest, you'll still be out there working in the post town, won't you?" Ai Fa said, suddenly frowning. Her expression had instantly changed from solemn to childish. "So, what is your plan? I doubt it's to leave a totos at home for me to ride to the Turan lands by myself, is it?"

"N-No. Naturally, I was thinking of having you come to the post town with us so you could go check on them while we're working."

"That would be fine with me."

Ai Fa's frown swiftly vanished, and she slurped down some giba soup from her dish. It was as if her melancholy had melted away, with a much more positive

mood taking its place.

The Ratsu woman's words from before vividly came to mind. *It is important to have time to deepen our bonds with our families too.* It felt like my chest was filling up with warmth.

"What are you staring at my face for? If you don't hurry up and eat, the food will get cold."

"Yeah. You're right."

If Ai Fa came to the post town with us, it would be the first time in a while that we had been together from morning to night. But if I were to voice that thought, I would surely earn a pinched cheek or kicked knee, so I simply ate my meal instead.

3

The next day arrived.

As planned, Ai Fa accompanied us to the post town before swiftly heading over to the Turan lands in Gilulu's wagon, bringing a box of giba meat preserved in pico leaves with her so that if Myme wanted to buy any, they'd be able to complete the transaction with no further hassle.

Maybe Mikel or Myme are sick and resting up? That would be rough, though, since they're a family of only two people.

I wanted to make sure they were okay, and I was sure the members of the Ruu clan, Toor Deen, and Yun Sudra all felt the same way. Over the course of the revival festival and the following friendship banquet, the pair had become two of the few friends the people of the forest's edge had in town.

At any rate, as long as the two of them weren't both away from home at the moment, I was sure Ai Fa would be able to find out what was going on with them. For now, I just had to focus on my own work and wait for her to return.

"My, this is the first time we've had a noble come by in quite a while," Yamiru Lea remarked from the neighboring giba manju stall.

The morning rush had just ended and we were taking a bit of a breather. I

turned my gaze to the north, and sure enough, I saw a fine totes-drawn carriage protected by soldiers approaching. It was none other than Polarth, the second son of the house of Daleim, who appeared from inside.

“I am glad to see you looking well, Sir Asuta.”

“It’s been a while, Polarth. Is the conference at the castle all wrapped up, then?”

“Indeed. We were finally dismissed this morning. But it certainly left me with stiff shoulders.”

The elites of Genos had been holding a conference in the castle over the past several days. And incidentally, it was during the last such conference that Lefreya had kidnapped me while her father was away. Polarth hadn’t been summoned to attend that one, since he hadn’t had an official post then, but he had received a special invitation this time.

“I was granted two roles for this conference. One was to assist Lord Melfried in his role as mediator between us and the people of the forest’s edge, and the other was to aid the foreign affairs officer tasked with handling the merchant groups visiting Genos.”

“Ah, I don’t know anything about that stuff, but it sounds amazing that you were given two jobs at once.”

“Well, it is more like I was granted roles that were applicable to the work I’ve been doing for a while,” Polarth stated, but he didn’t look especially proud. He did have his usual jolly smile on his face, though. “One additional job I have taken on is that I must attend any future meetings between Lord Melfried and the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge. It is my hope that this will lead to an even tighter bond being forged between our people and yours.”

“Oh, okay. I think Melfried’s pretty trustworthy on his own, but it’s reassuring to know you’ll be there too, Polarth.”

“Yes, indeed. I’m looking forward to the next such meeting, whenever it should happen.”

We then invited him to step into the space behind our stalls, as he had another more complicated matter to discuss. Sheera Ruu had been working the

restaurant space, but she was similarly beckoned over.

“Now then, you will be receiving an official messenger regarding this matter later on, but I wished to discuss it with you in advance, Sir Asuta. You see, the right to deal in giba sausage in the castle town has just been officially granted.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Indeed, though only sausage. Since it was approved at our conference, the new rule is now set in stone.”

When I asked for more details, Polarth explained that Count Luidross Saturas had vigorously supported the idea, which was what had allowed it to pass. In short, Luidross was quite taken with the sausage I had given him as a gift, and he had expressed great interest in purchasing more. We’d hardly had any interaction with the nobles for the past month, but it seemed things had been steadily progressing behind the scenes.

“Naturally, this doesn’t mean it can *only* be sold in the castle town. But even without being restricted in such a way, it costs enough that it would be difficult for townsfolk or travelers to afford, correct?”

“Yeah. Giba meat’s already expensive to begin with, and when you dehydrate it, the weight decreases by quite a bit... Plus, it takes a lot of effort to grind the meat and wash out the intestines, so I’m sure it’s going to cost much more than ordinary jerky.”

“How much were you thinking, specifically? Anything you can tell me would be helpful, even if it’s only a rough estimate.”

Well, bottom line, four hundred grams would cost ten red coins. The market price of karon and kimyuus jerky was four times that of fresh meat, so I applied that factor and added a bit more on top to account for the difficulty of preparing sausages. If giba bacon was allowed to be sold as well, its price would have to be set at fifteen red coins. The price of sausages could be kept down thanks to the fact that you could use scrap meat in them, but bacon required comparatively expensive breast meat.

“Ah, I see. That would make it more expensive than even gyama jerky, which means that only those who are especially well-off, even among the residents of

the castle town, will be able to afford it. But at least there will be no risk of too much being ordered and depleting your stock of meat.”

“That’s good to hear. It would be pretty silly to run out of giba for the post town even after the ban on selling fresh meat in the castle town just because we want to sell sausages.”

“Indeed. Well then, I’ll see to it that talks proceed with that information in mind. I am certain Lord Luidross will be overjoyed.” Polarth then glanced between me and Sheera Ruu. “I have another unrelated matter I wish to discuss as well. The house of Daleim would like to throw a party to foster friendship with the people of the forest’s edge. From what I have been told, our maid, Sheila, has brought this to your attention before during some small talk.”

“Do you mean the invitation to the dance party?”

“Yes, that is the one. Though I am of the house of Daleim, I am not that deeply involved, but the people of the forest’s edge have not had much direct interaction with our house before, correct? Cutting through all the formalities, we would like to invite members of the leading clans and yourself to our manor, Sir Asuta. My mother is the one who proposed the idea of it being a dance party.”

“Oh, I see.”

“So, I have heard from Sheila that the Ruu and Fa clans have given their permission. Is that indeed true?”

“I think there’s something I need to explain...”

Sheera Ruu shot me an imploring look, and I went ahead and told him what the issue was. Namely, that Ai Fa had mistakenly assumed the dance party was a tournament, as much as that sounded like some sort of joke. Polarth started to laugh when he heard that.

“What an amusing misunderstanding. I suppose that’s what one should expect from a gallant person of the forest’s edge. Lady Ai Fa truly is quite a modest woman, isn’t she?”

“I-I’m really embarrassed about this.” I said, bowing in place of my absent clan head. “But even so, it’s an honor to have the house of Daleim invite us to your

party, and I know at least *I'm* happy about it, but the people of the forest's edge don't have a custom of dancing for fun."

"There is no need to be so tense. Forcing those who do not wish to dance to join in would be terribly crude of us. It would be enough to simply eat, chat, and enjoy the music."

"But it would be necessary to wear banquet attire to this kind of event, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Would that be inconvenient somehow? The clothes Lady Ai Fa wore when she rescued you were quite magnificent, were they not?"

"Not exactly inconvenient, but Ai Fa's a hunter, so she's not too fond of wearing that kind of outfit, no matter the occasion."

"I see," Polarth replied with a nod. "How disappointing. But if that is how Lady Ai Fa feels, then we shall not force her. Do you think you might be able to participate on your own, Sir Asuta?"

"Ah. I would like to, but...would it be possible to have Ai Fa accompany me just as a guard?"

Ai Fa would never accept me heading to the castle town on my own, even if there were other men coming along as guards.

Polarth looked troubled for the first time as he replied, "Hmm... Naturally, it would be no issue for her to accompany you to the manor, but she *would* need to stay out of the event hall."

"She would? But we've always been allowed to bring our guards in with us before."

"Yes. It is a rule particular to our house. My mother does not allow soldiers to set foot inside our banquet hall. She is quite insistent that if they wear swords, they must wait outside."

"Then, would she be allowed inside if she turned over her sword?"

"Hmm. In that case, she would likely still be asked to wear banquet attire. I can see my mother now, throwing a fit and saying that having someone wearing such plain clothing at a dance party is unthinkable."

Polarth was a pretty mellow guy, but it sounded like his mother was a lot more intense. However, when I asked him about her, he gave a strained chuckle and replied, “Ah, no, my mother is a mild-mannered woman and rarely raises her voice. But, how should I put it...? If I say that she gets along quite well with Lady Eulifia, would you understand?”

I remembered Melfried’s wife, Eulifia, well. It was true that she was a kind person, and I couldn’t imagine her raising her voice, but even Marstein couldn’t rein her in, and she could silence someone as unsentimental as Melfried with nothing more than a smile.

“I definitely get what you mean.”

“That is good to hear. You are all free to dress as you please outside of the event hall, and your swords will not be confiscated. And I promise here and now that nobody who might pose a danger to anyone will be allowed inside.”

So, Ai Fa had to either stand guard outside the hall, or come inside wearing banquet attire. Which option would she choose? Either way, it would undoubtedly be a painful decision for her to make. Perhaps it would be a good idea to brace myself for a kick in the leg.

“B-But, well...at the forest’s edge, dancing is a means of seeking marriage, so wouldn’t there be a concerning implication to unwed people taking part in such an event?” Sheera Ruu chimed in, trying her best to speak up. I knew she felt some responsibility for all of this, as she had been there when the invitation to the dance party had been offered.

“Well, it is true that a dance party is a place to enjoy some playful romance. But after the incident with Lord Leeheim and Lady Reina Ruu, everyone will know to exercise proper discretion. Men and women alike will know it is forbidden to approach any person of the forest’s edge with fickle feelings, so it should not be a concern.”

“But...what if their feelings aren’t so fickle? If a noble makes an official marriage request and they are refused, it could cast a shadow over our relationship on both sides, couldn’t it?”

Polarth seemed moved by the desperate look on Sheera Ruu’s face. “I see what you mean. Perhaps we do need to think more deeply about such things.

Many people of the forest's edge are quite beautiful, and possess a unique charm not often seen in the castle town. From what I hear, Lady Selanju of Viscount Madel's house fell quite hard for Sir Shin Ruu."

"Yes, so..."

"In that case, men and women should be invited in pairs," Polarth declared, clapping his hands together. "If guests of honor are invited together like this, nobody would even entertain the notion of making an advance toward them. That is an absolute rule of etiquette in the castle town, so there should be no chance of any issues arising."

"Th-Then only those who are married would attend?"

"No, there is no need to set that as a condition. Unwed men and women would be fine as well. Would it be easier to comprehend if I said that directing an amorous look at a person who is accompanying someone of the other sex would be the worst possible insult one could give to that person's partner?"

I couldn't say for certain that it had come across fully, but the key point, at least, was clear. If unwed men and women came as a pair, no one else would be able to interject between them.

It feels like Ai Fa's options are getting narrowed down more and more...

Sheera Ruu and I glanced unenthusiastically at each other, but Polarth just kept on smiling.

"Well then, you will be receiving an official request about this in the near future. A messenger will be sent out tomorrow or the next day, so please give my regards to Sir Donda Ruu."

"Right, got it."

With that, Polarth packed a number of dishes into some containers he had brought with him and departed in high spirits. Then Sheera Ruu, who was supposed to be back at work in the seating area now, approached me again.

"Um, you *are* going to go with Ai Fa, right?"

"Yeah, it seems like that's probably how things are going to work out. Of course, Ai Fa's the one who'll have to make the final decision."

“I can’t imagine Ai Fa ever entrusting that duty to another woman.”

It was embarrassing to admit, but I couldn’t help but agree. More than that, though, my attention was caught by the grim look on Sheera Ruu’s face.

“The Ruu clan will be deciding who’s going to participate soon, won’t they? And it’ll probably be members of the main house who get chosen,” I said.

“Yeah... I just feel a great deal of responsibility about this, since I was unable to stop Ai Fa from accepting.”

“Then what about asking Darmu Ruu to accompany you?” I asked, causing Sheera Ruu’s face to turn fire red. I had tried to keep my voice down low enough that the other women wouldn’t overhear, but it seemed I hadn’t tried hard enough.

“Wh-What are you saying, Asuta? Wh-Why would I ask him?!”

“Well, he’s part of the main house, so he’d obviously be allowed to attend, right? Wouldn’t that make him a convenient partner?”

“But Ai Fa’s going to be there in banquet attire, isn’t she...? So Darmu Ruu...” Sheera Ruu trailed off, looking down dejectedly, but then she shook her head. “Nothing will come of discussing such matters now. Let’s get back to work. My apologies for the interruption.”

“Ah! Sheera Ruu!” I called out, but she took off running before my voice could reach her. My partner for the day, the Gaaz woman, looked quite confused as I sighed stealthily.

I guess that’s a natural thing to worry about from Sheera Ruu’s perspective. I can’t imagine Darmu Ruu’s feelings for Ai Fa being rekindled at this point, but what do I know?

Even so, I had no doubts about this at all. With intense emotions blazing in his eyes, Darmu Ruu had declared that he would no longer speak against Ai Fa’s way of life. And he had told me I was the only one who could protect Ai Fa, so I knew his feelings wouldn’t be led astray so easily.

Still, Sheera Ruu doesn’t know anything about all that, so it makes sense that she’d be worried. Guess I shouldn’t have suggested that she should go with

Darmu Ruu so casually. I really wasn't the smartest when it came to these things.

Regretting my carelessness, I decided to just focus on my work for the moment.

4

As the sun approached its peak and the number of passersby started to rise, Ai Fa finally returned from the Turan lands.

"Thanks for going to all the trouble. Were you able to talk to Myme and Mikel?" I asked as she pulled the cart around to the rear of the stall.

After untethering Gilulu, she nodded. "Yes, I was."

"I really appreciate it. So, what happened? Did Myme buy the giba meat?"

"This isn't the sort of thing to be discussed during a spare moment. Once you are free from your work, you should ask her directly."

"Huh? You brought her along?"

"Yes. She is in the wagon."

Why hadn't she come out, then? I felt really uneasy, but I didn't, couldn't run over to Gilulu's wagon until I had finished up a few things first.

"Myme, are you there?" I called out.

A weak voice responded, "I am..." from beyond the hanging flap. Then Myme pulled it back and showed herself, her eyes swollen and red from crying.

"M-Myme? What happened?"

"Asuta... I'm so sorry. I couldn't even contact you..." Myme said, biting her little lip in a desperate attempt to keep herself from sobbing.

"Never mind me. Why are you..." I started to say, only to notice something that left me at a loss for words. Mikel was lying there behind his daughter in the dim interior of the wagon on bedding that had most likely come from their house. Even at this distance, I could see that his head and right leg were wrapped in bandages. "M-Mikel! What in the world happened?! How did you

get those...?”

“Oh, we’ve already made it to the post town?” Mikel said as he sluggishly tried to sit up, only for Myme to fly back to his side and cling to him.

“Dad! You shouldn’t force yourself to get up!”

“Stop fussing. I’m not hurt so bad that I can just keep sleeping all day.”

Despite his response, Mikel was obviously worn down. His already slender face was now even more gaunt, to the point that I could easily see the outline of his bones. His chin was coated in grayish stubble, and the bandage around his head was bloodstained. I noticed that his tightly bandaged right leg also had a splint keeping it straight. He had clearly been treated for a fractured bone.

“We were robbed not long after the start of the gold month.” Myme weakly explained.

“A robbery? At your house in the Turan lands? Did you tell the guards?”

“Yes...but we have yet to hear anything, even after ten days... I’m sure the culprits have left Genos by now.”

“Hmph. Or maybe they bribed the guards,” Mikel muttered, with Myme supporting him by his shoulders. “Only the folks who live in the Turan lands would know there was a mountain of coins in our house. They must have seen her heading to the post town during the festival to do business.”

“S-So you’re saying someone from the Turan lands broke into your house to steal your money?”

“That’s right. They made off with every last coin we had. Turns out, having a bodyguard in town isn’t much help against scoundrels who live in the same area we do.”

Myme had hired Barthia as a bodyguard to protect against such dangers, and since she would have kept an eye out for anyone tailing them, it was unlikely that this was a crime committed by an outside party.

“Everyone who lives there is poor, like us. And when poor folks get more than their fair share of fortune, it’s just asking for trouble.”

“I couldn’t leave my father alone, and it would’ve been too dangerous for a

child like me to go to the post town all by myself... I'm so, so sorry that we weren't able to contact you." Myme said, hanging her head deeply as tiny tears fell to the floor of the wagon.

Ai Fa had been silently standing beside me as I struggled with what to say, but now she spoke up. "Given the situation, I could not simply leave them there, so I brought them back with me. Asuta, give any spare coins you have to me."

"Coins? What are you going to use them for?"

"Medicine, of course. I was able to treat his fractured leg properly, but his head wounds require medicine, and he also has a fever. The kind that can be bought in town will help him recover quicker than romu leaves."

"I-I see. Got it. You can take all of our earnings for today."

"I don't need that much. You two rest here until I can deliver the medicine." Without waiting for the pair to respond, Ai Fa closed the flap, hiding the wagon bed from view. Then she turned toward me, her eyes burning with rage. "Also, make sure to set aside some food for the two of them. You can give it to them after his wounds have been treated."

"Food? Got it. But is Mikel in any state to eat?"

"If he doesn't eat at least a little, he won't last. All of their coins were stolen, correct? For the last ten days, they have had to survive solely on what they already had in the house. No one around them ever offered any assistance..." Ai Fa suddenly kicked at the ground. Then, seeing my surprise, she muttered, "My apologies. I'm angry at myself for failing to realize how bad their situation might've been when we spoke last night. If I had headed to the Turan lands then and there, I could have rescued them half a day sooner."

"W-Well, if that's how you're going to look at it, it took me ten days to even bring it up."

"But if you hadn't said anything, we never would have discovered the misfortune that had befallen them. And if I hadn't been free from work, I might have put it off until later as an unnecessary concern. I'm furious about my own carelessness."

Personally, I didn't think she had any reason to beat herself up. The people of

the forest's edge could never truly understand the idea of hurting someone else for the sake of money. Even more so when it was people living in the same town rather than bandits.

“Regardless, now that we know, we are going to save them from this predicament. I will gather their personal belongings so that they can stay at the settlement at the forest's edge for the time being. You have no objections as a member of the Fa clan, do you?”

“Of course not. I'm really grateful that you're so willing to take them in.”

“Don't be foolish. Mikel lent us his aid from the shadows when that noble kidnapped you, did he not? I still haven't repaid that debt,” Ai Fa said. She turned resolutely, making her hunter's cloak sweep out behind her. “We must obtain Donda Ruu's consent before returning to the Fa house. Of course, I have no intention of not taking action, regardless of what the leading clan heads say.”

“I'm sure Donda Ruu, at least, will be fine with this if we try to convince him together.”

And so, that day ended up being even more hectic than the previous one. Compared to this incident, the invitation to the dance party from Polarth seemed almost laughably trivial.

After wrapping up our business in the post town, we first headed over to the Ruu settlement. Sheera and Lala Ruu were on duty for the day, and they made it clear that they weren't going to argue against us. After all, they were happy to call Mikel and Myme their friends at this point.

It didn't take long for Donda Ruu to meet us in the main hall of his house. The men were out hunting at the moment, so Jiza Ruu and the others weren't present. Meanwhile, Reina Ruu and most of the other women were busy with preparations for work tomorrow, so only Mia Lea Ruu was there beside him.

“I see... So it is not just bandits who commit such vicious acts in town.” Donda Ruu took a sip of chatchi tea in place of fruit wine. Even though his right shoulder was nearly healed now, he was apparently still not allowed to drink.

There were seven of us there in front of him: Ai Fa and myself, Mikel and

Myme, Sheera and Lala Ruu, and Bartha, who had come running after hearing what had happened. Mikel had insisted on being here for the talks too, even though simply getting down from the wagon had caused him a lot of pain.

“So, the shameless bastards who did this are still free, even now?”

“Yes... It’s likely that even if they do live in the Turan lands, they aren’t people we know. If they were, they probably would have robbed us sooner... They must have seen me at the morning market or something and realized how much money I was making in the post town,” Myme replied, desperately trying to hold herself together.

Donda Ruu’s eyes were blazing as he looked at the admirable young girl in front of him and snorted. “Hmph. The way you put that, it sounds like even the people you *do* know would have done such a thing, given the opportunity.”

“You’re right... We cannot trust everyone we’re acquainted with.”

“Hrmm. This is why you can’t trust townsfolk.”

Myme’s shoulders trembled when Donda Ruu said that, but then Ai Fa instantly chimed in, “Donda Ruu, saying it that way makes it sound like you think everyone living in town is a fiend, and that is not true. Not when it comes to these people, at the very least.”

“Nobody said it was. I can see that you’re angry just by looking at your eyes, but don’t go picking fights with anyone and everyone.”

That seemed to stop Ai Fa in her tracks, at least for a moment.

“So, what is it you want from us, Mikel of the Turan lands?”

“Like I said...” Ai Fa started.

“I’m talking to Mikel. If you can’t hold your tongue, then wait outside the house,” Donda Ruu harshly retorted, leaving my clan head to grind her teeth. It had been a while since there had been such a dangerous feeling in the air between the two of them, which was making me get pretty anxious.

“I have only one request, leading clan head Donda Ruu...” Mikel said, slurring his words slightly with his splinted right leg stretched out in front of him. Myme was helping him sit up; his mind seemed to be a bit hazy due to the fever-

reducing medicine he'd been given. "We want you to shelter us here at the forest's edge... My daughter can earn money on her own... If you let us stay here awhile, she'll be able to repay you for it in full."

"Oh? And how long is 'awhile'?"

"Until I'm able to walk again..." Mikel's face was as pale as a corpse, but his eyes were shining brightly. I had never seen him so desperate. "With the way things are, we're pretty much just waiting for death to arrive... No matter how much Myme earns, if we return to the Turan lands, we'll simply be attacked again... But if I can get to the point where I can walk..."

"You being able to walk won't change the situation. They'll keep attacking you regardless, won't they?"

"If that happens...I'll send my daughter to the castle town on her own."

I stared at Mikel's grim face in shock.

Mikel, meanwhile, was still glaring straight at Donda Ruu. "I was originally from the castle town... If I cast aside all pride and shame, I should be able to find someone who will take her in... I'm certain I can... So I want you to let us stay here until I can move freely..."

Myme was biting her lip with her eyes fixed on her father's face.

Looking back and forth between the pair, Donda Ruu snorted once more. "You seem to be suffering from a serious fever. There's no point in discussing this further as long as you're in this state."

"That's not true! I..."

"The Ruu clan will welcome the two of you as guests. Determining the duration of your stay will wait until after your wounds are healed. You shouldn't have anything to complain about, then, right?"

I was once again shocked. Feeling similarly, Ai Fa immediately interjected, "You say you're willing to let them stay at the Ruu settlement, Donda Ruu? I was planning to take care of them at the Fa house."

"How will you care for them when there are only two of you in the Fa clan? And you're always leaving your house and running around the forest, even

though you're supposed to be resting." After swiftly shutting down Ai Fa's protest, Donda Ruu then turned to face Barthia. "Barthia, you will allow them to stay in the house where you are living. A branch house would probably work fine too, but I suspect this will be more convenient for everyone."

"Understood. I'll keep an eye on Myme while she's working too," Barthia said, flashing a bright smile. Seeing that, Donda Ruu once again turned toward the father-daughter pair.

"Barthia and her son Jeeda are guests of the Ruu clan. However, Jeeda has been assisting in giba hunting, so we take no payment from them. And they seem to have had no trouble earning the coins they need to support themselves."

"Yeah. We sell the birds we hunt in the morning. We're getting our meals provided to us too, so we don't need much money to begin with."

"There you have it. We'll provide housing and food for you. Anything else you need to buy, you should earn the coins for it yourselves. If you can accept those conditions, you can stay at the Ruu settlement."

"Th-Thank you," Myme replied, no longer able to keep the tears from streaming down her cheeks.

Hanging his head, Mikel quietly said, "I thank you for your kindness..."

"There's no need for thanks. You have given a great deal of aid to the Ruu clan's chefs. Isn't that right, Lala?"

"Yeah! They're the ones who taught us how to make delicious dried meats!"

"Right. And they have assisted us in many other ways as well," Sheera Ruu quietly added. Myme in particular had inspired her and Reina Ruu to be even more passionate about their work as chefs.

"I don't call townsfolk friends lightly. But you, girl, are doing business using giba meat, and we have welcomed the two of you as guests twice before. On top of that, when Asuta of the Fa clan was kidnapped by that noble girl from the house of Turan, you are the one who told Jeeda his location, Mikel."

"Yeah... I just told him where the Turan manor was, though..."

“Asuta of the Fa clan might not have been rescued without that advice, and since the Fa clan head has accepted him as a member of her house, that means you saved one of our comrades. We owe you a great debt for that,” Donda Ruu curtly stated before drinking more of his chatchi tea. “We’ve talked long enough. If you’ve got no complaints, go rest up at Bartha’s place. Any further discussion can wait until you can speak properly.”

Bartha stood up with a smile to help Myme support Mikel’s body. With a teary smile, the young girl bowed to her. We were about to rise as well, but then Donda Ruu grumbled, “Ah, there was one more crucial matter I almost forgot about... You said that the guards in town might have been paid coins in order to overlook this wrongdoing, didn’t you?”

“Uh, yes. We don’t have any proof, but...the guards were way too disinterested about this incident. Besides, that sort of thing isn’t uncommon in the Turan lands...”

“That isn’t something I can turn a blind eye to. We’ll have to ask the nobles about how exactly those guards are being trained.” Donda Ruu’s eyes were shining with such intensity that he was clearly frightening Myme. Of course, his anger wasn’t directed at the young girl, but elsewhere. “At the very least, that Melfried isn’t the sort to overlook such crimes. It seems we’ll need to send him a messenger.”

“Oh, if we can wait until tomorrow or the day after, the nobles should be sending a messenger to us, so why not bring it up then?” Lala Ruu said.

“What’s this, now?” Donda Ruu asked, furrowing his brow.

Right, we needed to report about the invitation to the dance party as well.

“We can discuss that among ourselves. You all take care of Mikel and Myme, Asuta,” Sheera Ruu said kindly.

“Okay. Thank you.”

Taking her up on that offer, we went ahead and left, though we were going to have to come right back after leaving Mikel in Bartha’s care. After all, the dance party the house of Daleim was holding wasn’t something that we could treat as secondary.

“I never expected Donda Ruu to personally invite the two of you to stay here as guests. At first, I felt pretty anxious about talking to him, since he seemed to be in such a bad mood,” I said while laying Mikel down in the wagon.

“That’s for sure,” Bartha replied with a chuckle. “He seemed really angry, hearing how those villains acted. It’s the same for you too, right, Ai Fa? It was actually kind of funny, seeing how you were both in such a bad mood for the exact same reason.”

“‘Funny’ is not the word I would use. It felt like he was taking out his anger on me.”

“I’d say that goes for the both of you. For a hunter of the forest’s edge, it must be unthinkable for someone to force their way into a house in order to rob the owners of their hard-earned money, right?” Bartha said, reaching down and patting the top of Myme’s head. “Hey Myme, the kind of doors they have here at the forest’s edge only have bolts keeping them closed. None of them can be locked from the outside. Do you know why that is?”



“Huh...? Because they have so many family members that there’s always someone there, even in the middle of the day?”

“Nope. Ai Fa and Asuta are a family of two, so their house is empty during the day. And it’s not like Asuta keeps the money he’s earned on him at all times.”

“Yeah. It would be pretty careless to go to the post town with so much money on me,” I said. As someone who wasn’t born here, I already understood what Bartha was getting at. Unfortunately, Myme was left staring in confusion.

“It means there isn’t a single person at the forest’s edge who would try to sneak into someone else’s house. No matter how much money Asuta earns, and even if everyone nearby knows about it, nobody would ever try to rob them. If I remember right, you get a toe cut off for entering someone else’s house without permission?”

“Yes, that is the law here at the forest’s edge,” I confirmed.

“That verbal promise alone is enough to protect the peace for them. That’s kind of unthinkable for us townsfolk, isn’t it?” Bartha said as she rustled Myme’s hair. “To be blunt, you don’t often come across people as ridiculously earnest as they are. So you can rest easy while you’re here. Personally, I find it such a pleasant place to live that I just haven’t felt like leaving.”

“Really?” Myme asked while wiping her teary eyes. Then she bowed deeply to me and Ai Fa. “Um, thank you so much! You put in a good word for us, and I swear to do my best to not cause you any trouble!”

“You don’t need to worry about that. Honestly, we were thinking of inviting you to the Fa house to begin with. Isn’t that right, Ai Fa?”

“Indeed,” Ai Fa answered with a nod, still looking rather dissatisfied, possibly because she had been fully ready to welcome them as guests of the Fa clan, only for the idea to be brushed aside unexpectedly. Seeing as how we were already disrupting things throughout the forest’s edge, though, it was probably better for the leading Ruu clan to take on this duty themselves. They had been the ones who had allowed Bartha and Jeeda to stay with them as guests before, so it likely wouldn’t be difficult for them to get even a stubborn man like Gulaf Zaza to give his approval.

Oh, right. We never would have gotten permission to sell sausages in the castle town without help from Mikel and Myme either. I'll have to tell Donda Ruu about that as well.

As that thought was running through my mind, figures were approaching us from two different directions. They were Toor Deen's group, who had been waiting for us in the plaza, and Reina Ruu's group, who had been working in the rear kitchen.

"What did he decide, Asuta?"

"We're not going to send Myme and Mikel back to town, are we?"

They must have already heard what was going on from Yamiru Lea. Reina Ruu looked deadly serious as she pressed me for an answer.

"Well, they've been welcomed as guests of the Ruu clan for now. The other leading clan heads and the nobles are going to have to be consulted about this later, but I'm sure Donda Ruu can handle it."

"Ah, I'm so happy to hear that." Reina Ruu said, bringing her hands to her chest and sighing heavily in relief before turning to face Myme with a smile. "Myme, welcome to the Ruu settlement. Please, make yourself at home and take it easy while you're here."

"I'm so glad, Myme. If there's anything we can do to help, please don't hesitate to ask," Toor Deen said. She, Yun Sudra, and the others all surrounded Myme with their expressions full of affection.

Tears once again started streaming down the young girl's face. "Thank you so much, everyone."

"There's no need to cry. We're your friends, after all!" Rimee Ruu added, pulling out a towel from her chest pocket and wiping Myme's cheeks.

Bartha's eyes narrowed happily as she looked down at them, and then she loudly said, "Now then, we've got to get your old man to bed first and foremost! Let's leave the chatting for after that!" She then grabbed hold of Gilulu's reins and gently got the wagon moving.

I watched them go with a small sigh. For now, Myme and Mikel would be just

fine. I once again felt truly honored to be able to call myself a person of the forest's edge.

5

On the following day, the twelfth of the gold month, Myme came with us to the post town. I figured it would have been perfectly fine for her to rest for at least one day, but she didn't seem willing to allow herself to take time off, so early that morning she had prepared fifty meals without anyone's assistance.

"I got the ingredients from the Ruu clan, so if this food doesn't sell, I won't be able to show my face around here anymore," Myme declared with a resolute look, but naturally, there was no way such a sad outcome would happen. The citizens of Genos were thrilled to see her reopening for business.

The dish she went with was the unusual viscous stew made with karon milk that she had first sold during the revival festival, where it had always proved to be such a hit that it always sold out right away.

"As terrible as the crime that brought you to us was, I'm so glad that you and your father are staying at the Ruu settlement. It'll give us another chance to see your skills up close and personal," Reina Ruu said during a break between work. The expression on her face was just as determined as Myme's was. "Once your break period is over, you'll be holding study sessions at the Ruu settlement again, right, Asuta? If Myme and Mikel attend, them being there should help everyone improve even faster. I'm really looking forward to it."

"Right. What happened to them was horrible, but there is a saying that every cloud has a silver lining."

Toor Deen and Yun Sudra were also relieved when they heard what the plan was for Myme and Mikel. If things kept going as they were and Myme's father could recover a bit more, the young chef would be back to smiling again in no time. With so many warm and welcoming faces among the Ruu clan, I was sure their hearts would soon be healed just like his wounds.

"Robbing someone like that is just awful! You did lock your door, right?" Yumi asked Myme when she stopped by as a customer.

As she stirred the contents of her pot so they wouldn't burn, Myme nodded back and replied, "Yes. It was late at night, so we had our door locked and bolted. But they broke the lattices on our kitchen window and forced their way in."

"Wow... Sounds like the Turan lands are pretty dangerous too. If that happened at our place, my old man would have beaten that lot to a pulp, though," Yumi declared, reaching out and patting Myme on the shoulder. "Well, I'm sure you'll be able to earn a mountain of coins again in no time! Actually, why don't you just go ahead and become people of the forest's edge? Then nobody will mess with you ever again!"

Myme smiled back at Yumi bashfully, but she didn't respond. I assumed she thought she shouldn't say anything about that while her father wasn't around. As for Yumi, she probably wasn't being serious and had only said that to cheer Myme up.

But I have to wonder about Mikel's plan to send Myme off to the castle town on her own... Was he already planning to do that, even before this happened?

There were no true restaurants here in the post town or the Turan lands, only dining halls at inns, and stalls that sold snacks, often run by those same inns. Of course, Myme was skilled enough to make a living off of running a stall alone, but if she was aiming to achieve greater heights as a chef, she would eventually have to move to the castle town or another town entirely. With her talent, she would have no problem making it as a chef in the castle town.

Well, that's not exactly the sort of thing I should be butting in to. I doubt Mikel wants to hand Myme over to some restaurant while she's still so young anyway.

After that, Dora and Tara showed up and talked to Myme as well. She had also spoken with Telia Mas this morning when she went to borrow her stall, so everyone who was closely connected to her knew what was going on at this point.

And in the meantime, some other folks who Myme wasn't especially well acquainted with also showed up: Diel, the daughter of a metalwork trader from the south; her attendant, Labis; and the eastern star reader, Arishuna.

"Welcome. It's rare for the three of you to show up together."

“Hey, we just ran into each other on our way out of the gates! And she followed us even when I told her not to!”

“There is, no helping that, as we were heading, to the same, destination.”

As always, they were complete opposites, one lively and the other perfectly calm. After shooting a threatening glare at Arishuna, Diel’s bright emerald-green eyes turned my way.

“There’s a lovely smell drifting through the air again today! What kind of dish is this?”

“This is a giba belly stew. For the broth, we used tau oil, sugar, and keru root.”

“Ooh, keru root! So you’ve finally started using it?” Crossing her arms, Diel glanced out of the corner of her eye at Arishuna, wearing a daring grin. As it happened, tau oil, sugar, and keru root all came from Jagar.

The dish was a take on the giba char siu that had been so popular during the festival of the hunt. Actually, it might have been more accurate to describe it as being halfway between cubed giba meat stew and char siu. At any rate, it had blocks of rib meat tied with strings that had been cooking in the stew since morning.

When serving it to a customer, I transferred aria, tino, and nenon that had been simmering in a different pot to a dish, then sliced off a bit of meat to add on top, along with plenty of broth. For a bit of an accent, I also gave each dish a pinch of chitt seeds. With the tender boiled rib meat, it made for a really good meal all on its own.

“Well then, I’ll take a plate of that! What else should I have, though?”

“How about trying that dish? I’m sure you’ve never had it before, Diel.” Naturally, I was referring to Myme’s cooking. Diel hadn’t really been able to leave the castle town during the revival festival, so I figured this had to be the first time she had seen Myme’s stall.

“Hmm? That little kid isn’t a person of the forest’s edge, is she?”

“No, she’s a resident of Genos, but she is connected to our people.”

“Oh? So you’re not the only weirdo like that out there, Asuta?” As Diel peered

over at Myme's stall, Arishuna leaned her neck forward beside her. "Hey, could you not get so close to me?" she said.

"But I am, interested as well."

Diel acted unfriendly, but from my point of view as an onlooker, I thought they made a great duo. They seemed to have quite a lot in common, despite the nations of the south and east being enemies.

Myme shot them a puzzled look. "Welcome. You can order some if you like. It costs two red coins."

"It doesn't look like just one would be enough to fill you up on its own, does it? Okay, let's go ahead and give it a try. Coin please, Labis."

Labis held out a white coin, which Myme accepted with a "Thank you," and then handed him back his change. Then she grabbed one of the skewers peeking out from the pot, wrapped a piece of poitan around the meat and vegetables covered in stew, and finally slid the wooden skewer out of them.

"Mmm, what a great smell! This is giba meat too, isn't it?"

"Yes. It uses giba belly and leg meat."

Diel bit into the poitan, and as she started chewing, her eyes grew visibly wider. "Delicious! I didn't think there could be anyone other than Asuta capable of making food this good here in the post town!"

"I'm glad it's to your liking," Myme said, smiling a bit. In the past, she would have been grinning as brightly as Diel was after hearing that. It felt like she had grown a lot more mature in a short period of time.

"Well then, may I have some, as well?" Arishuna said while holding out her own coins, causing Diel's expression to quickly shift once again.

"What, were you waiting to hear my impressions first? You're a sneaky one, aren't you?!"

"I had, no such intentions. But it is, a fact, that your, satisfied smile, drew my interest, all the more."

"Hmph! So you say!"

Myme let a little giggle slip out as she watched that exchange between Diel and Arishuna. Regardless of how the two of them felt, it really was quite amusing to see them bouncing off each other. For me, it brought to mind a Pomeranian yapping at a graceful Siamese cat.

“It certainly is, delicious... I am, surprised.”

“Hey, that’s what I said! Ugh, you’re so annoying...” With that, Diel scarfed down the rest of her portion before turning back to me. “All right, I’ll have your cooking next, Asuta! By the way, I’ve heard that you’ll be attending the house of Daleim’s upcoming dance party.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan, more or less. We haven’t received the official invitation yet, though.”

We had discussed the matter with Donda Ruu yesterday. He was leaning toward letting us attend, assuming there was no clear reason to turn down such a request from the nobles. It hadn’t been decided yet who would attend from the leading clans, but I had been singled out by Polarth, so it was essentially set in stone that I would be there.

“I see. I’m really on the fence about it. I mean, it’s not like I’m going to get to taste your cooking there...”

“Oh, you were invited too, Diel?”

“Yeah. I know their second son pretty well at this point, after all! Still, I don’t get many chances to take it easy and chat with you, so I guess I’ll be there.”

“Good. It’ll be much easier for me to relax if there are lots of familiar faces in attendance. By the way, will you have a gentleman accompanying you to the event?”

“Oh yeah, it’d be a hassle to have some fishy noble approach me, so I’ll be bringing Labis,” Diel replied, but then she shot me a glare. “What about you, Asuta? Are you going to bring that hunter woman with the nasty look in her eyes?”

“That’s a new one, hearing her called a ‘hunter woman.’ But yeah, that’s the plan.”

When Ai Fa had heard the condition Polarth had laid out, she sighed and said, “Then I suppose I will have no choice but to entrust my blade to them.” Apparently, the idea of waiting outside the event hall never even entered her head.

“You were invited too, weren’t you? Why do I keep running into you everywhere I go?!” Diel was saying.

“That is, most likely, because we both, have ties to Polarth. It is only natural, we would attend, the same banquets, with the same nobles.” Apparently, Arishuna had already made up her mind to attend. But it seemed she had been invited as a star reader rather than a guest of honor.

“So, I guess the next time we see each other could be at the dance party. But I’ll definitely come out here again if I can find the time!” Diel said, and with that, she and Arishuna moved over to the restaurant space with their dishes.

As we watched them leave, Myme called out, “Asuta, were those people from the castle town?”

“Yeah. As you saw, though, they’re from the south and east, so officially they’re guests invited to stay in the castle town.”

“I see... I guess with your level of skill, it makes sense that you would know a lot of people there.” Myme’s eyes dropped down to stare at her boiling pot. Her unusual reaction naturally caused me to worry.

“I’d say you’re surpassing me in terms of skill already, Myme. Everyone had a ton of praise for you before. Even Varkas. So there’s no denying how good you are.”

“Not really. Varkas also said that one cannot be called an excellent chef if they can only make one dish. I only know how to use a handful of ingredients, so I’m still nothing but a chef in training.” Myme bit her lip a bit, and then after staying silent for a moment, she quietly muttered, “I’m still so new at this. And...I don’t want to leave my father.”

It was impossible to miss the sadness dripping from her voice. It really reminded me that Myme was still just an eleven-year-old girl.

“That’s only natural. I was seventeen when I was separated from my family,

but I still wish I could have trained under my old man a lot more. My business may be doing well, but I've been fumbling my way through each day I face."

"I guess."

"And Mikel was one of the top two chefs in all of Genos. Staying close to him is the best way for you to improve. Donda Ruu also said that there's no need for you guys to leave the forest's edge immediately once Mikel's leg is healed."

"Right," Myme said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand as she firmly stirred the contents of her pot. It looked like she had managed to keep herself from crying.

I don't want to butt in to someone else's business, but... Even so, I couldn't possibly accept fate tearing such a close father and daughter pair apart, and since the people of the forest's edge valued blood ties so highly, they would surely agree with me.

No matter how close two people might be, the time when they would have to say goodbye would come eventually. But that was all the more reason to keep resisting the inevitable for as long as possible. I couldn't help but feel that way.

Ultimately, the day's work came to a close without any serious commotion. Naturally, Myme had sold all of the food she had prepared, and now she was finishing her cleanup with a heavy sigh.

"Good work, Myme. Looks like you didn't need to worry about having leftovers after all. Not that I ever really thought that you might."

"Yes, thank you. It's all because of your help, everyone." Myme then sent me a terribly apologetic look. "Also, there's something I'd like to discuss with you, Asuta... Could I ask you to wait a bit longer for me to pay you back for the medicine from yesterday? I need to repay the Ruu clan for the ingredients I used, and I also need money to prepare for business tomorrow..."

"You can do that whenever, no problem. It can wait until you have plenty of funds to spare."

"But normally, I would need to repay you right away."

"You don't have to act like we're strangers, Myme. If you were in my position,

would you demand that I pay you back immediately?”

Myme shut her eyes tightly to stop her tears from falling, then once again said, “Thank you.”

At that point, Reina Ruu approached and said, “Good work, everyone. Myme, it looks like fifty meals wasn’t enough, wouldn’t you say? If you need help to prepare more, feel free to let us know whenever.”

“Huh? But I can’t burden you all like that.”

“It wouldn’t be a burden, it would be a job request. We’ve been paying people to help with work for a while now,” Reina Ruu replied with a soothing smile. “Still, the details can wait until we return to the settlement. I’m sure you want to hurry back to Mikel, right?”

And so, we headed straight back to the Ruu settlement. We still needed to go to the Ravitz settlement to give lessons, though, so we couldn’t stay for long. Even so, we did stop by Bartha’s house to make sure that Mikel had stabilized before we left to do our next job.

“Well then, see you tomorrow. Make sure not to wear yourself out too much,” I said.

“Of course. Thank you so much for everything,” Myme told me.

After saying farewell to Myme and the members of the Ruu clan, we set out once more down the path through the forest’s edge.

Before long, Yun Sudra called out to me.

“That Myme is an amazing girl. She does all of her work well, despite how young she is.”

“Yeah. At this rate, it may not be long before we see her usual energetic self again. There’s no way I would’ve been able to handle the situation she’s in even half as well at the age of eleven.”

“The same goes for me. I’ve been growing more and more fond of the girl.”

I felt exactly the same way. It was because of the kind of people Myme and Mikel were that Ai Fa and Donda Ruu had extended a helping hand to them without the slightest hesitation. They were undoubtedly just the sort of folks

who could strike a chord with the strict yet purehearted people of the forest's edge.

"Mikel was driven from the city of stone because of that wicked noble, Cyclaeus, wasn't he? Shouldn't the nobles agree to let him live there again if you explain the circumstances?"

