

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**

VOLUME
25



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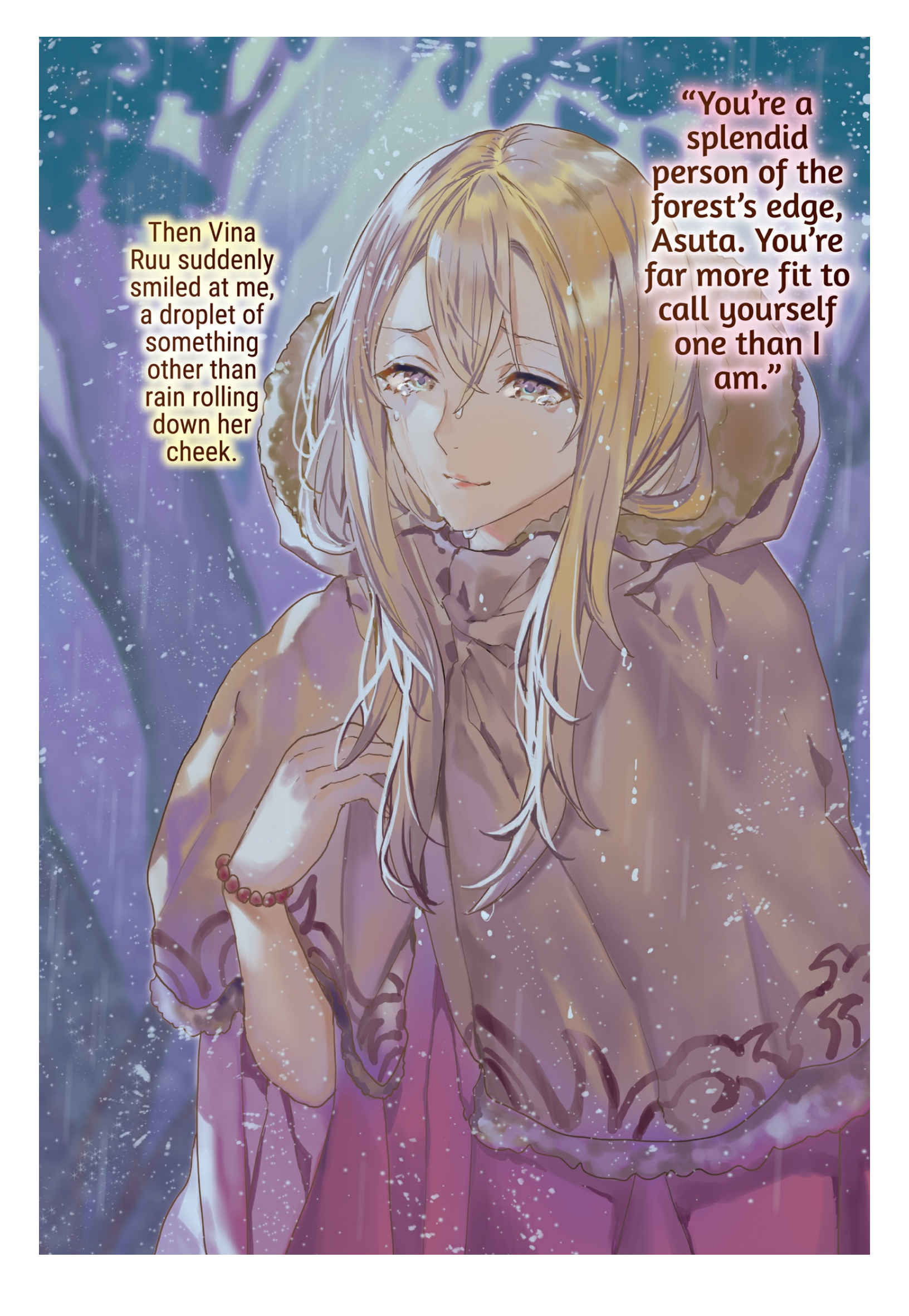
I ended
up having to
get some new
clothes for the
rainy season,
since this was
my first one.



“Hey Rimee,
you runt!
Don’t move
around on
your own!”

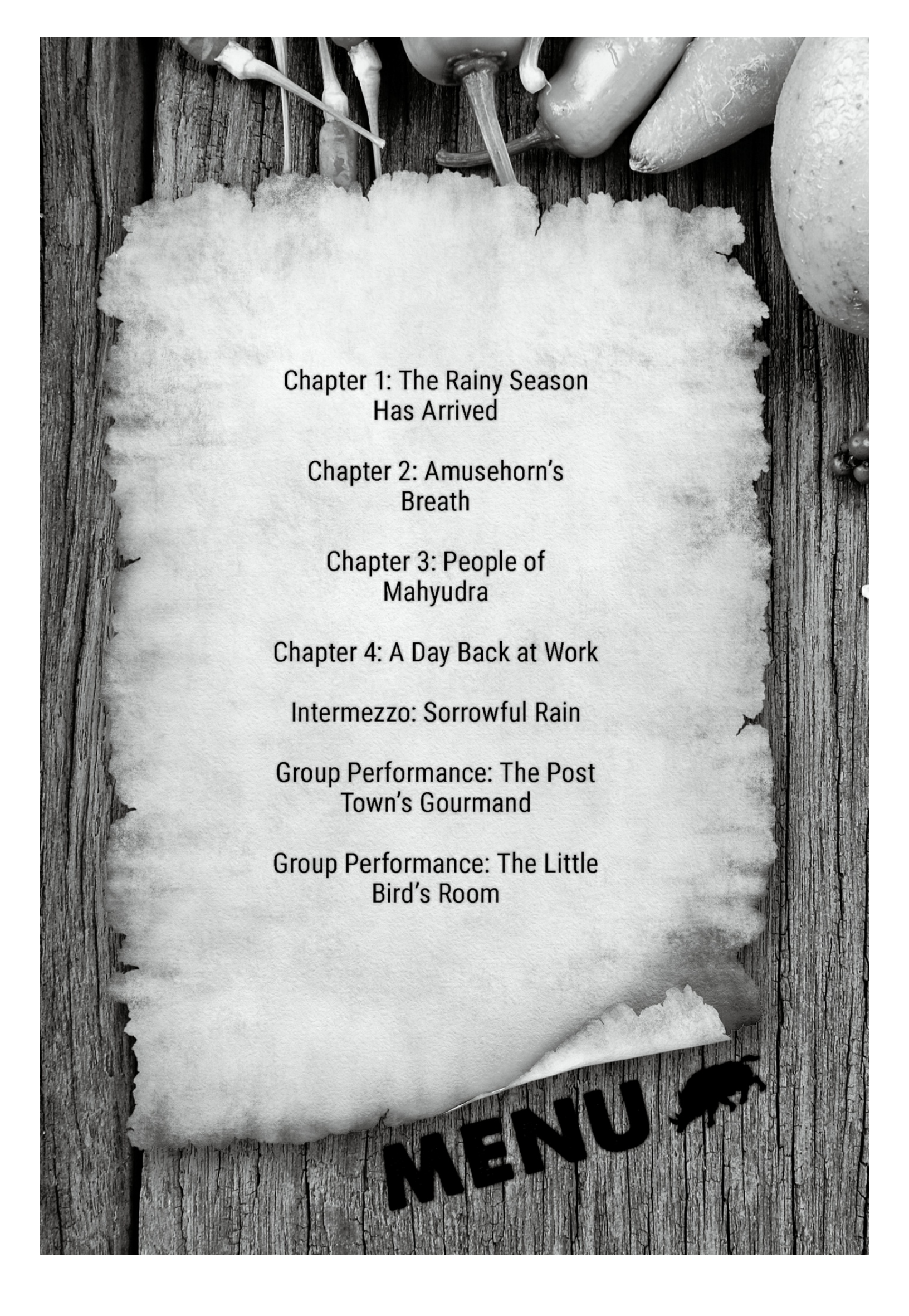
“Well then, let’s get
to work! If there’s
anything you don’t
understand, feel
free to ask! We’re
here to look out for
you, after all!”





Then Vina
Ruu suddenly
smiled at me,
a droplet of
something
other than
rain rolling
down her
cheek.

“You’re a
splendid
person of the
forest’s edge,
Asuta. You’re
far more fit to
call yourself
one than I
am.”



Chapter 1: The Rainy Season
Has Arrived

Chapter 2: Amusehorn's
Breath

Chapter 3: People of
Mahyudra

Chapter 4: A Day Back at Work

Intermezzo: Sorrowful Rain

Group Performance: The Post
Town's Gourmand

Group Performance: The Little
Bird's Room

MENU



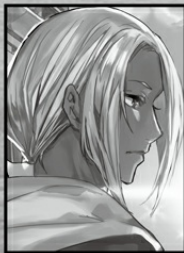


Character Introductions



~ 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.
	Jiza Ruu The eldest son of the main Ruu house. He has a strict personality and highly values the laws of the forest's edge. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		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.
	Lala Ruu The third daughter of the main Ruu house. A frank girl who has feelings for Shin Ruu.		Rimee Ruu The youngest Ruu daughter. An earnest, innocent child who specializes in making sweets. She adores Ai Fa and Tara.
	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.		Jiba Ruu The Ruu clan elder. Donda Ruu's grandmother. Thanks to Asuta's cooking, she has regained the strength to keep on living.
	Dari Sauti The head of the Sauti clan, and one of the three leading clan heads. Though he is young, he is coolheaded, composed, and broad-minded.	Ryada Ruu Donda Ruu's younger brother, and the father of Shin and Sheera Ruu. A serious injury to his right leg forced him to retire from hunting. He has a calm and composed personality.	
		Mil Fei Sauti Dari Sauti's wife. She has a calm and strict personality, but she started to warm up to Asuta while he was staying at their settlement during the battle against the lord of the forest.	
	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 sweet-making skills are constantly improving.		Yun Sudra A member of the small Sudra clan. Greatly adores Asuta.



Shumiral

A member of the merchant group from Sym known as the Silver Vase. Having asked Vina Ruu to marry him, he has been accepted as a member of the Ririn clan. However, he hasn't been given their name yet.

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.

Lili Ravitz

The wife of the head of the Ravitz clan, which opposes the actions of the Fa. She has an appearance like that of a Jizo statue and seems to be a very calm person, but it's always difficult to tell what she's really thinking.

~ Townsfolk ~



Yumi

The daughter of the owners of an inn called the Westerly Wind. Friendly and cheerful. Seventeen years old. She acts as a bridge between Asuta and her father, who dislikes the people of the forest's edge.



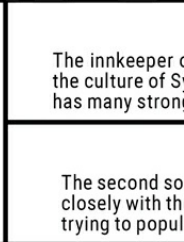
Milano Mas

The owner of an inn called the Kimyuus's Tail. A stubborn man with a strong sense of duty. Though he has had issues with the people of the forest's edge, they have been cleared up over time, and he has become a strong supporter of Asuta's.



Naudis

The innkeeper of the Great Southern Tree. An excellent businessman who has a cheerful personality. He has many strong connections with his southern customers.



Nail

The innkeeper of the Sledgehammer. He strongly admires the culture of Sym and always remains expressionless. He has many strong connections with his eastern customers.

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.



Melfried

The eldest son of Duke Genos. He is the arbitrator for all matters involving the people of the forest's edge. A coolheaded man who values law and order above all else.



Sanjura

Lefreya's attendant, an expert swordsman with blood from Sym who participated in Asuta's abduction. He values Lefreya more than anything.

Torst

Lefreya's guardian. An honest man who is working to revive the house of Turan.

Radajid Gi Nafassiar

The new leader of the Silver Vase after Shumiral stepped down from the role. He is over 190 centimeters tall.



Bartha

The wife of the head of a bandit group known as the Red Beards. Her crimes have been pardoned, and she is staying at the Ruu settlement as a guest.

~ Group Performance ~



Lefreya

The new head of the house of Turan. Because of her crime of ordering Asuta's kidnapping, she is excluded from participating in high society.



Chiffon Chel

Lefreya's maid. A slave from the northern kingdom. When entertaining guests, she always maintains a calm expression.



Diel

The daughter of a metalwork seller from Jagar. She has an earnest, direct personality. She currently lives in the castle town, seeking to secure business deals in Genos.

Eleo Chel

Chiffon Chel's older brother. A slave from the northern kingdom forced to work in the Turan lands.

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Chapter 1: The Rainy Season Has Arrived

1

The rainy season had arrived in Genos.

Apparently, the southern portion of the vast territory held by the Western Kingdom of Selva where the town was located saw an especially striking change in climate. During this season, it was only sunny out for extremely brief periods of time, with most of each day filled with damp and dreary rainfall. Normally, rain in Genos came hard in brief bursts, like a squall, but now the pattern was the exact opposite of that.

Moreover, the average temperature had dropped quite a bit. During the rest of the year, the climate in Genos felt similar to early summer in Japan, but now it had suddenly dropped to the sort of chill I would have expected from late autumn.

As a result, I ended up having to get some new clothes for the rainy season, since this was my first one. Before the weather had started to change, I followed the advice everyone I worked with in the post town gave me and bought a long-sleeved coat and undershirt. Both were made from sturdy cotton, and they closed in the front like a dress shirt. The buttons were made of nuts, which you could hold in place with string. The coats were sold with all sorts of different designs, but everyone recommended I purchase one with a Sym-style geometrical pattern sewn into it.

As for pants, my current ones covered me down to the middle of my shins, and if they were any longer, they'd get muddy too easily, so I did not switch those out for a different style. However, I did buy new shoes. My old shoes had been made in Japan, brought along from my old world, and a lot of folks advised me that they'd get wet with rain and coated in mud and be hard to clean, so I finally went ahead and purchased the same sort of leather footwear everyone else used. They were essentially sandals, so they exposed quite a bit

of skin. It was a given that your feet would end up getting dirty, wearing them. During the rainy season, the custom at the forest's edge was to leave a water jug by the front door so you could clean your feet before going inside the house.

I had been really stubborn about only wearing my original shoes out of fear of blisters and the like, but surprisingly, the sandals sold in Genos didn't feel half bad. They had leather straps that wrapped around your ankle, which made them nice and stable, and there was bark stretched out over their soles, so they were durable too. They didn't exactly have anything in the way of cushioning, but we used wagons whenever we had to move significant distances, so there didn't seem to be any need to worry about the burden on my legs.

With the purchase of this new attire and footwear for the rainy season, I had finally replaced all of the clothing I had been wearing when I arrived here. Considering that I had been wearing the same clothes for nine months straight, though, it was no surprise that my T-shirt and shoes were showing significant wear, so it was high time for a change anyway.

That just left the white towel I wrapped around my head, which was actually the most difficult thing to replace, in a way. There were a fair number of types of cloth and other fabric sold in the post town, but many of them were stiff and didn't feel good to the touch, and none of them felt particularly good wrapped around my head.

I ended up having to consult with Yang—a chef from the castle town I knew—and just two days later, an item was delivered to me that was pretty much ideal for my purposes. It wasn't as fluffy as my old towel, but the pure white woolen material was plenty thick and soft. Apparently, it was used to make some kinds of sheets in the castle town, and since the piece sent to me was of that size, I cut it up and made around ten replacements for my white towel.

With that, I had completely changed my outfit. Once the rainy season ended, I would need to look for casual wear to replace my T-shirt, and I was already wondering if something could be fashioned from the same white fabric as my new head towels.

As for my old clothes, I couldn't bring myself to simply toss them now that

they had served their purpose, so I carefully stored them away alongside my chef's uniform with the Tsurumi Restaurant logo on it. As for the underwear and socks I had once used, I gave them a thorough wash and then stowed them in the uniform's pockets. Even if I was never going to be able to return home... No, *because* I was never going to be able to, they were precious mementos to me.

There was also one more thing the Fa house needed to purchase: bedding. I picked some of that up as well, based on Ai Fa's advice.

"Nights are chilly during the rainy season, so you need a heavy sheet to sleep under. Unfortunately, I threw out the ones my family and I used two years ago, since they were getting old."

"Then what did you do for the last rainy season?"

"I have my hunter's cloak, so I had no issues."

And so, I went ahead and purchased the sheets I had been thinking of grabbing for a while now. Naturally, I got enough for Ai Fa as well. Considering the size of the Fa house's main hall, we wouldn't have to worry about them getting in the way as long as we made sure to fold them daily.

With that, our preparations for the rainy season were complete. We had stocked up on firewood starting the previous month, and if we ran short, we could still purchase charcoal. There was, of course, a lot more that needed to be considered, but we had at least taken care of everything we could do in advance.

As the end of the gold month approached, the temperature slowly crept downward. Then one morning, it started raining and didn't let up all day. The rainy season officially arrived on the fourth of the brown month, eight days after the dance party held by the house of Daleim.

On that day, we were working in the post town as always. However, the flow of customers had clearly dropped off. In fact, the number of passersby walking down the street in general had diminished significantly. There were a lot of inconveniences inherent to this season, and it seemed not many travelers cared to go out of their way to visit the southeastern reaches of Selva.

The number of stalls along the side of the road had also been cut by about half. Those selling snacks in particular needed to prepare dining spaces with some kind of covering to do business, so only those who were equipped to do so continued to operate.

The sky was full of gray clouds, and the townscape was a hazy white from the fine rain, almost like mist. The rainwater collecting on the rooftops came streaming down, and the sound of splashing footsteps along the street felt somehow melancholy. Normally, the post town was illuminated by brilliant sunlight, so now it was almost like we were in a completely different city. I had my new coat on, and the pot in front of me was over a flame, so I wasn't feeling cold in the least, but surrounded by the sound of light rain I had grown unaccustomed to, staring out at the blurry sight of the street, I couldn't help but get a sense of emptiness from the scene in front of us.

This is definitely what they call an offseason.

The amount of fresh meat and giba meals the inns were ordering had decreased to about thirty percent of the norm during this period, and for our stalls, we reduced the number of meals we were preparing from eight hundred down to four hundred. Our current aim was to observe and try to figure out how much food we needed to make to serve the citizens of Genos and the few travelers still passing by.

However, we didn't cut back on the number of employees we were bringing to town. The Gaaz and Ratsu had put in a request to swap out their people for others from related clans, though, so they were currently in training. Normally, we would have seven employees plus trainees, but we currently had seven in total. This way, we didn't have to increase our personnel expenses, unlike when we trained people during a busy period.

Our new employees came from the Matua, a clan under the Gaaz, and the Meem, a clan under the Ratsu. And as for the old hands joining them, we had me, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and Yamiru Lea, as well as Fei Beim, who joined us on a rotation. I was going to have the Matua and Meem women working consecutive days in order to get them accustomed to the job, while the Beim, Dagora, and Ravitz women swapped out every three days.

As today was their first day, I took on the Matua girl myself and entrusted the Meem woman to Toor Deen. Then Fei Beim and Yamiru Lea were paired up, leaving Yun Sudra in charge of the restaurant space. If Toor Deen or I were needed elsewhere, we could simply call for Fei Beim to take our places.

“It didn’t occur to me that your first day of training would coincide with the start of the rainy season. Are things going to be okay back home?” I called out.

“Yes,” the Matua girl replied with an energetic nod. “This season is inconvenient in all kinds of ways, but it happens every year, so it’s nothing we can’t handle. The only real change we need to worry about right now is how much longer it’ll take to dry out our poitan than before.”

Right, it took about an hour of direct sunlight to dry out boiled-down poitan. The sun being hidden behind the clouds for so much of the day was sure to be a significant issue going forward.

“Still, that’s a small price to pay for the sake of delicious food. I certainly wouldn’t want to go back to simply throwing poitan into a pot at this point... Besides, it’s kind of funny to see people from all the different clans rushing outside to dry their poitan when the sun comes out,” the Matua girl said with an open smile.

The Matua and Meem had both selected young women to help out in the post town, with the girl working with me being especially young at just thirteen years old. Still, Toor Deen and Rimee Ruu worked the stalls too and were even younger. She was the same age as Lala Ruu and Tsuvai, so I didn’t see any real issues there.

“By the way, you don’t need to speak so politely with a young novice like me. Please, treat me like you do the other young women.”

“That’s true. Sorry if I sounded too distant there. I’ll try to talk to you normally.”

Though this must have been her first time meeting everyone here, she didn’t seem to be intimidated in the least. In fact, she just seemed earnestly cheerful, and she was able to interact with the townsfolk quite naturally too. As long as she wasn’t an especially poor learner, she’d probably wrap up her training period in no time.

Oh, and like the new jacket I was wearing, the women of the forest's edge also had different clothes for the rainy season. The translucent veils were the only part that remained. Their new outfits consisted of something that looked like a poncho on top, while their lower halves were covered by wrap-around skirts that went down to below their knees. The clothes had the same swirling patterns as the women's usual attire, though, so they were still incredibly colorful.

Whenever they had to leave the cover of our canopy, they also put on a giba pelt cloak. However, in order to distinguish these cloaks from a hunter's cloak, they were made inside out, and the furless surface was dyed red and green with extracts from flowers. They were quite colorful too, with some being monotone while others almost looked like they were tie-dyed, and some even used numerous colors in a way that reminded me of camouflage.

The stiff fur had been softened, as would be done when making a rug, which also made it effective at keeping heat inside. The cloaks had hoods too, so you could completely prevent your upper half from getting wet by having one on. Of course, the drizzle would still soak your lower half, but it seemed in that case they would simply replace the wrap around their legs with a dry one when they got home.

"Ugh, what irritating weather! If it's gonna rain, it should all just come down at once!" a lively voice called out as a customer rushed over to our stalls to take shelter. When he lowered the hood of his leather cloak, I saw that he was from Jagar. At this time of year, even they needed to dress like their hated enemies from Sym.

"Thank you for coming. It sure is tough working out in the rain, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's for sure! I'm jealous of how you all get to work with a canopy over your heads!"

From what he was saying, it seemed he was a construction worker or something rather than a merchant. At any rate, after grumbling about the rain for a while, he went ahead and peered into our pot.

"So, what sort of dish do you have today? It sure smells tasty!"

"Today, we have a tau bean stew. It also uses tau oil for flavoring, so we

recommend it for customers from Jagar.”

In addition to tau beans, the stew also used chatchi and nenon. The stock was made from dried seaweed, then we flavored it with soy-sauce-like tau oil, sugar, and nyatta spirits, giving it a salty-sweet taste. Like the tau oil, the sugar and nyatta spirits also came from Jagar, which made it even more geared toward the tastes of southerners. Nyatta spirits were like refined Japanese sake, so they were a perfect ingredient for stews.

“That sounds great! It’d be too much of a hassle to go around to the other stalls, so just give me three red coins’ worth of that! Oh, and one of those manju too.”

“Of course. They cost two red coins,” Fei Beim said, passing a giba manju to us from the other stall. The customer from Jagar accepted it along with his plate of stew and fuwano bread, which he hid inside his cloak and then rushed over to the covered outdoor restaurant space.

Aside from the daily special that I was in charge of, the other stalls were all serving the same dishes as usual. However, the side dishes had been swapped from poitan to fuwano. As of today, we were officially in the rainy season, and soon the selection of vegetables that could be bought in the post town would start changing. For the time being, the storehouses in Daleim still had some tino, tarapa, and pula from the last harvest that we could use, but in around half a month, the vegetables specific to the rainy season would finally go on sale.

Out of everything we needed, poitan was the only ingredient that we hadn’t been able to secure enough of for our business. Or rather, we could have gotten what we needed if we had abused our wealth to monopolize all the poitan, but doing that would have made the townsfolk pretty mad, so we had decided to use fuwano instead.

Fuwano cost one and a half times as much as poitan under normal circumstances and became fifty-to-one-hundred-percent more expensive during the rainy season. Some businesses directly increased their prices, while others decreased their sizes, but some places did neither, going for quick sales with low profit margins. We were going the quick sales and small profits route,

using the same amount of fuwano as we did poitan and retaining the same price.

Naturally, that sent our costs soaring and really brought down our net profits. On top of that, we were looking at our consumer base decreasing to anywhere from half to even a third of what it had been. Still, this would only last for two months out of the year, so we just had to tough it out for a bit.

“It’s amazing to think that poitan is actually selling out. Is it because you came up with a way to make it delicious, Asuta?” the Matua girl asked me.

“Yeah. I’m glad we were able to secure enough for everyone from the forest’s edge to eat. On the off chance we couldn’t get what we needed, I was planning to use the Fa clan’s funds to buy fuwano, though.”

Fortunately, I had been able to put in an advanced order for an amount sufficient to feed all of us from the forest’s edge. As long as there weren’t any accidents or the like with the fields, we would be completely fine on that front. Still, since the Fa and Ruu were planning to buy the poitan all at once, I’d had some concerns about how we would distribute them. Rather than having each clan purchase them from town, the Fa and the Ruu were going to bring them back to the settlement at the forest’s edge, which meant we needed a way to get them to everyone.

Ultimately, we had decided that I would pick up the poitan from Dora on the way back from work. Then I would bring them back to the settlement and exchange them for coins with the various clans. Furthermore, since the Fa house was often empty, the distribution point would be the Ruu settlement instead. The clans located farther away could use wagons to get there if they needed to. Most clans were closer to the Ruu settlement than the post town to begin with, the only exceptions being the ones that lived out toward the northern extreme, like the Suun and the Ravitz.

Working all that out got really hectic at times, but now that we have a plan in place, we shouldn’t have any issues next year or the years after that.

However, there was still another matter for me to worry about this year: the plan to clear a path through the forest’s edge.

Since fuwano couldn’t be harvested during the rainy season, the slaves from

the Turan lands didn't currently have work to do. Normally, they would be assigned to repair the fence that protected the Turan lands during this time of year, but because of a proposal a merchant from the east named Kukuluel had made, they would instead be used to clear a path through the forest's edge.

It was a grandiose plan to construct a new highway to connect not just Genos, but the Western Kingdom of Selva as a whole to the Eastern Kingdom of Sym. On top of that, it was the same basic plan that had been proposed ten years ago by Milano Mas's brother-in-law, Leito's father.

If the plan succeeded, it would be possible to travel between Selva and Sym quicker and more safely than ever before. And Genos stood to benefit the most out of all the domains of Selva, as it would serve as the starting point for the highway. That was precisely why Duke Marstein Genos had decided to embark on such a major endeavor.

Work on the project had already begun in earnest. The fuwano harvest had wrapped up at the end of the gold month, with construction beginning at the start of the brown month. That meant a large number of northerners were currently being forced to do harsh labor at the forest's edge.

Apparently, the arrangements for that took quite a bit of effort too. Dari Sauti's been working hard lately.

Clearing of the forest was to start at the southern end of the settlement and advance east. For that reason, discussions with the people in charge of the project had been left up to Dari Sauti, as he was the leading clan head located farthest to the south. With over a hundred slaves from Mahyudra assigned to the task, as well as numerous guards from town overseeing them, Dari Sauti needed to plan things out carefully so that they could all safely carry out their work. That was undoubtedly a huge undertaking in and of itself.

Dari Sauti had also made a request to consult with me. I still didn't know the details, but I had been asked to stop by the Sauti settlement after work today. I had to wonder what use I could be to him under these circumstances. I hadn't the foggiest idea, but of course, I had no objections. And I did have concerns about how the work was being carried out...and about the man named Eleo Chel.

Eleo Chel was the brother of Chiffon Chel, who had worked in the Turan manor as a maid. I had met him in town once, right before the sun god's revival festival when he had been assigned to clear out more space for stalls and the like. He had auburn hair, purple eyes, and skin tanned from his time spent out in the sun, and he was a massive muscular man around the same height as Donda Ruu, but even girthier still, to give an idea of the scale of him.

According to the guards, he'd learned that I had spent some time in the Turan manor. That was why he had taken a chance to slip away from his work to come and find me, so he could ask how his sister, Chiffon Chel, was doing. The two of them had been separated from each other years ago.

Northerners are treated as slaves not only in Genos, but all throughout Selva, so it's not something I can do anything about...but I still want to help them in whatever small ways I can...

I owed Chiffon Chel a great debt. When I had been abducted and taken to the Turan manor, she had shown me a lot of concern after being put in charge of taking care of me. In particular, when I had tried to make a reckless escape attempt, she had warned me of the danger, but still secretly provided me aid. She had helped me, even though it could easily have led to her being whipped. Ever since she and Lefreya had moved, I no longer had any chances to see her. However, that just made me feel even more indebted to and sorry for Chiffon Chel.

It may be presumptuous of me to think I can help them... But still, isn't there anything I can do? I thought to myself, as a tall figure was walking up to my stall. When I looked up, I saw a familiar face nodding to me from under a hood.

"Oh, Radajid, welcome. Thank you for always stopping by."

"Of course. What is, this dish?"

Radajid was the new leader of the merchant group from Sym known as the Silver Vase. At 190 centimeters in height, he was especially tall even for an easterner.

"This is a Jagar-style dish, using tau beans and the like. If you'd like, I could add finely crushed chitt seeds to it."

“Yes, please. I would like, a half size.” The neighboring stall was serving giba curry, so that must have been his main interest. After paying the Matua girl, Radajid continued, “The rainy season, has arrived. And yet, Shumiral is in, the forest, correct?”

“Right. Apparently, they have to hunt no matter how rainy it gets. The number of giba they take down is definitely going to drop, though.”

“I am worried. Rain dulls, the senses, of hunting dogs.”

“Yeah. But it’s the same for giba too, so I don’t think it should be all that much more dangerous...or at least, that’s what I was told Shumiral said about it.”

Over ten days had now passed since Shumiral had become a person of the forest’s edge, but I had hardly had any chance to talk with him. Shumiral was living with the Ririn clan, who were located farther south than most of the clans under the Ruu. The Fa house was located well to the north of the Ruu settlement, so unless I went well out of my way to go there, we wouldn’t run into one another.

I had only gone there once so far, on the day off after the dance party. Shumiral was out in the forest from the time the sun hit its peak until the evening, which made it rather difficult to align our schedules on working days. On top of that, Shumiral’s current aim was to do everything he could to earn the Ririn name. I felt awkward about the thought of visiting him just because I was worried. It didn’t feel right to do so. The people of the forest’s edge didn’t normally visit other clans without a clear practical reason.

It was the same for Vina Ruu. She had been heard sighing a lot recently, to the point that it was apparently becoming distracting, and Mia Lea Ruu had even chewed her out for it. The sisters all seemed to be rather worried about her, especially Lala Ruu.

“Still, I’ve got business near the Ririn settlement today, so I was thinking of stopping by on the way back. I’ll tell you how Shumiral is doing tomorrow.”

“Thank you. I greatly, appreciate it, Asuta,” Radajid said. Then his gaze drifted pensively downward. “There are ten days, left until, we return to Sym. Would it be possible, to talk with him, at least once, before then?”

“If it’s in the morning or the evening, he should be able to make time for you. I’ll ask the Ririn clan head about it.”

“Yes, please do so.” With that, Radajid also placed an order for giba curry, then headed over to the restaurant space.

The Silver Vase had delayed their return home by half a month for Shumiral, which meant that half of their stay would be during the rainy season. That wouldn’t cause them any issues when it came to their main business—selling goods to the residents of the castle town—but it apparently made sales in the post town rather slow. That was no surprise, though, with how few people there were out on the street.

Even so, Radajid and the others didn’t blame Shumiral for it at all. They were just worried about his safety. The bond between them had to be incredibly strong or they wouldn’t have allowed Shumiral to remain in the Silver Vase after he had changed over to the western god.

Still, he’ll have to spend around ten months apart from them... Is Shumiral doing okay with the folks from the Ririn clan?

Rain really had a way of stirring up a sense of ennui.

Staring out at the drizzle pelting the street in front of me, I was barely able to keep myself from sighing.

2

After wrapping up business in the post town, we then headed to the Sauti settlement. I was the only one who had been summoned, though, and since I intended to stop by the Ririn settlement on the way back as well, I was going to need Toor Deen and the others to handle the preparations for tomorrow. My original plan was to send everyone else home in Fafa’s wagon and head to the Sauti settlement alone, but the members of the Ruu clan had asked to accompany me. Dari Sauti was in charge of overseeing the clearing work, and Donda Ruu had apparently said they should be there if he was going to make a request of me.

Speaking of Donda Ruu, he had finally resumed his hunting work at the start

of the brown month. The lord of the forest had gored his right shoulder, forcing him to take three months off to recuperate, but he had finally regained the strength to work as a hunter. Reina Ruu and the others had told me that he had been in unusually high spirits the night before, and had drunk an exceptional amount of fruit wine.

And so, I ended up heading to the Sauti settlement with the members of the Ruu clan—Rimee Ruu, Vina Ruu, Ryada Ruu, and Bartha. Two members of the main house who weren't busy, and two guards to accompany them. Normally, there would be no need for guards to come along when visiting another clan, but there were lots of northerners and guards from town near the Sauti settlement at the moment. It would be worrying to send chefs to such a place all on their own, so those two had been chosen to come along, as they didn't have any hunting work to take care of.

Bartha was of course dressed as a warrior, and Ryada Ruu was equipped with a sword and bow. Thinking back on his training with Donda Ruu the other day, Ryada Ruu didn't seem to have weakened at all, his right leg aside. It would be difficult for him to run, carry heavy loads, or walk for long periods of time, so he could no longer serve as a hunter, but he was perfectly capable of dealing with folks from town.

"One wagon should be plenty for five people. And the Ruu settlement is on the way back, so you can come with us in Gilulu's wagon."

And with that, we were on our way to the Sauti settlement. Perhaps this goes without saying, but I had asked them all to ride along with me so that Vina Ruu would get pulled along for the visit to the Ririn clan. After all, there was no way they'd want to walk back on foot in this rain. The diligent people of the forest's edge didn't visit other clans without business to take care of, so I had concocted this little scheme to get around that.

I can just tell everyone I want to stop by the Ririn settlement after we wrap things up with the Sauti. With any luck, we'll be staying at the Sauti settlement until it's almost evening. That'll guarantee that we'll be able to meet with Shumiral.

If I had to, I knew I could leave the prep work for tomorrow up to Toor Deen

and the others. That morning, I had talked with Ai Fa about letting them use the kitchen without me. From there, it was all down to the mother forest's guidance.

"I haven't been to the Sauti settlement in a long time! Not since Papa Donda got hurt, and now the violet, silver, and gold months have gone by...so it's been around three months!" Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed. She was sitting beside Vina Ruu, who still hadn't stopped sighing. Having Barthia and Ryada Ruu with us too on this trip made it feel like a fresh and new experience. "By the way, are you still not planning on doing study sessions at the Ruu settlement? Reina's been disappointed that you haven't, especially since Mikel and Myme are around."

"Yeah, I've heard about that. I just wanted to finish our cooking lessons for the Dai and the Suun first. Repeating a lesson after letting some time pass is a good way to get it to stick."

"Hmm, really?"

"Besides, it's still going to be a little longer before Mikel can walk without any problems, right? As long as Mikel can't move around on his own, Myme will want to keep nursing him as much as she can, so even if we invited her to a study session, she would probably turn us down. The way I see it, there's no need to rush. We can wait until both of them are able to join us."

"I see! You're so smart, Asuta!"

My cooking skills earned me tons of praise, but it was pretty rare to hear someone call me smart like that. I really adored Rimee Ruu.

"The rainy season around here is even worse than I'd heard. Is there any danger of landslides when it keeps pouring like this all day?" Barthia interjected.

"That's no issue," Ryada Ruu replied. "The ground is firm throughout the settlement at the forest's edge. The rain washes away sticky sand, but there's no risk of our houses or paths getting damaged. I recall the elder saying that's what makes this land unsuitable for farming."

"Huh. And thanks to the elevation, the rain all flows down into town, right? But even if it isn't dangerous, I still can't wait for this gloomy season to hurry on

by.”

“Fair enough. However, this rain brings prosperity to both the forest and the town, from what I’ve heard. It is all down to the will of the forest and the gods.”

Like Ryada Ruu said, I wasn’t having any serious issues with driving the wagon, even through this rain. Visibility was poor, of course, but the well-trodden yellow path supported the vehicle’s weight just fine. And as long as I avoided any large puddles, I probably wouldn’t get a wheel caught in the mud or anything.

Gilulu and the other totos didn’t seem to have any issues with the rain either. He had the same unaffected look on his face as he energetically ran down the path, just like always. It was a really reassuring sight.

We continued with our friendly chatting for a while, interrupted by the occasional sigh, until the Sauti settlement finally came into view. For now, I couldn’t see any guards or northerners around. The Sauti were located close to the southern tip of the settlement at the forest’s edge, though, so we would probably be able to see the work site if we went just a little bit farther.

I pulled the wagon into the Sauti settlement. The rain was still coming down, so there didn’t seem to be anyone out in the plaza either. However, I did notice one thing that had changed compared to last time. The plaza, which was a touch smaller than the one at the Ruu settlement, had a large leather tarp canopy stretched over it. What was that all about? It was wide enough to provide shelter to nearly half of the plaza. A number of wooden supports had been driven into the ground to hold it up, creating a rain shield that even outdid our outdoor restaurant space in the post town.

As I tilted my head in confusion, we detoured around that space and headed for the main house. And right as I was descending from the driver’s seat onto the damp ground, the house’s door swung open. They must have been watching us from the window. The one who appeared from inside was Mil Fei Sauti, who had attended the dance party along with us.

“Welcome to the Sauti house. We have been waiting for you, Asuta. And are these all people from the Ruu clan?”

“Yes. Donda Ruu ordered them to come along in case anything bad had

happened.”

“Anything bad...? No, no such thing has happened. We simply have something to discuss with you. Please, come this way.” Mil Fei Sauti, who was wearing the same sort of hooded cloak as us to protect against the rain, turned and started walking toward the rear of the house. I followed after her, tying Gilulu to a tree along the way, and we were all led to the kitchen.

It was a nostalgic sight, as I hadn’t been here for three months. We stepped inside and hung our wet rain gear on the wall, at which point Mil Fei Sauti once again faced us.

“First, allow me to thank you for coming all this way. As our clan head, Dari, is currently carrying out his work as a hunter, allow me to be the one to speak with you.”

“Ah, so Dari Sauti is finally back to hunting too?”

“Yes, thanks to the assistance you all lent us. Aside from the two who lost the capability to work as hunters, everyone else has been able to recover.” Mil Fei Sauti wasn’t generally a very expressive person, but she smiled faintly for a moment with narrowed eyes before shifting back to a serious expression as she continued. “I should start by explaining the situation... Four days have passed since work on clearing the forest began. Since then, the workers have been eating lunch here at the Sauti settlement.”

“Oh, so that’s what the cover outside is for. I was wondering about that.”

“Right. We have subordinate clans located farther south, but they do not have plazas big enough to handle such a large crowd, so they borrowed ours instead. There aren’t any people who get married during the rainy season, so it shouldn’t prove any inconvenience.”

“I see. So, what is it that you needed to discuss with me?”

“Well, you see...it has to do with what those northerners have been eating,” Mil Fei Sauti replied, giving a little sigh. “We set aside some of the food they’ve been getting. I’ll heat it back up. Would you be willing to try it?”

“Huh? I don’t mind, of course, but now I’m feeling even more confused.”

Mil Fei Sauti nodded, then lit one of the stoves, setting a very small pot on top of it. And when she removed the wooden board covering the pot, it revealed something strange underneath.

“What is that? It almost looks like oatmeal.”

“Oatmeal?”

“That’s a dish from my home country. But this...”

To put it briefly, it looked like a really crude dish. Still, perhaps there was no helping that, since it was being made for slaves. There was a mysterious milky white paste, and I could spy at least a couple chunks of vegetables and meat scattered here and there throughout.

Before long, the smell of the reheated dish filled the kitchen. Rimee Ruu’s eyes were sparkling with curiosity, and her nose was twitching like a bunny’s.

“It smells pretty tasty! That white stuff is karon milk, isn’t it?”

“Yes. They used karon milk and a poitan-like ingredient called fuwano.” There was only enough of the dish left to fill a single bowl, so it heated up quickly. After transferring it to a wooden plate, Mil Fei Sauti said, “Here you are,” as she handed it to me. “I tried it earlier today, and I swear to the forest that it shall do your body no harm.”

“I wasn’t worried about that at all. The northerners have been eating this stuff, after all.”

I scooped some up with a spoon, then popped it into my mouth. Instantly, I let out a pathetic groan. “Ugh... How should I put it...? I think I’d have trouble calling it good even if I was trying to be polite.”

“Yes. Still, it may be easier to eat than soup made with giba meat that hasn’t been bloodlet.”

Mil Fei Sauti was certainly right on that front. It wasn’t as if there was anything odd about the taste, and the smell was okay too because of the sweet aroma of karon milk. But its texture was just awful. It was as floury as the poitan soup I had eaten in the past, and the ingredients were all mushy. I couldn’t even clearly make out what meat and vegetables had been used, and the only flavors

I could taste were karon milk and salt.

If I were to classify it as good or bad, then I'd have to say it was bad. The sweet karon milk and the saltiness didn't pair well. Despite the sweet smell, the salty taste was the stronger of the two, and the texture was akin to botched oatmeal. I wouldn't go so far as to describe it as muddy water, but it would be difficult to find anything to praise.

While I was doing my analysis, Rimee Ruu shouted, "I wanna try it too!" so Mil Fei Sauti pulled out a fresh spoon. For taste testing, even people who weren't clan members could share a dish as long as they didn't double-dip with a spoon. At any rate, everyone aside from Ryada Ruu had a single bite of the bungled dish.

"Ah ha ha, gross!" Rimee Ruu laughed.

"It would certainly be difficult to call that delicious... I would prefer not to taste any more..." was Vina Ruu's opinion.

"It's like they just tossed whatever they had lying around into it, huh? If you could do something about this floury texture, I might be able to handle it, though," Bartha said.

"To be sure. Would you like to see the ingredients they used?" Mil Fei Sauti put her rain gear back on and led us to the pantry next. The room was jam packed with huge jars and wooden boxes taking up every last bit of floor space to the point that there wasn't even anywhere to stand. "They use these ingredients to make that dish from before. Please, take a look."

The jars and boxes all had lids covering them, so I had to look through them one by one. The majority were filled with vegetable scraps. Aria, nenon, nanaar, sheema, gigo, pula, chan, ro'hyoi... There were bits and pieces from all sorts of vegetables crammed inside, regardless of whether they were cheap or expensive. Some of them were parts of high-class ingredients, like the stalks of mushrooms, while others were things even I threw away, like sheel skins.

Aside from that, there was also karon milk and meat pickled in salt. The meat was all scraps as well, including stuff like karon meat stuck to the ribs and whole kimyuus feet. I did spot one solid chunk of meat in there, but a moment later I noticed that it was starting to turn blue. With meat like that, even if it was

pickled in salt, it would need to be eaten by the following day at the latest to not wreck your stomach.

The karon milk must have been around for a while too. It didn't smell like it had spoiled yet, but I was still a bit worried. At least the temperature was cooler than usual now that we were in the rainy season.

"From what I'm seeing, these seem to be leftover scraps gathered from the castle town."

"You think so too, Asuta?"

"Well, there are ingredients in the mix that not many folks in the post town can get their hands on, so yeah. This is the food they're giving to the northerners?"

"Yes. Apparently, they ate the same thing in the Turan lands as well." Most of them had probably been slaves there for years at this point. It seemed pretty clear what sort of food they had been provided in that time. Furthermore, as someone with ties to a huge number of restaurants, it would have been easy for Cyclaeus to establish a system for collecting such unused scraps. "The only difference between this and their usual diet is that now it's being made with fuwano rather than poitan. It used to be made with poitan before the rainy season, but there isn't any available anymore. Not even a single one."

"Yeah, the residents of the post town have been struggling to get them too. Still, it feels a bit ironic that they're having to use fuwano instead, since it's more expensive than poitan."

"It's the northerners who are left to suffer in the face of that irony, though. Because fuwano cost more, the sizes of their portions have been decreased to make up for it."

I was left at a loss for words.