"Hmm. If Mikel could still work as a chef, that would probably work out. But as things stand, he just can't make enough money to live there. And I can't imagine him asking the nobles for their patronage so he can do so."

"I see... Well, I'm glad that they were willing to rely on us people of the forest's edge instead of the nobles."

Once again, I completely agreed. Mikel was stubborn and didn't let his emotions show often, but he had relied on the people of the forest's edge without any hesitation, which made me incredibly happy to see.

Mikel, Myme, Bartha, and Jeeda all had their destinies thrown off course because of Cyclaeus and Zattsu Suun. That might have made Donda Ruu even less willing to turn a blind eye toward their struggles.

Thinking back, this might have been more fallout from what Cyclaeus and the others wrought. But as they say, fortune and misfortune are linked. They're two sides of the same coin, and can gather together and intertwine like a braided rope. I prayed from the depths of my heart that after facing such suffering, Myme and Mikel would be met with even more happiness and joy in turn. Even looking at my own case, after losing the entire life that I had lived for seventeen years, I had still found so much happiness.

It was possible that great tragedy and misfortune was still lurking in our future. Even so, we had no choice but to keep on living, trusting that happiness would be waiting there for us on the other side. At least, that was how I saw it.

6

We were currently heading to the Ravitz settlement. On foot, it would have been a two hour journey to the north to get there from the Fa house, but with a wagon, it only took forty minutes. If you continued farther north from there,

eventually you would find the Suun settlement, and past that, there were only the clans under the Zaza.

“The Ravitz, Naham, and Vin clans live in this area. The Suun never paid them much mind, as far as I know. The Deen and Liddo established blood ties with the Suun, but those three never did,” Fei Beim said.

I was focused on counting the number of side paths we were passing, following the instructions Ai Fa had given, and slowing down our pace as we went.

“I guess. Back when the Suun were the leading clan, the Ravitz and the clans under them were supposedly the ones who suffered most. I figured that meant they didn’t approve of our actions solely out of fear of the Suun, but since their opinion still hasn’t changed, there must be some other reason,” I mused.

“We in the Beim hold the same position, but since the Ravitz are located so far away from us, we don’t have any interaction with them. I’m kind of interested to hear what their reasons are for opposing the Fa clan.”

Naturally, I felt the same way.

There were three major clans who opposed our actions: the Zaza, the Beim, and the Ravitz. The other opposed clans were all subordinates of those three. Among them, I had already started building bridges between us and the Zaza and Beim, and had also taught them bloodletting and cooking techniques. They were still opposed to us doing business in the post town and interacting with townsfolk, but they had at least accepted the value of delicious food.

Currently, Ai Fa and some members of the Fou were teaching the Ravitz bloodletting and carving techniques, and they had agreed to allow us chefs to visit as well. This was a big job, and it would determine what sort of bond we could form with the people of the Ravitz.

“Ah, I think that’s the one that leads to the Ravitz settlement.”

I stopped the wagon and got down from the driver’s seat, with five women following behind me: Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, Fei Beim, and the Gaaz and Ratsu women.

We headed down a side path that extended to the east from the main route

—which ran north to south—and before long we came upon a large plaza. Parent clans all tended to have cleared plazas like this one, as they were necessary for banquets and the like. This one was surprisingly large, though. It was almost as big as the Ruu clan's, and a good deal bigger than the one at the Fou settlement. There looked to be seven houses encircling it.

“What an impressive settlement. Are the Ravitz really this big of a clan?” Yun Sudra whispered.

“No,” I replied with a shake of my head. “From what I’ve heard, they have fewer members than the Ratsu. But the Ratsu have absorbed two clans under them in the past year, which has made them about as large as the Ruu now.”

“I don’t sense many people around, so I guess you’re right. These houses may only be about half full.”

The houses all had their doors shut, and I didn’t catch so much as a glimpse of anyone working. It was possible they were all simply working behind their houses rather than out in the plaza, but the fact that there wasn’t even a single child out running around and playing reminded me of what the Suun settlement had been like back during the clan head meeting.

“For now, let’s head over to the largest house.”

I gave Gilulu’s reins a tug and started walking across the plaza. Then I entrusted the totems to Toor Deen when we arrived so I could knock on the door.

“Is anyone there? I’m Asuta of the Fa clan, here as we agreed.”

After a fair bit of silence, I heard the sound of a bolt being removed.

“The Ravitz clan welcomes you... I am the clan head’s wife, Lili Ravitz.” The woman who had appeared before us was very small and middle-aged. She had a plump, round build and a kind face. Her dark brown hair was pulled up at the top of her head, and she had slender, happy-looking eyes that reminded me of Jiza Ruu. My initial impression was that she kind of reminded me of a plump Jizo statue.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Asuta of the Fa clan. I believe you should have already heard about our visit from the Fa and Fou clan heads. Is this going to be any issue?”

“Not at all. The women have already gathered in the kitchen. Thank you for your assistance today.” Lili Ravitz then closed the door behind her, and I heard it being bolted again almost immediately. “We didn’t want the children to feel frightened, so we gathered them all here in the main house. Please, come this way,” she said, walking off toward the rear of the house. She seemed to be a gentle woman. I didn’t sense any animosity from her...and yet, perhaps because her eyes were similar to Jiza Ruu’s, I couldn’t seem to get a read on what she was thinking.

“This is the kitchen.”

“Thank you. Is it all right if we tie up our tolos around here?”

“Yes, of course.”

The tolos and wagon Ai Fa’s group had come with were being kept nearby too. I released Gilulu from the wagon and tethered him there beside his buddy.

“Oh, and I’d like to use the knives that I brought along. Could I have your permission to bring them into the kitchen?”

“Go right ahead.”

I got the leather bag I had purchased in Dabagg out of the wagon and stepped into the kitchen. It was in every way the equal of the one at the Ruu house. There were four stoves inside and two outside, and the workstations were more than big enough. There were also a fair number of pots and cooking knives about.

Five women were waiting for us there. Four of them were older women, while the fifth was much younger, but they were all wearing one-piece outfits, indicating that they were married.

“For the time being, we have selected two women from each of the Ravitz, Naham, and Vin. All of the clan heads’ wives are gathered here, myself included.”

The oldest woman among them (who looked to be around fifty) was the Naham clan head’s wife, while the one who seemed to be around my age was married to the Vin clan head.

As was proper etiquette, the women of our group all introduced themselves as well. But once they had finished, Lili Ravitz interjected, “Hold on. I was told that the Fa, Fou, Ran, and Sudra would be working together on this task. But you only have a Sudra woman there with you.”

“Oh, right. These are all women who help out with our business in the post town. I asked for their assistance today because the Fou and Ran are short on women, so it’s difficult for them to spare any.”

“I see.” Lili Ravitz replied, her Jizo-like eyes looking the women over. “The Gaaz and Ratsu approve of the Fa clan’s actions, correct? But I believe the Beim were opposed... And do the Deen not fall under the leading Zaza clan?”

“We do,” Toor Deen replied in a surprisingly steady tone. “The Deen and Liddo men haven’t been allowed to be part of this, but I’ve been helping with work in town for a while now so we can see what changes the Fa clan’s actions are causing, and I was given special permission to join in this task.”

Then Fei Beim stepped up beside her. “As a member of the Beim clan, I am in the same position. I have been working alongside Asuta of the Fa clan in order to determine whether or not doing business in the post town and deepening bonds with the townsfolk are proper courses of action. Did you not accept this offer with similar intent?”

“I am not certain. We simply gathered here under our clan heads’ orders,” Lili Ravitz stated, the kindness in her expression unwavering. “It is our clan heads who will determine whether what we are doing today is proper as well. If that is acceptable, then please begin your cooking lessons.”

“Understood. I look forward to working with you.” I couldn’t tell what they were thinking or feeling, but at least it didn’t seem like they were rejecting us out of hand. They felt a bit cold and distant, but that was likely because they were placing the position their clan had taken over any personal feelings.

That’s perfectly normal when it comes to the people of the forest’s edge. Fei Beim was originally way more hostile than she is now.

At any rate, the only thing I could do was carry out the work in front of me.

“Well then, let’s get started. Have you already confirmed for yourselves how

much better bloodlet meat tastes?”

“Yes. Both the grilled and boiled meat we cooked were so delicious it was shocking. I can understand why our clan heads were so worked up after the clan head meeting.”

“All right. Then I’d like to teach you how to make it even more delicious. Do you use any ingredients besides aria and poitan in your homes?”

“No. At most, we might add some tarapa and tino for banquets.”

“Then what about herbs like myamuu?”

“We only use that for banquets as well.”

In that case, it seemed like they were a bit more frugal than the Dai, who would at least occasionally buy other ingredients even if they weren’t having a banquet. However, there had been clans who met their ruin here at the forest’s edge because they were unable to purchase even aria and poitan. The Sudra in particular had been getting close to that point before they got involved with the Fa.

Now that I think about it, the Vin’s subordinate clans died out, and they had to form blood ties with the Ravitz. Were their lives as harsh as the Sudra’s before then? While I was thinking about that, I looked over at the Vin clan head’s wife, but she hurriedly averted her eyes. It was possible that she was actually younger than me—her timid face still had some childlike aspects to it.

“Let’s start by teaching you how to bake poitan. Learning how to do this will improve the quality of your cooking tremendously by itself.”

And so, the lesson began. My top priority was indeed teaching them how to bake poitan, since getting rid of the need to eat muddy poitan soup was the first huge step on the road to an improved diet for them.

I heated up the poitan we had brought along, and after boiling them down as much as I could, I set the result out to dry in the sun. It would take roughly an hour for it to reach the point where we could pulverize it, so in the meantime, I added water to the poitan flour I had brought with me and taught them how to cook it. Once the poitan had been cooked to a light cream color, I split it up into pieces for them to try. The six women were hesitant to take their first bite, but

when they did, they all ended up tilting their heads.

“I can’t tell if this tastes good. It’s an unusual flavor.”

“Yeah. It might not do much for you if you’re just eating the baked poitan alone, so let’s go ahead and prepare some soup without poitan next.”

This was also a pretty simple recipe, as it only used giba meat and aria. After teaching them how to properly cut the ingredients, both the meat and the vegetables went into a pot to slowly boil. Next, I taught them that they should add a pinch of salt, and showed them how to scoop the scum and manage the heat.

“I imagine all of you probably consider meat to be done as soon as it’s been heated through, but if you take your time boiling it, the delicious flavor of the meat will seep out into the broth. We call this ‘making a stock.’”

I had given this explanation many times before. The first was at the Fa house, and the second was when I gave it to the Ruu clan... Then at the clan head meeting, I had conveyed it to the Suun women, and after that, to the Fou, Ran, and Sudra women, followed by the Gaaz and Ratsu... I could remember them all, but it felt like it would go on forever if I went through the whole list.

Even when it came to clans I hadn’t been able to instruct directly, like the Sauti and Zaza, their lessons must have started pretty much exactly like this, with how to make baked poitan and prepare giba soup using nothing but aria and salt. No special ingredients were needed. All that was required was a big pile of firewood and time. Would baked poitan and giba soup be worth their time and effort? Getting them to make a decision about that would be the first turning point in this endeavor.

As the pots were boiling, I gave a lecture on the various ways meat could be cut and the differences between meat from various parts of the giba’s body. Fortunately, the Ravitz didn’t customarily discard the torsos of the beasts they hunted. Thigh meat was always their first pick, but apparently they would still eat torso meat too during periods when they weren’t hunting many giba. It seemed that the Ruu clan was in the minority in how they hunted way more than they needed to.

“You can eat a giba’s innards, brain, and eyeballs as well. If we get the chance,

I'd like to teach you how to work with those as well."

"Innards, brains, and eyeballs? I can't say any of those sound particularly appealing to eat."

"Maybe not. But some kinds of the innards go down pretty easily and don't take much effort to prepare, so I'd like you all to decide for yourselves whether they're worthwhile to eat."

For clans who wanted to get involved with our business in the post town, even innards could serve as goods to be sold. Reina and Sheera Ruu's giba offal stew was still on the menu, so the Ruu would sometimes buy innards off of other clans during break periods. The Dai clan was quite interested in learning how to handle innards for exactly that reason, but the Ravitz would have to decide whether they had any interest in eating offal themselves. Still, the heart, liver, diaphragm, and tongue could all be prepared without much effort.

An hour passed by in a flash, but just as I was thinking it was about time for us to get ready to leave, things got quite noisy out front. The hunters had returned from the forest.

"We're back. Ah, you're still in the middle of your lesson, eh?"

One of the hunters had opened the door to the kitchen and stepped inside. He had a medium build and a striking appearance. He had to be around forty and had a strong light shining in his eyes. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about his face, but he had a shiny bald head, had hardly any eyebrows, and lacked any sort of beard or mustache. In other words, the only real hair he had from his neck on up was his eyelashes. People with thin eyebrows always seemed to have a special sort of intensity about them. That was true of Bartha too. I didn't sense any animosity in his expression, but he still felt frightening somehow.

"So you're the Fa clan chef, huh? It's been a good long while since the clan head meeting, but I still remember that pale face of yours. I'm the Ravitz clan head, Dei Ravitz."

"I'm Asuta of the Fa clan, and I'm truly grateful that you and the other clan heads accepted my proposal."

“You have no reason to thank me. I’m only interested in that tasty food stuff,” Dei Ravitz muttered as he stroked his hairless chin. “You lot are the ones putting in the extra effort, so what are you thanking me for? You sure are eccentric.”

“Uh, well...”

“Lili, how’re the lessons going?” he said, cutting me off as he glanced over at his wife.

With a polite bow, Lili Ravitz replied, “Well, we have learned how to make baked poitan, and currently, we are in the middle of preparing soup without poitan.”

“Hmph. Then you’re more or less done, eh? We’ve only got aria and poitan here, so it’s not like I was expecting the sort of stuff you fed us at the clan head meeting,” Dei Ravitz said, before his gleaming eyes turned in my direction. “Good work, Asuta of the Fa clan. I’ve got no intention of thanking you since you’re the ones who came barging in on us, but, well, I guess I’m at least grateful for the chance to eat some tasty food.”

“Ah, well, if it makes the lives of the Ravitz even a little happier, then...”

“If you’re done here, you should hurry up and leave. I’ve got skinning to do, so excuse me,” Dei Ravitz said, once again cutting me off before swiftly leaving the room.

Yun Sudra stood beside me, blinking in confusion. “What an impatient man. Did he even hear what you were saying, Asuta?”

I was pretty worried about that myself, so I figured I should ask Lili Ravitz for her opinion. But before I could say anything, she bowed deeply to me.

“Thank you for your efforts today. We can finish up the rest, so please leave.”

“Huh? But we haven’t even tried the soup yet.”

“We believe you have done enough. We will convey what we learned today to the other women, starting tomorrow.”

“But, well, it’s probably going to take a little more time for you to fully absorb these cooking techniques.”

“Is that so? The clan head said that one day should be all the cooking lessons

we need.”

Well, nobody had said that to *me*. It sounded like Dei Ravitz and Ai Fa’s group hadn’t quite managed to get on the same page with each other. In fact, that seemed quite likely, considering how the Ravitz clan head had been acting.

“I-I’d like to make sure of a few things with Dei Ravitz. Could you take me to him?”

“Yes. Come this way.”

I told Toor Deen and the others to take care of things here in the kitchen before stepping out behind Lili Ravitz, only to find some familiar faces gathered there.

“Oh, so you’re all back too, Ai Fa?”

“Indeed.” My clan head nodded with a blank expression that bordered on being a pout, while next to her, Baadu Fou seemed to be suppressing a strained smile. It seemed the Fa and Fou clan heads had been trying to work together to teach the head of the Ravitz clan bloodletting and carving techniques.

“Their other men have already left to return to the Naham and Vin settlements. Are you done with your work too, Asuta?”

“No. There’s something I need to confirm with Dei Ravitz,” I said before telling them what had happened.

After hearing my explanation, Baadu Fou sighed heavily. “It’s true that we didn’t decide on a specific number of days, but Dei Ravitz really jumped to a hasty conclusion there, limiting it to only today. If he’d just given it a little thought, surely he would’ve realized that there’s no way that could be enough time.”

“Maybe he thinks one day of lessons should be all the women need because he assumes we were able to teach the Suun women what to do in only a single day before we prepared the meal for the clan head meeting. Whatever the reason, do you think you can convince him to allow us to come here for a few more days?”

“Of course. We’ll get this taken care of right now.”

Baadu Fou then started to lead us to the giba carving room. As we followed along behind him, I whispered to Ai Fa, “By the way, why didn’t you two follow him when he left to go carve up the giba? That’s part of the lessons, you know.”

“He insisted he had already seen enough. Apparently, the Ravitz have always eaten torso meat. And we already dealt with the innards out in the forest... He sliced the giba’s stomach open right then and there, cut the organs out all on his own, and discarded them.”

“Huh? But I was hoping to show them how to work with innards sometime.”

“The hunters failed at bloodletting today, so we returned the organs to the forest since they wouldn’t have been edible anyway,” Ai Fa replied. Then she brought her face close to mine. “It seems the Ravitz men are poor learners. I’m not saying they act like fools, but their behavior is rough and crude.”

That must have been another source of stress for Ai Fa.

At any rate, we soon reached the carving room, and Baadu Fou knocked on the door.

“Sorry to bother you when you’re busy, Dei Ravitz, but there’s something we’d like to discuss.”

The door quickly opened and Dei Ravitz’s bald head poked out. “What, you’re still here? Today’s lessons are over.”

“Never mind that. It seems we didn’t explain about the cooking lessons well enough, so we’d like to go over that again with you,” Baadu Fou started to explain, but unsurprisingly, he was cut off midway.

“One day is plenty for cooking lessons. I prefer to avoid having folks we don’t share blood ties with in my house.”

“But—”

“If that bothers you, then why not simply form blood ties with us? The Fa clan head over there is a real beauty, and plenty of our men would love to have her as a wife. If you become a clan under the Ravitz, you can come and go as much as you please.”

“I told you on the first day that I have no intention of becoming anyone’s

wife.” Ai Fa replied, holding back all emotion.

“That’s a shame,” Dei Ravitz said with a shrug. “In that case, you should leave and go back to your own house now. We’ve already learned everything we need to know about that bloodletting stuff too.”

“You haven’t succeeded at bloodletting a giba on your own even once yet, so how can you possibly say that you’ve learned everything you need to know?”

“You’ve just got to learn through trying again and again with stuff like this. Now that we know how it’s done, the rest is up to us.”

His logic was as slippery as an eel. He was neither accepting nor rejecting our involvement outright; he was simply brushing us aside. It was very unusual for a person of the forest’s edge.

“Can I chime in too, Dei Ravitz? A single day is definitely not enough time to teach your clan members how to prepare delicious meals. There’s still a whole lot I would like to teach them, so is there any chance that you’d be willing to allow me to come to your kitchen for another four or five days?” I proposed.

Dei Ravitz’s nearly hairless brow wrinkled a tiny bit. “I’ll permit you to come to my house for *two* more days. Any more than that is unnecessary.”

“Two more days? Understood. In that case, I’ll be absolutely sure to make the most—” I started to say, only for my words to be cut off when the door slammed shut in our faces.

Ai Fa scratched her head, while Baadu Fou sighed once again and said, “Dei Ravitz is such an odd man. Even after all the time we’ve spent together for the last couple days, I can’t seem to figure him out.”

Lili Ravitz just stood there beside us as if nothing strange had happened. It seemed she was as quiet and detached as a Jizo statue too.

7

The next two days passed without incident...at least, on the surface. Thankfully, there weren’t any serious commotions or accidents during that time. Myme was able to operate her business without issue and Mikel was

recovering at a steady rate. The other leading clan heads and the nobles hadn't raised any objections about their stay with the Ruu clan either.

However, the law did not treat residents of the Turan lands, such as Mikel and Myme, the same as outsiders like Barthia and Jeeda. Apparently, there were procedures to follow when someone moved from one region of Genos to another. Furthermore, the settlement at the forest's edge was a pretty unconventional part of the Genos domain. Things worked differently there in a lot of ways, the biggest probably being the lack of any taxes.

For example, if someone were to move from the Turan lands to the Daleim lands, the person in charge of their taxes would change. There was a whole process involved in that, similar to transferring your family register when moving to a new address in my old world, which was necessary in order to properly keep track of which houses would become empty and which would gain new residents. It made a lot of sense as a way to manage taxation. The ruling lord would take possession of any empty houses, and no one would be allowed to live in them without permission.

But then there was our settlement. Until very recently, it would have been unthinkable for anyone who wasn't a person of the forest's edge to live there. There had never been a need to hammer out the legal details involved in situations like this one.

Officially, Barthia, Jeeda, and I were being treated as guests. Our staying at the settlement was considered to be the same thing as travelers spending the night at an inn, despite the fact that, unlike Barthia and Jeeda, the people of the forest's edge had accepted me as one of their own. Of course, the nobles of Genos still had some serious concerns about all this, since I was a mysterious foreigner who came from overseas, but they had ultimately given me permission to live freely. I was still formally considered to be a guest, but I wasn't forbidden from calling myself a person of the forest's edge.

So, with that background information in mind, we now had Mikel and Myme to deal with. In order to keep things from getting any more complicated, we took the stance that they should also be treated as guests, just like Barthia. They were still residents of the Turan lands, but they had a good reason for staying with us at the forest's edge, and from our perspective there was no problem

with them still paying taxes to the house of Turan like they always had. Since that was the position we took, they were permitted to stay at the forest's edge without any issues.

Anyway, it all worked out, no problem. However, that still left the question of when exactly Shumiral would return to Genos weighing on my mind. He had asked to marry Vina Ruu, and if she accepted his proposal, there would be a ton of issues we'd need to work out with the nobles of Genos once again. They had gradually come to accept my presence over the course of the chaos surrounding Cyclaeus playing out, but Shumiral didn't have any of that working in his favor. He simply wished to become a person of the forest's edge.

If an outsider wanted to take up permanent residence at the forest's edge, how would the law handle that, and what would the nobles decide to do? A lot of questions had been glossed over in my case, but the nobles of Genos would have to make an official determination this time. It was no longer an issue they could avoid tackling. But honestly, it was kinda strange that outsiders weren't already allowed to marry into the forest's edge.

The people of the forest's edge were all citizens of Genos, but they were treated differently than everyone else. Even if the distinction had arisen as a result of the hunters' fearsome nature, it wasn't as if none of us ever left the forest, so Genos's laws and customs would definitely need to be revised in the future.

That also included the taxes the people of the forest's edge were currently exempt from, which they would almost certainly need to start paying eventually. One of my aims was to make sure they all became wealthy enough that the added burden wouldn't lead to any of them starving. But of course, both the taxation issue and Shumiral's return were problems that hadn't quite cropped up yet, so it was no use worrying about them too much.

It would be fair to say that there had been no major disturbances over the past two days, but if I had to come up with something to complain about, it should be no surprise that the training at the Ravitz settlement would be it.

"This is the third day of our agreement. It's been a bit hectic, but I think I've managed to cover everything I wanted to," I said, standing in the kitchen of the

main Ravitz house.

This was the last day Dei Ravitz had granted me for teaching. We had once again spent an hour or so after wrapping up work in the post town on cooking lessons, which we had just concluded. Our six students were the same group of women we had taught on the first day.

Still looking like a Jizo statue, Lili Ravitz gave us a slight bow on behalf of the group. “Thank you for all of your help. We will start teaching our other women these techniques tomorrow.”

“Good. I hope you’ll all be able to learn about the joys of delicious food in the process.”

Even after three days had passed, they were still as stiffly polite as ever, and I couldn’t sense their true feelings at all. Even as they tried a bit of one dish after another, all they said was, “This seems tasty,” never getting worked up like the women from other clans.

It looked to me like they were intentionally suppressing their emotions. The youngest woman from the Vin in particular had been visibly holding herself back from showing her surprise each time she tried something. However, she couldn’t conceal the sparkle in her eyes.

“Now then, we have to get started on dinner soon. Please take care on your return trip.”

“Ah, if you don’t mind, would it be possible for us to watch you making dinner?”

Lili Ravitz tilted her head a bit in response to my request. “Why would you ask for such a thing? Members of other clans are not permitted to assist in making dinner.”

“We won’t get involved, and we’ll try to keep our talking to a minimum. Tomorrow’s a day off from work in the post town for us, so I thought maybe we could wait here a bit longer for Dei Ravitz to return. Would you mind if we observe you and see how much your skills have improved in the meantime?”

Lili Ravitz still looked puzzled, but she ultimately gave us permission to stay.

The Vin and Naham women needed to return to their own houses, so I had two members of our group accompany each of them. Toor Deen and the Ratsu woman went to visit the Vin clan, Yun Sudra and the Dagora woman did the same for the Naham, and Fei Beim and I remained at the Ravitz house.

Lili Ravitz and the other woman who had participated in the lessons set about making dinner. Apparently, they wouldn't be bringing in any additional chefs for the task.

"By the way, what were you planning on making today?"

"Well, the clan head told us to show him the results of our training, so we were planning to prepare everything you've taught us how to make."

That said, the only ingredients they had were aria, poitan, salt, pico leaves, and fruit wine. Really, the only reason I had been able to finish my cooking lessons in three days was because the ingredients they had available to them were so limited.

Lili Ravitz filled a pot with water and got to work on making some giba soup, while the other woman began preparing the poitan. It was still two hours or so until sunset, so there was plenty of time to cook them. It didn't seem like there would be any need for me to step in again. They had taken their studies seriously, just like the women from the Dai and the other clans.

The others seem to be having some real trouble with the men, but there really haven't been any issues on our end. Of course, it wasn't like either the men or the women had been unwilling to learn from us. If they had refused, that would have been the end of it, obviously. But apparently, their men never brought down many giba, and since Ai Fa and the others weren't being allowed to assist in the actual hunting, it seemed their lessons weren't really progressing.

I have to wonder what kind of person Dei Ravitz actually is. That was the one thing weighing on my mind. The Ravitz were a parent clan, and he was the clan head. His opinions surely had a huge impact on the Vin and Naham, just like how it was with Donda Ruu in his role as leader of the Ruu clan. He must have been the one to decide that Lili Ravitz and the other women shouldn't let their emotions show. However, it was also possible that they were simply following the custom that there should be a clear boundary between those who do not

share blood ties.

Gulaf Zaza and his people helped us take down Cyclaeus, and we were able to bridge the gap between us and the Beim thanks to their neighbors, the Gaaz and Ratsu. I wouldn't go as far as to say we're friends yet, but at least we've all been able to share our thoughts now.

The people of the northern settlement were exceptionally dauntless and deeply valued old customs, so they were worried that increased interaction with outsiders would corrupt the people of the forest's edge. The Beim, on the other hand, held a deep-seated resentment toward the townsfolk, stemming from the time when their clan head had been executed for taking revenge against a group of outlaws who had harmed one of their people.

Those were their reasons for being opposed to interacting and doing business with the townsfolk. But what was the Ravitz clan head's viewpoint on the issue that led to him disagreeing with our actions? That was what I was wondering about at the moment.

I wasn't able to speak to Dei Ravitz yesterday since he got back late, so today I'm going to stick around as long as I can and wait for him to return. If I let this chance slip by, I might not be able to talk with him again until the clan head meeting.

Honestly, it seemed pretty obvious what the result of the meeting would be if we were to go by majority rule. As long as the neutral Sauti clan didn't switch to opposing us, the majority of the people of the forest's edge were already in agreement with the Fa clan's actions. Still, even if it was a majority, it wasn't an overwhelming one. Out of thirty-seven clans, the Zaza led seven of them, the Beim two, and the Ravitz three, meaning twelve clans opposed us. The number of people in each clan varied, so I didn't have an exact count of those for or against us, but twelve clans out of thirty-seven was practically a third.

If at all possible, I wanted everyone to come together in deciding the path forward for us. If we chose a new path to walk, there would surely still be new hardships awaiting us. Whatever difficulties arose to replace the threat of starvation, I wanted to overcome them as a community. That was something I felt very strongly about.

“You are an unusual man,” Lili Ravitz suddenly muttered. “Why are you so concerned about us people of the forest’s edge, even though you were born in a foreign land?”

“Because your people deeply charmed me. I was raised in a town, but I really want to be recognized as a fellow person of the forest’s edge.”

“But you are already a member of the Fa clan, and the leading clan heads have accepted that. And yet, you’re always acting like a townspeople and trying to change our way of living. That means you think our ways are mistaken, does it not?” Lili Ravitz questioned, her face remaining as calm as ever.

“Maybe, in a way. I believe the Suun clan ended up as they did because of their involvement with the townsfolk and nobles. But that’s all the more reason to form proper bonds with the people of Genos, I’d say. Ai Fa, Donda Ruu, and so many others feel the same way, which is why they’ve allowed me to do what I’ve been doing. If I had been a townspeople instead, I might have still tried to reach out to you from the other side instead. What I want most of all is for everyone to get along well.”

Lili Ravitz didn’t respond. She just silently kept on chopping ariana. The other woman and Fei Beim didn’t say a word either.

After a while, when the women were almost done with the prep work, I sensed a group approaching. The hunters had returned from the forest. The door to the kitchen swung open, and a familiar bald head peered inside.

“So you really are still here. I figured, since I saw your totos out there.”

“Hey there. How was it today?”

“Hmph. I think we probably succeeded at that bloodletting stuff. The others carried the giba off to a branch house, and they’re skinning it now.” Dei Ravitz barged into the kitchen and stared down at the workstation the women were using. “Hmm. Looks like you’re making all sorts of stuff.”

“Yes. As you asked, we are preparing every dish that we have learned from Asuta of the Fa clan.”

The giba soup, baked poitan, and stew made with fruit wine were nearly finished. They were also nearly ready to start cooking the giba steak, meatballs,

and boneless rib and aria stir-fry. That was everything I had taught the Ravitz women over the past three days.

“Good work, there. That’ll be the end of these cooking lessons, then. We’ve got business to take care of around here, so you should hurry up and leave.”

After saying that, Dei Ravitz quickly left. After telling Fei Beim to keep an eye on things in the kitchen, I followed after him.

“Hold on, Dei Ravitz... Oh, Ai Fa, good work today.” Ai Fa was standing right in front of the Ravitz clan head. Baadu Fou must have been watching over the butchering process at the branch house. “I’ll be leaving soon, Dei Ravitz. But before I go, could we talk for a bit?”

“Talk? What in the world is there to discuss?”

“I’d like to know why the Ravitz oppose the Fa clan’s actions.”

Dei Ravitz’s nearly browless eyes narrowed as he looked at me questioningly. “Is there any point in telling you?”

“Yes. I more or less know the Zaza and Beim clan heads’ thoughts about all this, so I would like to hear your feelings as well.”

“You sure are an odd one. Still, if that weren’t the case, I couldn’t imagine you ever coming all the way out here for this in the first place.” Dei Ravitz crossed his arms and stared at me and Ai Fa. “Well, if you really want to know, then I’ll just come out and say it. I see no reason to hide my feelings or lie to you about them.”

“Okay, thank y—”

“I can’t stand you lot,” Dei Ravitz stated bluntly, cutting me off.

“Y-You can’t stand us?”

“That’s right. I hate you. What, did you assume I liked you guys or something?” In spite of what he was saying, I didn’t sense any animosity or malice from Dei Ravitz. Ai Fa also seemed calm as she listened to his words. “A woman hunter who won’t fulfill her role as a woman, and a man who cooks instead of carrying out a man’s work. Plus, you’re a foreigner to boot. I seriously can’t stand the thought of a foreigner calling himself a person of the forest’s

edge, or of there being someone foolish enough to welcome a guy like that into her clan. That's all there is to it."

"I-I see. Well, if that's really how you feel, I suppose that's completely natural for a person of—"

"Of course I do. Personally, I can't help but wonder if the Fou and Ruu have gone mad whenever I hear about how they're handling things with you. Why are they accepting a foreigner's way of thinking and turning their back on our traditions, eh?" Dei Ravitz muttered, despite not seeming worked up in the least. "That's why I can't stand to see you coming and going here at the Ravitz settlement. If your lessons are done after today, that's a big relief. You should be getting ready to go right now too, shouldn't you, Fa clan head?"

"I cannot do that. You still haven't fully mastered the technique yet. There are still a few days left in our break period, so I would like you to allow us to continue coming to the Ravitz settlement until the end," Ai Fa replied, her voice full of its usual weight. "Now that you have told us to our faces that you do not like us, I finally understand. I'm surprised you've been willing to follow my instructions so far without complaining, all things considered."

"As if I could be rude when you were teaching us something. I kept my emotions contained for the sake of delicious food."

"Your desire to eat well is quite strong, isn't it?"

"Of course. As if I would invite you lot into my house otherwise. The Naham and Vin clan heads under me were really captivated by your delicious cooking too."

Ai Fa's eyes narrowed slightly. However, it didn't look like she was in a bad mood. "I find you to be an amusing man. Even if you hate me, I am still fond of you. It's almost a shame our houses are so far apart."

"Don't be ridiculous. I've got a wife already, and I love her."

"You're the one being ridiculous. I am a hunter, so I would never say I was fond of you in that way," Ai Fa shot back with a little shrug. "At any rate, Asuta was the one who wanted to speak to you. Sunset is fast approaching, so we should leave soon."

“Right. I’ll wrap things up as quickly as possible.” As the sky was steadily being dyed purple, I stared directly at the Ravitz clan head. “Dei Ravitz, could I ask you to send one of your women to work for me like the Beim clan does?”

Dei Ravitz glared back at me with his expression unchanged as he replied, “What? That’s quite a wild proposition. Were you not listening to what I said? Why should I entrust a precious member of my clan to a suspicious guy like you?”

“So we can deepen our understanding of one another. I want you to decide whether the Fa clan’s actions are mistaken based on information coming from as close to the center of things as possible.”

“There’s no need for that. I already know how I feel.” He was listening to my words, but his rejection was so firm that there didn’t seem to be much room for argument. However, I thought I could see a glimmer of hope in his detached nature.

“Dei Ravitz, it isn’t as if Donda Ruu and the other clan heads accepted me immediately without any reservations. Donda Ruu even called my presence a poison. It took a lot of work to earn his acknowledgment. When I asked for help so I could start my business in the post town, he even told me he would demand my right arm if I betrayed the trust of the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Hmph. That’s only natural for one of the leaders of our people.”

“Right. The Fa and Ruu clans have a relationship of trust now, but it took us a long time to get to that point. I want to build a relationship like that with the Ravitz as well.”

“I told you, I already know how I feel, so—”

“But you hardly know anything about me or Ai Fa, do you?” I said, stealing his trademark move and cutting him off for once. Dei Ravitz’s expression shifted a bit as he glared at me. “And you said that you don’t know what Donda Ruu and Baadu Fou are thinking, right? Well, those two are important comrades to me, so I’d really like you to fully understand why they would accept a stranger like me.”

“Hmph. So you’re aware of how suspicious you are?”

“Of course. Nobody understands that fact better than I do.” That was how I truly felt, and it was also why I was so truly grateful to everyone who had accepted me nonetheless. “If you still hate me, fair enough, but I want you to understand my true nature. So, would you be willing to try to see past the surface and find out what sort of person I really am before hating me? I wouldn’t have any complaints then.”

“You sure are persistent. I will never acknowledge a man who, on top of being a foreigner, won’t even do his proper work as a hunter.”

“So you say, but the northern clans don’t acknowledge *you* as proper hunters, do they?” Ai Fa suddenly interjected. “You focus more on protecting your lives than they do. That’s why you hunt fewer giba than other clans. To the daring hunters of the north, such behavior makes you seem weak.”

“Hmph. As the head of the main house, it’s my job to decide what the Ravitz clan should do. Even the leading clans have no right to interfere.”

“I know. Personally, I do not think your approach is wrong either. A hunter should always try to live and keep working for as long as they can, even if it’s only for one more day.” Even though Ai Fa was maintaining a solemn demeanor, her eyes seemed to be smiling. “I myself used to act recklessly when I was on the hunt, back when I didn’t have any other clan members. I performed sacrificial hunting more frequently than I do now, and I wanted nothing more than to meet my end out in the forest. I believe that recklessness was born of having no one waiting for me to come home.”

“What foolishness. If you were planning to die at such an early age, why were you even born? The souls of so many young people who wanted to live have returned to the forest against their will. We all have a responsibility to survive as long as we can.”

“Indeed. I think I finally understand you now. That is why I cannot bring myself to hate you. But I never would’ve been able to come to this understanding if I hadn’t gone into the forest with you for the last several days.”

Dei Ravitz simply listened to her in silence.

“To be honest, at first I thought you were a disagreeable man. You appeared

to have little interest in your work as a hunter, and you seemed stubborn and narrow-minded. It wasn't until I spent a fair amount of time with you that I started to feel otherwise. Won't you give Asuta the same opportunity? I would like to make that request as well, as the Fa clan head."

Dei Ravitz sighed, rubbing his bald head. "What a hassle. If I had known this was how things were going to turn out, I never would have invited you to come here."

"You lost your appetite. There's no point in regretting it now. It seems to me that carelessness is a weakness of yours. That is why your work is so sloppy."

"You sure do run your mouth, considering you're a guest at someone else's house."

"We are both speaking our minds freely."

Ai Fa seemed to be having an easier time speaking to him than she usually did with other people. It was like she had more trouble talking to people who regarded her with goodwill and kindness than those who acted otherwise.

"So, are you willing to at least consider it, Dei Ravitz?" I chimed in. "I understand that you place a lot of value in blood ties. But I believe that having a strong bond that connects all of us, even if we aren't related to one another, is more important. That would make the people of the forest's edge stronger than they've ever been, don't you think?"

"You're not even a child of the forest, so even if you try to act all clever—"

"Asuta is a person of the forest's edge. I have accepted him as a clan member, and the leading clan heads have found no fault with that. That is one point I refuse to yield on," Ai Fa said in an especially firm tone, but then her expression softened. "Dei Ravitz, it is a person's soul that determines who they truly are, is it not? Even though he was born at the forest's edge, the forest will surely never forgive Zattsu Suun for how he strayed from the proper path. But that is also why I believe it is possible to consider someone born in a foreign land a precious comrade if he values the future of our people above all else."

"Hmph. So you're saying this Asuta's soul is that of a true person of the forest's edge?"

“I am. If my words are false, then may the mother forest take my soul back here and now.”

Dei Ravitz sighed once more, then stared up at the twilit sky. “What an absolute hassle.”

“Don’t grumble. Instead, you should simply decide what the correct way to go is as the leader of dozens of our people.”

Dei Ravitz shook his head, then looked at us in a bit of a sulk. “I cannot decide something this important all on my own. I’ll discuss it tomorrow with the Naham and Vin clan heads, so for now, you two should hurry up and go home.”

“Really? Thank you!” I said.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. We’ll discuss whether we should lend you a woman, but no matter how much you keep talking at me, I’ll never accept the idea of a woman hunter and a male cook.” And with that, Dei Ravitz turned around and left without even saying goodbye.

Ai Fa gave a bit of a strained smile as she watched him leave. “What a truly strange man. I think this might be the first time I’ve ever had such a hard time understanding another person of the forest’s edge.”

“That’s for sure. Still, I can’t bring myself to hate him either. That’s why I really want him to understand the Fa clan’s actions better,” I replied. Then I stared at Ai Fa’s face from the side. “Err, thanks, Ai Fa.”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“I mean, you swore to the forest that I was a true person of the forest’s edge.”

Ai Fa shot me a displeased glare. “Is that truly something you need to thank me for? I simply spoke naturally.”

“I get that, but it makes me glad to hear someone say it again. Please don’t get so angry about it.”

“I’m not angry.”

“Then don’t sulk about it.”

“I’m not sulking either! Stop trying to find fault with me!” Ai Fa started to frown, but her thoughts seemed to shift midway through. “At any rate, the fact that Dei Ravitz is opposed to our actions remains unchanged. We should continue pushing forward in every way we can until we gain the approval of all of the clans.”

“Yeah. I agree.”

It seemed Ai Fa didn’t want to win by a simple majority vote either. How bright of a future could we show our fellow people of the forest’s edge in the half a year we had left? We both had to keep doing our best to meet that goal.

That goes for Shumiral too. In order to attain his own desires, Shumiral would need to be accepted as a person of the forest’s edge as well, and this experience had reminded me just how difficult that would be for him. *Still, I’m sure Shumiral will be fine. He has his act together a whole lot better than I do, and he has a much firmer grasp on the logic of this world.* That was why I wanted him to return alive and well as quickly as possible. But while I was thinking about that, Ai Fa brought her face close to mine.

“Asuta, what has you looking so worried?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing serious. It’s just...I can’t help but feel concerned about Shumiral not being back yet.”

“Shumiral is that easterner, is he not? Unlike Mikel and Myme, he is more than strong enough to protect himself, so there is no need for you to worry,” Ai Fa replied with a peevish look in her eyes. “I wish you wouldn’t make that face, like you’re a lost child. You’re going to make me worry too.”

“Ah, sorry... You’re kinda overprotective sometimes, aren’t you, Ai Fa?” That earned me a kick to the leg. “Actually, I was going to call you kind, but then I got embarrassed and switched to something else at the last second.”

And there came a second kick.

As all that was going on, Toor Deen and company returned from the plaza. But before they reached us, I hurriedly whispered to Ai Fa, “You guys are going to take tomorrow off from giving lessons too, right?”

“Indeed. We only have a few more days to teach them, but it’s important to

get as much rest as you can when the time to do so comes.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “We’re also taking tomorrow off from doing business in the post town, so we should be able to spend the whole day actually relaxing for once. Well, I suppose in the evening I’ll still need to help out a bit so we’ll be ready for the day after tomorrow.”

“Right.”

“But I’m glad that I’ll finally be able to take some time to unwind with you again.”

I figured that might earn me yet another kick, but I still had to tell her what I was feeling. However, the look Ai Fa gave me was gentler than I expected it to be. Then she nodded and said, “Indeed.”

And then the sun finally set. There were only a few days left until our break period would be over.

Chapter 2: A Great Upheaval

1

It was now the sixteenth of the gold month. We had finished our cooking lessons for the Ravitz clan and had a day off after, and now we were working in the post town again. This was the fourteenth day of our break period, and since months in this world also lasted around thirty days, as of tomorrow it would be half a month since it started. That would be the final day, and the end of the bloodletting and butchering lessons for the hunters.

Of course, the break period lasting half a month was really just an average, and it wasn't as if the hunters needed to immediately go back to working full-time. It would take more than half a month for the supply of fruit in the forest to fully recover, so there still wouldn't be all that much prey around. Even so, giba would still occasionally wander into the area, which made it necessary to set up traps and patrol the forest in order to ensure that those stray giba didn't eat all the vegetation as it was regrowing. That period would last for another twenty to thirty days, giving the hunters some more time to take things a bit easier. My hope was that they would spend it together with their families and get some actual rest after all the extra work we'd had them doing.

As for us chefs, we would be giving lessons to the Suun clan starting today. The break period ending made little difference to us, so our plan was to spend the next five to seven days on this. Before that, though, we had our business in the post town. Starting today, we had a woman from the Ravitz clan assisting us as well. Despite Dei Ravitz's disdain for the Fa clan, after consulting with the Naham and Vin clan heads, he had given his approval to sending us a woman to help out, which I was incredibly grateful for. And surprisingly, the one chosen for the task was none other than the head of the clan's women, Lili Ravitz.

"Even though I'm sure I'll come up short in all kinds of different ways, I look forward to working together," Lili Ravitz had stated with a bow when she

arrived at the Fa house at the agreed upon time.

This was the first time I'd had a woman of her age assisting us with business. We had women young and old assisting us with preparations at the Fa house, but when it came to working in the post town, the clans exclusively sent young women. Aside from Li Sudra and Ama Min Rutim, they had all been unmarried, and the oldest of them was likely the twenty-one-year-old Yamiru Lea, followed by the nineteen-year-old Fei Beim. That was how low the average age was.

Older women had an important role when it came to overseeing work around the house, and the younger folks were more flexible in their thinking, so they didn't have as much of an aversion to interacting with townsfolk. Those were the two reasons why all of the other clans had so far chosen to send young women. But now we had Lili Ravitz.

"Actually, there don't seem to be any real issues with her," Fei Beim whispered to me while we were working.

Fei Beim was right. Lili Ravitz's performance was proving to be satisfactory, and she was a hard worker. She was also polite and had a kindly demeanor, which made her well suited to dealing with customers. Since she was a little on the short side, we had needed to prepare something for her to stand on, but I thought that just added to her charm.

Of course, at present we were only having her accept payment and occasionally hand over giba manju, but she was showing some real aptitude. Perhaps spurred on by her gentle appearance, I noticed that a lot of our customers smiled at her, especially older women and young children.

Glancing at Lili Ravitz out of the corner of her eye, Fei Beim whispered again, "If I had to think of something to take issue with, it would be that she's making me remember how clumsy and useless I used to be. I was a real mess, especially in the first few days."

"You weren't that bad. Lili Ravitz *is* pretty good at this, though."

At this rate, she would be ready to move on to the next step after just a few days of training. We simply needed to take our time teaching her how to serve food and cook basic dishes. Everything was working out perfectly.

“If she can do the same work as the other women, does that mean you’ll be dismissing someone?” Yamiru Lea asked from the neighboring stall.

“I’m not sure,” I replied. At present, I was borrowing three women a day from among the Beim, Dagora, Gaaz, and Ratsu. If I added the Ravitz to the mix, we’d have to shift from four rotations to five.

“Why not go ahead and dismiss me? That would give the other women more work to do.”

“No, Rau Lea was insistent on having you help out... Besides, it’s really reassuring to have you around. I’m sure you’ve noticed that I’ve been having you take charge of the stalls a lot, especially since the revival festival.”

She offered no reply to that.

“Do you want to work with the Ruu clan’s stalls rather than mine, Yamiru Lea?”

“Not especially.” Ai Fa would have been frowning at this point, but Yamiru Lea remained cool and collected as she shrugged.

“Anyway, if we keep using seven chefs from the small clans each day, that’ll mean the Fa clan is going to have to send out two wagons daily. Considering how much luggage we have to bring with us, six people including the drivers seems like it’s probably the limit for us... Still, putting business concerns aside, I really would like to keep working with you, Yamiru Lea.”

“I understand. As long as the other women have no complaints, that’s fine.”

Yamiru Lea must have felt that she was somehow inferior to everyone else under the Ruu. But in my opinion, our current crew of four experienced permanent members supplemented by three rotating helpers was ideal.

Currently, Yun Sudra was the main person in charge of the restaurant space, and she could also sub in for Yamiru Lea. However, Toor Deen and Yamiru Lea weren’t very well suited to working on that side of our business. But on the other hand, they *were* skilled enough that I could easily leave running the stalls to them. Because I had such a solid group of four working for me, we were able to operate without any real issues, regardless of how much we had the other members on our team rotating in and out.

Honestly, I wish I could have given the Fou and Ran women a chance to experience working with us here during the break period. But I guess that'll have to wait until next time.

Also, the Gaaz and Ratsu had apparently been saying they would like to have more work for their women too. Naturally, I wanted to have as many people as possible interact with the townsfolk, but I didn't think it would be a good idea to shuffle my permanent workers around in order to fulfill their requests without careful consideration.

I continued to ruminate on the matter for a while as I worked, until I noticed a noble's totos carriage approaching us for the first time in several days. I figured it probably had to be Polarth, but it was his maid who appeared instead.

"It has been some time, Sir Asuta."

"Yeah, it has, Sheila. I guess you aren't helping Yang out today. So, is Polarth not with you?"

"He is not. Lord Polarth has work he cannot postpone in the castle town, so he sent me on my own," she said with a deep bow. "I am terribly sorry that my lacking explanation caused so much trouble the other day."

"Huh? Oh, you mean about the dance party? That was just an unfortunate misunderstanding."

"But did it not make Lady Ai Fa terribly angry when she found out?" Sheila asked, looking incredibly worried. For some reason, what Ai Fa thought seemed very important to her.

"She wasn't angry with you or anything. In fact, she didn't even seem all that reluctant when she decided to attend anyway."

The matter had already been settled between Polarth and the leading clan heads. The event would be held on the twenty-sixth of the gold month, exactly ten days from today. After discussing things with the Ruu clan and the inn owners, I had made arrangements so that we would now take a break after five days of working instead of ten, which meant the party would take place right before our day off.

As for why I had shortened the interval between days off, it was because our

daily sales had risen dramatically thanks to the revival festival, and the prep work we had to do had become pretty grueling, so I wanted to do something to take some pressure off us. Though they were able to handle it physically, working from morning till night like the women had been doing had been cutting into the amount of time they could spend with their families quite a bit. The risk of mental exhaustion was what had prompted me to make the change.

At any rate, the dance party was ten days away. After finishing up work in the post town, I would meet up with Ai Fa after seeing everyone back to the settlement at the forest's edge, and then we would head to the castle town.

"So, what brings you here today? Has there been some sort of change in plans?"

"No. I have brought a tailor along today."

"A tailor?" I repeated, thrown off by the unexpected word.

"Yes. Your measurements must be taken so that appropriate attire may be prepared for you to wear at the event."

Well, *this* was unexpected.

"Er, I do remember someone saying something about the leading clan heads needing banquet attire. But what you're talking about is making something custom for me from scratch, right?"

"Indeed. The hunters do not have many chances to come to town, but you at least could use a properly tailored outfit, Sir Asuta. My apologies, but it would make the lady of the house quite happy to gift you such an outfit."

She was talking about Polarth's mother, who was apparently a lot like Eulifia.

I chuckled dryly. "This is kind of awkward for me, but I'm guessing it would be pretty rude to refuse her request, wouldn't it?"

Sheila smiled, but she was fidgeting a bit. Yeah, if I declined, Polarth's mother was definitely going to reprimand her.

"Got it. Er, I'd like to be back here before the sun hits its peak. Is that possible?"

"Yes. Your shoulder width and leg length and the like can be measured in the

carriage, so this should take less than a quarter of an hour.”

In this world, a quarter of an hour was around fifteen to twenty minutes.

Holding back a sigh, I stepped away from the stalls. “Sorry, can I ask you to handle things here for a bit?”

“Of course. With today’s menu, that should be no issue,” Fei Beim replied.

Today’s daily special was roast giba, so all she needed to do was sauté the vegetables that went with it, which would be no problem for her.

I noticed that Lili Ravitz was watching what I was doing with her Jizo-like stare. I was sure that she had heard about the dance party by now, but I would probably still have to explain it to her a bit more later.

Well, I guess this is just how the nobles do hospitality. I owe Polarth a lot, so the only thing I can do is gratefully accept, I thought as Sheila led me to the totos carriage. However, as I walked past the restaurant space, something suddenly occurred to me.

“Um, we have a woman here who will be attending the dance party as well, so what should we do about her?”

“Ah, is that so? In that case, please allow us to measure her as well. We already have fairly good estimates for the sizes of all those who will be participating, but knowing her measurements precisely will allow us to prepare something much more impressive for her.”

With that decided, I called out toward the restaurant, “Sorry Sheera Ruu, but could I have you come over here for a bit?”

“Yes? What is it?”

After handing the tableware she was holding to a Lea woman, Sheera Ruu approached us. In the end, the Ruu had decided that she could attend the party with Darmu Ruu as her partner. I couldn’t even begin to guess how that discussion had played out, but when she told me the outcome the next day, it had been with red cheeks and eyes full of determination.

“Measurements...? Very well. I can’t say that I fully understand, but if that is the custom in the castle town, then I shall accept.”

And so, Sheila guided us to the fine wooden totes-drawn carriage parked by the road out of town. Awaiting us inside were a number of elegant girls dressed in uniforms similar to Sheila's. Sheera Ruu was led over to the other side of the cabin and a cloth curtain was pulled between us, meaning we could no longer see one another.

"Well then, please excuse me."

With that, one of the women began measuring my sizes using something similar to a tape measure. Fortunately, I wasn't asked to remove my clothing. She measured the width of my shoulders, the length of my arms, the distance from my neck to my hips and my hips to my ankles, as well as the circumference of my neck, torso, and thighs, and jotted it all down in a notebook.

"Um, this doesn't mean I'm going to be the only one dressed in an elaborate outfit, right?"

"Of course not. That would be terribly rude to everyone else."

I didn't make a habit of getting all dressed up. Even before becoming a resident of the forest's edge, I had spent nearly all my time in a school uniform, a chef's uniform, or loungewear, and had hardly any clothes for going out at all. The thought of receiving custom-made party attire was making me feel incredibly bashful.

I suppose that means I really have no room to disagree with Ai Fa when she starts complaining about having to wear banquet attire... Still, she looks good in anything.

Shin Ruu had also looked great in the white military uniform he'd worn to the tea party. If you put something like that on me, I'd probably look downright ridiculous. Though we were around the same height, hunters of the forest's edge tended to have long limbs and slim waists, and were all just incredibly good-looking. On top of that, Shin Ruu had refined facial features like those of an easterner, and with the way he was maturing, he seemed to look more gallant by the day.

Well, I'm not exactly trying to compete with anyone in terms of appearance, I thought to myself as I was made to wear a coat for measurements. It was a rather large undyed piece of clothing, with the girls adding temporary stitches

to match it to the thickness of my arms and waist. It took quite a while to tailor even a single piece of clothing. Did nobles put in this much effort for each and every event?

“Thank you for your patience. We are now finished.”

“Good, thank you.”

I stepped outside to wait with Sheila, and Sheera Ruu appeared two or three minutes later.

“My apologies for interrupting you during such a busy time. The tailor will strive to make the best banquet attire possible for all of you, so I hope that you will be looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, I appreciate it.”

Sheila gave one more bow before boarding the carriage, and they soon departed, along with the cavalry escorting them.

I gave a little sigh and turned toward Sheera Ruu. “This is the first time we chefs have been invited to the castle town purely as guests. I’m not even a member of the leading clans, so I can’t help but feel awkward about it.”

“But without you, we never would have formed proper bonds with the nobles in the first place. I think it’s only natural for you to be invited.”

“It’s mostly the food that I’m looking forward to. And not just the food their head chef, Yang, will be making. They’re inviting outside chefs too, which makes me even more excited.”

“Yes, I totally agree,” Sheera Ruu said with a bashful smile. It seemed she’d been having to work hard to maintain her composure today, knowing that she would be attending the event alongside Darmu Ruu. I just smiled at her, figuring it would be better to not say anything about that.

“Well then, shall we get back to work?”

“Yes. It looks like the sun will be hitting its peak soon.”

We headed south down the road, to where the number of passersby started to rise, and were about to slip past the restaurant space when a wild voice called out, “Ah, you’re finally back! Hey, Asuta, over here!”

Rimee Ruu was jumping in the air and waving her hands. She had been on duty today along with Sheera Ruu.

“What’s up? Is there some sort of issue?”

“No, nothing like that! Come on, hurry!”

Rimee Ruu was always full of energy, but she seemed to be more flustered than usual. Feeling a little worried, I jogged over to the covered area with Sheera Ruu, where a group of men—tall figures, clad in long leather cloaks—were rising from their seats and moving to surround us.

I stepped back a bit, shielding Sheera Ruu as I said, “Wh-What’s going on?”

One of the figures stepped forward. They were really tall, each being at least 180 centimeters, and they were all easterners too.

“It has been, some time, Asuta,” a nostalgic voice calmly stated. With that, everything finally clicked.

“Yeah, it really has. You finally made it back.” My voice trembled. But really, no one there could blame me for that. And even if they did, I wouldn’t care. There was no way I could help how worked up I was feeling. It didn’t matter what anyone said.

“I am sorry, we are later, than scheduled.” The figure pulled back his hood, revealing long silver hair that shone brightly in the sunlight. “I am glad, to see you, once again, Asuta,” he said with a gentle smile that seemed to envelop me. It was the same smile he had shown me when we said farewell. There was a gentle light shining in his black eyes too.

The high bridge of his nose, his thin lips, his long and slender face, his tall and thin figure, and his worn leather cloak... They were all exactly as I remembered them.

After six months, I had at last reunited with my foreign friend, the leader of the merchant group known as the Silver Vase: Shumiral.

2

“Shumiral... Ha! Shumiral! I’m so glad you made it back safely!” I called out,

letting my emotions drive me as I gripped Shumiral's hands. They were warm and strong, despite his fingers—adorned with many rings—being so long and slender. With the same smile still affixed to his face, he gripped my hands back.

“I am also, glad to see, you well. Very, very glad.”

The other members of the Silver Vase then started to approach from the left and right to greet me one at a time. There was the especially tall vice-leader Radajid, the old-timer who specialized in star reading, the youth who visited my stall before anyone else... There were ten of them in total. The whole of the Silver Vase had returned to Genos, without a single missing member. I felt so emotional that I could've cried.

“I've been so anxious to see you. I mean, I got worried when half a year passed and you didn't show up. I was sure you were safe, of course, but still...”

“My deepest apologies. There were, circumstances.” Shumiral was still smiling as he held my hands. Though citizens of Sym considered it shameful to let their expressions shift, that wasn't stopping him. That was proof that he still hadn't abandoned his desire to become a person of the forest's edge.

“There is much, I wish, to discuss. Do you, have time, after work?”

“Of course! Would you mind coming to the Ruu settlement too?”

“I would, not mind. Would that be, permitted?” Shumiral asked, his black eyes now directed at Sheera Ruu beside me. She was also smiling.

“Yes. Whether you will be invited inside the house as a guest will be up to the clan head, Donda Ruu, but we can at least take you back to the settlement.”

Sheera Ruu had also been there when we said farewell to the Silver Vase.

And as for Rimee Ruu, this was her first time meeting him, but she had probably heard about Shumiral from her older siblings. That explained why she was so full of energy as she moved about the restaurant space, constantly stealing glances at us.

Shumiral nodded to Sheera Ruu and said, “Thank you. My apologies, for using up, your time. Please, feel free to, return to your work, Asuta.”

“Right. I'm a little worried about whether I'm in the right state of mind for it,

though.”

“That, will not do. Asuta, please carry out, your work. Your cooking, is very delicious.”

Shumiral and company had already ordered food from the stalls, and had been in the middle of eating in the restaurant space. I pulled my hands back and wiped my eyes, then smiled to hide my embarrassment.

“Thank you for your purchases. We’ll be working until the lower second hour, so I’ll see you after that.”

“The lower, second hour. Understood. I shall be, looking forward, to it.”

With that, I bowed to all ten of them, then headed back to work. The sun was already approaching its peak, and there were a lot of customers crowding around the stalls.

“We arrived, in Genos, this morning,” Shumiral explained as we swayed along in Gilulu’s wagon after work. “We entrusted, our wagons, to the inn. After that, we took care of some business, in the castle town, then returned, to the post town. That was soon, after you left, the stall.”

“Are you staying at The Sledgehammer again? We delivered food there today, but we didn’t hear anything about you all making it back.”

The inn’s owner, Nail, didn’t know about Shumiral’s connections to the people of the forest’s edge, other than me. Maybe he thought there was no need to mention it, since Shumiral would be dropping by at the stalls soon enough anyway. Whatever his reason, it had worked out to give us a really surprising and emotional reunion.

“I was surprised, at how much, had changed. But I am glad, to find you all, doing well.”

Since he had gone to the castle town earlier, Shumiral had already learned of Cyclaeus’s downfall. He had left Genos right before we really started facing off with the wicked noble, and according to him, that had been the thing he’d been most concerned about. It must have been quite the surprise for him.

Cyclaeus and his brother Ciluel had antagonized the people of the forest’s

edge, only to have their own crimes exposed. It didn't take long for them to face judgment after that. The house of Turan had been second only to Duke Marstein Genos in power, so it was probably pretty difficult to believe that we had taken him down.

"There are also, so many ingredients, throughout the post town. That was, very surprising, as well."

"Right. A lot has happened in the last half a year."

There was no way we could cover it all in the fifteen minutes it took to travel between the post town and the Ruu settlement. Still, Yun Sudra was driving, so I was able to give Shumiral my full attention. The Silver Vase was also bringing their wagons, but Shumiral was having the vice-leader, Radajid, drive in his place.

"By the way, what do you have in those wagons?"

"The results, of our journey. I had to find, a method, to hunt giba. That is why, I was late, returning to Genos."

"Ah, I see."

Shumiral had promised to find a way that he could hunt giba after Vina Ruu had said that her father would not permit any man who wasn't a hunter to marry into his house. He had also asked to be allowed to spend several months each year traveling the world as a merchant, and the rest of his time as a person of the forest's edge. But since he wasn't a hunter, would it really be possible for him to take down giba? That was my biggest concern, personally.

"Shumiral, I only learned about this recently, but...apparently it's taboo for the people of the forest's edge to use poison when hunting giba," I said, only for Shumiral to tilt his head in confusion.

"Citizens of Sym, excel at, handling poisons. But we do not, use poison, when hunting. They are solely, for protecting, ourselves."

"Oh. So, do you have experience hunting some other sort of animal, then?"

"No. I am, a merchant. I have no, experience with hunting. I have only, dealt with beasts, that have, attacked us."

Then, had he discovered some sort of trap he could use for hunting? He had said before that his strength came from the knowledge he gained as he traveled the world.

“I discovered, a hunting method, in the capital. I am sure, it will be useful, in hunting giba.”

“I see. Still, don’t get too reckless, okay? I was accepted as a person of the forest’s edge even though I’m not a hunter, after all.”

“You have, great strength, in cooking. It is, only natural, you would, be accepted,” Shumiral said with another gentle smile. As we talked, Toor Deen and the others were watching us silently. Toor Deen had been with me the longest out of this group, but even she had never met Shumiral before. “Your cooking at, the stall, was delicious. That shaska-like dish, was very unusual.”

“Oh yeah, those dishes come from my home country. It’s called pasta, or spaghetti.”

“Pastaorspaghetti...?”

“Uh, no, just pasta. I call it pasta.”

“Pasta... I see. The offal dish, was also, fantastic.”

“Ah, that’s the giba offal stew that the folks from the Ruu clan came up with. Toor Deen here was the one who originally showed us how to use giba offal.”

With that, I brought the others into the conversation, and we spent the rest of the journey chatting and letting them get to know him. It seemed that even if he was an unfamiliar easterner to them, they figured he couldn’t be a bad person if I was friends with him.

Lili Ravitz, on the other hand, seemed to have turned into a real Jizo statue as she silently observed us. Now that I thought about it, the Ruu clan was pretty much the only one that knew who Shumiral was. Raielfam Sudra had actually proposed forming an information network to connect the vast expanse of the settlement at the forest’s edge on the very day that Shumiral had first visited, after all. From then on, we had started a custom of passing important news from clan to clan to clan. But we had been dealing with the Cyclopeus problem at the time, so something as trivial as an easterner visiting the Ruu clan apparently

hadn't been circulated.

Regardless, the fact that Shumiral asked to marry Vina Ruu definitely only made it to the Fa and the clans under the Ruu.

How would Vina and Donda Ruu greet Shumiral? I could feel my heart pounding in my chest just thinking about it.

We arrived at the Ruu settlement, those fifteen minutes passing by in a flash. Yun Sudra stopped the wagon, turned to face me, and said, "Asuta, do you think that perhaps we could handle the lessons for the Suun clan on our own today?"

"Huh? But..."

"Even if we do encounter a problem, it won't be an issue so long as you join us tomorrow. You should be able to do as you please, at least for one day."

I had hardly explained the circumstances, but maybe they sensed something from my expression or conduct. I agonized over it for a good long moment, but I ultimately decided to take Yun Sudra up on her offer.

"Okay. In that case, I'll be counting on you. And let the folks in the Suun clan know that I'll be looking forward to seeing them tomorrow, all right?"

"Understood. We'll go ahead and use Fafa's wagon."

We all exited the wagon at the entrance to the plaza. Most of the women then headed over to Fafa's wagon, where Fei Beim was holding the reins. The only one who stayed with us was Lili Ravitz.

"Asuta, I would like to remain here. Would that be acceptable?"

"Huh? But why?"

"I have no reason to head to the Suun settlement, so if something is occurring here, I believe I should observe it."

The Ravitz were a clan that valued old customs. In fact, Dei Ravitz had told me and Ai Fa to our faces that he didn't like us. It was possible they'd dislike Shumiral asking to marry Vina Ruu just as much as they took issue with our actions. But still, there was no point in trying to hide it. All of the clans at the forest's edge needed to be informed of such an important event, after all.

“All right. But Donda Ruu as the leading clan head has the final say in everything that occurs at the Ruu settlement. Is that okay?”

“Yes, of course.”

And so, Shumiral, Lili Ravitz, and I stayed behind. As the others departed in the wagon, they called out, “We’ll see you later!”

Beside us were Rimee Ruu holding the reins to Ruuruu’s wagon, Radajid doing the same for their pair of linked wagons that were being pulled by two tolos, and Yamiru Lea and Tsuvai, who had been dropped off in Fafa’s wagon. Sheera Ruu, Morun Rutim, the Min and Lea women, and Myme also got out of Ruuruu’s wagon and joined us.

“Let’s get going.”

There were young children running all around the plaza. A number of them started to come over to us with smiles on their faces, but then they noticed Shumiral and stopped. It was just like what had happened half a year ago. To kids who had never visited the post town, townsfolk were nothing but outsiders. It was one thing when they knew about a visit in advance, like with Dora and his family, but this was the natural result when a complete stranger suddenly showed up at their home.

“Well then, I’ll be excusing myself,” Myme said as she broke away from us, returning to the house where Mikel was recovering. We then cut across the plaza and found people waiting for us in front of the main house. One was a man with an especially impressive build, while the other was tall and slender—Donda and Ryada Ruu.

Neither of them were active hunters, but they were currently training with each other. They were standing in place with long grigee polls in their hands and were clashing with them at point-blank range, Donda Ruu deflecting one blow after another from Ryada Ruu. The latter had retired from hunting due to a leg injury, but his attacks didn’t seem the least bit rusty.

Donda Ruu was wielding his pole using only his left hand. He had injured his right shoulder, so he must have been training his left arm alone. Ryada Ruu’s blows were sharp, but the movements Donda Ruu used to guard against them were even sharper. It was all so intense that I had to wonder if those sturdy

grigee poles would snap.

“Papa Donda, we’re back! And we brought guests!” Rimee Ruu energetically shouted, and the two hunters instantly came to a stop. Donda Ruu turned our way without missing a beat, but when he saw Shumiral, his eyes narrowed.

“You’re that easterner from a while back, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am Shumiral. It has been, some time, leading clan head, Donda Ruu.”

Shumiral calmly pulled back his hood. Meanwhile, Donda Ruu silently cast his grigee pole aside.

“He says he wants to talk to you and Vina! Can I go get her?”

“Fetch Mia Lea too... They should all be in the kitchen.”

“On it!” Rimee Ruu took off toward the back of the main house, the wagon rattling along behind her as she went.

“We should depart as well,” Sheera Ruu said, holding her hand out to me. “Asuta, I can take care of the tolos and wagon.”

“Th-Thanks... Um, Donda Ruu, would you mind if Lili Ravitz and I join in too?”

“Ravitz...? I’m not very familiar with the clan.”

“I will be working with Asuta as of today. The Ravitz clan is located to the south of the Suun settlement,” Lili Ravitz replied, bowing her head with her usual calm face. “A person from town, and a foreigner from Sym at that, visiting the forest’s edge is quite a notable event. I am certain the details will be passed along to us later, but if possible, I would like to observe personally.”

“Do as you please,” Donda Ruu muttered disinterestedly.

One of the other members of the Silver Vase took the reins of their tolos from Radajid, and aside from the vice-leader, the rest all disappeared behind the house as well. Yamiru Lea followed along with them, which just left me, Shumiral, Lili Ravitz, and Radajid there.

Mia Lea and Vina Ruu appeared shortly after. The latter stole a momentary glance at Shumiral before swiftly averting her eyes.

“My, it’s been quite a while since I last saw you. Do you remember me?” Mia

Lea Ruu called out cheerfully, easing the tension in the air.

“Yes,” Shumiral replied with a nod. “You are, the clan head, Donda Ruu’s wife, and Vina Ruu’s mother, Mia Lea Ruu. It has been, some time.”

“Yes, and you’re Shumiral, right? Is he one of your comrades?”

“That is, correct. I am, Radajid Gi Nafassiar, of the Silver Vase. I work, alongside Shumiral.”

“Radajid, is it? Welcome to the Ruu house. Well then, how about we invite you to come in now? That’s not a problem, is it, clan head?”

Donda Ruu didn’t reply. He simply turned and went inside. After watching him leave, Ryada Ruu turned to us.

“It seems we are finished with training for the day, so I’ll be heading back home. Take care, Asuta.”

“You too, Ryada Ruu.”

Under Mia Lea Ruu’s guidance, we stepped into the main Ruu house. Shumiral and Radajid handed their daggers and their cloaks over to her, and then found places to sit. The three members of the Ruu clan and we four guests sat there in the main hall, facing one another.

“I’ve heard a bit about what went on between you and Vina. Still, since I heard your return would take half a year, I didn’t see much point in discussing it, so we let the matter lie,” Mia Lea Ruu calmly started. “So I suppose I’d like to hear you speak about your feelings now. Why did you visit our house today, Shumiral?”

Shumiral sat up perfectly straight and replied, “I would like, to marry, Vina Ruu. I wish, to marry into, the main Ruu house. I have come, to ask, if such a thing, would be permitted.”

My palms were getting all sweaty as I clenched them tight. Sitting next to Mia Lea Ruu, Vina Ruu was staring at the ground in front of her, while Donda Ruu’s blue eyes blazed brightly.

“I see. As Asuta’s friend, you understand a good bit about us people of the forest’s edge, correct?”

“Correct.”

“And yet, you’re still asking to marry into the Ruu clan?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Well then, I suppose we should start by asking Vina’s feelings.”

Vina Ruu’s shoulders suddenly trembled. She was still hanging her head.

Mia Lea Ruu smiled at her. “Vina, what do you think? If you wish to refuse his proposal, then there is no point in discussing it any further. Putting our customs aside for the moment, do you have any interest in taking Shumiral as a husband?”

“I...” Vina Ruu started in a hoarse voice. “I...don’t believe I can marry someone...without really knowing their character...”

“Hmm. In other words, you can neither accept nor refuse until you truly get to know him?”

Vina Ruu offered no response.

“You don’t need to think too hard on it, Vina. All we want is to hear your honest feelings.”

“I believe it’s just as you said before, mother,” Vina Ruu replied, her head hanging even lower. Her chestnut-colored hair was tumbling down, almost entirely obscuring her expression. It felt as if she would collapse in a heap if someone didn’t help her stay up.

Still looking at her daughter, Mia Lea Ruu smiled and said, “I see. If there *is* a chance that you might come to accept him, then there are a number of problematic issues we’ll need to sort out. Why not start with the question of whether a person of the forest’s edge can accept an outsider as a spouse, clan head?”

“A person of the forest’s edge has never married an outsider, not even once... I believe I said as much before,” Donda Ruu grumbled.

“Yes.” Shumiral nodded.

“Furthermore, Vina is the eldest daughter of the main house of a leading clan.

Do you understand how serious of a matter it would be, having her marry a foreigner?”

“I do not know, if I truly, understand fully. But I would like, to try, to do so.”

Donda Ruu glared intensely at Shumiral, who maintained his natural expressionless look. I felt my heart pounding abnormally fast.

“Well then, I have a number of questions for you. Are you resolved to live as a person of the forest’s edge like Asuta here, Shumiral?”

“Yes.”

“Can you make the forest your god and offer up your soul to it, as you live the rest of your life here at the forest’s edge?”

“No,” Shumiral replied, shaking his head for the first time. “I am prepared, to take the forest, as my god. And I would like, to live here, at the forest’s edge. I also believe, my soul should, eventually go to the forest. But I, would also like, to continue my work as, a merchant...”

“Right, my children told me about that. Could you speak on that a bit more?”

“Yes. The Silver Vase, travels around, the western kingdom. That takes, half a year. Aside from that time, we live at home. I would like, to make that home, the forest’s edge.”

That statement was going to require some supplemental explanation. Shumiral wasn’t especially fluent in the western tongue, and I was strong with calculations anyway, so I went ahead and summarized things for him.

“The Silver Vase generally spends a year traveling around the western kingdom, then they go back home for half a year before they head out again. But if Shumiral were to marry into the forest’s edge, he would spend the time when the others are traveling between Sym and Genos here as well.”

It took nearly two months to go between Sym and Genos in either direction. Four months for the round trip. That travel time was included in the year they spent going around the western kingdom. On top of that, the Silver Vase spent a lot of time right here in Genos—a month after they arrived from Sym, and then another month when they completed their circuit before they went back

to Sym. Subtracting those two months from the total as well left us with Shumiral only being away from Genos for half a year each cycle.

Radajid and the others would also be sticking to the schedule they had used up until now, so they would be heading back to Sym after they finished their business in Genos. After separating from Shumiral, it would take them the next two months to make it back home, where they would spend the next half a year before setting out again, at which point it would take another two months for them to reunite.

In other words, their lifestyle of spending a year doing business followed by half a year back at home would instead be half a year traveling around on business followed by a year at the forest's edge for Shumiral.

"I see. Then you would spend a third of your life outside of the forest's edge?"

"Correct."

"Hmm... Could a person who spends so long in the outside world really be considered a fellow person of the forest's edge?" Mia Lea Ruu calmly questioned.

With his posture unchanged, Shumiral nodded and answered, "Yes. I would like, to try with everything I have, to earn, your acceptance. I will, work hard, to make up, for my half year, away."

"And how exactly would you do that? The men of the forest's edge all work as hunters, except for those who have been injured like Ryada Ruu—who you saw before—and Asuta, who is an excellent chef."

"Right. I am a merchant, so if you, would not mind, I would like, to explain, with numbers."

"Numbers?" Mia Lea Ruu asked, her eyes going wide.

"Yes," Shumiral said with a nod. "Say, for example, a hunter, of the forest's edge, hunts a hundred giba, in a year, and a half. If I could, hunt a hundred, in a year, as well, would I be, permitted to leave, the forest's edge, for half a year?"

The blazing inferno in Donda Ruu's eyes grew to be incredibly intense. "Easterner, are you a hunter?"

“No, I am, a merchant.”

“Are you saying you think you can do a better job of hunting giba than we can?”

“Yes,” Shumiral replied, and Donda Ruu’s eyes burned even brighter.

“I recall hearing that easterners use poison. But using poison in giba hunting isn’t permitted.”

“Right. I shall not, use any poison.”

“Then how exactly will you hunt giba?”

“I discovered, a method, in the capital. I believe, it shall prove, effective. But I will not know, for certain, until I try it, of course.”

Donda Ruu suddenly broke out in a grin. It was an expression like that of a wild beast, the one he wore when faced with a formidable foe.

“Interesting. Go ahead and show us this method of yours. We’ll talk after that.”

“Very well,” Shumiral said, rising to his feet. “My method, for hunting giba, is in my wagon. I brought it here, to show you.”

“So you came prepared.” Donda Ruu also slowly stood, and we all headed back outside.

We moved around to the back of the house, since that was where the wagons were being stored. When we got there, Rimee Ruu peered out from the kitchen where she had been cooking poitan and loudly called out, “Huh? You’re done talking already? That sure was quick.”

“No, there’s just something in the wagons we need to take a look at,” I replied, since Donda Ruu was staying silent.

In the meantime, Shumiral had already arrived at the two wagons his company had brought. Also, because of their boxlike design, there was no way to tell what they were carrying from the outside.

Shumiral approached a wooden door built into the back of one of the wagons. He then reached out to it, and casually opened it for us. “This is, my method for,

hunting giba.”

Donda Ruu peered inside first, and whatever it was that he saw, it seriously surprised him. “Hey, what are these things?!”

“I found them, in the capital. They will grant me, the strength, to hunt giba.”

When the two women looked through the opening, Mia Lea Ruu gasped in shock, and even in her withdrawn state, Vina Ruu put her hands over her mouth. I hurried over to see for myself...and sure enough, when I managed to peek around them, I was astonished too.

“Whoa! What are those?!” Rimee Ruu shouted excitedly, clinging to me from behind.

Crouching inside the wagon were six hunting dogs, all with strong builds and light-brown coats.

3

“These beasts, are dogs, from Jagar. They have, been trained, for hunting. Hunters in Jagar, and Selva, use such hunting dogs,” Shumiral explained, paying our shock no mind. “I was late, returning to Genos, because I was learning, how to handle them. I have trained, for half a month.”

“Hmph... So you’re saying you can use these dog things to hunt giba?”

“Yes. Jagar dogs, are clever, like people. They are capable, of hunting all sorts, of beasts. I am certain, they can hunt, giba as well.”

Donda Ruu’s face was rigid as he stroked his bearded chin. “Those traveling performers who visited Genos for the revival festival were capable of manipulating beasts as if they were their own limbs. Are you saying you can match that feat after only half a month of training?”

“That much, would be difficult. But we have, established a bond.” Shumiral turned back to the wagon and called out, “Duey.”

In response, one of the dogs leaped down to the ground, making Rimee Ruu let out a “Wow!” with her eyes sparkling.



“I named the leader, of these hunting dogs, Duey. Duey, lie down.”

The hunting dog followed the command, lowering its head to the ground smoothly. It was a big, solidly built dog, around seventy centimeters tall and a hundred and thirty long, and had short light-brown fur, a large head, and somewhat floppy ears. If I were to compare it to a breed I was familiar with, it was closest to a bloodhound.

“Good,” Shumiral called out, and the dog swiftly rose. It then gazed at us softly with its black eyes. “Well? Do I have, permission to, use these dogs, in hunting?”

“You obviously wouldn’t have heard about this, but there was an occasion where we allowed traveling performers to bring beasts into the forest not too long ago... There’s little chance that the nobles or the other leading clan heads would deny you after what we allowed before,” Donda Ruu said, turning his piercing gaze toward Shumiral. I couldn’t get any sense of his emotions from listening to his voice. “But the beasts those performers brought here were as large and as powerful as giba. These are only about as big as a mundt. Are they really capable of bringing down a giba?”

Shumiral tilted his head a bit in response, so I jumped in to explain. “The traveling performers came here with an algura silver lion, a gaaje leopard, and a vamda black ape.”

“Such beasts, entered the forest, of Morga? That is, a surprise,” Shumiral replied, his eyes opening slightly wider. He still seemed to be having difficulty with letting his emotions show, but that was still more than enough for me to know what he thought about that. “Regardless, hunting dogs, are indeed used, even when hunting, animals of that size. They are even, used to hunt, muffur bears, which are, larger still.”

“So you’re saying these little animals are even stronger than lions and black apes?”

“No. In a, one-on-one fight, they would lose. But they do, help hunters, be more effective. Their excellent eyes, ears, and noses, can be used, to drive prey, into traps.”

Donda Ruu stared at him for a moment, looking deadly serious, then called out to his youngest daughter, “Hey. If you’re just going to play around, go get Bartha. There’s something I want to ask her.”

“Huh? Okay, but you better not put him away before I get back! Oh, wait... I’ve gotta take care of the poitan first!”

Rimee Ruu then grabbed Mia Lea Ruu to get her to help with lowering the pot of poitan to the ground before hurrying off to somewhere on the other side of the house. Once she was gone, Donda Ruu stepped forward and started carefully inspecting the hunting dog, Duey.

“Hmph... It certainly seems to be well-behaved. Can a beast with such a relaxed bearing really take down a giba?”

“Hunting dogs, are trained, to not attack humans. They see humans, as allies, so they cannot, be used, as guard dogs.”

At that point, I decided to share some information that I didn’t think any of them had heard before. “Um, when I was held at the Turan manor, I was told that the place had guard dogs protecting it at night. Are dogs popular animals here in Selva?”

“Yes. Nobles of Selva, who are well-off, keep dogs from Jagar, and cats from Sym. In addition to, guard dogs, and hunting dogs, many are simply, for keeping, in the house.”

From the sound of things, even in a world like this one, dogs were more common than animals like lions and panthers.

Shumiral got down on one knee and started lovingly stroking Duey’s head. “This has been, my first time, handling dogs, from Jagar. But like tolos, hunting dogs are, clever and obedient. If you, people of the forest’s edge, can handle tolos, then you should, be able to, do the same, with hunting dogs.”

“You’re saying you don’t just want to work with these beasts yourself, you want us to use them too?”

“Yes. Six dogs, are too many, for one hunter. Two are enough, for me. I would like, to offer, the other four, to the hunters, of the Ruu clan. You can think, of them, as an extension, of my strength.”

Donda Ruu silently crossed his arms in front of his broad chest, just as Rimee Ruu returned with Bartha in tow.

Bartha took a single glance at Duey and commented, “My, that’s a wonderful hunting dog you’ve got there! Are you finally going to start using them here at the forest’s edge?”

“You’ve used these beasts as well, Bartha?” Donda Ruu asked.

“Oh, no. Dogs cost even more than tolos do. But there were plenty of hunters on Mount Masara who had them.”

“Gaaje leopards live on Mount Masara, correct?”

“Yeah. But if you’ve got a dog with you, they’re nothing to worry about. They’re sure to be really useful for hunting giba too.”

Bartha didn’t know anything about Shumiral, so we could count on her opinion being completely neutral.

Donda Ruu snorted with a severe expression on his face. “Hmph... I see. Sorry for pulling you away from your work. You can go back to taking care of Mikel now.”

“He should be fine for the time being, what with Myme having returned. If you’re hesitating over whether or not you should buy these hunting dogs, Donda Ruu, I think it would be a great idea. They’re definitely pricey, but you can’t put a price tag on people’s lives.”

“Their lives?”

“Yeah, that’s right. First of all, you hunters of the forest’s edge are always pushing yourselves too hard. I mean, you hunt vicious beasts like giba, but you only use swords and bows. If you guys can figure out how to use hunting dogs properly, your work should get a whole lot safer. It would be no exaggeration to say that you can expect every hunting dog you buy to prevent multiple deaths,” Bartha said, her eyes narrowing in a show of emotion that was rather unusual for her. “Both Jeeda and I are dependent on you. If this helps Jeeda be safer, I’d be thrilled to see it happen.”

Donda Ruu closed his eyes for a moment before once again glancing at

Shumiral. “It seems that there is indeed some merit to your proposition... But what about the other matter?”

“The other matter?” Shumiral asked.

“Yeah. You’re an easterner and we’re westerners. While we hold the forest as our god first and foremost, we also fall under the western god, Selva. You’ll need to change gods in order to become one of our people.”

“Become one of your people?” Bartha asked, her eyes opening wide. However, she seemed to sense that this was not a good time to interject further, so she said no more after that.

Shumiral simply nodded. “Yes. I am prepared, to change gods. That is, no issue.”

“That’s a pretty casual answer. It’s a huge deal for a townspeople to change gods, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But I could not, ask to marry, into your clan, without such resolve.”

Mia Lea Ruu then chimed in for the first time in a while, having been quietly watching the conversation. “Do you mind if I say what I’m thinking, Shumiral? I believe you already know this, but we as a people changed gods from Jagar to Selva eighty years ago. We see the forest as our god, so we don’t place as much value in the four great gods, but regardless of how we felt, we were seen by those around us as traitors.”

“Yes, I know. Though Radajid, and the others, have accepted, my decision, other people, of Sym, most certainly, will not.”

“And you’re prepared to deal with that? Don’t you have family back in your home country?”

“I have, distant blood relatives, but none, that I have lived with. The souls, of my family, have all, returned to Sym.”

“Right, about those souls. Your family’s souls have returned to the eastern god. But your soul would end up going to the forest and the western god instead. You really don’t mind that?” Mia Lea Ruu continued.

Unsurprisingly, Shumiral’s tone didn’t change at all as he replied, “I do not. I

gathered, my resolve, before asking Vina Ruu, to marry me. My determination, has been, set in stone, for half a year now.”

“Hmph. But if you don’t get to marry into our clan, it won’t matter how resolved you are. The eastern god will be laughing at you from up above the clouds,” Donda Ruu stated in a combative tone, but Shumiral offered no response. Perhaps not liking his attitude, Donda Ruu deeply furrowed his brow. “Like Mia Lea said, we don’t know much of anything about the four great gods. What exactly is a god to you lot?”

“A god is one, to offer up, our souls to.”

“Oh? But you’re trying to cast your god aside. Actually, it’s like you want to be able to take your pick of two of them. If we accept you, you’ll become a child of Selva, but if we don’t, you’ll stay with Sym. That sounds quite convenient for you, doesn’t it?”

Shumiral offered no response.

“You’re free to deal with the four great gods however you please, but we won’t permit you to call the forest your god so frivolously. And that goes for all of our people, not just me.”

“Understood. I shall work hard, to earn your trust.”

As an oppressive silence filled the air, Radajid finally decided to step into the conversation. “Shumiral, your explanation, was lacking, wasn’t it?” he said, staring expressionlessly at his companion. This was the first time the man—who was even taller than Shumiral—had spoken since introducing himself. “I know, that Shumiral, is sincere. But you, leading clan head, of the forest’s edge, cannot be so sure, of that. I feel, that I must, explain it to you, properly.”

“No, that—” Shumiral started to say.

“Shumiral is already, a westerner,” Radajid stated, cutting him off. “He accepted the blessing, of Selva, in the western capital’s, grand temple. Shumiral has, cast aside Sym, and become, a child of Selva. He has discarded, the name, Zi Sadumtino. He is no longer, the easterner Shumiral Zi Sadumtino. He is instead, the westerner Shumiral.”

“Is that true, Shumiral?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Yes,” he replied, glancing downward. “A shop run, by a citizen, of Jagar, sold the finest, hunting dogs, in the capital. The merchant said, he would never, do business with, a citizen of Sym, so I decided, I had to become, a citizen of Selva, right away.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Right. I felt that, there was no need, to bring it up, until my proposal, was accepted. But I suppose, I should have, at least mentioned it.”

How would I have felt if I was in Shumiral’s position? I suppose it was possible that I might have chosen to hold my tongue like he had. After all, telling the party you were negotiating with that you had taken such an extreme step would end up putting a lot of pressure on them.

“Even if, you do not accept, his proposal, Shumiral is now, a westerner. You can never, take back a god, you have cast aside. Even so, Shumiral said, he will have, no regrets, and he will hold, no grudges, even if, you refuse him. That is, the sort of man, that Shumiral is. That is why, we wish for him, to remain a member, of the Silver Vase, even after becoming, a westerner,” Radajid stated before stepping back. “My apologies, for speaking impertinently. But I hope, that you will trust me, when I say, that Shumiral, is a sincere man.”

“Yes, I believe you,” Mia Lea Ruu said with a gentle smile. “And I feel honored that such an honest person has fallen for my adorable daughter. All we need now is for our clan head to make his decision.”

With everyone’s gazes on him, Donda Ruu slowly closed his eyes. The silence that fell over us then felt even weightier than the last one. Around thirty seconds or so passed before I finally broke down, unable to take it any longer.

“Er, Donda Ruu, I’ve been trying to be careful not to speak out of turn, but could I add just one thing?”

My question went unanswered, so I pressed on.

“I also believe in Shumiral’s honesty, and I’d like to tell you one of the reasons why I feel that way.”

Donda Ruu’s stern expression didn’t budge in the slightest, his eyes and mouth remaining firmly shut. Feeling my heart beating faster and faster, I kept

going.

“I’ve never discussed this with you personally, but maybe you’ve heard about it from someone else. Shumiral is the one who originally put me in contact with Mikel, who is now a guest of the Ruu clan.”

Donda Ruu said nothing to that.