Mil Fei Sauti was staring at me with a deadly serious gaze. "The nobles of Genos have decided that the northerners should be given shabby meals. But now, they aren't only shabby. They are also small. What do you think about that, Asuta?"

"What do I think...? It feels really bad to hear that, of course. I never expected

the northerners would have to deal with a problem like this.”

“Our clan head feels the same way. I’m glad to hear you agree, Asuta,” Mil Fei Sauti said, her gaze growing ever so slightly gentler. “Of course, it was only the amount of fuwano that decreased, but that is just as important of an ingredient as poitan, isn’t it? Here at the forest’s edge, when those who become impoverished are unable to eat enough aria and poitan, they grow weaker. Our clan head is worried that the northerners might grow weaker as well over the course of the rainy season.”

“Right, I definitely think so too. And they’re being forced to work even harder than they usually would, which makes this that much more of a concern.”

Doing some basic math, fuwano cost one and a half times as much as poitan. That meant if the budget was kept the same, they would get two-thirds of their normal amount each day. Decreasing your carbohydrate intake by that much while forced to do intense physical labor would be incredibly rough.

“Our clan head only learned about this yesterday. He discussed the matter this morning with the heads of our subordinate clans, and we will be sending messengers to the Ruu and Zaza tonight. If the other leading clan heads agree, we plan to tell the nobles that we people of the forest’s edge would like to purchase enough fuwano to make up the difference.”

“You do? Ah, were you thinking of using the reward money...?”

“Yes. We’ll need to do calculations to determine if it will be enough, though.”

There were over a hundred northerners being used in this project. To pay for one-third of the fuwano for each of them every day... Yeah, that would definitely require some calculations.

“If it’s not enough, the Fa clan will pay for it. Actually, I’d like to have us pay for all of it. I’m the reason poitan have been selling out, so...”

“But you came up with the new method for eating poitan so we people of the forest’s edge could have delicious meals, did you not? And from what I am told, that knowledge was then spread around town to strike a blow against some wicked nobles.”

“Yes, that’s true, but...”

“Then this isn’t a problem for the Fa clan to shoulder alone. And you’re a fellow person of the forest’s edge, so we should all be sharing the burden between us regardless,” Mil Fei Sauti stated, her gaze both strict and kind at the same time.

“Sorry,” I replied, bowing my head. “That was foolish of me. It’s embarrassing how little thought I put into these things.”

“You’re still young, Asuta, so you don’t need to let it worry you so much. But if our actions are bringing misfortune to others, that’s certainly not something we can overlook. I am certain Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza will both listen to what our clan head has to say.”

That was what it meant to be a person of the forest’s edge. Seeing once again how noble they were as a people left me awestruck.

“We were thinking of sending out messengers to the Ruu and Zaza soon. And this is where I should bring up the request we have of you, Asuta.”

“Right. Ask away, please.”

“In that case, I shall convey our clan head’s words directly. Asuta, would you use these ingredients to make a more delicious dish?”

“Huh? Using *these* ingredients?”

“That’s right. It pains our clan head to see the northerners fending off starvation with food that’s just as bad as poitan soup. We tried to suggest cooking the fuwano like poitan to make their meals a bit better, but the guards rejected that idea.”

Cooking enough fuwano for over a hundred people would require fuel. And we were currently in the rainy season, so fuel was a precious resource. It was probably only natural for the nobles of Genos to think that such expenses and effort would be wasted on slaves. But personally, I very much agreed with Dari Sauti.

“Understood. I need to use the same ingredients, keep to the same budget, and prepare it in the same amount of time, right? I’ll give it some thought.”

“Thank you. But you work from morning until midday, correct? The northern

women prepare the food in the morning, then they need to help the men soon after.”

“Oh, so they prepare the food themselves? How many women are there, and how long do they spend on it?”

“There are five of them. And as for the time...they start shortly after the sun rises and cook until the sun is about halfway to its peak, I’d say.”

The time from dawn till noon was roughly six or seven hours. Considering the transit time from the Turan lands, I figured they took roughly three hours.

“Just five people preparing enough food for a hundred is quite an undertaking... Okay, got it. I should start by thinking about what type of dish to make...”

“But you can’t step away from your work, can you, Asuta?”

“No, I can’t. But there’s no need for me to teach the Mahyudra women directly. I can tell all of you what to do, and then you can teach them in turn, right?”

“Huh? W-We’ll be instructing the northerners?”

“Right. I don’t think it should take long.”

“No, it’s not a matter of time. With our skills...”

“That’s not an issue. We’ve cooked alongside one another, so I know what level of skill you all have. And if what I’m thinking of works, the Sauti women should be perfectly capable of handling it.”

“You already know what to make, Asuta?”

“Yeah. Or rather, it’s more like I have so few options that I’m kind of being forced into it.”

Mil Fei Sauti started shaking her head, looking impressed. “I truly am shocked. Our clan head and I had half given up, thinking it would be too difficult for even you to make these scraps into a proper meal.”

“That’s definitely not the case. Even if they’re scraps, this is a mountain of treasure that even includes high-class ingredients. There may not be many

seasonings here, but it shouldn't be difficult to make something tasty."

There was plenty of karon milk here, after all. It was a cheap ingredient, so the chefs of the castle town would buy large amounts, knowing some of it would go bad. Thinking back on it, while I had been at the Turan manor, they'd had a lot of karon milk in stock with no particular use in mind for it. That was why I wanted to make karon milk the spearhead of my attack strategy.

"The issue is that the preparations will take some time. Are we allowed to mess with the ingredients right now?"

"Yes. They are borrowing this space, so they shouldn't have any issue with that."

"In that case, it should be just fine, yeah. I can come to help out like this after work, and I have every sixth day off, so I could come see how the Mahyudra women perform personally then."

Mil Fei Sauti smiled gently in response to my words. That caught me a bit off guard, but it was quite a charming smile.

"Thank you. Our clan head is sure to be quite happy as well. I am truly proud to call you a fellow person of the forest's edge, Asuta."

"I'm personally glad to see you and Dari Sauti worrying so much about how the northerners are treated. It's not like we have any reason to hold a grudge against them, after all."

"Right. We aren't in any position to speak about the war between the north and the west... But even so, the nobles of Genos knowingly made the decision to bring the northerners to the settlement at the forest's edge. And so, while they're here, we should be able to follow our customs with them, correct?"

Mil Fei Sauti spoke decisively, but it was abundantly clear that she wasn't disregarding the nobles. But even though she acknowledged the superior position of the other side, she still refused to throw away her pride. Perhaps Mil Fei Sauti felt that way because she had set foot in the castle town for the first time just the other day for the dance party, where she had actually met nobles face-to-face.

Maybe I'm just doing it for my own personal satisfaction, but I really do want

to give the northerners something good to eat... I wonder if Eleo Chel is with them?

While I was thinking about that, I stared out over the mountain of ingredients covering the whole floor. It felt as if the open black mouths of the jars and boxes were laughing and calling out to me, “If you think you can handle us, go ahead and try.”

3

“All right, that should do it.”

Roughly two hours had passed since our arrival at the main Sauti house, and we had finally completed a sample dish meant for the northerners. We had naturally used the ingredients from the castle town to prepare it, since we would have to make the real thing with the same stuff. We would just have to purchase fitting replacements for whatever we had used from the post town tomorrow.

Including Mil Fei Sauti, I’d had five chefs in total assisting me. We had arranged things that way so we could provide one-on-one instructions to the five Mahyudra women. My other assistants came from the Sauti branch houses and the Vela, all women I had worked with before in the kitchen before during the incident with the lord of the forest.

The four visitors from the Ruu clan silently watched us work, and once the sample was done, Rimee Ruu, clinging to me like a puppy wagging its tail, exclaimed, as if she’d been holding it in for a long time, “Amazing! It even smells totally different! So, is that stew? It is, isn’t it? It looks really tasty!”

“Yeah. Under these conditions, I couldn’t come up with anything else to make.”

Like Rimee Ruu had said, I had gone with a stew. Because of the large amount of karon milk we’d had to work with, I’d decided to make something akin to a fresh cream stew. I could make a more ideal version of the dish with full access to the ingredients available in Genos, but I still felt that I’d done a decent job with what was on offer here.

We'd all worked hard to stir the karon milk and separate the fat from the skim milk. This karon milk had been brought here yesterday, so fortunately it had already been starting to separate a bit from the get-go. By cooking fuwano together with that milk fat, we were able to prepare roux to serve as a base.

Thanks to the wide variety of ingredients on offer, we'd had no issue whatsoever with creating stock. In particular, I was grateful for the salted karon ribs and kimyuus legs, which still had bones inside. By boiling them together with a variety of vegetables, we could easily make a high-quality soup stock.

What was most important there was the order in which we had added those ingredients and the level of heat used. Since the slave cooks had just been throwing everything in together and boiling it over a high heat like the people of the forest's edge used to do in the past, it had ended up as a mushy mess. And because they'd been using meat and vegetable scraps to begin with, the resulting dish had been little more than a paste.

My first step had been to get a decent stock from the bones and the chunks of meat clinging to them. Then I had added the vegetables in a particular order so that they wouldn't fall apart. That meant getting the tino, chatchi, and nenon in early, and not adding the chan and nanaar till near the end. Unfortunately, chefs in the castle town viewed aria as an ingredient for the poor because they were cheap, so there wasn't much of that to be had here.

There were also a number of rather large chunks of vegetables in the mix. The chefs of the castle town had no qualms whatsoever when it came to wasting ingredients. The outer surfaces and cores of the tino—in other words, the harder bits—had all been discarded. And for the nenon and chamcham, a lot of them seemed to have had just their centers removed while the rest had been discarded. Chefs such as Varkas and Timalo took the stance that any unnecessary bits were to be treated as trash, which ended up helping us out in this unexpected manner.

The way that only the mushroom caps were used while the stalks were all discarded feels like Varkas's way of doing things. There's definitely a good chance that his scraps are a part of this pile.

Of course, there were also some ingredients that weren't a good fit for a

cream stew. Those included the arugula-like ro'hyoi, garlic-chive-like pepe, and daikon-like sheema. The bamboo-shoot-like chamcham and zucchini-esque chan harmonized surprisingly well, so I had gone ahead and used them in the stew. But since ro'hyoi and pepe could be used as herbs, they packed too strong of an aroma, and I wasn't foolhardy enough to try to add sheema, which was just like daikon, to a cream stew. Still, they were important sources of nutrition for the northerners, and the guards surely wouldn't allow them to be left out. I could easily imagine them giving the order to simply throw whatever wasn't being used into the pot anyway. That meant we'd need to have another dish that did include them.

My solution had been to finely mince up all the ingredients that weren't well suited to being part of a stew and use them to make steamed fuwano manju. And since I had been on my way back from business in the post town before this, we'd already had the steaming baskets meant for the giba manju on hand.

Those steaming baskets were designed to be placed above a heated pot, so as to utilize the steam the pot produced. In other words, the fuwano could be steamed at the same time the stew was boiling. That meant no additional firewood would need to be used, so the guards couldn't complain about that.

I had chopped up the ro'hyoi, pepe, sheema, and sheel skin I hadn't been able to find a use for, as well as the sour arow berries. Then I mixed them together with minced karon and kimyuus meat to create a filling for the manju. I felt kind of bad about how this had ended up as something of a mishmash of a dish only meant to preserve the quality of the cream stew.

However, the ingredients that were brought here varied in amount and type on a day-by-day basis. We couldn't afford to supervise the cooking daily, so this was the only real way to handle things. The strong flavor of the garlic-chive-like pepe formed the core, and I just had to pray that there didn't end up being too much arow, as it didn't really play nicely with such a taste. In that case, we would have to add as much meat as we could to try to cover things up with some saltiness.

At any rate, our improvised cream stew and meat and vegetable manju were complete. And to be honest, I actually thought that at least in terms of appearance, the manju hadn't turned out too bad, even compared to the giba

manju we sold.

“What do you think? Figuring out the manju felt like a pretty steep challenge,” I remarked.

“We won’t know till we try it! Let’s give it a taste test!” Rimee Ruu earnestly exclaimed, causing the Sauti and Vela woman to giggle.

She was right. It was time to evaluate our work. As we had only made a very small portion of the stew, we once again ended up eating from the same plate.

“Ooh, this is good! It’s not as tasty as Reina’s stew, but it’s about as good as what Lala and Vina make!”

“Hey, Rimee...” Vina Ruu said, giving her sister a look.

“Ah, I’m not saying you’re bad at it or anything. This stew is just that tasty!”

“Enough, already.”

I felt bad for Vina Ruu, but I didn’t have any real complaints about how it had turned out. Of course, it didn’t have any pico leaves, tau oil, or wine for flavoring, so the taste seemed lacking in overall depth, but it was definitely a proper cream stew. Even the chamcham and chan, ingredients that I wouldn’t generally use here, had a surprisingly positive impact on the dish. As for the stock from the bones, the quality of the kimyuus and the fullness of the karon went quite well together.

As for the manju, they just barely managed to scrape by. Ultimately, it would be difficult to call them tasty, but they weren’t especially bad either. Considering that I’d had to use arow and sheel skin in them despite not wanting to, that wasn’t a half-bad result, I’d say. Ultimately, it was saved by the garlic-chive-like pepe providing a good flavor to the dish, as well as the high quality of the karon meat. I could definitely make it a whole lot tastier if I had access to tau oil or myamuu, but it’s not like I could use what I didn’t have.



“Hmm. This is sorta like the dishes people in the post town sell,” Rimee Ruu commented after eating her small slice of manju. “You know, with the way you took all sorts of ingredients and just sorta jammed them all in together!”

“Now that you mention it, you may be right about that.” The residents of the post town still didn’t seem to know what to do with all the new ingredients they were getting. And it was true that this hastily improvised manju had ended up being similar to the sorts of dishes they had been making. “Is this the best I can do...? If I’d had access to tau oil, I’m sure I could have brought it together better,” I commented.

Then a voice called out from elsewhere in the room, “Um, Asuta...do you mind if I voice my honest opinion?” a Vela woman chimed in, wearing a small smile that seemed to have a lot of competing feelings behind it. “The soup dish, at least, is actually more delicious than the things we normally eat. If we simply used giba meat instead, I’m sure my family would be very pleased with it.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. We cannot afford to buy too many different ingredients in our house, and this was a dish you prepared using scraps from the castle town, so that is perhaps only natural.”

Now that she mentioned it, the clans under the Sauti weren’t as well off as the Ruu or Zaza. In fact, it was possible that nowadays, the small clans selling giba meat to the Fa might have been doing better than the Sauti. Still, if they could recover from the damage inflicted by the lord of the forest, the Sauti would likely end up being the third most prosperous clan in the forest’s edge. And if that happened, they wouldn’t need to suffer from poverty in their day-to-day lives.

“The key components of this cream stew dish are the karon milk and the bones. Karon milk costs around the same amount as fruit wine, and you could get a high-quality stock from giba bones too. Since we’re working with bones anyway, why don’t I teach you about that starting tomorrow?”

“Huh? You’re going to visit the Sauti settlement again tomorrow?” Mil Fei Sauti asked in surprise.

“Yes,” I answered with a nod. “I’m sure you’d have some concerns about trying to teach this after only a single lesson to go on, right? I’d like to get the Mahyudra women learning these techniques as soon as tomorrow, but for now, I think I should keep stopping by for at least the next few days.”

“But Asuta, you have your work at home.”

“My workload in the post town has lightened up quite a bit with the arrival of the rainy season, so it shouldn’t be any issue. Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and the others can handle the prep work without me now too. In fact, that’s what our plan for today was.” Mil Fei Sauti still looked worried, so I added, “When I slip out of work like this, I ask a number of women from clans like the Fou and Ran to help out in my place. Now that there’s less work to go around thanks to the rainy season, they’re happy to take it. After all, work generates wages.”

“But you’re the one who needs to pay those wages, aren’t you? That means you’re taking a loss by doing this, doesn’t it?”

“No, we’re only talking about a few red coins... Ah, sorry if that sounded arrogant of me!” I quickly said, flustered by my own carelessness. However, the look in Mil Fei Sauti’s eyes remained as calm as ever.

“It’s truly wonderful how much you value the pride of our people and always act kindly toward others, with no concern for how much it costs you. The way you think...it’s almost like how the leading clan heads must constantly take the needs of their people into consideration.”

“A-Ah, no, I don’t think anywhere near that highly of myself.”

“I’m praising you, so please don’t look so troubled. I was only comparing you to a leading clan head as an example,” Mil Fei Sauti said, bringing a hand to her mouth and breaking out in a smile. “I would like to convey the techniques you have taught us to the northerners as accurately as possible. What should we do for preparations?”

“For now, I think just preparing the milk fat and sorting the vegetables would be plenty. Then, starting tomorrow I would like you to have the Mahyudra women take care of as much of that as possible while the pots are boiling. If they eventually become capable of cooking all on their own, the guards and nobles would have no reason to complain about it.”

“Understood. We shall try our hardest to make that a reality.”

That brought our business at the Sauti settlement to a close for the time being. For the first day of work, that was plenty. The rainy season lasted two months, so I wanted to take my time engaging with Mil Fei Sauti and the others, as well as the women from Mahyudra.

With that, we moved to depart from the Sauti settlement. Sundials were essentially useless during this season, but there was already less light coming in through the window. I figured we were about at the lower fifth hour.

“Well then, see you tomorrow. Give my regards to Dari Sauti, okay?”

“Of course. I really do appreciate everything you’ve done today.”

As Mil Fei Sauti and the others saw us off, we put our rain gear back on and left the Sauti settlement behind us. It was dark enough that it seemed like the sun was probably about to set, and with the rain intermittently starting and stopping, the forest’s edge looked quite gloomy.

“It’s gotten pretty late, hasn’t it? Um, I’m sorry I forgot to mention this before, but...” I started, and then, while I was carefully managing the reins, I told them that I also wanted to stop by the Ririn settlement.

“That should be fine!” Rimee’s voice energetically called out from behind me, though I didn’t turn to look. “We didn’t know how long things would take with the Sauti clan, so we’ve already wrapped up all of our work back home! We’ll be just fine as long as we’re back by dinner!”

“H-Hey, Rimee...and Asuta, this is such a sudden request,” Vina Ruu said.

“But if I don’t take advantage of opportunities like this one, I’ll never get a chance to talk with Shumiral. And besides, I have a message to deliver from Radajid of the Silver Vase to Giran Ririn. Sorry, but would you all mind coming along with me?”

“Of course. I don’t mind,” Bartha replied.

“I’m not especially busy either. With the weather like this, I can’t exactly cut firewood or teach swordsmanship,” Ryada Ruu added.

The vote seemed nearly unanimous, one member of our group aside. Satisfied

with the result, I broke out in a smile, only to hear a sigh by my ear.

“You arranged this as a trap for me, didn’t you, Asuta?” Vina Ruu said.

“I-I wouldn’t call it a trap. I didn’t know you’d be coming along until I stopped by the Ruu settlement, after all. But I’ve been planning to visit the Ririn settlement ever since I got that request from the Sauti.”

Vina Ruu remained silent.

“Right now, you really want to find out what kind of man Shumiral is, right? So don’t you think you should try to see each other every now and then?” I whispered quietly so that Rimee Ruu and the others wouldn’t hear, only for her to grab the bit of hair that hung down in front of my right ear and twist it. “H-Hey, that hurts! You’re going to tear my skin!”

“I can’t imagine how you of all people would think you could tell me how to handle things between me and that man, Asuta.”

“You’re right! I’m really, really sorry!”

“Hey, what are you two whispering about?” Rimee Ruu asked, saving my hair and the surrounding skin from getting torn off. With my scalp still stinging and tears in my eyes, I couldn’t help but wonder if her grabbing my hair rather than an ear or a cheek was to keep from running afoul of the custom saying men and women shouldn’t touch one another unnecessarily.

Well, Vina Ruu did try to creep into my room at night the very first day we met... I hope Shumiral never learns about that. Actually, would it be wrong of me to try to hide that fact? Well, at the very least, I didn’t want him to hear about what had happened until things had been settled between the two of them. Not until the day arrives when we can just laugh it off... Though I guess if Vina Ruu and I don’t say anything, there’s no real chance of anyone ever finding out.

As that thought ran through my head, Rimee Ruu called out, “We’re almost at the Ririn settlement!”

I had gone there once before, but I had come from the north that time, so I had no clue where I was going. It really was reassuring to have Rimee Ruu here to act as a navigator.

“Hmm, that last side path went to the Muufa, so it should be the one after the next.”

“Thanks. So you’ve visited the Ririn too, Rimee Ruu?”

“Yeah! When I used to go on walks with Granny Jiba, we would go around to all the subordinate clans!”

Asking around, I found that this was the first time going there for everyone else. It was apparently quite rare for members of a parent clan to visit their subordinate clans. That made sense, though, as festivals of the hunt and large weddings were all held at the Ruu settlement. Still, that meant that Vina Ruu had spent the last ten or so days not even knowing where in the forest’s edge Shumiral had been living. *That doesn’t sit well with me. And there aren’t really any reasons to gather the subordinate clans during the rainy season. Was Vina Ruu intending to spend the next several months without seeing him?*

If she kept on sighing like she had been, it felt like she would lose not just her happiness but her very spirit itself. It really was a stroke of good luck that she happened to be accompanying me today.

“It’s the next path. And it’s a narrow one, so be careful!”

Following Rimee Ruu’s directions, I turned the wagon off onto the side path. And sure enough, it was definitely narrow. Still, that made sense, considering nobody had expected that a wagon might need to pass through it when they’d been making it.

I had Gilulu advance carefully, making sure that the canopy and wagon wheels didn’t get snagged on any branches. With all the greenery hanging over us, it really was starting to get dark now.

When we reached the end of the path, our field of view suddenly opened wide. It was a larger settlement than I had expected, since I had heard the Ririn only had ten members, but there were four houses lined up there. But then again, I saw empty houses pretty often here at the forest’s edge. It wasn’t like every small clan had been small from the beginning, after all.

“That house on the far right is the main house. It’s getting dark, so the men might be back already!”

The house Rimee Ruu pointed out wasn't an especially large one. In fact, all of them were around the size of the Fa house. I directed our wagon toward it, still taking care not to get our wheels stuck in any mud. There was light streaming out of the windows, and I could hear loud voices even though we were still well away from the door.

"It seems like the men are back after all. What do you all want to do?"

Everyone aside from Vina Ruu was already standing. As for the eldest Ruu daughter, she was curled up in the corner of the wagon, with Barthia poking her head and laughing.

"What's the matter? Now that you've come all this way, you can't simply leave without even seeing him."

"Well...I wasn't expecting this... And my hair's all wet from the rain..."

"If any guy complains about stuff like that, you should just send them flying."

"Come on, let's go. Shumiral's gonna be real happy to see you too," Rimee Ruu urged.

It took roughly thirty seconds of that to get Vina Ruu to finally rise to her feet. The rain had pretty much come to a stop, so everyone else stepped out without any rain gear, though I had mine on already and didn't take it off. As I was the one who had suggested this whole venture, I went ahead and knocked on the door.

"Excuse me. This is Asuta of the Fa clan, with Vina Ruu, Rimee Ruu, Ryada Ruu, and Barthia from the Ruu clan. Are the Ririn clan head and Shumiral present?"

For a moment, my words went without any response.

Despite how noisy things were inside, nobody came out.

Were they already in the middle of dinner, perhaps...? As I tilted my head and wondered about that, the door finally opened, and I was instantly taken aback, as I found myself faced with an incredibly unique woman.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, and visitors from the Ruu...? The Ririn clan welcomes you," the woman said, tilting her head. She was very pretty and had blonde

hair, which was rare for a person of the forest's edge. However, she wasn't *just* beautiful. She also had this mysterious feel about her that was difficult to describe.

Her hair, the same color as Ai Fa and Rau Lea's, had been trimmed short. The nape of her neck was completely exposed, and she wore a hair accessory above her right ear. Her bangs came down to around her cheek, but only on the left side.

Her eyes were a clear, pale blue. She had long eyelashes, with the corners of her eyes drooping down ever so slightly as she looked my way with an amiable gaze. Her facial features were all precisely aligned, as if everything had been placed exactly where it belonged. Her nose was neither too long nor too short, her lips neither too plump or thin, and her overall appearance wasn't especially similar to someone from either Sym or Jagar, instead having a face that didn't look like it belonged to any one nation in particular.

She also had an incredibly slender build. Because of the poncho she wore to protect herself from the rain, I couldn't precisely make out the contours of her body, but her shoulders were narrow and her arms were thin. And as for her height, it looked to be about the same as mine.

I couldn't begin to guess how old she was. I could at least say that she seemed to be older than fifteen and younger than thirty, and she had a kind of detached air about her, which was probably the reason she felt so enigmatic.

"My apologies, but we are currently a bit busy... Ah, I am the clan head Giran's wife, Uru Lea Ririn."

"O-Oh, you're Giran Ririn's wife? I'm Asuta of the Fa clan. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Uru Lea Ririn replied with a smile. It was an open, almost fairylike expression, and it remained firmly in place as she turned back toward the inside of the house. "Clan head, Asuta of the Fa clan and some members of the Ruu have stopped by for a visit. It looks like it's going to start raining again at any moment, so can I invite them inside?"

"Go ahead!" a voice replied from within.

We stepped inside onto the dirt floor, washed our feet with water from a jug, and then entered the Ririn house. Right in front of us, there was a curtain with brilliant embroidering. It must have been for keeping out the cold. After hanging up my rain gear by the entrance, I went ahead and passed through it.

Beyond the curtain was the main hall, where four or five men and women were leaning over with their backs to us.

“Welcome, Asuta... Ah, and the eldest daughter of the Ruu is with you too,” one of the figures said, straightening up and shooting us a smile. It was the Ririn clan head, Giran Ririn.

I started to greet him back, but before I could, I froze in place. Now that he was facing us, I was able to see who had been hidden behind him. “Shumiral! What in the world happened?”

“It’s nothing serious. He just got a bit of a chest injury,” Giran Ririn replied.

Shumiral remained lying on the floor. I clenched my fists and turned toward Vina Ruu. She was frozen in place, like I had been, her face deathly pale.

“Apparently, the rain dulled the eyes and ears of the hunting dogs. We ran into a starving giba, and he took a hit from it when it charged us.”

“I-Is he really okay? It doesn’t seem like he’s able to respond.”

“It didn’t get him with its horns or tusks and his ribs aren’t broken, so it isn’t serious. He should be able to regain his strength in a few days,” Giran Ririn commented with his usual gentle smile. And all the while, Shumiral was lying there listlessly by his feet. His upper half had been stripped bare, and there were bandages wrapped all around his chest. “He can’t speak up, as breathing is still difficult for him, but if you come closer, you can talk to him if you’d like.”

Giran Ririn gestured to the people who were gathered around Shumiral to treat him, and they made room for us to approach.

As I came closer, the smell of medicinal herbs stung my nose. They had a grassy smell that reminded me of the lilo used for bruises. When Vina Ruu had hurt her ankle, something similar had been applied to her injury too.

All five of us went up to Shumiral. His eyes remained closed, and his breathing

was pained and shallow. His face was coated in cold sweat, causing his loose silver hair to cling to his thin cheeks. The orange light from the lit stove formed deep shadows on his face, making the pain in his expression all the more obvious.

“Are you okay, Shumiral? It’s Asuta. Vina Ruu is here too,” I called out while taking care not to be too loud. Shumiral opened his eyes a bit, his weak gaze turning my way.

“Asuta, Vina Ruu... Why are you, at the Ririn settlement?”

“Don’t force yourself to talk. We had business with the Sauti clan today, so we stopped by on our way back.”

“I see...” Shumiral’s voice was faint, and was getting stuck in his throat. Even if he didn’t have any broken bones, he had still been injured pretty badly. It was difficult for me to keep my emotions in check, seeing him like this.

“Shumiral was injured because I wasn’t experienced enough. I was supposed to be the one guiding him, and yet I still allowed this to happen,” one of the men off to the side said. He was quite young; I couldn’t even tell if he had hit twenty yet. His face looked really tense, which was understandable, in light of what he was saying.

“They decided to take refuge up in the trees when they ran into the starving giba because they didn’t have good footing on the ground. But his hand slipped, and he fell right in front of the beast. Shumiral was injured trying to defend him,” Giran Ririn added from the other side, his voice sounding incredibly calm. “If Shumiral hadn’t saved him, he could very well have taken a tusk to the throat. In addition to rescuing him, Shumiral was also able to protect his own life. It was incredible work for a hunter.”

“No... I showed, my inexperience, in how I could not, avoid the giba...”

“That’s true. You still have plenty of room to grow even stronger as a hunter. In that way, you’re still very inexperienced.”

Shumiral gave a faint smile in response to Giran Ririn’s kind words. Then his gaze slowly shifted over to Vina Ruu. “You have seen me, in quite an, embarrassing state. Are you, doing well, Vina Ruu?”

“Never mind how I’m doing.” Vina Ruu had been hanging her head all this time, and because of her long hair, I hadn’t been able to see her expression from my position next to her. “You’re so thin... And yet you still intend to keep on being a hunter?”

“Yes. If I train, I should be, able to, gain a bit more strength.”

It was only natural that Shumiral was thin compared to a hunter of the forest’s edge. Folks from Sym were generally tall and lanky. Despite his height, his shoulders and waist were slender, and his limbs were long, strengthening that impression all the more. Still, he didn’t look weak at all to my eyes. His arms were toned, his stomach was taut with well-defined abs, and he had no excess fat whatsoever. His body absolutely looked like it belonged to an athlete.

“I wish, I could have, seen you yesterday. I was able, to make, a catch then.”

“Are you saying I’m in the way by being here?”

“No. But I am embarrassed, to let you see me, so weak.”

“You were injured saving a comrade. That’s something to be proud of,” Vina Ruu said, desperately trying to keep her emotions out of her voice. But being right next to her, I was able to pick up on an ever so slight tremor in her tone.

“Pardon me. The medicine is ready,” Uru Lea Ririn called out as she approached. She held a wooden plate giving off the smell of medicinal herbs in her slender fingers. “It’s made with romu leaves. If you drink it, you’ll be able to sleep easier. Clan head...”

“Right,” Giran Ririn responded, and he gently grabbed ahold of Shumiral’s shoulders, pulling my friend up to lean against his chest.

Uru Lea Ririn knelt down in front of Shumiral and started bringing the medicine to his mouth with a spoon. Romu leaves were what Ai Fa had used when she’d dislocated her left elbow. They served to treat fevers and relieve pain.

With the clan head and his wife diligently nursing him, Shumiral drank down all of the romu leaf medicine. A little spilled from his mouth at the end, which Uru Lea Ririn wiped up with a towel.

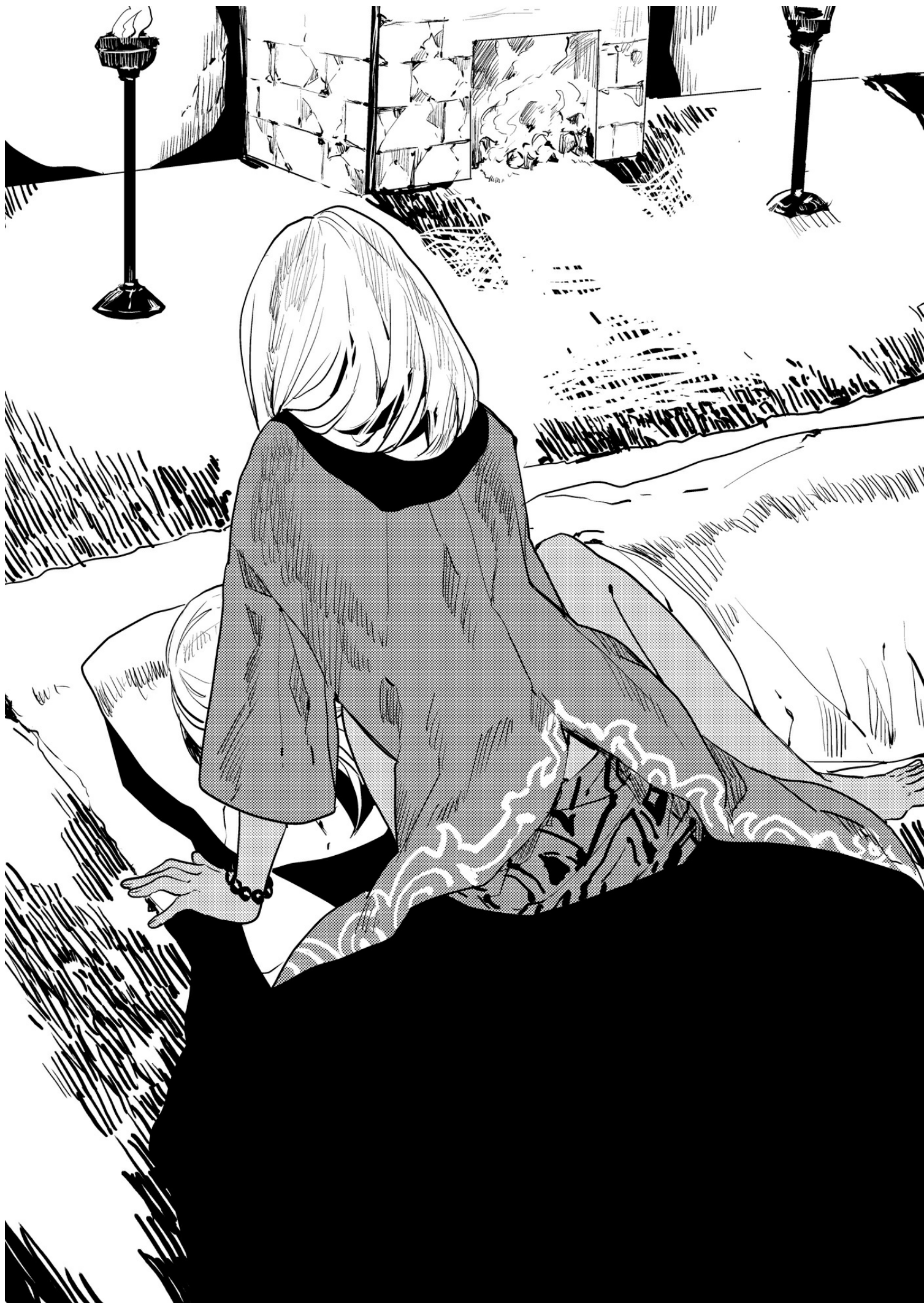
“Now you should feel a bit less pain when you next awaken. We’ll rouse you when dinner is ready, so go ahead and rest for the time being,” Giran Ririn said.

“I will. Thank you...” With that, Shumiral lay down again and he closed his eyes, still looking pained. Uru Lea Ririn then started wiping the cold sweat off his face.

“It will take three days for you to be able to move around like normal, and another three to be able to head out into the forest. At the longest it will be ten days, so don’t push yourself too hard, Shumiral,” Giran Ririn continued.

“Understood.”

“Uru Lea will watch over you during the day. You have nothing to worry about, so just get as much rest as you can.”



Vina Ruu stirred by my side. “Are there not any other people in the main house?”

“Hmm? It’s only us and the children living here, though we’ve now gained a new clan member in Shumiral.”

“Where are these children?”

“They’re in the care of my younger brother’s family at the moment. They have a young kid too, so that was the most convenient place to send them.”

Vina Ruu was still hanging her head, but her eyes turned upward toward the clan head and his wife. Taking notice of that, Uru Lea Ririn broke out in that straightforward, fairylike smile of hers.

“We will entrust the children to them during the day until Shumiral has recovered. I’ll stay by his side the whole time, so please don’t worry.”

“By his side, the whole time?”

I was starting to feel a bit worried. Vina Ruu had been acting rather meek lately, but she had always had an unusually tricky mentality for a person of the forest’s edge. Given the unusual circumstances of Shumiral’s injury, I couldn’t help but wonder if she was about to let go of her self-restraint.

“But it isn’t good for young children to be away from their mother from morning till night, is it?”

“No, but Shumiral will not be able to rest properly with such young children nearby. They will simply need to wait for a few days.”

“The suffering of our subordinate clans is our own...”

“What?” Uru Lea Ririn questioned with a tilt of her head, her smile remaining just as pronounced as ever.

“Giran Ririn, if I said I wished to aid you in this time of hardship, would I be getting in the way?” Vina Ruu asked.

“I can’t quite say I understand what you’re getting at, but I can’t make that kind of decision without Donda Ruu’s knowledge,” Giran Ririn replied, his eyes narrowing as he smiled and stroked his gray mustache.

Vina Ruu slowly turned toward her little sister. “Rimee, could I ask you to deliver a message to Papa Donda?”

“Yeah, of course,” Rimee Ruu said, bringing her hands together behind her head. That pose was one of her older brother’s favorites, and she had the same sort of impish look he often did in her eyes.

“I am responsible for Shumiral coming here to the forest’s edge. If that has led to an inconvenience for the Ririn, then I want to provide them whatever aid I can. Could you tell Papa Donda that?”

“Got it. So you won’t be coming home today?”

“That’s right,” Vina Ruu replied, deeply hanging her head once more. However, her position had shifted a bit, so I could see around her bangs a little this time, and there was no mistaking the fact that her face was as red as a tarapa.

“Asuta... What has happened...?” I suddenly heard Shumiral say from down on the ground. Were the romu leaves taking effect? He had the same empty look in his eyes that I had previously seen in Ai Fa’s.

“It’s nothing. Just get some rest, Shumiral.” There was still a chance that Vina Ruu could be taken back home in a few hours, so I decided not to answer him directly.

“Very well...” Shumiral replied, closing his eyes.

Would Donda Ruu allow his daughter to get away with this little contrivance? I made a secret mental note that if he did, I would have to stop by tomorrow on my way to the Sauti settlement and drop off some curry base.

Chapter 2: Amusehorn's Breath

1

On the morning of the fifth day of the brown month, two days after the start of the rainy season, I was sleeping away all warm and cozy under my newly purchased blanket.

It had always felt like the temperature fell to around fifteen degrees Celsius at night—though that was of course just based on what my senses were able to tell me—yet now it seemed to be going down to seven or eight degrees, or thereabouts. Whatever the specific numbers actually were, it was undoubtedly chilly enough that it would be really tough to have to spend the night without bedding.

The sheets and blankets you could get ahold of in the post town were only about as thick as a terry cloth blanket at best, but we had bought a pretty decent number of them so that we could stack them up to give us both cushioning and protection against the cold. Even at the forest's edge, that was the typical method for making it through the cold nights of the rainy season, at least for clans that weren't especially impoverished.

If I consulted with a resident of the castle town like Yang, I would probably be able to purchase the sort of soft down quilts they used there. I had learned that they had that kind of thing in the castle town back when I'd been abducted and taken to the Turan manor. However, up through last year, Ai Fa had gone without any bedding at all, simply pulling a fur cloak over herself when going to sleep, so even though we did have the funds to afford such quilts now, spending that much on them would be a very unfitting act for a person of the forest's edge. Besides, we had been sleeping in a huddle atop a fur rug up until the last few days. Hanging curtains over the windows, layering up sheets to sleep on top of, and then pulling a blanket over myself was already enough to satisfy me.

Additionally, neither the people who lived at the forest's edge nor the post town seemed to use pillows, so I had wrapped up an extra sheet I had bought and laid it under my head. At first Ai Fa had looked at me with a dubious gaze when I had done that, but in the end she'd said, "This isn't half bad," and had done the same.

Bottom line, we had successfully ensured that we would be able to sleep soundly even during the rainy season. I had already been sleeping deeply enough that I rarely dreamed, but I seemed to be sleeping even deeper since we'd started using the bedding.

However, that deeper sleep had led to a bit of a shift in my internal cycles. On this particular day, I failed to wake up at the usual time, leading Ai Fa to mercilessly snatch away my blanket.

"Do you intend to keep sleeping forever, Asuta? Dawn has long since broken."

"Gah, cold!" I said, sitting up atop the bedding as my body trembled. "Well, okay, maybe it's not that cold, but having the temperature drop that much is pretty uncomfortable." I took off my coat when I got in bed, so I was only wearing my long-sleeved undershirt and pants, and the morning chill was harsh enough that it had made me yelp a bit there.

Ai Fa was standing there holding the blanket she had stolen from me, shooting me an astonished glare. "You slept rather heavily yesterday too, until I called out to you. I was the one who suggested that we buy bedding, but now I have to wonder if I was mistaken to do so."

"D-Definitely not. It's just that we don't get much sunlight coming in during the rainy season, so I ended up oversleeping."

"Hmm... Still, this is quite concerning for me, to think that I may be spoiling my clan member," Ai Fa remarked with a troubled look.

I was starting to get a bit flustered, raising my voice a little as I said, "H-Hey, you're not planning on banning the bedding, are you?"

"Hmm..."

"I'll be more careful tonight! Please don't make any hasty decisions, clan head!" I called out, clinging to the bedding in her hands.

My beloved clan head's expression grew even more exasperated. "Why are you so desperate, Asuta?"

"I mean, the nights are even chillier than I expected. If you take away the bedding, I'll end up catching a cold."

"What do you mean...? How can one grab on to coldness?" Ai Fa questioned, a doubtful look in her eyes as she pulled on the sheets.

As I pulled back just as hard, I thought about what to say for a moment before answering, "Um... A cold is a type of illness from my home country. It's easy to catch when it's cold out, and when you get one you run a fever and get all snotty. It's awful."

"Hmm. So, something like Amusehorn's breath?"

"Amusehorn's breath? Amusehorn is the name of this continent, right? There's some sort of local ailment that goes by that name?"

"You have nothing to worry about. It is an illness that only affects young children. But that said, more than a few impoverished families here at the forest's edge have lost children to it," Ai Fa explained, tugging at the bedding all the while.

"I see," I replied, tugging back.

"Asuta, why do you refuse to let go?"

"I mean, it feels like if I do, you're going to shove it into storage."

"Do you really think I'm that stubborn?"

"I-I'd say you're pretty darn stubborn, yeah... Ah, not that I mean that in a bad way!"

After giving a small sigh, Ai Fa leaned over beside me. Her beautiful blue eyes stared at my face with a look so clear even a young child could understand it. "It's true that I'm worried you may become spoiled, but that isn't something to be decided in just two days. I was simply planning to help put the bedding away."

"A-Ah, I see. Sorry, it's not like I don't trust you or anything."

“Do you really think I would push ahead with something you were *that* opposed to? That is...a bit sad to hear.”

“S-Sorry! I really didn’t mean it like that!” I said, letting go in a hurry.

“Of course not.” Ai Fa had a serious look on her face. “Even if I put it into storage, there would be no purpose as you could easily get it back out. Should I burn it in the stove instead?”

“Gyah!”

“I’m joking. That’s quite a sound to be making so early in the morning,” Ai Fa remarked, hiding the lower half of her face with the blanket she stole from me as she giggled.



I slumped over weakly, thrown for a loop by that adorable laugh, and muttered, "Give me a break."

"It's true that this bedding is quite pleasing. Take care that you do not fall prey to its appeals." As she was saying that, Ai Fa began folding the bedding. Naturally, hers had already been folded and was off in the corner of the room. With a childish click of my tongue, I started cleaning up the sheets beneath me.

Naturally, my teasing yet adorable clan head had also changed her outfit for the rainy season. She was wearing a top with long sleeves, like me and the other men, while on the bottom she wore a long skirt like the women, making for something of a hybrid style. The long skirt was meant for everyday use, but she swapped it out for her usual short one whenever she went out hunting. Having her legs on display like that with her upper half almost completely covered by her cloak and long sleeves gave her a whole new kind of appeal. But naturally, I would absolutely never express that thought to anyone.

"By the way, about that illness we were just discussing..."

"Hmm? We have no small children at the Fa house, so you have nothing to be concerned about. It is true that Amusehorn's breath is a terrible ailment, but it only ever afflicts the young."

"So an adult won't get sick even when it's this cold out?"

"Never. But if your body grows too cold, you will lose strength, which can lead to you experiencing pain in your chest or stomach...so the cold of the rainy season still isn't something to simply be disregarded."

Based on what I was hearing, there really seemed to be no equivalent to the common cold here in this land. Colds were caused by specific kinds of viruses, so if those viruses didn't exist here, you would never catch a cold no matter how cold it got. Now that I thought about it, I had heard that it was hard for viruses to live in Antarctica, so despite how frigid it was, the chances of catching a cold there were close to zero.

If I had been sick when I came here, it could have led to a really awful pandemic... But then, I don't think I've even caught a cold in the last couple years at least.

I knew that river and rainwater could be drunk directly here at the forest's edge. Naturally, without any filtration you couldn't hope to remove any fine impurities, but no one seemed to treat boiling it or the like as a necessity, so it seemed that there were definitely far fewer pathogens here than in my old world. As a result, there was pretty much no need to go to the washing place during the rainy season, as you could just do laundry and clean tableware and the like with the rainwater that filled up your water jugs. And if you tried to bathe in the river, it would be too cold, so we either used water from a jug for that too or simply took natural showers.

And so, we once again carried the tableware and pans we'd used for last night's dinner over to the front door and washed them. As we did, the two of us stared out at the gentle drizzle together, with our shoulders close enough to almost touch, and I found myself taken by a feeling of quiet contentment.

"There are a ton of hassles that come with the rainy season, but it isn't all bad," I said.

"Hmm? Why are you saying that now?"

"Well, I've been spending more time in the house, which means more time with just the two of us. And that makes me happy."

Ai Fa looked shocked, as if I had caught her completely off guard, but in the end she frowned and jabbed me in the side with her elbow.

"Still, you mustn't underestimate the challenges presented by the rainy season. Both visibility and footing are poor, so exercise special care when driving the wagon."

"Yeah, I know. And you take care when hunting giba, Ai Fa."

"That goes without saying. Even putting aside what happened to Shumiral over in the Ririn clan, I know full well the dangers the rainy season can bring," Ai Fa said with a sigh as she wiped off the cleaned tableware with a cloth and stacked it by the entrance. "And since the rain drowns out the scent of giba-summoning fruit, I'm no longer able to catch as many as I did before. It would be ideal if I could have a break period coinciding with the rainy season, but it all comes down to the will of the mother forest."

“I see. It’s an off season for business in the post town too, so it really is rough these days.” However, spending time with Ai Fa like this made my heart feel at ease. The sound of rain and the white mist hanging in the air felt gloomy when I was working, but now it was only adding to the sense of peace I felt.

Our normal everyday lives will return once these two months are over, so for now I should try to fully experience both the good and the bad of this season, I thought to myself as I splashed the water in the pot I was holding out the front door.

Things hadn’t changed much at all since yesterday in regard to our business in the post town. We had a similarly scant number of passersby, and though we had reduced the number of meals we prepared by more than half, we still just barely managed to sell out. And actually, it was possible that we were only able to do even that well because there weren’t very many other stalls open. If the inns started serving giba meat in the morning, I could see them snatching away every last one of our customers.

“Naturally, I would never do anything to betray your trust. Our contract says that I am buying food for dinner, so even if it is delivered in the morning, selling it in the afternoon isn’t something I would ever attempt,” Nail of The Sledgehammer told me.

We had a tacit agreement that he would only sell giba cooking in the evening, so as to not interfere with our stalls. That applied to the whole year, not just the rainy season. However, it wasn’t like we were selling the fresh meat under a contract that explicitly said it could only be used for dinners, so we wouldn’t have any grounds to complain if the inns started selling giba cooking they prepared personally during the day, but Nail, Milano Mas, Naudis, and even Sams of The Westerly Wind had all decided that they wouldn’t do anything like that.

“If I were to displease the people of the forest’s edge and you stopped selling me giba meat, that would lead to huge losses. I can’t imagine any of the inns even thinking about doing something that might interfere with your business,” Naudis of The Great Southern Tree had said. Now that I thought back on it, Naudis and Yumi had both asked for our permission to run stalls during the

revival festival. Naturally, since our goal was to show as many people as possible how delicious giba cooking was, we'd had no reason to object.

That didn't just go for the revival festival; I figured it would be fine for them to sell giba cooking during the day all the time as well, but the inn owners hadn't changed their stance. Of course, it was customary for people in the post town to eat a midday snack from a stall, so if they did something to upend that, it would hurt their reputation with the other folks out there who ran stalls.

"It's different during the rainy season, though. There are a lot of customers who stop by our inns for snacks during this time of year, so we *will* be serving giba cooking during the day whenever your stalls are taking a break. Of course, that means our daytime sales are going to soar when that happens. That'll be a huge boon for us," Naudis had added.

On top of that, the humble inn owners also all shared the opinion that even during the rainy season, they wouldn't be able to expect much of an increase in sales when we were open for business anyway. So, what it all amounted to was that even though the inns had been cutting back on their orders of cooking and meat since the end of the golden month, on the days our stalls weren't open, they were going to be purchasing more than ever.

"Still, you haven't had any more inns trying to purchase giba meat? That's a bit of a surprise," Milano Mas of The Kimyuus's Tail asked me.

"That's true. I figure that has a lot to do with the fact that karon torso meat became available for purchase around the time of the revival festival. A chef named Yang is working hard over at Tanto's Blessing to help popularize it."

"Hmph. Or maybe it's because there're still lots of folks out there who lack the nerve to work with you people of the forest's edge. When we innkeepers have meetings, a bunch of the others ask us about you, but it seems like they're not able to take that last step."

The stall spaces were under the management of the inns, so it made sense that we were a topic of discussion at their meetings. Folks in the same occupation who did business in town had organizations that were referred to as "firms," which periodically met to make all kinds of decisions. But aside from traveling merchants, most of those who worked stalls only did so as a side

business, so there was no stall owner firm.

“As for selling meat, Genos only deals in the karon from Dabagg and kimyuus from the Daleim lands, and that’s all under the control of those folks in the castle town, so there’s no need to have a firm to handle them.”

“I see. But we people of the forest’s edge are officially citizens of Genos, so normally we’d belong to some sort of firm too, right?”

Due to the poitan shortage, we had used fuwano instead, aiming for small profits and quick returns rather than raising prices. But that wasn’t something I had discussed with anyone; it had just been me nervously fumbling about and making a decision on everyone’s behalf. So far, I hadn’t ever really had any serious problems with doing things that way, but I couldn’t help but worry that people might start thinking, “That outsider’s really making a killing.”

“Well, you haven’t attracted any real opposition from the people who live around here yet, so there’s no need to worry about it. But if you want to talk with some townsfolk...” Milano Mas started, only to fall silent with a sour look on his face.

“What is it? If you have any ideas about how I could start a dialogue with some more people from around town, I would really appreciate hearing them.”

“Right, well...in that case...you might be able to come along to an inn meeting as an associate of my shop... The stalls selling snacks all fall under inns, so that’d be the most appropriate meeting for you to intrude on...probably.” Milano Mas seemed strangely evasive, for some reason. “But if you do that, everyone will think you’re on the best terms with my place.”

“Isn’t that exactly right? Oh, wait, would it be inconvenient for you somehow if people thought that?”

“Of course not! But I don’t exactly buy as much from you as the other inns.”

“Please don’t worry about stuff like that. The Kimyuus’s Tail is the first inn I formed a connection with, so this place is special to me.”

And so, Milano Mas ended up promising to set things up so I could eventually come along to an innkeepers’ meeting. But apparently, those events were typically held at the beginning of the month, and the one for the brown month

had already happened, so that wouldn't be happening until next month at the earliest.

As for the other matter of note that happened on that day in the post town, I was able to tell Radajid and company about what happened to Shumiral. As a man of Sym, Radajid didn't easily let his emotions show, but I saw his shoulders tremble as he leaned forward when I told him. He didn't go so far as letting his facial expression shift, but the worry and unease in his black eyes was easy to see.

"Is Shumiral, all right? I am, worried."

"Well, apparently he'll be able to move around just fine in a few days... But I suppose that doesn't make things any less worrying."

I also ended up telling them that I got permission from the Ririn clan head for them to stop by and see Shumiral.

"I see. Asuta, you have, our gratitude. We will definitely, head there, soon."

"Got it. He should be doing a lot better by tomorrow or the day after, so I think you should aim for around then."

With that, our business day came to a peaceful close.

Afterward, we headed to the Sauti settlement for another visit. There was no need for the members of the Ruu clan to keep accompanying me at this point, but Rimee Ruu and Bartha came along once again anyway.

"We gathered a whole lot of firewood and pico leaves before the rainy season, so there's not much to do around the house. That's why Papa Donda told us we should go ahead and check out how things are going with the Sauti!" Rimee told me.

"That was probably just an excuse, though. I'd wager that he's actually worried about you going there all on your own, Asuta. We didn't see them yesterday, but there are a whole lot of guards and northerners in the area," Bartha said.

Ai Fa was rather concerned about that too. It still wasn't clear how close the Sauti settlement and the worksite really were, which made her pretty anxious.

“I’d like to have a look at the worksite at least once too. I was thinking about asking to do so on our next day off, but I guess the clan heads wouldn’t allow that without any guards to accompany us,” I remarked.

“That’s true. Northerners are known for being savage barbarians, after all. Even if they *are* held in chains, there are over a hundred of them in the forest, so you’ll need to be very well guarded.”

That would make things rather difficult, if it was decided that Bartha and Ryada Ruu alone wouldn’t be enough. The clans around the Fa and the Ruu had already finished their break periods, and there was no way I could ask hunters to take time off their work for something like this.

For now, I’ll try consulting with Ai Fa tonight. If any of the other clans are in the middle of a break period right now, we may be able to borrow some men from them, I thought as we stopped by the Ririn settlement first. In the end, Vina Ruu had indeed been permitted to stay at the main Ririn house after all, with Rimee Ruu being given the task of checking up on her.

I knocked on the door just like yesterday, and as expected, Uru Lea Ririn once again greeted us. Unsurprisingly, she still had the same strange fairylike air about her. When her clear, pale blue eyes directed themselves at me, I started to feel all out of sorts for no reason whatsoever.

“The Ririn clan welcomes you. Please, come inside.”

“Ah, sorry, today we’re only here to deliver something to Vina Ruu. How is Shumiral doing?”

“His breathing has settled today, and he is much more at ease. Right now, he’s sleeping.”

“Then I think we’ll be leaving as soon as we make our delivery. We still have work to do with the Sauti, after all.”

“Understood,” Uru Lea Ririn said before disappearing behind the curtain, and then Vina Ruu came out in her place. Once again, she was deeply hanging her head today, with her long bangs still hiding her expression.

“What sort of business do you have with me? Did you come to laugh at me, perhaps?”

“Wh-Why would we laugh at you? Were you expecting us to get on your case about this or something?”

“I mean...it’s almost as if I’m the one asking to marry him now, isn’t it?” No matter how low her bangs drooped, her mouth was still visible to me, and once again, I could see that her face was red from embarrassment.

“That doesn’t matter, does it? Didn’t Mama Mia Lea say that you should do whatever you need to so you can figure out how you feel?” Rimee Ruu said.

Vina Ruu offered no response.

“Besides, everyone’s way more worried about how you still haven’t gotten married. We’ll all be super happy if Shumiral’s the right husband for you!”

“Oh, be quiet, Rimee...” Vina Ruu replied, wriggling her body in that sensuous way she sometimes did and looking like she was trying to shrink down into herself. Before she could completely shrivel up, though, I held out the bundle I had prepared.

“Er, this is a gift from me. Could you feed it to Shumiral for dinner?”

“What is it? Our customs say that dinner must be made at a house’s own stove to be eaten there.”

“This isn’t a finished dish, so it shouldn’t go against those customs. Please, make it into something tasty.”

Naturally, the bundle contained curry base, made by sautéing a variety of herbs and spices, aria, fuwano, and milk fat together and then drying it out. I had filled a lidded container I had bought in the post town with enough to serve everyone at the main Ririn house for around three days.

Perhaps realizing what it was from the scent leaking out of the package, Vina Ruu muttered, “Jeez,” as she squirmed a bit more. “What is with you all? Are you trying to kill me with pressure?”

“No, not at all. Anyway, give my regards to Shumiral and everyone in the Ririn clan.”

With that, we swiftly departed, before Vina Ruu’s strength could give out entirely.

Once we were on the move again in the wagon, Bartha chuckled and said, “Good grief. It’s ridiculous how naive and innocent she is when she’s *that* pretty and charming. There’s no way she could have lived to the age of twenty without having *any* experience with romance, right?”

“Well, Vina’s had a bunch of people ask to marry her, but she turned them all down instantly, so she hasn’t actually talked much with men from other clans,” Rimee Ruu explained.

“So if she does get married, the whole family really will have a reason to rejoice, huh?”

“Yup, that’s right! Papa Donda will probably be a bit sad, though.”

Personally, I couldn’t even imagine Donda Ruu looking *sad*, but Rimee Ruu was incredibly perceptive when it came to people’s emotions, so she undoubtedly had a much better grasp of her father’s feelings.

However, Shumiral would have to secure the Ririn clan name before they could get married. The thought of the clan head deciding that Shumiral was unsuited to being a person of the forest’s edge while the two of them had feelings for one another was the worst outcome I could possibly imagine.

Still, I’m certain that Shumiral is going to be accepted as a fine man of the forest’s edge.

Even Shumiral’s injury had been the result of covering for a member of the Ririn clan, so no one would be able to say he had been careless. And furthermore, it had resulted in the unexpected plot twist of Shumiral and Vina Ruu spending time together after not seeing one another for quite a while.

It was entirely possible that all of this was only being allowed because there was less work to do both at home and in the post town thanks to the rain. If so, that was just more proof of how the rainy season could bring both hardships and blessings.

It’s not all good, but it’s not all bad either.

Feeling as emotional as I had been that morning, I hurried Gilulu along toward the Sauti settlement.

And so, we arrived at the Sauti settlement. Rather than Mil Fei Sauti, though, it was an older woman from a branch home who greeted us in front of the main house.

“The Sauti clan welcomes you. I am in charge of the work here for today.”

She was one of the five I had offered lessons to yesterday. If I recalled correctly, she was the wife of the head of her branch house. I still didn’t see Mil Fei Sauti when we moved over to the kitchen, but in her place, there was one more woman there. She was a member of a Vela branch house, whom I had become acquainted with during the incident with the lord of the forest. As we took off our rain gear and got ourselves straightened out, the first woman finally started to explain what was going on.

“Mil Fei Sauti’s youngest child collapsed from illness yesterday, you see. Because she needs to look after the child for the time being, I took charge in her place.”

“Ah, so that’s it! Is it Amusehorn’s breath, then?”

“Oh, so you know about that, Asuta? Yes, Mil Fei Sauti’s youngest is only four, so they have a difficult trial ahead of them.”

I didn’t know what she meant by “trial” so I asked for more of an explanation and was informed that Amusehorn’s breath was a unique illness that only afflicted those under the age of five. Surviving it was seen as a trial that all children born on this continent needed to overcome at some point between the time they were weaned and their fifth birthday.

“If a child lacks the necessary strength, their soul will be returned to the gods then and there—an outcome which is all too common, I’m afraid, which may be what led to the custom of not counting children under the age of five as clan members.”

“That’s right! We hardly lose any kids in the Ruu clan, though,” Rimee Ruu added.

“Strong children soon regain their strength even if they end up with a fever. But apparently, many children of poor clans are lost to the illness.”

As we talked, I started to feel more than a little uneasy.

“Will Mil Fei Sauti’s child be all right? I’m sure nothing can be said for certain at this point, but still...”

“That’s right, though her two older children did manage to overcome the trial successfully. Dari Sauti and Mil Fei Sauti are both strong, and I’m sure their children inherited that strength,” the Sauti woman said with a gentle smile. “No matter how painful it may be, the trial will end within three days. The rest of us simply want to work as hard as we can to ensure that Mil Fei Sauti’s duties are taken care of as well.”

For the people of the forest’s edge—no, for all of the people of this continent, this rite of passage was an essential part of life. Bartha was born somewhere around Mount Masara, for example, but she didn’t seem especially surprised or like she was thinking about it too deeply as she listened.

So Kota Ruu and Aimu Fou will eventually need to face that challenge too? Actually, it’s possible they already did and are in the clear now, I thought.

The Sauti woman offered me another smile. “That is why the four of us were the ones to instruct the Mahyudra women this morning, without Mil Fei Sauti. As we are still rather lacking, we weren’t able to prepare the same sort of splendid feast as you... But even so, several of the Mahyudra women were moved to tears when they tried it.”

“Th-They cried?”

“Yes. They said they were incredibly grateful for how we were showing such kindness to people as lowly as them... I admit, I have some complicated feelings about that. We’re all human, so why must they think of themselves as lowly?”

I couldn’t understand it either. Even after having the harsh task of hunting giba thrust upon them, and then being shunned by the townsfolk they protected, the people of the forest’s edge never came to think of themselves as lowly. Even if the elites of Genos forced them to live like slaves, they were tough enough to never yield.

But the people of Mahyudra were actual legal slaves, and even if they came from a nation of tough people originally, that didn’t mean they would be able to

endure just as well. Only they knew how painful it was to be bound with chains and forced to live under such harsh conditions.

“At any rate, the northerners were overjoyed with how delicious the food we made for them was. The men who were gathered in the plaza for their meal got so worked up that it caused some real trouble for the guards,” the woman said with a stifled chuckle. “We would like to continue to instruct the Mahyudra women more thoroughly. Could you lend us your aid to make that happen?”

“Of course. That’s exactly why I’m here.”

With that, we once again set about making cream stew and fuwano manju. Rimee Ruu, meanwhile, watched us intently while we worked. She was a big fan of stew, so she was observing with great curiosity to find out what tricks were involved in making it so good. I couldn’t help but think to myself that when we restarted the study sessions at the Ruu settlement, I should teach everyone the recipe to make a proper cream stew.

“By the way, has the castle town been told that we people of the forest’s edge want to cover the cost of making up for the shortage of fuwano for the people working on this project?” I asked.

“Yes,” the Sauti woman replied with a nod. “Neither Donda Ruu nor Gulaf Zaza had any objections. Ah, has that matter been discussed with the Fa clan as well?”

“Yeah. The Fou and Beim also attend meetings with the three leading clan heads, and then they tell everyone else, so the Fa clan was informed of the decision this morning.”

We had also been told that Dari Sauti intended to head to the castle town personally before he had to go out on the hunt when the sun hit its peak. I had hoped we might see him while working in the post town, but apparently his path never crossed ours, so I had no clue how things had gone after that point.

“It was a sudden visit, but apparently he was able to get an audience with a noble by the name of Polarth. However, it seems this matter needs to be discussed with the other nobles, so we were told to wait a few days.”

“I see. I wonder how it will all play out,” I replied, figuring that the request

from the people of the forest's edge probably wouldn't be accepted right off the bat. Looking at the situation through the lens of the values of the people of the forest's edge, it felt like an incredibly natural request. Asuta of the Fa clan, one of their own, had caused poitan to sell out, and they wanted to take responsibility for that. They couldn't simply overlook their actions bringing misfortune to others.

But from the viewpoint of the castle town, the argument would probably be seen as being based on nothing but emotion. Besides, Polarth had been the one to actually make the effort to show people how good poitan could be in order to strike a blow against the house of Turan as Kamyua Yoshu had advised him. From what I could recall, Polarth and someone from the house of Saturas had worked together in secret to spread the knowledge of the cooking method throughout the post town.

Therefore, the nobles were the ones who truly held responsibility. On top of that, they were the ones who had decreed that it didn't matter how slaves were treated. And yet, the people of the forest's edge were directly opposing that decision.

Of course, the people of the forest's edge weren't asking for the nobles to take responsibility. They were simply saying they wished to follow their own code of ethics and do something about this with their own money. The question was, how would the nobles view such a selfless act?

The root of the matter was that the way they thought about the northerners differed. The people of the forest's edge saw them as human beings, while the nobles solely thought of them as tools to be used up. That difference of opinions was what had led us to the current state of affairs. What would Melfried, Polarth, and eventually Duke Marstein Genos think of this request? I was extremely anxious to find out.

"Hmm. I think the manju from yesterday might have been tastier," Rimee Ruu remarked while sampling a fuwano manju a few hours later, her eyebrows seriously drooping.

"That's true. The sourness of the arow and sheel really does clash with the other flavors."

There were no seasonings available to help bring them into harmony. New scraps were arriving daily, but sugar, tau oil, and liquor didn't really spoil, so they were virtually never disposed of. And herbs from Sym were dried to preserve them, so that was even more true for these. We had pepe and ro'hyoi, equivalent to garlic chives and arugula, which were treated as vegetables despite their strong aromas, and the salt used to preserve the meat, but I just couldn't bring the flavor together with that alone.

"Things would be totally different if only I had access to tau oil and sugar. If it were allowed, I'd love to pay for them personally."

But if we started supporting the northerners too much, that really would earn us the animosity of the nobles. This was a matter involving the very laws and customs of the kingdom, so we had to be very careful about how strongly we asserted our own feelings and opinions.

Wanting to take responsibility for poitan selling out, and wanting to feed them a delicious meal... Those two wishes are on completely different levels from one another.

At any rate, for now we simply had to wait for the reactions from the nobles. We would then be able to learn a bit more about how they regarded the northerners and how they intended to handle them.

Regardless, my lessons for the day concluded smoothly. The stew wasn't a particularly simple recipe, so I figured reviewing it would help the Sauti and Vela women be more confident about their ability to prepare it.

"It's gotten rather dark out, hasn't it? Please take care on your way back."

"Right. See you tomorrow. And please give Mil Fei Sauti my regards too."

With our work at the Sauti settlement wrapped up, we headed out into the rain in our wagon once more.

The rain really didn't let up much from morning till night. I couldn't help worrying about the Lanto or Tanto Rivers flooding, but since this was a yearly occurrence, I was sure that proper countermeasures must have been in place, both at the forest's edge and in Genos.

"Hey, Asuta, is Ai Fa doing okay?" Rimee Ruu asked on our way to the Ruu

settlement, leaning forward out of the canopied back next to the driver's seat.

"Yeah, she's doing just fine. She's been complaining about how the rain makes hunting giba harder for her, though."

"I see. I guess that makes sense. But the amount of meat and the number of meals we sell in the post town have gone down too, so doesn't it all work out?"

"That's true. It's only the second day of the rainy season proper, though, so it's hard to say how much the rate she hunts giba at is actually going to drop off in the long run."

At the same time, now that the house of Daleim's dance party was over, we were finally able to sell bacon and sausages. We were still sort of feeling things out, but a number of nobles and restaurants had already put in requests to purchase them. Polarth was in charge of those dealings on the nobles' side, while the Ruu clan was handling them for us, so as to not burden the Fa clan further.

It had also been decided that the clans located near the Fa would provide the new products initially. Among them, the Deen and Liddo fell under the Zaza and weren't allowed to participate, leaving the Fou, Ran, and Sudra in charge of that important task. Since they were meant to be sold, a certain level of quality needed to be maintained, and it was determined that those clans would be best able to do so because Mikel and I had taught them directly.

The Ruu also wanted to take lessons from Mikel on how to better make dried meats in the near future, according to Mia Lea Ruu, since they figured that eventually the small clans alone might not be enough to handle the demand. Mikel was probably feeling pretty bored at this point, so their request would do him good too.

Myme's also been down since her sales at the stall have fallen to half of what they were. Ours have been reduced to less than half, though, so she's still doing just fine, I'd say, I thought as we approached the Ruu settlement.

Then I spied a slender figure ahead of us, causing me to tilt my head and ask, "Huh? What are they doing out in this rain? From their stature, it looks like a Ruu woman."

“Hmm? That’s Lala’s cloak!” Rimee Ruu declared, and sure enough, she was right. Lala Ruu was standing all alone at the entrance to the settlement, clad in a colorful hooded cloak.

“You’re finally back! Jeez, you guys are really late!” Lala Ruu shouted out as I stopped the wagon next to her.

“Hey, there. What’s up? Do you have some sort of urgent business with Rimee Ruu?”

“No, with you, Asuta! Just hurry up and come this way already!”

I had no clue what was going on, but I went ahead and moved the wagon as Lala Ruu directed. She eventually led us to Shin Ruu’s house rather than the main one.

“Seriously, what’s going on? What’s the big rush for?”

“Never mind, just come inside! Granny Jiba’s waiting for you!”

“Granny Jiba...? Er, Jiba Ruu?”

I felt even more confused. Why was Granny Jiba waiting for me, and at Shin Ruu’s house instead of the main one to boot? But it didn’t seem like I was going to get any explanation from Lala Ruu, so I simply went with the flow. With a “Good work today,” Bartha left to head over to the house where Myme and Mikel were waiting, leaving me with only Rimee Ruu.

After removing my rain gear and washing my feet at the entrance, I stepped into Shin Ruu’s house, to find Granny Jiba and Ryada Ruu waiting for me there. Shin Ruu was out in the forest, and Sheera and Tari Ruu must have been in the kitchen. Lala Ruu entered the room ahead of me and sat down beside Granny Jiba.

“It’s been some time, Asuta... Have you been doing well?”

“Yes, thanks for asking. I’m glad to see you looking well yourself, Jiba Ruu.”

“If anything, I’m doing *too* well, and I keep on causing trouble for my family because of it.”

“You’re no trouble at all! But you should at least hold off on the walks for the duration of the rainy season,” Lala Ruu said in a bit of a jab, but her eyes were

narrowed in a happy way, and I could feel warmth welling up in my chest. Apparently, Granny Jiba had resumed her habit of taking walks once her legs had regained a bit of strength. Of course, she needed to have somebody to assist her, but I didn't think anyone would be upset about having to do so.

"I'm sure Ai Fa will be thrilled to hear that. Still, please take care not to trip in the mud."

"Yes. I was thinking about just walking around inside the house for the time being... But it felt sort of good to have rain falling down on me for the first time in years yesterday and today." There was a clear light shining in Granny Jiba's eyes beneath her drooping eyelids. "Now then, there's something I'd like to give you, Asuta... Could you pass this to him, Lala?"

"Right," Lala Ruu said, accepting a small cloth bundle with the top securely tied together with a vine, and then passing it over to me.

"Those are dabira herbs... It's a special sort of medicine, which can't be gathered in the forest and has to be bought in town instead."

"Dabira herbs? I've never heard of them before."

"Of course... The Fa clan has had no need for them until now, after all." Granny Jiba stared straight at me, with Lala Ruu supporting her. "They are used as medicine for children afflicted with Amusehorn's breath... Do you know of that illness?"

"Yes. It apparently only impacts children under the age of five, right? Ai Fa just told me about it this morning, and I've heard that the child of the Sauti clan head has caught it."

"I see... Our Kota has actually caught it as well."

"Huh?! Is Kota Ruu all right?!"

"That is something for the gods of the continent to determine, not us... For this, we must pray to them rather than the forest... One cannot live here on this continent if one does not overcome this hardship," Granny Jiba replied, her shoulders trembling slightly. "It is no coincidence that Ai Fa discussed the matter with you this morning... Here in Genos and at the forest's edge, many children tend to suffer from Amusehorn's breath during the rainy season... I do

not know the reason for that, but perhaps it has something to do with the rainwater or the cold.”

“I see. We had an illness that tended to spread when it was cold back in my home country as well. But apparently you were more at risk of catching it when the weather was dry.”

“Ah, I see... This illness is also unique in that once one child catches it, the ones in neighboring houses will too, one after another... Of course, after it afflicts you once, it will not do so again... But regardless, the children at the Ruu settlement who have not yet been judged in that trial are sure to face it soon.”

“Judged...? The Sauti clan used the word ‘trial’ too, now that I think of it.”

“Yes... Amusehorn’s breath is also known as the flames of judgment... You break out in a fever so intense it’s like a blazing inferno, and those children who do not pass the trial have their souls returned to the gods. As such, it is apparently a form of judgment from the gods, to determine who is fit to live on.”

All I could say was “I see.” When I thought about the meaning of the cloth bag I had been handed, my heart started pounding faster. “So if you’re giving me medicine to treat it, does that mean...”

“Yes, that’s right... I worry that you may be afflicted as well, Asuta.”

I gulped.

Granny Jiba’s clear gaze remained fixed on me. “I heard a rumor in town long, long ago... It was said that those who come from overseas have difficulty living on Amusehorn, as they have not faced this judgment... It is a terrifying and painful ordeal to be afflicted by Amusehorn’s breath as an adult... They should be much stronger than children, yet they have great difficulty overcoming it.”

“Right.”

“It was only a rumor, though, so I do not know the truth of the matter... Of course, in these parts, we never hear anything about the sea or what lies beyond it except in rumors and tales, and it is not as if visitors from overseas are commonplace... It could simply be a baseless story someone invented to amuse themselves... But you came from overseas, didn’t you, Asuta...? At the

very least, you were not born here in this land.”

“That’s true. I was definitely born outside of this continent.”

“Hmm... Still, even if that rumor is true, you are a strong person... I believe that you can overcome this trial.”

As I tightly gripped the bag she’d handed me, I once again nodded and replied, “Okay.”

“Well then, my apologies for taking your time... I’m the only one left at this point who has heard that old rumor, so I wanted to tell you.”

“Thank you. I really am grateful, Jiba Ruu. We don’t have anything to combat this illness at the Fa house.”

“Of course... Without any young children, this wouldn’t normally be a concern for you. Well then, Ryada Ruu, can I leave the rest to you?”

“Indeed,” Ryada Ruu said while rising to his feet and grabbing his hunter’s cloak from the wall. “Rimee Ruu, you are skilled at handling a wagon, are you not?”

“Yeah! I think I’m ever better at it than Reina!”

“Then I’ll follow in Ruuruu’s wagon, so could you handle Asuta’s? If Amusehorn’s breath afflicts you while you’re holding the reins, it could prove deadly. Then once we get you back to the Fa house, Asuta, we’ll await Ai Fa’s return.”

“H-Hold on. Does Amusehorn’s breath really hit you that suddenly? I feel totally fine right now.”

“Children can be perfectly fine, playing around one moment, and then suddenly collapse in pain with a fever. That’s the sort of illness Amusehorn’s breath is.”

So then, I had been driving everyone around in a wagon without a care in the world, despite being at risk of catching it. That really caused a chill to run up my spine.

“I myself had completely forgotten that rumor about Amusehorn’s breath until Kota broke out in a fever,” Jiba Ruu said.

“Children of the Ruu and Sauti have caught the illness, so you are most likely to break out in a fever today or tomorrow, since you have been visiting those locations. But if you do not break out in a fever before the end of tomorrow, there should be no fear of Amusehorn’s breath afflicting you,” Ryada Ruu explained, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Hopefully, it will turn out that we’re all worrying for nothing. It may be frustrating, but you should take tomorrow off from work in the post town and spend the day with Ai Fa. If you don’t have the hands to spare, the Ruu clan will lend them to you.”

“Thank you. I really, truly appreciate all of the help.”

I bowed to Granny Jiba once more, then exited Shin Ruu’s house. Rimee Ruu and I then got in our wagon, and we waited for Ryada Ruu to come around with Ruuruu.

“It sure is a surprise that you might catch Amusehorn’s breath, Asuta! Everyone says adults never get it!”

“It may be less that adults can’t catch it, and more that you can’t catch it a second time. If everyone born on the continent catches it as a kid, there’s no chance of suffering from it again after that.”

There were plenty of contagious diseases like that back in my old world too. That was why vaccines existed. And if you caught something like the mumps as an adult, the symptoms were supposed to be pretty serious compared to if you had caught it as a child. *So even though they don’t have common colds, they still have a potentially deadly illness like this, huh? It’s pretty unusual to have something with an infection rate of a hundred percent like that.* But maybe that was simply because of the vaccines we had back home, which ensured that I never had to worry about that kind of danger. Considering they only had boiled herbs for medicine in this world, it made sense that such an illness would be so dangerous.

“Hey Asuta, do you know the legend of Amusehorn?”

“Hmm? Amusehorn is the name of this continent, isn’t it?”

“Yeah! But it was a god’s name to start with. The god who created this world was named Amusehorn, but he went to sleep, so his children, the four great gods, are the one who watch over us.” Rimee Ruu turned around to smile at me

from where she was sitting in the driver's seat. "And Amusehorn's breath is supposed to be that god breathing in his sleep! His snores are what determines who lives and who dies. It's kind of a funny story, isn't it?!" Then Rimee Ruu's little hand reached out and gently wrapped around my fingers. "I'm sure you won't lose to those snores, Asuta! So even if you do get a fever, just try your hardest, okay?"

She was shooting me a big smile, but I saw a bit of concern flickering in Rimee Ruu's pale blue eyes. As I gripped her small hand back, I nodded and said, "Right. By the way, how old were you when you caught it, Rimee Ruu?"

"Apparently, it was at the end of my first year. I was still all energetic even with the fever, so nobody noticed at first."

"I see. You and Ai Fa and everyone else already overcame this trial, so I guess I'll have to do it too. I'm sure Kota Ruu and Mil Fei Sauti's child will be fine."

"Yeah!" Rimee Ruu replied with an energetic nod, just in time for Ryada Ruu to approach in Ruuruu's wagon.

"Sorry for the wait. Shall we head out?"

With that, we headed back to the Fa house with Rimee Ruu driving the wagon.

I couldn't detect any changes in my health at this point. I had been feeling chilly regardless of any fever, and even when I placed my hand against my forehead, nothing seemed out of sorts.

So if I'm going to show symptoms, it'll happen either today or tomorrow, huh? To be on the safe side, I guess I should take time off until the day after tomorrow. If the symptoms hit me while I'm working, it would cause a whole lot of trouble for everyone.

Since they said it caused a fever severe enough to make you collapse, it had to be a pretty serious illness. I had caught influenza in elementary school and run a fever of thirty-eight degrees Celsius, and I couldn't imagine having a fever higher than that.

Those grandiose words like "trial" and "judgment" were making me even more worried about my situation. To someone born in another world like me,

that tale about needing to be judged by the gods and pass a trial in order to live felt incredibly ominous.

Do I have what it takes to live here in this world? I thought with a tremble.

Still, I did have a bit of hope to cling to: the legend of Misha the White Sage, which I had heard the minstrel Neeya perform during the revival festival. Hearing that myth about the gods from Rimee Ruu had prompted me to remember it.

Misha could very well have been someone who had found himself in the same circumstances as me. I had heard from both Arishuna and the traveling star reader Railanos that I was a starless one just like him, and on top of that, Misha's true name was Mikhail Volkonsky, which sounded very Russian.

As the White Sage, the starless Misha had helped a tribe called the Rao conquer all of Sym. After that, he had been assigned the post of chancellor, and had essentially laid the foundation for the entire country.

Of course, that was all nothing more than a legend. It was a tale from hundreds of years in the past, so it would be foolish to assume that it was completely, unquestionably true. But if it *was* true...then Misha had lived for many years in Sym. And if nobody who lived on this continent could avoid the threat of Amusehorn's breath, he must have overcome it and still had a long life afterward.

If Misha could do it, then there was hope for me too. At the very least, it was certain that it wouldn't take the lives of absolutely every starless one. That was how I decided to look at it, trying to think positively.

"So if I *do* catch Amusehorn's breath, I should drink this dabira herb stuff and take it easy?"

"Yeah! Your fever should settle down in about three days! You might not be able to eat any food in the meantime, but you need to drink water and medicine every day, okay?"

"If I don't eat for three days, I'm sure to lose some weight," I said, trying to sound as cheerful as I could.

"Ah ha ha," Rimee Ruu laughed in response.

The people of this world were prepared to face this illness from the moment of their birth. That was why Rimee Ruu's expression hadn't even shifted when she'd heard that Kota Ruu had caught it. The Sauti clan members didn't seem especially worried for Mil Fei Sauti either.

It's all down to the guidance of the mother forest and the gods, huh? Then I guess I should look at it the same way everyone else does.

I was more curious about how Ai Fa would react when she heard about this. If our positions were reversed, I would surely be an absolute mess worrying about her.

It's not normal to catch this illness here at the forest's edge outside of childhood, plus the symptoms could be more severe, so I could see her worrying too.

As I breathed a light sigh, the wagon slowed down and entered a side path. We had arrived at the Fa house. I peeked out next to Rimee Ruu and saw that the house hadn't been lit up yet.

"It looks like Ai Fa isn't back yet, even with how dark it already is outside," Rimee Ruu said while parking the wagon next to the house. I did spy a light coming from the kitchen, though. The others should have left to go home and make dinner by now, but it looked like someone was still here.

"Before we head into the house, let's take a look in the kitchen. We need to make sure everything is ready for tomorrow."

"Yeah, got it. But are you feeling okay, Asuta?"

"Nothing seems out of sorts, at least for now."

I put my rain gear back on and stepped down onto the soaked ground. Then I walked over to the kitchen door and opened it to find Toor Deen and Yun Sudra inside by themselves.

"Hey there. What are you two doing here so late?"

"Welcome back, Asuta. We didn't have any work to do at home today, so we decided to stay a bit longer."

Apparently, the two of them were practicing making sweets. When Rimee

Ruu came in next to me and saw what they were doing, she immediately said, “Ooh, that smells delicious! Are you making roll cakes?”

“That’s right. Yun Sudra said she wanted to learn how to make them. Ah, but of course, we brought all the ingredients and firewood we needed from home, though!”

“I would never suspect you two of doing anything wrong. I’m just sorry for relying on you for prep work two days in a row.”

And at this rate, I’d have to leave not just the prep work but the business at the stalls tomorrow up to them. And I’d have to ask them to tell the Sauti and Ririn that I wouldn’t be showing up there for a bit.

“Actually, there’s something I need to discuss with you...” I started to say, only for Rimee Ruu to make a surprised sound and tug on my cloak. When I turned to look, I found Ai Fa standing there alongside Ryada Ruu, totally soaked.

Apparently, it was best to have one’s face uncovered when hunting, so hunting cloaks lacked hoods. But one still needed to have something to ward off the rain for the rest of the day, so Ai Fa and Ryada Ruu both had some additional headgear. Also, my clan head was carrying a small young giba. Despite the rain, she had managed to make a catch today.

“What is it, Asuta? It seems you have something urgent to tell me.”

“Yeah, you see, I actually heard something kind of crazy, so...” I started to say as I stepped toward Ai Fa.

But then, I felt a strange impact on my right shoulder and arm, as if someone had suddenly shoved me. I let out a confused “Huh?” Ai Fa and the others were now sideways. No, wait. *I* was sideways now. My right side had slammed into the wet floor.

“Asuta!” Ai Fa shouted.

She seemed to be turning bright red in my vision as my consciousness faded away. Just as Granny Jiba had predicted, I had caught Amusehorn’s breath.

In the three days after catching Amusehorn's breath, I didn't wake up even once.

According to what I was told later, I occasionally responded when people called out to me, and I was able to drink water and medicine on my own, but I did all of that unconsciously. For the entire time between when I collapsed out in the kitchen and when I awoke, I was completely unaware of the real world.

And all the while, I moaned from the nightmares I was having.

Well, perhaps it wouldn't quite be accurate to call them nightmares per se, but regardless, it felt like I was going back and forth between a pitch-black void and a scorching crimson hell. When I sank into the darkness, I was chilled down to my bones, and when the blazing red heat took me, it felt like it would burn me to ash.

I spent three whole days in that world of agony. However, my consciousness and my very soul were saved from being torn apart by brief moments of relief I felt every so often. Sometimes they would come in the form of a soft white light, and other times it would be a sweet scent, or occasionally the gentle touch of a fingertip. My five senses weren't functioning properly, but I was still able to vaguely pick up on that hand of salvation reaching out to me again and again.

If not for that relief, however faint it was, the experience could very well have destroyed me. The suffering and despair I faced really were *that* intense.

And as if that wasn't enough, those blazing flames inevitably reminded me of my death. I had been burned by fire, wrapped in black smoke, and then finally crushed under rubble. It was a truly horrifying way to die. I had relived it in a nightmare once before and had felt the full force of my despair washing over me. I couldn't imagine anything being harder to endure than that.

Only people who had actually experienced death could understand. I had been burned alive while struggling to breathe, and then finally my whole body had been crushed. It was the kind of pain and despair a living person could only experience once, but in this nightmare I had been pulled into, it came back to me again and again. And each time I felt my death repeating itself, I was sure my mind would be shattered.

That white light was all that saved me. Months ago, when I'd had that nightmare about my death, that light had enveloped me then as well and allowed me to return to Ai Fa. But this time around, there was no escape for me. Now, even when I clung to that white light, tendrils of black and crimson wrapped around my legs and dragged me back down into the depths of hell.

And in the midst of that cycle of despair, I would occasionally see visions of my old home. I saw my old man lying in his sickbed, my childhood friend Reina sobbing and clinging to my chest, the Tsurumi Restaurant cruelly burned to ash... All things that threatened to break my soul. Each time they happened, I would scream out in the nightmare. But no matter how much I tried, my hands would never be able to reach out to them. Of course they couldn't. They'd been burned by those red-hot flames and frozen by that dark void. At this point, they were no longer recognizable as belonging to a human.

If this is what I have to endure...! I thought again and again and again. But I somehow managed to hold myself back from ever finishing the thought with *"then just kill me!"* In all likelihood, it would all be over once I did. If I gave up, my fate would come to an abrupt end. That death I had experienced would once again become a reality.

I wanted to live. Even if I could no longer return to my old home... No, all the more because I couldn't, I never wanted to let go of this second chance at happiness and hope that I had been given. I clung to that thought alone, somehow managing to endure that hell of black and crimson.

And then, we came to the morning of the third day.

I finally managed to open my eyes.

I first noticed a sweet scent was coming from all around me. Then, I felt a light touch and a gentle warmth surrounding my body. I felt as if I had finally managed to leap into that white light and hold on to it like I never wanted to let go.

Hope and joy welled up from deep inside me. My head felt hollow, and I couldn't put any strength into my arms or legs, but I knew I had finally escaped from that hell. I was so happy I could almost cry.

“Are you awake, Asuta?” a kind voice whispered into my ear, making me feel even happier, and I clung to it all the more obsessively.

Bit by bit, my senses were returning to me. I seemed to be lying on my side, wrapped in a gentle warmth. My arms were wrapped around someone else’s body, and that certain someone was gently hugging me back as well. Naturally, I didn’t even have to think about who it was. It felt as if my eyes had been glued shut, but I tried my hardest and somehow opened them, and I found exactly who I expected affectionately smiling at me.



“Are you in pain? If you want water, I can fetch it for you.”

I was still half asleep, so I was neither able to properly reply nor feel embarrassed, so I just clung to Ai Fa’s body. As she cradled my head and smiled at me, she said, “You’re almost like a child.”

I wanted to indulge in the warmth of Ai Fa’s body and her sweet, gentle smell forever. But after a bit, she once again whispered into my ear in a pleasant voice. “Three days have passed as of this morning, and it seems the fever that tormented you has finally settled. But the neighboring women said you should still take dabira herbs this morning. I need to prepare your medicine, so I will have to step away for a bit, Asuta.”

Without thinking, I mumbled, “Don’t go.”

Ai Fa let out a troubled laugh, and then hugged my head tightly. “It really is like you’ve reverted to being a child. You certainly are a handful.”

Had Ai Fa always been this motherly? Or was my heart still weak from that nightmare? I felt like I would lose everything again if I let go of her hand, so I didn’t think I had it in me to allow her to leave.

Her fingers still buried in my hair, Ai Fa rubbed her cheek up against mine, but I couldn’t sense any of her usual childish and catlike nature in that action. Instead, she felt like a mother consoling her unruly child.

“There’s nothing to worry about. I have to do this for you to get better, Asuta.”

After one last tight hug, Ai Fa swiftly rose to her feet. My arm seemed to have no strength in it at all, as it immediately fell down onto the sheet. We had been lying next to one another in our bedding, and as Ai Fa got out of it, she swiftly tucked the sheet back in and pulled it up to my chest.