“Shumiral was the one who warned me that Cyclaeus was dangerous and we should keep our distance. He was able to see how much of a threat that awful nobleman was when he was selling ingredients and cooking knives to the house of Turan. But he didn’t just warn me. He even went out of his way to find evidence of Cyclaeus’s crimes, which was how he came across Mikel.” I was remembering the day we had said farewell as I spoke. On the final day of the blue month, we stood on the border between the forest and the town as Shumiral calmly told me everything he had learned. “The Silver Vase does business in the castle town, so Cyclaeus was absolutely not someone Shumiral could afford to make an enemy of, but he still did all he could to help us. On top of that, Mikel’s life was in ruins because of Cyclaeus, and he wasn’t able to do much about it except try to drown his sorrows. It was thanks to Shumiral that he met us...and that’s the only reason we were able to forge the bond that we share with him now.”

The leading clan head still did not respond.

“I’ve been helped by a lot of different people, but Shumiral is one of the most important of them. He’s irreplaceable to me. He’s the most honorable man I know, and I’m sure that he—”

“How long is this ‘one thing’ of yours going to be?” Donda Ruu grumbled, cutting me off with a tone as heavy as a blade being swung. He finally opened his eyes and glared harshly at Shumiral once more. “As I told you before, becoming the husband of one of the daughters of the main Ruu house isn’t something that can be done lightly.”

“I understand.”

“We also can’t accept an outsider as a clan member so easily. The Fa clan head might have been able to do so without a care, but as a leading clan, the Ruu must act as an example for all our people to follow.”

“Of course.”

“But if we take you in as someone with a righteous heart who can bring great strength to our people...I’m certain the other clans will agree to accept you as well, just like they accepted Asuta of the Fa clan.”

I really did not expect that. Donda Ruu was basically admitting right in front of me that he thought I had a righteous heart. Nobody else seemed to take much note of it, but to me, that was an incredibly big deal.

“I’ll discuss with the other leading clan heads whether you should be given that opportunity. And with the nobles in the castle town as well. If they all give their permission...the first step would be to have you hunt giba alongside the hunters of the Ruu clan. If you can demonstrate that you are strong enough to be a hunter, we’ll permit you to join a clan. Talk of marriage will have to wait until after that.”

“I can, accept that. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. There are a lot of folks here at the forest’s edge who value old traditions more than I do,” Donda Ruu said, and then his gaze drifted down to Rimee Ruu. His daughter had been stroking Duey’s head, but when she noticed him looking at her, she hurriedly pulled her hand away. “Rimee, find a woman with time on her hands and send her to the Sauti settlement. As for the northern settlement... That’d be a bit rough for a woman. Guess we should have Ryada go.”

“Got it! Should we invite Dari Sauti to dinner?”

“Yeah. And they should reach out to the Lea and Rutim along the way. Tell them if any of their men are around, they should hop on their totos and come to the Ruu settlement. Then we’ll send them off to the castle town.”

“On it! But what if there aren’t any men?”

“Then just have someone bring their totos here, and I’ll head out personally.” After he finished giving Rimee Ruu her instructions, Donda Ruu turned his glare back to Shumiral. “Come to the Ruu settlement again tomorrow before the sun hits its peak. We’ll tell you the results of our discussions then. And if you’re prepared to enter the forest, bring those hunting dogs of yours along with you.”

“Understood. Then I shall, arrive at, the upper fifth hour.”

Shumiral bowed to Donda Ruu, who simply turned around and headed back to his house. Rimee Ruu took off running toward the kitchen, while Barthia started talking to Mia Lea Ruu, asking for more of an explanation.

Shumiral looked at Vina Ruu hesitantly. She had been standing around silently this whole time, and now that there was finally no one else around her, he went ahead and approached her.

“It has been, some time, Vina Ruu.”

Vina Ruu hung her head again rather than replying.

But even so, Shumiral offered her a smile. “I am overjoyed, to see you, looking well. I am, truly sorry, for my late, return to Genos.”

Vina Ruu remained silent.

“I am also, glad you did not, refuse my proposal.”

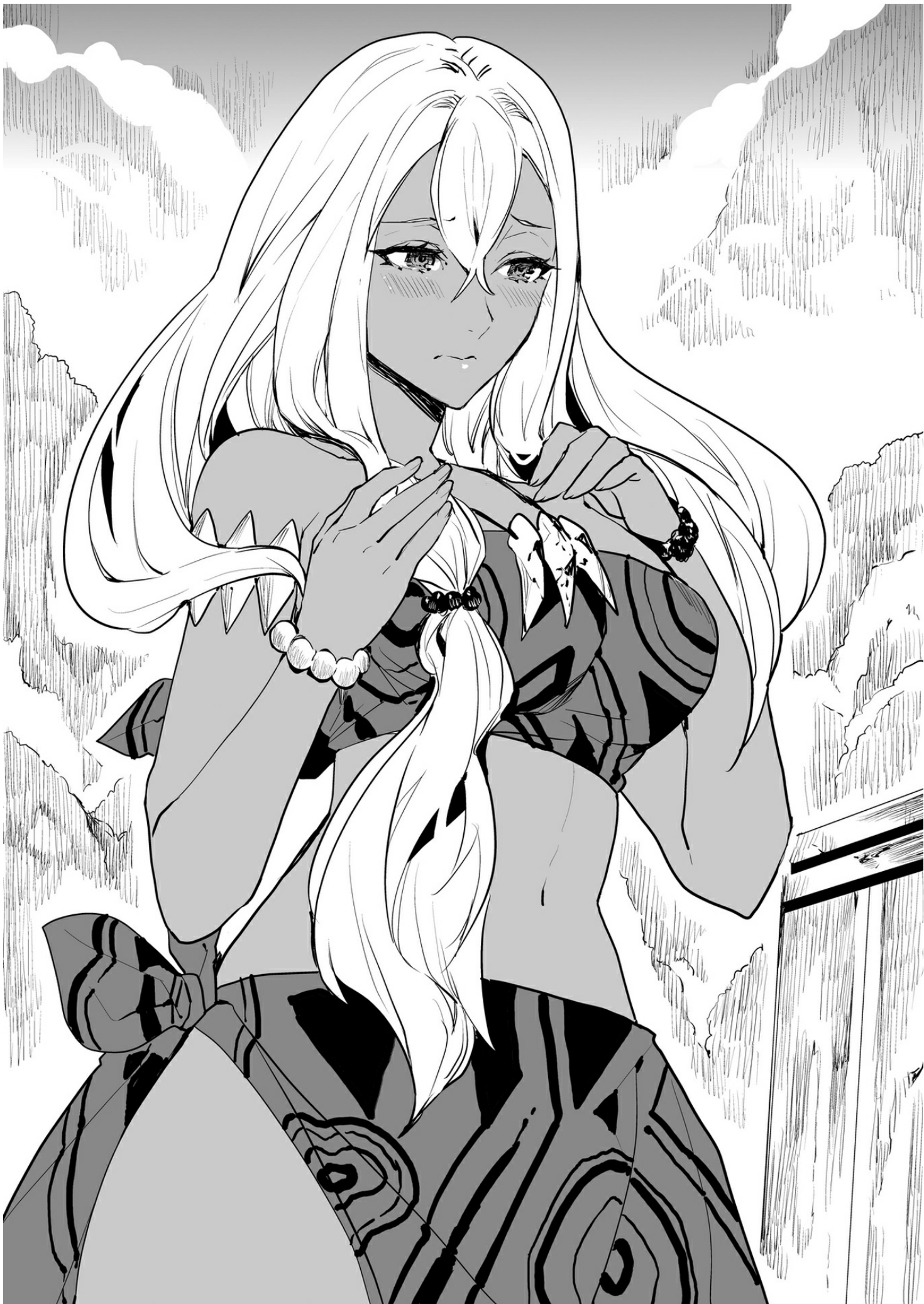
“I-I still don’t know anything about you...”

“True. And I would like, you to know, everything,” Shumiral stated, quickly stepping back. “If I am, given permission, I will prove, my strength to you. Please observe, and see if, I am fit, to be your husband.”

“Ah, wait!” Vina Ruu called out, raising her head. However, she still couldn’t bring herself to look at Shumiral directly. Instead, she started fidgeting with the bracelet she wore—the one with the cherry-blossom-colored stones that Shumiral had given her when they parted. “Shouldn’t I return this to you now that you’ve made it back safely?”

Still smiling, Shumiral replied, “No. That is, a protective stone, to keep you, away from danger. There is no need, to return it. I wish for you, to live, a healthy life.”

“I see...” Vina Ruu said with her hands in front of her chest, one clasping the bracelet she wore on her other arm. She was staring off in a random direction, still seemingly incapable of looking at Shumiral. “Then I suppose I can keep holding on to it... Um, I’m on cooking duty today, so...”



“Of course. I shall, look forward to, seeing you again tomorrow.”

Vina Ruu practically fled from the scene after that. Staring at her slender back as she left, Shumiral started listlessly leaning against his wagon.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Shumiral? Are you okay?”

“I am fine. All the tension, has simply drained, from my body.”

“You were nervous? You didn’t look it.”

“I was. Terribly so. Even more than, when I was, surrounded by muffur bears,” Shumiral said with a big sigh. “I am truly glad, that Vina Ruu, did not reject me. I give my thanks, to the western god, and the forest, of Morga. I feel grateful, from the depths, of my heart.” He then brushed his silver hair aside and shot me a smile. “My heart is trembling, with joy, at meeting Vina Ruu, for the first time, in so long... And not just my heart. My fingers, and knees, are shaking as well. What should I do?”

“I don’t think there’s anything you can do... Still, don’t you think you should tell Vina Ruu stuff like that?”

“That would be, far too embarrassing. She would think, I am like, a child.”

Personally, I thought hearing something like that from a quiet guy like Shumiral would have a big impact on her. But regardless, I went ahead and smiled back at him.

“Shumiral, I’ve got a request for you. Or maybe I should call it a proposal.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“The Sledgehammer currently has a dish called ‘giba curry’ on their menu. I also serve it at my stall every third day. It’s a dish that’s really popular with folks from Sym...but I’d like you to hold off on trying it for now.”

“Only me? My companions, can have it?”

“Yeah, Radajid and the others can have their fill. I know this sounds weird, but would you be willing to trust me and avoid eating any of it?”

“I always trust you, Asuta. I do not, understand why, but I promise, to do as you ask.”

“Thank you. I’ll explain everything when the time comes.”

That was about all I could do at the moment. Now it was up to Shumiral to show the hunters how strong he really was.

I looked over at Duey, who was sitting obediently nearby, and whispered, “I’m counting on you.” The clever dog blinked, silently watching me and Shumiral.

4

It was now the following morning.

I headed to the Ruu settlement at the agreed upon time, finding a bit of a commotion there. I arrived right at the upper fifth hour, since that was when Shumiral had said his next visit would be, but it looked like he had shown up a bit early. There was already a crowd surrounding him, which included hunters from not just the Ruu, but their subordinate clans as well.

“Well, if it isn’t Asuta! Long time no see!” Rau Lea called out from the crowd as I was approaching them after bringing my wagon to a stop. He was right; it *had* been quite some time since I’d last seen him. In fact, it might have been since that welcome party we’d had for Dora and the other townsfolk.

“Yeah, it’s really been a while. What brings you here today?”

“Donda Ruu invited me! He said I should come and see what I think about this crazy easterner and the hunting dogs he brought with him.”

Rau Lea and I were the same age, but despite that, he was already the head of the main Lea house. His hair was golden, like Ai Fa’s, and he had fine facial features like a woman, but he was still a pretty brazen and mischievous guy. His light blue eyes were sparkling like a child’s as he stared at the hunting dogs, which he was seeing for the first time.

Behind Rau Lea, I spied a middle-aged man with gray-brown hair and a mustache grinning at me: Giran Ririn, who I also hadn’t seen in some time.

“So you’re here too, Giran Ririn? Were all of the subordinate clan heads invited?”

“Indeed. And there seem to be some folks who aren’t clan heads here too,”

Giran Ririn said, right before someone else in the crowd started roaring with laughter. And sure enough, the person who was laughing was not a current clan head, but a former one.

“Excuse me for a moment... Dan Rutim, I’m glad to see you looking well.”

“Hey there, Asuta! Just look at these things! Pretty interesting, aren’t they?!” Dan Rutim was sitting on the ground, playing with two of the hunting dogs. He almost looked like a giant baby holding two huge stuffed animals. “Yes, very interesting! They kinda resemble varb wolves too! Isn’t there some legend about wolves who left the mountains and became dogs?”

“Yeah, I heard something like that from Ai Fa. I’m sure dogs and wolves are related, at the very least.”

The dogs looked like the kind of breed that would come from the west in my old world. They had droopy ears, square faces, and strong bodies, but there was still something weirdly cute about them.

“I knew it! They’ve got the same clever look in their eyes that varb wolves have! What incredibly interesting creatures they are!”

When I met Radd Liddo, I had thought that he and Dan Rutim were pretty similar, but on second thought, it was pretty obvious that this man had the bigger heart by far. The hunting dogs were perfectly content to sit around him without even a hint of fear.

Dan Rutim was clearly the most enthusiastic person in the crowd, but it looked like a majority of them were at least smiling. Any of them who had seen the show put on by the animal tamer from the traveling performers had probably grown a lot more accustomed to seeing unfamiliar beasts.

Wondering where Shumiral himself was, I glanced around until I spotted him talking to Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim, who were both looking pretty serious. From Jiza Ruu’s perspective, this was the man who was asking to marry his sister. As someone who valued the customs of the forest’s edge more than almost anybody else, Shumiral was probably as much of a headache for him as I had once been.

Feeling a bit worried, I started to walk over there, but before I could reach the

three of them, a certain brother and sister pair I was friends with called out to me.

“Hey, Asuta! Welcome back!” Ludo Ruu said.

“Look, look! The doggy likes me!” Rimee Ruu added.

There was a dog on either side of the pair, and they were doting on the animals as eagerly as Dan Rutim was. I had long suspected that the Sym blood running through their veins was the reason the people of the forest’s edge were able to bond with tolos so quickly. Maybe there was something in the Jagar part of their blood that caused them to be drawn to dogs like this too.

“Sorry for the wait, Asuta. We’re getting ready to head out now,” someone said to me from behind. When I turned around, I found Reina Ruu standing there smiling a short distance away from the crowd.

“Ah, thanks. Um, how are things going with Shumiral?”

“Well, he’s at least been granted permission to enter the forest. As for whether or not he’ll be permitted to become a member of a clan or marry into a leading clan, they’ll be discussing all of that after they see how effective he is on the hunt.” That made sense. There was no way they could have figured everything out in a single night. Once Shumiral showed them what he could do, then the discussion could move on to the next step. “They’re going to start by having him head out into the forest with hunters from the Ruu and their subordinate clans. How well he does will determine what happens next.”

“I see. That’s good to hear,” I said with a sigh of relief. Then I waved at Shumiral, and he bowed back to me next to Gazraan Rutim. “Well then, how about we get going? We’ve got our own work to do.” As I separated from the crowd, I saw that Ruuruu’s wagon was already on standby. We had decided that the Fa clan would bring two wagons to town until Lili Ravitz’s training was over, so the women who were going to ride with me were also standing there off to the side. One of them was Vina Ruu, who was on duty today. “Good morning, Vina Ruu. How are you feeling?”

“Feeling...? The same as always, I’d say.”

She seemed to have lost her meekness from yesterday and returned to her

usual self somehow. As I tilted my head in confusion, Reina Ruu brought her mouth close to my ear for a whisper.

“With all the commotion Shumiral’s arrival caused, they haven’t been able to talk to one another yet. Jiza’s barely left his side since he got here.”

“I’m sure. From your brother’s point of view, this situation must be really alarming.”

“Yeah... But actually, he seems less shaken than I expected him to be. He’s been keeping a really close eye on Shumiral this whole time, trying to find any fault he can, but if Shumiral’s abilities impress them enough, he might not raise an objection,” Reina Ruu said, smiling in a way that made her look really mature. “Jiza’s changed. And he’s still changing, I’m sure. Compared to how he was when he first met you, he seems to see things in a totally different way now.”

It would soon be nine months since I first appeared at the forest’s edge. That was more than enough time for someone’s perspective to evolve. After glancing back at Jiza Ruu and Shumiral one last time, I headed over to the wagon so we could get on with our own job.

Our work in the post town was going smoothly again today, and the same was true for Myme’s stall. She had asked the Ruu women to help her with her preparations in the morning, and had managed to get a hundred meals ready as a result. Selling a hundred meals would earn her two hundred red coins. Even subtracting the cost of the ingredients, that would work out to around a hundred and twenty coins of pure profit, and because of her strong sense of duty, the first thing she did with that money was repay the Fa clan for the medicine we had bought for her father.

“Thankfully, my father’s wounds have healed quite a bit. It’ll still take a long time for his leg bone to be fully fixed, but he’s gotten a lot of his energy back already,” Myme told us, with a smile that had also been restored to about eighty percent of its original brightness. The remaining twenty percent must have been due to her worries about the future.

Six days had now passed since Myme and Mikel had come to the Ruu settlement. Living together with Barthia and Jeeda seemed to be no problem for

them, so the only point of concern was what would come next.

“I’m really fond of the settlement at the forest’s edge. I’d be perfectly happy if my father and I could simply keep living with Bartha and Jeeda. But it’s not going to be that simple, is it?”

Myme had heard about Shumiral by way of Bartha, so she knew how harshly an outsider trying to be accepted as a person of the forest’s edge would be scrutinized.

“Well, the reason they’re being so tough on Shumiral is because he’s trying to marry into the main Ruu house. But I was allowed to live as a member of the Fa clan without any of that.”

Still, there was a chance that I would have been driven from the forest’s edge at the previous clan head meeting if I had spent my time idly. Back then, even Jiza Ruu had strongly felt that I should live in town instead. But as guests, the standard Myme and Mikel would be judged by wouldn’t be nearly as high. After all, Bartha and Jeeda had been living in the forest for several months already, so I wanted Myme to spend her time with us feeling carefree instead of worrying.

At any rate, we carried on with our business regardless of the drama happening behind the scenes. Our proposed contract that would guarantee our supply of poitan was also steadily moving toward being finalized. I had already paid Dora eighteen silver coins for the minimum number we would need, though I was still trying to figure out what the actual quantity was ultimately going to end up being.

The Ruu clan had covered half of the advance payment, since even though the Fa clan was the one that had made it our mission to bring happiness to our fellow people of the forest’s edge, a leading clan like the Ruu couldn’t overlook the predicament we were all facing. At any rate, now we had no need to worry about anyone starving because they were unable to purchase the poitan they needed.

The members of the Silver Vase, Shumiral excluded, also stopped by our stalls. Five of them showed up in the morning and four in the afternoon, and they all bought sizable meals from us. When Radajid made his purchase, he started talking to me in a formal tone. “Shumiral is, currently in, the forest,

correct? We shall pray, for his, safe return.”

“I’m sure Shumiral will be fine. He’s got a bunch of really strong hunters from the Ruu with him, after all.”

“Yes... If he could, ride a totos, there would be, no need to worry, but the forest, of Morga, is so dense, that totos, cannot enter, correct?”

“That’s true. If you tried to go in there riding on a totos, their head would keep getting caught on stuff. They’re so big, it’s kinda inevitable.”

“How unfortunate. If he could, ride a totos, he would not, even need, those hunting dogs.”

I didn’t really get what he meant and so I asked for a clarification, and was told that Shumiral was extremely skilled at handling a totos. He could even hold off a muffur bear or an algura silver lion while riding one.

“That’s amazing. And it puts me even more at ease. I think we should just have faith in Shumiral.”

“Yes.” Radajid nodded, then he seemed to remember something and looked directly at me. “There is one more, important matter, to discuss. We have brought, a great deal, of ingredients, from the capital. Now that Count Turan, has fallen, we wanted to, sell them to you, but it seems, we must deliver them, to other nobles.”

“Yeah, the business deals Cyclaeus was a part of are all being handled by Duke Genos and the guardian in charge of the house of Turan now. It could cause a bit of trouble if you sell that stuff in the post town without their permission.”

“That is, a shame. If we could, sell to you, directly, we would have, made it, a good bit, cheaper.”

“Thank you for thinking of me like that. But I’m still grateful to you. Genos’s stock of dried seaweed and saltwater fish and the like has been getting worryingly low lately.”

With that businesslike discussion out of the way, Radajid returned to the castle town. Since Shumiral had already switched over to the western god, he had taken up leadership of the group. They had headed straight to the castle

town first yesterday because they needed to inform their business partners about that. As for the post of second-in-command, that had gone to the older member who specialized in star reading.

Shumiral's now more like an outside collaborator. It must have taken a lot of resolve to entrust Radajid with the group his father had created. I seriously hoped that resolve would be rewarded. But first, the question of whether those dogs would be useful in hunting giba would need to be answered.

I was still thinking about that as we were wrapping up our business in the post town for the day. After that, it was finally time to give cooking lessons to the Suun clan. After saying farewell to Reina Ruu and the others at the Ruu settlement, we headed north, dropping Lili Ravitz off along the way before heading for the Suun settlement.

This would be the first time I had visited the place in over half a year. After a long while, we arrived and pulled the wagon into the settlement, as an indescribable sense of nostalgia ran down my spine.

The massive ritual hall with its dome-shaped roof of dried grass still sat in the center. That was where the clan head meeting had been held. I had met Gulaf Zaza and the other northern hunters for the first time there, fed everyone a meal made with bloodlet giba meat, and explained the Fa clan's actions... And then at night, Diga and Doddo had attacked.

Ludo Ruu had fought off Tei Suun while bleeding from his head, Dan Rutim had come running with Tsuvai under his arm, and Donda Ruu had cornered Zuuro Suun with his face looking like a lion's. And there was the sight of Ai Fa asleep with her limbs bound. One after another, these images floated through my mind.

Then there were the members of the Suun clan. Once all of their crimes were exposed, the members of the branch houses had all cried out. Toor Deen had been one of them. They had thought they were going to be scalped, but they were also finally free of Zattsu Suun's curse. I could still clearly recall their lamentations, and how they made the night air seem to tremble.

It had been a huge turning point for us. I had met Ai Fa in the forest, been invited to the Ruu settlement, encountered Kamyua Yoshu in the post

town...and then, we came here to the Suun settlement. One event had led to another, and another, and another, leading us to where we were now. Feeling all kinds of emotions welling up in my chest, I gripped Gilulu's reins tight.

"Er, which building should we head toward?"

"That one on the far left. That's where the family currently in charge of managing the Suun clan lives."

The Suun had lost their main house and hadn't been permitted to select a new one yet, so they were trying to rebuild with all of their people on an equal standing. However, the house with the oldest member had been put in charge of managing the clan's affairs for the time being.

As I got down from the driver's seat and headed in that direction, I let out an "Ah" before I could stop myself. I had just noticed that the former main Suun house, which should have been right beside the one I was walking to, was now gone.

"When Zuuro and Zattsu Suun were moved to the northern settlement, Gulaf Zaza and the others burned that house down. After all, no one was going to be returning there ever again," Toor Deen quietly explained from up in the wagon.

Awash in feelings that were difficult to put into words, I replied, "I see."

It was true that there was no longer anyone to return there. Yamiru Lea had joined the Lea clan, Mida the Ruu, Tsvai and Oura the Rutim, and Diga and Doddoo the Dom. And of course, Zattsu's and Tei Suun's souls had long since returned to the heavens, while Zuuro Suun had been sent off to a penal colony somewhere. With that, their crimes had finally been forgiven. Their ties had been severed and the house where they'd been raised had been burned to the ground, but in return, Yamiru Lea and the others had been permitted to walk a new path in life.

When I thought about that, a strange feeling caused my heart to skip a beat, and a cold bead of sweat ran down my cheek. Their ties had been severed, and their home burned down...permitting them to live new lives. It was nothing but a coincidence, and yet... *That's practically the same as my story, isn't it?*

I gulped, causing Yun Sudra to shoot me a concerned look as she walked

beside me.

“What’s the matter, Asuta? You look a bit pale.”

“It’s nothing.”

Nothing but a coincidence. It wasn’t like I was being judged for a crime. But still, I felt like I was suddenly seeing Yamiru Lea and the others in a new light.

They all lost a lot, but they were able to grab hold of happy new lives in exchange. We’re the same in that way.

Zattsu and Tei Suun were the only ones who hadn’t been saved while they were still alive, but their remaining family deserved a chance to live happily enough to make up for that fact. That was how I felt as I stood before the old house.

“Excuse me. We’re here to give your people cooking lessons.”

The door swung open in response, and an older woman appeared from inside. She wasn’t quite old enough to be called elderly, but her hair had gone rather white. When she saw me, tears streamed from her eyes as she said, “Ah... Asuta of the Fa clan... So you really did come. I was worried that you might still be angry with the Suun clan.”

“O-Of course not. I just happened to have some business suddenly crop up yesterday that prevented me from coming here,” I replied in a fluster. Then I looked at Yun Sudra, and she gave me a troubled smile in response.

“I tried to explain it to them, but apparently my words weren’t enough to ease their worries.”

“I see. Um, please don’t cry. I’m not angry with the Suun clan. Everyone at the forest’s edge decided to forgive you, right?”

But the woman still continued to cry as she looked at my face. However, her brown eyes no longer looked like they belonged to a dead fish, as they had before. Instead, they had a noticeable sparkle in them, which her tears made all the brighter. Since I had recruited all the women of the branch houses for the meal I served at the clan head meeting, I must have met her before.

“Everyone is gathered in the kitchen. Please, teach us your lesson.”

“Got it. I’ll see you in a bit.”

At her direction, we circled around to the rear of the house. Then we stepped into the kitchen, where we were greeted by an unexpectedly large number of women.

“Oh, Asuta, we’ve been waiting for you.”

“I’m glad that I get to see you again, Asuta.”

There were ten of them there, as well as a number of young children. But from what I had been told, there weren’t even twenty members of the Suun clan left at this point. If that was the truth, then this must have been everyone aside from the hunters.

The kids who were younger than five all stared at me in amazement. Those who were a bit older smiled at me bashfully or hid behind their mothers, but regardless, they were all looking in my direction. The women, both young and old, had a variety of reactions, running the gamut from smiling to looking nervous. But again, none of them had those dead-fish eyes or were expressionless like clay dolls.

Sure enough, I did indeed remember a number of their faces. They had all cooked alongside me at the clan head meeting. The woman who had injured Toor Deen with a splash of boiling water was there. The one who had burned the myamuu giba while Sheera Ruu had tried to instruct her was there too, as was the woman who had said the Suun settlement didn’t have any aria or poitan. All of them were full of emotion now as they watched me.

“It’s been a long time, everyone. I’m glad to see you all doing well,” I replied, feeling rather emotional myself, and I saw a number of them once again having to hold back tears. To them, I was a living representation of the Suun clan’s downfall. Donda Ruu and the other clan heads under him had driven Zuuro Suun into a corner, but I was the one who had said we should search their pantry.

Back then, they had surrounded us, looking like living corpses. And when the secret of their pantry was exposed, their tears came pouring out as if a dam had been broken.

“Our apologies. Everyone wanted to see you, so even those who cannot cook are gathered here. But as we don’t want them to get in the way of your work, they’ll be leaving shortly.”

“Ah, no, I’m grateful for the sentiment. I look forward to working with you all these next few days.”

The women who had brought the young children to the kitchen bowed their heads and stepped outside. That just left five Suun women in there with us.

“We’re looking forward to working with you as well. Thanks to you, we’ve been able to remember the joy of living.”

“Today’s the last day of lessons for the men, isn’t it? Have you already been able to enjoy the taste of bloodlet giba meat?”

“Yes. We have enough meat now that we’re starting to run short on pico leaves,” one of the women replied, and then I heard some cheers from the plaza. Though the sun was still high in the sky, the men had returned from the forest.

I wanted to greet them first before starting work, only for an unexpectedly large figure to appear before me and catch me off guard. I could tell that he was a hunter from the northern settlement, since he wore a pelt with the head part still attached.

“The Fa clan’s chef, eh? So you’re here today too.” A number of similarly dressed brawny hunters were there behind him as well. They numbered six in total, and were carrying three giba. “We’re hunters from the Jeen clan. We came here today to give the Suun men hunting lessons.”

“Oh, I see. Well, good work.”

They visited the Suun settlement once every few days to assist the Suun clan’s men, who had forgotten how to hunt giba. They were also tasked with confirming that the Suun were living proper lives and not touching the fruits of the forest, because they were the angriest and felt the greatest responsibility for the Suun clan’s past actions.

Farther back were two more groups, one familiar and one not. They were the hunters of the Sudra and Suun clans—four from the former, and seven from the

latter, carrying five giba between them.

“Good work, Raielfam Sudra. That’s quite a haul, considering how high in the sky the sun still is.”

“Indeed, though we only successfully bloodlet half of them. But we need to skin the pelts, so we brought them all back,” the Sudra clan head replied, bringing his wrinkled forehead close to mine. “Still, I certainly never expected to take down eight whole giba. I’ve never seen hunting grounds with so many of them running around.”

“That was why the Suun clan chose this place for their settlement. After all, they once possessed more strength than any other clan,” the Jeen man who had spoken to me before interjected. “The fruits of the forest have fully recovered in the past half year, and the number of giba about has continued to rise. If we didn’t stop by occasionally, the Suun men would surely be in quite a bit of danger.”

“Yes, you are all certainly excellent hunters. There can be no mistaking that, after I’ve seen the strength of the northern clans firsthand. Still, do none of you use bows in your hunting?” Raielfam Sudra asked.

“I wouldn’t say that we don’t use them at all, but we didn’t bring any hunters who specialize in them today.”

“There are ten hunters in the Jeen clan, correct? So at least six of you don’t use bows?” Raielfam Sudra questioned, crossing his short arms with a complicated expression on his face. In the meantime, I went ahead and greeted the Suun men one by one.

I hadn’t had any direct interaction with any of them, but they had all been present for the moment of their clan’s downfall. They hadn’t wept like the women, but their eyes had still been flooded with emotion.

Around when they started the process of hanging the eight giba they had hunted from some tree branches, Raielfam Sudra spoke up once more.

“Jeen hunter, I have a proposition for you. Could we join you again when you go out into the Suun hunting grounds?”

“What? We only visit this place once every five days at most. Your

bloodletting lessons should already be over by the next time we come.”

“I would like to hunt alongside you, even outside of those lessons. To be honest, our Sudra hunters have started to have a bit too much time on our hands.”

“Oh? You only have four hunters, but you have time on your hands?”

“Indeed. The clans surrounding the Fa have grown strong over these past several months. I am certain that as of late, all of them have been hunting more giba than they ever have before. As a result, our hunting grounds have started to feel somewhat restricted. We would need to head farther into the forest to expand them, but we’re aware of our limits.” Raielfam Sudra stared up at the Jeen hunter, who was over a head taller than him. “So, our hunting grounds now feel restrictive, while the Suun clan are suffering from a surplus of giba. I feel it would be beneficial for both sides if we visit the Suun settlement like this on occasion. And if we could borrow the strength of the northern clans as well, it would be even more worthwhile. We specialize in bows while you are among the strongest when it comes to blades, which should mean we both get an advantage from working together.”

“It’s true that we were able to hunt eight giba in such a short time because the Jeen, Sudra, and Suun hunters were all working together,” the Jeen hunter replied, clearly thinking about the proposal carefully. “It is our job to hunt as many giba as possible. With that in mind, I could see our clan head considering your idea. At any rate, it won’t be too long before we visit the Suun clan again.”

“I see. In that case, if you can inform us of the date, we’ll come here as well. The Fa clan is paying us for meat, so you can keep all of the horns, tusks, and pelts.”

“That would feel like accepting charity from you. The fruits of the hunt should be split evenly.”

Though he had ended up reverting to the usual stubbornness of the northern clans at the end, he seemed to have more or less accepted Raielfam Sudra’s suggestion. I was honestly impressed to see that the Sudra clan head’s quick tongue was effective even against the northern clans.

Raielfam Sudra stole a glance in my direction and said, “By the way, are the

Suun clan permitted to sell meat to the Fa clan? They used to oppose the Fa clan's actions, but the main house is gone now, so I'm sure they must think differently now."

"That...would need to be discussed with the leading clan heads. It could be dangerous to allow the Suun clan to acquire excessive wealth, after all," the Jeen hunter said.

"Then they could simply use their earnings to buy the food and medicine they need, and have the Zaza clan hold on to whatever is left. There are a lot of young children at the Suun settlement, so it seems like they're probably going to end up running out of funds sooner or later as things stand."

"Only the leading clan heads can make that kind of decision...but I will pass your words along to Gulaf Zaza."

"I see. I'll be counting on you." Raielfam Sudra gave a big nod, and then he turned to face me directly. "By the way, how long do you plan to keep watching us? The sun has sunk quite a bit now."

"Oh, right. Please excuse us."

With that, we all headed back to the kitchen. Along the way, Toor Deen whispered to me, "Um, Raielfam Sudra... He's a very strange man, isn't he? It seems as if he can see things that we can't."

"Yeah, he's an amazing guy. I'd say he's playing a starring role in helping to change everyone's lifestyles here at the forest's edge."

I glanced over at Yun Sudra, and she shot me a proud smile.

"I'm feeling overwhelmed, honestly. I'm very proud to be a member of the Sudra clan."

"Yeah, I'd say you're right to feel that way. So, do you still think your clan head isn't sensible?"

"Isn't sensible? When did I ever say such a thing?"

"Didn't you mention something like that some time ago? You know, back when he didn't let you go with us to Dabagg."

"I-I mean, it was just that I wanted to go too...but it wasn't like I was seriously

criticizing my clan head!” Yun Sudra loudly shouted, causing the Suun clan women to look her way in confusion. She blushed red and shot me a reproachful glare. “That’s cruel of you, Asuta, dragging up the ancient past.”

“Ah ha ha, sorry.”

The forest’s edge was in the midst of an upheaval, even now. As I prayed from the depths of my heart that Shumiral would be able to smoothly slot himself into our community, I went ahead and carried out the rest of my work for the day.

5

From there, the days steadily passed on by. Shumiral had been my greatest point of concern, but he had really done a good job of showing off his skill during that period.

In order for the hunting dogs to demonstrate the full range of their capabilities, Shumiral had first needed to learn how to become a hunter himself. The natural physical proficiency he had from the very start was enough to seriously surprise the hunters on its own, but even still, he had lived his life as a merchant. He wasn’t capable of hiding his presence like a hunter, and had a lot to learn about the nature of giba. As totos and poisons couldn’t be used out in the forest, he would need to put in a great deal of effort in order to be able to work as a hunter.

Even at this stage, though, the hunting dogs were doing an incredible job of supporting him. When it came to his biggest stumbling block of being unable to hide his presence, the hunting dogs could notice a giba before it noticed Shumiral, canceling that issue out. When the hunting dogs picked up on a giba, Shumiral and the hunters would move downwind. Then they would let the dogs loose in order to drive the giba toward a trap. That was the basic strategy.

“They’re usually so well-behaved, but they make some really crazy sounds when they’re driving the giba. That catches the giba off guard, and they take off running without thinking,” Ludo Ruu told me.

The Sauti and some other clans used metallic noisemakers to drive giba,

which the Ruu tended to forgo using. Giba hated loud sounds by nature—a fact that this strategy used against them. It wasn't likely that a hunting dog's fangs would be able to take down a fully grown giba, but if they weren't starved or especially vicious, they would prioritize fleeing instead, so the hunting dogs were already proving to be quite effective.

“Their noses seem to be even better than mine too, so they can find the giba quicker! There's no fear of a surprise attack from giba with them around!” Dan Rutim had said. It hadn't taken long for the hunters to start seeing the hunting dogs in a favorable light, which was proof of how valuable their presence was.

I didn't know if it would be of any use, so I refrained from saying anything, but I knew that hunting dogs were also a great help in hunting boars. I could recall a hunter at the farming camp I had attended telling me there was a saying that went “First dogs, second legs, third guns.” It meant that when hunting boars, the most important thing was having hunting dogs, followed secondly by the legs needed to pursue them, and your gun only came in third. Apparently, a lot of hunters believed that maxim. They knew how critical dogs were to the process.

And so, it had only taken Shumiral a couple days to show the hunters the dogs' potential. Above all else, they were extremely good at protecting the hunters' lives, just as Bartha had said. A hunter in training like Shumiral wouldn't be able to cause a sudden rise in the number of giba being brought back, no matter how hard he tried, but there was no real risk of having to deal with a sudden attack from a starving giba with the hunting dogs around.

There was no denying that it was going to be beneficial to have them. After all, you couldn't exchange coins for lives. Furthermore, it was apparent that not only were they helping, but they were also smart enough to not get in the way of what the hunters were doing too. That meant there was basically no real reason left to reject them.

Also, though this was a trivial matter in comparison, the dogs were doing a good job of charming the people of the forest's edge even when they were off duty. The beasts were both loyal and clever. They couldn't do tricks like Huey and Sara from the Gamley Troupe, but they could follow simple commands like “lie down” and “wait” without any issues, and they could also catch a thrown

stick out of the air and bring it back. For the people of the forest's edge, tricks like those were already plenty.

At any rate, the hunting dogs were clearly clever enough to understand what people wanted. To the people of the forest's edge, they seemed to be closer to humans than beasts. On top of that, they never directed any of the ferocity they showed on the hunt toward people. They had been thoroughly trained so that they wouldn't attack even if they ran into other hunters out in the wild. That was why they couldn't protect a house as guard dogs.

The way they strictly followed what they had been taught made them all the more charming to the people of the forest's edge. The young women and children were even more excited to see them than they had been when the totos first arrived, to say nothing of what Dan Rutim and Ludo Ruu thought of them.

"Hey, if they decide that working with hunting dogs is permitted here at the forest's edge, would you consider buying one for the Fa clan?" I proposed to Ai Fa one night. My clan head dubiously furrowed her brow. She had finished giving lessons to the Ravitz clan and had returned to her hunting work not long ago.

"You're getting rather far ahead of yourself, aren't you? I don't see any point in thinking about that after only a few days."

"Right. But apparently, dogs are incredibly useful when it comes to protecting hunters, so I'd really like you to have one too."

"Even so, it's too early for that. And besides, we already have Gilulu, don't we?"

It was like I was begging a parent to get a pet or something—a thought that made the conversation we were having seem kinda funny, but of course, I wasn't going to back down that easily.

"As long as they're properly trained, they shouldn't be any threat to Gilulu. Why don't you stop by the Ruu settlement and interact with them a bit?"

Though she had resumed her hunting work, she still had a good amount of time to spare. And so, after finishing up her work early one day, Ai Fa followed

my advice and ran over to the Ruu settlement, getting a bit of exercise in the process.

That night, she did a complete about face and said, “I’m willing to get one, as long as our laws allow it.” It seemed their charms had worked on her as well. She was strangely excited and restless all night.

And then, we arrived at the twenty-first of the gold month.

It was a day off from our work in the post town, and it was also the sixth day since Shumiral had returned to Genos. I had the women from the neighboring clans gather together two hours from the sun hitting its peak and we swiftly wrapped up preparations for the next day. After that, I had Toor Deen stay behind for a bit to teach her a little more about how to make sweets.

She had actually been invited to cook for the dance party five days from now alongside Reina and Rimee Ruu. The others from the leading clans and I would be attending purely as guests, but Polarth had said that he still wanted to show off the skill of the chefs from the forest’s edge to his house, and so they had received a separate invitation.

As for why Toor Deen was invited, that was because Melfried’s family would be there as guests of honor, and Melfried’s daughter Odifia had made a big fuss about wanting to eat Toor Deen’s sweets, which led to the young chef being selected.

For my part, I was currently instructing Toor Deen on how to make something new. She was more skilled at making sweets than I was at this point, but I still had quite a bit of knowledge from back in my old world. I wanted to have Toor Deen put it to good use, so I decided to share a bit of it with her since we had a day off.

“Still, we’ll be working in the castle town without any help from you, Asuta. Is it really okay for me to go?”

“It is. You’ve been doing a great job of working with the folks in the northern settlement, haven’t you? And Reina and Rimee Ruu will be there too, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

We had recently received information about the outside chefs who would be

participating in the event. For the dance party, Varkas's disciples Shilly Rou, Bozl, and Roy would be working the kitchen.

"Lord Polarth tried to reach out to Sir Varkas, but apparently he's been holed up in his kitchen and rejecting all job requests for a while. He's been experimenting with an ingredient known as shaska that was delivered from Sym," the Daleim head chef, Yang, had informed me. "But his disciples are all exceptionally skilled, and with Lady Toor Deen and the others also present, I shall have to give my all as well."

Despite the calm tone of his voice, Yang seemed to be full of enthusiasm. I personally would rather have been invited as a chef instead of a guest of honor, but I would just have to put up with it this time. The house of Daleim had singled me out by name, and this was an event meant to deepen the friendship between our groups, so I had no choice but to behave myself and be satisfied with looking forward to seeing what kinds of dishes everyone else prepared.

At any rate, those were the circumstances that had led to me working with Toor Deen to create a new dessert. We were currently in the detached kitchen that her father and the others had constructed. Poitan flour, karon milk, gigi leaves, and so on were spread out atop the workstation, and we had our noses to the grindstone, trying to bring a new idea to fruition.

After a while, our little friend Rimee Ruu came rushing in. "Hey, they decided what to do with Shumiral! Papa Donda just told me, right after he got back from the castle town!"

"Huh? Really?" It had only been five days since Shumiral had started training to be a hunter, and four days since he had actually begun entering the forest. "Does that mean they've come to an agreement about whether he can become a person of the forest's edge? They reached a decision that quickly about something this important?"

"Yeah, apparently! Last night, Papa Donda talked to Dari Sauti and Gulaf Zaza. Then this morning, he went and talked to the nobles in the castle town too!"

News had of course reached me that the leading clan heads had met again. I had also heard that they had agreed that making the decision to welcome Shumiral in as a member of the Ruu or one of their subordinates should be

Donda Ruu's responsibility...but I never expected him to decide in such a rush.

"S-So, what did Donda Ruu decide to do with Shumiral?"

"I don't know! He said he'd let us know when Shumiral gets back and to wait till then!"

How was I supposed to contain myself after hearing that? "In that case, I'll have to stop by when the hunters return. Could you let Donda Ruu know?"

"Yeah, got it!" Rimee Ruu replied, then hopped up on Ruuruu, who had been waiting outside, and took off. She was as skilled at handling the reins as any adult at this point.

"So they've really decided? That easterner... No, his name was Shumiral, right? Is he going to become a person of the forest's edge?" Toor Deen asked.

"Well, the hunting dogs seem to have made a positive impression, but I'm still not sure."

I had hardly gotten to talk to Shumiral at all these past four days. Each morning, he arrived at the Ruu settlement at the upper fifth hour to take hunting lessons from Ludo Ruu and the others, which kept him so busy that all I could ever do was give him a brief greeting.

"I hardly know anything about that Shumiral man, but he's an important friend of yours, isn't he?"

"Yeah. I don't rank my friends or anything, but he's really important to me."

"Then I hope his wish to become a person of the forest's edge is granted."

If his wish *was* granted, Shumiral would finally be standing at the starting line. If it was refused, his desire to marry into the Ruu clan would never come to fruition. In that case, he would have to find a way to live a lonely life as a single westerner. Even if he could continue to work with his merchant group, he could no longer return to his old home. He would also have no use for the six hunting dogs. Just thinking about it was enough to make me feel a sinking sensation deep in my stomach.

"All right, why don't we clean up here? You should be able to keep practicing with this back at your place."

“Right. And my dad should be getting back soon too.”

I said farewell to Toor Deen and was left all by myself, terribly on edge. Ai Fa and the other hunters whose break period had recently ended would be returning soon, but Shumiral and the Ruu hunters wouldn't be back until around sunset.

For the moment, I went ahead and did some prep work so that I could make dinner right after I returned from the Ruu settlement. But right in the middle of my task, there was another knock on the door. When I went out to look, I found someone standing there who I really wasn't expecting.

“What in the world brings you here, Lili Ravitz?”

“Well, I was on my way to the Ruu settlement and I thought to stop by here.”

“To the Ruu settlement? But why?”

Lili Ravitz had been traveling on foot. Just getting to the Fa house must have taken her two hours, and it would be another hour still to walk to the Ruu settlement.