“Hold on for just a moment.”

Ai Fa disappeared from my vision. Even shifting my position to follow her with my eyes was too much for me. I was lying on my left side, and I could see the familiar and terribly nostalgic sight of the Fa house’s main hall. It seemed like it was raining outside again today, as I could see gray through the half-open

curtains on the window.

The room was dimly lit, but I could hear the crackling of a fire from behind me, filling the space with a faint orange light. The stove had been lit. I noticed that even though Ai Fa had said it was morning, I didn't feel cold in the least, and Ai Fa was only wearing her standard outfit. I hadn't even noticed that until now, with how I was still barely conscious. It was like there was a gauzy film covering my head, and my five senses were all muddled and unreliable.

She said three days had passed, right...? Then it's still the brown month, and today's the... I tried to think, but my mind kept wandering off. I couldn't even remember what day in the brown month it had been when I had lost consciousness.

"Sorry for the wait." Ai Fa had finally returned. Quicker than my eyes could catch sight of her, Ai Fa's hand snaked around under my head. "I'm going to sit you up for a moment. If anything hurts, tell me right away."

She helped me up, supporting my head and shoulders. The world around me suddenly started flickering, and I closed my tired eyes.

"Is it too much? That's no surprise. You've been lying down for three days now."

"No... Just let me stay like this for a bit." I was taken aback when I heard my voice. It sounded scratchy like an old man's, completely different from how it normally was.

My throat was tight and sore. I hadn't noticed earlier, but my whole body felt dried out, with my mouth being completely parched.

"I gave as much water as you could drink, but if I had tried to force you to take too much, it could have gotten stuck in your throat, so I was only able to give you a little at a time," Ai Fa said in a gentle voice while softly cradling my head. "You should keep your eyes closed until your blood starts circulating properly again. The dizziness should subside soon."

As she had said, I had been stricken with some kind of vertigo. I wasn't getting enough blood flowing up to my head, and I felt like my eyes were spinning even though they were closed.

Ai Fa kept supporting me from behind as I slumped down, trying to swallow as much saliva as I could to help my painfully parched throat.

“Is it a bit better now? If so, you can open your eyes and drink some water.”

I waited a few seconds after Ai Fa whispered that, then slowly cracked my eyes open. It seemed I had broken free of that anemic state.

The dimly lit room looked the same as it had a moment ago, and I could feel my clan head’s warmth against my back and head. Even if I couldn’t see her, I was certain that she was who it was coming from.

“Here’s your water,” Ai Fa said, as the tip of a spoon full of cool, clear water appeared in the corner of my vision. She gradually poured it into my mouth, and it slowly trickled deep into my throat. My body had a desperate craving for liquid, but if I didn’t hold back, I was sure I was going to start violently coughing. And so, Ai Fa patiently gave me one sip of water at a time. Bit by bit, I could feel my thirst starting to be quenched.

It was then that I finally noticed I was half naked. The sheet was now down near my stomach, leaving my visible ribs and chest fully exposed. I could also see the outlines of all the muscles and tendons in my arms and the backs of my hands, which were so thin it was as if they belonged to someone else entirely.

With a sudden sense of unease coming over me, I brought my hand up to my face. My skin was rough and dry. There seemed to be a pot filled with water on the stove, filling the air with vapor and heat, but my body was much too dehydrated for that to satisfy it. I was shocked to find out how bony my cheeks had become. I had lost all the fat from my cheeks and chin, to the point that I could easily feel the shape of my skull. The area around my eyes was hollow in a way it hadn’t been before too.

“Don’t worry. Once you’re able to eat again, you’ll be back to normal soon enough,” Ai Fa said with another gentle hug, as if she had picked up on my worries. I didn’t have anything covering my chest, and Ai Fa was wearing her normal top, so I was feeling the warmth of her body directly. That was undoubtedly the warmth that had brought me relief when I had been trapped in that nightmare.

Was she warming me with her own body heat that whole time?

I reached out with my trembling fingers to touch Ai Fa's arm, which was wrapped around my neck, and my clan head gently rubbed her cheek up against my temple.

"I saw a young Ran child contract this illness once. After three days of anguish, the child was a pitiful sight, just skin and bones, but was back to running around like normal a few days later... I'm certain you'll be fine as well, Asuta."

"Yeah..."

"Well then, why don't we give the medicine a try?"

After Ai Fa said that, she used the spoon to bring some liquid with a bizarre smell up to my mouth. It was pitch-black, reminding me of ink, and must have been boiled herbs dissolved in water. It had a sour, lavender-like smell, plus a burnt scent too, making for a truly strange aroma.

"I ground it down carefully, so it shouldn't get caught in your throat, but still, we need to make sure you don't throw it up."

"Right..."

I opened my mouth after working up my resolve, and Ai Fa slowly brought the spoon in. Instantly, an overwhelming bitterness and sourness started running rampant in my mouth. There was a stinging sensation everywhere the liquid touched, and my taste buds felt like they were shriveling up. I had to be even more careful when downing it than I had been with the water, or my throat would reach its limit in no time.

Ai Fa continued to take things slowly and carefully, without rushing. In the end, I only downed half of a small container of the stuff, and it still took me several minutes to do that much. After that, I drank several mouthfuls of ordinary water, before Ai Fa finally declared, "All right, that should be good. Before I lay you down again, would you like to clean your body a little? There's no need to force yourself if that sounds too difficult, but your sweat carries the sickness's poison in it, so it should be wiped away as soon as possible."

"Yeah, I think that would be fine... But first, could I see your face one more time?"

After a bit of silence, Ai Fa appeared at my side. Her hair was carefully done up, and her face looked exactly the same as always. Even though I had just seen it, I felt so moved I could hardly put it into words.

“Ai Fa... It feels as if I haven’t seen you in years...”

“I feel the same way...” Ai Fa replied with a smile, and a few moments later, tears started flowing down her cheeks. “My apologies. I shouldn’t be letting my composure slip yet... Still, I don’t think there’s any way I could keep my feelings under control after hearing you call my name like that.”

“Then don’t.” My thoughts were still moving rather slowly, so I just said whatever came to mind.

Ai Fa hugged me tightly, still supporting me from the side. It hurt a little, but the happiness that filled me up all the way to my core was so much stronger.

“I had faith that you would pass this trial...but that was the most painful thing I’ve experienced since I lost my father.”

“Yeah...”

“Asuta, I...” Ai Fa said, but instead of finishing her sentence her body started trembling slightly.

Before I realized it, I had started crying too. I somehow forced my powerless arms to rise, wrapping them around Ai Fa’s back. We sat there for a while without saying a word, just feeling one another’s warmth with our whole bodies as tears poured down our cheeks.

4

“Ever since you collapsed behind the house, the neighboring women have been taking turns caring for you,” Ai Fa said after finally regaining her composure, squeezing the liquid out of a towel into a bucket as she did. I was leaning up against a wall as I listened to her. There was a blanket behind my back and a sheet over my legs, so I wouldn’t collapse at the drop of a hat. However, I did wish Ai Fa was still holding me.

“I couldn’t leave your side, so they took up the tasks of making dinner, doing

the laundry, and so on. Someone was always stopping by the Fa house, one after another, from morning till night. I'm sure someone will be here shortly today as well."

"I see... Sounds like I caused a lot of people trouble, not just you."

"‘Trouble’ isn’t the right word. But you should be deeply grateful to the women who lent us their aid even though they are not members of our clan," Ai Fa calmly stated as she began wiping down my right arm with the towel. The feeling of her touch through the cloth was enough on its own to let me feel her presence all around me. It seemed my heart was as exhausted as my withered body, if not more so.

"Toor Deen and the others have also done a splendid job of managing the stalls. And Rimee Ruu has taken over your role with the Sauti clan."

"Rimee Ruu has been handling the Sauti?"

"Indeed. She was there to observe your skillful demonstration, was she not? Apparently, that was enough for her to take care of it for you without any issues."

"I see," I said with a smile. I *did* remember Rimee Ruu passionately watching us as we worked.

In the meantime, Ai Fa moved over to my other arm. "And it hasn't just been the neighboring clans either. The Ruu and their subordinates stopped by here and there too. Reina Ruu and Gazraan Rutim visited every single day."

"Huh... Once I'm feeling better, I'll have to thank everyone."

When I said that, Ai Fa suddenly stopped cleaning my left arm. Wondering why that was, I turned to look at her and found her doing a strange sort of mumbling motion with her mouth. It looked like she was desperately trying to keep herself from frowning.

"Asuta, I was going to save this question for when you were feeling better, but..."

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Is Reina Ruu someone special to you?"

I was taken aback.

“While the fever had you in its grasp, you would frequently moan and speak incoherently. I heard you mention my name, your father...and often Reina Ruu’s name as well.”

“I said Reina Ruu’s name?”

“Indeed... And you didn’t add her clan name, simply calling her Reina.”

At that point, Ai Fa seemingly couldn’t hold back anymore, and a deep frown appeared on her face. However, all it did was make me feel all warm and fuzzy because of how adorable she looked like that, as I turned her question over in my head.

“Ah... That’s probably a different person entirely.”

“A different person? Someone who has the same name as Reina Ruu?”

“Yeah. My childhood friend from back home was named Reina. Haven’t I mentioned her before?”

Ai Fa stopped cleaning my body, looking like she was giving some serious thought to what I had said. And then, it seemed to suddenly hit her. “I remember. You did indeed mention that name before. You said you knew someone with the same name, back when you first met Reina Ruu.”

“Ah ha ha, you have an amazing memory, Ai Fa. That was the first day I visited the Ruu clan...so it was around ten months ago now, right?”

“You rarely ever talk of your old home, so it left a strong impression.” The frown swiftly vanished from my clan head’s lips, and she shot me a look that said she was thinking deeply. “Then, that Reina who is not Reina Ruu was someone you were quite close to?”

“Yeah. Reina was like family to me. We were pretty much raised together, after all... My family wasn’t very close with any of our relatives, so we ended up forming a really strong bond with Reina’s family instead.”

Reina was also the last person I had spoken to in my old world.

How were Reina and my old man doing back in that world I had left behind? That thought was the one that pained me most of all.

“So that’s how it is. I’m embarrassed with how I jumped to conclusions.”

“Don’t worry about it. If I actually had called out for Reina Ruu without her clan name, no matter how much you raked me over the coals for it, I would have had a hard time trying to find a counterargument.”

“Hmm... Even so, if you...” Ai Fa started to say, only to hold her tongue, and then she suddenly pressed her head up against my left temple. She had probably just stopped herself from saying that if I took Reina Ruu as a bride, she wouldn’t have any grounds to object. Still, I found her to be incredibly adorable when she was sulking, shy, and frazzled like this. “At any rate, regaining your strength comes first. That is what everyone who has been so worried about you wants to see.”

After forcefully shifting the topic back, Ai Fa began wiping down my chest and stomach. It tickled quite a bit, but I overcame that with the happiness all this physical contact with her was making me feel.

“I really want to thank everyone as soon as possible. Has anything else worth mentioning happened?”

“Shumiral has apparently recovered enough that he no longer needs to spend all day sleeping. And his comrades from town visited the Ririn and Fa houses.”

“Huh? Radajid and the rest of the group came to visit me too?”

“Indeed. I believe it was in the early afternoon yesterday. However...you were in such a bad state at the time that I only heard about it later from the other women.” Ai Fa had been by my side constantly, nursing me from morning until night. Even though her work as a hunter was incredibly important to her, she had taken three whole days off. I couldn’t help but feel both deeply sorry and grateful at the same time. “I’ll wash your back too... Are you capable of moving away from the wall?”

“Yeah, I am.”

I leaned my body forward with Ai Fa gently supporting me with one arm, then she began wiping down my back with the cloth. The stove was still lit, so the hand towel soaked with cold water actually felt quite pleasant. And the closer I got to Ai Fa, the more at ease I felt.

“Ah, the Ruu and Sauti children also overcame the trial of this illness.”

“Oh, they did? That’s really good to hear.”

“Indeed. Apparently, their fevers went down in just two days. As you are not a young child, it seems you were given the greatest hardship.” Ai Fa leaned my body up against the wall when she was done and showed me her gentlest smile, which I hadn’t seen in a bit. “I know very well how much suffering you’ve endured these last few days. I feel truly proud that you did such a splendid job in conquering this trial, Asuta.”

“I was able to try my hardest because you were there. That’s the plain and honest truth.”

Ai Fa nodded back and said, “Of course,” while rinsing out the hand towel in a bucket of water.

After that came my neck and head. First she washed my neck and face, then gently, carefully did the same for my hair, tuft by tuft. I felt so helpless that it really was like I was a little kid, and having to leave everything to Ai Fa was making me feel weirdly emotional.

“That just leaves your legs. If it’s too cold, I’ll add more firewood.”

“I’m fine. It feels even warmer than it did before the rainy season.”

I went ahead and removed the blanket on my own, exposing my lower half, which was clad only in the loincloth style of underwear they used in this world. My thighs and legs had gotten a whole lot skinnier all around, and it looked like I had lost about sixty percent of the volume of my belly. Apparently, losing all your subcutaneous fat really made your abs stand out.

This was the first time I had ever shown so much skin to Ai Fa, which made me feel a wave of embarrassment. Still, sometimes you have to let go of your modesty when you’re really sick. Besides, I was only about as exposed as a beachgoer might be, and it would have been too difficult to wash my legs myself anyway.

“Oh, and apparently, Aimu Fou overcame this illness before the rainy season.”

“Huh. He got it before the rainy season even started?”

“Indeed. The end of the gold month was intensely chilly. Aimu Fou is sure to become an outstanding hunter someday.”

“Yup. He takes his name from you, so... Ah, sorry! Please stop! That tickles!”

“Tickles?” Ai Fa questioned as she looked up at me. She was pressing the towel against the soles of my feet. I could handle her wiping down my torso, but that one spot in particular was a bit too sensitive. “You said something similar in the past, though it was about your stomach rather than your feet.”

“Isn’t everyone ticklish on the soles of their feet? I’ll clean that myself later.”

“I see,” Ai Fa said, moving over beside me once more. Then, after closing her eyes, she suddenly reached toward my underwear.

“Clan head?! What are you doing?!”

“Washing you beneath your underwear, of course. Don’t worry, I’ll close my eyes.”

“I-I don’t think that’s suddenly okay just because you’re not looking!”

“But the poisonous sweat needs to be wiped away.”

“I’ll do it myself! Please, you can leave that part to me!”

Despite what I was saying, simply talking to her like this was exhausting me. After letting go of my underwear, Ai Fa opened her eyes and brought her face close to mine with a worried look.

“You shouldn’t raise your voice so much after you’ve lost so much strength. Besides, why are you even making such a fuss over this?”

“I-If you were in my position, would you have just silently accepted it?”

Ai Fa brought a hand to her shapely chin and started thinking. Then, with her face going beet red, she leaned in so close our noses almost collided. “Why do you have to put such images in my head?!”

“Well, at least you understand why I’m so embarrassed now.” At any rate, I had my clan head turn around and cleaned what I needed to before finally changing out my underwear. That ate up a whole lot of my stamina, but you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. “Since I was asleep for three

days, did you wipe off my sweat and change my clothes during that time?”

“Indeed.”

“I see... Uh, thanks.”

“It feels unnecessary to say this out loud, but I did not lay eyes on your naked figure. After the differences between men and women become clear around the age of ten, such actions are not permitted at the forest’s edge, even among clan members.” As she roughly washed me down with the hand towel I handed back to her, Ai Fa glared at me, her face still red. “So you can stop going on and on about it now. You’re going to make me start feeling strange about it too.”

“Ah, sorry. You’re the one who had to put up with all that hassle. Just thinking about being in your position...”

“Don’t picture it! And don’t make me do so either!”

I had driven Ai Fa really out of sorts because I wasn’t thinking as clearly as usual, so I made sure to let her know how sorry I was.

“At any rate, this should clear away all the poison of the illness from you. It should be fine for you to put some clothes on now.”

It was a relief to be able to get dressed for the first time in three days. I put on my long-sleeved undershirt and vest first. Then, sitting against the wall once again, I pulled the blanket up to my stomach. With that, I was finally able to feel at ease.

After that, Ai Fa quickly washed herself off, and then she had to change her clothes as well, since she had been in close physical contact with me all night. But while she was off in another room for a few minutes doing that, I found myself feeling really lonely. I must have looked awfully happy when she returned, as she had a rather complicated expression on her face as she rustled my hair.

“By the way, what day in the brown month is it? You said I was out for three days, but does that include the one when I collapsed?” I asked to hide my embarrassment.

As my clan head sat down beside me, she shook her head and replied, “No. It

was three whole days, that one excluded. Today is the ninth of the brown month.”

“I see. So today’s a break day for the stalls, huh? If things had gone as normal, I would have liked to observe the worksite where they’re clearing the forest today.”

However, it would take several days for me to properly recover. For now, I needed to focus on regaining my strength. Also, what time in the morning was it anyway? Right as I was about to ask that question, though, there was a knock on the door. Ai Fa grabbed her coat that was hanging on the wall, then moved over to the door.

“It’s us, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra. How is Asuta doing?” From where I was situated, well away from the door in the main hall, I could only vaguely make out the sound of a familiar voice.

“Asuta has finally awoken. I’ll open the door now.” Ai Fa undid the bolt, then after saying something quietly through the narrowly opened door, she finally opened it wide. There was no curtain by the entrance at the Fa house, so I was able to see Toor Deen and Yun Sudra without any obstructions between us.

“Asuta... I’m glad to see you awake.”

“Long time no see, Asuta! How are you feeling?”

Ai Fa must have warned the two of them not to lose control of themselves, but when they flicked back the hoods of their rain gear, they looked so happy they could cry.

“I’m fine now. Thanks for worrying about me,” I called out from across the room, choosing to express gratitude rather than apologize.

Ai Fa closed the door, then pointed at the water jug at the entrance. “You should be able to talk for at least a bit, and I’m sure Asuta would like to as well. If you wish, you can come inside for a short while.”

“Thank you! In that case, we’ll leave the washing for later and...”

“Asuta is awake now, so we won’t need to trouble all of you with our chores anymore. I’ll take care of the washing now, so you can talk with him in the

meantime.”

Thanks to Ai Fa being so considerate, we were able to talk to each other for the first time in three days. After taking off their rain gear and cleaning their feet, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra knelt down in front of me.

“Asuta, you’ve gotten so thin. But if your fever’s gone down, I’m sure you’ll be fine now. You’ll be able to regain your original strength soon,” Yun Sudra said with a dazzling smile. Meanwhile, Toor Deen was there beside her, looking like she was about to break down sobbing.

“I’m... I’m so glad... If something were to happen to you, we...”

“Toor Deen, you were the most worried about Asuta out of all us chefs, weren’t you? A lot of young children were lost to Amusehorn’s breath back in the former Suun clan, so that must have made you even more anxious, right?” Yun Sudra said with a gentle smile, wrapping an arm around the young girl’s shoulder. As she leaned up against the older girl, tears started streaming from Toor Deen’s eyes.

“Thanks for thinking of me so much. I really am grateful, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra. And you all helped out a lot, both with the business and around the house too, right?”

“That was nothing compared to the hardship you and Ai Fa faced. Um, is Ai Fa doing okay?” Yun Sudra asked in a quiet voice. Ai Fa was by the entrance cleaning clothes, plates and the like, so she probably hadn’t heard that. “Children afflicted with Amusehorn’s breath are tended to by giving them water and medicine morning and night, wiping away their poisoned sweat, and sharing your warmth with them. Normally, the family would take turns doing so, but Ai Fa did it all on her own. The Fou and Sudra asked to help, but she turned them all down.”

“I’m sure.”

“That means she’s hardly been getting any sleep since she woke up four days ago. She had to keep adding firewood and charcoal to the stove all night so that it wouldn’t go out... As a hunter, Ai Fa possesses more strength than your average woman, but I’m still a bit worried.”

“Yeah, I get it. Thanks for telling me. I’ll ask Ai Fa to get some proper sleep later.”

The smile returned to Yun Sudra’s face as she gave an energetic nod and said, “Good.”

And Toor Deen gave a bashful smile too as she wiped away her tears. “It’s strange for me to be so upset when you and Ai Fa were the ones who were facing this nightmare, isn’t it? I’m truly sorry for the pathetic sight.”

“I don’t think it’s pathetic at all. I know I’m repeating myself, but seriously, thank you.”

If I let my guard down, I was liable to start crying too. There was no need for words. Their expressions and gazes alone were enough to make it painfully clear how much the two of them had suffered on my account. However, me speaking up did earn a flurry of responses.

“We’ll tell the neighboring clans that you’re awake later. Three days have passed now, so I’m sure they’re all feeling very anxious,” Toor Deen said.

“But you won’t be able to relax if everyone comes shoving in at once, so we’ll tell them to hold off on visiting until tomorrow. We’re really fortunate to have the chance to talk with you like this,” Yun Sudra added.

“When the sun nears its peak, we’ll make some food for you. I’ve been thinking up a soup that would be easy for you to eat, Asuta.”

I was so overjoyed and grateful that I was starting to feel dizzy.

A few minutes after that, Ai Fa finished with the cleaning, so the pair stood up, looking seriously reluctant to part with me.

“Well then, excuse us for now. Ah, and did you hear about the meals for the northerners from Ai Fa?” Yun Sudra asked.

“Yeah. She said Rimee Ruu was helping out in my place.”

“That’s right. But that’s not all. A supply of sugar, tau oil, and fuwano has been delivered from the castle town.”

“Huh? I can understand the fuwano, but what’s this about sugar and tau oil?”

“You said before that you could make those crude dishes much tastier with sugar and tau oil, didn’t you? Rimee Ruu ended up passing that along to someone from the castle town.”

Even with that explanation, I still couldn’t understand. It was true that I wanted seasonings, but I’d had no intention of seeking them from the castle town, because I’d been sure they wouldn’t have provided them if I had tried.

“I see. You’ve been out of the loop for a bit now, haven’t you. Um...two days ago, a messenger from the castle town visited the Sauti settlement. They informed us that the house of Turan would pay for all of the additional fuwano, so there was no need for the people of the forest’s edge to pay for it.”

“The house of Turan is paying for the fuwano? Okay, they brought the northerners here in the first place, so I can understand that much. But they’re providing sugar and tau oil too?”

“Yes. They asked if there were any ingredients we needed that could give the northerners more strength, and Rimee Ruu answered them, so they sent us some tau oil and sugar yesterday.”

The more I heard, the more surprised I became. I could sort of understand if it was to give the northerners more energy to work rather than to serve them delicious food... But just a little while ago, they had gone so far as to restrict the amount of essential fuwano that was being provided. It was hard to wrap my head around how they were now providing the full amount of fuwano and seasonings as well after a single request from the people of the forest’s edge.

“What in the world? Who gave their permission for that?”

“I’m not sure... I heard that the messenger who visited the Sauti came from a noble named Melfried, though.”

Melfried was in charge of mediating between the nobles and the people of the forest’s edge, so that was only natural. But still, he was ultimately no more than a proxy for the lord of this land, his father Marstein. If Melfried permitted it, then you could say that Marstein did as well.

“It seems like I’ll have to ask the leading clans for more details. I’ll try talking to the Ruu or the Sauti when I’m feeling better.”

“Right. I’m sure someone from the Ruu clan will come visit you today. It’s not like we could ask someone from a leading clan to refrain from visiting, after all,” Yun Sudra said with an impish smile, sticking out her tongue cutely. Our two guests then left the Fa house for the time being.

“Should I have informed you about that matter with the house of Turan as well? I didn’t want to trouble you with too much, Asuta,” Ai Fa said.

“That’s okay. I don’t seem to have enough endurance to be stressing over too many different things so soon.”

With a deep sigh, I lay down atop the sheet, probably looking pretty listless. At any rate, Ai Fa swiftly got down on her knees next to me and brought her face close to mine.

“Are you tired? Was it still too soon to invite guests inside?”

“No, I’m glad I talked to them. But could you let me rest a bit until we eat?” As I tried to keep my drooping eyelids open, I stared at my clan head. “Aren’t you tired yourself, Ai Fa? I’m fine now, so you should get some rest too.”

“I’m a hunter, you know. I won’t lose my strength over something like this,” Ai Fa replied, patting the top of my head with her hand. “You rest up, and I’ll watch over you.”

“Then you should rest with me, while keeping watch.”

Ai Fa tilted her head a bit, then crept into my bedding like a cat. She placed her head on the same makeshift pillow I was using and stared at my face up close and personal. “Perhaps I could watch over you while resting like this. But it isn’t right to crowd you so much after you just got over an illness, is it?”

I silently reached out my arm and hugged Ai Fa to me.

“I see,” my clan head whispered, rubbing her head up against my cheek.

And so, we were able to get a bit of rest before Toor Deen and Yun Sudra returned to prepare our meal.

The sun approached its peak before long, and Toor Deen and Yun Sudra returned to the Fa house as promised to make food for me. That said, the food was ultimately just giba soup without any major added ingredients. I hadn't eaten for three whole days, so I couldn't hope to stomach anything heavier than that. Even so, I felt deeply moved by the meal. They had gotten stock from giba meat and vegetables, then added a hint of rock salt and tau oil to give the simple soup a faint bit of flavor, but the nutrition and warmth alone from the dish affected me.

The nutrients my malnourished body needed swiftly flowed through me, and it was as if each and every cell in me was trembling with joy. I actually found myself unable to speak at all for a little bit.

My body had entered a state of total starvation, so I was now terribly weak. If I tried chewing giba meat this soon, it could cause a real problem for me. They actually prepared some soft fuwano bread for me in a steaming basket too, but when I took a single bite of it, I could feel my danger instincts kicking in.

"It's still too soon for something solid like that, huh? Adding poitan or fuwano to the soup would really hurt the flavor, so we were left at a loss as to how to handle them," Yun Sudra said.

"But you really should have some poitan or fuwano, shouldn't you? We'll boil some poitan flour in a separate pot, so please eat that as well," Toor Deen added.

And so, a poitan broth was prepared for me after the giba soup.



Boiling poitan flour was enough to make it at least a little softer and easier to get down than just tossing poitan into a soup directly. It was like dissolving wheat flour in water, so it wasn't exactly something you could ever call tasty, but it did provide nutrition I desperately needed, and I didn't really have to force myself to swallow it or anything either. Right now I desperately wanted moisture in general, so downing it felt pleasing in a different way than the food that satisfied my appetite. They used a bit of salt and tau oil in that poitan broth too, which I really enjoyed. It felt similar to eating thin rice gruel or rice porridge.

At any rate, I was able to regain a bit more of my strength thanks to Toor Deen and Yun Sudra. There was no way I would ever forget the taste of the food I had eaten today. And when I expressed those feelings, tears welled up all over again in the young chef's eyes.

Ai Fa went ahead and smoothly polished off the remaining steamed fuwano and the remaining materials for the giba soup. Then she bit into some jerky, looking like she was quickly recovering from the fatigue of nursing me for several days.

"Well then, we'll stop by again later to make dinner," Yun Sudra finally said. She and Toor Deen seemed to feel like they really shouldn't stay too long, so they swiftly departed.

We were next visited by members of the Ruu clan and their subordinates. The group included Reina Ruu, Rimee Ruu, Ludo Ruu, and Gazraan Rutim. Today was a day off for work in the post town, and hunting was harder than ever during the rainy season, so every few days, the men would take a break too.

"Hey, so you managed to wake up okay, huh? Well, I always figured you'd be just fine," Ludo Ruu remarked with a nonchalant grin. Rimee Ruu wore a wide smile too, while Gazraan Rutim had a gentle one on his face. Reina Ruu was keeping her emotions under control, but she was definitely tearing up a bit. "We figured you'd wake up today for sure, but our mom Mia Lea warned us not to make too much of a commotion. So we used Morga Three-Way Deadlock to decide it!"

Morga Three-Way Deadlock was a game like rock paper scissors that I had

sort of taught to the Ruu clan at some point. Paper and scissors didn't exist in this land and would be too hard to explain, so we used wolves, giant snakes, and savages instead.

"Lala and Sheera Ruu wanted to come too, but Rimee and I were the winners today. As long as it's not too hard on you, we were thinking we could have everyone else come tomorrow," Reina Ruu chimed in.

"I also had a difficult time persuading my father Dan. I'm sure his hearty laughter would be rather difficult for you to handle right now, after all," Gazraan Rutim added.

I was incredibly grateful for their kind words.

"You're so skinny, Asuta! Kota's totally back to normal now, chomping down on meat and poitan."

"Right. I'm really glad that Kota Ruu overcame his trial."

"We hardly lose any kids to Amusehorn's breath in the Ruu clan... But it looks like it really is a lot worse to get it when you're not a kid. I could hear your pained groaning from outside the house yesterday morning," Ludo Ruu said. Then he turned toward Ai Fa, who was seated a short distance away. "It's tough seeing your family suffer. And you looked after Asuta all on your own, which is really impressive."

"What I did wasn't special, considering I needed assistance from the nearby women. They were the ones lending aid to people with whom they don't even share blood ties, so you should be praising them instead."

"They're praiseworthy, and so are you. I'm sure Asuta knows that too."

With my head full of various thoughts, I nodded back and said, "Yeah." This was the first time I had heard that my moaning was audible outside the house. Just imagining how distressed Ai Fa must have been was enough to make my heart ache.

And though he was smiling brightly now, Ludo Ruu had been going out of his way to visit the Fa house repeatedly for the last few days. It really highlighted how worried so many people had been for me. It was in my nature to feel apologetic first and foremost at times like this. But the people of the forest's

edge tended to see that as acting distant. And so, I decided to let them know how grateful I was instead, telling everyone, “Thanks.”

“You don’t need to keep saying that all the time!” Ludo Ruu said with a laugh, raising his right hand. But as soon as he did, he froze in place. Even if it was meant as a bit of friendly physical contact, I was in no state right now to receive a slap from a hunter, so he must have rethought his actions. With his arm still up in the air, Ludo Ruu turned around and found Ai Fa frozen in place with her hips off the ground, having stopped in the middle of getting up. It was possible she would have grabbed him before that arm could swing down and hit me. “That was a close one! I told Rau Lea he shouldn’t go near you for a while, Asuta, and then I went and almost made the same mistake myself.”

“You gave Rau Lea a warning about me? Thank you so much for that.”

Despite my harsh words, I wanted to recover to a point where I could receive Rau Lea’s overzealous displays of friendship again as soon as possible.

Ludo Ruu and the others departed from the Fa house not long after, having stayed for only a short while. They had all been quite worried about me. I had been interested to know what was up with the new ingredients that had been sent for the northerners by the house of Turan, but it seemed it would be better to put off any discussions about work until after I had recovered more of my stamina.

From then until the sun set, I spent my time buried deep in our blankets, resting. And following my request, Ai Fa slept beside me the whole time. In the future, I would probably be embarrassed by how much I had Ai Fa dote on me, but I didn’t have the strength to care about my dignity at the moment.

I had never fallen seriously ill before, so I’d had no clue how terribly weak and helpless people got at times like this. I had sought out Ai Fa’s warmth like a young child, and she kindly granted my wish. She wasn’t the sort to spoil a member of her clan, though, so perhaps she simply considered all of this to be necessary.

“Back when I was injured, my biggest source of support was your presence. If I can support *you* now, nothing would make me happier.” Ai Fa was snuggled up against my side as she spoke in an incredibly soft voice, while I was quickly

dozing off.

That evening, I was presented with the same mostly plain giba soup and poitan broth as before. Ai Fa had ordinary soup, yakiniku, and baked poitan. Ever since the day I had collapsed, the nearby women had been providing Ai Fa with dinner as well. Now that I had woken up, though, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra had taken the responsibility entirely upon themselves. Apparently, this had been accepted because they were exceptionally skilled, making them well suited to cooking food my ailing body could digest. Even on days when they had work with the stalls, they would cook for me while doing prep for the next day.

“I’m sure that either tomorrow or the day after, I’ll be able to handle steamed fuwano. I may not be able to eat it all, but would you mind preparing it for me again?”

“Of course not! Are there any other dishes or ingredients you want to eat, Asuta?”

“Let’s see... Ah, if you add grated gigo to the poitan broth, that might make it even easier to get down. I tried that a long time ago at the Ruu settlement.”

“Gigo, huh? That’s packed with nutrition, so I’d love to give it a try.”

“It might also be easier to eat if you scramble some kimyuus eggs and heat them until they get firm, but not too firm.”

“Ah, eggs have a lot of nutrition too. Sorry, we still have so much to learn from you, even at a time like this...”

“Don’t worry about it. I think I’ll be able to prepare my own food again in two or three days, but I’ll be counting on you until then,” I said, bowing my head a bit, which the pair of chefs politely returned.

“Even if it’s just for two or three days, I feel incredibly honored to have the chance to make you dinner,” Yun Sudra said.

“Yeah. And to think you’d look so delighted while eating food we prepared... I’m bursting with happiness at the thought,” Toor Deen agreed.

“I don’t have many chances to eat food someone else has made for me, so it makes me really happy too.” It was an especially rare occurrence to have

someone else make me a normal dinner. And this one had been made specifically for me and my needs. They had really put a lot of effort into figuring out which dishes would be easy for me to eat, and what I'd find tasty. Their thoughts and feelings gave the meal an extra layer of seasoning, making it even more satisfying for me.

After Toor Deen and Yun Sudra left, I cuddled up against Ai Fa in the dark and we talked about what I was feeling inside. "It's a wonderful thing, having someone else cook for you. I thought I already knew that, but this has really driven it home for me."

"Hmm?"

"I want to be able to feed you my cooking again soon. If doing that for you can make you this happy too, I'd feel incredibly blessed."

Ai Fa let out something between a sigh and a chuckle, then gave me a hug. She was no longer keeping the stove lit at bedtime, so I fell asleep feeling her warmth alone over my whole body.

The next few days were dedicated to rest and rehabilitation. Amusehorn's breath wasn't an illness you could keep catching, like a cold, so once you were over it, you just needed to convalesce. That said, since I hadn't caught the illness as a kid, this part wasn't exactly normal either. My stamina had taken such a serious hit that I needed to be careful to not push myself too hard and end up with another affliction.

For my second day since recovering, I was once again served plain giba soup and poitan broth, as well as scrambled kimyuus eggs. The following day, finely diced meat and aria were added to the soup, and I was able to eat more solid food the day after that.

Even so, I stuck with minced giba meat and vegetables that had been boiled till they were mushy and soft. I also asked them to avoid herbs, spices, and other highly potent ingredients, and to instead aim for light tastes with tau oil and sugar at the core of the flavor. I ate that giba soup with some steamed fuwano. Occasionally, I had the fuwano fried like a wonton, but at any rate, I continued to get my nutrition in a form that wouldn't be difficult to digest.

By that point, I had regained a fair bit of bulk on my thinned body. My skin had also regained some moisture and elasticity, with my cheeks and the hollows around my eyes recovering the fastest. With long-sleeved clothing on, you could hardly tell by looking that anything about me had changed at this point. That night, Ai Fa looked me over thoroughly and then gave me a tight embrace, likely having similar thoughts.

I decided to step in front of the stove in addition to my normal rehab the following day, the thirteenth of the brown month. It was the tenth day of the rainy season, and the fifth since I awoke.

I was of course still far from fully recovered, but I was at least no longer suffering from dizziness. As long as I didn't carry anything heavy, I likely wouldn't have any issues that would make people worry at this point. I just had to rest when I was tired. Now that I had a little more leeway in terms of stamina, I went ahead and provisionally returned to work.

The first thing I needed to take care of was the morning prep work. Toor Deen and the others had worked hard to keep the stalls going, and had been doing the preparations each day at the Fa house's kitchen. I headed there at the appointed time, and when I arrived, everyone gathered there greeted me with smiles and applause.

Over the past few days, countless familiar faces had stopped by to visit me. The Gaaz, Ratsu, and Beim went without saying, but Dari and Mil Fei Sauti also visited us from way down south, and Sufira Zaza and Lem Dom from all the way to the north. Embarrassing as it was, news of my illness and recovery had been passed all around the forest's edge through the Fou and Beim's information network.

As a result, the women from the nearby clans had pretty much all come to see me at least once, but they seemed relieved in a totally different way to see me back at work rather than being curled up in bedding. Their smiles were filled with so much joy that I had difficulty holding back my tears.

After spending around two hours making food for the stalls and inns, I returned to the house to rest. I didn't quite feel like I needed to sleep, but I figured I should get plenty of rest before everyone returned in the early

afternoon.

It was around then that Ai Fa started to have some worries she had to deal with. Basically, she needed to decide when exactly she would resume her hunting work.

“I doubt I’ll collapse again at this point, so I don’t think you need to worry about that,” I offered, only for Ai Fa to swiftly break out in a frown.

“I know you don’t mean anything bad by that, but I dislike it when you speak that way. It’s like you’re saying you don’t need me.”

“Huh? That’s not what I meant at all, though.”

“I’m well aware it isn’t. These feelings are the result of my own weakness and immaturity.” She was looking down at me as I sat at the head of my bedding. “Nothing would make me happier than seeing you feeling better. But...up until yesterday, you were so utterly adorable, like a young child.”

“I-I see. Still, it’d be real bad if I didn’t bounce back from that state.”

“I’m fully aware of that as well. But you were just so cute...” How exactly was I supposed to react to someone telling me that to my face? As I was left scrambling for an answer to that question, Ai Fa inserted herself into my bedding. She grabbed hold of my shoulders next, then gently yet firmly pulled me down atop the sheets. “When you are fully recovered, we will no longer be able to keep sharing the same bedding like this.”

“Yeah... That’s true.”

Ai Fa started feeling my sides, running her hands over my clothing. It made me feel more ticklish than usual, but my clan head had a very serious look in her eyes, so I managed to hold out.

“Your ribs can still be felt quite clearly. It will take a few more days for you to fully regain your strength.”

“Yeah, I think so too.”

“If you catch Amusehorn’s breath once, you’ll never suffer from it again...so it’s unlikely I’ll have to feel this anxiety again in the future.” She moved her hand from my ribs to my face, bringing her warm palm right up against my

cheek. “Which is why...I think I shall take a few more days off from hunting to watch over you. I do not know whether that is the correct course of action for me to take as a hunter, or as your clan head...but I do not think it would be right for me to completely suppress these feelings.”

“Okay. I’ll take care not to worry you, Ai Fa.”

“Such an attitude would have done no good in the face of this affliction, though. You are in no way at fault, Asuta.” With that, Ai Fa finally shot me a smile. “I am still immature. But after these next few days, I swear to the mother forest that I shall dedicate myself to my work as a hunter more than ever before.”

“Right,” I replied, bringing my palm to Ai Fa’s cheek as well.

My clan head happily narrowed her eyes, and continued to stare at my face.

The following morning, a lively crowd visited the Fa house. It included Dan Rutim, Gazraan Rutim, Rau Lea, Giran Ririn, and even Shumiral. Gazraan Rutim and Shumiral were pretty quiet, but the other three were more than rowdy enough to make up for that.

“Seems like you’ve really got your strength back! It hurt to hear how much of a mess you were before!” Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty chuckle.

For his part, Rau Lea was also wearing an amused smile. “We’re a noisy lot, so we were told that we shouldn’t visit the Fa house. That was a terrible thing for them to say, don’t you think, Asuta?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s true. Well, I *was* extremely weak up until a few days ago.”

“I’m just glad you’ve got your strength back. We would be incredibly heartbroken to lose you now,” Giran Ririn said with a gentle smile. Of course, he had a comparatively relaxed personality. And next to him, Shumiral wore an even gentler smile still.

“When I heard, I was surprised. To think, Amusehorn’s breath, could appear, in such a form.”

“Yeah. I made it through all right, though, thanks to everyone helping us out.

You look like you're all better now too, Shumiral."

"Yes. Two days ago, I resumed work, as a hunter."

It had already been ten days since Shumiral had gotten that injury. He was sitting with his back straight, and looked exactly as I remembered him.

"Then, did Vina Ruu return to the Ruu settlement too?"

"Yes. She left in, the morning, two days ago. I would like, to work hard, so that, her thoughtfulness, does not go, to waste," Shumiral said, casting his gaze downward in embarrassment. I couldn't even begin to guess how the bonds between the people staying at the main Ririn house—Giran Ririn, Uru Lea Ririn, Shumiral, Vina Ruu, and occasionally the young children—had been developing over the past couple weeks. Giran Ririn continued to smile brightly, but didn't interject at all.

"If Vina Ruu's gotten that attached to you too, they might as well approve your marriage right now!" Dan Rutim boldly added, not knowing the meaning of the word "restraint."

"That's for sure!" Rau Lea added in agreement. "Still, I'm not big on girls who're soft and wriggly like Vina Ruu. I prefer my women to be firm and dauntless."

"I do not, seek that, in a woman," Shumiral said, quietly asserting his opinion without showing any signs of being offended. It felt rather fresh, seeing Shumiral interact with such a crowd in a place like this.

Amid all that, Gazraan Rutim quietly smiled. Apparently, he had come over more frequently than anyone else while I was unconscious, but we hadn't talked much since I recovered. However, his kind gaze alone clearly showed just how worried he had been before, as well as how relieved he felt now.

"By the way, have you heard about tomorrow yet, Asuta?" Gazraan Rutim finally asked, around when everyone was getting ready to leave.

"Tomorrow? No, I haven't heard anything in particular."

"I see. Observers are coming to the Sauti settlement from the castle town. They want to see the lessons the women of the forest's edge have been giving,

as well as how much stronger the northerners have become.”

“Ah, I see. And tomorrow’s...”

“Yes. It’s a break day for your business in the post town. Apparently, Rimee Ruu will be present, as the one who was in charge of the lessons.”

Because of how bad my condition had been, Rimee Ruu had ended up having to take on all the burden of giving the lessons. I had actually only gone to the Sauti settlement twice, so Rimee Ruu really was the person who was most in charge at this point.

“But I’m the one who decided on the menu and requested tau oil and sugar. If anything is lacking, then it’s my responsibility.”

“That’s not true. Dari Sauti is the one who asked for your assistance to begin with, and he says it is *his* responsibility. He also said that any praise they give for your accomplishments should be directed at both you and Rimee Ruu,” Gazraan Rutim explained with another gentle smile. “I suspected that this might be of some significance to you, so I wanted to make sure you knew. There’s no need for you to force yourself to visit the Sauti settlement right after getting over an illness, but please keep it in mind.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Since the conversation seemed to have come to a close with that, the other members of the group all stood up. Gazraan Rutim started to do the same, but then he went and grasped my hand.

“You seem to have regained quite a bit of strength, and I’m truly glad to see it. Due to her pregnancy, Ama Min is unable to visit the Fa house, but she feels the same as me.”

“Yeah. I’m really grateful too.”

I gripped Gazraan Rutim’s burly fingers back, as tightly as I could manage. And then, after shooting me one last kind smile, he left the Fa house along with everyone else.

“I’m so grateful for all the people who have been thinking of me. Once I’m feeling better, I’d love to go around to all of their houses and thank them,” I

said once the Fa house was quiet again.

“Hmm,” Ai Fa hummed, looking pensive as she knelt down beside my bedding. There was a serious look in her eyes as she stared at me. “Asuta, I’m certain that you’re thinking you’d like to go to the Sauti settlement.”

“Huh? Well yeah, of course... But I know full well that I shouldn’t push myself too hard.”

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied with a nod. Then she brought both of her hands to my sides. Her warm palm once again ran over my clothes. Apparently, this was something like a health checkup, and I once again did my best to not give in to my ticklishness. “A day from now, your body will have fully regained its strength... You’re presently in a state similar to how you were when you first arrived at the forest’s edge.”

“You mean, how I was before I was hardened by life at the forest’s edge? So, I’m weak but healthy?”

“Indeed. You’re as weak as a young child, and it feels like you would break if handled roughly.” As she gave me her overly earnest assessment, she moved her hand up to touch my cheek all over as well. She also looked inside my mouth and brought her other hand up to my neck. It seemed today’s examination was extra thorough. “It may not be a bad idea to visit the Sauti settlement first, rather than heading straight to the post town... If you spend some time enduring the swaying of a wagon and being struck by rain, you should be able to properly judge how much strength you have regained.”

“So, I can participate? I’ve been curious for a while now about what made the folks from the castle town send us those new ingredients.”

“Yes, and I can also accompany you as a bodyguard,” Ai Fa said with a nod, sitting down atop the bedding. She slid her legs under the blanket, then shifted until they were right up against mine. “We can see how much tomorrow tires you out and use that knowledge to determine when you should resume work in town. And once you are well enough to head into the post town, I can resume working as a hunter as well.”

“Right. Got it.”

“Well then, you should get some rest now.” Ai Fa gently rested her head on my shoulder, and her weight and warmth almost seemed to be pushing me down until I was fully enveloped in the sheets.

My clan head closed her eyes and hugged one of my arms tight, rubbing her cheek up against my shoulder. By this point she felt less like a reliable protector, and more like a kitten wanting to be pampered. That by itself made me feel revitalized, as it was proof that she had let go of some of the tension she had been holding inside.

Since the day I had come to live at the Fa house, this was easily the longest amount of time we had ever spent simply being together, with neither of us working. We tended to be quite busy even on days off, so this was the first time we had truly allowed ourselves to relax.

As both of us had fallen silent, I could hear the light pitter patter of rain on the roof. It was a rainy day of rest for us, and Ai Fa and I were close together, just listening to that sound. I was certain this was going to become another precious memory for me.

Once I'm fully recovered, Ai Fa will probably go back to normal like nothing happened. Ai Fa hated laziness, so I had no doubts about that. I swore to the mother forest that I would work harder than ever in the future, mirroring her vow from earlier. But for now, I gave myself fully to enjoying this wonderful moment in time that we had together.

Chapter 3: People of Mahyudra

1

On the fifteenth of the brown month, Ai Fa and I visited the Sauti settlement in the morning as planned. The observers from the castle town had said they wanted to start by watching the Mahyudra women cook, so we left the Fa house practically first thing in the morning.

Along the way, we met up with a few members of the Ruu clan. Rimee Ruu had taken charge of the lessons in my place when I fell ill, and since it was in the morning, they were able to provide us with some bodyguards too. And since Melfried would be joining us personally today as one of the observers, it was decided that Jiza Ruu should also come along to speak with him.

“It seems you’ve fully regained your strength,” Jiza Ruu stated, the same expression as always on his face. I really couldn’t ever tell what he was thinking. I figured he didn’t see me as a nuisance anymore, but I still couldn’t help feeling nervous.

“I was really glad to hear Kota Ruu recovered so quickly.”

“The western god and the forest of Morga have acknowledged Kota’s right to live on as one of our people,” the eldest Ruu son replied, moving right into the wagon.

As he watched his brother go, Ludo Ruu whispered to me, “That means you’re qualified to live as one of us too, Asuta.”

I wasn’t sure if Jiza Ruu’s words actually held that kind of subtext, but I decided to think positively and replied, “Right.”

Before heading to the Sauti settlement, though, I received a number of well wishes regarding my recovery. Lala and Sheera Ruu, as well as quite a few others, had stopped by the Fa house at least once over the course of the last several days, but there were a number of older women who couldn’t leave the

house so easily calling out to me now.

Granny Jiba, Mia Lea Ruu, Granny Tito Min, Sati Lea Ruu, Tari Ruu, and several women from the branch houses all smiled and congratulated me on overcoming the trial posed by the illness. Kota Ruu had gone through the same ordeal, but he was back to smiling now, and looked even more energetic than before.

Then you had Mikel and Myme, who were staying at the Ruu settlement. Myme had come to visit me while I was sick, but it had been quite a bit longer since I had seen Mikel. Mikel was still recovering, but he still got up just as early as the women and was also now able to walk around freely with a cane.

“You told me to heal up, and now look at you,” Mikel muttered right at the start, looking terribly displeased.

Myme then tapped him on the chest with a laugh and said, “Jeez.”

Feeling all warm inside, I replied, “I’m really embarrassed about that.”

I was also able to speak with Mida and Ryada Ruu, who occasionally got up early. When he saw me casually walking about, Mida’s cheeks started trembling, which made me feel really happy too. Unfortunately, Donda and Darmu Ruu were still asleep, so I wasn’t able to see them. I went ahead and returned to my own wagon at that point, saying I’d stop by again on the way back.

There were five members of the Ruu clan coming along with us: Rimee, Reina, Jiza, Ludo, and Shin Ruu. Apparently, Reina Ruu had been quite curious about the work at the Sauti settlement for a while now. Since it was a day off from the stalls, she had asked to come along.

Rimee Ruu alone rode with me, while the rest were going to the Sauti settlement in Ruuruu’s wagon. Naturally, Ai Fa was driving for us. Since you got pounded by rain in the driver’s seat and that could impact your health negatively, even if I were to resume work in the post town, I wouldn’t be taking the reins for the time being.

I sat as far forward in the wagon as I could so that my voice would reach Ai Fa in the driver’s seat, and spent the trip having a casual chat with Rimee Ruu.

“You really look like you’re doing a whole lot better now, Asuta! Do you think

you'll be able to work the stalls again soon?"

"Well, I figure I'll decide based on how today goes. If it wipes me out too much, I may end up taking a few more days to rest."

"Sure! It's not good to push yourself too hard, after all! Still, I know Tara and Yumi will be happy to see you looking all better... They've been really worried!"

Naturally, I was also eagerly waiting for the day I could see everyone from the post town again. I'd been able to talk with the folks around the forest's edge who I had ties with quite a bit, but I hadn't seen anyone from town in ten whole days now.

I hadn't continuously stayed in the forest's edge for this long since I first opened for business with the stalls. We had taken some time off in the period between Cyclaeus's crimes being exposed and his remaining subordinates getting rounded up, but even then, I had kept on delivering food to the inns.

"Now that I think about it, Shumiral's friends will be heading back to Sym soon, won't they? If they could've waited another two months or so, they might have been able to use the new path through the forest's edge, huh?" Rimee Ruu remarked.

"Yeah, that's true... But Radajid and the others will be visiting Genos again half a year from now, so I'm sure they'll be able to use it then."

And when they did, would they be able to stop by the settlement at the forest's edge first rather than the post town? The thought got me a bit excited.

"So that means Shumiral's been back in Genos for about a month now, huh? Time sure does fly!"

"That's for sure. It's pretty surprising, actually... And speaking of Shumiral, how has Vina Ruu been lately? She returned to the Ruu house a few days ago, didn't she?" I asked.

Swaying left and right with the motion of the wagon, Rimee Ruu energetically responded, "Oh yeah! Vina's been sighing even more than before she left! She even got in a big fight with Darmu a little while ago!"

"D-Darmu Ruu and Vina Ruu got in a big fight? Haven't they always been

really close as siblings?”

“Yup! But that might actually make them get into fights even more... Darmu got angry and said, ‘If you’re that crazy for the guy, why don’t you just join the Ririn clan already?!’ and Vina snapped back, ‘Yeah, well, when are *you* gonna get married, huh?’ and they were throwing stuff and pulling hair... And it kept going until Papa Donda started shouting at both of them.”



“Hmm. Is it okay if I think that sounds adorable?”

“Yeah! I thought it was fun too!”

In that case, I hoped it wasn't all that serious of a fight after all. Shockingly, though, I could hear Ai Fa giggle with trembling shoulders upon hearing that.

“My apologies. This is a serious matter for the Ruu clan, but I couldn't stop myself from laughing when I pictured it.”

“Yeah, Ludo and Granny Tito Min laughed too! Reina got kinda panicky, though, and Jiza was all quiet and just looked astounded!”

Hopefully that was all that it amounted to. After all, this was basically an incident where Shumiral's presence had stirred things up in the Ruu clan. Still, I figured Vina Ruu was the one at fault here, due to her difficult personality.

Our chat continued like that until we finally arrived at the Sauti settlement.

There were already a pair of luxurious totes-drawn box carriages off to the side of the main house, one bearing the crest of the house of Genos and the other the house of Daleim. I noted that though the house of Turan was also involved with this matter in a big way, I couldn't see their crest anywhere.

However, as we were heading over to the kitchen, I saw the familiar face of Torst standing there under the hastily constructed overhang. Lefreya was the head of the house of Turan officially, while he acted as her guardian. And when Ai Fa noticed who the person standing next to him was, I could see her expression grow tense. That was because it was none other than Lefreya's attendant Sanjura, wearing a hooded cloak of the kind favored by easterners.

“Thank you for coming all this way. I am glad to see you looking well, Jiza Ruu,” Melfried started by saying, clad in Jagar-style attire that looked easy to move in rather than his usual white leather armor. Naturally, he was wearing rain gear much like Sanjura as well. His choice of clothing seemed to be meant to show that he was here in his capacity as the mediator between the nobles and the people of the forest's edge rather than as the head of the ducal guard. However, his cool and commanding presence hadn't changed in the least.

“Indeed,” Jiza Ruu replied with a nod, taking note of each of the visitors who

were present. Melfried served as the mediator with our people, and Polarth was his aide. Torst and Sanjura were Lefreya's guardian and attendant, respectively. Those were the four that I recognized, with the rest looking like officers from the guards. There were more than ten of them in total.

Dari Sauti and one other young hunter were also standing there under the large overhang. If my memory wasn't failing me, he was the head of the Vela, a clan under the Sauti. The previous clan head had been injured by the lord of the forest, and was no longer able to hunt, which led to the responsibility falling to this young man.

We lined up beside Dari Sauti, and Polarth shot me a bright smile. "I heard about your illness, Sir Asuta! I never knew Amusehorn's breath could afflict a visitor from overseas in such a manner. I feel relieved to see you looking well now."

"Yeah. Thank you."

"Be that as it may, I never expected I would set foot in the settlement at the forest's edge like this! You truly can never tell where fate will lead you."

Right. This was only the second time in eighty years that nobles had visited the settlement at the forest's edge. The first one to do so had been none other than Lefreya herself. After her father's wrongdoings had been exposed, she had visited us here to ask that I make one final meal for Cyclaeus using giba meat... And then she cut her long hair as payment. Sanjura had accompanied her back then as well. He had an eastern mother and looked entirely like a citizen of Sym. Currently, he was staring my way with a calm expression.

"Allow me to make a statement before we begin," Melfried said, a chilly light shining in his gray eyes. "Sanjura has already been whipped as punishment for his crimes, but I'm sure you are not overly pleased with him being here at the forest's edge. Out of consideration for your position, we have removed all blades from his person. Lady Lefreya, head of the house of Turan, was insistent that he should accompany us, and I decided to allow it. However, Sir Torst is in charge of the house of Turan and is here with us today, so I believe there is no pressing need to have Sanjura present as well. As such, if you take offense to him being here, I shall have him return to the carriage. What say you?"

“I don’t think we have any reason to object at this point... If you have dealt with him in the way you believe is best, it should be no issue,” Dari Sauti replied.

“However,” Jiza Ruu added, “I would like to know why she was so insistent about having this Sanjura man accompany us. He is nothing more than Countess Lefreya’s attendant, is he not?”

“That is in fact the crux of the matter. Put simply, it was none other than the head of the house of Turan, Lady Lefreya herself, who has been pushing for sufficient food to be provided to the northerners,” Polarth declared.

“Oh?” Jiza Ruu questioned, turning toward him. “But that Lefreya girl is supposed to be the head of her house in name only, while that Torst man there is actually in charge of handling its affairs, correct?”

“That is indeed the case. That is why it is necessary to clarify the circumstances to you, our esteemed friends from the forest’s edge. After all, as per the agreement between Duke Genos and the leading clan heads, Lady Lefreya has not been granted the power to act as the head of her house,” Melfried said.

That agreement was the reason Lefreya had not been imprisoned for the crime of abducting me, and it had been negotiated because if she had been held accountable for those crimes, the nobles would have had to strip her of her title. But in exchange for accepting those conditions, Bartha’s crimes from her bandit days had also been pardoned. Apparently, it had been important for Marstein to transfer the title of Countess Turan to Lefreya as quickly as possible so he didn’t have to unilaterally get rid of the noble house entirely, as that would have caused him to lose face in the capital of Selva.

“In order to prove that we have not gone back on that agreement, allow me to offer an explanation. Lady Lefreya is the one who made the proposal, but it was her guardian Sir Torst who gave his approval... That is correct, is it not, Sir Torst?”

Melfried sent a glance at Torst, who lowered his gaze until he was looking at the ground and replied, “Y-Yes.” He was an older nobleman with a timid air about him, and his face was all wrinkly like a pug’s. He probably wasn’t always

this fainthearted if he had been assigned the role of Lefreya's guardian, but I couldn't remember him ever *not* looking exhausted. He had been a social outcast when Cyclaeus had been in charge, but then he'd had the full responsibility of the noble house suddenly thrust upon him, which must have caused him all kinds of hardships. "I-I myself was bewildered at first, as I did not understand the lady of the house's intentions. After all, what good would come of showing favorable treatment to northerners? Laughable as it may be, I was even starting to wonder if she intended to stage a revolt using the northerners, or something like that."

"That is no laughing matter. Still, if the northerners of Turan revolted outside of the stone walls, they would be no threat to the castle of Genos. Especially since the slaves who were taken to the Turan lands have no experience with war."

"R-Right. So I inquired as to her thinking...and it seems that she feels compassion for the northern woman who works as her servant."

"Her servant? You mean that huge woman?" Ludo Ruu asked. He had been staring at Sanjura this whole time, but that had gotten him to turn his gaze in Torst's direction out of curiosity.

Torst wiped his brow, clearing away his sweat before it started to bead up. Then he nodded and replied, "Yes. She was the only maid out of those who served the house previously who was permitted to stay by Lefreya's side, and her name is Chiffon Chel. You people of the forest's edge have met her multiple times now at the manor. And as the lady of the house has grown closer to the girl, she has started to become more and more troubled by how the northerners are treated."

This was a really unexpected turn of events. Still, at this point Sanjura and Chiffon Chel were the only people Lefreya had by her side. As she was the daughter of the criminal Cyclaeus and a kidnapper in her own right, Marstein and the other nobles were quite cautious of her. She had been cast out from high society, and had become the head of her house in name only.

"Still, we could not change our treatment of the northerners based on her sentiments alone, and so instead, she began insisting that we should make an

effort to ensure that the northerners will continue to benefit the Turan lands and Genos in its entirety as much as possible.”

Melfried and company must have heard this already, but the people of the forest’s edge all looked perplexed. It seemed like Dari Sauti was unhappy with the circumstances the northerners were facing because he had interacted with them up close, but generally such matters had nothing to do with us.

At any rate, with everyone’s attention fixed on him, Torst seemed to be trying to shrink away from us.

Then, Sanjura finally spoke up. “Treatment of northerners, varies greatly, throughout Selva. I cannot say, I have traveled to, that many places, around the nation...but to the north, and near the capital, they are treated more roughly, while in other areas, they are treated more gently. It changes, based on how much, northerners are hated, in an area.” His voice was just as calm as Shumiral’s, and he was a bit more fluent than my good friend. The hunters—Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, and Shin Ruu in particular—watched him with vigilant gazes. “That is what, led to the change, in Lefreya’s thinking. If the northerners, are treated more kindly, they can exhibit, greater strength. If their meals, and treatment improve, they will bring more wealth, to the Turan lands and Genos, than the cost of those improvements, she believes.”

“And, well, in this case, that means providing ingredients like fuwano, sugar, and tau oil. They provide nutrition, of course, but also, if the northerners are given good food to eat, perhaps they will work harder. At least, that’s the idea,” Polarth chimed in. “Apparently, exceptional workers in the Turan lands are given something of a reward. Those who can understand the western tongue or who do more work than the others will be given better meals and bedding. Lady Lefreya’s proposal is to raise those standards further.”

“This town of Genos is located quite far south in Selva’s territory. We live our lives completely removed from the war at the border, and do not have much reason to hate northerners as a result. Even so, it is absolutely forbidden by the laws of the kingdom to grant northerners their freedom, so they must remain as slaves. However, it seems that there are a few places where northerners are paid wages, and some are even permitted to marry among themselves,” Torst stated, his words flowing a bit smoother now that the other nobles had spoken.

“I intend to inquire with the merchants who visit Genos so that I may thoroughly ascertain how true all of that is, but at any rate, the previous head of the house had the northerners brought here on his own initiative, and so figuring out how we should handle them has been quite a problem for us.”

“On top of that, it seems there is no shortage of citizens of Sym and Jagar who do not approve of the mistreatment of northerners. It seems the east and south have no policy of taking slaves from enemy nations... Of course, we do not do any such thing here in Genos either.”

“However, it is also forbidden by the laws of the kingdom to return captured northerners to Mahyudra. After all, to our countrymen fighting at the border, that would be tantamount to giving assistance to the enemy. If released slaves were to take up arms as northern soldiers, that would worsen the danger our forces are facing, so that is also not an option.”

Dari Sauti looked rather stumped after hearing all of that from Torst, Polarth, and Melfried. “It seems the northerners have proved to be quite difficult for you to deal with. I suppose that is yet another ‘gift’ that Cyclaeus thrust upon you.”

“Indeed. On top of that, the majority of the work in the fields of the Turan lands was reassigned to the northerners, leaving many of the townsfolk without jobs, which has caused matters to deteriorate on that front as well. The recent robbery is clear evidence of that.” As Melfried spoke, the look in his gray eyes grew even chillier. Naturally, the incident being discussed was the one where Mikel and Myme’s house had been attacked. Donda Ruu had pressed Melfried about it quite harshly, questioning what in the world was wrong with the state of the Turan lands. “What it all amounts to is that we will have to decide how to handle the northerners with the utmost care and consideration for many different factors... I also have a message I would like to convey to the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“We would like to have you be mindful about how you interact with the northerners from here on out as well. To be specific...please refrain from making proposals to us out of compassion for the northerners.”

Suddenly, the atmosphere started to feel a bit tense. Melfried had been rather amicable lately, but he was once again showing how formidable he could be, like a frigid blade.

“So our request was out of line, then? But we share the head of the house of Turan’s opinion that giving them more proper meals would allow them to work harder,” Dari Sauti calmly replied.

“Yes,” Melfried answered with a nod. “But the house of Turan is responsible for the northerners, while the people of the forest’s edge are of a different standing entirely. As mentioned before, treating northerners with kindness could run afoul of the laws of the kingdom. And please understand that as you people of the forest’s edge are common citizens of Genos, you would generally not be permitted to offer such proposals in the first place.”

“I see” was all Dari Sauti could say in response. Meanwhile, Jiza Ruu’s narrowed eyes remained fixed on Melfried.

The tension in the air steadily rose. However, Polarth then interjected from off to the side with a smile, cutting right through it. “It all just goes to show how cautious we must be in handling the northerners. And that is not because of the laws of Genos, but rather of the kingdom. If Genos were to make a mistake with them, then Duke Genos would face punishment from the king of Selva.”

“The king of Selva, you say? But does the king not live a whole month’s travel on to toso back from here?”

“That is precisely the case. But Genos is one of the most prosperous towns in all of Selva, so the capital watches it very carefully. After all, they fear that if Genos grows too powerful, it may free itself from the kingdom’s control and declare itself an independent city-state.” That was apparently why the Genos duchy had also been divided into three counties. They feared what would happen if the house of Genos had a monopoly over that much influence and wealth. “Given that, inspectors do visit us every now and then, typically in conjunction with the delivery of foodstuffs from the capital. That happens two to three times every year, and I am certain we will see them again once the rainy season clears up.”

“If those people from the capital hear of this matter, the people of the

forest's edge will be the ones in danger. If the capital determines that you are a dangerous group that opposes the monarchy, we would be utterly unable to save you," Melfried said, staring down Jiza Ruu and Dari Sauti. "As the mediator with the people of the forest's edge and the heir to the house of Genos, I would like to form proper bonds with you all, which is why I need to ask you to refrain from acting rashly. The current ruler of this land, Duke Marstein Genos, feels much the same."

"It seems this issue is too complex for us to fully discuss it standing out here in the plaza," Dari Sauti said, his square face breaking out in a reassuring smile. "I assure you, I have taken your message to heart, as one of the leading clan heads of the forest's edge. We have our own thoughts and feelings on the matter, but we have not forgotten that Duke Genos is the lord of this land. When we three leading clan heads next gather, we will debate this matter until all of you are satisfied."

"Understood... However, as I see it, I believe it may be insufficient for the leading clan heads of the forest's edge to only meet with us once every three months. I would like to increase that to once a month, or at least every other month."

"I see. I shall tell the other leading clan heads that as well, but personally, I'm in full agreement."

With that, the tension lingering in the air finally calmed.

"Well then, why don't we get started with today's work? It seems the northerners' chefs have arrived," Polarth stated.

I turned to look, and sure enough, I saw another carriage approaching. There was a westerner in rain gear in the driver's seat, most likely a guard. I could see he was wearing a leather breastplate under his rain clothes.

After getting down from the carriage and saluting to Melfried and the other nobles, he opened the door of the passenger compartment...and at last, the northern women appeared from inside.

Northerners... A group of people from the kingdom of Mahyudra, far to the north.

Five such northern women were approaching us, guided by a guard. All of them were tall, not a one of them being shorter than me, and I wouldn't call them slender either. None of them looked as strong as Bartha, but based on my recollection, they seemed to have sturdier frames than the average western woman from my old world. Chiffon Chel was undeniably pretty in a slender way, like a taller Vina Ruu, but that might have been because she hadn't been assigned to physical labor. All of the women gathered here were clearly burlier than her.

They were all wearing hooded rain gear. Peering underneath those hoods, I could spy curly auburn hair, purple eyes, and ruddy tanned skin. Folks from Jagar had skin tones that went from white to faintly pink, but these women were much more distinctly tan, almost brown in color, and now that I thought back on it, Eleo Chel had looked similar back when I'd met him.

Their ages looked to be really varied, with the youngest probably around twenty and the oldest likely about forty. They all had chiseled features, and by my own personal beauty standards, I thought they were all quite attractive. However, their legs were hobbled by chains that were only about thirty centimeters long. Criminals at the forest's edge were restrained in a similar way, in order to prevent them from being able to run.

The women lined up before us in the little bit of remaining space under the overhang. For some reason, they seemed to have a really intense presence about them. There weren't many really big westerners out there. Even men were only around 170 centimeters tall on average, with well-built ones like Melfried being rare, so there weren't maybe people present who were taller than them. Even out of the people of the forest's edge who were currently with us, only Jiza Ruu and Dari Sauti were taller than those women.

Speaking of Jiza Ruu, Rimee Ruu was tugging on his arm. He bent down to see what she wanted, and his younger sister whispered into his ear.

"Rimee Ruu wishes to know if she and the others can start working now, and also if they may converse with these women as they normally would."

“That will not be a problem, naturally. We already informed you that our mission is to observe how you conduct yourselves. That is why we had you gather slightly later than usual,” Melfried stated.

Hearing that, Rimee Ruu stepped forward with a smile. “It’s been a while, everybody! I’ll be helping out again today, so I’m looking forward to working with you!”

Rimee Ruu had also visited the Sauti settlement on her day off five days ago, which was when she had taken on the teaching job I had been planning to handle myself. That meant this was the second time they had met...but their reaction to the young girl’s words was more than a little surprising to me. The northern women went from looking as expressionless as statues to smiling brightly in a matter of moments.

“It’s nice to see you again, Rimee Ruu. We look forward to working with you too,” the oldest of the women said with a bow of her head. Her speech was a little childlike, with clumsy intonation, but in a different way than an easterner.

The other women clad in rain gear also started bowing one after another. Undaunted by the respect they were showing, Rimee Ruu gave a bow of her own back.

“Well then, let’s get to work! Is everyone else already gathered in the kitchen?”

“Hey Rimee, you runt! Don’t move around on your own!” Ludo Ruu called out as he followed after his little sister, making the two of them the first to set foot in the kitchen. The five northern women and the guard watching them followed after, and then Melfried turned toward us.

“It would be difficult to fit everyone in the kitchen all at once. I believe we should have four or five people at a time enter, taking turns. What do you say?”

“I have no objections. You’ve been rather curious about how it’s been going, haven’t you, Asuta? You can observe first,” Dari Sauti offered.

Taking him up on that, Ai Fa and I entered in the first group. Among those from the castle town, Melfried, Polarth, and one of the soldiers tasked with guarding them joined us.

Mil Fei Sauti and company were already waiting for us there in the kitchen. Since Mil Fei Sauti had come to visit me once earlier, she just gave me a silent nod now. The other four women, meanwhile, gave me little bows, their expressions filled with joy and relief.

“Well then, if there’s anything you don’t understand, feel free to ask! We’re here to look out for you, after all!” Rimee Ruu declared.

It had been ten days now since the cooking lessons had started. Rimee Ruu and the other chefs moved around the kitchen with the northern women, but they didn’t interfere at all during this initial stage.

The northern women worked at a steady pace, neither rushing nor slacking off. After lighting the stoves, they started boiling some karon and kimyuus bones, and while waiting for that to finish, a few of them selected their ingredients from the pantry.

At the same time, two of the women swiftly added water to some fuwano and began kneading it. There were over a hundred northerners brought here and forced to work to clear the land, which meant the number of manju they needed to make was on the same scale. I had only been able to lend them half of the steaming baskets we owned, so it took numerous rounds of cooking to finish them all.

Still, there was no hesitation in their actions. They had seemingly learned the steps quite well over the course of the last ten days. The three who had been selecting ingredients added the appropriate vegetables to the pot, after which, two of them minced up fillings for the manju, while the last one set about separating out milk fat from the karon milk.

“Hmm. I don’t know what it was like before so I cannot say for certain, but they certainly seem to have a smooth workflow,” Polarth muttered to himself. I had no objections to that statement. They looked rather detached, but I wasn’t seeing any mistakes. They only looked so dispassionate because they never opened their mouths, and their lack of communication wasn’t causing any slipups because they were all well aware of what they needed to do.

A woman who was chopping up vegetables suddenly turned toward Rimee Ruu, who noticed after just a moment and hurried over. Atop the woman’s

cutting boards sat a big pile of bamboo-shoot-like chamcham cut into chunks.

With a cute tilt of her head, Rimee Ruu said, “Hmm... Chamcham’s really tasty in both manju and stew! Looks like we have a lot today, so why not add half to each?”

The woman gave a single nod, transferring half of the chamcham to a wooden plate, and then starting to swiftly dice up what was left.

“Can the northerners gathered here all speak the western tongue?” Melfried asked.

“Sir!” a guard replied with a salute. “It was decided that having a decent command of our language was essential for this work, which is why these five were selected! At the very least, they should be able to accurately understand all instructions!”

“I see,” Melfried said, and the soldier nervously returned to his post along the wall. To a common guard like him, it must have felt like Melfried, the leader of the ducal guard, was someone impossibly high up on the chain of command. Of course, for those who lived outside the stone walls, that was how they tended to look at all nobles.

But for the people of the forest’s edge, there isn’t much difference between the nobles and the townsfolk. They’re indebted to us, so they’ve been placing a lot of weight on our words up until now...but it’s different when northerners are involved, huh? I thought to myself as I stole a glance at Melfried’s chilly expression. Still, it wasn’t like I had any doubts about his character at this point. I hadn’t heard from Marstein in a long time, and there was a lot I still wasn’t certain about when it came to the duke, but I was sure that Melfried was someone I could trust. Of course, there was plenty I didn’t know about him either, since we had only ever exchanged a handful of words. And it had always been as hard to tell what he was thinking as it was with Jiza Ruu. It was only when his wife and daughter were with him that I could catch a glimpse of his more human side shining through.

Also, Melfried had lent us his aid to take down Cyclaeus. At the very least, I had no doubts that he valued justice and the law above all else. He never let things like old traditions or political concerns get in the way of his pursuit of

justice.

In order to expose the Suun clan's crimes, he had lied about his identity and set himself up to act as bait, and he had invited hunters of the forest's edge to participate in a combat tournament to rouse his own spirit as a swordsman, so he certainly wasn't opposed to thinking outside the box.

Today had been the first time in a while that he had directed such a harsh gaze toward our people. That must have been rooted in his strong desire to uphold the laws of this land. But he had also said he wished to form proper bonds with our people, and I wanted to trust in those words.

But in that case...what do western nobles like Melfried see when they look at these women?

To me, they of course just looked like any other human being. They were a bit on the tall and robust side, but they were healthy and attractive. Though they were dressed in shabby clothing, they didn't look particularly filthy or anything. Their hair was disheveled and scratches could be seen on their skin, but they must have been bathing daily. They had an acceptably clean appearance overall, no different than that of the people of the forest's edge or the townsfolk.

The chains on their legs were the only thing that felt out of place. With criminals, it was necessary to bind them that way, but the northerners brought to the Turan lands had never been soldiers, from what we had heard. They had never attacked the west, and had been made slaves simply because they were northerners.

And Kamyua has northern blood flowing through his veins too. If he were still in Genos, would he have come here too?

After things had been settled with Cyclaeus, he had carefully avoided approaching Chiffon Chel. According to him, it would have been a serious hassle if folks thought he had taken Cyclaeus down in order to save the northerners, so he had intentionally kept his distance.

That was just one example of the difficulties westerners had when it came to dealing with northerners. Perhaps things were easier for westerners who hated them. However, to keep people as slaves not because you held any ill will

toward them, but simply because that was the law of the land... It was a little late to be realizing this, but it really was quite a complicated situation.

“Ah, hold on! Don’t stir those ingredients in yet!” Rimee Ruu suddenly called out, causing my heart to skip a beat. The women who had been about to transfer their diced ingredients to a plate quietly turned to face Rimee Ruu. “I was thinking we could try to change how we make the manju a bit today... But is it okay for me to do something I thought up all on my own?” Rimee Ruu asked me.

“Of course,” I replied with a nod. “You’re the one in charge now, so you don’t need my permission. What exactly is this idea?”

“Well, it looks like there’s a lot more arow and ramam than usual today, so I was thinking we could try making fruit manju in addition to meat ones! I mean, we’ve got a lot of minmi too, right? It’s such a waste, considering how expensive it is!”

Minmi was a peach-like fruit that came from Jagar, so it cost a good bit more than arow and ramam, which were harvested in the west.

Just as Rimee Ruu had said, they did indeed have plenty of ingredients brimming with sweet and sour flavors today. There were arow berries, apple-like ramam, and sheel, which looked like a durian on the outside but was actually a citrus on the inside.

“We can use sugar now, so wouldn’t a sweet fruit manju be nice? If we use sugar, we should be able to make the arow and sheel taste delicious too.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. And as an added bonus, the quality of the meat manju should improve too if we take those superfluous ingredients out of them.”

“Eh heh heh,” Rimee Ruu happily giggled. “In that case, why don’t we dig out the sour bits of the sheel and use the skin in the normal manju? The skin is bitter and tough, so I don’t think it’d go well in a sweet manju.”

The instructions she gave the northern women were also quite precise. It seemed that Rimee Ruu had firmly secured her spot as the third best chef in the Ruu clan. I was secretly impressed, watching her work.

Then, the young woman who had been kneading fuwano dough all this time expressionlessly turned my way. “Are you Asuta of the Fa clan?”

“Ah, yes, that’s me. Nice to meet you.”

“I am very grateful to you,” she said with a little bow of her head, and then she silently resumed her kneading.

Had they previously been told my name, then? I couldn’t exactly picture these women shedding tears, but that brief exchange gave me a glimpse of how they truly felt.

Around then, Polarth interjected, “Hmm... I believe I have at least come to understand how skillfully they are working. Sir Melfried, I am thinking of trading places with Sir Torst now.”

Following his lead, we went ahead and yielded our places to Jiza and Reina Ruu as well. As those three took our places in the kitchen, we stepped out under the overhang with Polarth.

“That Rimee Ruu girl truly is skilled when it comes to manning the kitchen! She kept a watchful eye on the entire workspace, yet didn’t interject unnecessarily. For someone her age, her performance was quite impressive,” Polarth said.

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied with a swift nod, surely happy to hear Rimee Ruu praised. But then, she quickly turned her gaze downward and added, “My apologies.”

“There is nothing to apologize for. It is now an official duty of mine to converse with people of the forest’s edge, after all, so I welcome you speaking candidly with me at informal gatherings such as this one.”

“Informal?”

“Yes. At formal gatherings we hear the consensus of your people from the leading clan heads, but at informal gatherings, I wish to hear your personal thoughts and feelings. There is no need for formalities here.”

Ai Fa deeply furrowed her brow, considering his words carefully. Seeing the look on her face, Polarth let a little chuckle slip out.

“I believe your frankness is part of your people’s charm. Having to separate one’s personal feelings from the official stance one takes publicly just complicates things.”

“Are you saying you all have personal feelings you have hidden from us, then?”

“Well, let us say that I cannot imagine many people in the castle town go around always letting their true feelings show, though I do admit I personally tend to let people see mine quite often.” The frown on Ai Fa’s face was growing deeper, so Polarth said, “Umm...” as he pinched his round cheek and searched for what to say. “Take Lady Lefreya, for example. Her true desire is to better the lives of the northerners. But if she pushes for that openly, the capital could deem her to be guilty of treason. Instead, she decided to take the official stance that improving our treatment of them would also benefit Genos. To you people of the forest’s edge, do her actions seem mistaken?”

“Well... It is of course best to be truthful, but...that ‘official stance’ you speak of is not lying, is it?”

“Of course not. It is the result of her worrying over how to improve the lives of the northerners while still upholding the laws of the kingdom.”

“In that case, I believe her actions are correct,” Ai Fa readily declared, causing Polarth to break out in a wide grin and nod.

“I believe our opinions and those of the people of the forest’s edge do not differ so greatly regarding the northerners. That is why Sir Melfried is taking care to make sure no minor misunderstandings or mistakes get in the way.”

As Polarth was saying that, Melfried himself exited the kitchen, and though Jiza Ruu and Torst had just entered the room, they were now coming out again behind him.

“It seems they will be continuing to do the same tasks for the next while, so I believe we should observe the worksite now. Would that be acceptable?” Melfried proposed.

“Yes, I have no objections,” Dari Sauti replied, then he leaned in close to me. “My apologies, but could I join you in your wagon, Asuta? Ours lacks a roof, so

it's quite awkward to use during the rainy season.”

“Of course, that's fine. It's just me and Ai Fa in ours, after all.”

Dari Sauti, the Vela clan head, Jiza Ruu, and Shin Ruu all boarded the wagon along with us. Ludo Ruu would be remaining in the kitchen as a guard, and Reina Ruu would do the same as an observer.

With Ai Fa driving, we exited the Sauti settlement and headed south down the path through the forest's edge. It was my first time heading farther south than this. According to Dari Sauti, the Fei and Tamur, two subordinate clans of the Sauti, were down that way. The path itself was the same as always, though, even if all the rain was making the area dimmer.

After driving the wagon for a few minutes, Ai Fa let slip a low “Ugh...” from up in the driver's seat. Still clad in my rain gear, I immediately leaned forward beside her. In a way, what I saw there was exactly what I had expected.

Ahead of us, groups of northerners were using axes to cut down trees, which were then being loaded into carts and wagons. Dozens of men were working at the site, watched over by guards holding spears. The men looked like they were built as rugged as boulders, and were all at least as big as Donda Ruu, with some even being as big as Ji Maam. They technically had rain gear on, but it probably didn't serve much purpose when they were doing this kind of work—they were all soaking wet and coated in mud.

The majority of the laborers were brawny men, but there were women sprinkled here and there throughout, cutting branches off of the felled trees. Once the trees were stripped bare, they were loaded onto roofless wagons. However, since they stuck out from the back of the cargo beds a good bit, the northerners had to support them from behind as they were transported out into the world. Notably, the drivers of the wagons were all westerners, which meant that only the tolos and the northerners were forced to do manual labor.

The path that led out into the world, which connected to the southern extreme of the Daleim lands, had been cleared to be pretty wide. Before they had acquired a wagon, the Sauti and their subordinate clans had purchased aria and poitan from a village there, because it would have taken them a couple hours to walk to the post town from this area.

The old part of the path extended to the southwest, while a new part was being cleared to the east. Adding in the path we had come here from the north on, it formed a kind of awkward three-way intersection. The trees in this area were sparse, so the work seemed to have progressed a good bit more than I had expected. There were already hundreds of meters of road laid out, and trees were being carried from the far end one after another.

Now that I think about it, there's always been enough space here to allow large groups of wagons to pass through, hasn't there? Leito's father, Milano Mas's brother-in-law, had found out about this gap in the forest, which was what had led him to conclude that transiting through was possible. Then he'd sought permission to pursue the idea from the castle, and had been introduced to the Suun clan by way of Cyclaeus...but in the end, he lost his life to a giba that had been spurred on by giba summoning fruit.

The northerners kept on working in silence as our three vehicles approached, taking no note of us as we all stepped down to the ground, nobles and people of the forest's edge alike. They had their hoods pulled up far over their heads, so I couldn't see their expressions, but unsurprisingly, they too were working mechanically and disinterestedly, neither hurrying nor going too slow.

"You certainly have quite a few guards keeping watch," Jiza Ruu muttered as he stepped out of the wagon and into the rain.

The guards were standing at regular intervals off to the side of the cleared path, so as not to get in the way of the work. A few were walking around, giving instructions to the northerners, but for the majority of them, their only job seemed to be standing in the rain with their spears.

"There are around one hundred twenty northerners here in total, to whom we have assigned roughly sixty guards. Ten of them are directing the work, while the other fifty are keeping watch," Melfried replied in a low voice.

"I see," Jiza Ruu said with a nod. "So around fifty of them are standing around with nothing to do? If they were to assist with the work, it would be completed much quicker, would it not?"

"While we have no concerns about the northerners plotting escape or rebellion, they *have* been given axes and hatchets, so more caution than usual

is necessary... Though if they *were* plotting rebellion, fifty or sixty guards would not be enough to suppress it.”

“That’s only natural. In terms of arm strength, it appears that they would even be a match for us hunters of the forest’s edge. Of course, that’s only taking their physical strength into account.”

As I listened to them talk, I couldn’t help but feel terribly on edge. It wasn’t like I had assumed that the northerners were being constantly whipped to force them to work, and I had certainly been praying that wouldn’t be the case. And it had turned out that I was right; they were just solemnly working away without a single whip in sight, carrying out the harsh labor of cutting down huge trees in the rain and carrying them out of the forest systematically, like robots.

What’s going on...? Something feels strange here...

Perhaps it was only natural for people living as slaves to not let their suffering show. Even so, they were still far too silent. Although actually, it wasn’t like they were a bunch of clay dolls, utterly devoid of life. In fact, the members of the Suun clan had once been even more lifeless and pathetic than this.

Now that I think about it...I never would have guessed that Chiffon Chel was a slave if someone hadn’t told me so.

Perhaps slaves in Genos differed from my preconceived notions. After all, slaves didn’t even exist back in my home country to begin with. The ideas I had about them all came from history and fictional tales. It wasn’t like the nobles of Genos fit perfectly with my mental image of nobles either. Perhaps that went for the townsfolk, merchants, and hunters too.

Even so, the fact remained that they were slaves. They hadn’t been brought here of their own volition, and their legs were bound with chains. No matter how hard they worked, they would receive no payment, and they weren’t permitted to marry, nor would they ever be allowed to return home. It was an unbelievably tragic fate.

“As you said before, Dari Sauti, we have been left with the question of what to do to make amends for having let the previous head of the house of Turan, Cyclaeus, run free,” Melfried eventually stated in a voice I couldn’t possibly hope to read any emotion from. “I believe that is undoubtedly true. My father,

Duke Genos, has not been granted the authority to control what each count does with their own lands... However, the Turan county is still a part of Genos as a whole, and any fault that originates there naturally falls upon him as well. This is yet another unfortunate legacy Cyclaeus has left for us.”

“Are you saying you do not see using these people freely without paying them anything as being to Genos’s benefit?” Dari Sauti questioned.

“Of course I do not. It is not as if we harbor hatred toward northerners. And furthermore, we are not so wanting as to need to rely on slaves in any case. Yet, we find ourselves with no choice but to use them... I most certainly do not find that desirable.” Melfried’s gray eyes shone as if he was glaring at some invisible enemy. “Furthermore, the idea has been raised that we should sell these slaves to another town. But if we were to do that without warning, the Turan lands would suddenly be short on workers, and there are no other towns nearby that use slaves regardless. Also...” Melfried started, only to hold his tongue.

“Also?” Dari Sauti pressed. But Melfried remained silent, so Polarth spoke in his stead.

“Also, there is no guarantee they will be better off in some other land, so there is no benefit to us going far out of our way to find a buyer.”

Dari Sauti and Jiza Ruu both silently stared at Melfried. With eyes as chilly as moonlight, the noble clad in rain gear continued to stare out at the sight of the working northerners. “My previous explanation may have been somewhat incomplete...but this is what I mean when I say you people of the forest’s edge should not advocate on behalf of the northerners.”

“I see. Well, I don’t think it’s wrong to tell us not to stick our necks into such a troublesome matter,” Dari Sauti said.

“It is said that people should work within their means... Furthermore, it is our duty as nobles of Genos to be the ones to concern ourselves with the northerners living here.” After saying that, Melfried finally turned back to us. “There is no need for your people to worry about the northerners. However, we may ask for advice in the future in regards to their meals, and we would greatly appreciate any assistance you may provide.”

“Understood. We can discuss the rest in a proper meeting.”

Dari Sauti calmly looked out over the northerners, while Jiza Ruu looked at both them and Melfried.

It was then that I finally came to realize a certain fact. Kamyua Yoshu had changed gods from the north to the west, and he and Melfried were close enough to be called sworn friends. I had no clue what their relationship was really like, but even so, if Melfried called Kamyua Yoshu his friend...then whatever we felt about all this, he had to be more conflicted than any of us.

I wonder where that guy's wandering has taken him now? I'm sure someone who's traveled as much as Kamyua Yoshu would have some good advice to give about how to handle the northerners.

But even if that easygoing man had been here, it was possible he'd just play the part of an onlooker, offering nothing but a faint smile. It was pointless to try to imagine what he would do anyway. Kamyua Yoshu wasn't by Melfried's side now. The heir to the title of lord of Genos had no choice but to carry the full weight of responsibility for this matter on his shoulders as he dealt with the presence of these northerners directly.

Chapter 4: A Day Back at Work

1

The seventeenth of the brown month... That was the day I returned to my work at the stalls in the post town.

This was two days after my visit to the Sauti settlement, or twelve days after I had collapsed from illness. I could now spend as much time as I wanted outside the house without ever showing any indication of becoming seriously exhausted, so I had finally made the decision to properly get back into the swing of things.

Ai Fa would also be going back to hunting starting today. When I finished my morning prep and went to leave the Fa house that morning, I thought she looked even more gallant than usual as she saw me off. The only thing she said to me was “Let’s both get to work,” but that alone was enough to make me more excited to go do my job than ever.

“Well then, let’s get going.”

Yun Sudra was holding Gilulu’s reins in my place. Since the Fa were sending out two wagons today, Fafa’s was following along behind us. The other people riding in our wagon included Toor Deen, Lili Ravitz, and the young Matua girl.

“I’m so glad to see how well you’ve recovered, Asuta. If work starts to get too hard for you, be sure to speak up and don’t push yourself, okay? Though I guess it might be presumptuous of a newcomer like me to offer such advice,” the thirteen-year-old Matua girl said, smiling at me. As a trainee, she worked the stalls every day, and naturally ended up visiting me daily in turn.

“Right, thanks. I’m sorry I only ended up looking after you for those first two days, though.”