“That Shumiral man's fate was entrusted to Donda Ruu, was it not? This morning, a Fou woman stopped by and told us all about it. My clan head has ordered me to ask Donda Ruu what he intends to do.”

“Dei Ravitz said that? He sure is being impatient.” Still, seeing as how Donda Ruu had actually already made up his mind, maybe it wasn't all that hasty after all.

I informed Lili Ravitz of what Rimee Ruu had told me, and she calmly nodded and said, “I see. Then Donda Ruu must have decided to welcome that Shumiral man in as a clan member, and asked the nobles for permission.”

“That seems like the most logical conclusion, considering that he set out on a totos the day after their discussion.” Or at least, I couldn't help but hope that was the case.

At any rate, Lili Ravitz then turned to the side and bowed her head deeply. “My apologies for stopping by when you were absent, Fa clan head. Please pardon me. I had a matter to discuss with Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“Of course,” Ai Fa replied as she came into view. She was carrying a massive giba on her back. She had apparently managed to bring one down fairly early.

“Welcome home, Ai Fa. Rimee Ruu actually stopped by a little while ago.”

After hearing my explanation, Ai Fa nodded and said, “I see. Then after I finish dealing with this giba, shall we head to the Ruu settlement in a wagon? You can ride along with us if you would like to, Ravitz woman. We can escort you back in the wagon as well.”

“You do not mind? The Fa and the Ravitz are...”

“Regardless of what clans we belong to, we are all people of the forest’s edge. There is no need to refrain,” Ai Fa said, her voice quite solemn, and then she disappeared into the carving room. After watching her go, Lili Ravitz turned back to me.

“The Fa clan head can take down a giba that massive all on her own?”

“Yeah. I know you’ll probably think I’m only saying this because I’m in her clan, but she’s incredibly skilled.”

“Such wondrous strength... I suppose that is why she wishes to be a hunter despite being a woman.”

Dei Ravitz was highly critical of her about that, but his wife’s feelings on the matter remained a mystery.

“Um... By the way, why is Dei Ravitz so concerned about Donda Ruu’s decision? Is he really that invested in Shumiral’s fate?”

Her eyes still narrowed like those of a Jizo statue, Lili Ravitz tilted her head a bit. “He does not seem to be especially concerned about that Shumiral man. As he is a foreigner, my clan head naturally finds him loathsome...but he said that this person can do as he pleases as long as he can work properly as a hunter, as that would be greatly preferable to a male chef and a female hunter.”

“Oh, really? I’m glad to hear it,” I said with a sigh of relief.

Lili Ravitz stared at me calmly. “You are fine with that? In the end, all it means is that he holds the Fa clan in even lower esteem.”

“Well, I figure it’s simply going to take some time for us to understand one

another. I'm just glad Dei Ravitz isn't too strongly opposed to Shumiral joining us. After all, he's a precious friend of mine," I said, and then I tilted my head again. "But if that's how he feels, I don't see why he would send you all the way to the Ruu settlement. If he's not that interested in Shumiral's fate, why would he bother?"

"My clan head is greatly interested in those hunting dogs. He wishes to know whether turning that Shumiral man away would also apply to his beasts."

I was more than a little surprised to hear that. Did that mean he wanted the Ravitz clan to use hunting dogs?

"Yes. He believes they should not be refused if they can effectively protect hunters. Still, it takes a great deal of money to obtain hunting dogs, does it not?"

"Yeah, they apparently cost more than totos. Still, the people of the forest's edge receive reward money from the lord of the land. Any clan should have the right to use hunting dogs purchased with that money, shouldn't they?"

After the Sauti clan had asked for aid, some of the other clans had started using a bit of the reward money as well. But since the people of the forest's edge tended to live humble, honorable lives, they only used it to purchase necessities like medicine and blades.

"At any rate, the question of whether or not that Shumiral man will be accepted as a person of the forest's edge remains," Lili Ravitz stated as Ai Fa returned to the kitchen with a pot that was packed full of giba innards.

Since we still had some time to spare, I went ahead and showed Lili Ravitz how to clean them again. I had only had enough time to dedicate a single day to this topic at the Ravitz settlement, so I figured it would be necessary to review this.

After giving them a good wash, I placed the bits that perished quickly into a pot to use for dinner. They could still be preserved for several days, but our meat storage room was already nearly full with what we had purchased from other clans and what Ai Fa had brought back today. It was a bit of a happy accident, having Ai Fa return with such a big haul at a time like this.

The sun was finally starting to set as I wrapped up preparations for dinner. Ai Fa then attached Gilulu to his wagon and we started down the path to the Ruu settlement with her holding the reins.

Along the way, Lili Ravitz suddenly spoke up. “These totos have also brought a great deal of change to our lives at the forest’s edge. But you need to sell meat or meals in the post town in order to afford them, don’t you?”

“That’s true. Even the cheapest totos would cost around five hundred red coins... In terms of giba horns, tusks, and pelts, that would be around twenty giba’s worth.”

And a wagon cost more than twice that. When you threw in the reins and the harness, a totos and wagon together would cost 1,770 coins in total. Even if you tanned all the hides flawlessly, that would still be the equivalent of seventy-three or seventy-four giba.

“Totos and hunting dogs are essential for us people of the forest’s edge... My clan head, Dei, is keenly aware of that fact,” Lili Ravitz said, but then she went silent. For the time being, I didn’t feel like pressing her on the matter any further.

Eventually, Gilulu’s wagon arrived at the Ruu settlement, which appeared to be unusually crowded. I figured Shumiral and the others might have already made it back and hurried to the center of the plaza, where I found the hunters of the subordinate clans gathered.

“Well, if it isn’t Asuta and Ai Fa! Apparently, the Ruu hunters are still out in the forest.”

“Good to see you, Dan Rutim. Did Donda Ruu summon you all here?”

“Sure did! He said we should gather in the Ruu settlement after we returned from the forest! Well, he actually called for the clan head, Gazraan, though!” Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty chuckle, as his son, Gazraan Rutim, also approached us.

“It seems that Donda Ruu has settled matters with the nobles of the castle town. Will we finally be welcoming Shumiral as a clan member?” the Rutim clan head asked us.

“I’m not sure, but I’ve been feeling really uneasy about it for a while now,” I said.

Gazraan Rutim responded to my rather pathetic comment with a gentle smile. “I suspect it’ll all turn out fine. If nothing else, everyone has already acknowledged how useful those hunting dogs are.”

“But it would be easy for the Ruu clan to buy hunting dogs of their own with their current funds. It’s not like they would need to accept Shumiral in order to get ahold of them.”

“So you’re saying you think we might expel Shumiral, who informed us of these hunting dogs, and then purchase them for ourselves? That doesn’t sound like the sort of thing Donda Ruu would do. In fact, if he heard you say that, I’m certain he would erupt in a raging fury.”

“Ah, no, I was only trying to imagine the worst-case scenario there. I absolutely *do not* believe Donda Ruu is the kind of guy who’d do something that underhanded. Er, could I ask you to keep this conversation just between us?”

It seemed I was even more flustered at the moment than I had realized. I was really feeling antsy about how things would turn out for Shumiral. Gazraan Rutim simply smiled gently, as if to comfort me.

“I’ve spoken with Shumiral several times, and I’ve come to believe that he is an exceptionally honest man with a pure heart. Ludo Ruu even said he was so brave that it was hard to believe he was a townsperson. If all he wanted was to become a person of the forest’s edge, I have no doubt that he would have been swiftly accepted.”

“So he needs to be judged even more harshly because he’s asking to marry into the Ruu clan?”

“Yes. After all, that makes it a question of whether or not Donda Ruu can entrust his precious daughter to a newcomer. If this were a few months ago, I could easily imagine him saying he would never accept this unless Shumiral could beat him in a contest of strength.”

In that case, Shumiral’s desire would have been completely unobtainable.

I must have been making a pretty pathetic face, because Gazraan Rutim then

tried to cheer me up by saying, “Don’t worry. Donda Ruu is now a leading clan head of the forest’s edge. That means he’s sure to hand down a just decision. As the Rutim clan head, I’m quite certain of that.”

But then, a commotion started up all around us. The Ruu hunters had finally returned. Tightly clenching my fists, I waited for the fateful moment to arrive at last.

6

The Ruu clan hunters steadily advanced into the center of the plaza. There were nearly twenty of them in total, not including their guest, Jeeda, and Shumiral with his six hunting dogs.

They had seven giba with them altogether. Mida was carrying one of them by himself, and when he noticed us, he turned to head in our direction.

“It’s been a while, Ai Fa. And I’m happy to see you again too, Asuta.”

“Indeed. It seems you are properly carrying out your work as a hunter,” Ai Fa said.

“Yeah... I wish I could talk to you more, but I’ve gotta deal with this giba,” Mida said, walking away before the other men could hurry him along. In his place, Jiza Ruu and Shumiral came over and stood before us.

“If the heads of the subordinate clans are gathered here, the matter must have been settled with the nobles from the castle town. I’ll go get my father, so you wait here, Shumiral,” Jiza Ruu instructed.

“Of course.”

With that, Jiza Ruu departed, leaving behind Shumiral and his hunting dogs. As our conversation continued, Dan Rutim and Rau Lea started playing with the animals, their eyes sparkling all the while.

“I’m glad to see you made it back okay, Shumiral. How was the hunt today?” I asked.

“I believe, I have grasped, giba hunting techniques, fairly well. Of course, I still have, a long way, to go. My strength, is still lacking. The Ruu hunters, are very

skilled, at using, the hunting dogs.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to believe they’ve only been using them for five days now. They’ll be full-fledged dog handlers in no time at this rate.”

Someone else then approached us from the side. With his red hair and yellow eyes, it could only be the Ruu clan’s guest, Jeeda. “I’ve never used hunting dogs before either, but they sure are convenient. If the Ruu clan has the funds to spare, I think they should buy a whole lot more of them,” he said.

“I see.” In that case, it would probably be okay to get my hopes up. I was still pretty shaken up, but Shumiral looked as calm and composed as always.

Not long after that, Donda Ruu appeared from within the main house. He was followed by his three sons, Jiza, Darmu, and Ludo Ruu, as well as Mia Lea and Vina Ruu.

“I thank the heads of our subordinate clans for coming here today. This morning, I spoke directly to the nobles Melfried and Polarth, and I am now ready to announce the outcome of our discussions,” Donda Ruu started without any preamble, his voice resounding clearly. Even Dan Rutim and Rau Lea reluctantly stopped playing with the hunting dogs and rose to their feet. “After taking the events of the past several days into consideration, I’ve come to a conclusion. The other leading clan heads, Gulaf Zaza and Dari Sauti, have already granted their concurrence, as has the lord of Genos, so keep that in mind as you listen.”

“We’re not gonna have to say goodbye to these little guys, are we?” Dan Rutim questioned, but Donda Ruu ignored him.

“We will welcome the westerner Shumiral as a person of the forest’s edge.”

I felt as if I had been struck by lightning.

Then something warm touched my shoulder, so I turned my head to look, half dumbfounded, and saw Ai Fa’s pouting face right there.

“Do not lose your composure like that out of nowhere. I almost thought something was wrong.”

Apparently, I had started to collapse without realizing it, forcing Ai Fa to

support me from the side. That was how hard the news had hit me.

“Sorry,” I replied, straightening up again, and then I turned my full focus back to Donda Ruu’s voice.

“However, whether or not he receives a clan name will be determined by his actions from here on out. And it goes without saying that anyone who does not have a clan name cannot ask to marry, just like with Mida there.”

At some point, Mida had moved to stand behind us, but I paid him no mind. Donda Ruu’s words were taking up all my attention. I listened to them intently, with my heart pounding in my chest.

“Mida has displayed abnormal ability as a hunter, both in the contests of strength during our festival of the hunt, and when actually hunting giba. However, his heart is still fixated on his former family, so I have not given him the Ruu name. It is the same for the Rutim clan’s Oura and Tsvai, as well as the Dom clan’s Diga and Doddó. Yamiru Lea alone has already been granted a clan name, based on Rau Lea’s decision.”

Rau Lea shrugged indifferently. He had given Yamiru Lea the Lea name without any hesitation on the same day that he welcomed her into his clan.

“That reflects how serious it is for one without blood ties to be granted a clan name here at the forest’s edge. It cannot be done without acknowledging the recipient as equal to your own flesh and blood. Do you understand, Shumiral?”



“Yes. I want to do, all I can, to be acknowledged, as a true, clan member. And I feel, truly honored, to be welcomed as a, person of the forest’s edge, even with no clan name.”

Shumiral started to bring his fingers together, but then he stopped. That was the way of showing gratitude in Sym. Instead, he gave a little shake of his head, then bowed to Donda Ruu.

“So, what clan will he end up with? Are the Ruu going to take him in?” Dan Rutim asked.

“No,” Donda Ruu replied. “The Ruu are a leading clan here at the forest’s edge. We cannot welcome outsiders into our clan so lightly. That said, we can’t push the problem onto some other clan either, so one of our subordinate clans will have to take him.”

“Oh, so what about us?! The Rutim would gladly take charge of him! Oh, but I guess I shouldn’t just say that in our clan head’s place, though,” Dan Rutim said with a hearty chuckle, only for Donda Ruu’s gaze to look to a figure diagonally behind him instead.

“I would like to ask the Ririn clan to take on that role. Are you willing to accept my request, Giran Ririn?”

“Ah, my clan?” Giran Ririn asked, his eyes opening wide. He was a middle-aged man who was especially gentle and mild for a subordinate of the Ruu. However, he was also one of the strongest of their hunters. I thought I had a fairly decent relationship with him. “Naturally, I have no intention of opposing the will of our parent clan, but would you mind if I ask what your reasoning is?”

“I have determined that the Lea and Rutim are unsuitable. Both of their clan heads are eccentrics among our people, and it wouldn’t do for him to be given a clan name too easily.”

The clan head of the Rutim was Gazraan Rutim instead of his father Dan Rutim at this point. As a flexible and progressive thinker, it was true that the Rutim clan head often strayed from what was normal for a person of the forest’s edge. Something similar could also be said of Rau Lea, who had given Yamiru Lea a clan name at the drop of a hat.

“Out of the four remaining clans—the Min, Muufa, Maam, and Ririn—the Ririn have the smallest number of clan members. But you, Giran Ririn, often served as a guard during the revival festival, and were able to form bonds with some of the townsfolk and those traveling performers, so you are the most suited to judge someone like him fairly.”

“I’m honored. It’s true that I get along with townsfolk better than most of the other men.”

“Still, you won’t be permitted to give him a clan name as lightly as the Lea clan head did. I only gained the consent of the nobles of Genos after explaining the laws and customs of our people to them. They have put their trust in us by permitting us to welcome in an outsider as one of our own. You understand what that means, don’t you, Giran Ririn?”

“Indeed. I am not to give this Shumiral man our clan name until I cherish him as much as my own flesh and blood, and he sees us the same way, right? Understood,” Giran Ririn said, the smile lines under his eyes deepening. “I am the clan head of the Ririn, the only clan that has been permitted to become a subordinate during your generation, Donda Ruu. So what you’re asking is, will I grant him my acknowledgment in the same way that you did for me? I swear to the mother forest here and now that I won’t betray your trust.”

“Good,” Donda Ruu said with a nod. Then he turned to Shumiral. “That’s all I have to say. If you want to marry my daughter, start by living as a member of the Ririn. From now on, you’re a man of the forest’s edge, Shumiral of the Ririn clan.”

“A man of, the forest’s edge, Shumiral of, the Ririn clan,” Shumiral repeated, giving another deep bow. “I will always, conduct myself, in a way, that will not, not bring shame, to that name. Leading clan head, Donda Ruu, I thank you, for your kindness.”

“It’s no kindness. I am not a man who lets himself be moved by emotion,” Donda Ruu said in the same weighty tone before looking over everyone present. “As for the hunting dogs, the Ruu hunters have learned much about how to handle them. Starting tomorrow, we’ll begin conveying those techniques to our subordinate clans. And if it grants us strength...I will permit

the purchase of additional dogs.”

“What?! So you can get ahold of these fellows even here in Genos?!” Dan Rutim asked.

“No, that is not currently possible. However, southerners are always visiting Genos, and they would no doubt be happy to transport some here for us if we reach out to them. That is something we will have to rely on Polarth for, though.”

It sounded like Donda Ruu had discussed a lot more with Polarth than I had expected. At this point, I had so many competing emotions tugging me around that it was all I could do to remain standing.

Shumiral, meanwhile, was completely calm, his gaze fixed on Vina Ruu. For her part, Vina Ruu was half hiding behind her mother, hanging her head like a young child. Perhaps noticing that, Donda Ruu snorted. “Hmph! Shumiral, I’m sure you need to discuss all of this with your comrades in town, so you should spend some time in town today and move in with the Ririn clan tomorrow.”

“Yes, understood.”

“The Ruu clan will allow you to stay here as our guest tonight. You can head back to the post town after sharing dinner with us,” Donda Ruu declared before turning around.

After watching her husband’s large back as he left, Mia Lea Ruu broke out in a smile. “You’re cooking tonight, aren’t you, Vina? There’s still time to add one more dish, isn’t there?”

“Huh...? But I...”

“No buts. Shumiral might have become a member of our subordinate clans, but that doesn’t mean we’ll be able to have dinner with him very often outside of banquets.”

The members of the main house and I were probably the only ones who understood what those words meant—that the reason Vina Ruu had been practicing making giba curry was for a day like today. She was fidgeting so badly that I felt bad just looking at her, and after one last glance in Shumiral’s direction, she took off running toward the kitchen without saying a word.

“All right! Regardless of everything else, you now fall under the Ruu clan, Shumiral! You’d better be sure to live a life that won’t bring any dishonor to that name!” Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty slap on Shumiral’s back, and with that, the six clan heads all started approaching to greet him. Ludo Ruu, meanwhile, started strolling over to us, watching them out of the corner of his eye.

“Hey there. Good thing everything wrapped up smoothly, right?”

“Yeah, that’s for sure. I was so nervous, I almost keeled over,” I said.

“Sounds pretty over the top. You should really leave all the worrying to the folks who are actually involved.” Ludo Ruu gave a carefree laugh, and then he looked between me and Ai Fa. “By the way, I’ve been wondering for a while now... Why haven’t you given Asuta the Fa clan name, Ai Fa?”

My clan head did not respond.

“It’s not like you haven’t acknowledged him, right? Is it so he can’t go and marry a woman from some other clan?”

“Of course not! My reasons are my own!”

“You don’t need to get so angry about it. Still, it’d be a pain to change how I talk to you now, so even if you do get the Fa clan name, I’ll still just call you Asuta.”

Having finished stirring things up with our clan, Ludo Ruu headed back over to the hunting dogs. At some point, Rimee Ruu and the other young children had gathered around the dogs and were now playing with them, along with Dan Rutim.

Mida was standing behind us, looking like he wanted to talk, and we still had to see Lili Ravitz back home too, so I decided it would be best to try to clear this up right away.

“So, having a clan name isn’t really a big deal to me, but what *are* your reasons for not giving me one, Ai Fa?” I whispered, only for my clan head to frown in a really unhappy way and keep her mouth firmly shut. “I’m not worried about it or anything. I mean, this is *you* we’re talking about. It’s not like you haven’t accepted me as family or anything, right?”

Even now, Ai Fa didn't speak a word.

"H-Huh? Wait, have I still not fully earned your trust?"

"That's not it at all!" Ai Fa started to loudly protest, but then she scratched her head. "Still, I have my reasons. If you had followed the customs of the forest's edge, I would have done the same and given you the clan name."

"The customs of the forest's edge? Have I broken them somehow? I don't have any idea what you mean... Or actually, it's more like I've gone against them in so many ways, it's hard to know what you're talking about specifically."

"Then there is no need to concern yourself with it. There's no issue with things staying as they are, is there?" Ai Fa said, turning away in a huff, but that just made it all the more difficult for me to leave things be.

"Wh-What's the matter? If I'm doing something wrong, shouldn't I fix that?"

"If it isn't causing any issues, there's no need for that."

"Uh, but if I'm doing something I shouldn't without even knowing, that's concerning to me. What in the world is it?"

"If you truly refuse to let this go, then just let me say..." Ai Fa said, lowering her voice further so those around us couldn't hear. "If you became a proper member of my clan, it wouldn't be fitting for you to call me by my full name, now would it?"

I was taken aback, but then it slowly dawned on me. Members of the same house only used one another's full names when introducing someone to an outsider. It was different when you had a main branch and a side branch, of course—Ludo Ruu and his siblings called Shin Ruu by his full name, after all. But when they lived in the same house, they would say stuff like Papa Donda, Jiza, or Rimee instead. In other words, when I called her Ai Fa, I wasn't following the customs of the forest's edge because I included her clan name... I was supposed to call her by her first name alone.

I gulped. Then, I tried rolling the name "Ai" off my tongue, only to instantly feel flustered. "Gah, I can't! I feel so embarrassed I could die! Sorry, I need more time!"

Everyone turned to look at me in surprise. At the same time, Ai Fa went beet red and kicked me in the leg.

“That’s why I said there’s no need to force yourself to change if it isn’t causing any issues! What in the world is going on with you?!”

“S-Sorry. I’m just embarrassed about how much I don’t know and don’t think about.”

“Asuta, Ai Fa, it’s bad to fight,” Mida chimed in.

“We’re not fighting! I’m simply disciplining a foolish member of my clan!”

This time, I didn’t even try to offer any excuse. Still, I couldn’t help but feel out of sorts.

As we dealt with that untimely disturbance, Shumiral approached us next by himself. “Asuta, I am sorry, for worrying you. My first desire, has been granted.”

“Yeah, congratulations. I really, truly mean that, Shumiral.”

“Thank you. It all began, when I met you, Asuta,” Shumiral replied with a calm smile. “I met you, at the end, of the green month. I did not know, back then, that my fate, was about to shift, so greatly. This fate, was brought into being, by multiple gods... The eastern god Sym, the western god Selva, and the forest of Morga.”

“Right. I definitely never would’ve guessed that someday I’d be able to call you a fellow person of the forest’s edge.” As I spoke, I felt a lump form in my throat. As of today, we were both people of the forest’s edge. We were also the only two foreigners living here without any blood ties. I doubted any of the others would be able to understand how happy this moment made us.

When we first met, we were just a stall owner and a customer. We had only known each other for about a month, and yet Shumiral had impacted my life tremendously. I had been drawn to him right from the start.

He had been expressionless, as was fitting for someone from Sym, but he had sometimes shown me an incredibly kind gaze and occasionally even a childish side, and I loved his awkward way of speaking in the western tongue. I liked pretty much everything about him.

“My next desire, is to be acknowledged, by the Ririn clan head,” Shumiral calmly stated. I went ahead and shot him a smile, feeling like I was about to cry.

“Giran Ririn’s a really nice guy. I’m sure the two of you will get along great.”

“Yes. I am glad, to have received, a new family. I will try my best, so that Giran Ririn and I, can come to see one another, as true family, just like, the two of you.”

Ai Fa was still looking rather displeased, but she made a point of restoring her solemn dignity as she turned toward Shumiral.

“I am certain you will work as hard as Asuta does. Giran Ririn is a fine clan head, so you would do well to follow his example of how to live as a person of the forest’s edge.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“So Shumiral’s under the Ruu clan now too? I’m happy to have new family,” Mida added.

“Right. I look forward, to working, alongside you, Mida of the Ruu clan.”

I couldn’t help but feel moved by even that casual interaction.

Before long, Shumiral would be wearing a hunter’s cloak and a necklace of tusks and horns. And after he had spent a year here at the forest’s edge, he would switch to a leather cloak and head out on a journey as a merchant. It was as remarkable a way of life as my own—going into town to work as a chef—if not more so. The leading clan heads and the nobles of Genos had accepted that lifestyle, and that was undoubtedly yet another major change the people of the forest’s edge had undergone.

He was a man of the forest’s edge, Shumiral of the Ririn clan.

If his clan head, Giran Ririn, acknowledged him, he would become Shumiral Ririn. And then, would he become Shumiral Ririn Ruu? Or, if he was permitted to have her marry into his clan, would she become Vina Ruu Ririn instead? There was no way to know yet.

Even so, Shumiral had been permitted to take a huge first step. For now, I hoped he would reflect on that joy as he tasted the giba curry Vina Ruu had

been working hard on for the past few months.

Those were the thoughts that filled my head as the twenty-first day of the gold month steadily came to a close.

Chapter 3: The House of Daleim's Dance Party

1

It was now the twenty-sixth of the gold month, five days after Shumiral had been accepted as a person of the forest's edge, and it was also the day of the dance party the house of Daleim was putting on.

We carried out our work like always until the early afternoon, then after driving everyone back to the settlement, we got ready to head out once more. The only ones outside of the leading clans heading to the castle town were Ai Fa, Toor Deen, and myself.

Though it had been suggested that the Fou and Beim could attend as observers, they had decided to respectfully decline. Apparently, Baadu Fou and the Beim clan head were hesitant about the idea of being invited as honored guests and required to wear banquet attire in the style of the castle town.

"Sorry, but we're gonna have you guys observe the event as the representatives for the small clans this time around," Baadu Fou had told me on a prior day, looking truly apologetic.

At any rate, we had no time to take it easy. When I arrived at the Fa house by wagon, I found Ai Fa and Toor Deen waiting there for me with a large number of wooden boxes. Toor Deen had taken the day off from work in the post town today so she could prepare the dessert she would be serving in the castle town.

Normally, Toor Deen would only be tasked with making dessert, but based on my proposal, she had ended up preparing a small snack in addition. She had borrowed the help of the women from the neighboring clans for that, but they had already left.

"Good work. Looks like you finished the preparations okay."

Toor Deen shot me a smile, her expression a jumble of both tension and a sense of accomplishment. After taking her and Ai Fa on board, we headed to

the Ruu settlement, where Reina Ruu greeted me with a smile. “Welcome. We’re all done with the preparations, so let’s hurry to the castle town.”

Sheera Ruu and I would be attending as guests, so Reina Ruu was in charge of the chefs for today. However, she appeared to be dealing with the pressure being placed on her in a positive way. There was a great deal of pride and excitement showing on her face as she smiled brightly at me.

“Oh, Asuta, could you let Rimee ride with you too? She’s been wanting to talk with Ai Fa.”

“Of course. I don’t mind. There are only three of us over here, after all.”

Even without Rimee Ruu, there were still five passengers in Ruuruu’s wagon. They included the guests, Darmu and Sheera Ruu; the chef, Reina Ruu; and the guards, Ludo and Shin Ruu.

“We’ll be meeting up with the folks from the Zaza and Sauti in front of the castle gates, right? So let’s get going,” Ludo Ruu said.

After letting Ruuruu’s wagon, which he was driving, take the lead, we once again set off down the path. As Rimee Ruu was clinging to Ai Fa, I was left to handle the reins.

“I haven’t been to the castle town in a while! Let’s give it everything we’ve got, Toor Deen!” Rimee Ruu said.

“Uh, yeah. I look forward to working with you.”

“You made some sort of new sweet again, right? Hee hee, I’m looking forward to it!” Rimee Ruu’s adorable earnestness seemed to be on full display this afternoon.

When we arrived, Reina Ruu, Rimee Ruu, and Toor Deen would be manning the kitchen alongside Yang, Shilly Rou, Bozl, and Roy from the castle town. If it had been possible, I would have preferred to work with them too.

“Rimee Ruu, how is Mikel doing?” Ai Fa asked along the way.

“Oh, right!” Rimee Ruu energetically replied. “He can walk around on his own now with a cane! But Bartha’s had to chew him out a couple times, ’cause he gets a fever if he pushes himself too hard.”

“I see. That’s good to hear.”

“Yeah! Myme’s cheered up a lot too, now that Mikel’s doing better.”

I saw Myme on a daily basis, so I had already seen that for myself, but when she had heard that Polarth wanted to invite a number of chefs to this party, Myme had looked rather worried. Apparently, she had been concerned that Mikel would say he wanted her to take part.

If the nobles became aware of her skill, it would eventually give her a foothold that she could use to get work in the castle town. On top of that, Varkas’s apprentices had been invited to cook for the party as well. Varkas favored Mikel and Myme, so he would probably be the most direct about recommending her. However, Myme didn’t want to move to the castle town. Instead, she wanted to keep living with her father more than anything.

In the distant future, it was possible she might wish to become a chef working in the castle town, but there was no rush. If she wanted to try for that in five or even ten years, it wouldn’t be a problem for her. What she needed now was to have some time to live in peace with her father, the only family she had left. Perhaps sensing his daughter’s feelings, Mikel hadn’t said anything more on the subject, allowing Myme to finally smile from the depths of her heart again.

Well, I’m sure Mikel can’t stand the thought of staying at the Ruu settlement without paying lodging fees, but Reina Ruu and the others probably want them to stick around forever.

I remembered that one of Shumiral’s companions from the Silver Vase, the star reader, gave me a prediction once, a long time ago.

“The people of the forest’s edge will gain great strength through their encounter with Mikel. With that, a new path shall open to them.” I think it was something like that...

It was true that Mikel had given the people of the forest’s edge great strength. It was thanks to Mikel that I was rescued from the Turan manor, and then later he taught me how to prepare jerky more efficiently, how to cook brains and eyeballs, and how to handle unfamiliar ingredients. He really had helped me in all kinds of ways. However, all of that might have been just a precursor. It was possible that Mikel would help us even more in the future.

Meeting Mikel's daughter, Myme, had made Reina and Sheera Ruu start aiming for even greater heights as chefs. If Mikel and Myme stayed at the Ruu settlement, who could say what impact they might have. Even now, Reina and Sheera Ruu were getting more and more fired up each time they watched Myme prepare her cooking for business.

I'm not one to believe in such things, but it feels like some sort of fate that they've started living at the Ruu settlement.

Still, regardless of whether fate existed or not, it was up to people to grab ahold of it as they lived their lives. That was what I believed. Thinking that we were simply walking the paths that fate had laid out for us from the start seemed like a gloomy existence. We all had to work our hardest to pick out the best path forward.

I was still ruminating on those rather sentimental topics when our wagons arrived at the castle gates. It was the first time I had been here since the friendship banquet held by the house of Saturas roughly a month ago. The members of the other leading clans and the guards greeting them were already standing there in front of the gates and the lowered drawbridge. As our wagons approached, an especially large figure among them casually waved at us.

"We've been waiting for you. Everybody's here now."

"Sorry for being late. I'm glad to see you looking well, Dari Sauti."

"Yeah. I'll be able to get back to my hunting work before much longer," Dari Sauti remarked with a calm smile. Bowing her head beside him was his wife, Mil Fei Sauti, who I was seeing for the first time in three months. That was how long it had been since Dari Sauti and Donda Ruu had needed to step back from hunting. Dari Sauti had fractured his right arm, but he no longer needed a sling or a splint, and looked perfectly healthy.

"So you're finally here, eh? You sure made us wait a while," a large figure stated, getting up from the roofless wagon beside Dari Sauti. It was Geol Zaza, a hunter from the north who wore a giba pelt cloak with the head still attached. His twin sister, Sufira Zaza, was seated there beside him with her knees together. That was everyone from the forest's edge who would be attending the dance party.

“Well then, please leave your wagons in our care. We will deliver your luggage to your destination on your behalf,” the soldiers, guiding us as they had done so many times in the past, said as we were led over to a pair of fine carriages meant for transport, each drawn by two totos. Though I had been invited to the castle town countless times by now, I still had never walked in on foot.

At any rate, we were heading to the Daleim estate...with Geol Zaza glaring at Ai Fa and Shin Ruu the whole time. Two carriages had been provided for us, and for some reason he had decided to join us in this one when we split up.

“What a scary look. What, do you still see yourself as Shin Ruu’s rival or something?” Ludo Ruu asked Geol Zaza, taking a break from his chat with Rimee Ruu. “Glaring won’t make you stronger than him, you know. If you wanna get better, then you’ve just gotta train harder as a hunter, right?”

“I don’t need you to tell me that,” Geol Zaza muttered in a sulky tone, turning away in a huff. Now that I thought about it, Ludo Ruu had gone along as a guard to the banquet for the swordsmanship tournament, so he must have gotten to know Geol Zaza there. This was a novel experience for me, seeing him talk to the Zaza hunter in his usual casual tone.



“You’ve got amazing hunters like Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom up at the northern settlement, so if you train with them, you’re sure to get stronger. Shin Ruu’s gotten so strong because he’s been training with me, Rau Lea, and Darmu.”

“Are you really stronger than Shin Ruu?”

“Yeah. Or at least, I’ve never lost to him in a contest of strength at a festival of the hunt,” Ludo Ruu said, turning and shooting Shin Ruu a grin. “But who knows how the next one will go. You’ve seriously gotten strong, Shin Ruu.”

“I still have a long way to go,” Shin Ruu quietly replied.

Watching them out of the corner of my eye, I whispered to Ai Fa, “Now that I think about it, the men who are coming along as guests are a pretty awe-inspiring bunch. I’m really glad Dari Sauti will be there.”

Ludo Ruu and company were only coming to guard the chefs. That only left Dari Sauti, Darmu Ruu, Geol Zaza, and myself for the men in attendance. The average age among the group wasn’t that old, but they could still be awfully intimidating.

Still, Ai Fa didn’t seem to understand what I was thinking, as she tilted her head and replied, “Hmm? I don’t quite know what you mean by awe-inspiring, but if Dari Sauti were uninjured, he would easily be a match for the youngest Zaza son or Darmu Ruu as a hunter.”

“No, this isn’t about their strength as hunters, I’m talking about how fierce their appearances are.”

The question mark seemed to still be lingering over Ai Fa’s head, so I gave up on trying to explain. After all, nobody could intimidate my clan head, no matter what they looked like.

Ai Fa beat Darmu Ruu in a contest of strength and believes she couldn’t possibly lose to Geol Zaza, full stop, so of course they wouldn’t intimidate her, I thought as the totes-drawn carriages arrived at their destination. As the door swung open from the outside and we stepped down, a rotund figure hurriedly approached us.

“We have been awaiting you, dear guests from the forest’s edge! Allow me to

extend my sincerest gratitude to you for accepting our invitation.” Naturally, it was Polarth. He was wearing a flowing robe, different from the banquet attire we had seen him in previously.

“I’m sorry we ended up bringing along such a large number of people. Thank you so much for your understanding,” Dari Sauti replied. As one of the leading clan heads, he was the one in charge of our group.

“Well then, I must greet our other guests, so our maids will guide you in my place.”

One of the maids in question was Sheila. After casually glancing in Ai Fa’s direction, she gave a polite bow. “Allow me to first show you to the bathhouse. This way, please.”

The Daleim manor was a brick structure, and was a fair amount smaller than the former Turan manor. The roof was blue rather than yellow, but the overall style seemed to be fairly similar. After we walked through a thick double door with guards watching over it, we passed over a rug meant to clean our feet, after which the brick floor was openly exposed. It wasn’t as large as the Turan manor or as decorated as the Saturas one, but it was fittingly grand for a noble estate, and everything had been carefully cleaned.

I didn’t know much about the hierarchy of nobles in Genos, but as far as I could tell, the houses of the counts were the immediate subordinates of the duke. Apparently, there were viscounts below them in turn, but I didn’t know anything about them. At any rate, even if it wasn’t as impressive as the Turans’ had been, this was the estate of one of only three counts in Genos. It was only natural that the manor of Count Daleim wouldn’t be shabby in any way.

“This is the bathhouse for the gentlemen. The ladies are to come this way.”

Sheila led Ai Fa and the other women farther down the hallway, leaving us with some page boys. The bathhouse was, unsurprisingly, similar to the one I was familiar with. Everyone first stepped into the antechamber, then one of the pages brought his hands together in front of him and bowed.

“We have been told that you will not need assistance with cleansing yourselves. Is this true?”

“Indeed. We’ll handle it ourselves, so you don’t need to bother with trying to help us. In this group, the only one of us who hasn’t used one of these bathhouses before should be you, Darmu Ruu, correct?”

“Yeah, but I’ve heard about them from my brothers, so it shouldn’t be any issue.”

Apparently, Dari Sauti and Geol Zaza had previously used a bathhouse before the last celebratory party. Actually, aside from Darmu Ruu and myself, everyone here had attended that event.

The hunters went ahead and tossed their clothing into a woven basket the pages had left here in the antechamber. Personally, I felt fortunate that Shin and Ludo Ruu were here, because Dari Sauti, Geol Zaza, and Darmu Ruu were each around 180 centimeters tall, and they were all absolutely shredded. Dari Sauti stood out especially strongly. His kind-looking face made it easy to forget that his build was on the same level as Donda Ruu’s. He was both the tallest and the heaviest out of our group, and it would be no exaggeration to call him a mountain of muscle.

“Aww, there’s no place to bathe in the water here,” Ludo Ruu quietly grumbled as he stepped into the steamy room. Sure enough, there didn’t seem to be any sort of sunken bathtub. There hadn’t been one at the Turan manor either, so it seemed they weren’t standard for such residences.

At any rate, we hurriedly cleaned ourselves and exited the bathhouse. Then the four of us who were going to attend the dance party were presented with brand new waistcloths and gown-like robes.

“Your banquet attire has been prepared in a separate room, so please put these on. We shall lead you there shortly.”

As they watched us out of the corner of their eyes, Ludo and Shin Ruu put their own clothes back on. Meanwhile, Darmu Ruu and Geol Zaza looked rather displeased as they dressed themselves in the unfamiliar clothing. Their fathers had undoubtedly told both of them to abide by the customs of the nobles.

“Hey, are the women out yet?” Ludo Ruu called out.

One of the pages politely replied, “No. The ladies must wait for the moisture

to leave their hair, so I believe they will need a bit more time.”

“In that case, Shin Ruu and I will wait here for them. Our job is to guard the chefs, after all.”

With that, Ludo and Shin Ruu separated from us, and the four of us who were guests for today were led all the way to the second floor, and into a large, surprisingly jumbled room. This was undoubtedly the first time I had seen a room this messy at a noble’s manor. From what I could tell, it seemed to be a wardrobe room combined with a changing room. As the other guests would probably change into their attire at their own homes, there wasn’t anyone but us around.

“Please, come this way.”

The pages guided us farther in, where an older tailor and two youths who seemed to be his assistants were waiting. The youths looked tense, but the older tailor smiled graciously at us.

“We have been waiting for you. We have prepared banquet attire for the four of you, as the count’s wife has ordered. They must be properly fitted to your bodies, so we shall handle you one at a time.”

And so, we let the old man take care of us one at a time. The other three hadn’t been measured, so their hems needed to be adjusted a bit, and so on, but the man’s skills were so polished that it didn’t even take ten minutes to get one of us dressed.

“Well? Is it to your satisfaction?”

“Hmm... Well, I don’t know what makes for good or bad banquet attire...but at the very least, my movements don’t feel restricted,” Dari Sauti replied with a smile that almost didn’t seem to be strained at all.

I was just glad I didn’t look overly weird, but I did think that the banquet attire looked quite striking on my three comrades. That especially went for Darmu Ruu. He was the handsomest man among us, and was both slender and tall. Shin Ruu had looked a bit like a young prince when he had been put in military attire before, and Darmu Ruu seemed every bit as gallant now. Like, seriously stylish.

He had on a sleeveless vest, loose-fitting trousers that cinched at his ankles, and an ornamental cloak that hung from his shoulders to his waist. They were all made of what looked like high-quality silk, and there was embroidery with golden thread around the collar and hems. There was also a colorful sash tied around his waist, with the excess dangling off to around his knees. His exposed upper arms and wrists were adorned with golden accessories, and his vest had an unfamiliar dark green crest sewn into it.

And then there was his hair. The other two had short hair, so nothing had been done with it, but Darmu Ruu was a different story. He normally left his bangs to hang naturally, but they had been combed out, and his hair had been brought together loosely at the back of his head with a decorative string. If it weren't for his piercing gaze and the scar on his right cheek, he could have easily passed as a young noble or even a prince.

Once the tailor looked good and satisfied with Darmu Ruu, he turned my way. He reached up with his sinewy fingers and very gently ran them over my hair.

"My apologies. Your hair is quite soft, but the ends cannot help but spring up. If you so desire, we can bring you oil."

"Ah, no, I'm fine. I don't rub oil into my hair."

I had naturally fine hair. I was well aware of the fact that it was hard to handle, but if I did rub oil into it like Luidross and Leeheim, I would just look comical, like a ventriloquist dummy.

The rest of us had been dressed in more or less the same sort of outfit as Darmu Ruu. There were some slight differences in the colors of the fabric and the ornamentation, but nothing all that significant. However, each of our vests had the same emblem on them, with the same shape and color of thread used for the embroidery.

Perhaps noticing the same thing I had, Dari Sauti poked at his chest and said, "These are the sort of characters used in town, correct? What sort of meaning does it hold?"

"That is an emblem made by adding ornamentation to the characters. They originally meant 'forest,' and green thread was selected to match that."

“I see... Forest. Did you pick these characters?”

“No. They were requested by the lady of the house.”

“Ah, I see,” Dari Sauti said with a smile. This one wasn’t strained, though. It was his usual gentle one. “You have my gratitude for offering an inurbane lot like us such fine clothing. We’ll tell them ourselves later, but I would like to offer my thanks to the nobles who provided them for us as well.”

“I am undeserving of such praise,” the old tailor said, offering us a gentle smile of his own. He didn’t seem prejudiced against the people of the forest’s edge in the least. That might have been the reason he had been put in charge of us.

“Well then, allow me to show you to the antechamber. This way, please,” the page who had been waiting off to the side all this time said, leading us out of the room.

Along the way, Geol Zaza started whispering to Dari Sauti, unable to hold himself back any longer. “This whole thing is such a hassle. Way more trouble than what we had to put up with for the banquet after that tournament.”

“These are the customs of the nobles, so we have no choice but to abide by them. If you cannot do so, then you should simply refuse the next such request.”

“Hmph. I think I will.”

Geol Zaza seemed quite displeased, but the banquet attire also suited him quite well. Actually, without the giba pelt over his head covering part of his face, he looked a lot more his age. He had a scar above his right eye and a really square face that looked pretty rugged, but there was still a sort of boyishness about him. It was pretty fitting when you considered the fact that he was only sixteen, three years younger than Darmu Ruu.

I was a little worried for a moment there, but he probably won’t stand out too badly at the event. Actually, I hope that’s true for me too...

Next, we were led into a small empty room. It was the complete opposite of the last one, with very little inside, except for a leather couch and some small tables. It looked to have around ten square meters of floor space, and felt like it

was just barely short of being too barren.

“Please wait here. I believe your companions will be ready soon.” Having said that, the page moved to wait off to the side of the door.

“Hmph!” Geol Zaza snorted as he flopped down onto the couch.

The women showed up around fifteen minutes later. Sheila announced their arrival, and the door opened for them. When I saw Ai Fa, I forgot to breathe for a moment.

“Ooh, what a striking difference,” Dari Sauti remarked in amusement as Ai Fa, Sheera Ruu, Mil Fei Sauti, and Sufira Zaza entered. The unadorned room turned dazzling in an instant as they stepped inside.

They were all wearing dresses in the style of the castle town. To me, they had a foreign feel about them, perhaps Middle Eastern or Persian. At any rate, it was clear that they were party dresses meant for noblewomen.

The upper parts of their dresses smoothly traced the contours of their bodies, while the skirt portions bloomed outward. They had deep, wide necklines lined with frills that thankfully weren’t overly showy, making it look like countless little flower petals had been sewn into them.

The dresses were sleeveless, so the women’s arms were fully exposed, and they had stylish gleaming jewelry on their fingers, wrists, and upper arms. On top of that, their hair had been let down and similarly adorned with various accessories. Aside from Mil Fei Sauti—as she was the only married woman present—they all had long hair that came down to around their hips, which made them look even more radiant.

Though the dresses had boldly revealing necklines, the women of the forest’s edge normally dressed so lightly that they actually had noticeably less exposed skin than usual right now. The dresses were long enough to come all the way down to their ankles, after all. But even so, there was no denying that they looked especially glamorous and charming tonight. Regardless, I still only had eyes for Ai Fa. She was just that special to me.

My clan head’s dress was light blue, which contrasted wonderfully with her dark skin and blonde hair. It didn’t have any kind of sash, but had clearly been

fitted to her body. It was tight around her hips, doing nothing to conceal her beautiful contours. As she slowly approached, I felt as if my heart were about to explode.

“A-Ai Fa... How are you walking so gracefully like that?”

“Hnn. When I visited the Turan manor to rescue you, I was taught how they walk in the castle town. I believe it best to walk like this when wearing such attire.” As soon as she opened her mouth, it was clear that she was still the same Ai Fa as always. She also had her usual calm expression on her face, but she still looked like a different person entirely. She leaned in close to my face and whispered, “Well...?”

“W-Well what? You look super pretty, obviously.”

“Never mind the banquet attire. I was asking about this,” Ai Fa said with a stealthy pout, pointing at her throat, where a shining blue stone was hanging over her lovely collarbone. It was the necklace I had gifted her, which she always kept on her person. However, the leather cord had a silver chain and some decorative strings wrapped around it, making it look a bit more extravagant than usual.



“Right, that’s the necklace I gave you. It looks kinda showy now, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed. When I last wore the attire of the castle town, I had to remove this necklace because I was told it was unfitting. But this time, that Sheila woman had a solution ready so it could be worn as part of this banquet attire.”

“I see. Sheila sure is considerate, huh?”

“She is. She remembered how displeased I was about not being able to wear it,” Ai Fa replied, and then she broke out in a smile. “I hid it under my waistcloth anyway, but I believe having it hanging from my neck is best, so I am sincerely grateful to her.”

I had positioned myself in the corner of the room earlier, so I was the only one who could see Ai Fa’s expression as she faced me. That must have been why she was okay with letting her guard down and being this open with her emotions. Faced with her unbelievably radiant smile, I was so enraptured that I almost felt dizzy. Honestly, I had to congratulate myself for not hugging her automatically.

If I’m being affected this badly before the dance party even starts, how am I ever going to make it all the way to the end?

Despite my concerns, the moment when the Daleim dance party would begin was fast approaching.

2

After waiting for a while in the antechamber, we were finally invited to proceed to the event hall.

We passed by numerous pages and maids, all rushing around in a hurry. There must have been all kinds of things they still had to do, from greeting guests to final preparations for the dance party. Our destination was a door guarded by men with longswords, with a reception desk staffed by a neat and tidy woman in a beautiful outfit. Our guide, Sheila, whispered to the woman, who approached us with a woven basket under her arm.

“Pardon me. Please allow me to attach these floral ornaments.”

“Floral ornaments, you say?” Dari Sauti asked.

“Correct. The red flowers indicate that you are married, while the blue ones show that you are accompanied by a partner.”

So this was the method for avoiding romantic approaches that had been mentioned. The woman pinned red flowers to Dari’s and Mil Fei Sauti’s chests, while most of the rest of us got blue ones. However, I was confused when the Zaza siblings stepped back from the woman without being given anything. Sufira Zaza noticed and shot me a chilly glare.

“We are brother and sister, which apparently means we are not protected in the same way you are, so according to the customs of the castle town, Geol and I do not get flowers.”

“Huh? Doesn’t that mean you don’t have any grounds to complain if someone approaches you romantically?”

“Yes, but even so, the nobles of Genos have been told that they aren’t permitted to approach us people of the forest’s edge frivolously.”

Sufira Zaza stopped talking after that, while Geol Zaza stifled a yawn. He had been uninterested in any of this from the very start. Had Gulaf Zaza intentionally selected these two in order to test the ethics of the nobles? I couldn’t see any other reason for him to have intentionally sent this pair while being aware of the customs of the castle town.

Of course, Polarth did say that he was going to be really sure that people knew what was and wasn’t allowed on that front, because of what happened with Leeheim...but will it really be okay?

Geol Zaza was one thing—he still had the presence of a hunter even when clad in banquet attire—but Sufira Zaza had a remarkably graceful face. Sure, her gaze tended to be awfully sharp, but some people might see that and think it was simply a sign of her being highly intelligent. Plus, she was undeniably pretty in her fine banquet outfit.

Also, among those with blue flowers, there was Sheera Ruu, who was charming in a very different way. She wasn’t overly flashy, but it had already been made clear back at the Rutim wedding celebration that she had a totally

different feel about her when she was wearing banquet attire.

Even in the finery of the castle town, she was as lovely as a small flower blooming under the light of the moon. Obviously, when it came to charm, Ai Fa was in a class all her own from my perspective, but Sheera Ruu was definitely no less attractive than Sufira Zaza. Anybody could see that she and the handsome second son of the Ruu looked good standing next to each other. Actually, a quiet girl with a strong heart was probably a perfect fit for a fierce guy like Darmu Ruu. That might have just been wishful thinking on my part, but I couldn't help feeling that way.

Even Mil Fei Sauti with her red flower made a very strong impression. She was a resolute woman, a bit like Sufira Zaza, and it was easy to see the difference her age made, despite the fact that she looked younger than she actually was. She was ten years older than Sufira Zaza and was a mother of three, so even though this was her first time visiting the castle town, she looked perfectly dignified.

Needless to say, neither the men nor the women seemed to be feeling nervous. In fact, the person who was the most out of sorts in our group seemed to be me. But while I was ruminating on that, the doors to the event hall opened wide, and one of the pages declared in a clear, boyish soprano, "Presenting Sir Dari Sauti, leading clan head of the forest's edge, and his wife, Lady Mil Fei Sauti."

With that, Sheila led the two of them inside. Apparently, the guests attending the dance party needed to be announced. Next, the Zaza siblings were ushered in, followed by the pair from the Ruu clan, and finally Ai Fa and myself, which was likely based on our ranking at the forest's edge. In order, we had a current leading clan head, an heir to that post, the second son of a leading clan head, and then a couple members of a clan not connected to any of the leaders.

As we passed through the door, I saw around forty or fifty men and women clad in beautiful banquet attire already there. I had heard this was going to be a fairly exclusive event, but it turned out that there were still quite a few attendees. However, the event hall was large enough that even with this many guests, it felt a little empty. I figured it could probably fit around two hundred people if you really crammed them in.

Fittingly for an event hall, it was gorgeously decorated. There was a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, as well as candlesticks atop the round tables that were dotted about, making the room as bright as the outdoors during the day. There were also a large number of open windows on the upper portion of the walls, to allow for proper ventilation.

All that light was doing a good job of illuminating all the showy decorations I had come to expect of an event in the castle town. The floor was covered by a thick rug, and there were velvet tapestries hanging from the walls. An especially large banner with the Daleim family crest on it was hanging from the wall directly across from the entrance, and there were huge statues carved from white stone on either side of it. The one on the right was a man, and on the left there was a woman. Both of them were clad in long robes, and the man was carrying a disk that looked like a wheel, while the woman held what appeared to be a chalice. They were so lifelike that they felt as if they'd start moving at any moment. Were those gods that appeared in the myths of this continent?

The pleasant sound of music was filling the room. There was a group of six musicians over by the right wall, giving an enchanting performance. I saw that one of them had the same seven-stringed guitar-like instrument the traveling performer Neeya used, and there was also a percussion instrument like a bongo drum, a string instrument that was plucked with the fingers similar to a sitar, and a fife, among others. Together, they wove a gentle melody that sounded like it came from somewhere in the eastern part of my old world.

Some of the members of the crowd casually glanced in our direction as they chatted with each other and enjoyed the performance. For most of them, this was probably their first time seeing people of the forest's edge. Even if we were dressed similarly to them, there was unsurprisingly nobody else around with a build like Dari Sauti's or Geol Zaza's, and their dark skin caused them to stand out all the more.

"Dear guests from the forest's edge, this way, please."

Sheila guided us to a table farther in on the left hand side. However, I didn't see any sort of chairs. It seemed that this would be a standing buffet party. On top of the table sat a large number of bottles and drinking cups made of glass and clay.

“We have been waiting for you. I am glad to find you in good health, Dari Sauti,” someone said, quietly approaching us from a neighboring table. It was Melfried, clad in white formal clothes that were more western in style by the standards of my old world.

“Ah, finally a familiar face. I’m glad to see you looking well too, Melfried.”

“Indeed... Is this your wife, Dari Sauti?”

When Melfried’s chilly gray eyes turned her way, Mil Fei Sauti remained undaunted and gave a small bow. “I am Dari Sauti’s wife, Mil Fei Sauti. I am not familiar with the customs of the castle town, so if I fail to show proper respect in any way, I apologize.”

“This is a dance party, so there is no need for such formalities. And you are the Zaza clan head’s son and daughter, correct?”

Geol Zaza had of course fought him in the swordsmanship tournament, and Sufira Zaza had met him as well at the celebratory banquet. Faced with a man who had once defeated him, Geol Zaza glared at Melfried with a look of great displeasure.

That just left the members of the Fa and Ruu clans. Darmu Ruu was the only one among us who was essentially meeting him for the first time. That said, the remaining three of us had a rather unusual relationship with him.

“I’m glad to see that you’re doing well, Melfried. Er, it feels kinda strange to reintroduce myself now, but...”

“Asuta of the Fa clan. It is true that we have seen one another here and there, but this seems to be our first time formally introducing ourselves to one another.”

I had been invited to the castle town as a chef many times now, and I had often stood in the same space as Melfried, as he was the mediator with the people of the forest’s edge. Moreover, the first time we had met had been long before any of that. However, back then I hadn’t been aware of his true identity. In order to expose the crimes of the Suun clan, Melfried had wrapped his face in bandages and used the fake name Haan of Dabagg, working alongside Kamyua Yoshu. He had also been there when I watched Zattsu Suun being taken away

after the old former clan head had been captured in the forest, when I was attacked by Tei Suun, and when we directly confronted Cyclaeus and Ciluel. But even though we had both been present for so many major events, we hadn't directly spoken much at all, leaving our relationship in an odd position.

"Oh? How unfair of you, going on ahead without us. Will you not introduce us to our guests from the forest's edge as well?" Two figures came up behind Melfried—Eulifia and Odifia, his wife and daughter. I had spoken with them fairly frequently at dinners and tea parties.

"My... Are you perhaps the one who was dressed like an officer at the tea party?" Eulifia asked.

"Indeed," Ai Fa replied with a nod. "I am the head of the Fa clan, a woman of the forest's edge known as Ai Fa. I'm not sure how to speak politely, so I ask your forgiveness."

"My, you have the appearance of a woman but you speak like a gentleman. How delightful," Eulifia said with a smile, looking like she was truly enjoying herself. Ai Fa remained politely expressionless as the noblewoman continued. "And you... My apologies. We've met a number of times, have we not? I believe you're from the Ruu clan..."

"I'm a member of a Ruu branch house, and I am the older sister of Shin Ruu, the head of my house. My name is Sheera Ruu. This is Darmu Ruu, the second son of the main Ruu house." Sheera Ruu bowed elegantly, while Darmu Ruu just nodded with a sour look on his face.

When she saw him, Eulifia once again remarked, "Goodness. The men and women of the forest's edge are all so handsome. Were you not wearing that blue flower, your entrance might have caused quite a commotion."

Darmu Ruu offered no response.

"If you are of the main Ruu house, that means you are the son of that imposing man, Donda Ruu, correct? His first son, Jiza Ruu, is equally large; however, you... Ah, but those eyes like blue flames *are* exactly like your father's."

Darmu Ruu remained silent as he listened to Eulifia talk. He was starting to

show a bit of tension around his brow, which might have been a sign that he was worrying about how he should respond. Sheera Ruu stole a glance at his face from the side, then once again bowed her head and said, “Darmu Ruu has always been untalkative by nature, and this is essentially his first time ever speaking with nobles. I hope that you will forgive him for being a touch uncommunicative.”

“My, there’s no need to worry about that. Except on the occasion that an odd mood strikes him, my own husband tends to be as silent as a stone,” Eulifia replied with a laugh, then she pointed at her daughter down by her feet. “Allow me to introduce our beloved daughter as well. This is our first daughter, Odifia. Odifia, greet the nice people.”

Odifia remained silent, her little fingers pinching at her frilly skirt. Like always, she was as adorable as a French doll, and was utterly lacking in sociability. After glancing down at the young noble for a moment, Darmu Ruu’s gaze returned to Melfried, looking like he had swallowed a stone or something.

“Your daughter’s eyes look just like her father’s too.”

“Oh, you think so as well? She gets her stubbornness from her father, while her free-spirited nature comes from me,” Eulifia said with an amused laugh, and Darmu Ruu rustled his carefully styled hair.

Had that been Darmu Ruu attempting to communicate with them in his own way? Though the father and daughter pair remained expressionless, with their gray eyes gleaming, it was still kinda heartwarming to see them interacting with each other.

“By the way, Dari Sauti, though it may be a bit boorish to discuss such a matter in a place like this, there is something I wish to inform you of,” Melfried said now that his wife had stopped talking. “It is regarding the robbery in the Turan lands. Unfortunately, we have been unable to find any evidence that the guards intentionally turned a blind eye toward the culprit who attacked Mikel,” Melfried said in an emotionless tone, but his eyes were growing more and more chilly as he spoke. “However, based on what I have observed, it is impossible for me to believe that the guards in charge of the Turan lands have been properly maintaining order. They were not even able to tell me which unit was patrolling

the area in question that night, much less who was responsible. Therefore, if a guard were ever to be accused of aiding and abetting a criminal, they would have no way to clarify the matter. I intend to hold a meeting with the head of the militia and take steps to thoroughly enforce proper discipline.”

“The head of the militia would be the person placed in charge after that Ciluel man was judged for his crimes, correct?”

“Indeed. Though the person in question is trustworthy, half a year is not enough time to rebuild from ten years of corruption. But from here on out, I intend to put all of my efforts into seeing them restored to full competence.”

I didn’t know the actual extent of their corruption, but the guards had quite a negative reputation throughout the post town. There were some honest guys like Marth among them, but nothing that small handful did could overcome people’s impression that most of them were the lapdogs of the nobility. After ten years of a villain like Ciluel being the head of their group, their public image had fallen greatly. However, I believed that with Melfried’s coolheaded gaze watching over them, there was still a chance that they could improve in the future.

“Goodness, you certainly do become talkative when it comes to your work. You truly *are* boorish, Melfried,” Eulifia chided with a laugh, at which point a page called out from the entrance once more.

“Announcing the head of the house of Daleim, Lord Paud, and his wife, Lady Littia.”

Finally, the head of the house had arrived. We turned toward the entrance, and soon enough, a middle-aged man with a great deal of presence about him appeared alongside a short and rotund woman. They both looked to be around halfway through their forties. The man had a sturdy build, abundant sideburns, and a mustache, while his wife’s hair, which had started to go white, was done up at the top of her head. The pair of them were wearing flowing silken robes and transparent purple shawls.

“Announcing from the house of Daleim, the first son, Lord Addis; the second son, Lord Polarth; and the second son’s wife, Lady Merrim.”

Their sons and daughter-in-law entered in turn after them. This was the first

time I had seen Polarth's older brother. He had a rather stern appearance and almost looked like his father with the mustache and sideburns removed. He also seemed to be pretty stout and burly for a westerner. Polarth and Addis were also wearing white robes with purple shawls, presumably coordinated in advance to match.

And then there was Polarth's wife...who was something of a surprise to me. She appeared to be quite a bit younger than Polarth and was a real beauty. The light pink dress she wore suited her well. Her chestnut-colored hair was curled into ringlets in a way that was really striking, and she had big eyes that reminded me of a rabbit. If I had to say, I'd guess that she was on the smaller side, and was brimming with vitality. The way she walked made her steps look oddly light too.

The Daleim family advanced straight through the middle of the room, then stood in front of the far wall. Beneath the house's crest, Count Paud proclaimed in a deep voice, "We are deeply grateful that you all accepted our invitation to come here to our manor today. But this is no stuffy formal gathering, so please, relax and enjoy yourselves." With that, the guests placed their glasses down on the tables and gave a refined round of applause that sounded like the murmuring of a stream. "Furthermore, we have some special guests today from outside of the castle town... Polarth?"

"Of course. Sir Dari Sauti, could I ask you to come this way?"

Dari Sauti went ahead and approached without the slightest hesitation. The whole time he was making his way over, I could see the crowd trying to hold themselves back from making comments to each other.

"This is one of the leading clan heads of the forest's edge, Sir Dari Sauti. We have invited seven additional guests from the forest's edge as well, and it is our hope that the friendship between us shall deepen this evening," Polarth said with a smile.

Meanwhile, Polarth's father and older brother stared up at Dari Sauti's massive frame. As this was their first time meeting him, they looked rather nervous.

"Polarth, could I offer a greeting as well?" Dari Sauti asked.

“Yes, of course. You do not mind, do you, father?”

“N-Not at all... Well then, Sir Dari Sauti, leading clan head of the forest edge, shall offer a greeting.”

“You have my thanks. I am not a noble, but rather a hunter of the forest’s edge, so I ask that you pardon my clumsy words.” Dari Sauti slowly looked out over the people present throughout the hall. “Because we people of the forest’s edge were not able to form a positive connection with the former head of the house of Turan in the past, we brought great trouble and even disaster to the people of Genos. In order to ensure that such tribulations will not be repeated, we wish to form a more suitable bond with all of you as we head toward the future together. It is true that occasionally our thoughts and feelings may not align due to the differences between our values, but I still hope that we can find a way to respect one another even so,” he said in a completely calm tone, and then he turned to face Polarth’s father. “I would also like to thank you for this opportunity to expand our friendship with you who live in town. If we happen to do anything that goes against the customs of the castle town, please rebuke us without hesitation... That is all I have to say.”

“Very well. I shall properly introduce myself to you later, so until then.”

“Understood. Well then, please excuse me.” Dari Sauti bowed, and then calmly returned to us. Even though he was still only twenty-six years old, his demeanor was incredibly dignified. He was also being careful to act as unintimidating as possible.

“Well then, please go ahead and enjoy the food and the musicians’ performance,” Count Paud declared as the doors swung open wide. Pages and maids started bringing in food on silver carts, one after another. I was sure the sun hadn’t set yet, so it seemed we were eating an early meal.

“First everyone enjoys a light snack, then the guests can do as they please. You are free to dance, or to simply chat. There is no need to think about your choice too much,” Eulifia explained with a smile as various appetizers were laid out atop the tables. Each large plate had a single kind of food piled high on top of it, confirming that this was a buffet-style event where we could eat what we pleased. “It would be impolite for us to use plates here, so each dish was

prepared in small servings. If anything is not to your tastes, you can simply dispose of it in this empty pot.”

I had already heard about that from Reina Ruu, who was currently working as a chef. In fact, I had given her advice on how to prepare her contributions with that in mind.

“Thank you for the explanation. Ah, this looks delicious!” I said earnestly, only for a displeased voice to sound out from behind me.

“This is all food from town. What are those chefs from the forest’s edge thinking?” Naturally, that complaint had come from Geol Zaza. He had grabbed a wine cup at some point, and he was already turning a little red around his eyes.

“Our chefs got here late, so they’re probably still cooking. The giba meat dishes will be brought out soon.”

“Hmph. This is all food for nobles. There’s no way it’d taste good to a hunter,” Geol Zaza quietly grumbled. He still looked displeased, but he seemed to be exercising at least a little self-restraint. As for Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu, they didn’t voice any displeasure, but they looked utterly uninterested in the piles of food. Perhaps they figured there was no need to force themselves to eat now if there would be giba cooking coming out eventually.

“I think we need to take the lead here, Sheera Ruu,” I said.

“Yes, you may be right.”

With that, we walked over to the nearest table, and the plate sitting on it. Just as Eulifia had said, the food had been prepared in bite-size portions. The most common style of appetizer seemed to be ones that had a flat piece of fuwano with a diameter of around six or seven centimeters, topped with a variety of different things. I also noticed some skewered dishes, but they had generally also been prepared to be easily eaten in a single bite. There were also sweets and pastries that had been brought out at the same time.

“Hmm, these are exactly what I’d expect from Yang’s and Varkas’s apprentices. It’s hard to tell how they taste just by looking at them,” I remarked.

“That’s true. This one seems to primarily be a meat dish, though,” Sheera Ruu said while picking up a piece. There was a faintly reddish meat on top of the fuwano, along with slices of dried milk, covered in some kind of green sauce. When she popped it into her mouth, Sheera Ruu’s eyes opened wide as soon as she bit into it. “This...is shockingly soft. And the taste... What in the world is it?”

My curiosity piqued, I took a bite of the same appetizer.

“Ah, this is probably something similar to my roast giba. They must’ve cooked the karon meat in a covered pan. But this tenderness...”

Karon chest or back meat was more tender than giba, sure. But the meat used in this appetizer was around seven or eight millimeters thick, and yet it practically melted in my mouth.

“Asuta, isn’t this kind of similar to that one dish? The one that we had a long time ago in the castle town?”

“Right, the one Timalo served. It reminds me of that too.”

We were referring to the dish that had made Ludo Ruu shout that it was nothing more than a sack of fat when he had tried it. As I recalled, before cooking the meat, Timalo had opened countless holes in it with thin needles and injected it with fat, with the end result being unbelievably tender. This appetizer had the same sort of texture. However, it lacked the overwhelming fattiness. Of course, a lot of fat had been used in the dish, but the flavor of the meat overcame that. It tasted like a steak that had been artificially marbled before being cooked in a covered pan, with a texture as smooth as tofu.

“It’s certainly an unusual flavor. Still, it isn’t unpleasant in the least,” Sheera Ruu commented.

“I agree. And the sauce is fantastic. It seems to be a combination of mamaria vinegar and multiple herbs, but I can’t tell exactly which ones were used,” I added.

As we were talking, I glanced around at our other companions, only to find that all six of them were shooting us astonished looks.

“All of that, just from a single bite? By the time you sample all of them, dawn will likely be breaking,” Ai Fa said, speaking for the group.

“Yeah, but it’s always like this, right?”

“That is the norm for you all? I truly admire your passion,” Dari Sauti chimed in, trying the same dish. Shortly after I had finished talking, he popped the whole thing into his large mouth. “Hmm, it’s definitely odd. Perhaps it’s best that you don’t try it, Geol Zaza.”

“Hmph. I had no interest in having any from the start.”

“Then I suppose we’ll simply have to find something else that will better suit your tastes,” Dari Sauti said, eating an unfamiliar dish from the neighboring plate. “Hmm, this is a strange one too. I can’t quite tell if it’s meat or some kind of vegetable.”

“D-Dari Sauti, you don’t have to force yourself. We can handle this.”

“But the nobles of Daleim kindly prepared these for us. As a leading clan head of the forest’s edge, it would be wrong of me to complain about them without even trying them first,” Dari Sauti replied with a cheerful smile. “Besides, I’ve eaten a fair amount of food from the castle town at this point. It won’t take me by surprise so easily anymore.”

This was one way in which Dari Sauti was probably the best of the three leading clan heads. He was definitely cautious and consistent, but he also seemed to be capable of the same kind of flexible thinking as Gazraan Rutim. And so, the three of us started thoroughly sampling the cooking of the castle town, launching into a search for dishes that would suit the tastes of the people of the forest’s edge.

There really were a huge variety of appetizers on offer. Even the fuwano bases could either be grilled, baked, or cooked in a kiln or pan, depending on the recipe. Some of the dishes were really wild too. There were these wraps of fragrant karon skin that were full of thick sauce made with tomato-like tarapa, pickled-plum-like dried kiki, and mamaria vinegar, as well as a dish made by marinating karon meat in super sugary arow jam; neither of these seemed like they would suit the tastes of the people of the forest’s edge at all. In fact, even I felt like I was going to break down crying as I forced some bites down.

Citizens of the castle town tended to consider a meal to be high-quality if it was complex or unusual in some way. For example, Polarth and the other

nobles had no issues with Timalo's cooking, which we had great difficulty eating. That culinary cultural gap was on full display here as well.

Still, they also had universally delicious food that caused no offense in this world. Or, if calling them universally appealing was too much of an overstatement, you could at least say that most people would enjoy them. There were certainly tastes that the people of the forest's edge, the citizens of the castle town, and even myself, a person born in an entirely different culture, could all find delicious. And by going around to the various tables, we were able to find a number of offerings among the multitude that had been presented to us that fit that description.

"Ai Fa, this is good. Why don't you give it a try?"

My clan head offered no response.

"Yang, Shilly Rou, and the others made these dishes. It'd be a bit of a waste to not at least give them a try, right?"

"Now that you mention it, that Shilly Rou girl prepared the food for the dinner party at the house of Saturas as well," Ai Fa said, her expression shifting a bit as she picked up a piece of the appetizer I had pointed out. It consisted of thin strips of karon meat that had been marinated in tau oil and herbs, and then grilled, most likely. The reddish brown strips of meat were arranged in a strange spiral shape, but I found the flavor to be incredibly delicious.

"Hmm. It seems tastier than the food I ate in Dabagg."

"Right? I'd give this one a pretty strong recommendation too."

The next one I pointed out had been made by sandwiching small pieces of grilled fish between raw gigo slices, with a sauce made with herbs, sugar, and red mamaria vinegar poured over the top. Gigo was reminiscent of Japanese yam, and its texture when combined with the grilled fish worked exquisitely. The chef had done a wonderful job of balancing the spiciness, sweetness, and sourness in the flavor as well. On top of that, the fish had also been smoked, so it must have taken quite a bit of effort to prepare.

The fuwano base had been fried in reten oil, the effect of which had also undoubtedly been part of their careful calculations. I felt confident that this was

the work of one of Varkas's apprentices.

"What a strange flavor. Still, it does indeed seem to taste good."

None of the others seemed dissatisfied with it either. It was possible that Dari Sauti's initial comment had made Sufira Zaza reconsider some things as well, judging by how she didn't refuse any of the appetizers we recommended, and she even forced her younger brother to try them too. Geol Zaza looked displeased about that, but he didn't call any of them bad.

"What do you think, Darmu Ruu?" Sheera Ruu asked.

The stubborn second son of the main Ruu house bluntly replied, "So this is the sort of cooking Jiza and Ludo were talking about, huh? I doubt I'll ever be able to say that a meal lacking giba meat is delicious without any reservations...but I can see how townsfolk would think so, and I don't think this is particularly awful either."

"Good. I'm sure Shilly Rou and her fellows were the ones who prepared it," Sheera Ruu said.

"Shilly Rou?" Darmu Ruu repeated, looking puzzled. "Oh, that girl from the castle town who came to the banquet at the Ruu settlement? So she's involved in all this too, huh?"

"Yeah. You were able to get to know her a bit, weren't you, Darmu Ruu?"

However, his reply was a confused "No? We were there in the same place, but I don't recall ever talking with her. And she didn't seem to have any business with me either."

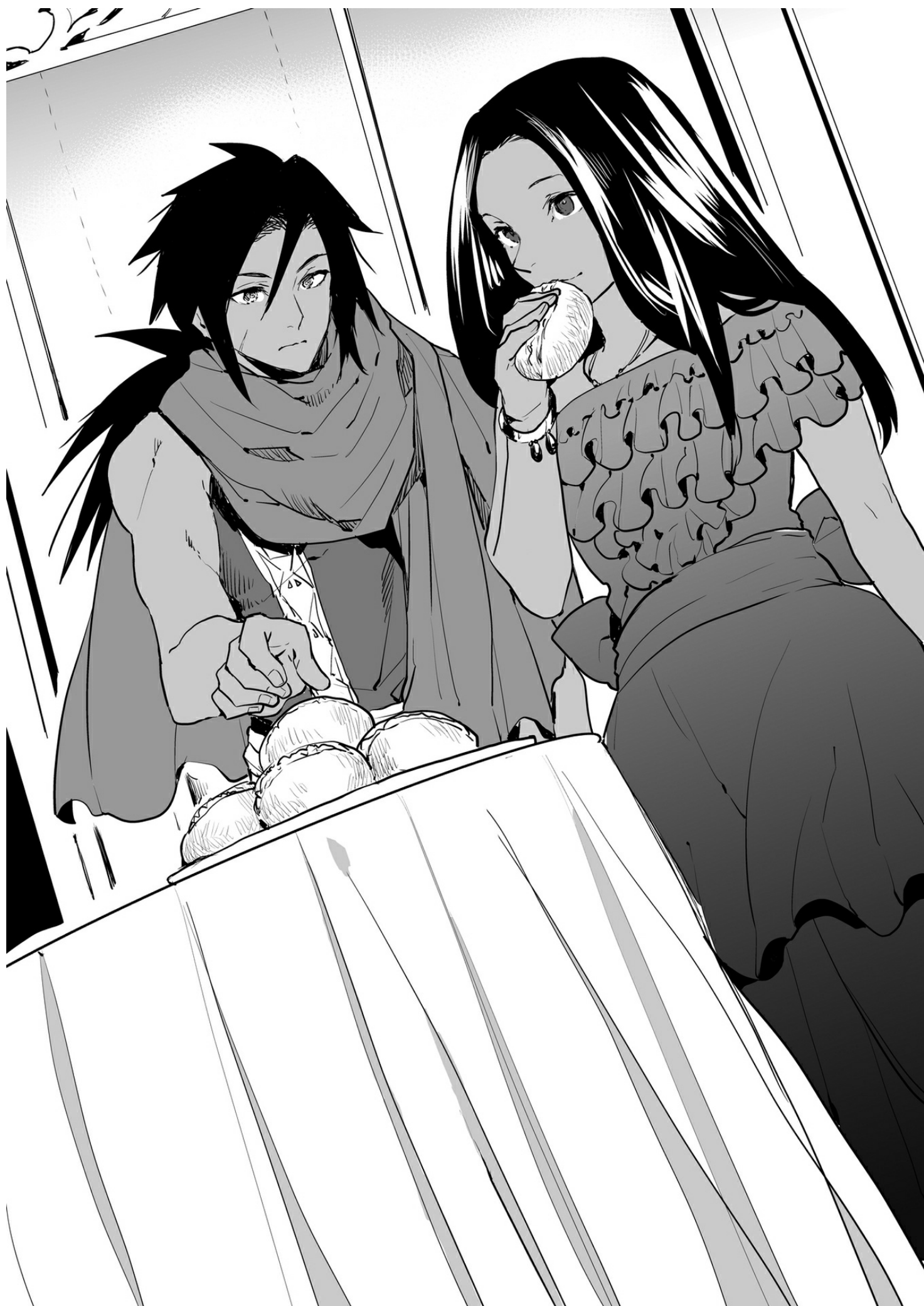
"But I entrusted her to you for a while, didn't I? When I went to get the whole roast giba for her." Darmu Ruu's head remained tilted doubtfully, though, which Sheera Ruu couldn't help but smile at. "It seems you really don't remember. I suppose you must've had a bit too much wine to drink that night."

"What are you talking about? It's true that I ended up falling asleep partway through the night, but I've never lost my memory due to drinking."

"Or you lost your memories and simply don't remember doing so. Make sure to be more careful today, please."

“I’m telling you, I would never let people see me that drunk,” Darmu Ruu childishly insisted, which I personally found pretty amusing. Sheera Ruu looked pleased too. Just as I had predicted, Darmu Ruu’s eyes had opened a bit wider when he saw Ai Fa in her banquet attire, but he hadn’t shown any particular interest beyond that.

But on the other hand, he seems to be treating Sheera Ruu the same as always. Still, they make a great pair.



Surprisingly, it seemed the people of the forest's edge were able to act naturally even in a place like this. Their bold willingness to do as they pleased without paying any attention to how outsiders saw them was working out well in this case.

However, we hadn't interacted with any of the other guests after we had separated from Melfried's family. This event was meant to foster friendships, which wouldn't happen if we just stuck to ourselves. But just as I was starting to worry about that, a group approached us as if they had heard what I was thinking.

"Why, hello there. My apologies for the late greeting. Have you been enjoying yourselves, dear guests from the forest's edge?"

When I turned to look, I found that Polarth had come over to talk to us. He was smiling, of course, and his parents, his older brother, and his wife were all standing there behind him as well. An opportunity for us to deepen our bonds with the members of the house of Daleim had finally appeared.

3

"Allow me to introduce my father, Paud, head of house Daleim; my elder brother and the first son of the house, Addis; my mother, Littia; and my wife, Merrim," Polarth said.

The men looked worried, while the women wore reserved smiles. Polarth's mother, Littia, was the first to step forward.

"That banquet attire suits you all so well. Is the house of Daleim's gift to your liking?"

"You have our sincerest gratitude for preparing such fine outfits. The crests you placed on them to represent us people of the forest's edge were especially well chosen," Dari Sauti replied, earning a satisfied smile from the lady of the house. She appeared to be a pleasant and highly refined noblewoman, with a plump figure that seemed to put the people who interacted with her at ease. I also noticed that she and Polarth looked very much alike, while Polarth's older brother mostly took after his father.

“I felt that we should give our guests from the forest’s edge a proper greeting, and I’m happy to see that it seems to have gone well.” The lord of the house stepped forward. He was a man with some real presence about him. Marstein and Luidross were both very fastidious men who never had so much as a hair out of place, and the head of the House of Daleim seemed just as aristocratic as them in his own way.

Now that he was right in front of me, I was surprised to find that he actually wasn’t all that tall—only two or three centimeters taller than me at the most. However, his body *was* impressively wide, with his broad-shouldered physique giving him a majestic bearing. His carefully kept mustache and sideburns were also pretty fitting for a noble.

The eldest son of the family, Addis, was the spitting image of his father. His eyebrows were thick, his nose was large, and his eyes gleamed intensely. If you added his father’s mustache and sideburns, it would probably be hard to tell them apart from a distance.

Then you had Polarth’s wife, Lady Merrim. Seeing her up close, she looked even smaller and cuter. She seemed to be around my age, and in terms of height, she was around 150 centimeters at most. The women were both so small that it might have been making the men appear larger than they really were.

“It’s a pleasure and an honor to meet all of you who come to us from the forest’s edge,” Merrim said, curtsying adorably. Her brown eyes were sparkling beneath her curly chestnut-colored hair. “My husband is always talking about you. You are Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, correct?”

“Ah, yes. Pleased to meet you. Polarth has helped us out a whole lot.”

“My husband would not have been able to reach his current position without your assistance as well. For that, you have my deepest thanks,” Merrim said with a smile, and everyone from the forest’s edge bowed and nodded back. She then took a moment to look us all over, stopping on my clan head. “And you are Ai Fa of the Fa clan, are you not? Our maid, Sheila, has spoken of you. You are every bit as beautiful as she said.”

“Thank you,” Ai Fa replied, expressionless. My clan head wasn’t fond of

people commenting on her appearance, so she must have been trying her best to not let her displeasure show on her face.

After that, Dari Sauti went ahead and introduced everyone from our group. However, the feeling in the air wasn't changing. The men on the nobles' side were still on edge, while the women just kept on smiling.

"I believe this means we have finally met all of the counts. Polarth and Melfried may be the only ones who have been assigned to the role of speaking with our people, but I hope that our relationship with the rest of you will continue to develop in a good direction." However, even when Dari Sauti said that, the head of the house and his first son were only able to nod awkwardly. It seemed the intense aura some of the hunters like Darmu Ruu and Geol Zaza had was overwhelming them. We hadn't interacted with all that many nobles, so it was difficult to tell if that was a typical reaction or not.

It was then that someone else approached us, calling out, "Pardon me."

When Geol Zaza glanced in that direction, the look in his eyes became turbulent. That was because the speaker was none other than a certain young nobleman of the house of Saturas.

"Ah, Sir Leiriss. My apologies for the late greeting. Have you been enjoying the cooking?" the lord of the house asked.

"Yes, they have all been truly wonderful dishes. And the musicians have given a fantastic performance as well." After exchanging that greeting, Leiriss turned toward Geol Zaza. "It has been some time, son of the Zaza clan. Have you been in good health since our last meeting?"

"So you were invited here too, eh, knight of Saturas, or whatever your title was?"

Now that I thought about it, Melfried hadn't been the only one to defeat Geol Zaza. This young noble had managed it as well. Still, that was nothing to be ashamed of. A huge number of swordsmen had participated in that tournament, and Leiriss had taken third while Geol Zaza ended up in fourth. Put another way, Melfried and Leiriss were the only townspeople who had managed to take down a hunter of the forest's edge.

“I’m starting to get impatient. With a crowd like this gathered here, shouldn’t we be clashing blades instead of dancing?” Geol Zaza commented.

“I would love to test my strength against yours again someday as well. But for now, we should enjoy the performance put on by the musicians and the delicious food,” Leiriss said with a small smile. His expression differed so greatly from the one he had worn when we had visited the Saturas manor that he seemed like a different person entirely. But then, at the time, he had been extremely riled up because of the dishonor of his father’s actions. “By the way, is Sir Shin Ruu not with you...? I heard that he was invited to attend tonight as well.”

“Ah, Sir Shin Ruu was invited as an attendant for the chefs. He was not planning to make an appearance here in the event hall,” Polarth replied.

“I see,” Leiriss replied with a frown. “How unfortunate. Would it be possible to greet him later on?”

“Of course. He will not be leaving until the dance party has concluded, so a maid or the like can show you to the kitchen later on.”

“You have my thanks,” Leiriss said, appearing so relieved that it was as if an evil spirit had left him. This was surely what he normally looked like: an elegant, refined noble.

Sheera Ruu then whispered something to Darmu Ruu, who said, “Oh? So you’re the one who fought with Shin Ruu and the youngest son of the Zaza at that tournament thing, huh? I wasn’t expecting you to be such a young and tidy-looking man.”

“My apologies, but who might you be?”

“I’m the second son of the main Ruu house, Darmu Ruu. Shin Ruu’s father, Ryada Ruu, is my father Donda’s younger brother.”

“Ah, a member of the Ruu clan? My foolish father caused your clan quite a bit of trouble.”

“That’s already been settled. There’s no need to apologize now,” Darmu Ruu said. Then he looked Leiriss over. “Still...that Melfried fellow is one thing, but to think a young guy like you beat a hunter of the forest’s edge. I’d love to see you

in action myself the next time a chance comes up.”

Darmu Ruu had been rather quiet while we were dealing with Eulifia, but he was a lot more talkative now. Apparently, the story of Geol Zaza falling to someone from town had been passed around among the Ruu clan as well.

“I myself observed the tournament, and Sir Leiriss and Sir Geol Zaza both showed off truly splendid swordsmanship! If you will be participating next year as well, then I shall have even more to look forward to,” Polarth said with a smile, carrying out the role of host, as his father and brother were still all clammed up. Meanwhile, Dari Sauti silently observed them. Polarth continued, “Now then, it simply won’t do for us to just keep talking and nothing else, so why not enjoy a bit more food? Have you tried that splendid meat dish over there?”

“No, we still haven’t made it to that table yet,” Dari Sauti replied.

“Well then, allow us to guide you there. I am certain it will suit the tastes of the people of the forest’s edge.”

“We still need to greet our other guests, so please excuse us. We leave the rest to you, Polarth,” Paud said, hurriedly departing alongside his family after hardly interacting with us at all. After waiting until they were out of sight, Dari Sauti turned toward Polarth.

“Polarth, do your father and older brother harbor some sort of ill feelings toward our people?”

“Oh, most certainly not! My father and brother simply do not have the kind of fortitude Duke Genos and Count Saturas possess. It seems they still have not yet figured out how to interact with you people of the forest’s edge, famed for your hardiness.”

“There’s no need to worry about such things. The lord of the land is, of course, Duke Marstein Genos, but all nobles are above us, are they not?”

“Hmm. This may be a little difficult to explain. My father and brother value our relationship with your people, in their own way, so they are afraid of some fault on their end causing that bond to fracture.”

“Being so cautious is traditional for the house of Daleim,” a voice chimed in

with a laugh. It was Merrim, the only one who had stayed by her husband's side out of their group. "And after you yourself have spent most of your life in the background, now you've finally had your chance to take center stage. The lord of the house and your older brother are doing their best to not get in your way, wouldn't you agree?"

"That's quite a thing to say in front of guests! Still, as they are from the forest's edge, perhaps they would appreciate such a manner of speaking," Polarth said with a broad smile, which seemed to draw out a grin from Dari Sauti as well.

"It is true that we prefer speaking without embellishment. So, you were a social outcast, Polarth?"

"Yes, in a sense. A noble without a post has little standing."

Polarth had said something similar when we first met. His desire to take down Cycлаeus had likely come in part from a desire to break free of his situation.

However, Polarth wasn't the sort to fixate solely on his own success in life. Rather, it was more like he wanted to rejuvenate the house of Daleim, which had fallen into an inferior position because of the house of Turan. And he had definitely succeeded. The houses of Daleim and Saturas seemed to be growing in strength. Now, if the house of Turan could rebuild itself using legitimate means, the balance between the three houses would finally reach a good place.

"Your name is Merrim, correct? My apologies, but you look quite young," Dari Sauti asked sociably.

"My," Merrim replied with a smile. "I am honestly not that young. I turned twenty at the start of this year."

"Twenty, you say? Once again, I apologize, but you look to be three or four years younger."

I was in agreement on that front.

Polarth broke out in an amused smile. "Merrim comes from a branch of the house of Saturas, and we were wed three years ago. As we were seventeen and twenty-two at the time, I would say we were a fair match."

“Hmm? Then you’re still only twenty-five, Polarth? I didn’t think that you were younger than me. I thought for certain that you were over thirty.”

“How awful! I am still a young man.” For better or worse, thanks to the overly tense members of Polarth’s family leaving, the conversation had started flowing smoothly. “Well then, let us move over to that table. I would love for all of you from the forest’s edge to taste that dish.”

With that, Polarth guided us over to the table. The groups of people scattered around the hall all seemed to be enjoying themselves, chatting to each other as they stole occasional glances at us. The reserved performance from the musicians also served to add some vibrancy to the atmosphere.

“Here it is! This one is outstanding!” It was a rather strange skewer dish. I was pretty sure he had said it contained meat, but it had been wrapped in fuwano. Had it been broiled or baked, perhaps? It was shaped like a disk that got thicker in the center, and the surface had been cooked to a golden color. “Once the surface breaks, the insides will spill out, so you should eat it in one bite. It has karon meat in it.”

As we had previously been doing, Sheera Ruu, Dari Sauti, and myself all reached out first. Like the rest of the dishes, it had been prepared so that you could easily eat it in a single bite. I honestly thought it had a really cute shape, with its little bulge in the middle.

As I popped the whole thing into my mouth, the fuwano coating easily broke apart. It was thin and crispy, like a pie crust. What was hidden inside was undoubtedly karon meat, but rather than being minced or cut into blocks, it had been sliced into thin strips which were then arranged in numerous layers. A pleasantly large amount of fat and meat juices also filled my mouth.

What followed was the rich flavor of meat and an indescribable aroma. I struggled to identify what else was in it. It had a gentle sweetness, a spiciness that faintly burned the tongue, and a robust bitterness all intertwined. And the taste kept growing deeper as I chewed, giving it countless layers of joy and surprises.

“This taste comes from herbs, doesn’t it? But it keeps on changing, so I have no idea what was used,” Sheera Ruu commented.

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “It’s definitely got an unusual flavor. Did they place a bunch of different herbs and sauces between each of the thin layers of meat, so that they mix together as we chew, causing the taste to shift?”

“Ah, I see... I wouldn’t have thought you could use such a precise technique with something this small,” Sheera Ruu remarked with a sigh of admiration.

“Hmm...” Dari Sauti hummed. “This certainly is tasty. I don’t know anything about cooking, but the meat is good at any rate.”

“Yeah, and that’s what’s most important.”

Though the flavoring was a surprise, it worked well thanks to the amazingly good karon meat—so good that I could hardly put it into words. No matter how complex the extra parts might have been, they were ultimately just a trick to make the meat stand out even more.

As the cooking had been prepared in advance and left out, it had lost pretty much all of its warmth. However, the heat inside my mouth helped revive the flavor of the meat so it could really shine. And though the meat was sliced thinly, it had been layered until it was around two to three centimeters thick in total, so there were no issues in terms of chewiness. It was simply delicious.

“Well? Is it to your liking?” Polarth asked.

“Yes! I’d say the people of the forest’s edge should definitely be able to enjoy this.”