“No, think nothing of it. I can’t say I wouldn’t have wanted you to teach me personally... But even so, thanks to Toor Deen and Yun Sudra, I’ve become

skilled enough to not feel embarrassed by my work. I'm really looking forward to seeing whether you judge me ready to stand on my own today."

She and the Meem woman had started training at the start of the rainy season, and their pay would remain low until they were recognized as full-fledged employees. Of course, it wasn't like they were all that worried about the money. Her earnest smile made that clear enough.

Next to her, Toor Deen was wiping her eyes stealthily. When I'd told her I would be working the stalls again as of today, happy tears had once again started flowing down her cheeks.

"I'm certainly glad it wasn't any worse... I look forward to working with you again, Asuta," Lili Ravitz quietly stated from her position, seated separately from everyone.

With a bow of my head, I replied, "I'm looking forward to working with you too."

She looked like a calm Jizo statue, as always, and I still couldn't tell what she was thinking. But from what Ai Fa had said, even though she only worked the stalls once every three days, she had inquired as to how I was doing each time she visited the Fa house.

After around twenty minutes or so, we arrived at the Ruu settlement. We stopped for a bit to see if anyone would want to ride along with us, at which point the Min and Muufa women approached our wagons.

"Um, I know this will change our usual distribution, but could we ride in this wagon?"

"Yes, of course. It's rare for you two to ride with us."

These women worked for the Ruu clan on a semialternating schedule, along with one other from the Lea clan, with two of them selected to work each day.

"Everyone else has already had a chance to talk to you, so they let us ask to go with your group instead. It really is good to see you looking well, Asuta."

"If too many of us came to see you, we knew it would have inconvenienced you, so we didn't visit the Fa house, but everyone from the Min clan is

overjoyed that you're feeling better."

The nearby clans, the Ruu, the Rutim, and even people like them who I didn't have close ties with had all had so many kind words for me. When I asked them about their request, they told me that Sheera Ruu had suggested they ride with us, as we didn't have many chances to talk while working. I was grateful for how considerate she was, feeling more and more content as we headed toward the post town.

There was yet another commotion once we did arrive. When we arrived at our first stop, The Kimyuus's Tail, Telia Mas was there, and she immediately started crying, while Milano Mas grabbed ahold of me with incredible speed.

"Hey?! Are you feeling all better now?!"

"Y-Yes. Sorry for worrying you."

"I can't believe you. You're already almost fully grown, so how'd you go and catch Amusehorn's breath of all things?!"

It was like I was being chastised for some sort of betrayal or something. Still, that just went to show how concerned Milano Mas had been for me. It was hard for me to keep from crying myself as he shook me back and forth by my shoulders.

Telia Mas broke out in a tearful smile as she watched the two of us. "I really am glad. I kept thinking about stopping by your house to see how you were doing. But even if I did, I couldn't have done anything to help."

"Those words alone are plenty. Thank you so much, Telia Mas, Milano Mas."

"Hmph!" Milano Mas snorted, finally letting me go. Then, he shot me an angry glance as he looked me over. "So, you really are all back to normal?"

"Yes. It'll still take a few more days to fully regain my original stamina, but I figure I'm at a point where I can work as long as I keep an eye on my condition."

"So you've come strolling into town when you're still not fully recovered?!"

"Ah, no, I'm only talking about my stamina... There's really no need to worry."

After somehow managing to calm an overly excited Milano Mas, we were finally able to pick up our stalls.

The Ruu clan was taking care of delivering food to the other inns today, so I figured I would check in with the rest of the inn owners after work. That meant our next destination was Dora's shop...and when he saw me, he grabbed my hands and started shedding manly tears.

"Asuta! You've finally made it back to town! Everyone told me there was no need to worry, but still...I'm just so glad!"

Though he usually looked fairly stern, his face was now a mess of tears and snot. His adorable daughter, Tara, then slipped past him to hug me, wearing her rain gear.

"It's been so long, Asuta! You look like you're doing way better!"

"Yeah, thanks. Are you doing okay, Tara?"

"Yup!"

Unlike her father, she had greeted me with a bright smile, and though we were both wearing rain gear, she rubbed her little head up against my chest. Sandwiched between the emotional father-daughter pair, I was starting to tear up too.

"I'm so glad... I felt like my heart would give out on me those first few days! I ended up going to the temple of Selva that's not far from here every single day, even though I normally never go anywhere near the place!"

"Yeah, we prayed at the temple every day! We asked Selva not to take your soul away! Since Amusehorn's sleeping, we had to pray to his child, Selva."

"Thanks. I'm feeling all better now."

Just as I was thinking I might need to pull my hood down over my eyes to hide my tears, Dora finally let go of my hands.

"It's going to be like this everywhere you go today, Asuta, so you'd best prepare yourself! Now then, which vegetables would you like to buy today?" After nonchalantly wiping my eyes, I went ahead and ordered the veggies we needed. "By the way, this is finally the last of my tino and tarapa! We'll be able to harvest our first crop of rainy season vegetables in the next few days, so I hope you'll order some then!"

“Right. I’ll definitely do that. But I’ll have to bring some back home first so I can figure out how to use them to make something good.”

Now that I thought about it, nearly half a month had passed since the beginning of the rainy season. Since Dora’s tarapa, tino, and pula were all sold out as of today, that meant I would finally need to drastically change up the menu at the stalls.

“See you later! Tara and I will stop by your place when the sun nears its peak!”

“Okay. We’ll be waiting for you.”

With that, we headed to the far north with our wagons and stalls in tow.

As we walked, Yun Sudra shot me a smile. “He was right about how this sort of thing is going to keep happening today. We’re stopping by the other inns on our way back, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I need to go see all of the people who have helped me out.”

With that, my first work shift in around twelve days kicked off.

Of course, I was the only one who had taken time off, and things at the stalls were unchanged. The customer traffic was still on the low side because of the rainy season, so you could definitely say we had a peaceful day at work.

I kept on getting familiar customers nonchalantly calling out to me, “Hey, so you’re finally back, eh?” All they had been told was that I had fallen ill and would be gone for a few days, but even so, I still felt incredibly grateful whenever I spoke to one of them.

The next big commotion came after we made it past our modest morning rush. Yumi arrived in rain gear that was every bit as colorful as what the women of the forest’s edge wore, and when she peered into my stall, she got all excited.

“Asuta! You’re okay now?! Really?! I heard you might not be back for a while!”

“Ah, yeah. I figured if I gave a date and didn’t return by then, it would make people worry for no reason, so we just didn’t. Sorry to have worried you, Yumi.”

“You sure did! Jeez. I was actually kind of scared there for a bit, not knowing what was going on with you!” Underneath the hood of her rain gear, I could see a radiant smile on Yumi’s face. “Telia Mas and I talked about coming to see you so many times! But I heard you were still all skinny even after your fever came down, so I decided not to! I’d totally break down crying if I saw you like that!”

“Ah ha ha, I see.”

“It’s not funny! I was seriously worried about you!” Despite her words, Yumi was laughing too. Though the ways they expressed it differed, everyone really had been concerned about me. Having been hit with one wave of happiness after another all day, my chest was starting to feel tight from the sheer joy of it all.

“Still, I sure am glad! Is Diel gonna show up today, do you think? She was super worried too!”

“Oh, so Diel heard about my sickness too? I guess since I was away for over ten days, she must have stopped by the stalls once or twice.”

“Yeah, but she seemed to know about your sickness right from the start. There were probably rumors about it in the castle town.”

Rather than rumors, she had probably heard about it directly from Polarth. He would have been a part of the discussions with the leading clan heads regarding the northerners, which had been starting up around then, so my situation had probably been mentioned to him right away.

“You still look a bit skinny there, Asuta.”

“Ah, you can tell? I think I’m mostly back to normal from the neck on up.”

“Your neck looks skinnier too! You were already skinny to begin with, so you’ve got to eat properly and get some meat back on your bones, okay?”

“Sure thing. I’m eating well every day, so I’ll probably be back to normal soon enough.”

There were no more customers arriving, so Yumi decided to hang around in front of my stall for a while. As we were chatting, she suddenly leaned in close to me and whispered, “By the way, I heard an easterner asked Vina Ruu to

marry him and moved into the settlement at the forest's edge. Is that true?"

"Yeah, it is. Apparently, he received permission from the lord of the land to do so."

"Huh?! You need permission from the duke to live at the forest's edge?!"

"That's right. There're a lot of things that are special about it, after all. We don't need to pay taxes, for example, so it'd cause a whole lot of trouble if anyone from town were allowed to move there. That's why Myme and Mikel are still officially citizens of the Turan lands, and are only staying at the forest's edge as guests."

"Hmm, I see. Sounds complicated... By the way, what did that easterner need to do to be accepted as a person of the forest's edge?"

"He had to meet the baseline qualifications for living as one of our people... Oh, and he showed his resolve by changing gods from Sym to Selva."

"Oh, so he's a westerner now, not an easterner... Well in that case, what should someone who's a westerner to begin with do to show their resolve?"

At this point, I finally started having questions.

"What exactly are you talking about, Yumi? Do you know someone who wants to live at the forest's edge?"

"Huh? Yeah, me. You didn't hear that from Ai Fa?"

"N-No, I haven't! What's that all about?"

"Eh? It was a big monumental decision for me to open up about that! Did you not tell him either, Toor Deen?"

The girl in question was selling giba curry at the neighboring stall. She looked rather bewildered by the attention suddenly being directed at her. "N-No. I thought since it was so important to you, it would be bad to spread it around carelessly. I'm sure Ai Fa and Yun Sudra felt the same way."

"Oh, I see! I'm just glad you didn't think it was some random nonsense," Yumi remarked with an amused chuckle, prompting Toor Deen to give a troubled laugh in return.

“I’m shocked. When did you talk about that, anyway? Actually, I can only recall seeing you and Ai Fa talking to each other a handful of times.”

“It was at that one party, the welcome banquet put on by the Ruu clan! The men and women split up to sleep, right? We all talked about it then!”

That had been over two months ago. It was a shock to hear that such an important conversation had happened that far back.

“It’s not like I have any specific plans or anything, though! It’s just that the forest’s edge seems fun, and there are lots of handsome men there, so it felt like it might be a nice place to live! What do you think, Asuta?”

“What do I think...? I’m shocked you’d make a decision like that just because it sounds a bit *nice*.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not like I’ve made up my mind yet or anything! I don’t even know if any of the guys there would take a girl like me for a wife to begin with!” Yumi seemed so utterly carefree.

I thought about my next words carefully as I stared at her earnest smile. “I see... Well, I certainly don’t think it would be easy. Still, putting all the difficulties that would be involved aside, it makes me glad to hear you think that way.”

“Really? You mean it?”

“Yeah. I’m really happy to hear you think it’d be fun to live at the forest’s edge. Especially since you’re a native child of Genos.”

“Yup. If my folks heard about this, they’d probably topple over,” Yumi remarked, laughing for a bit and then shrugging. “Well, whatever. I can worry about it once I find a guy I like. Anyway, for today, I think I’ll go with curry! Does the dish you’re selling pair with curry, Asuta?”

“Yeah, I think they should go together okay.”

I was selling today’s special, a meat and vegetable stir-fry in the style of twice-cooked pork. Since we weren’t getting many customers, I figured it would be good to serve dishes that could be left to sit for a while.

During my absence, Yun Sudra had handled the giba curry, while Toor Deen

had done her best to think up daily specials. Reina and Sheera Ruu had also helped out, and they'd somehow managed to make it through those twelve days.

"I'm shocked to hear someone from town would ask to marry into the forest's edge! Not that long ago, everyone looked down at us and called us 'giba eaters,'" the Matua girl commented after Yumi disappeared into the outdoor restaurant space. She sounded impressed.

It certainly *was* surprising to hear. Shumiral had fallen for Vina Ruu first, but he hadn't decided to ask her to marry him until some time later. However, in Yumi's case, her interest in living at the forest's edge had come first, which was even more shocking in a way.

Of course, it would be far from easy, and Yumi didn't seem all that serious about it at the moment. Still, her nonchalance actually made me even happier. It felt reassuring, somehow. Yumi was a native of Genos who had really looked down on the people of the forest's edge at first, so her attitude had changed a lot since then. *All sorts of changes have been happening. Even ones I haven't noticed.*

I could hear Yumi happily chatting away in the restaurant space. Since my return, Yun Sudra had gone back to working on that side of the business, and I could hear her laughing too.

After that, Dora and Tara arrived as promised, and time slowly passed on by. It was just starting to look like we were somehow going to sell all of the food we had prepared when the merchants of the Silver Vase showed up at our stalls.

"Asuta, I see that, you have returned, to work. Congratulations, on your recovery," Radajid said with an expressionless bow of his head.

"Thank you," I replied with a bow of my own. "I heard that you all came out to the Fa house, which I really appreciate too. I was still delirious with fever at the time, though."

"Yes. We could hear, your pained voice, from outside, of the house. It filled me with anguish, to hear it."

"I'm pretty embarrassed about that."

“It is nothing, to be embarrassed about. We offer our thanks, to each of our gods, that you are, all right,” Radajid said, a gentle light shining on his eyes as he continued, “We actually intended, to visit, the Fa house today. Tomorrow morning, we are departing, from Genos.”

“Oh, that’s right! You’re finally returning to Sym, huh? You were only planning to be in Genos for a month, and we hardly got to talk at all during the back half of your stay. That’s a real shame.”

“Yes. But we shall, visit Genos, many times. I look forward, to the day, we meet again.”

Still, taking travel time into account, it would be ten months before the Silver Vase returned to Genos. Looking at it one way, it meant that Shumiral had a lot of time before he would be returning to his merchant work, but that didn’t change the sad fact that he would be separating from Radajid and the others until then.

“Um, you’re of course going to go see Shumiral too, right?”

“Yes. We intend, to visit, the Ririn clan, in the evening. We also, need to visit, the Ruu house.”

“In that case, would you mind stopping by the Fa house as well? I don’t have all that much, but I’d like to give you some giba jerky.”

“But you sell that, in the castle town, do you not? It is, very expensive, I am told. It would be difficult, for us to buy,” Radajid stated, sounding deeply reserved.

I shook my head in response and said, “No, I’m talking about a special kind of jerky, not the ordinary stuff. It’s a farewell gift, not a product for sale.”

“A farewell gift... We appreciate that, very much so, but we cannot accept. Giba meat, costs far more now, than it used to.”

“Even so, I’d really like you to accept it. I want all of you to try it, of course, but it’s also for the people waiting for you back home in Sym.”

“The people, back home?” Radajid repeated with a tilt of his head.

“Yes,” I replied with a nod. “Shumiral said he didn’t have any close relatives

back home, but he still had friends and acquaintances, right? I'd like those people to have a chance to try giba meat. It might make it a little easier for them to picture what it's like for Shumiral to live here, so far away to the west, if they eat the same sort of food as him."

"I see." Radajid brought his fingers together in a strange manner and bowed his head once more. "I appreciate, your thoughtfulness. We will make certain, to stop by, the Fa house. And we will, say our farewells, when we do."

"Right. See you then."

Radajid and company bought all of the remaining curry, then headed over to the restaurant space. As I watched their tall, slender figures leave, I sighed deeply. The past month seemed to have gone by in a flash. Perhaps it was only natural that I would feel that way, considering how I had been bedridden due to sickness for ten days, but even so, I was once again reminded how cruel the passage of time could be.

But as long as we're all still alive, we'll be able to meet again. For now, I just had to cling to that thought. After I had been forced to relive my death again and again in my nightmares, it had really strengthened my appreciation for the joy of being alive.

I want to keep living with everyone. With Ai Fa, of course, and everyone from the forest's edge, and Genos, and foreigners like Radajid and company. All of us together. As I was thinking that, I stepped back a bit and stared up at the dark gray clouds. Would the gods of this world allow me to continue to live in this land? Who exactly had brought me here to begin with? I had no way of knowing any of that...but I found myself expressly praying to the gods for the first time since I had appeared in the forest.

Please, allow me to keep living here in this little corner of the world. I swear I won't do anything bad.

Naturally, I got no response.

The Matua girl working alongside me worriedly called out, "Um, Asuta, if you're going to step out from under the roof, please put on your rain gear. It's not good to let yourself get all chilly."

“Right. Thanks.”

After directing one more firm look up at the gray sky, I returned to the shelter my stall provided. It would be closing time before very much longer now.

2

After work, the plan was to head by The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree, then return to the settlement at the forest’s edge.

Nail and Naudis both celebrated my return, each in their own ways. They didn’t get as hysterical as Milano Mas or Dora, but their feelings about what had happened came through loud and clear.

“Even while you were away, the quality of the meals that were delivered to us didn’t decrease at all. It was quite reassuring,” Naudis, the most businesslike of the inn owners, told me with a brilliant smile.

I also wanted to stop by The Westerly Wind, but there tended to be dangerous people skulking around that area after the sun hit its peak, so I was warned that it would be too risky to go there without guards. I had no choice but to give up on visiting them today, instead deciding I would see them eventually when I delivered giba meat in the morning.

Instead, we went to Tanto’s Blessing. We had no business ties with the place, but the chef Yang came here almost every day to prepare food. He had handed off the running of his stalls to someone else and was now focusing on his work in the kitchen.

“Ah, Sir Asuta. So you are back at work today? I’m so glad to see you looking well,” Yang said with a calm smile, appearing from the kitchen. I had met with his employer, Polarth, just two days ago, so he must have already heard that I would be returning soon. “I happened to encounter Sir Varkas’s apprentices the other day in the castle town market. As you were still doing poorly at the time, they were quite worried.”

“Varkas’s apprentices? Were Shilly Rou or Bozl there?”

“It was Lady Shilly Rou and Sir Tatumai. Sir Tatumai is in charge of procuring vegetables, after all.”

Tatamai was an older gentleman with mixed blood from Sym. I felt like I hadn't seen either him or Varkas in quite some time.

"Sir Varkas is currently dedicating his efforts toward experimenting with an ingredient from Sym known as shaska, and I am quite eager to see what sort of dish he will unveil."

"It's supposed to be similar to the pasta and soba I've made, right? Yeah, I'm looking forward to it too." Still, as I wasn't even a resident of the castle town, it was pretty rare for me to get a chance to try Varkas's cooking. I figured I was going to have to wait until another opportunity for us to work a kitchen together came around for that to happen. "If you happen to run across them again, could you tell them that I'm sorry for worrying them? I have no way of getting in contact with them myself."

"Understood. Ah, and regarding Lady Arishuna, you have no need to worry, as Sheila has been passing the news along to her daily." As we currently couldn't purchase poitan and were unable to sell pasta at the stalls as a result, we were instead selling giba curry on a daily basis, with a serving being delivered to Arishuna each day by way of Yang. "Lady Arishuna has been terribly worried about you, so I am sure it shall soothe her greatly to hear that you have resumed work. We have all been keeping you in our thoughts, Sir Asuta."

"Yeah, and I'm incredibly grateful. I doubt something like this will happen again, so I look forward to continuing to work alongside you."

With that, I said farewell to Yang, and we finally set off back toward the forest's edge.

Fafa's and Ruuruu's wagons had gone on ahead, so we only had one wagon with us now. And just like this morning, Yun Sudra was in charge of driving.

"From what I hear, Rimee Ruu's still going to the Sauti settlement on a daily basis, right? There's no consistency in how much of each ingredient is getting delivered each day, so she has to teach the Sauti women how to deal with that," Yun Sudra remarked.

"Yeah," I replied. This first day back at work was a trial of sorts, and if I continued to not have any issues, I intended to start going to the Sauti settlement again myself. "Rimee Ruu really is something else. I thought I had a

good grasp on her skills as a chef, but I had no clue she had become this adaptable.”

“Yes, and then you have Toor Deen too. I’m confident in my skills as a chef now thanks to your help, Asuta, but I’m still far from being on their level.”

“Ah, but...”

“Yes, I know it’s more that they’re simply too amazing than anything else, so rather than feeling inferior, I want to keep trying even harder using them as an example.”

Incidentally, Toor Deen was currently next to me, cradling her knees. Her face was bright red as she shrank into herself even more.

“Oh, I can see the Ruu settlement. We’re just stopping by there for a moment today, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a little business with Reina Ruu and the others. I wanted opinions on the dishes we’ll be serving starting tomorrow.”

This was a matter I would have taken care of sooner, had I not collapsed from illness. During the rainy season, we couldn’t use tarapa, tino, or pula, which would have a big impact on the giba burgers and myamuu giba sold by the Ruu clan.

It was quiet today at the Ruu settlement. During the rainy season, you had to do virtually all of your work inside the house. That said, I found it pretty amusing to imagine young children running around excitedly as the women tanned hides and split firewood in the entrance or main hall of their house.

We stopped by the main house first to inform them of the purpose behind our visit, then circled around back to the kitchen. Waiting for us there were Reina, Sheera, Mia Lea, and Lala Ruu.

“The Ruu clan welcomes you. Sorry for having you come all this way. Are you feeling okay now?”

“Yes, I haven’t had any trouble at all yet... Ah, that sure is a nice smell wafting through the air.”

“Reina and Sheera Ruu have been putting a lot of thought into this new dish,

and they came up with something really interesting. I don't think there are any issues with it, but they won't feel at ease till they hear it from you," Lala Ruu told me.

The two chefs in question were standing beside the stove, looking nervous.

"Well then, could we ask you to give it a taste test? We call it a new dish, but it's ultimately just changing up the flavoring of a giba burger," Reina Ruu said.

"Yes. Giba burgers are still quite popular, so we tried to think of a way we could keep selling them during the rainy season," Sheera Ruu added.

With that, Reina Ruu removed the lid from the pot, and the fragrant aroma filling the kitchen intensified. Looking inside, I saw a boiling orange sauce. It looked thick enough that you could almost call it a stew.

"Ah, that's a great smell. Does that color come from nenon?"

"Yes. Since we cannot use tarapa, we wanted to see if nenon would work."

Nenon was a vegetable akin to a carrot. The flavor wasn't as strong as a carrot's, but it was somewhat sweeter. Though it tended to not stand out very much in terms of taste, it was useful for adding some color to all sorts of dishes.

"I see, nenon... Now that I think about it, the kimyuus manju sold by other stalls use a lot of nenon too."

"Yes. We tried all kinds of things to add our own touches to it, but still...we'd like to hear your honest opinion," Sheera Ruu said, bringing over some fuwano bread. They prepared the same size of giba burger as was sold at the stalls, then split it into four equal parts. A good amount of that orange nenon sauce had been poured over the giba patty, and slices of aria and nenon were sandwiched in with it.

"Ooh, so you used raw nenon too, huh?"

"Yes. The taste was too sharp when we only used aria. We sliced them as thinly as possible, so I don't think they should be a problem."

Lili Ravitz and the Matua girl had headed home already, leaving just myself, Toor Deen, and Yun Sudra there as visitors. The last fourth of the dish ended up in Lala Ruu's hands.

“Well then, thanks for the food!”

When it had been whole, the burger had already been smaller than the ones we used to make, so a quarter of it only amounted to a single mouthful. Also, the sauce would almost certainly spill out if we bit into it carelessly, so even Toor Deen—the smallest of us—made an effort to get the whole thing into her mouth all at once.

The taste was superb. The flavor of the nenon was weak, so it primarily asserted itself through its color. It was mainly the natural sweetness of the vegetable that reached our tongues.

I was sure that they had used minced aria and fruit wine, just like how we made our tarapa sauce. They didn’t seem to have added any sort of herbs to the sauce, but the pico leaves provided some good seasoning on their own. The various other seasonings in the dish also seemed to be well balanced. It was a wonderful flavor with some real depth to it, fully on par with tarapa sauce. And it also seemed to go perfectly with the giba meat patty, which was dripping with meat juices.

Furthermore, the aria and nenon slices added a pleasant texture and refreshing crispness to the dish. Their flavors weren’t as potent as the onions and carrots I was familiar with, so even when they were added to the sandwich raw, they didn’t wreck the taste.

“Yup, this seems pretty tasty to me. Did you use any seasonings aside from salt, pico leaves, and fruit wine?” I asked.

“We used tau oil, red mamaria vinegar, and just a pinch of sugar.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that increasing the saltiness, sweetness, and sourness would improve the overall taste...but it all came together really well...”

Reina and Sheera Ruu were watching me attentively, their gazes deadly serious.

Looking at her sister and cousin out of the corner of her eye, Lala Ruu licked the sauce off of her fingers. “He said it was delicious, so that should be enough for you, right? Honestly, it should have been enough that the two of you

thought it was tasty.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I can’t think of anything to add, so I’d say that you should have more confidence in your own sense of taste,” I agreed.

Reina and Sheera Ruu silently grasped one another’s hands and breathed a sigh of relief.

Watching the two of them as happy smiles steadily spread across their faces, Yun Sudra gave a satisfied nod. “I think it’s really tasty too. I’d say it’s at least as good as the giba burgers I’ve eaten before.”

“Yes, I feel the same way. But...” Toor Deen started to say, only to trail off.

Reina Ruu’s expression shifted as she asked back, “But what?”

That caused Toor Deen to flinch and hide behind my back with the swiftness of a little bunny. “W-Well, it’s just...I thought the two of you would use more seasonings, so I was a bit surprised.”

“Does it feel like it needs seasonings to you, Toor Deen?” Reina Ruu asked insistently.

“N-No, of course not! I just found it a bit unusual!” the young girl said, her tiny fingers digging into my back.

Reina Ruu brought a hand to her chest to calm herself, then somehow managed a smile. “My apologies. I thought that a chef of your skill level might have noticed something we overlooked...so I may have lost control a bit there.”

“N-No, don’t worry about it.”

“We didn’t use seasonings because our other new dish uses so many. And Asuta is selling curry on a daily basis now as well. If we rely too heavily on them, it might displease our southern customers,” Sheera Ruu said as she opened a leather bag. Instantly, the overwhelming scent of herbs displaced all other smells in the room.

“Oh, is this that grilled herb and meat dish you two are so good at making?”

“Yes. We were thinking of selling this dish to take the place of myamuu giba.”

Myamuu giba also used shredded tino, which meant that we could no longer

make it as we had been either. But just throwing some other vegetable into the recipe would harm the flavor, so they decided to rework the flavoring entirely instead.

“We added boiled nanaar to the dish too. Please, give it a try.”

Using a metal pot, they sautéed some rib meat that had been marinated in fruit wine and finely chopped herbs. Then they put some of it on a flat piece of fuwano bread and added boiled nanaar on top, before folding the whole thing up like a crepe.

I had already known for some time now how delicious their grilled herb and meat dish was. Nanaar was a vegetable akin to spinach, but in the face of such powerful seasoning, its only contribution to the dish was a bit of texture.

What caught my attention more was actually the fuwano wrapped around the fillings, which was giving off a sweet and mellow aroma. It seemed they had added karon skim milk into the fuwano dough, though the herbs were kind of overpowering its scent.

“We used nanaar for the color and to provide nutrition. And as for the karon milk in the fuwano...that was to add some harmony to the aroma of the herbs, if only a little.”

“Yeah, I think that really helped to make it even tastier than your normal recipe. This is really good,” I said, feeling thoroughly satisfied.



Lala Ruu also looked overjoyed as she bit into the grilled herb and meat dish. “I love this dish! I’d definitely say I prefer ordinary meat to hamburger steak.”

“Yes, it’s very good. I think it’s even better than the version I had before,” Yun Sudra agreed.

“The sweetness of the fruit wine goes really well with the flavor of the herbs,” Toor Deen added. Naturally, those two had no complaints either.

While we had been offering our opinions, Reina and Sheera Ruu had just kept on staring at me with serious looks on their faces.

“So you think there would be no issues with serving these dishes at the stalls, Asuta?” Reina Ruu asked.

“Of course. I figure you could even keep selling them once the rainy season’s over. The grilled herb and meat dish in particular is something you’ve been working on for a while, and it shows,” I said, and then a thought came to me. “In fact, why don’t we move sales of the myamuu giba back to my side? We’ve gained access to an interesting new ingredient—keru root—so I’ve been wanting to try using that to improve the taste of the dish anyway.” Originally, myamuu giba was a dish I had come up with while trying to emulate pork fried with ginger, but myamuu was an herb more like garlic, so I’d had to change the target I’d been aiming for. Reina and Sheera Ruu were already employing keru root in the myamuu giba at my suggestion, but it would take some more experimentation to perfect the ginger pork deliciousness I wished to capture. “If you do that, all of your products will be things you came up with, aside from the giba burger patties. Your stew and offal hot pot are already quite popular, so you shouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

“That does sound like something worth thinking about. Of course, it’s thanks to Asuta’s lessons that you’re able to make such amazing dishes now. But as chefs, you’re the pride and joy of the Ruu clan, Reina, Sheera Ruu,” Lala Ruu said. Reina Ruu gave an embarrassed smile, while Sheera Ruu cast her gaze downward. “In a few days, the rainy season vegetables will go on sale. You might be able to use those to make these dishes even better.”

“Right, they’re finally going on sale, huh? But they’re supposed to be difficult to work with, so who can say how that’ll turn out,” Reina Ruu said.

It went without saying, but the people of the forest's edge had been eating those rainy season vegetables each year too. The poorer clans could only afford to buy aria and poitan, but a clan like the Ruu would have been able to purchase whichever ingredients they pleased.

"Once we're able to buy them, would you come back here to the Ruu settlement again, Asuta?" she then asked.

"Yeah, of course. I was thinking we should invite Mikel and Myme too and hold a grand study session."

"That sounds wonderful. It's been...hmm, a month and a half now since the last time you did one here, hasn't it? Everyone's been eagerly awaiting the day when you will teach us again."

It made me incredibly happy to hear that.

"Well then, let's call things here for today. Thank you for the delicious samples."

"Of course. Once you're done with your prep work, please be sure to take it easy."

"I'll be looking forward to seeing you again tomorrow, Asuta."

"Be careful on the way back. And Toor Deen and Yun Sudra, see you tomorrow too!"

We went ahead and exited the kitchen, the members of the Ruu clan seeing us off. But as we moved toward the wagon, I suddenly froze in place. There was a woman in rain gear standing under the tree Gilulu was tethered to.

"I've been waiting for you, Asuta... Could I have just a bit of your time before you leave?" It was Vina Ruu. She was standing there like a ghost in the drizzling rain, the hood of her rain gear hiding her expression.

"O-Of course I don't mind. We could talk in the wagon, if you'd like."

"I'm sorry... I don't want anyone else to overhear, so would you mind coming over this way instead?" With that, Vina Ruu smoothly turned around and started walking into the cluster of trees.

Yun Sudra blinked in surprise, then turned toward me. "What's going on?"

Something seems off, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. I wonder if something happened with Shumiral. Sorry, but would you guys mind waiting for me?"

Leaving Yun Sudra and Toor Deen behind, I went ahead and followed Vina Ruu. She had stopped at the line where the greenery started to become a bit denser. The leaves and branches above us were catching most of the rain, and hardly any of it reached the ground.

"What's up, Vina Ruu? It looks like something's worrying you," I called out, but Vina Ruu said nothing. Her face wasn't red today, and though I could see the lower half of her face under her hood, I couldn't make out any clear expression on it.

After a few more moments of silence, she finally spoke. "Asuta, are you angry?"

"Huh?" I replied, only for her to hurriedly shake her head. Then she removed her hood, as it was getting in the way, and stared straight at me.

"Why did I have to put it like that? No, that isn't what matters. Whether you're angry or not, I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize? For what? I don't have the slightest clue what you're talking about."

"I knew it. Of course you're not the kind of person to get angry over something like that. I've just been worrying myself about it for no reason." Vina Ruu's pale eyes then turned incredibly serious, and she continued, "The reason I want to apologize...is because I didn't come visit you when you were suffering from your illness."

"Huh? But you *did* visit the Fa house, didn't you?"

Ludo Ruu had visited us one morning along with all four of his sisters. How many days after I regained consciousness had that been?

"But that was after you recovered, wasn't it? I'm talking about while you were still suffering."

"Oh, so during those first three days? But my mind was so murky at the time

that I don't remember anything about who did or didn't visit us."

"I see... Reina and Ludo visited you every day, and Rimee, Lala, and Sheera Ruu came to see you once or twice. That's only natural. It goes to show how close the ties are between you and the Ruu clan."

I still didn't understand what Vina Ruu was getting at. However, a thought then struck me. "But Shumiral was bedridden from his injury then, wasn't he? He wasn't even able to move about on his own until around when I regained consciousness, right?"

"Yes, that's right. That was why I couldn't bring myself to leave the Ririn house," Vina Ruu explained, her eyes narrowing as she looked pained. "Still, his injuries were not life-threatening, whereas for you, it was a life or death matter. I couldn't bring myself to leave his side, though. No, it was more that I felt it would be wrong to do so."

"Wrong? What do you—"

"I asked you to marry me once...so I thought it would be wrong to value you more highly than him," Vina Ruu said, cutting me off.

It was rare for her to interrupt someone.

"I threw away my feelings for you, knowing that you only had eyes for Ai Fa. I most certainly don't regret falling for you, or letting those feelings go. But even so, if I were to leave his side and run to you...I think that would have been unforgivable," Vina Ruu said, mustering all her strength to do so as she gripped her shoulders through her raincoat. "I don't know how other people would have seen it, but I could never have forgiven myself for doing that... I felt that if I left him to go see you, I wouldn't have any right to receive his love after that."

"Yeah... I don't think you're wrong to feel that way."

"Yes... But it was painful to do so. If your soul had been taken away, I couldn't have forgiven myself for not coming to see you either, for as long as I lived. But if that had happened, it would have been the fate I had chosen for myself. Why was a good-for-nothing like me born here at the forest's edge, I wonder?"

"Please, don't say that. I know how you feel, but I—"

“You’re a splendid person of the forest’s edge, Asuta. You’re far more fit to call yourself one than I am.” Then Vina Ruu suddenly smiled at me, a droplet of something other than rain rolling down her cheek. “Still, I want to start anew as a woman of the forest’s edge. I’ll never again wish to cast aside my home. I want to live as a proper member of our people.”

“Don’t worry. You’re a splendid person of the forest’s edge yourself. And even setting that aside, you’re a wonderful, charming person in general. Otherwise, someone like Shumiral would never have asked you to marry him.”

“I’m not so sure. I’d imagine anyone would run the other way if they learned just how petty and wretched of a woman I really am.”

“That’s absolutely not the case,” I said firmly, taking a step toward Vina Ruu. “You’ve been worrying about this a lot these past few days, right? Now that I think about it, even when we’ve seen each other, you’ve hardly spoken at all. I think the fact that this has been bothering you so much is proof that you have a just heart. The more you suffer, the more obvious that truth should be.”

“I’m worth less than damp pico leaves.”

“Well, I’m sure there’re ways even damp pico leaves can be useful. Nothing in this world is truly without value.”

“You didn’t deny me being like damp pico leaves, huh?”

“Ah, no, I didn’t mean that in a bad way!”

“Thank you. I’ve always loved how kind you are, Asuta.” Vina Ruu didn’t move to wipe away the tears from her cheeks, but did smile even more brilliantly than before. “I want to take another look at myself. Am I capable of loving someone? Am I worthy of being loved? I can’t accept anyone’s feelings until I figure that out.”

“I don’t think it’s a matter of being capable of it or not. But I think I understand your meaning. I’ll be praying to the forest that you find the proper path forward for yourself.”

“You too, Asuta. I can’t help but worry when I look at you and Ai Fa,” Vina Ruu said, tilting her head back. Her chestnut-colored hair swayed, and her tears fell to the ground. “I’ve come to learn exactly what kind of person I am thanks to

you and Shumiral. No matter what the future holds for me, I think it's for the best that I know that now. I shall search for a path that lets me be myself, as a woman of the forest's edge."

"Right," I replied with a nod. I sensed that Vina Ruu didn't need me to say anything more at that point.

As she looked up at the sky that was being concealed by the forest canopy, Vina Ruu didn't say anything else either.

3

After returning to the Fa house from the Ruu settlement, we set about handling preparations for tomorrow.

There were already nine women awaiting us there in the kitchen when we arrived. They included the Matua and Meem women who helped out with work in the post town, Lili Ravitz, and two women each from the Fou, Ran, and Liddo. Then you had me, Toor Deen, and Yun Sudra, bringing our total up to twelve. But even still, our newly built kitchen space was big enough to allow us all to work without issue.

"Welcome back, Asuta. We've largely gotten the spices ground down into powder already."

"I see, thank you."

I could smell the aroma of the spices used to make the curry base wafting throughout the kitchen. Since we couldn't make pasta due to the poitan shortage, it was imperative for us to make sure our curry base production continued to go as smoothly as it had been before the rainy season.

The women all got right to work without needing any instructions from me. At this point, our workflow was sufficiently well established that they could carry on just fine without needing me to tell them what to do. Even with a few inexperienced cooks in the mix, the practiced hands could support them, so they were able to wrap up their tasks quickly and efficiently.

"How have things been with the Ravitz clan lately?" I called out while giving Yun Sudra pointers on how to cut the meat.

Lili Ravitz, who was currently stirring karon milk, tilted her head a bit and replied, “There have been no real changes of note. The biggest thing is the number of giba being hunted has fallen off because of the rainy season.”

Lili Ravitz hadn’t previously been participating in these prep work sessions, but thanks to the rainy season, she had more leeway with work around her house now, so she had started joining in on days when she was on duty.

The Ravitz clan only purchased a very limited variety of ingredients, so she wouldn’t have much opportunity to put the knowledge she gained here to use. Even so, I was happy to see that a man who opposed our actions like Dei Ravitz had asked his wife to take part in this work.

Dei Ravitz was also greatly interested in hunting dogs. If the Ruu clan decided it would be acceptable to keep using them, he was planning to purchase some soon after the end of the rainy season. I secretly thought to myself that it would be nice if that led to the Ravitz hunting more giba and starting to buy more kinds of ingredients than they did now.

“Ah, right, now that Asuta’s feeling all better, isn’t it about time to move forward with that one matter, Yun Sudra?” the older Fou woman asked.

Yun Sudra’s gaze fell down to her hands, and she quietly replied, “You’re right... But even so, I’m in no position to interfere... I just want to wait for my clan head’s decision.”

“Oh? But you’re an involved party too, aren’t you? We’re definitely looking forward to the day when we can welcome you all.”

I had no idea what they were talking about, which one of the Ran women who was working on my other side noticed, and she provided an explanation with a smile. “You see, the Fou, Ran, and Sudra were all thinking of holding banquets where we would send our young women off to one another’s houses in the hopes of pairing them up with young men.”

“Ah, I understand now.”

They were talking about something similar to the sort of arranged meetings some people in my home country participated in when they were looking for someone to marry.

Yun Sudra just kept on quietly slicing meat.

The Fou and Ran women continued their explanation. “The Sudra don’t have many clan members at the moment, right? That’s why we figured it would be a problem to have your men pulled into other clans.”

“So if a Sudra woman marries into either the Fou or Ran clan, and we send a woman to marry into the Sudra, the number of people in your clan would stay the same.”

“It’s easier for a woman to adapt to the customs of another clan than it is for a hunter, after all! And if we form blood ties, the men can hunt together, giving them a chance to learn each other’s ways. That’s why we want to see whether we can have the women marry into other clans.”

The Sudra only had two unmarried women, which meant that even though Yun Sudra was only fifteen, she had been selected to be one of those potential marriage candidates. I had been told a little bit about this plan previously, and I still suspected that Yun Sudra was going to have a rough time being a part of it, considering her personal feelings.

“Well, if there really aren’t any men you like, it’d be fine for us to just marry into the Sudra. Then we’d be proper relatives!”

“Um, that Cheem Sudra man who won that archery contest isn’t married, right? He’s small, but he seems like a fine hunter, and he has a pretty cute face, so I can definitely imagine lots of women being happy to marry him!”

Judging by the Fou and Ran women’s grins, they looked like they were really enjoying themselves. It would definitely be a blessing for the dwindling Fou to add a new clan to their list of relatives. At any rate, I considered all of those clans to be important comrades, so I secretly prayed to the forest that things could be settled in a manner that would satisfy everyone.

It was then that the Liddo woman who had been listening to our conversation with a smile said, “Oh, the sun’s out! Asuta, the poitan and pico leaves are in the neighboring room, right?”

“Yeah. Everything’s ready over in the pantry.”

With that, all the women who weren’t handling flames took off out of the

kitchen so fast it was like they were racing each other. During the rainy season, the sun only came out for very brief periods, so it was important to take advantage of that precious sunlight while it was available to dry out poitan and pico leaves, the supply of which was dwindling by the day.

Yun Sudra and I also quickly got to a good point to take a break from cutting meat and followed after them. Looking up, I saw widening gaps in the thin gray clouds above us, and white sunlight streaming down, gently illuminating the ground.

The women were running around excitedly like children, spreading thin layers of pico leaves across cloth sheets. They were also bringing out wooden crates full of all the poitan we could get our hands on, which we had previously boiled down in preparation for this stage.

“You can also dry it out by setting it near a stove, but it really is best to use the sun!”

“The folks back home must be in a big hurry too. We’re getting a pretty good amount of light right now, even though it’s already close to sunset.”

The apparent temperature seemed to have shifted dramatically with the appearance of the sun. When the sunlight hit your cheeks or the back of your hand, it felt like being gently embraced by some kind of great presence.

I called out to the women who had remained in the kitchen through a latticed window. “Once you reach a stopping point, why not take a bit of a break? It’s a rare opportunity, so I think we should all have a chance to take some time to enjoy the sun god’s blessing.”

“All right,” one of them replied. “The curry base is almost boiled down, so this is perfect timing.”

A few minutes later, Toor Deen and three other women came outside holding pots. The curry base also needed to be dried out in the final stage of its preparation.

And so, we all got to spend a few moments just basking in the sun god’s blessing. It was a joy we only got to really appreciate because of the rainy season. I wasn’t sure how much time passed as we took it easy, but eventually I

heard the sound of a wagon approaching. It was a huge one pulled by two tolos that appeared from beyond the thicket. Holding the reins of the vehicle was an easterner clad in a leather hooded cloak.

“Welcome to the Fa house, Silver Vase. You guys are earlier than expected.”

“Yes. We finished work, sooner than expected. The hunter Shumiral, has not yet returned, so we decided, to visit, the Fa house first,” the young easterner whose name I didn’t know replied, stepping down from the driver’s seat. Eight more easterners streamed out of the wagon in turn, and an especially tall one stepped over to stand in front of me.

“Asuta, we came, to say farewell. I am glad, the rain stopped.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure. From what I hear, long trips are difficult during the rainy season.”

“It is, no issue. After traveling, for a bit, we shall enter, a land where, the rainy season, has no impact,” Radajid said as he pulled back his hood. “You have, many women, who help you, with your stalls. I thank you all, for this past month. We had, a wonderful time, eating your, delicious food.”

“We can’t quite tell you all apart yet, but you’re the easterners who came by every single day, aren’t you? We’re really happy to hear you say that,” the Meem woman said with a bashful smile.

“Of course, we only started working recently,” the Matua girl added with a similar expression.

Once they were done greeting each other, I said, “Hold on just a moment,” and headed into our pantry. Yun Sudra followed and helped me carry out their farewell gift.

“Radajid, this is my gift to you.”

It was just a perfectly ordinary box. However, the size of it caused Radajid’s eyes to open a bit wider.

“This is, jerky? There is, quite a bit, of it.”

“Actually, there’s something else in there in addition to the jerky. This is packed with all the spices you need to make curry, like the mixture that’s drying

in that pot over there.”

“Spices for curry,” Radajid repeated, his eyes opening even wider.

“I portioned out the proper amount of each and dry roasted them. We sauté them with aria and milk fat in order to make the curry base. You can toss these spices into soups, stews, or even stir-fries as well to lend the dish the taste of curry.”

“But...herbs and spices from Sym, are valuable, in Genos, are they not?”

“Even so, I really want the people close to you and Shumiral to taste it. It would be more than enough for me if you would tell me their impressions when you next visit Genos.”

“But...”

“Oh, and please bring lots of seasonings back to Genos with you. This is a dish we can’t make without them, after all. We’ll be counting on you.”

Radajid gave a small sigh before accepting the box. Then another member of the group ran over and politely took it from him.

“Asuta, thank you, for your kindness.”

“Ah, no. It’s to show my gratitude to all of you for coming by the stalls each and every day. I also hope you’ll see it as proof of our friendship, considering we have a shared friend in Shumiral, so there’s no need to repay me.”

“We cannot, accept that,” Radajid said, signaling to one of his people with his eyes. Another young man approached holding a flat wooden box. Radajid accepted it, and then held it out to me. “This is our present, to you.”

“Uh, but I can’t accept such a—”

“We accepted, your gift.”

This was probably not a good time for Japanese-style modesty, so I simply accepted with a bow and a “Thank you.” It was a flat wooden box, square in shape with thirty centimeter sides and a depth of around twelve or thirteen centimeters. It felt quite a bit heavier than it looked.

“This is a leftover, item we, did not sell, but it is, most certainly, not of poor

quality.”

“Thank you. Is it okay if I open this here?”

Radajid gave a nod, so I had Yun Sudra support the underside as I lifted the lid off the box. Instantly, the contents caught and reflected the sunlight that was coming down on us from overhead. Inside was a large glass plate. The whole thing had been finely engraved, and it sparkled like a gemstone.

“Ooh!” As Yun Sudra and the other women peered in from the side, they all exclaimed excitedly.

“Th-This must cost quite a bit, right? I know it may be tactless to discuss prices, but still.”

“It is, no issue. This is not just, proof of our friendship, but also payment, for a request, we wish to make, of you.”

“A request?”

“Yes. We ask, that you please, watch over Shumiral,” Radajid replied, his tall frame bending down in a deep bow.

The other eight members of the group all bowed as well.

“Shumiral’s destiny, belongs to him. You need not, lend him, your strength. We simply wish, for you, to watch over him. We cannot do so, and as such, we must ask this, of you. Please watch, over him, as his fate, plays out.”

“Got it. I’ll swear on my name and this wonderful gift that I will see that promise through.”

“Thank you,” Radajid stated, slowly raising his head.

Naturally, there was no expression on his face. But even so, in his black eyes I could clearly sense his concern for Shumiral and his trust in me.

A few hours passed by after that, and night arrived.

As we ate dinner in the candlelight, I told Ai Fa the origin of the glass plate now adorning our main hall.

“I see. Shumiral and his group genuinely seem to possess a bond similar to that of blood,” Ai Fa stated in an incredibly solemn tone. She had gotten excited

like a child when she first saw the glass plate, so perhaps now she felt a need to regain her dignity. At any rate, my clan head adored such beautiful glasswork. “When they next return to Genos, Shumiral will leave the forest’s edge for half a year, correct? You should watch with your own eyes to see if he will be granted the Ririn name before then, and if he shall be permitted to marry into the Ruu.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I intend to do,” I replied, thinking back on the tears and the smile Vina Ruu had shown me earlier in the day.

In the meantime, we steadily ate our meals. For tonight’s dinner, I had made a sirloin sauté with tarapa sauce, a giba meat cream stew, a side dish of bell-pepper-like pula stuffed with minced meat, and a fresh vegetable salad.

This was the last of the tarapa and pula we would be getting for a while. For the salad, I had used plenty of the cabbage-like tino, and added a specially made dressing prepared from ground sesame-like hoboi seeds.

Watching Ai Fa eat those dishes was enough to cause my heart to bubble up with joy. It had been several days now since I had resumed making dinner, and the feeling was just as strong now as it was then.

“You taught the northern women how to make this stew with karon milk, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. But I’d prefer to find a way to make a better stock for it, both when I make it and when they do. If I could boil kimyuus bones for half a day, that would probably produce a deeper flavor.”

If I paid them coins, I could ask the neighboring woman to do that. But I felt awkward about hiring people to help make an everyday dinner, and besides, I wanted to make meals for Ai Fa all on my own as much as possible.

“Ah, right, there’s something I wanted to discuss with you, Ai Fa. Would it be okay if I buy some bricks in town?”

“Bricks? You mean those things that are used for making houses in the castle town?”

“Yeah, those are the ones. I want to use them to make a stone oven here at the forest’s edge. It would probably be difficult to gather stones and clay during

the rainy season, so I figured it would be quicker to simply buy bricks. What do you think?”

“Naturally, I am fine with leaving that decision in your hands, but can you not wait until the rainy season is over?” Ai Fa asked, seeming a bit confused as she reached out for the salty-sweet stuffed pula ground meat dish.

“Well, I’ve been interested in getting a stone oven for a while now. And besides, I’d like to perfect the process before the end of the rainy season for the northerners.”

“For the northerners?”

“Yeah. Right now they’re being given fuwano, but it’ll be back to poitan once the rainy season is over, right? And poitan doesn’t stick together like fuwano does when you just knead water into it, so it takes a bit more effort to cook. But with a big stone oven, you should be able to bake a lot of poitan all at once.”

“Hmm.”

“With fuwano you can steam it like we do now, or boil it like wontons, but poitan are difficult to handle. We could also look into ways to make some kind of poitan soup that actually tastes good, like what Toor Deen and Yun Sudra tried to cook for me, but I think it’ll seem a lot more substantial if we make it into bread, and be tastier to boot.”

Ai Fa just sat and listened.

“If we could dissolve poitan in water, put it on a large plate, and bake it in a stone oven, that would allow us to make real baked poitan without all that much effort. At the very least, it should be much cheaper to build an oven with bricks than to buy a bunch of metal trays. So, if we have the northerners build a stone oven in the kitchen they’re currently using, they should be able to keep eating delicious meals even once the rainy season ends.” Ai Fa placed the wooden plate she was holding down on the rug and stared straight at me. Her deadly serious gaze caused me to feel a bit flustered. “Of course, it isn’t as if I’ve forgotten Melfried’s warning to not interfere too much when it comes to the northerners. But Polarth said we should voice our opinions freely, and Melfried himself said they might borrow our knowledge when it comes to meals.”

“Such matters do not particularly concern me. I am simply impressed, seeing how you’re even thinking about how to utilize the poitan soup you ate while you were bedridden,” Ai Fa said with an incredibly solemn expression. “Your body has recovered around seventy percent of the way, but your heart and spirit seem to be completely back to normal. That makes me incredibly happy as your clan head, Asuta.”

“I-I see. But you know, you’ve had some amazing results since you started hunting again.”

Ai Fa had returned today carrying a giba in the eighty kilo range, and on top of that, she had the horns and tusks from another one. Apparently, she had run into a starving giba out in the rain, and the fight to take it down had been fierce enough to ruin both its meat and its pelt.

“I took more than ten days off, so I still haven’t done enough. I swear I will do even better in my work as a hunter from tomorrow on.”

“You’re amazing. On my end, we’re in the middle of a slow period, so I don’t know how much I even *can* work hard.”

“That’s not how I see it. You are constantly coming up with all sorts of ideas as you do your job, are you not?” Ai Fa calmly stated after gulping down the remainder of her stew. “I am proud of you. And I feel truly overjoyed to be able to eat your cooking again like this, Asuta.”

“Yeah. And I feel so ecstatic whenever you eat my cooking that I can barely stand it,” I said with a smile.

Ai Fa furrowed her brow a bit in response as her shoulders gave a little twitch.

“What’s wrong? Did I say something that rubbed you the wrong way?”

“Of course not. I simply do not like it when you look so vulnerable.”

“Huh? Are you saying I have to hide my feelings around you?” I asked, taken aback.

Obvious wrinkles were now forming on Ai Fa’s brow. “Oh. I seem to have badly misspoken. Forget everything I just said. I take it all back.”

“Okay, got it. But I’m kind of worried about you. If there’s something

troubling you, let me know, okay?”

“Nothing is troubling me. It’s simply that for those ten days, things were so far outside of what is normal that now I feel like I need to force myself to focus constantly so I can properly act as a clan head and as a hunter.”

“Ah, so that’s why you’re wearing such a serious look. You can be really inflexible, you know,” I said, letting a laugh slip out.

Ai Fa’s body then began to sway. She looked irritated. “It’s almost frustrating, how much you seem to be back to normal, Asuta.”

“Really? I’d say my emotions have been pretty unstable, no matter what I might look like. In fact, just seeing how satisfied you were while you were eating the food I cooked for you made me so happy, I almost cried.” Those were my honest feelings, and I was sure they were showing on my face as well.

Ai Fa rose to her feet in a way that felt full of intent, took three steps toward me, then got down on her knees as gracefully as a carnivorous beast.

“Wh-What is it? You’re staring at me like you’re going to strangle me or something.”

“As if I would ever do such a thing,” Ai Fa said as she gently wrapped her arms around me. Her fingers lightly touched my back as she rubbed her cheek against mine. She had done this many times since I had gotten over my illness, but naturally, it still caused my heart to start pounding intensely.

“Wh-What are you doing? You’re acting really strange, Ai Fa.”

Rather than replying, my clan head just hugged me a bit tighter.

Her warmth, her softness, her strength, and her sweet smell all flowed over me.



I started to wrap my arms around her back as well, feeling like the weight of my happiness might be about to crush me. But in that very instant, Ai Fa let go of me and stood up. Feeling much like I did when she suddenly ripped my bedding away from me on a cold morning, I looked up at her face and the serious expression upon it.

“My apologies. I swear here and now that this is the last time I let my weakness get the better of me.”

“Huh? Ah, um... Sorry, I don’t really understand what you mean.”

“Normally, we would not be permitted to touch one another unnecessarily. Because of our recent circumstances, I had no choice but to break that taboo. However, starting now, I intend to make this a clear line that we shall not cross.”

“Well, I suppose that makes sense.”

“That is why I decided to settle things tonight. I swear that from here on out, I shall not let our bodies touch solely because I feel charmed by you,” Ai Fa stated, returning to her spot and starting to finish off the small amount of food left.

But of course, I was left feeling completely unsatisfied. “H-Hold on a moment. I have a lot of respect for how serious you can be, I really do! But what am I supposed to do with my feelings when you go and draw a line between us all on your own?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious?! I wasn’t prepared! I moved too slow because I thought I had time!”

Ai Fa tilted her head like a kitten. Her stern expression softened, causing her to look almost content, and throwing my emotions even more out of whack. “I see. I was resolved to make that the last time, but you were not prepared to do the same.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess that’s about right.”

“In that case, you should gather your resolve too, and then you may feel free

to touch my body.” Ai Fa remained seated as she stretched out both arms toward me.

With my hands on the rug, I heaved a sigh with all my strength. “I think the sentiment is plenty on its own... Please, continue with your meal.”

“Is that really all right with you? Starting tonight, we will be sleeping separately again, you know.”

“It’s fine, okay! It’s embarrassing when you make me say it again!”

“I truly do not understand you.”

That was because there was a major disconnect between our points of view. However, that was just one more aspect of Ai Fa’s personality. She was still more precious to me than anyone. This was simply the kind of person she was. Both simple and complex at the same time. Though we both valued one another above all else, we couldn’t get married, so how were we supposed to deal with our feelings? I kind of felt like I knew what I had to do, but at the same time, I felt like I had no clue whatsoever.

“I feel sort of exhausted,” I uttered with a sigh, and Ai Fa brought her face close to mine, looking worried.

“That’s because your body isn’t back to full strength yet. If you’re getting too tired, you can take every other day off work.”

“No, that’s not what I meant... Well, whatever,” I said with a chuckle.

Ai Fa seemed puzzled, but said nothing.

“If I wasn’t feeling better, I wouldn’t be able to chat with you like this now. So I’ll just be grateful for that.”

“Right...” Ai Fa had a slightly bewildered look on her face for a short while, but eventually she bounced back and resumed eating.

Outside of the house, the rain continued to fall. The weather that had cleared up in the early evening had gone back to raining off and on again right before the sun set. The rainy season had gotten off to a wild start, and this was just the beginning. We had only made it through half of the first of two months so far. There was no telling what kind of difficulties still lay ahead of us. I vaguely

pondered that thought as I continued to enjoy the time we had alone together —just me, Ai Fa, and the giba meat we were eating.

Intermezzo: Sorrowful Rain

Ever since Asuta had collapsed from Amusehorn's breath, Yun Sudra had spent her days with a heavy gloom hanging over her. Of course, she wasn't alone in that. Countless people living at the forest's edge must have felt similarly. There was no denying how important he had become for their people.

Furthermore, when they had told their acquaintances in the post town about Asuta, it had caused a huge commotion there too. When Milano Mas of The Kimyuus's Tail and the vegetable seller Dora had heard the news, they had gone deathly pale before shouting at Yun Sudra and the other workers at the stalls, "Is Asuta okay?!"

It was incredible how many people cared for him. Asuta had been born across the sea, so he didn't have even a single relative here. And yet, so many people who had heard what was happening had been affected so intensely that it was as if they'd been told a family member was on their deathbed.

"Is Asuta going to be able to recover?" asked Toor Deen, who was especially close to Asuta, tears welling up in her eyes. She had come from a Suun branch house originally, and had very strong feelings toward the chef. Since the two girls had worked the stalls together for a long time now, it fell to Yun Sudra to cheer her up.

"Don't worry. The mother forest would never abandon Asuta. Once the three days have passed, I'm sure his fever will go away and he'll be just fine," Yun Sudra said, desperately forcing down the oppressive worries assailing her own heart.

Yun Sudra had fallen for Asuta. But of course, she had already accepted that she would never be able to marry him. Asuta's heart already belonged to Ai Fa, and Yun Sudra had learned months ago that there was no place for her in it. Instead, she prayed earnestly for his happiness, and if he needed Ai Fa for that, then she would bury her romantic feelings for him deep down inside.

It wasn't as if she regretted her decision to do so. Staying by Asuta's side as a

chef was plenty for her. Even if she married into the Fou or Ran in the future, there would be no need for her to sever her ties with him. If she couldn't become Asuta's wife, she would aim to become as fine of a chef as he was and bring joy to her precious family with those skills. She spent her days working hard so that she could make other people happy, just like Asuta did.

"All we can do now is keep the stalls running in Asuta's place to protect the bonds he forged here in the post town. That's something we and only we can do for him, thanks to all the lessons he taught us."

With that encouragement from Yun Sudra, Toor Deen wiped away her tears and replied, "Right." The young girl was frail and often showed weakness on her face, but over time, her heart had grown a lot stronger and more resilient, as was only fitting for a person of the forest's edge. Yun Sudra couldn't help but believe that Asuta was the one to thank for that too.

This is no time for complaining. The ones who have it the hardest are Asuta himself and Ai Fa who's watching over him. This time, I'll definitely repay my debt to the Fa clan, Yun Sudra thought as she carried out her work at the stalls for the day.

It was already the fourth day now since Asuta had collapsed from illness. If he overcame Amusehorn's trial, his fever would recede tomorrow morning. No matter how much he might have suffered, he would be able to breathe easily once again when the time came. That was what they all had to believe.

With light rain falling down on them, they headed from the post town back to the Fa house, and when they approached, they could hear a noise like a wailing beast, even from outside the house. It was the sound of Asuta screaming in agony as he suffered from his fever. The moment she heard that, Toor Deen could no longer stop the tears from pouring down her cheeks.

"It seems Asuta still hasn't recovered," Reina Ruu muttered with her shoulders trembling a bit. She had ridden to the Fa house in the same wagon as them. "We'll come back again tomorrow to check how he's doing. Yun Sudra, Toor Deen...we'll leave things at the Fa house to you."

"Right. We'll take care of everything."

Reina Ruu and a number of other women dejectedly headed back down the

path.

Yun Sudra and Toor Deen walked over toward the house so they could get started on their prep work. The stalls wouldn't be open the next day, but they had been preparing curry base in advance on a daily basis lately. With Asuta's wailing constantly assaulting their hearts, they passed by the main house and entered the detached kitchen, where they found that the Fou and Ran women were already present and hard at work. They were worried about Asuta and Ai Fa too, and had been spending as much of the day there as they could. When they weren't too busy, they brought their work from home over to the Fa house too, preparing for when they would be needed.

"Ah, you're back. Welcome. Are things still the same in the post town?" the Fou woman, who was older than the rest of them, asked in a surprisingly peppy tone. It wasn't as if she wasn't worried about Asuta, but folks who had lived a long time had seen many children have their souls returned to the forest by Amusehorn's breath. That meant she had a lot more resilience against this kind of thing than someone as young as Yun Sudra.

"Yes. Some girls named Yumi and Telia Mas who know Asuta quite well made a request to visit the Fa house...but when we told them how he's doing right now, they changed their minds."

"Yes. Asuta's still in no state to meet with anyone," the Fou woman said with a sigh. "It goes without saying that it's painful to see him in this condition, but it's just as hard to look at Ai Fa. Even so, she's a fine woman, and she never complains about her lot."

Yun Sudra had hardly seen Ai Fa over the course of the past three days. The Fa had no other clan members, so Ai Fa had constantly remained right by Asuta's side as she took care of him.

"Ai Fa has hardly had any time to sleep, right? Is she really refusing to rely on any other women at all for his care?"

"That's right. Apparently, she doesn't want anyone else to see Asuta as he suffers. And knowing Ai Fa, I can imagine her thinking she can't allow herself any rest as long as Asuta is enduring this torment."

The members of the Fou and Ran had been interacting with the Fa clan for

years. Unlike Yun Sudra, who'd had nothing to do with her back then, they had known Ai Fa since she was a child.

"I'll deliver dinner to Ai Fa today. You two should rest up at home," Yun Sudra said.

"Oh, really? Then we'll finish up work here and leave."

Since Ai Fa was watching over Asuta, several members of the neighboring clans were taking care of all of the work that needed to be done around the Fa house. For the women in the kitchen, that included preparing her meals as well.

Several hours after that, when the sun was about to set, it was time for Yun Sudra to deliver Ai Fa's dinner. Toor Deen had remained as well, continuing to do prep work alongside her. After placing a cloth over the precious meal so it wouldn't get soaked by the rain, the two headed for the main building of the Fa house.

"Pardon us. We've brought you your dinner, Ai Fa," Yun Sudra called out, but she received no response for a bit.

A deathly silence had fallen over the house. She could no longer hear Asuta's anguished moans. Yun Sudra suddenly feared that the worst might have happened, and felt a chill run down her back. But then, the sound of the bolt being removed came through the door. It swung open, and Ai Fa was standing there.

Laying eyes on the hunter left Yun Sudra frozen stiff with horror. It wasn't as if Ai Fa's appearance had changed all that greatly. She looked just as beautiful and gallant as Yun Sudra remembered. However, there was a blazing light shining in her blue eyes. It was like meeting the gaze of a raging beast. But Ai Fa wasn't angry. The intense emotions behind her expression were worry and sadness, which she was barely managing to keep contained.

"W-We brought your dinner," Yun Sudra somehow managed to force out.

With a calm nod, Ai Fa replied, "I see." That behavior was also entirely familiar, but her eyes were still blazing intensely. "Yun Sudra and Toor Deen. So you're the ones bringing it over today. You've been making the food for the past few days as well, correct? I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the

effort you have expended on behalf of the Fa clan, despite the lack of blood ties between us.”

“Oh, you don’t have to thank us. Compared to everything the Fa clan has done, this is nothing,” Toor Deen replied. Though there were still hints of tears in her eyes, she kept her gaze firmly fixed on Ai Fa. “Please, eat up. We used a variety of ingredients to provide you with all the nutrition you need.”

“Thank you,” Ai Fa repeated, accepting the plate with the cloth over it.

It seemed like she was about to shut the door, so Yun Sudra hurriedly called out, “Um, Ai Fa... It’s been three full days now since Asuta collapsed. His fever should subside by tomorrow morning at the latest, so...please hang in there, until it’s finally all over.”

“Of course,” Ai Fa answered with a nod, and then she disappeared from view behind the door.

Yun Sudra and Toor Deen both stared silently at the door for a moment, then turned around.

“Ai Fa really is strong. She must be hurting more than anyone, but she never shows any signs of weakness,” Toor Deen said as she wiped the tears from her eyes. “I wish I could learn how she does it, but...I guess someone as timid as me could never hope to copy a hunter like Ai Fa.”

“That isn’t true, Toor Deen. You’re a wonderful person too,” was all Yun Sudra could think to reply with. “All right, we’ll come here again first thing tomorrow morning. We’ve been entrusted with the task of feeding Asuta his first meal, after all, so let’s make sure we see it through.”

“Right. See you tomorrow morning.”

Having said farewell to Toor Deen, Yun Sudra trudged back to the Sudra clan on her own. Midway through the journey, though, she suddenly stood up straight. She couldn’t let herself get discouraged when Ai Fa was working so hard.

I’m sure Asuta will be fine. Ai Fa’s pushing herself so incredibly hard, after all.

That intense look in Ai Fa’s eyes had reflected her affection for Asuta. It might

have looked like burning anger, but that was only because she was furious with the world for threatening him. Ai Fa loved Asuta with all of her heart and soul. She would always keep him safe, even if it meant making an enemy of the entire world. Yun Sudra knew it with certainty, and that was enough to allow her to keep a lid on her own feelings.

And then, the next morning arrived.

Yun Sudra and Toor Deen visited the Fa house first thing in the morning and were greeted by Ai Fa, whose eyes were now so calm that one might think she was a different person entirely.

“Asuta has awakened. He is no longer stricken by illness, thanks in no small part to all the effort you and the others put in,” Ai Fa said quietly through the small gap in the door. “However, before you speak to Asuta, you need to know that he has lost a great deal of weight, and he is so skinny now that he looks like a different person.”

“Understood. I’m so incredibly glad to hear that he’s recovered,” Yun Sudra replied, only for Ai Fa to suddenly frown.

“Also, before you see Asuta...I would like to apologize for my rudeness last night.”

“Rudeness? What do you mean?”

“You two were worried not just for Asuta, but for me as well, yet I did not have the time to properly talk with you. The brusque attitude I took, even though you were working so hard for our sake, is unforgivable,” Ai Fa said, looking terribly apologetic.

Though her eyes were no longer burning with emotion like they had been the previous night, her body was rigid with tension. She was clearly still worried about Asuta. But even so, she wasn’t treating Yun Sudra and Toor Deen as unimportant.

I really can’t beat her... Yun Sudra thought as she offered Ai Fa a smile. “I didn’t think it was rude of you at all. You have nothing to apologize for. The ties I share with you and Asuta are incredibly precious to me.”

Ai Fa just blinked repeatedly, seemingly having trouble figuring out what sort of face she should make. The way she was acting was oddly childlike, and it made Yun Sudra realize all over again that the Fa clan head could be incredibly charming at times.

Yun Sudra smiled at Ai Fa once more as the hunter continued to blink, still looking a bit confused.

Group Performance: The Post Town's Gourmand

Roughly two months before the arrival of the rainy season, during the last third of the violet month, when the Genos post town was celebrating the sun god's revival, the leader of the Sym merchant group known as the Black Flight Feathers, Kukuluel Gi Adumuftan, was walking through town alongside three of his companions.

There were even more people than usual along the stone-paved highway, and they were all quite lively. The atmosphere in castle town was undoubtedly full of excitement too, but the festivities weren't nearly as spirited there as they were here in the post town, where you didn't need a pass to visit.

Kukuluel, like any easterner who worked as a merchant here in the western kingdom, deeply cherished the lively energy at events such as this one. If they didn't, they would have no reason to travel so far from their homeland. Making a living casually chasing gyama around the endless grasslands, feeling the breath of the wind god Sym on your cheeks... Only people who had grown sick of such a life would choose to wander instead.

That was why even though his group was larger than most and served western nobles exclusively, Kukuluel tried to visit the chaotic post town whenever he could find the time to do so. For someone like him who came from those grasslands, his interactions with both the polite residents of the castle town and the rough and wild citizens of the castle town were always fresh and novel experiences, and he treasured them all.

"Kukuluel, this year's revival festival seems especially lively," one of his companions said in the tongue of their homeland.

"You're right. We were in the capital last time, so it's been two years since we've been in Genos for the festival, and it definitely does seem to have changed in that time."

They had already learned the reason in the castle town. Just a few months prior, the head of a count's house here in Genos had been arrested for some

extremely serious crimes. Furthermore, the man in question was Cyclaeus, who the Black Flight Feathers had previously sold ingredients from Sym to. He had been a very important client, so Kukuluel had expected that they would lose some serious money on this trip as a result, but fortunately, the houses of Turan and Genos had split up Cyclaeus's business dealings and were maintaining them. Kukuluel's group still had a customer to buy the live gyama that had been so difficult to transport from Sym, and their contracts were still in place.

However, their clients in Genos apparently had a variety of problems they were currently dealing with. From what they had been told, Cyclaeus had been monopolizing the ingredients he purchased, not really circulating them at all. That meant the ingredients he didn't use for his own purposes were simply wasted, along with all the money paid for them, but that had seemingly been of no concern to him. Cyclaeus had been an especially obsessive gourmand, so he hadn't sold so much as a single sprig to any noble or restaurant that wasn't connected to him.

But Cyclaeus's rule had come to an end, and as a result, all sorts of ingredients were now flooding into the post town. The last time the Black Flight Feathers had visited Genos, there had only been crude dishes on offer in this part of the region. In terms of seasonings, the people who lived here had previously had nothing but rock salt, a small number of herbs, and the mamaria vinegar that came from the Turan lands to work with. The only major ingredients they'd been able to get their hands on were locally grown vegetables, kimyuus meat, and karon leg meat from the neighboring town of Dabagg.

Truthfully, this is how lively things ought to be in the commoners' town of a domain as prosperous as Genos. The citizens of the castle town are as well off as their peers in the capital, so it was always strange how the residents of the post town used to live like this was just some backwater.

But now, there were numerous stalls operating in the post town, and one would be able to enjoy all kinds of aromas simply by walking down the main road, such as those belonging to karon milk fat, numerous herbs and spices from Sym, and tau oil from Jagar. In the past, one could only ever smell such things in the castle town.

“It seems the people of the forest’s edge have already closed down their stalls for the day,” another one of Kukuluel’s comrades stated.

Apparently, the nobles of Genos were relying on the assistance of a chef from the settlement at the forest’s edge to promote the usage of new foodstuffs in the post town. He was a real oddity who had come from overseas and now lived at the forest’s edge, but was skilled enough to work with many different kinds of ingredients, and was every bit the equal of the chefs of the castle town. That man was providing an example for the citizens of the post town to follow, showing how the unfamiliar imports could be used to make delicious meals.

Incidentally, Kukuluel had a plan to try to carve a path through the forest of Morga, and during some of the discussions he’d had regarding his proposal, he had occasionally heard rumors about this chef that had piqued his curiosity. However, the forest dwellers’ stalls were only open from sometime before when the sun hit its peak until the lower second hour, so Kukuluel and his group had yet to see the strange foreigner.

“Well, we’ll have more free time once the revival festival ends. Until then, we should enjoy the other stalls.”

In the castle town, you could enjoy as many carefully prepared dishes as you pleased. However, part of the joy of traveling to different places was trying out the dishes the locals worked so hard to come up with. That was why Kukuluel made frequent visits to the post town when he didn’t have business he needed to attend to in the castle town.

“Shall we just go ahead and try one?”

Kukuluel and company then went ahead and picked out a stall without many people standing in front of it to purchase a snack from—a small dish of kimyuus meat wrapped in poitan. Apparently, the trend of late was to offer smaller, cheaper portions. That was something Kukuluel appreciated, as it meant he could enjoy a variety of dishes in a single day.

As for the dish in question...it had a rather unusual flavor to it. The kimyuus meat and vegetables had been boiled, and it seemed the cook had used milk fat and mamaria vinegar, creating a strange sweet and sour combination. And the sweetness definitely seemed to be more prominent, so they had likely used

Jagar sugar as well.

“It would no doubt be difficult to master using new ingredients in just a few months. Still, I don’t find this to be especially good,” one of Kukuluel’s comrades stated in the eastern tongue so he didn’t offend the stall’s owner.

It would definitely be difficult to call it an excellent dish. It felt as if something unnecessary had been added, or perhaps that something was lacking. Frankly, milk fat and mamaria vinegar didn’t seem like ingredients with much compatibility to begin with. *Still, it’s important to try to tackle new challenges. Boiled dishes that only use meat and salt won’t attract the attention of customers anymore.*

You wouldn’t find a town with ready access to so many ingredients from Sym and Jagar in all of Selva, aside from the capital. Given time, Genos could easily end up developing a culinary culture completely unique to itself.

“It may have been a mistake to choose an open stall. Let’s try a popular-looking one next.”

They next headed south along the crowded road, and near the end of the stall area, they found one that had a noticeable crowd around it. The sign had “giba” written in the western language on it.

“Is that shop run by the people of the forest’s edge?”

“No, the owner is apparently a southerner. Or did he have mixed blood from the south and west...?”

At any rate, they couldn’t ignore the fact that giba was being served there, considering the rumors they had heard about it now and then in the castle town. For some reason, giba meat was not sold in the castle town, but it was said that it would be when the appropriate time came, so the issue wasn’t anything to do with the quality of the ingredient itself.

“It would have been impossible to even consider the idea of giba cooking not so long ago.”

“It was also a surprise to see poitan made into bread like fuwano. To think that things could change so much in just a few months,” a couple of Kukuluel’s comrades commented to each other as they stood in line. Naturally, none of

them were so careless as to let their emotions show, but it was perfectly clear that they were excited. Of course, Kukuluel himself was feeling much the same, considering they were in the middle of a festival.

“Sorry for the wait. We have herb and tau oil flavors. Which would you like?” the shop’s owner asked with a cheerful smile as Kukuluel’s group made it to the front of the line. It seemed he really was of mixed blood. His facial structure and build were that of a southerner, while his skin color was that of a westerner. That made it easy for citizens of Sym like them to interact with him.

“Two of each, please.” The shop was selling smallish manju, so Kukuluel decided that this would be a good number to get for a taste test. They then split the manju four ways to let every member of the group have some of both.

When he took a bite of manju, Kukuluel found it was legitimately delicious. The tau oil one seemed to also use sugar, giving it a flavor that southerners would likely enjoy. Both of those ingredients came from Jagar, so they went together quite well. Even a citizen of Sym like Kukuluel would have no issues with the taste. And the giba meat went very well with that flavoring. It was a really chewy kind of meat, and it asserted itself strongly enough to not get overwhelmed by the powerful flavors of the tau oil and sugar. Overall, it was probably closer to gyama than karon, in his opinion.

The other kind of manju, made using herbs, was even more surprising. How was someone with blood from the south this skilled at working with them? It used so many that even a citizen of Sym like Kukuluel had difficulty telling them all apart, but they were all in perfect harmony. It was packed with flavor, without being so strong that it burned his tongue. The chef had definitely made use of tau oil, karon milk, and sugar to bring the spiciness of the herbs into harmony. Kukuluel and his companions would all have preferred that the taste be even sharper, but that didn’t get in the way of their enjoyment.

The giba meat also went very well with this one. If the chef hadn’t gotten a proper stock from the meat and vegetables, the manju wouldn’t have turned out this well no matter how many herbs he used. Though the strong taste of the herbs was by far the most prominent part of the flavor, the stock also had an important role to play, as the underlying foundation of the dish.

Kukuluel—who was standing off to the side of the stall now—found himself compelled to offer the owner a compliment. “This dish is delicious. Surprisingly so.”

As he prepared another batch of fresh manju, the owner replied with a smile, “Thank you very much. There are only a few places here in the post town that use giba meat, so if you’re interested in having some more, why not stop by our dining hall too?”

“You are an innkeeper?”

“That’s right. I run The Great Southern Tree. It’s mostly southerners who lodge with us, but we get plenty of westerners and easterners in the dining hall.”

“We would certainly like to stop by this evening.”

Aside from the day of the sun’s peak and the day of the downfall, they were relatively free at nighttime. It was forbidden to come and go from the castle town at night, so they would have to find lodgings in the post town, but that was fine if it meant having a delicious meal in exchange.

After thanking the owner, the group resumed their stroll. Turning back down the road, they started checking out the opposite side of the path, where there were even more popular snack stalls set up. Anyone visiting the Genos post town for the first time in a while would probably be overwhelmed by how much things had changed.

One stall was roasting skewered kimyuus coated in tau oil. Another one with a leather canopy over it was serving a soup dish that smelled of spices. The next was frying fine slices of karon leg meat in milk fat, and the one after that was boiling something in a large amount of mamaria vinegar, followed by one that was selling meat and herb sandwiches made with poitan bread mixed with vegetables to give it color. They seemed to be desperately trying to attract the attention of customers by using unusual ingredients.

At a stall with the crest of the house of Daleim on it, they were serving a dish made with karon breast. In the past, people could only buy the cheaper leg meat in the post town.

Perhaps in an effort to compete with that, there were also stalls using kimyuus meat with the skin still attached in their cooking. That cost more money, but it was possible that they could recover the cost by using less tau oil or seasonings from Sym than other shops. Or perhaps it didn't matter because people tended to get carried away and spend coins more freely than usual during a festival.

Still having room left in their stomachs, Kukuluel and his group decided to purchase one more snack. They chose one that looked like a poitan wrap full of meat and vegetables that had been boiled in an herb broth. The meat was karon leg, and the vegetables were aria, ro'hoyoi, and chamcham. Ro'hoyoi and chamcham grew in Jagar and Selva, but were supposed to be rare around these parts.

"Ooh, this one has an interesting flavor," one of his comrades suddenly exclaimed. If he had been any less careful, his emotions probably would have shown on his face, but Kukuluel could understand how he felt. This dish used lots of seasonings from Sym, but they had been utilized in a rather unusual way.

Chitt seeds that stabbed the tongue and sarfaal herbs that stimulated the back of your nose wouldn't typically be used together in Sym. Generally, sarfaal would be dissolved in water and then smeared over grilled meat and the like, so it wasn't even seen as an herb one should boil in the first place.

On top of that, perhaps because the flavor was too intense for westerners and southerners, they had even gone so far as to add sugar and karon milk. That was yet another unexpected combination. It seemed to be a rather haphazard creation compared to the giba meat snack from before.

The idea of using sugar because the other seasonings were too spicy was certainly an interesting one, as sugar wasn't available in Sym. Or rather, in the grasslands ruled by the Gi and Ji tribes, they had no access to anything similar to pure sugar. It was possible that the other provinces of Sym did have something like it.

That made this the sort of dish you could only try in a foreign country, using seasonings from Sym in a way that would normally never be considered. Though the way they were used was terribly sloppy compared to the previous

stall, Kukuluel couldn't help but find it strangely enjoyable.

"This will make a fine tale to tell our families back home, won't it? That's also one of the joys of traveling."

His comrades nodded in agreement as they finished off their last snack with a bit of difficulty.

Night then arrived.

After returning to the castle town for a while to finish up some work, Kukuluel headed back to the post town. Three comrades accompanied him once again, but a different group than earlier in the day. Apparently, the boiled sarfaal dish had discouraged that group of three quite a bit, so they decided to eat dinner in the castle town instead.

"It's still so lively, even at night. It almost feels like this must already be one of the main holidays."

Just like his comrade had said, there were still stalls here and there serving snacks, even at night. The amount of foot traffic was about half of what it had been during the day, but a celebratory mood was still very much in the air.

Tonight, however, rather than sampling more street food, they were after a meal from an inn's dining hall.

They enjoyed the revelry of the festival around them as they headed south toward an area with several inns, where they eventually found The Great Southern Tree. For an inn in the post town, it was rather large, and even though it wasn't one of the main holidays, they had tables set up outside the shop, all of which were filled with customers. Since inns that served giba meat were so rare, business seemed to be booming for them.

"Welcome. Are there four of you in your group?" the owner from earlier asked with a smile as they stepped into the dining hall on the first floor. It seemed that he didn't recognize Kukuluel, though. People from other nations tended to look quite similar, and Kukuluel had also worn the hood of his cloak all the way over his head earlier in the day.

"Unfortunately, we're pretty full at the moment, but we can split you into two

groups of two. Would that be acceptable?”

“We don’t mind.”

“Also, we’ve sold out of giba meat for today. Is that okay?”

That left Kukuluel at a bit of a loss, but it would be shameful to let his expression shift, so he simply replied, “I see. That is unfortunate. It hasn’t even been an hour since the sun set, but you’re already sold out?”

“My apologies. We had a large group show up today, you see. But I’m planning to purchase a whole lot more for tomorrow.” Kukuluel contemplated the matter. The giba meat they were after had sold out, so he couldn’t see any reason to eat in this shop with so many southerners around, split up into groups of two on top of that. “Oh, are you perhaps the customers who purchased food from my stall earlier in the day?”

“Yes. I’m surprised that you recognized me.”

“Ah. Well, it’s pretty rare to meet an easterner who’s so fluent in the western tongue,” the owner said, then he started thinking deeply. “Hmm. I did invite you to come to our dining hall, but then we went and sold out of giba cooking too early. I really am terribly sorry about that. If you’d like, I could point you toward some other inns that sell giba cooking.”

“I would very much appreciate that. You don’t mind doing so?”

“Not at all. It’s the least I can do to show my appreciation, after you came all the way down here.” The owner then told Kukuluel the names of three other inns. Apparently, they were the only ones in the post town that worked with giba meat. “There’s been a whole mountain of new ingredients flowing into the post town, after all. Once that settles down, I’m sure there will be a lot more places asking to buy giba meat.”

After those final words from the owner, Kukuluel and company left The Great Southern Tree. They first headed to the largest of the three inns, The Kimyuus’s Tail, located just a short distance to the north up the main road.

“Ah, here it is.”

It was a bit smaller than The Great Southern Tree, and looked like a fairly

typical inn. They didn't have any tables set up in front of the place, but there was a rather lively air coming from within.

"Welcome. So there are four of you?" a young woman greeted as they stepped inside. She was holding empty plates in both hands, and looked to be incredibly busy, with sweat glistening on her plain but expressive face. "My apologies. We're currently full, so the wait may be around half an hour."

"Half an hour?" That would be rather difficult to stomach, considering their group was already quite hungry. "If we do wait that long, we'll be able to eat giba cooking?" Kukuluel asked even so.

"Hmm," the girl replied with a little tilt of her head. "Please hold on a moment... Dad, will the giba last another half an hour?"

"Go ask those gluttons clogging up our dining hall that!" a rough voice called out from beyond the door past the reception desk. Even though their dining hall was thriving, it seemed they were drastically short-handed.

"My apologies. Giba cooking is very popular, so it's likely to sell out soon. I imagine we'll probably purchase a lot more for tomorrow, though."

"I see. Then we'll stop by again some other time."

With that, Kukuluel and company once again dejectedly withdrew.

"Inns on the main street seem to be especially popular. The remaining two are supposed to be smaller, so let's put our hopes on them."

And so, they entered an alley that led to the next inn, one called The Sledgehammer that catered to easterners. The more they walked, the fewer people were around. It seemed this inn was in an area with a lot of private homes.

"So they run an inn in a place like this? You would never know it's here without being told."

"That's true. But some places like that turn out to be hidden gems."

After walking for a bit, they came across The Sledgehammer, just as they had been told. Its size and structure made it look exactly like an ordinary house, except for the fact that it had a sign set up out front. If not for that, they

probably would have missed it. The entire area was rather quiet, and that included the inn.

“They may not be full, if there’s so little noise here.”

And so, the group opened the door, only to immediately discover that they had been naive. The inn’s dining hall was packed tight with people from Sym. The reason it was so quiet was because easterners didn’t make much sound while eating. The diners were all clad in the same sort of cloaks as Kukuluel and his companions, and were crammed together on narrow seats, chewing meat and slurping soup. The aroma was undoubtedly the same as that herb dish they’d had earlier in the day.

“Welcome. A group of four?” a man who seemed to be the owner asked, approaching without making a sound. At a glance, he looked to be an ordinary westerner, but he remained as expressionless as an easterner. “Oh, this is the first time I’ve seen you all. Welcome to The Sledgehammer. I am the owner, Nail.”

“How courteous of you. I am Kukuluel, leader of the merchant group known as the Black Flight Feathers.”

“Ah, the Black Flight Feathers? I’ve been hearing that name for quite some time now. You’re one of the largest merchant groups in Sym, are you not?” the man said, his expression not budging in the least. It seemed he was well acquainted with the customs of Sym. “As you can see, we’re currently at capacity. But if you wait a quarter of an hour, I believe I should be able to seat you.”

“I see. But what about your giba cooking?” Kukuluel asked, only for Nail’s gaze to drift downward apologetically. His response was completely predictable.

“My apologies, but we just sold the last of our servings of giba. We’ve never had such a busy revival festival, so I failed to stock a sufficient amount.”

“I see. This is the third inn we have visited without being able to eat giba cooking in any of their dining halls.”

“I’m sure those other inns also failed to predict how many customers they would see with the start of the revival festival. And only a very limited number

of inns serve giba cooking in the first place. Giba cooking has been extremely popular at the stalls during the day, which has led to a great deal of business coming to us at night.”

“I see... But when we were walking around during the day, we only saw one stall serving giba meat. How have the people of the forest’s edge had such an impact, even though they closed their stalls so early in the day?”

“The people of the forest’s edge run five stalls themselves, and two more are run by westerners. Apparently, they’re selling over a thousand servings a day.”

“A thousand...” That was almost enough to cause even Kukuluel’s expression to shift, but he hurriedly restrained his emotions. “It sounds like they’re unbelievably popular, then. But they only keep their stalls open for an incredibly short amount of time, right?”

“That’s right. And you can take that as proof of just how excellent their cooking skills are. I personally purchase both giba meat and premade giba meals from them.”

It was then that a question popped into Kukuluel’s mind. “By the way, there’s a smell in the air here very similar to that of a dish I ate during the day. I was quite surprised, as it seemed to contain a combination of seasonings that I thought even an easterner would have difficulty coming up with.”

“Ah, from Naudis of The Great Southern Tree’s stall, yes? I have heard that he’s been selling a snack made with giba curry. The herb mix that serves as the base for such dishes was created by Asuta of the forest’s edge,” Nail replied, his eyes narrowing proudly. “The four inns that handle giba meat all sell giba curry. Every dish Asuta makes is outstanding, but giba curry is something extra special.”

“Then, that Asuta man came up with the combination of seasonings as well?” Once again, Kukuluel felt impressed by the skills of this Asuta chef, whom even the nobles of the castle town sought the services of.

“The Great Southern Tree uses ingredients from Jagar to make their curry sweeter, while here I add chitt seeds to make it spicier. It’s quite remarkable how the taste of giba curry can change based on who is preparing it. I would love to have you try my variety before you leave Genos.”

“Yes. I do find myself greatly interested.”

After that, Kukuluel and the others left the third of the inns. As they walked under the light of the moon, still hoping that the final inn would be different, one of his comrades said, “Kukuluel, after smelling the herbs at that last inn, I’ve found it quite difficult to suppress my hunger.”

“I agree. If we don’t get to eat giba cooking now, it will feel like we came out here to the post town just to suffer.”

The final inn was situated in an area that seemed like a bit of a slum. A significant number of filthy people who were clearly not respectable citizens were sitting along the sides of the path, drinking fruit wine. None of them dared to hassle a group of easterners, but it looked like a place where it would be a good idea to not let your guard down.

The name of the inn was The Westerly Wind. It wasn’t all that big of an establishment, but unlike The Sledgehammer, it was clear as they approached that it was quite lively inside.

“Welcome! Four of you, huh?” a western girl with long hair greeted them. Her pale shoulders and stomach were completely exposed, and she was obviously quite busy at the moment. They looked to be around eighty percent full.

“Are you here to eat, or to stay? We have openings either way right now.”

“If we do eat here, we would like to pay for lodgings as well. But first...do you have any giba left?”