With that, Ai Fa and the others also ended up trying the same dish. When Geol Zaza begrudgingly grabbed ahold of a skewer at his sister’s urging, his eyes shot open wide in surprise for the first time. However, he obviously didn’t voice his impressions, though he did eat another two pieces while standing there.

“This is delightful, isn’t it? I never imagined I could find cooking from town this good,” Mil Fei Sauti commented after staying silent all this time. Ai Fa still wasn’t saying anything, though, so I stealthily asked her thoughts.

“Well? You don’t have any complaints, right?”

“I don’t. It demonstrates remarkable skill,” Ai Fa said. However, as she did so, she also shot me a rather down look. “But I won’t be able to eat any of your

cooking today. Thinking about that makes all of this feel rather empty.”

That unexpected strike left me unable to reply. After all, this was Ai Fa in a beautiful dress saying those words. Seeing her narrow her eyes sorrowfully while dressed like that was quite a blow to my heart.

“B-But the giba cooking from Reina Ruu’s group should be ready soon, so how about we just look forward to that?”

“Right...” Ai Fa replied, casting her gaze downward, which was still hitting me as hard as before.

It was then that a voice we hadn’t heard in a while called out, “Announcing the daughter of the southern metalwork seller Sir Grannar, Lady Diel, and her attendant Sir Labis.”

I recalled she had said she would be attending this dance party too. As they were led into the hall by a page boy, I saw that Diel was wearing a blue dress, while Labis had a white outfit with a standing collar. Polarth raised a hand with a smile, signaling the page boy to lead them over to our table.

“My, you certainly are late, Lady Diel. I am glad that you made it before the food was all gone.”

“My apologies for being late. Business negotiations went a bit long.”

Diel placed both of her hands over her stomach and gave a graceful bow. That was undoubtedly a Jagar-style greeting. I was rather accustomed to seeing Diel in a dress by this point, but I still thought that she looked like an entirely different person whenever she wore formal clothing. Her bangs were pulled up just a bit with a hair ornament, but that alone was enough to make her seem a lot more feminine than her usual self. The dazzling cobalt blue dress also suited her quite well.

Diel turned toward me, shooting me her normal smile. “Your banquet clothes suit you pretty well too, Asuta. When did you manage to get something like that?”

“The lady of the house provided these for us. It’s been a while, Labis.”

Labis simply nodded back silently. He was dressed similarly to Melfried, which

made him look like some kind of military officer. Actually, I remembered hearing once that Melfried liked wearing Jagar-style clothes, so it was possible that his outfits came from the southern nation.

“The giba cooking should be served soon. Several of the women who usually work our stalls are over in the kitchen right now.”

“Oh, really? Hooray! In that case, I’m glad I came here in a...” Diel started to say, but then her eyes opened wide. Apparently, she had just realized who the person standing diagonally behind me was. “H-Huh? Is that...you?”

“I am indeed me,” Ai Fa answered.

“Wow! You’re like a whole other person! You’re not wearing that Sym-style outfit today, huh?” Diel had been there when Ai Fa infiltrated the Turan manor in banquet attire, claiming to be the daughter of a wealthy merchant from Sym, so her clothes had been in the style of that nation. “Hmm. If you’d just keep your mouth closed, you could easily pass for the daughter of some noble family. Your skin’s dark enough that you’d have to be a noble from Sym, though!”

Ai Fa offered no response.

“Why are you a hunter when you’re that pretty? It’s a bit of a waste, isn’t it?”

“How would you reply if I said it was a waste that you were making a living as a metalworker?”

Even in such fine clothes, the two of them were the same as always. Things between them didn’t seem quite as tense as before, but I could still see a fair number of sparks flying.

“Well, whatever. I’ve got to greet the lord of the manor and the other guests, so I’ll see you later. I’ll be excusing myself for a bit, Lord Polarth,” Diel finally said.

“Of course. Until then.”

With that, Diel and Labis hurriedly departed, and Merrim gave another amused smile. “She is always so energetic. By the way, I would like to introduce all of you from the forest’s edge to some other guests. What do you say?”

“Oh? What other guests?” Dari Sauti asked.

“Everyone with an interest in your people. We naturally have a particularly large number of such individuals here tonight.”

“True. That is precisely why such a sizable crowd has gathered here,” Polarth chimed in, his smile widening. “After all, this dance party is an event meant to deepen our friendships with the people of the forest’s edge. We invited half of the guests, but the other half made personal requests to attend, so this is like an assembly of those interested in seeing the people of the forest’s edge who have shaken things up in Genos so greatly over the course of the past half year.”

“I see. In that case, we would like to form bonds with them as well.”

“Then allow us to begin by introducing the women of your group to them. Everyone has been glancing this way looking like they wish to speak with you for a while now.”

It was true that our group of eight had remained together all this time, which might have made it difficult for anyone to call out to us, so the idea was for Merrim to bring our four women to speak with some of the noblewomen.

Ai Fa had a look in her eyes like she wanted to say something, so I whispered to her, “There’s nothing to worry about, considering the group we’ve got here. Just protect the other women, okay?”

“Right,” Ai Fa replied with a begrudging nod, then she slowly followed along after Merrim. Even with that gorgeous dress on, Ai Fa was still ultimately thinking of herself as a guard. For my part, I prayed in my head that a drunken noble wouldn’t make a pass at Sufira Zaza or anything.

“Now then, why don’t we all head this way? I shall guide you,” Polarth said.

The rest of us ended up heading around the hall in the opposite direction, snatching up some food as we went.

As it was a dance party, the average age of the guests looked to be fairly young. There were some middle-aged noblemen and women in the mix, but the majority were in their twenties or thirties. And perhaps somewhat surprisingly, a number of those young noblemen had a strong interest in Geol Zaza. That included some who had watched the swordsmanship tournament, and even a

few who had participated in it themselves. The participants in particular repeatedly commended him on his prowess.

At first, Geol Zaza had a sour look on his face as he took it all in, but eventually the wine started circulating through his system, and his usual uninhibited nature steadily started coming out. It seemed like they were managing to clear away the gloom he felt from having met Shin Ruu, Melfried, and Leiriss in quick succession—all people who had achieved better results than him.

“For better or worse, he’s a simple man. Still, maybe that’s to be expected, considering he’s only sixteen,” Dari Sauti remarked with a bit of an awkward chuckle.

Aside from Geol Zaza, the one who was getting approached the most was none other than myself. There were a large number of people present with an interest in giba cooking. Apparently, I had become known throughout the castle town for possessing skill nearly equal to the famed Varkas.

“There was a gathering of chefs not so long ago to learn how to work with black Banarm fuwano, correct? The head chef of my manor was summoned then,” a man who introduced himself as a viscount declared. “That wriggly black fuwano dish is truly amusing! I even quickly started serving it at my own business.”

“Ah, you manage a restaurant in the castle town?”

“Yes. That is how our head chef ended up receiving that invitation. I started it merely as a hobby, but it now has a reputation on par with that of the Silver Star!”

So he was the restaurant’s patron? From what I recalled, Cyclaeus also had a number of restaurants under his control, and they were the only places that had received rare ingredients.

It barely felt real to me, but Cyclaeus’s downfall really was having a huge effect on people throughout the castle town as well. There were some who were suffering greatly from what had happened, and others who were making a great fortune. And apparently, a few of those who were profiting had gained a fondness for and interest in the people of the forest’s edge, who had brought

about Cycclaeus's downfall.

"It is undoubtedly the house of Daleim that has profited the most. After all, poitan are selling so fast that we cannot expand our fields quickly enough to keep up. That is why my father and elder brother have such deep gratitude toward you people of the forest's edge and Sir Asuta in particular, and also why they have been acting so timid, as they are terribly afraid of angering you," Polarth explained as we walked to another table. "The house of Saturas in particular nearly ended up in a rather dangerous situation with the people of the forest's edge, correct? Sir Leeheim caused an unfortunate misunderstanding due to a difference in cultures, and the incident with Sir Geimalos was simply outrageous. They fear that another such misunderstanding could put their relationship with the people of the forest's edge in jeopardy."

"As Lady Merrim said, they are quite cautious. But there is certainly nothing wrong with that," Dari Sauti said.

"Yes. That is also what allows me to act as freely as I do, so it all works out in the end," Polarth said, right before the doors of the event hall opened wide. I thought that meant a new guest had arrived, but that turned out not to be the case.

"Our apologies for the wait. We have brought the cooking made by the chefs from the forest's edge."

Reina Ruu and the others had apparently finished their work for the day, about two hours after we had arrived at the Daleim manor.

The pages and maids brought in a huge amount of food, causing a big stir among the guests. Their voices all seemed to be full of joy and anticipation. Of course, nobody who found giba cooking repulsive would have been invited in the first place. The guests seemed to be wondering what this giba cooking that Duke Genos himself had praised was like, as they watched the large plates being laid out atop the tables.

Large plates laden with giba cooking and sweets were set out on one table after another. Reina Ruu, Rimee Ruu, and Toor Deen had worked hard to prepare them. As I wondered what the guests would think of them, I felt my heart pounding as hard as it would have been if I had manned the kitchen myself.

As would be expected of a crowd of nobles, they didn't all rush toward the food at once. They continued chatting with each other as they waited for the pages and maids to finish laying out the plates. Then, once everything was in place, they slowly started approaching. The food had been distributed equally to the various tables, so each one ended up with seven or eight people gathered around it.

"Ooh, so it's finally time for the giba cooking? Now our real dinner can begin," Geol Zaza triumphantly declared as he started moving. It seemed his mood had fully recovered, and he had quite a bit of alcohol in his system to boot.

"Ah, Sir Geol Zaza. The giba cooking you have been waiting for has finally arrived."

We had just said farewell to Leiriss, but by coincidence, he happened to be standing next to the table we approached. There were also three young noblemen and a similar number of delicate noblewomen there. The ladies who had been staring at the food on the table with great curiosity backed away a bit as Geol Zaza approached, but they didn't flee.

"Hmm? What is this? It looks pretty weird," Geol Zaza said as he grabbed a piece and took a bite of it. Then, after chewing it with a look of satisfaction, he glared at the crowd surrounding him. "Staring at me won't fill your stomachs. If you're not going to have any, I'll just eat it all myself."

"Ah, no, I've been looking forward to the giba cooking myself. I was not in the right mental state to enjoy the flavor during the banquet held by the house of Saturas," Leiriss said with a calm smile as he tried the same dish, and then his eyes opened wide. "Oh, this is delicious. You all should try it as well. You have been anticipating this too, correct?"

Following Leiriss's advice, the nobles began taking some for themselves. This was surely their first time trying giba, and they showed even more surprise than

Leiriss when they tried it.

“You were right, this *is* delicious... It has an entirely different taste to it than karon meat.”

“It has an unusual flavor. Is this the taste of giba meat?”

“Still, I cannot say that I dislike it.”

As there didn't seem to be any unexpected reactions there, I breathed a sigh of relief. Giba was a lot quirkier than karon or kimyuus, but Reina Ruu's group had taken care to flavor it so that it would be easy for everyone to eat.

“Hmm... It seems to differ a bit from the cooking I've had up until now. What sort of dish is this?” Polarth asked.

“This is a dish that uses the specially prepared jerky I mentioned before. For today, we went with a menu centered around the jerky and sausage meat that's going to be sold in the castle town,” I explained.

“I see! If this leads to their charms being better known, it could result in even better sales!” Polarth remarked as he took a bite, an earnest smile breaking out on his plump face. “Yes, truly delicious! This is my first time trying giba jerky! It has a totally different flavor to it compared to regular giba meat!”

“Thank you,” I replied in place of the other chefs as I grabbed a piece myself. This was also a dish I had given advice on. It had a thin base layer of baked poitan, with gooey gyama dried milk and tarapa sauce on top. The giba bacon and other ingredients had been mixed into the poitan batter.

This was a bit of an odd dish, a pizza-style okonomiyaki. There weren't any kilns or ovens at the forest's edge, so I had racked my brain and came up with this creative solution. We had used aria and pula to take the place of onion and bell pepper from my old world, along with some mushrooms from Jagar. We had then folded all of those ingredients into the poitan batter along with giba bacon, and pan grilled it like okonomiyaki. Finally, we topped it with some tarapa sauce and dried milk mixed with karon milk, and cooked it for a while longer in a covered pan.

The dried milk had been mixed with milk so that it wouldn't harden up too much after it got cold. After all, this was a buffet-style dinner. There was no way

to guarantee it would be eaten hot. Either way, I was sure it would still be like eating small pieces of pizza bread.

To add a bit of an accent to the flavor, we had also included a small amount of finely ground chitt seeds and mamaria vinegar. We hadn't been able to create pepper sauce yet, as that would need a long fermentation period, but I had come up with the idea in order to add a bit of sourness and spice.

Now then, how did they prepare it? I thought to myself as I brought the little fan-shaped slice of pizza-style okonomiyaki to my mouth. As it had just been brought out, it was still faintly warm, and the poitan was pleasingly soft.

The sourness and spiciness were rather restrained, so the tarapa sauce and dried milk flavors were noticeably more prominent. They really hadn't held back in their use of dried milk, which I believe did a lot to soften the giba flavor. That said, the tastiness of the bacon hadn't been harmed in the least.



The most important point to us had been the question of how much we should emphasize the taste of the meat for the sake of people trying giba cooking for the first time, but I had been sure they would have no issues accepting this dish. In fact, they clearly already liked it. The smiles those young nobles wore really didn't look like they were merely for the sake of politeness.

I had only prepared it once as an example, then I left the rest to Reina Ruu. She had then adjusted the amount of each ingredient she used according to her own sensibilities as a chef. The difference could be seen in how she had gone light on the chitt seeds and red mamaria vinegar, and the poitan was thinner than when I had made it.

It was clearly an excellent recipe. If this wasn't good enough for the nobles, then they wouldn't have liked it if I made it myself either. The only thought I had was that I had to wonder yet again about whether we could build stone ovens at the forest's edge in order to make proper pizza. *They make such fine stoves that they could surely make stone ovens on their own too. There are some things that if you can't slowly bake them in a proper oven, you'll never be able to get them to come out as amazing as they could be, after all.*

Still, I felt this unusual dish would be more than effective enough to demonstrate how good giba bacon was. Would the people of the castle town consider my usual pairing of tarapa sauce with dried milk and chitt seeds to be elaborate enough? Hopefully the bitterness of the bell-pepper-like pula would also help on that front.

"Sir Asuta, is this the sausage that you mentioned?" Polarth asked, pointing at the neighboring plate.

"Yes," I replied with a nod. "That's a dish referred to as a hot dog back in my home country. If it weren't for the high cost of sausages, I would love to serve this dish at the stalls."

We had sandwiched sausages in poitan along with finely cut strips of tino, then added ketchup and sarfaal herb for flavoring. By putting sarfaal in water, boiling it down, and then dissolving it again, you could create a sharp taste akin to mustard. It was an ingredient I didn't get to use that often, but it was perfectly suited to hot dogs.

They had also cooked pieces of poitan that were thin and exceptionally long, to the point that they would stretch from one side of our pans to the other, so they could make their hot dogs as big as possible, before cutting them up into bite-size bits. As these hot dogs tended to fall apart easily, they had to be held together with wooden skewers. The crowd was staring with great curiosity at the unfamiliar food that had an exposed cross section of sausage showing on either end.

“Yes, this is delicious too! Did you chop the meat up finely and then harden it back together like with that dish from your stalls?”

“That’s right. Then we stuffed it into our intestines and smoked it just like we do with our jerky in order to make sausages.”

This seemed to surprise Leiriss and the other nobles even more than the pizza-style okonomiyaki. That was only natural, though, as they hadn’t had giba burgers before, like Polarth had. Mincing meat wasn’t a common cooking method here in Genos.

“How truly splendid. I’ve heard that giba jerky and sausages are quite expensive, but with this, I am certain that you shall find buyers,” Leiriss commented, right before a young noblewoman timidly spoke up from beside him.

“Um... You are the Asuta of the Fa clan who has made a name for himself as a chef from the forest’s edge, correct? The people of the forest’s edge can make dishes like this even without you?”

“That’s right. The women of the forest’s edge have been training on a daily basis and have developed a lot of skill as a result.”

Polarth looked satisfied as the noblewoman gave a sigh of admiration, then raised his voice and called out, “Now then...shall we enjoy some cooking from another table? If we stay too long in one place, there’s a good chance that certain things will be all gone before we can get to them.”

Following Polarth’s gaze, I saw both Geol Zaza and Darmu Ruu silently chowing down. Though Reina Ruu and the other chefs had worked hard and split the dishes up into lots of small portions, there was definitely a real chance that the plates could end up bare before everyone got to try what was on them.

“U-Um, there are lots of other dishes, so let’s move over that way. You really seem to like this one, though, don’t you, Geol Zaza?”

“Hmph. It’s giba cooking, so it’s only natural that it would suit the tastes of a person of the forest’s edge,” Geol Zaza shot back, sounding annoyed, and then he gulped down some fruit wine. “Well then, shall we get moving? I am eager to find out what else awaits us.”

With that, we once again set off walking around the hall with Polarth at the head of our group.

I started to wonder how Ai Fa’s group was doing and glanced around until I noticed that the table farthest from us had quite a colorful group gathered around it. Ai Fa and the others were surrounded by a swarm of noblewomen, making it look as if flowers of many different colors were blooming there. I was looking forward to asking her later about their interactions with each other.

“Hey there, Asuta! This giba cooking is absolutely incredible!”

We arrived at the next table, where Diel and Labis were. The only other noble standing nearby was an older gentleman, of which there weren’t all that many at this event. Had they been negotiating some sort of business deal having to do with metalwork? Well, whatever they had been talking about, they were also snacking on giba manju and an original dish Reina Ruu’s group had come up with.

The original dish involved cooking bacon with herbs, then serving it together with chatchi that had had its starch extracted, all on top of poitan. The two herbs they had used were ones I didn’t know the names of, but Reina Ruu must have been quite fond of them, as she had employed them in her herb-grilled dish as well. One of them had a sharp stinging taste, while the other was fragrant like olives. Both of them went quite well with bacon.

The addition of the starch-extracted chatchi would cause the texture to grow dry. However, the chefs of the forest’s edge had added reten oil to make it smooth instead, then adjusted the flavor with tau oil and pico leaves, and added crushed ramanpa nuts to boot. Ramanpa had a similar texture and flavor to walnuts, and they were really good when paired with fried chatchi.

Toor Deen and the women under my guidance had prepared the giba manju.

It was a dish that had mainly been sold by the Fa clan, so Reina Ruu and the others weren't especially familiar with it. That was why the women from our area of the forest were the ones who were taking care of it.

"Toor Deen was only assigned to work on the sweets, but we really wanted the people of the castle town to give this a try, so I asked if we could specially prepare it," I explained.

"Hmm?" Polarth questioned with a tilt of his head. "This is a dish sold at your stalls, is it not? I do think that they are delectable morsels, but do they hold some sort of special meaning to you, Sir Asuta?"

"No. But it *is* flavored differently than the ones from the stalls. It should be a flavoring you're familiar with too, Polarth, and it's quite an interesting combination."

Polarth bit into the miniature giba manju with a look of confusion, only to then let out a surprised "Oh! This is the flavoring of your giba curry!"

Indeed, it was a dish designed to emulate curry manju. Since this was a standing-buffet-style meal, people weren't using plates, which meant that normally it wouldn't be possible to serve giba curry. That was why I had come up with this instead. It wouldn't be as good as when it was freshly steamed, but I figured it should maintain its flavor to a similar degree that curry bread did. If I'd had more time to experiment, I would have liked to try frying it with oil to make it into actual curry bread, though.

"The ordinary ones are delicious, of course, but these are just as good! I don't care for folks from Sym, but their herbs are definitely worth eating," Diel remarked, sparking my memory.

"Speaking of folks from Sym, I haven't seen Arishuna. Has she not arrived yet?"

"She's sitting over in that corner. I think she got here before I did."

Looking in the direction Diel had indicated, I found that it was the same place where Ai Fa's group was, along with all those noble ladies. Polarth was smiling as he ate his curry manju, but he seemed to notice our discussion and added an explanation.

“Lady Arishuna was given a seat so she could display her star reading talents. As she is the only one seated, I suspect that the crowd has simply been hiding her from your view all this time.”

“Ah, I see. Has she been eating the food too?”

“I’m not certain. I’ve only really taken note of the continuous stream of young noblewomen who have been visiting her. Perhaps she plans to eat after her work is done, like the musicians.”

Arishuna had been invited as part of the entertainment rather than as an honored guest. Perhaps there was no helping that her meal would have to be pushed off for later.

“In that case, would it be possible to have some pieces of this dish set aside for her? As you know, she’s really fond of giba curry.”

“Oh, I see. In that case, we can make a request of the pages,” Polarth replied with a smile.

At that, Diel shot me a sulky look and said, “You really are taken with that Sym woman, aren’t you, Asuta?”

“Well, we know each other fairly well.”

“But you’ve definitely known me longer than her,” she grumbled with a childish pout, causing me to smile brightly.

“I don’t rank how important my friends are. If you were in the same position, I would ask them to set aside food for you too. There are a lot of dishes I want you to try, after all.”

Diel stared blankly for a moment, but then she broke out in a smile that made her look like an angel. “I’m happy to hear it. I’d love to have you make dinner for me sometime, Asuta.”

“Well, before anything like that can happen, you’ll have to consult with Polarth about it. I can’t get into the castle town without his help, after all.”

The moment I finished talking, though, Diel excitedly grabbed ahold of my collar. “Do you really mean it?! Genos-style lip-service won’t work on me, you know.”

“I’d never try something like that with you.”

Fortunately, Diel let go of me before she could accidentally damage my banquet attire.

“Of course not. But in that case, I’ll try asking when I have an important business deal or something! I’ll have you make something with lots of tau oil and sugar then!”

“Got it. As long as we receive the request at least five days in advance, I should be able to make it work.”

By this point, Diel’s smile was shining so brightly that it wouldn’t have been surprising if an angel’s wings were to burst from her back. Her girly dress was adding to her smile’s charms too. But as Diel and Polarth looked at me from their respective directions, I suddenly recalled something else.

“By the way, is Lefreya allowed to come to events like this?”

“No, she’s still supposed to stay away from big social gatherings. A tea party with a handful of attendees is one thing, but letting her come to a party with this many people would be pretty problematic,” Polarth explained.

Lefreya was the head of her house, if only in name. For that reason, her movements were restricted in order to ensure that nobody with any wicked schemes involving the house of Turan could get close to her, or anything of that sort.

Diel looked rather pained after listening to Polarth’s words, and brought her face close to mine. “Hey, once the rainy season comes around, there’s going to be northerners working around the settlement at the forest’s edge, right? It seems Lefreya’s been really concerned about that.”

“Huh? Why would that concern Lefreya?”

“I don’t really know, but apparently, someone related to Lefreya’s maid is going to be one of them. I guess that means she can’t just treat it like somebody else’s problem.”

Was that how it was? When I thought about it, I realized I had absolutely no grasp of what the relationship between Lefreya and Chiffon Chel was like. *Has*

she really gotten that close to a northerner like Chiffon Chel...? Well, that would be great if it were the case, I thought to myself.

Then Polarth clapped his hands together and said, “Now then, I would say it’s about time to meet back up with the ladies. Then after that, why not split up into even smaller groups and spend time getting to know a few more guests?”

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea to me,” Dari Sauti replied with a smile as he bit into a bacon dish prepared by the members of the Ruu clan. We then headed off to the corner where the women were.

With the crowd around them being entirely composed of noble ladies, getting close turned out to be rather difficult. However, Merrim quickly noticed us and called out, “My, we were just talking about you gentlemen from the forest’s edge, and here you are. Please, come this way.”

What kind of stuff had they been talking about, exactly? Well, anyway, we were swiftly led to the center of the group, with stares aimed at us from every direction. Then as we approached the table, I started to smell a sweet aroma. There were all sorts of desserts lined up there.

“We have sweets prepared by the chefs from the forest’s edge here as well, and they all came out splendidly,” Merrim remarked, and the other women all smiled to show their agreement. When I glanced in the direction of the table, I found Eulifia and Odifia there. I hadn’t seen the two of them in a while.

“Ah, so you have finally arrived. Odifia’s legs have been rooted in place here, which has proved to be quite troublesome.” Unsurprisingly, Odifia was standing there silently eating the desserts she so craved, one after another. The noblewomen around her were all looking down at the adorable sight with warm gazes. “She seems especially taken with this poitan confection. This was, of course, prepared by Toor Deen, correct?”

“Yes. I gave her the idea, but Toor Deen was the one who perfected the flavor.”

I had asked Toor Deen to make something based on the roll cakes from my old world, to serve as the centerpiece of the desserts they had prepared for the party tonight.

The main difficulty was that they had to be fluffier than our usual pastries. Getting the right outcome involved thoroughly beating a large number of kimyuus eggs, and then mixing in poitan flour and panam honey. That was easy enough to put into words, but figuring out how much she needed to beat the eggs and how long she needed to stir after adding the poitan flour had required quite a bit of trial and error. There had been many failures along the way, such as the whole thing collapsing, or the poitan flour getting all clumpy due to not being stirred enough.

A lot of experimentation had been needed to find the right thickness for cooking it too. After all, we didn't have any specialized molds or even ovens at the forest's edge. Instead, we had lined the four edges of a tray with metal plates, and then poured the batter onto it to cook on a stove over a carefully managed flame. Just like with the pizza, it had made me desperately want to have a stone oven.

Still, the effort had been worth it, as we had eventually managed to produce a roll cake similar enough to what we'd been aiming for. After that, we had simply slathered the freshly baked pastry with a large amount of whipped cream and wrapped it up into a coil. Then we cut it into shorter slices, like the hot dogs, taking care not to let it crumble.

Furthermore, we had made multiple flavors by adding cocoa-like gigi leaves to the batter and the cream. That gave us four different varieties of roll cake to offer, produced by combining the plain and gigi flavors in different ways. Personally, I thought the varying colors we had on display made it a perfect fit for such an event.

As Odifia had been stuffing her cheeks with them, the outside of her mouth was coated with cream. Her mother wiped it away with a napkin frequently, but since she never stopped eating, it didn't take long for her to get dirty again. While I was a little concerned about letting the expressionless six-year-old continue to gorge herself on desserts in total silence, apparently everyone around her thought it was all too cute to put a stop to.

"Hmph. In the future, I will have to make certain that you finish eating your other food before I give you any sweets. At this rate, your body will end up all out of sorts."

“Yeah, you really should,” I said.

Toor Deen’s sweets typically had a relatively restrained sweetness to match the tastes of the people of the forest’s edge, but they still used lots of eggs and karon milk. But regardless, it definitely wasn’t healthy to eat nothing but desserts.

“These confections were a wonderful surprise for the rest of us as well. They were so delicious, I felt as if they were bewitching my tongue,” an unfamiliar young noblewoman remarked.

Our other desserts included the familiar chatchi mochi and pudding prepared in the style of chawanmushi. As there were no plates here, they were instead being served on top of thin pieces of baked poitan. I was honestly a little tempted to peek into the kitchen to see what sort of face Rimee Ruu was making as she tasted them.

“What about you, Darmu Ruu? You don’t hate sweets, do you?” Sheera Ruu asked.

Darmu Ruu silently popped a piece of chatchi mochi into his mouth, and the light in his eyes visibly brightened. “This...might have been made with more skill than even Rimee possesses.”

“I don’t think anyone can beat Toor Deen and Rimee Ruu when it comes to making desserts. I’m no match for them at all,” Sheera Ruu replied, making Darmu Ruu frown dubiously.

“But what’s most important is how you handle giba meat, right? You’re more skilled at that than Rimee is, so there’s nothing to get upset about.”

“Oh, I wasn’t getting upset or anything,” she said, looking surprised, then her eyes narrowed as she smiled. “Still, it makes me glad to hear you worrying about me like that.”

“I wasn’t worrying. I simply spoke the truth.”

The noblewomen watched the two Ruu cousins talking with wide eyes. Several of them soon cast their gazes down in disappointment, though, perhaps because they saw the blue flower on Darmu Ruu’s chest. In his current getup, he looked as wild as a wolf and as refined as a nobleman at the same time, so it

was possible that he was now almost too attractive for the ladies to handle.

Behind them, the Zaza siblings seemed to be having some sort of back-and-forth as well.

“Are you really saying you don’t see what makes this dessert so wonderful, Geol?”

“It’s not like I said it was bad. But it’s too sweet and doesn’t have any giba meat in it, so I just don’t think it’s suitable food for a hunter.”

“People can’t live on meat alone. Don’t be so shortsighted. Will you really be able to inherit the post of leading clan head like that?”

Now that I thought about it, Sufira Zaza was one of the people who had shown the most interest when it came to sugary foods. When she’d heard that Toor Deen, a member of a subordinate clan under the Zaza, had made these, she must have felt a great deal of pride. In fact, I felt a bit disappointed that I had missed the moment when her usual coolheaded expression had broken down, as it didn’t happen very often.

“Sweets sure are delightful, aren’t they? Still, I was quite surprised to learn that these were made without Asuta around,” Mil Fei Sauti said.

“I can’t compete with Toor Deen or Rimee Ruu when it comes to sweets,” I told her. “If you have the time to do so, maybe you should consider trying to learn how to make desserts for the Sauti clan too.”

“Indeed. As long as we have the time for it, of course.” Mil Fei Sauti rarely smiled, but I thought I saw the corners of her mouth rise a little then. Dari Sauti was enjoying some roll cake when he noticed it too, and it seemed to surprise him a bit.

“Oh, it seems you’re finding it a lot easier to talk to Asuta now, Mil Fei. When we invited our comrades to come to the Sauti settlement, I don’t remember you ever letting that strict expression of yours slip. Not even once.”

“Is there some sort of issue with Asuta and I being able to chat casually? After all, he and many others have done so much for the Sauti clan,” she replied, a demure look on her face. She still had a smile in her eyes, though. She had first started to open up to me right before we left the Sauti settlement.

That just left Ai Fa. Even now, she was surrounded by noblewomen, completely unable to escape. Despite the fact that she was clearly wearing a dress, it almost looked like they were fawning over some gentleman. Every last one of them seemed to have teary eyes and red cheeks, as if they were maidens in love. Perhaps Ai Fa's commanding expression and natural composure were making them feel as if they were in some sort of forbidden flower garden that only they could enter.

As I wondered what was going on, my gaze met Ai Fa's from a distance. Her gallant expression was as unwavering as ever, but the look in her eyes was clearly saying, "Save me." Holding back a smile, I picked up two roll cakes from the table and headed over to her.

5

I attempted to push my way through to Ai Fa while being extremely careful to not brush up against any of the noblewomen who were present.

"My apologies for interrupting your chat, but would you mind if I cut in to speak to my clan head for a bit?"

With that, the noblewomen started to clear a path. It looked like a giant flower was blooming open, with Ai Fa standing in the center, clad in a beautiful dress. My heart started pounding for no reason in particular, and I hurried over to her.

"Ah, you are Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, are you not? I believe this is the first time we have met," one of the noblewomen who had been staring dreamily at Ai Fa said to me. Apparently, she was the daughter of a viscount. A number of other women also introduced themselves, and after taking the time to give them all appropriate responses, I finally made it to my clan head.

"Hey there, Ai Fa. Looks like you've been getting to know a whole bunch of people tonight, huh?"

Ai Fa silently stared back at me, suppressing her emotions so they didn't show on her face. The fact that she didn't even give me an "Indeed" meant that she must have been pretty tired.

“We were talking about splitting up into new groups and going around the hall a bit more. Would it be possible to ask you all to save the rest of your discussion for later?”

“Yes, of course.”

“We shall see you again soon, Lady Ai Fa.”

“Do not forget your promise to dance with me, all right?”

The noblewomen were clearly reluctant to part with Ai Fa, but they went ahead and dispersed. My clan head sighed deeply, then once again looked my way.

“You saved me, and you have my thanks for that.”

“You better not let those noblewomen hear that. By the way, what was that about promising to dance?”

“I have no idea. I don’t recall ever making such a promise,” Ai Fa quietly muttered, snatching one of the roll cakes out of my hands. She bit into it almost desperately and sighed. “It’s sweet.”

“But not too sweet, right? Toor Deen worked hard to make it.”

“Indeed. I can feel it soothing my nerves.”

She sounded so done that I couldn’t help but smile.

“Even dressed like that, ladies are still drawn to you. You’re just so gallant that men and women alike are always falling for your charms.”

“Don’t joke. I’m exhausted.”

Spending so much time surrounded by unfamiliar faces was really taxing for Ai Fa. That was true even when it came to her fellow people of the forest’s edge, so naturally it applied to these noblewomen from the castle town as well.

“Can we step outside to get some fresh air? I feel like I won’t be able to last until the end of the party at this rate.”

“Why don’t we go ask Polarth? But can I quickly say hello to Arishuna first?”

I could now spy Arishuna not far from Ai Fa. Her slender figure was seated in a large chair up against the wall, and she looked just as worn down as Ai Fa.

“Are you all right, Arishuna? You look pretty tired.”

Arishuna raised her face and stared up at me from within the shadow of her hood, which was pulled far up over her head.

“Asuta, I am sorry, for the late greeting.”

“Ah, no, you’re not able to move from this spot, so I’m the one who’s late greeting you. Are you not feeling well right now?”

“I am, fine. Star reading, is tiring. I did not have, any time to rest, until the women, from the forest’s edge, arrived, so I am simply, a little weary.”

I definitely felt bad for her, hearing that. It seemed the young women of the castle town really did have a strong interest in fortune-telling.

“We prepared a lot of special giba dishes for today, so please give it a try if you find the time. I asked Polarth to have some set aside for you.”

“Special giba dishes? I am, very much interested.”

“Yeah. We even came up with one that uses curry flavoring in a different way than normal. If we can borrow a steamer from the kitchen, we should be able to make it taste even better for you.”

Arishuna’s black eyes started sparkling with obvious joy. “Asuta, you have, my gratitude. I feel as if, new life has, been breathed into, the flames of, my life force.”

“Hearing stuff like that makes me feel kind of awkward... Um, it may be bad manners to pass something like this to you by hand, but would you like to try this?” I was holding another roll cake in my hand, of the kind where both the dough and the cream had been made with gigi leaves. Arishuna politely accepted it from me.

“The cooking from, your stalls, is always passed to me, by hand, so I do not, find it rude.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true. I hope it’s to your tastes.”

“Thank you... Your consideration, touches me deeply,” Arishuna stated, bowing her head deeply. “Um, I am having, difficulty preventing, my expression from shifting. I would like, to talk more, with you, but could I, have a bit, of

time?”

“Got it. I have something to take care of myself, so I’ll see you later.”

I stepped away, back toward Ai Fa, but I found that she was looking off in a totally different direction. Following her gaze, I spotted Geol Zaza looking bewildered, with noble ladies laughing elegantly all around him.

“Wh-What in the world is going on over there?”

“I am not completely certain, but it seems that some women who heard the stories about that swordsmanship tournament have taken an interest in him. Just like with contests of strength at the forest’s edge, those who have achieved success there are rewarded with great acclaim.”

Right. Taking fourth place in that tournament was definitely worthy of praise. And Geol Zaza didn’t have a blue flower, so anyone could feel free to talk with him without the slightest hesitation.

Wondering what his sister was up to, I glanced around and found that she was chatting with Leiriss, and both of them were holding roll cakes. Leiriss was smiling casually, while Sufira Zaza was as expressionless as always.

“That noble doesn’t appear to be wearing a flower,” Ai Fa whispered to me. It was true; the only thing he had on his chest was the crest of the house of Saturas.

“So he doesn’t have a woman with him either. Still, after all the problems Leeheim and Geimalos caused, I can’t imagine him being dumb enough to repeat their mistakes,” I said.

“Hmm.”

Something seemed to be worrying Ai Fa, but I hadn’t seen anything that suggested to me that Leiriss might be dangerous. At least, not according to my admittedly terrible judgment about such things. Just like when we were talking a little while ago, he was simply smiling tactfully at his conversation partner, as a young nobleman would be expected to do.

On the opposite side of the table from the two of them, Dari Sauti was talking with another group: Polarth’s family. Apparently, the leading clan head had

called out to them as they were passing by.

Aside from that, I noticed that young men and women had finally begun dancing in the center of the hall, and the musical performance had grown a bit louder. It wasn't loud enough to interfere with those who wanted to keep chatting, though, so the event hall was only growing livelier as a result.

Then the doors leading into the room were once again opened.

"The chefs who catered for this event have arrived to offer their greetings," a page called out, and I saw some very familiar faces step into the hall.

"Announcing Sir Yang, the head chef for the house of Daleim; Sir Bozl and Lady Shilly Rou of the Silver Star; and Lady Reina Ruu, Lady Rimee Ruu, and Lady Toor Deen, the chefs of the forest's edge."

The chefs from the castle town were clad in their usual white attire. No surprises there. What *was* a surprise, though, was what the chefs from the forest's edge were wearing. Reina Ruu seemed to be dressed in a chef's outfit for men similar to the kind Shilly Rou wore, while Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen were in the same sort of maid-uniform-like clothes they had been given for the tea party.

The crowd gave a modest round of applause, taking care not to drown out the musical performance. A number of the noblewomen seemed to be really enjoying how cute Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen were. Once the clapping subsided, several people left the crowd and walked over to briefly talk with the chefs. They must have been praising the chefs for their amazing skills.

"Ai Fa, why don't we go say hi too before we take our break?"

"Very well," my clan head agreed, and so the two of us headed in that direction. I figured it was best to start by thanking our fellow people of the forest's edge.

"Good work, you three. I was a little surprised to see you dressed like that, Reina Ruu."

"Yeah. I was told to get changed for the greeting. And then Ludo laughed at me." Reina Ruu's cheeks were turning red from embarrassment, but I didn't see anything to laugh at. Her dark skin contrasted nicely with the white outfit,

which was very similar to the familiar chef's attire from my old world. It suited her almost surprisingly well.

Of course, since it was made for men, the bottom half was composed of pants with cylindrical legs, but it didn't look strange on her at all. In fact, the only problem with it that I could see was how tight it seemed to be around her chest.

Meanwhile, Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen were wearing dresses with aprons that made them look absolutely adorable. I started to call out to them too, only for a frilly figure to appear by my feet.

"Your sweets were really tasty, Toor Deen." Naturally, it was none other than Odifia.

Looking incredibly flustered, Toor Deen bowed to the six-year-old noble. "Th-Thank you. I'm glad you enjoyed them."

"They were really tasty," the expressionless girl repeated. Then she grabbed ahold of Toor Deen's hands. "Make more for me sometime, okay?"

"O-Of course, whenever another chance to do so comes up."

I shot a smile at the girls over Odifia's head, and then moved to the right, to where Yang, Bozl, and Shilly Rou were standing. The head chef of the house of Daleim was wearing his usual calm smile.

"Your outfits suit you well, Sir Asuta and Lady Ai Fa."

"Thank you. The food you all prepared turned out amazingly well."

"I would appreciate hearing which dishes you enjoyed later. I am sure the other chefs made most of them, though."

"No, no, you're exceptionally skilled too, Sir Yang! That kimyuus skin dish was sublime!" Bozl chimed in with a loud laugh. He was an incredibly large man, of rare stature for someone from Jagar, and he had a deeply amused smile on his bearded face. "I'm also interested to hear your evaluation, Sir Asuta! Even just telling us which dish left the strongest impression on you would be plenty."

"Let's see... I still haven't tried everything yet. But for now, I'd say the baked, skewered one that used thin slices of karon meat wrapped in fuwano really

stood out to me.”

“Ooh! That’s one that I came up with! What an honor!”

So that dish was Bozl’s? Now that I thought about it, I had heard that he was the apprentice who had been assigned to work with meat. Was that why he was able to bring out such wonderful flavor from karon meat?

“Is that the only dish that caught your attention?” Shilly Rou interjected, standing beside Bozl. Her pale hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and her expression was full of competitive spirit. The white chef’s uniform also looked quite good on her.

“No, there were a lot of other ones too. There was the baked one with finely chopped karon meat, and the one that layered small bits of fish with gigo. Oh, and there was that karon meat dish that seemed to almost melt in my mouth.”

“That first one was Sir Yang’s dish, and Bozl made the other two,” Shilly Rou stated, glaring at me with an irritated look. “What about the desserts? That was what I was in charge of.”

“Ah, I see. Sorry, I still haven’t touched the desserts.”

“Are you saying you decided that the desserts I prepared weren’t even fit to taste?”

“Uh, no, I make a habit of eating desserts last, after I’ve had my fill of everything else, so I’ve been putting those off for later.”

Displeasure was swirling about in Shilly Rou’s eyes. It had been a fairly long time since we had last seen one another, so things between us felt a little tense. However, Rimee Ruu then came springing in from the side.

“Hey, Shilly Rou’s sweets are really good too! They’re yummy and have a mysterious taste, like all sorts of fruit flavors and smells exploding in your mouth!”

“I see. Then I look forward to trying them. Um, I’ll be sure to give them a shot later, I swear.”

Shilly Rou frowned childishly, while Bozl let out another hearty laugh.

“Shilly Rou and Sir Roy racked their brains in order to come up with sweets

that would delight the people of the forest's edge. They came out wonderfully, so I would certainly like for you to taste them!"

"Yeah, sure thing. I promise, I really am interested in seeing what you all made. By the way, did Roy not come along with you?"

"That's right. He is only an assistant, not a true employee of the Silver Star, so unfortunately, he could not come along to be introduced as a chef," Bozl explained, though his narrowed eyes looked even more amused than before. "However, I am certain that it will only be a few short years before he has a restaurant of his own, which would be no small feat for someone as young as he is. We certainly can't afford to dawdle!"

"Hmph. You make it sound like we're letting a business rival steal our techniques." Shilly Rou's mood wasn't improving. Actually, I didn't think I had *ever* seen her in a good mood. But regardless, I absolutely wanted to sample the desserts she had prepared for the people of the forest's edge.

Other guests were coming to greet the chefs, so we had to yield our spots to them. Dari Sauti and the others had also split up into pairs of men and women and had come to thank Reina Ruu and the others. Toor Deen had the two Zaza siblings coming at her from both sides, which was making her look troubled and yet truly happy as she smiled at them.

"All right, let's move on to the next few dishes," I said, turning toward Ai Fa, only to find her looking back at me miserably. Now that I thought about it, we had been just about to take a short break before. I hurriedly nodded at my clan head, and then I called out to Polarth. "Um, would it be all right if we got a bit of fresh air?"

"Yes, of course. Look on the other side of that partitioning screen, and you will find a way out. There should be no danger, so please, take as long as you would like."

"Thank you."

After mentioning our intentions to Dari Sauti, we went ahead and stepped away.

The partitioning screen that Polarth had mentioned was set up along the left

wall. We walked along the outer perimeter of the room so as to not interrupt the dancing until we reached the screen, on the other side of which we found a patio of sorts. It was paved with stone, and a number of chairs were scattered around. There were numerous flames illuminating the outer wall, so as long as we didn't stray too far from the building, we had no need to worry about having limited visibility. The space in front of us was probably the inner garden, and beyond it I could see lit torches slowly moving back and forth. They were undoubtedly being carried by the guards who protected the manor. And since it was impossible for outlaws to get into the castle town anyway, it was clear that we were completely safe here, with security being this tight.

"I'm feeling a bit tired myself. Why don't we take a seat?" I said, sitting down at a small round table, with Ai Fa taking the seat across from me. The sky above us was filled with stars, and the cool air and nighttime breeze felt really pleasant on my flushed skin. "The sun's finally set, but the banquet is going to continue for a while."

Ai Fa cast her gaze downward and gave a little sigh. As I had repeatedly thought to myself many times by now, she was wearing a dress. Her neatly combed blonde hair shined in the light from the outer wall, making her look all the more beautiful.

"Everyone seems to have done a fair bit of mingling, so coming here was definitely worth our while. I'm sorry you ended up getting dragged along with me, though, Ai Fa."

"Don't say that. This was my decision. If Polarth wishes to deepen ties with you, then as your clan head, I naturally wouldn't want to get in the way of that," Ai Fa replied, suddenly looking up at me. "This is a necessary step toward forming proper bonds with the nobles of Genos, correct? No matter how much trying this may be, I still feel proud of you for what you're doing."

"P-Proud?"

"Indeed. We never would have been able to connect with the nobles without you." There was an incredibly serious look in her eyes, and it was making my pulse speed up even more. She was still Ai Fa, no matter what she was wearing, but seeing her in a dress really stirred up my emotions in a totally different way

than usual. "I feel proud of the fact that you are a member of the Fa clan. Those feelings have never changed."

"Thanks. It makes me incredibly happy to hear you say that. Still, I'm sorry that I can never seem to follow the common sense rules of the forest's edge."

When she heard me say that, Ai Fa smiled softly. "You're still worried about that? It's not a serious issue. You can act as you see fit."

"Yeah, but...the Fa clan name is precious to you, and there's only the two of us in our family, right? So I feel bad about how I've been ignoring your customs whenever they become any kind of problem for me." Naturally, I was talking about how I referred to Ai Fa.

However, my clan head's smile just softened even more as she reached out to me. And then, her ring-clad fingers gently wrapped around my hand.

"It doesn't matter. It's true that the custom at the forest's edge is to refer to family without their clan name, and to give your clan name to those you acknowledge as being part of your clan as well. But the way we've been doing things isn't hurting anyone, so I don't think you need to pay that much mind."

"R-Really?"

"Yes, really. What matters most to me is having you by my side. Terms of address are trivial in comparison." Ai Fa's grip grew ever so slightly stronger, and that sensation, along with her warmth, was making me even more flustered. "Besides...I find it quite pleasant, hearing you call me Ai Fa, so I also feel no need to force you to change."

"If you really feel that way, then that's a huge relief. My biggest worry was thinking that this might have been something that had been bothering you this entire time."

"If it had been bothering me, I would have forced you to change it, even if I had to wring your neck to do it," Ai Fa said with a chuckle. It was super rare to hear her laugh out loud like that. She must have been feeling really at ease, now that we were finally free of prying eyes. "I know that you call me Ai Fa with great affection. Indeed, I'm certain enough about that fact that this matter doesn't concern me at all. You can keep acting as you always have, Asuta."

“Yeah...”

“Still, I let the chance to give you a clan name slip by me. But as long as you aren’t going to get married, that shouldn’t be a problem. Perhaps I should plan to give it to you when the time comes for you to take a bride.”

“Hey, I’m not planning on marrying anyone, so...” I was about to start arguing the point in a fluster, but I stopped myself when I saw the sincere look in Ai Fa’s eyes. There was only one person in this world I would ever want to marry, and I had already informed my clan head of that fact, so despite her comments...I knew there was no need for me to run my mouth about it again. “Got it. If that time ever comes, then please do grant me the Fa name.”

“Of course.”

“Still, even if it doesn’t, the person I want to have by my side for the rest of my life is you, Ai Fa.”

Still wearing that same gentle smile, Ai Fa nodded and repeated, “Of course.”

Things seemed to be getting even livelier on the other side of the partition, but it felt like the two of us were in our own calm quiet little world. A powerful sense of déjà vu struck me then, and before I knew it, I found myself laughing. “This reminds me of the night of the festival of the hunt. We separated from everyone to talk like this that time too, didn’t we?”

“Hmm? Yes, we certainly did,” Ai Fa said with a confused tilt of her head. Then she brought her face close to mine as if to make sure no one could possibly overhear. “Still, it’s no surprise that we keep doing this. I’m not good with banquets of any kind... Whenever I have that many unfamiliar faces surrounding me, I always find myself wanting to talk with you so badly I can hardly stand it.”

“You like to have your family pamper you, huh?” That comment earned me an angry headbutt from my clan head. However, her fingers were still gripping my hand all the while. “All right, why don’t we take just a bit more of a break before heading back in?”

Ai Fa frowned a bit, but she still looked happy as she nodded. “Sure.”

It was wonderful to have some time to relax together like this. The woman

who was more important to me than anyone in the world was there by my side, and I had been reminded once again of how blessed I was to have her with me.

“So much has happened during the golden month,” I said, speaking first the words that came to mind as I felt the warmth of Ai Fa’s fingers. “First there was the festival of the hunt with the six clans, then we taught the Dai, Ravitz, and Suun bloodletting and cooking techniques. Our break period passed us by in a flash, Shumiral finally returned to Genos, and now we’ve got this dance party to top things off.”

“There are still a few days left in the month.”

“Right. Then, at the end of this month, the rainy season will begin. I’ll need to spend some time on research to figure out what we can do with the vegetables that’re going to be available to us, and the work on that path running through the forest’s edge will be starting... It seems like next month is gonna be really busy too.”

“Is that troubling?” Ai Fa asked with a smile.

“No, not in the least,” I replied with a grin of my own. “Each and every day I’ve spent here has been fun and exciting for me. And it’s all thanks to you finding me out there in the forest.”

“In that case, should I be grateful for the fact that you ended up in my pitfall trap?” Ai Fa stared straight at me as she brushed aside a bit of blonde hair dangling in front of her cheek. “If I had gone back home without stopping there...you could have been attacked or even killed by mundt or giiz. Just thinking about that...makes me feel as if I’m being swallowed whole by a pitch black abyss.”

“That’s probably not the sort of thing you should spend your time thinking about, then.”

“Indeed. I am grateful to the mother forest. The two of us finding each other must surely have been due to her grand will. That is what I believe.” Ai Fa then lifted my hand and gently pressed it against her cheek. “You are my fate, my destiny, Asuta. I was surely brought into this world in order to meet you.”

My breath caught in my throat. For half a moment, I hesitated. And then I got

up. "Sorry, but would you mind indulging me a bit, Ai Fa?"

"Hmm?" Ai Fa questioned with a childlike tilt of her head, and then I hugged her as gently as I could. Her body, wrapped in that soft fabric, was as warm as I remembered, and was giving off the same sweet scent as always.

"It's rather rare for you to be the one to embrace me," Ai Fa whispered, hugging me back with the same amount of strength.

When I had said each day was fun and full of excitement, that was no exaggeration. It was very much how I truly felt about my life here. And yet, I couldn't help but wish this moment could last forever.

The curtain was steadily closing on the twenty-sixth of the gold month. However, there were no signs that the party would be ending anytime soon. We would eventually have to return to that festive hall, but until then, we would enjoy our precious time together, just the two of us with our feelings perfectly in sync.



Intermezzo: The Ririn Clan

It was now the twenty-second day of the gold month, the day after the leading clan head Donda Ruu had declared that Shumiral would be permitted to become a person of the forest's edge.

Shumiral was now visiting the Ruu settlement once again. Not long had passed since the break of dawn, but the diligent women of the forest's edge were already setting about their work for the morning. As Shumiral pulled into the plaza with his totos-drawn wagon, Giran Ririn approached him from off to the side.

"You're here early. Shall we head to the Ririn house now?"

"Yes. But do I not, need to greet the, leading clan head, Donda Ruu?"

"Donda Ruu's sure to still be asleep at this time of day. You already talked plenty last night, didn't you? So there's no need to wake him up now," Giran Ririn replied, the laugh lines around his eyes growing deeper. For a middle-aged man of the forest's edge, he was a remarkably amiable person. Shumiral had heard he was a highly skilled hunter, but that kind smile of his almost made that hard to believe. "So, that's the totos and wagon you brought as a gift, huh? And from what I understand, these aren't ones you've used before, but new ones you went to the trouble of buying in the post town, right?"

"Correct. Our totos and wagons, belong to the group, so I purchased these, because I felt, I needed them, personally. The Ririn clan, should feel free, to use them, whenever necessary."

"Yes, but you bought them with money you earned through your work as a merchant. Of course, I'm glad that we'll all be able to freely take advantage of them as members of the same house, but they're ultimately your possessions. That means your needs take priority when it comes to using them."

"Understood."

After that exchange, Shumiral and Giran Ririn headed out in their covered

wagon with two of the hunting dogs that the Ruu clan was currently looking after. Shumiral was holding the reins, with the Ririn clan head peeking out of the back beside the driver's seat.

"Start by heading south. There are a number of side paths along the way, but those all lead to the settlements of other clans. Just keep going until I signal you."

With that, the tolos and wagon began moving smoothly along the path. Rather than fearing the darkness of the forest, the large bird actually seemed to be enjoying itself. That was fortunate, because it would be living here at the forest's edge from now on as well.

"You were talking with the members of the Ruu clan until pretty late last night, weren't you? Did you get to know Vina Ruu any better in the process?"

"Yes... Actually, I am, not certain. I was nervous, and bashful, and could not, take the lead, and speak much. However..."

"Hmm?"

"The giba curry, Vina Ruu prepared, was so delicious, I could hardly, believe it."

That was why Asuta had asked him to not eat the giba curry served in the post town. Shumiral felt a deep need to thank his friend for that advice.

"Giba curry, huh? That stuff sure is tasty. Unfortunately, the Ririn clan can't make it yet. We're too far away from the Ruu settlement, and we don't have hands to spare, so it's been pretty difficult to find time for lessons."

"Yes, I understand. There are, around ten, members of your clan, correct?"

"Yeah. If you include the kids under five years old, we've got almost fifteen. Before today, there were four members of the main house, and now we're adding you to that number, even if you don't have our clan name yet," Giran Ririn remarked with an amused smile, narrowing his eyes against the breeze that was coming from ahead of them.

Shumiral glanced at Giran Ririn out of the corner of his eye and asked, "Were the other people, in the Ririn clan, opposed to me, becoming a member?"

“Hmm? Would it be some sort of issue if they were?”

“No. I would simply, have to work harder, to earn their trust.”

“Then there’s no point in worrying over stuff like that. Even I won’t know how they’ll react to you until you actually meet them,” Giran Ririn said with a laugh. “Still, to think that you fell for Vina Ruu of all people. Your heart sure did pick a problematic woman.”

“Yes... Vina Ruu, is problematic?”

“Definitely. I’m pretty sure she’s turned down ten marriage offers already. I don’t know how it is in town, but you don’t often hear of that many proposals being rejected here at the forest’s edge.”

“Ten... That certainly is, a lot. But that is simply, proof of how, charming Vina Ruu is.”

“Right. But the point is, even if you *are* given the Ririn clan name, whether you’ll be able to win Vina Ruu’s heart is another matter entirely. Many ordeals await you on the path you have chosen.” Giran Ririn’s voice remained cheerful, and Shumiral didn’t think the other man was mocking him. The clan head then shot him a big grin. “You know, you remind me of myself. Like the Ruu clan will tell you, I fell for a pretty problematic woman too.”

“I see. You married, a woman from, the Lea clan, correct?”

“Indeed. Not that long ago, the Ririn were a clan that had lost all our subordinates and were on the verge of destruction. And yet, despite being the head of such a lowly clan’s main house, I let myself fall for a woman from the Lea, who were under the Ruu. There’s no denying that I was being unreasonable.”

“But you, did eventually, marry her, and were accepted, as a clan under, the Ruu.”

“Yes. That must have been a really difficult choice for Donda Ruu to make. But in the end, he welcomed the Ririn as a new subordinate clan,” Giran Ririn remarked, his bright, clear gaze turning Shumiral’s way. “Now, that role has been handed to me. I have to be every bit as strict and impartial in determining whether or not you’re suited to become a member of the Ririn clan as Donda

Ruu was with me back then.”

“Of course. I wish, to tackle, the challenge, with total sincerity,” Shumiral replied, right before Giran Ririn spoke up again.

“The next path is the one we want. That’s the one that leads to the Ririn settlement. All of the members of my clan should be there awaiting your arrival.”

Shumiral found himself growing more and more nervous as he handled the totos’s reins.

Not long after entering the side path, they came to the settlement’s plaza, which was far more meager than that of the Ruu clan. There were only four houses in total, but with only fifteen clan members, that was all they needed.

“Our clan members are gathered at the main house. It’s the one farthest in.”

A heavy silence filled the air, which only worsened Shumiral’s anxiety. It had only been the previous evening when Donda Ruu had declared that Shumiral would be welcomed into the Ririn clan, and no more than half a day or so had passed since then. What did the Ririn clan members think about having to suddenly welcome a foreigner like Shumiral as one of their own? He couldn’t stop his heart from pounding at the thought.

“We’d better leave the hunting dogs here, so they don’t distract the kids. We need to introduce you to everyone first.”

Following Giran Ririn’s instructions, Shumiral descended from the driver’s seat. Then he tied the totos to a nearby tree, and the two of them headed toward the main house together.

“We’ve kept you waiting, huh? I’ve brought back our new clan member, Shumiral,” Giran Ririn announced as he opened the door, and as expected, there were over ten people waiting inside.

A young woman with golden-brown hair stepped forward from among the group. “We’ve been waiting for your return, clan head. And for our new clan member, Shumiral.”

Everyone else silently stared at Shumiral. He quickly calmed his breathing,

then slowly bowed his head. "My name is Shumiral. Thank you, for welcoming me in."

Instantly, a lively feeling filled the air.

"Glad to have you, Shumiral. I'm Giran's younger brother. My brother and I can be a bit sloppy, so we may cause you some worries, but I'm looking forward to working with you."

"I'm the head of a branch house, and these two are my wife and child. I'm sure it would be hard to remember all our names at once, so why don't you start with memorizing our positions?"

"I'm also the head of a branch house. I married into the clan from the Rutim, and that guy there married in from the Maam, so you can remember us that way."

The women and older children also greeted him. The children who were too young to hold a proper conversation just stared up at him, looking puzzled.

"What's the matter, Shumiral? You seem rather taken aback," Giran Ririn said with a chuckle.

"Yes," Shumiral replied with a nod. "I am, rather surprised. I did not expect, such a warm welcome."

"A warm welcome? It's not like we're going out of our way to show you extra hospitality. There's no need for us to bother with entertaining a member of our own clan, after all," the man who had introduced himself as Giran Ririn's younger brother said with a cheerful smile. "I mean, if Donda Ruu and Giran acknowledged you, we already know you can't be a bad person. And now we can see that with our own eyes. It'll probably take someone who was born in a foreign country like you a good long while to get used to the customs of the forest's edge, after all."

"Right. All we need to do is take our time getting accustomed to each other," Giran Ririn said with a chuckle, scooping up two young children at the same time. One was a boy who was probably less than five years old, and the other was a girl who looked just a bit too old to call a baby. "These are my kids. Come on, you two greet him too."

“Okay... Welcome to the Ririn clan, Shumiral,” the young boy said awkwardly with a bashful smile. His round, adorable eyes shone with childlike curiosity and affection.

Shumiral felt his chest grow tighter. He had been left all alone in this world after losing his parents and siblings, yet now he had all of these people welcoming him in as a clan member. He had never imagined he would be met with such a warm welcome after causing so many people trouble in pursuit of his unreasonable request.

Still...this must be what it means to be a person of the forest's edge. All of them possessed such earnest souls. Shumiral needed to apply himself completely from here on out, so that he could proudly declare that he was one of them. *I will never be permitted to ask Vina Ruu to marry me otherwise.*

Shumiral felt his resolve renew itself, as the members of the Ririn clan watched him with warm gazes.

Group Performance: Idle Weakness

It was around halfway through the silver month, a few days before the question of whether Lem Dom would be permitted to live as a hunter would be answered, based on her contest of strength with Ai Fa.

Diga was sobbing anxiously in a desolate, dimly lit room. In front of him, his brother... No, his former brother, Doddo, was lying on his side as he moaned in pain. They were in the bedroom that had been allotted to them in a branch house at the Dom settlement. Doddo had been seriously injured during their hunting work today. Recently, the food they'd been getting had become a lot more appetizing, and Diga and Doddo had finally found themselves able to eat enough to fill their stomachs. Strength had returned to their skinny bodies, and they had been steadily proving to be more useful as hunters bit by bit. And yet, it had all led to this calamity.

A giba that had been shot with an arrow had charged angrily and gored the base of Doddo's right leg. The clan head, Deek Dom, had swiftly dealt with the rampaging giba, but an unbelievable amount of blood had been spurting from Doddo's wounds, and it hadn't seemed like he could possibly be saved.

And yet, Doddo was alive. His leg muscles had made it through okay, and there were no issues with his bones either. But he had lost a dangerous amount of blood, so the Dom woman who treated him said what happened next would depend on how strong he was.

Doddo's pained moaning hadn't let up for one moment, and he hadn't tried to open his eyes even once. If Doddo's strength came up short, his soul would return to the forest. When Diga thought about that, he couldn't stop himself from crying.

It wasn't as if Diga and Doddo had been especially close up until that point. To be honest, Doddo had been incredibly violent back in the days when he had been able to drink as heavily as he liked, to the point that Diga had found him a bit frightening. The only times Diga hadn't felt afraid were when he himself had

been drinking a similar amount of wine. However, Doddo was the only person Diga still had by his side now. They had been torn away from the rest of their family, and their blood ties had been severed. But even so, Doddo alone was still with him, as they found themselves here in the northern settlement, surrounded by so many terrifying hunters.

On top of that, Doddo wasn't scary in the least anymore, now that he had been banned from drinking fruit wine. The change was so profound that Diga couldn't help but wonder if his former brother was even more weak-willed than he was. He found that he was now dependent on Doddo's presence, and the reverse was also true. That made Diga happy, and he had grown more fond of Doddo than he had ever been before. Even if their blood ties had been severed, Doddo was still his younger brother and was now incredibly important to him.

Was that the reason this fate had befallen them? Diga's and Doddo's crimes had been forgiven in exchange for their blood ties being severed, but they just couldn't stop clinging to one another. Had their weakness been so unbecoming of a pair of hunters that they had earned the forest's anger? He didn't know, but it hardly mattered. Diga was so distressed that he could barely endure it, and his tears were flowing uncontrollably.

"Doddo... Please don't die... Don't leave me all alone..."

There was then a rattling at the door, causing Diga to freeze. Someone was undoing the bolt from the outside. Diga and Doddo had committed a great many crimes, so even though they were no longer bound with leather straps, their bedroom remained bolted from the outside so that they couldn't move about freely.

"Sorry for the wait. The banquet's starting soon. You should get out there," a large man declared, stepping into the bedroom. A giba pelt covered his head, marking him as a Zaza hunter rather than a member of the Dom. Despite his young age, he had a really stern face, with a large scar near his right eyebrow. He was the youngest son of the main Zaza house, Geol Zaza.

The hunter's eyes were like black flames as they glared at Diga, who shrank away from them. Diga had difficulty dealing with people who had black eyes. They reminded him of the former leading clan head, Zattsu Suun—a man he

had feared more than anyone. That left Diga hesitant to look Deek Dom, Asuta of the Fa clan, or even his younger sister Tsuvai in the eyes.

“Were you seriously crying?” Geol Zaza muttered, sounding astounded.

Diga hurriedly wiped at his eyes, staining the back of his hand with tears and snot.

“You really are an utterly hopeless weakling! No matter how much you cry or wail, the forest will be the one to decide his fate. Besides, there’s a banquet tonight, so get up already.”

“Banquet? What banquet?”

“You forgot? The second son of the Jeen took down a giba, so he’s been acknowledged as a full-fledged hunter. Deek Dom must have told you we were holding a banquet to celebrate, right?”

Sure enough, he had heard about that last night. He and Doddo had been looking forward to it, figuring they might get a chance to eat a bunch of delicious food again. Just thinking back on that was enough to cause the tears to well up in his eyes again.

“B-But the banquet’s being held at the Dom settlement, isn’t it? Who’s going to look after Doddo?”

“There’s no need for that. He’s been given medicine, and the bleeding has stopped. All that’s left is to wait for him to get up on his own. Even if somebody does stay by his side, they wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

“No, but—”

“Shut it, you sorry excuse for a man! You’re a member of the Dom clan now, aren’t you? Do you intend to disrespect this celebration for the second son of one of their related clans?”

Under the burning glare of Geol Zaza’s black eyes, Diga was unable to say anything in response.

I’m sorry, Doddo... I’ll hurry back as soon as I can, so you better not die on me...

Diga trudged out of the house with Geol Zaza hurrying him along, and found

that the sun was already halfway sunken below the western horizon. With the settlement at the forest's edge awash in twilight, the members of the Dom clan were all cheerfully departing down the path to the Jeen settlement.

"Hmm? Is that you, Geol Zaza?"

"Ah, Deek Dom. You were so late that I came to meet you. We can't start the banquet until you've all arrived."

"I see. Sorry about that."

Geol Zaza was wearing a pelt with the head still attached, while Deek Dom wore a hunter's cloak and a giba skull. Even during banquets, the men of the northern settlement remained clad in their hunting outfits. The women, however, were in their banquet attire, which consisted of thin fabric from Sym and accessories bought in town, just like what the women of the other clans wore. However, they additionally decorated themselves with giba pelts and bones, which Diga still wasn't used to seeing.

Celebrating a hunter like this was a custom unique to the northern settlement. Or at the very least, they had never held such banquets at the Suun settlement. Apparently, men from this part of the forest weren't seen as full-fledged hunters until they managed to chase down a giba and kill it with their own strength. Hunters that were only capable of finishing off giba that were caught in traps, like Diga and Doddo, were still treated as novices in training.

Once a hunter finally reached the point where they didn't have to rely on such methods, the clans held a banquet like this. The size of the banquet was determined by the house and rank of the hunter in question, and as this was the second son of the main Jeen house, it meant everyone from the northern settlement was gathering.

"The heads of the subordinate clans have also been summoned today in order to deepen our bonds. They're supposed to be bringing their young men and women along, so if any new weddings end up coming out of this, that'll mean another banquet will be happening soon," Geol Zaza remarked with a hearty laugh as they walked. Then, his black eyes turned to look directly at Deek Dom with a quizzical expression. "You're looking pretty gloomy today. Are you that worried about Lem Dom?"

“The Fa clan head’s wounds have finally healed, so the agreed upon contest of strength will be carried out soon.”

At this point, Lem and Deek Dom hadn’t reconciled, nor had she ever returned home after separating from her family. Geol Zaza hadn’t met Ai Fa yet either.

“Hmph. If that woman hunter is even half as strong as they say, then taking down a girl who’s had no real training should be no problem for her, right? In fact, she ought to be able to win with only one hand, easily. If Lem Dom happens to get the better of her, then her hunter’s cloak should be ripped away and she should be forced to live as a woman,” Geol Zaza said, and then he suddenly turned toward Diga. “Now that I think about it, I heard you fell for that woman hunter, didn’t you, Diga? And she turned you down in a pretty definitive way, right? Not that you’re anyone to measure against, but was she actually strong enough to call herself a hunter?”

“Yeah, probably... I don’t think she’s any weaker than your average hunter, at least.”

“What an ambiguous answer! What do you think, Deek Dom?”

“There’s no need to worry. Ai Fa of the Fa clan seems to be uncommonly capable.”

“The one who needs to stop worrying is *you*! And once Lem Dom’s back, safe and sound, just have her marry me as agreed!” Geol Zaza said with a big laugh, then he shot another glare Diga’s way. “And you. Your face is even gloomier than Deek Dom’s. You were finally starting to look like you had the eyes of a real hunter, but now it’s all ruined.”

Diga offered no response.

“You’ve been corrupted to your core. Even a woman like Lem Dom would never lose to a coward like you in a contest of strength.” Geol Zaza suddenly came to a stop and picked up a thick stick that was on the ground. “Hey, grab the other end and try to steal this stick from me.”

“H-Huh? What are you saying?”

“Just hurry up and do it. If you don’t, I’ll break your nose.”

Left with no choice, Diga did as he was told and grabbed the stick. Geol Zaza was holding on to the other end with only one arm, but no matter how hard Diga pulled, the man's sturdy body didn't so much as budge.

"Do it like you mean it. If you beat me, I'll give you special permission to drink fruit wine today."

Diga didn't find that motivating, though. Doddo was the one who loved fruit wine. Diga had no intention of drinking the stuff all on his own without his brother. But if he didn't try for real, he'd end up with a broken nose. Geol Zaza might have seemed like he had a sociable personality, but when he got mad he was every bit as terrifying as his father, Gulaf Zaza.

Diga once again pulled on the stick with all his might. A single tug had no chance of working, so he tried pulling again and again, mixing up fast and slow attempts. Though Geol Zaza still had a relaxed look on his face, that was finally enough to get him to brace his legs.

At this rate, I might actually be able to win. With that, Diga tried to put even more strength into his next tug, only for Geol Zaza's black eyes to ignite like an inferno. With a beastly yell, Diga's opponent snatched the stick away from him, and since he had been pulled at that exact moment, Diga went tumbling down.

"I win. You really are good for nothing."

Geol Zaza leaned over Diga, casting the stick aside. Seeing those black eyes so close up caused Diga to break out in a cold sweat.

"Diga, what you lack is spirit. There's a lot of other stuff you're missing too, but first and foremost, your heart is simply weak. That's why you can't even win a contest of raw strength like that."

Diga said nothing in response.

"You're the same size as I am, aren't you? I may be bigger than you in a few years, but right now you shouldn't be too far below me in terms of strength. So the first thing you need to fix in order to become a full-fledged hunter is that cowardly nature of yours." Then, Geol Zaza grinned and stood up. "Now then, that's enough of a diversion! Let's get going to the Jeen settlement. The Deen and Liddo women are supposedly preparing a real feast for their relatives

today!”

Like Geol Zaza had said, everyone else had already gathered at the Jeen settlement. There were the members of the Zaza, Dom, and Jeen, as well as the heads of the subordinate clans, accompanied by one person each. And then there were the chefs from the Deen and Liddo who had been invited as well. All in all, there had to be at least sixty people present.

“Looks like everyone’s here. Well then, let’s begin this celebration for the second son of the Jeen, who has now become a proper hunter,” the leading clan head, Gulaf Zaza, announced in a deep voice. There was a ritual fire set up in the middle of the plaza, and he was standing in front of it along with two women. One of the women held a hunter’s cloak, while the other had a sheathed sword. “Step forward, second son of the Jeen. Your family will grant you a new cloak and blade.”

A broad-shouldered man slowly approached the ritual flame. He had on the same sort of headless hunter’s cloak that men from most of the other clans used, and which Diga was wearing as well. The second son of the Jeen undid the fastener on that cloak and handed it over to one of the women, and they then placed the new cloak on him. This one still had the head part attached, including the giba’s skull as a foundation, so when it was on him, it looked like he was wearing a helmet. And furthermore, it had been made out of the giba that he had taken down himself.

Similarly, his blade was replaced with a new one. The old cloak and blade would be passed down to another young man when he turned thirteen. And as the second son donned his new equipment, his relatives all raised a cheer for him. Men and women alike were calling out so loudly that it felt as if the ground itself were trembling. There was a unique intonation to it as well, which seemed to resonate all the way to the depths of one’s stomach. This custom of the northern settlement was still quite frightening to Diga. The subordinate clan heads and chefs looked rather intimidated as well.

“We have gained a new hunter! My comrades, let us give our thanks to the mother forest and fill our stomachs with giba meat!” Gulaf Zaza shouted, cutting through the cheers. He lifted up a container of fruit wine, and with that, the celebratory banquet began. Geol Zaza and Deek Dom quickly headed

toward the center of the commotion, leaving Diga all on his own.

Nobody else seemed to have any interest in Diga either, and they certainly didn't approach him. Until Diga and Doddo became full-fledged hunters like the second son of the Jeen just had, they likely wouldn't be accepted as true comrades either. Hunters-in-training with such large bodies would probably be viewed as nothing more than useless burdens here at the northern settlement.

Not so long ago, everyone here fell under the Suun clan, Diga thought to himself, sitting off in a corner while watching his former comrades enjoy the banquet in the distance.

The Zaza, Dom, and Jeen, and even the Liddo, Deen, Havira, and Dana had all once been under the Suun. But since their connection through the Suun clan had been severed, it was likely that a number of them didn't share any blood ties now. The Jeen and Liddo had only recently formed such ties, but the Deen surely hadn't done so with any clan other than the Suun. And clans located far to the north like the Havira and Dana probably hadn't had very many chances to interact with the Liddo and Deen.

But from here on out, they'll be able to form blood ties without involving the Suun clan. They'll forget the Suun branch houses completely, even though our settlement is still located right in the middle of all of theirs. And it was none other than Diga and his family who had brought such a fate upon the members of the branch houses. With a deep sigh, Diga leaned against the trunk of a tree. He hadn't eaten anything since he finished his jerky ration around when the sun hit its peak. He was so hungry his stomach felt like it would tear itself apart. But without Doddo around, he lacked the courage to walk into such an energetic party all on his own.

Tch! If Lem Dom were here, she would just drag us over there while making fun of us the whole time.

Thinking of Doddo caused tears to well up in his eyes again. He felt pathetic and useless, and like all he wanted was to run back to Doddo.

"Um, are you feeling unwell somehow?" a girl's quiet voice asked from above him. Diga looked up, and found a young girl standing there holding a plate. She had a rather childlike face, but she must have been at least ten years old, as she

was wearing a woman's outfit with the top and bottom being separate pieces. Her family must not have been all that well-off, though, since her sparkling clothes were only decorated with berries and flowers.

"Who are you? A woman from the subordinate clans?"

"Yes. I am Toor Deen of the Deen clan. Um, do you not remember me?"

"Toor Deen...?"

She was a rather cute girl, with blackish-brown hair and blue eyes. The expression on her face looked rather timid, but in a few years, she'd surely grow into quite a beauty.

"I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before. Who are you, again? Have we met?"

"Yes. I... I previously belonged to a Suun branch house. After the night of our downfall, I was taken in by my mother's birth clan, the Deen."

"A-A member of the branch houses?" Diga muttered, gulping. "Wh-What do you want with a guy like me? Did you come to take out your grudges on me?"

"No, I didn't come over here for anything like that," Toor Deen replied with a troubled smile, causing her to look all the cuter, like a sweet little flower. "I just wanted to talk with you a bit... You can eat this if you'd like. It's soup made with giba offal and tarapa."

The warm steam coming off the plate wafted toward Diga's nose. The sour smell of the tarapa alone was enough to make Diga's stomach grumble loudly. Toor Deen smiled again, and Diga went ahead and accepted the plate, his face turning red.

"Wh-Why do you want to talk to me? There shouldn't be anything to talk to me about besides old grudges."

"It's a little complicated, so how about you eat a little first?"

Toor Deen sat down an appropriate distance away from Diga, who had no idea what was going on as he picked up the spoon and took in a mouthful of the soup. A striking flavor instantly started dancing across his tongue. It was really remarkable, made up of all sorts of vegetables and herbs.

“Oh, this is the dish that was served at the wedding banquet for the Jeen and Liddo clans! You made this, then?”

“Y-Yes. I taught the northern women about the recipe, and then we made it together.”

“That’s amazing. The meals we’ve been having at the Dom clan have been incredibly good lately, but they just don’t compare to this stuff.”

“Yeah. The Ruu and Rutim sent some women here recently. I hope my work doesn’t compare too poorly to theirs.”

“Of course not. Even out of all the stuff we’ve had at banquets, I like this most of all.”

After that, he obsessively shoveled down the rest of the contents of the dish. She had said it was giba offal, but rather than being chewy innards, it felt like proper meat. And it went incredibly well with the sour and spicy broth, making for a dish so tasty it almost brought Diga to tears.

“It really is good. This might be even tastier than the soup we had back at the wedding banquet. Actually, I think it’s probably just as good as the stuff we had a while back at the Ruu settlement.”

“You’re exaggerating. Those dishes were made by Asuta and the Ruu women, weren’t they?” Toor Deen said, grinning blissfully all the while. However, seeing her innocent smile made Diga’s chest ache for some reason.

“You were a member of the Suun clan, but you’re still able to smile like that.”

“Huh?”

“Back when we all lived at the Suun settlement, everyone from the branch houses always looked like walking corpses. All because we were forcing you all to uphold the ways of the Suun clan.”

Toor Deen’s smile shifted, growing a bit pained. However, it still kept its childlike innocence. “The branch houses committed the crime of not correcting the main house’s mistakes. I’m trying my best to live a proper life in order to make up for that.”

“Hmph. As if the branch houses ever could have opposed the main house.

Who knows what sort of awful fate would have awaited you if you tried.”

It was a crime to be weak. The Suun clan was strong and needed to rule over the weak... Those were the rules laid out by Zattsu Suun. But Diga and Doddo hadn't been able to do much of anything except cover up their weakness with bluster, throwing their weight around and pretending to be rulers.

Zattsu Suun could have cut them off at any time if he had noticed their weakness, and at that point, all they would have had to look forward to was despair and destruction. That was why Diga and Doddo had to act as if they were strong. And then they forced such despair and destruction on the powerless branch houses and subordinate clans in turn.

Diga felt like he wanted to disappear. He and Doddo had been unable to atone for their past sins, instead making an absolutely miserable showing of themselves. And yet, even after having such utter despair thrust upon her, Toor Deen could still smile with such happiness. He felt like a dirty bug, a pest, looking up at a beautiful flower.

Diga had also noticed that Toor Deen's slender shoulders were trembling. She was desperately suppressing the unease she felt inside in order to show him that smile, which was only natural for a former member of the branch houses. Diga didn't remember Toor Deen, but there was no way someone from the branch houses would ever forget the members of the main house. Diga and Doddo in particular had been as cruel as Zattsu and Migi Suun, so much so that the fear of them would have seeped down into the very bones of the young children from the branch houses.

Just like Diga and Doddo had feared Migi Suun, the members of the branch houses felt the same way about them in turn. Even if their blood ties had been severed, the fear and grudges they had inspired wouldn't go away that easily. And yet, Toor Deen was still able to smile at Diga. That made him feel even more pathetic.

“That's probably not enough for you, is it? Why don't I bring you a meat dish with a bit more substance to it?” Toor Deen asked, still smiling and knowing nothing of what Diga was thinking.

“Don't bother,” Diga said with a weak shake of his head. “You should leave

me be... You've got so many relatives here tonight. Why not enjoy yourself with them? Nothing good will come of getting involved with a guy like me."

"But I came here because I had something to discuss with you," Toor Deen said as she was standing up. Then she continued in a formal tone, "By the way, where is the second son... Ah, I mean the former second son, Doddo? I haven't seen him anywhere."

"Doddo got injured," Diga replied, feeling a stinging pain in the back of his nose. "A giba got him in the leg with its tusk, and it's possible he might die... He's in pain right now, with nobody by his side."

"Oh. I see..." Toor Deen replied, her gentle voice full of pity, causing Diga to finally break down in tears.

"Just forget about us already. You've managed to start living a proper life and everything, so you shouldn't spare a second thought for guys like us... We're good-for-nothings fated to die out in the forest."

"But that's not what Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom said," Toor Deen remarked in a serious tone, leaning forward. "They said you two were finally starting to look like hunters. That they'd be able to give you your cloaks before long. Both of them thought so."

"But I can't do anything on my own. If Doddo dies, I'm done for."

"You're really worried about Doddo, aren't you? It'll be okay. I'm sure of it. The mother forest is watching over you." Diga stared at Toor Deen's face, sniffing constantly. Seeing her kind face was making him cry even harder. "All we can do is pray to the forest for Doddo to overcome this trial so he can continue on his path to becoming a hunter. I know you'll pull through. The two of you are strong. After all, you *are* former members of the main Suun house."

"It's hard to believe that. Doddo and I are pretty much just insects."

"That's not true at all. Yamiru Lea, Mida, Tsuvai, and Oura have all had difficulties they've had to overcome through the strength of their spirits. I'm sure you guys can get through this too."

Diga leaned forward, his face now absolutely soaked with tears and snot. "A-Are they doing okay? Mida's real strong, but he can't do anything on his own."

“Mida made it into the top eight of a Ruu clan contest of strength. Twice, actually,” Toor Deen said with an incredibly kind smile. “Yamiru Lea and Tsuvai have been helping out at the stalls in the post town. Oura has mostly been staying at the Rutim settlement this whole time, so I haven’t had many chances to see her, but she seemed to be doing well at the previous banquet.”

“I see. So they’re all properly atoning for our sins.”

“So are the two of you. And Zuuro Suun. He’s out there somewhere in the kingdom, working to make amends for what he did,” Toor Deen remarked, staring off into the distance. “And so are we. Those like me and my father who were taken in by other clans, and the members of the branch houses who remained at the settlement... We’re all living our lives as well as we can. I was allowed to stop by the Suun settlement while I was on my way here today. Several men have had their souls return to the forest, but they’re all trying so hard to redeem themselves.”

“Everyone from the branch houses too? I see...”

“Yeah. So we’ll be fine. Our mother forest won’t abandon her children when we’re trying our best to live proper lives.” Toor Deen’s expression was filled with such fondness that it was as if she herself were the forest. Diga almost felt like the gentle light in her blue eyes was embracing him. “That was what I wanted to tell you and Doddó. Your blood ties have been severed, but I thought that hearing how your former family was doing would be encouraging for you, so I got permission from Gulaf Zaza to tell you about them.”

“A little girl like you went to Gulaf Zaza, one of the leading clan heads, for permission to do something?”

“Yes. I was so scared I couldn’t stop my legs from trembling, but I somehow managed to get my request out,” Toor Deen replied with an embarrassed smile.

Diga loudly snorted, sucking some of his snot back in. “I really am pathetic... Even a little girl like you is doing so much better than I am.”

“I’m sure that’s only because you’re so upset about Doddó’s injuries. And you’re hungry too, aren’t you? People often get a bit jittery when they’re feeling hungry,” Toor Deen said, energetically rising to her feet. “I’ll bring you some other dishes. Then if you get your energy back, I’d like to hear how your

lives with the Dom have been. I have a lot more to tell you about Yamiru Lea and the others too.”

“Hold on. Actually...I’d like to bring some food to Doddo too.”

Toor Deen’s eyes went wide with confusion when she heard that. “Is Doddo even able to eat right now? You just said his life was in danger.”

“But if he smells a bunch of delicious food, that might be enough to get him to open his eyes, right? He’s every bit as much of a glutton as I am,” Diga replied, gathering up all the energy in his body and smiling.

Toor Deen’s eyes narrowed, and she gave him another almost motherly smile. “Well then, let’s deliver some food to him. And if he wakes up, I’d love to hear what both of you have to say.”

“Yeah, got it.” Diga forced all of his strength into his weak legs and stood up.

Toor Deen belonged to the Deen clan. To a member of the Dom clan, that made her a relative. If Diga and Doddo lived proper lives and were given the Dom name, then they could proudly declare that they were related to her again. That would be a proper bond between them, as people of the forest’s edge.

“Okay, let’s get going. How about some herb-grilled giba meat? It smells just as good as tarapa and offal stew, don’t you think?”

Diga wiped his face with the back of his hand, then started walking beside Toor Deen.

The plaza was filled with light. There were so many people around whose names Diga didn’t even know, making such a commotion that it felt as if sparks were flying through the air. And yet, the banquet no longer felt frightening to him in any way.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-fourth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

For this volume, we have Ai Fa in beautiful banquet attire adorning the front cover. Back when the contents of the volume were being published online, I dreamed of the day when kochimo would draw that image. Four years have passed since then, and that dream has finally become a reality. And I truly do owe it all to my readers.

I don't have enough pages to babble on and on about stuff in this afterword, so let me just say that I hope you will all enjoy the story that goes along with kochimo's beautiful illustrations for this volume.

And finally, I want to thank everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

See you again in the next volume!

February 2021,

EDA



**“Yeah, it
really has.
You finally
made it
back.”**

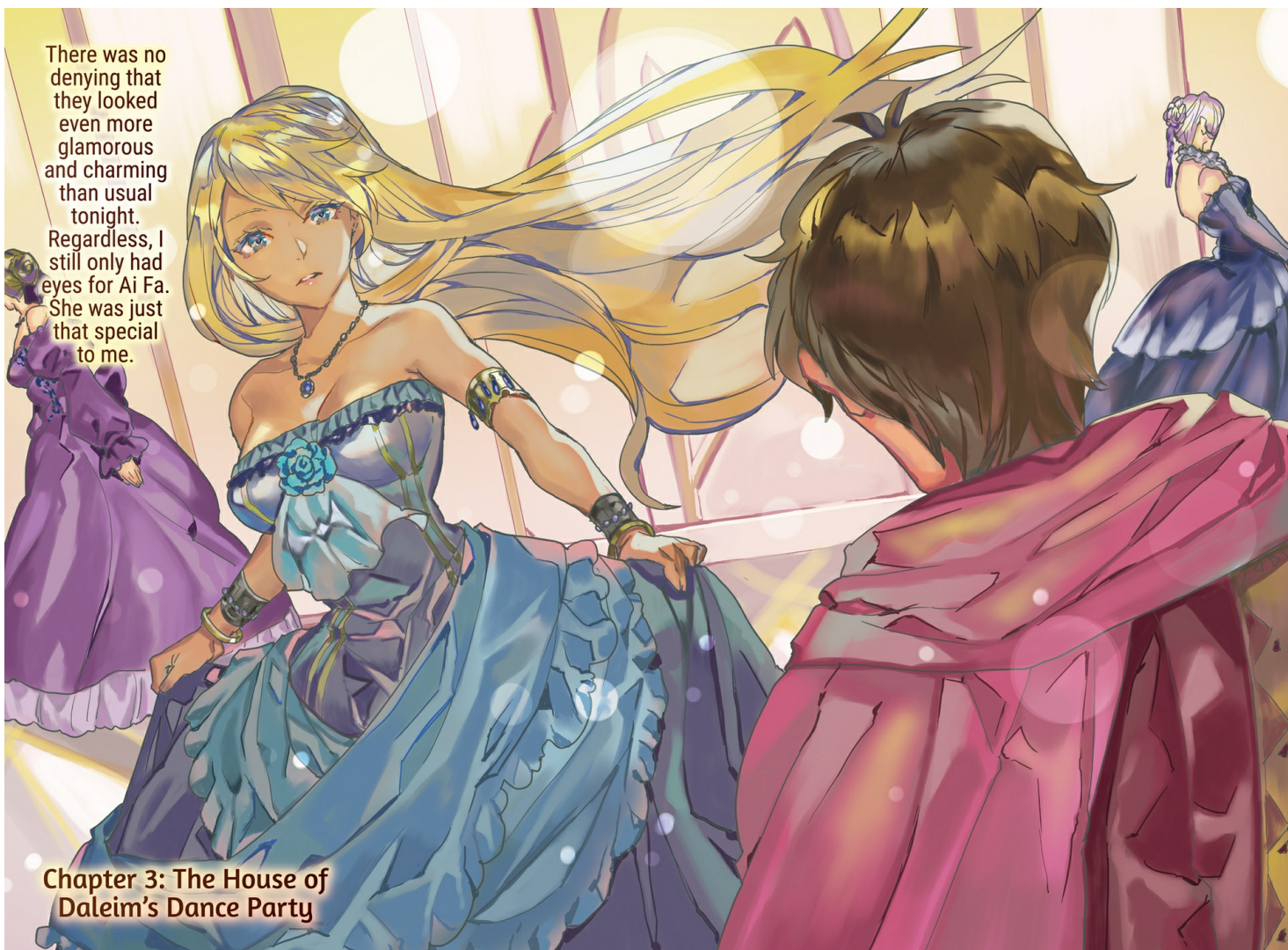
My voice
trembled.

**“It has been,
some time,
Asuta,”**

a nostalgic
voice calmly
stated. With
that, everything
finally clicked.

There was no denying that they looked even more glamorous and charming than usual tonight. Regardless, I still only had eyes for Ai Fa. She was just that special to me.

Chapter 3: The House of Daleim's Dance Party





“The chefs
who catered
for this event
have arrived
to offer their
greetings,”

a page called out,
and I saw some
very familiar faces
step into the hall.

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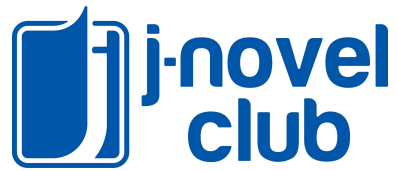
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 24

by EDA

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