“Ah, you’re after something with giba in it? Sorry, but we’re sold out of giba curry. Seems the folks who couldn’t make it into The Sledgehammer ended up coming over here,” the girl said, but then she broke out in a big grin. “However, if it’s just any old kind of giba cooking you’re looking for, we do still have some simpler meals available. We bought enough meat for three days, but it’ll all be gone by tomorrow at this rate!”

“Well then, we would indeed like to have some,” Kukuluel replied, feeling relieved.

“We’ve got four customers coming in!” the girl shouted out toward the back of the inn. “Here are your seats. For giba dishes, we have grilled meat, a poitan

dish, and soup. Which would you like?”

“How much would be appropriate for all four of us?”

“Ah, you want your entire meal to be giba? It’ll be more expensive than if you have some karon or kimyuus too.”

“Yes, that’s acceptable.”

“You easterners sure are generous! In that case, how about two each of the grilled meat and poitan dishes, and enough of the soup for each of you? If you’re still hungry after that, you can order more. And are you okay with fruit wine to drink? We have ramam and dried kiki juice wine blends today.”

“Then we’ll take two of each of those.”

With that, Kukuluel and company were finally seated. Walking around while starving had really exhausted them. If they had failed to find giba cooking here too, it would have made for quite a miserable night.

Now that I think about it, the giba snacks were a bit on the expensive side too. Is that why the giba cooking didn’t sell out here at this inn? Since The Westerly Wind was located in the middle of a slum, many of the diners looked like ruffians, or worse. If a guard were to suddenly enter, half of the folks here would probably run for it. There were a few other easterners in the hall in addition to Kukuluel’s group, but there wasn’t a single southerner. The southerners who visited Genos were all merchants and fairly well off, so they’d never enter an area like this without bodyguards, and they wouldn’t have any reason to do so regardless. Ruffians and scoundrels weren’t exactly the sort to have much cash to spare. For people like that, a meal made with giba meat would be a real luxury.

“It’s rare that we eat at such a shabby inn. I hope they can serve us a proper meal,” one of the younger members of the group said. Kukuluel was the only one who had eaten giba during the day, so apparently the others were feeling a little uneasy. Perhaps they were starting to regret following him out of curiosity.

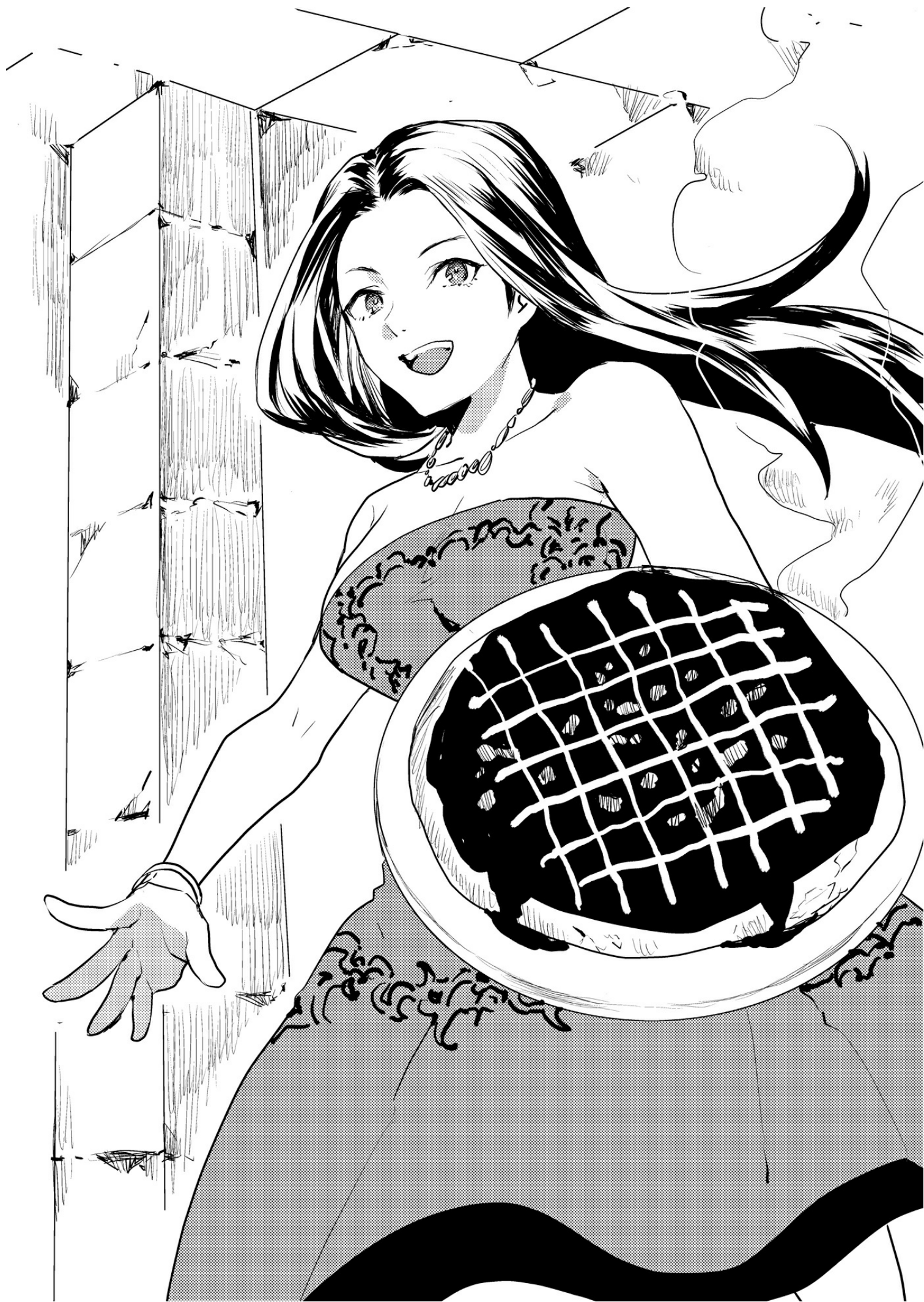
Still, this inn wouldn’t use expensive ingredients unnecessarily. Giba meat would probably taste wonderful even if it was just grilled by itself with a bit of salt, and preparing the meat using such a simple method could very well be the

best way to experience its true wonder.

While Kukuluel was thinking about all that, the dishes they had ordered started being carried out one after another, and when he saw them, he was rather surprised. It turned out they weren't as simple as he had expected.

The grilled meat dish also included aria, pula, and nenon, with some kind of sauce that smelled both sweet and spicy poured over the top. Kukuluel could make out the aroma of tau oil and myamuu coming from it.

And then there was the poitan dish, which looked quite strange. It seemed they had mixed meat and vegetables into the poitan and cooked them together. It was flat and circular in shape, and covered in some kind of sauce that also smelled of tau oil, but that had a sour aroma overall rather than sweet and spicy. There was also some kind of mysterious yellowish-white liquid on top of the sauce. Actually, was it partially solid? It had been poured on in thin lines, making a net pattern, and was managing to maintain its shape as it shined in the light that filled the hall. That shine seemed to indicate a high oil content.



And as for the soup, it had been made with karon milk, and perhaps milk fat too. It had a mellow and sweet aroma, and there were plenty of chunks of meat and vegetables floating in the liquid.

“Here’s your fruit wine cut with dried kiki juice, and here’s the ramam. If you run out, just give me a holler.”

With that, the girl and an older woman who had been helping her carry out the food hurriedly left. Kukuluel and company gave thanks to the eastern god before their meal, then poured the fruit wine into cups.

These weren’t the kind of spirits you got in the castle town. They were sweet and potently sour mamaria fruit wine. The dried kiki juice added more sourness, while the ramam gave it additional sweetness. They weren’t bad flavors, but they didn’t seem to be all that strong.

The food was what really mattered, though. Kukuluel hadn’t expected the dishes to use so much tau oil and karon milk, but he had no serious issues with them in terms of appearance or aroma. The girl had also given each of the easterners their own individual plate, so they were able to divide up the two orders of the meat and poitan dishes between the four of them, and they all took their first bite.

“This is...so good,” the youth who had sounded so worried before remarked before anyone else.

Kukuluel had no objections to that statement.

The grilled meat dish was sweet and spicy, as its smell had suggested, and those tastes paired really well with the giba meat. Also, it wasn’t just seasoned with tau oil and myamuu. There seemed to be sugar and grated aria in there too, and it was amazing how skillfully that sweetness was balanced with the tau oil’s saltiness and the flavor of the myamuu.

The meat had likely come from either the back or chest. It had the perfect amount of fat to it, and was nice and chewy. Kukuluel had noticed this with the snack he’d had earlier too, but the way giba meat managed to stick out, even in the face of some very strong seasonings, was really splendid. It was accompanied by a little bit of baked poitan too, and they tasted even better

when eaten together.

In contrast, the poitan dish had a strong sour flavor to it. Along with the tau oil, it also seemed to use tarapa and mamaria vinegar, which had strengthened the sourness of the dish.

As for that mysterious yellowish-white condiment on the very top, it was sour at its core too. It must have been made with mamaria vinegar as well. However, its flavor wasn't all that strong, and its color was very white, so they must have used the Banarm white mamaria vinegar that had started appearing in Genos recently. It was difficult to tell what else was in it, but there was more to it than just sourness. In a strange way, it really seemed to elevate the flavor of the dish.

The dish employed two different condiments that strengthened its overall sourness, but the poitan which sealed in the meat and vegetables was quite thick, and as a result, when you took the dish as whole, it didn't give the impression of being all that sour. The meat mixed into the poitan was fattier than the cut used in the previous dish, which made it incredibly delicious. The only vegetable on the inside of the dish was some coarsely sliced tino, but that alone was enough to add some pleasant texture.

Grilling the poitan batter together with the meat and tino felt like a rather wild choice, but the result was quite tasty. It wouldn't have been the same if they had all been prepared separately. That combination of textures and flavors was the whole reason the end result was so interesting.

Lastly, you had the soup dish, which seemed comparatively simple. Karon milk and milk fat had only very recently started seeing use in the Genos post town, but they were commonplace in the castle town and the neighboring town of Dabagg, where it was completely normal to use them in soup dishes. There weren't any other especially unusual ingredients in it either. It contained salt and pico leaves, and perhaps a bit of tau oil too, but it was a very ordinary, simple flavor.

However, because it was so simple, it was easy to get a clear sense of how excellent the giba meat was. The stock was quite hearty, and you could sense the nutrition permeating your body when you slurped up the broth. On a day

where you weren't feeling particularly hungry, this soup dish and some poitan alone would probably be more than enough to satisfy you.

The generous helping of giba meat was also fantastic. In terms of texture, it was kind of similar to karon shoulder meat. The red meat was densely packed with fibers, and even as it came apart in your mouth, it remained pleasantly chewy for a while. It was a very particular kind of flavor that could only be produced by carefully boiling tough meat.

It was then that Kukuluel noticed his companions had also all been eating in silence. Their spoons just kept on moving, as if they thought it a shame to waste time sharing opinions. It was also quite noticeable that the food was disappearing far faster than the fruit wine.

"Well? Is it to your tastes?" the girl called out while delivering wine to another table.

"Yes," Kukuluel answered with a nod. "It's quite delicious. This is my second time eating giba meat, and I'm quite satisfied."

"Glad to hear it. If this is your second time, does that mean you ate something from the stalls run by the people of the forest's edge?"

"No. We arrived at the post town late, so we purchased a snack from a stall run by The Great Southern Tree."

"Ah, right, they close up shop by the second hour. They make really elaborate dishes, so apparently they have to do a lot of prep work after they return to their settlement." This girl seemed to really enjoy talking. "We've also been running a stall where we sell that poitan dish you've got there, the okonomiyaki, and we run out of food to sell around the same time they do because we're close enough to catch some of their popularity for ourselves. And Myme sells out even quicker than that."

"Ah, I heard there were other stalls serving giba cooking alongside the people of the forest's edge. So that was referring to this inn?"

"Yeah, that's right. But we're only going to keep running our stall until the end of the revival festival. The food Asuta and the others make is on a whole other level, so you should make sure you try it before you leave Genos!"

“The people at the other inns told us that as well. But even so, I find these dishes incredibly delicious.”

“Well, of course! Asuta’s the one who taught us how to make Worcestershire sauce, mayonnaise, and the sauce for the grilled meat! But their cooking is really something else. They use much better ingredients than we do, so I’m sure you’ll be surprised when you try it.”

“Why do you look so happy when you’re talking about someone else’s business selling better food than yours does?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“The last inn owner spoke the same way. I get the sense that both of you greatly venerate this Asuta man.”

“I don’t really know what ‘venerate’ means, but yeah, we’re pretty close! ‘Cuz, see, they aren’t our business rivals. They’re our comrades, and we work very hard so we can all succeed together!” the girl said with an earnest smile.

Even though citizens of Sym found it shameful to let their expressions shift, it didn’t distress them to see foreigners do so. And frankly, it was an incredibly charming smile.

“I’ve been traveling to Genos for over twenty years, ever since I was young, but I have never spoken to any of the people of the forest’s edge. It feels quite strange to hear that those hunters have opened stalls in the post town, but it seems this Asuta person must have caused some change in them, yes?”

“Hmm, I’m not so sure... They probably never would have opened those stalls if it hadn’t been for Asuta, but it seems to me that the way they are now is the way they’ve always been. And I love the people of the forest’s edge!”

It would have been unthinkable for a westerner to say such a thing not too long ago. The people of the forest’s edge had long been scorned by the people of both the west and the south. They had been labeled a tribe of barbarians, or heretics who’d abandoned the southern god.

A few months ago, nobody would have ever imagined they would be running stalls serving the meat of giba, which were seen as living natural disasters...and earning such an incredibly positive reputation to boot. *Perhaps my idea to carve*

a path through the forest of Morga isn't as far-fetched as I thought, Kukuluel mused to himself.

Then the girl stopped talking for a moment and looked over their table, immediately exclaiming, “Wow! You guys sure did eat quickly! Were you really that hungry?”

Kukuluel looked around in surprise. His comrades had all cleared their plates and were staring straight at him.

“What do you all think? If you're full, I can show you to your room now.”

Kukuluel had to desperately hold himself back from smiling as he replied to the girl, “No, it seems neither I nor my companions are satisfied just yet. Could we get two more servings of both the grilled meat and poitan dishes?”

“Got it!” the girl energetically replied before turning away.

His comrades who had stayed behind in the castle town were probably filling their stomachs in a fine stone-built inn, but it seemed impossible that they could be feeling any more satisfied than the four who were gathered here. Kukuluel pondered that thought as he enjoyed the sweet and sour flavor of the fruit wine while waiting for seconds to arrive.

The Little Bird's Room

1

The hectic revival festival had come to an end, and the silver month had arrived. At present, Chiffon Chel was in a small space surrounded by gray walls, absentmindedly lost in thought. This was an antechamber leading to the room belonging to her mistress, the current head of the house of Turan, Lady Lefreya. As long as her lady didn't give her any task to do, her current job was to sit here in this room all on her own.

Though the job only involved sitting, it wasn't like it was easy. Sitting all on your own for most of the day with nothing to do was, in fact, surprisingly challenging. Being left alone with her thoughts often caused them to wander in all sorts of directions.

Recently, Chiffon Chel had been especially prone to getting caught up in ruminating about the past, probably because of the message from Asuta that someone from the house of Daleim had delivered to her. Asuta had met her brother in the post town, and had sent her a message to tell her he was still alive.

My brother Eleo is alive... What kind of twist of fate did it take for Asuta to encounter him?

Chiffon Chel had been separated from her brother for almost five whole years now, without ever having seen him in that time. She lived in the castle town, whereas he was confined to the Turan lands. The two of them had been captured and enslaved over ten years ago. The armies of Selva had raided the settlement in the Tarless mountain range where the Chel family had lived and destroyed it. The adult men and old folks had all been slaughtered, while the young women and children were taken as slaves. Men of Mahyudra grew large enough to fight as warriors by the age of thirteen, so if the raid had occurred even one year later, her brother Eleo Chel would surely have been killed as well.

Yes, her brother had been twelve when they lost their homeland, while Chiffon Chel had been merely ten years old. Thirteen years ago, their fate had been sealed. They would have to live the rest of their lives as slaves.

They had first been taken to some manor five days away from Mahyudra by wagon. Chiffon Chel hadn't been able to understand the western tongue at the time, so she hadn't even known the name of the place. They had spent eight years in that little corner of Selva. Those days had been the most difficult ones they faced. Their parents and brethren had been slaughtered, and they'd been forced to work as slaves in Selva. They'd even cursed the gods, wondering why such a cruel fate had been thrust upon them.

They had been fed once a day—a muddy soup made by boiling bones, vegetable scraps, and poitan together—bound with chains, whipped, and worked like animals. And for bedding, they'd had nothing but filthy straw. The manor must also have been located rather far north for Selva, as the nights had been almost as cold as they were in Mahyudra, and over the course of those first few years, around half of their brethren had lost their lives.

Citizens of Selva who lived near the border hated everyone from Mahyudra from the depths of their hearts, so there was no chance of them ever showing mercy to slaves from the north. Chiffon Chel's back still bore vivid scars from the whippings she had received.

Still, it would be incorrect to say that they hated the people of Mahyudra without reason. The two nations had been warring since long before Chiffon Chel had been born. When Mahyudra occupied western towns, citizens of Selva were made into slaves as well, and both sides had massacred the other's civilians over and over for as long as the war had been going on. Selva and Mahyudra shared a history of hatred that stretched back for centuries.

A man had said he was going to whip her because her people killed his younger brother.

A woman had spat on her because northerners had taken away her daughter.

Chiffon Chel had first learned the western tongue through the abuse that was often hurled at her. The first word she had learned was most likely "barbarians."

She herself had not held any hatred toward westerners to begin with. The settlement where the Chel family had lived had been peaceful, and she'd never even seen a westerner before that calamitous day.

However, it wasn't as if Chiffon Chel's brethren hadn't been involved in the war with Selva. Her father and the others had killed countless westerners. They would head down from the Tarless mountains, attack a town or settlement belonging to Selva, and then return with the rare meat and vegetables they'd procured in the process to feed their families. Back then, Chiffon Chel had been too young to consider the amount of blood that had to have been shed in order to acquire that food. But then, soldiers from Selva had slaughtered her brethren in retribution for their attacks. That was how the links in the chain of hatred were endlessly forged. And the first time Chiffon Chel had grasped that hopeless truth, it had left her as sad and as frightened as she had been when her parents had died.

Chiffon Chel had spent eight years in that place, until she was eighteen and Eleo Chel was twenty, both full-fledged adults. But since they had never been given enough to eat, the slaves were all skinny and malnourished. The men in particular only had about half as much muscle as they would have had as proper warriors of Mahyudra. Those eight years had robbed the fierce northerners of their strength, and not just physically. The slaves had been whipped and spat upon by westerners from a young age, until now they were as beaten as old livestock. Their hopeless lives had eaten away at their spirits even more than their bodies.

Why had the great northern god sent his children such hardship? For the first few years, they had been filled with hatred, but eventually they had lost the strength to keep that up and were now little more than living corpses forced to work.

But then their days in that place had come to an end, suddenly and without warning. Their owners had simply loaded them all into wagons one day to be sent elsewhere, and that was that. In all likelihood, the lord of the land where they had been forced to work had lost his wealth for one reason or another. There hadn't been any signs of significant conflict with Mahyudra recently, so his loss of fortune was probably unrelated to the war, but beyond that, they

had no clue what could have caused them to be sold. All they knew was that the lord of another land was buying them. Chiffon Chel was able to understand a bit of the western tongue by that point, so she was able to pick up at least that much from the soldiers' chatter. They were being brought to Genos, or more precisely, to the lands of Count Turan.

The trip was a long one. It took about a month of riding in the wagon for them to reach their destination. The temperature steadily grew warmer over time as they traveled, and by the halfway point, they no longer needed the furs they had been given for warmth, though they did start to suffer from sunburn. The world was awash in brilliant light, and the color of the ground and trees even shifted.

"To think, Selva has lands filled with such bounty," one of the women riding in the same wagon muttered in a hollow voice. "So why do the people of Selva feel the need to attack a land of ice and snow like Mahyudra? Just how greedy are they?"

As she stared out at the same sight through the little window the wagon had, Chiffon Chel couldn't find anything to say in response.

The Selva army had burned Chiffon Chel's village to the ground, likely because they'd had no intention of occupying it. Taking that into consideration, it seemed likely that Mahyudra was the one trying to steal territory, while Selva was simply fighting back. But at the same time, it was hard to understand why Selva monopolized this fertile land. Perhaps Selva had taken some of this land from Mahyudra at some point in the distant past.

Just how long had Selva and Mahyudra been fighting? Had they lived together peacefully before the war had begun? What had caused them to start stealing land from one another, and which side was justified? There was no way Chiffon Chel could possibly know the answer to those questions. It seemed to her that the only ones who did know were probably the gods, who watched the actions of humankind from on high.

At the end of their monthlong journey, the slaves arrived in the Turan lands. As they got down from the wagons, they found soldiers clad in white armor waiting for them there.

“From now on, you will all be working in this land. If you do your jobs well, you won’t be whipped. Also, know that anyone who plots to flee will be decapitated on the spot.”

All of her brethren gathered there silently listened to those words. As eight years had passed since their enslavement, there were no longer any young children among them. Additionally, the women over the age of twenty had been sold to another land a while back, leaving just a few young women in their group, along with men of various ages.

“Can anyone among you speak the western tongue?” the man who seemed to lead the soldiers asked. “Those of you who can will be tasked with conveying our words to your fellows. If you prove that you are capable of doing that, you will be given better food and bedding than the others.”

Ten of them reluctantly volunteered. Of course, they had no real hopes of truly being given good food or bedding, but even so, they figured they would be whipped if they lied. Chiffon and Eleo Chel were among their number.

“Very well. Then tell the rest of your people what I just said. And that anyone slacking off won’t be fed, so they had better work hard.”

With that, their new lives in the Turan lands began.

Unsurprisingly, they were working fields, tending to the fuwano and mamaria that could be grown there. From the break of dawn until sunset, the slaves were worked like beasts.

Even so, their lives seemed a bit easier than they had been in the past. The heat during the day was tough to endure, but the nights were no longer freezing. They were fed meals twice a day, which was unsurprisingly almost always a crude poitan soup, but there was a lot more meat and vegetables in it than they were used to. And like they had been told upon their arrival, those who could speak the western tongue were occasionally permitted to eat fuwano bread and kimyuus meat with herbs and spices.

At the very least, they were all able to eat enough to fill their stomachs. The owner of the land seemed to see slaves dying of starvation or sickness as a financial loss for himself, so he never skimped on the amount they were fed. That allowed them to grow strong and sturdy, as people of Mahyudra were

supposed to be. The men became visibly bigger, even seeming taller to boot, and at the age of twenty, Chiffon Chel finally started menstruating.

There were other changes worth noting as well. After coming to this land, they were hardly ever whipped. At the previous manor, even a slight mistake would lead to a whipping. Actually, you could make no mistake at all and still be punished or verbally abused. People who hated northerners didn't need any particular reason to be cruel to them. However, the westerners in this land hardly ever used whips. Those who plotted escape were mercilessly executed, but otherwise they faced virtually no abuse or violence.

These people didn't seem to hate northerners at all. In fact, rather than scorning people from Mahyudra, it was almost as if they feared their own slaves. The people of Genos had never crossed blades with the people of Mahyudra, so perhaps they had no reason to feel the same animosity their countrymen did.

"Even so, it's not like we have a good master here. At the previous town where I worked, northerners were treated much more like human beings," a woman who had been purchased from somewhere else once told Chiffon Chel. In the place where she had previously worked, slaves were given money for their labor, and they were permitted to marry their fellow northerners. Chiffon Chel had difficulty even imagining it. "This place is too far away from Mahyudra, so they don't know how to handle slaves. If you pay people, they will work harder, and if you let them have children, that will give them the resolve to build lives for themselves here in this land. And any kids who are born will be slaves too, which also benefits the lord of the land, right? The master here doesn't even understand such obvious facts."

There were a few others who voiced similar complaints here and there, and they were also the only ones who ever plotted escape, but Chiffon Chel and everyone from her village obediently accepted their new lives. They had been made to work under far worse conditions in the past. As long as they didn't give up on life, there was always a chance they could be bought by a better owner. Or perhaps they could find themselves forced to endure the same sort of hardship as they had before. They could always try to flee later, after things worsened, if such a thing was ever going to happen. That was what they all

seemed to feel.

After half a year, further changes arrived. An unfamiliar officer came and had the slaves line up next to the fields.

“Our lord is looking for slaves to act as servants. I am here to take the three of you who are best at speaking the western tongue to him.”

Chiffon Chel, another woman, and a man were the ones chosen to go. Eleo Chel volunteered, but he was sadly rejected. That was the last time that Chiffon Chel would see her brother.

Because the male and female slaves slept in different places, and they weren't permitted to talk while working, she had only been able to interact with her brother during their two daily meals. But now, even that small amount of time had been snatched away from her, so even though she was being brought to the castle town to take on a new job, Chiffon Chel felt empty inside. Her chains were removed and her body cleaned, and she was given finer clothes than she had ever worn back home in Mahyudra, but her feelings still didn't change.

Furthermore, it quickly became clear that Chiffon Chel was right to be so dour about her new circumstances. The castle town most definitely wasn't a better place to be than the world outside. She and the others were tasked with working as servants in a fine stone-built manor. They carried food and luggage, did the washing, and took care of guests.

It was certainly much easier than working out in the fields. However, there were only westerners around. Occasionally, an easterner or a southerner would visit, but a northerner would never be invited there. On top of that, the other two who had been selected for the job worked elsewhere, leaving Chiffon Chel more alone than ever.

The lord of the manor, Count Cyclaeus Turan, was an eerie little man. He never seemed to show any hatred for northerners, and yet he looked down on them even more than the soldiers who watched over the slaves did, as if they were nothing more than animals.

It was entirely possible that he had decided to have northerners work for him as servants on a mere whim. After all, the guests who visited the manor were

often surprised when they saw Chiffon Chel, and found her amusing. Those from the south in particular never got to see people from the far off land of Mahyudra, so they looked upon her with great curiosity.

The other potential reason was that Cyclaeus simply didn't see northerners as fellow human beings. In addition to the various chores they handled, Chiffon Chel and the others had also been given the task of testing his food for poison. It seemed very likely that Cyclaeus had a complete lack of trust in other people, and was only able to enjoy continuously inviting famous chefs to cook for him because he had poison testers to rely on. If a northerner happened to eat poison and die, he wouldn't mind in the least. That seemed to be the biggest reason she and the others were brought in as servants.

Still, that aside, Cyclaeus wasn't an especially bad master. Since he didn't see northerners as humans, he showed no interest in them whatsoever. She had only seen the man a handful of times, and even if he looked down on her, he never did her any harm.

The real issue was her other master, Cyclaeus's younger brother Ciluel. He was the head of the militia and was far more cruel than his brother. Chiffon Chel had hardly ever seen him either, but he had whipped her multiple times. She hadn't made any major mistakes around him, and Ciluel didn't seem to hold any special hatred toward northerners either. Yet in spite of that, he still whipped her anyway. It was a simple diversion to him, something akin to a child throwing a plate during a tantrum. However, Ciluel was no child. He was a fully grown man, with a fairly robust physique for a westerner. He was a military leader as well, so he most certainly wasn't weak. That meant that whenever he whipped Chiffon Chel, she wouldn't be able to work properly for half a day afterward.

Still, she was lucky to get off that lightly. The other two servants had died because of Ciluel's torture after less than a year in the castle town. Though she didn't know the details, apparently they had made some kind of mistake in front of him, or otherwise done something to earn his displeasure. It wasn't as if they had been plotting to escape or anything like that, but Ciluel had still returned their souls to the gods.

That had actually gotten Cyclaeus to reprimanded his brother for once. Their

guests had found the slaves from Mahyudra amusing, and furthermore, they had needed a lot of training to get them to the point where they could work in a noble's manor. It would take a great deal of effort to replace them with new slaves, so Ciluel had apparently been told to be more careful in the future.

That had undoubtedly saved Chiffon Chel's life. Thanks to Cyclaeus, her encounters with Ciluel were even more infrequent than before, and he did not whip her again. However, no new slaves were summoned to replace the two who had lost their lives. They had taken turns testing Cyclaeus's meals for poison before, but now the task fell on her every single time.

Chiffon Chel was truly, utterly alone.

After that, she never saw another northerner, not even once. She was the only one left in the stone manor, hidden behind the walls surrounding it. Her skin that had been burnt red steadily became white again, and she gained more fat in place of muscle. Whenever she stood before one of those strange tools they called mirrors, she saw a beautiful woman reflected back at her, looking exactly like her mother once had. However, that did nothing to improve Chiffon Chel's spirits. After she had been removed from the worst circumstances imaginable and brought to the Turan lands, her emotions had steadily thawed, but now she found them turning to ice once more.

She learned how to behave gracefully so as not to offend guests, and was trained to smile even when she wasn't enjoying herself, so to an outsider, she probably looked like she was doing just fine...but inside, her heart was frozen, like the surface of a river before dawn. Even she herself had no idea what might be swirling around within her.

Five more years passed by, and unsurprisingly, Chiffon Chel had spent that entire time within the manor's stone walls. Even now, there were no signs of that changing anytime soon, despite the massive upheaval that had been taking place for the last few months.

Currently, her master wasn't Cyclaeus, but rather his daughter, Lefreya. Cyclaeus and Ciluel had been judged for their crimes—the former Count Turan had been thrown into prison, while his brother had been sent to a place where he would be forced to do hard labor. Ciluel had once whipped slaves, and now it

was his turn to be whipped and treated like a slave himself.

Suddenly, the house of Turan found itself facing annihilation. The name of the house remained, and its current master, Lefreya, was in good health, but it no longer possessed even a shadow of its former glory. The luxurious manor had been seized to serve as a place for entertaining noble guests, and Lefreya's freedom had been taken from her as if she was a prisoner too. The man chosen to be her guardian, Torst, seemed to be constantly running around with a thousand things that needed doing, but at least he seemed to be succeeding at keeping the noble house intact. However, that did nothing to change the positions of Cyclaeus, Ciluel, and Lefreya.

Once again, Chiffon Chel had lost her master. However, her new mistress was Lefreya, so her situation hadn't shifted as wildly as it had five years ago. All of the pages and maids had been sent away, leaving only Chiffon Chel to serve her.

She had expected to be sent back to the fields, or perhaps sold off to some other land...but both of those predictions proved to be off the mark. Chiffon Chel didn't yet know whether that was a good thing or not. But what she did know was, the words in the message Asuta had sent her weren't going to stop swirling around in her heart anytime soon.

Eleo is still alive. He's working in the fields of the Turan lands, just like he was five years ago.

What should she think about that? Even Chiffon Chel herself couldn't tell whether the emotion she was feeling in her chest was joy or sadness.

Chiffon Chel lived with gray walls all around her, but there were walls inside of her as well that were just as thick, keeping her heart trapped within them.

2

There was a knock on the door to the hallway.

Roused from her thoughts, Chiffon Chel stood and opened the door, and found Sanjura standing there. He was the bodyguard tasked with protecting Lefreya. He had previously served Cyclaeus as something like a secret agent, and he was the only other member of the former count's staff who had been

permitted to remain with the house of Turan. That wasn't because he was being shown any kind of mercy, though. The real reason he was being allowed to stay had to do with the fact that he was considered to be dangerously strong, and it seemed best to not let him roam free.

"Excuse me. What is, Lefreya doing?" Sanjura asked in a calm voice. He outwardly appeared to be nothing more than a terribly kind and gentle young man. He had mixed blood from the east and west, and had apparently chosen to live as a child of the western god, but his skin was dark and his skill with the western tongue was shakier than Chiffon Chel's, so it was hard to see him as anything but a citizen of Sym. His pale hair and eyes were the only things that gave any indication that he was also partially a westerner.

"In the morning, Lady Lefreya made use of the bathhouse, and she has been relaxing here ever since. I do not know for certain what she has been occupying her time with, though," Chiffon Chel replied.

"I see," Sanjura answered with a smile. As he was a westerner, he found no shame in letting his expressions show. "I wish, to talk with her, so please, usher me in."

"Very well."

As long as she wasn't in an especially bad mood, Lefreya never turned him away. And sure enough, she replied through the thick door by saying, "You may let him in. Ah, and could you prepare tea as well, Chiffon Chel?"

"Very well," Chiffon Chel once again replied, stepping into Lefreya's room alongside Sanjura.

Lefreya was relaxing on a leather couch in the single-room bedchamber of her official residence, located not far from the castle. It was spacious enough, but it wasn't elegantly adorned in the way her previous manor had been.

She was dressed in a long white robe meant for being worn around the house, just as she had been when she returned from the bathhouse. She didn't have on any accessories, and was letting her curly brown hair fall naturally.

"You look quite bored, Lefreya," Sanjura called out, and the girl glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

“That’s true. It’s hard to imagine how there could be very many people in the entire world who are more bored than I am right now.”

“Why not go out, every now and then? People need sunlight, to live healthy lives.”

“Hmph. Soldiers need to be summoned to keep watch over me each and every time I go out, and neither I nor they have the time to waste on that. Besides, it’s not as if there’s anything interesting waiting for me out there if I do go on a walk.”

“I see. How about, riding totos? From what I’m told, the nobles of Genos will amuse themselves, when they are bored, by riding totos around, their gardens.”

“That’s true... In the past, I often rode totos to stave off boredom,” Lefreya replied, propping up her cheek by resting her arm on the couch’s armrest and staring off into the distance as her eyes narrowed. “How nostalgic. Not that there was anything fun about riding around our garden in endless circles.”

“Totos riding serves, to train the muscles in your body. That is another reason, nobles enjoy it.”

“Hmph. If totos could fly through the sky, perhaps then they would be worth riding,” Lefreya said before glancing over at Chiffon Chel. “Ah yes, I wanted some tea to drink. Could you prepare some chatchi tea?”

“Very well.”

Five months had passed since she had lost her life of luxury and her father. Though not much had changed about her in terms of appearances, she was no longer the Lefreya she had once been. Her previous haughtiness had softened quite a bit, and she often had a pensive look in her eyes.

Her father Cyclaeus had been imprisoned as a criminal, and she was being held in captivity as well. Though she was officially the head of her house, she was not permitted to act freely. During outings and meetings with other people, soldiers had to be summoned to keep an eye on her. The greatest of caution was being exercised to make certain that no one with wicked intentions approached her.

Everyone who had been involved in Cyclaeus’s crimes had been arrested.

However, there were still lots of people with close ties to the man who had never done anything that was against the law. Duke Genos was hoping to prevent people like that from using Lefreya's position as head of the house for their own benefit.

Westerners grew a year older with the arrival of a new year, so Lefreya was now twelve. She was going to have to keep living like this until she someday found a husband and granted him her rank. In a way, her noble title was now a chain that bound her and took away almost all of her freedom.

"My apologies for the wait," Chiffon Chel said, as she placed two cups of chatchi tea on the saucers that the polished black table between them was always set with.

When he looked down at them, Sanjura's eyebrows drooped and he looked troubled. "You made some for me, as well? But I am not, a guest."

"Oh quiet, you. You can drink it if you want to or not, but as long as you're staying here, then sit. I feel on edge when tall folks like you just stand around like that," Lefreya replied. Chiffon Chel had prepared tea for two, as she knew that the young lady had long wanted to say those words to him.

As he scratched his head, which was covered in long brown hair, Sanjura took a seat directly across from Lefreya. Finding herself satisfied with that outcome, Chiffon Chel then said to Lefreya, "If you have no further business with me, I shall return to the antechamber. Would that be acceptable?"

"Why don't you stay here for a bit too? It would be a pain to have to summon you again each time I want more tea."

"Very well."

Depending on her mood, Lefreya would either firmly distance herself from people or bring them closer. And today, it seemed to be the latter. She had been that way before as well, but ever since losing her former status, that tendency had grown much stronger.

Chiffon Chel and Sanjura were the only people Lefreya still had by her side at this point. The newly hired pages and maids had been instructed to keep their distance from her as much as possible. That was the level of caution the

daughter of a noble guilty of rebellion was treated with.

Loneliness changed people, and Lefreya had undoubtedly been changed by hers. Still, even Chiffon Chel, who spent so much time with the young lady, only had a vague sense of what those changes were.

“So, what were you up to all morning? If you go wandering around again, Torst and the others will get suspicious of you even if you aren’t doing anything.”

“I was summoned by Torst, and met with a messenger, from the castle. At the end of the month, a swordsmanship tournament, will be held.”

“A swordsmanship tournament? Ah right, they *were* planning to hold one during silver month, weren’t they? The revival festival only just ended, and they still haven’t had enough revelry?”

“Yes. It is the custom in Genos, to hold the tournament, before the rainy season. The hearts of the people sink, during the rainy season, so perhaps this custom, is meant to bolster their spirits, before that.”

Genos had a rainy season that lasted for two whole months. The fact that the calendar included a leap month every third year—which the current year was—made the exact start date difficult to determine, but it would undoubtedly begin sometime around the end of the next month, so it seemed they were planning to hold their tournament before that.

“You are being invited, as the head of the house of Turan, Lefreya. Torst and the messenger, worked out the arrangements.”

“Thanks for that. Not that I have any interest in such an event, mind you,” Lefreya said after taking a sip of chatchi tea, and then she glanced up. “By the way, are you going to be participating in the tournament?”

“Me? Why would I?”

“What do you mean, why? You’re a swordsman, are you not? And for swordsmen, winning that tournament is the greatest of honors.”

“I have no need for such honor... I will be satisfied, as long as I can, protect you.”

Sanjura's eyes narrowed as he smiled, while Lefreya frowned in annoyance and turned away. Occasionally, Sanjura looked at Lefreya as a brother would his younger sister, and whenever he did, Lefreya reacted by becoming especially curt for a while.

A brother... Is Eleo eating his midday meal around now? Chiffon Chel thought with a sigh as she waited off in a corner of the room. Then, for some reason, Sanjura's gaze turned toward her.

"By the way, did you hear about, what will happen, during the rainy season, Chiffon Chel?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"During that time, the northerners will be tasked, with a different sort of work."

"A different sort of work? You don't mean mending the fence protecting the Turan lands, do you?" Chiffon Chel had participated in that particular task herself once, five years ago. Fuwano and mamaria didn't grow properly during the rainy season, so they would have been left without work to do otherwise.

However, Sanjura shook his head. "No. A different task, than that. They will be ordered to, clear a path through, the forest of Morga."

Chiffon Chel was so surprised, she couldn't speak. The people of the forest's edge, who had brought down the house of Turan, lived in the forest of Morga.

"Supposedly, they will be making a new path, to Sym. The people of the forest's edge, also gave their permission."

"But...the forest of Morga is an extremely dangerous place full of giba, is it not?"

"Yes. But the people of the forest's edge, will be assisting, to mitigate that danger."

Eleo Chel and the others would be doing their work with the people of the forest's edge—who were every bit as ferocious as northerners—very close by. Just thinking about it was enough to cause Chiffon Chel's heart to start pounding, though she wasn't quite sure why.

The first member of that tribe she had met was a peculiar boy named Asuta of the Fa clan. Asuta was a strange young man who had moved to the forest's edge from some distant foreign country, but in terms of appearance, he looked exactly like a westerner. And he was no hunter, but rather a chef who had been abducted by the house of Turan. The kidnapping had been carried out by Sanjura, under Lefreya's orders. Lefreya was temporarily imprisoned for that crime, while Sanjura had been whipped.

Asuta was incredibly odd. He was shorter than Chiffon Chel and seemed like a very sweet person, but he also possessed incredible courage and willpower. Had that inner strength been granted to him by his life at the forest's edge, perhaps? He had never completely given in to the people who had kidnapped him, and on the first night he had even tried to flee through a second story window.

That strength of will had been dazzling for Chiffon Chel to behold at the time. Anger and resentment at having your freedom taken away. A rebellious spirit fighting against an unreasonable fate. To one such as Chiffon Chel whose home had been burned down thirteen years ago, and who had long ago been forced to accept her cruel destiny, it had been incredibly striking.

If Asuta had possessed the strength of a warrior, Chiffon Chel might not have been all that surprised. But he didn't. He was just a powerless chef. In fact, he might have been even weaker than she had been at the age of ten. Yet in spite of that, he absolutely refused to submit.

In the end, his comrades from the forest's edge had eventually rescued him, but if he hadn't managed to stay strong despite everything that happened, it might have been difficult for him to return to his healthy, normal everyday life. But when she had seen Asuta later, he looked so happy it would have been easy to mistake him for another person entirely. His inner strength had conjured a befitting future for him out of thin air. Chiffon Chel couldn't help but feel that was the case.

Of course, if Asuta had found himself in the same circumstances she had, perhaps his spirit would have broken somewhere along the way too, but Chiffon Chel didn't want to even imagine the sight of Asuta submitting to his fate. There was a calm ferocity inside of him, different from the hunters of the forest's

edge or the people of Mahyudra.

“What are you looking so dazed for, Chiffon Chel?” Lefreya suddenly asked, bringing Chiffon Chel back to her senses. The girl was staring at her questioningly.

“Ah... I became a bit flustered when I heard my fellow northerners were being taken to such a dangerous place. My deepest apologies for the unsightly display.”

“Hmm?” Lefreya hummed, frowning once more.

Sanjura offered Chiffon Chel a smile. “You worked in the Turan lands before, did you not? Do you perhaps have, family there?”

“Yes,” Chiffon Chel replied simply, and Lefreya’s eyes opened wide.

“You have family, Chiffon Chel? And yet you’re working here in the castle town all on your own?”

“Yes” was the only response she could give.

Lefreya bit her lip, and her gaze fell to Chiffon Chel’s feet.

Since their mistress had fallen silent, Sanjura spoke up in a calming tone as if to soothe them. “I’m sure it will not, be dangerous. That is why the people of the forest’s edge, are assisting. They are worthy of trust.”

“Yes, that’s true...”

Then that was a knock on the door, and a man’s muffled voice came from the other side. “Is Lady Lefreya present? I’ve brought a guest.”

Chiffon Chel brought a hand to her chest, which was full of swirling emotions she was having trouble understanding, and then walked to the door to carry out her duty.

“I am the maid, Chiffon Chel. Who is this guest?”

“A southerner, Lady Diel—the metalworker’s daughter.”

Apparently, Lefreya had heard his voice as well, because she immediately commanded them to “Let her through” before Chiffon Chel could say a word.

With that, the maid promptly opened the door, revealing a familiar soldier

who bowed to them, and she ushered their guest inside.

“It’s been a while, Lefreya. Are you stuck here in this room again today?” The girl with speckled dark-brown hair looked all around the room as she entered with a smile, holding some sort of large leather satchel in her hands. The sun was still high in the sky, so she was dressed in Jagar-style men’s clothing. When her bright green eyes caught sight of Sanjura, though, the smile vanished from her face.

“Ah, so you’re here too, huh? It’s Sanjura, right?”

“Yes. It has been some time, Lady Diel.” Sanjura rose to his feet, and bowed like a knight would. Then he turned back toward Lefreya with a smile. “I’ll wait, in the antechamber. Please summon me, if you have any need.”

“I didn’t say you had to leave or anything,” Diel interrupted with a frown.

“Of course not,” Sanjura replied with a nod. “But I look like an easterner, so seeing me, puts you on edge, correct? And I believe your attendant, also wishes for me to leave.”

“Then why don’t you go play with Labis out front for awhile? It’s true that he’d feel more at ease that way.”

As southerners and easterners were hated enemies, Diel had difficulty dealing with Sanjura. But even if Sanjura had blood from Sym in his veins, he was still a westerner, so it seemed like she didn’t really know how she was supposed to interact with him.

The end result was that Sanjura left the room, and Chiffon Chel stepped away to start making some fresh tea.

“You’re always wearing the same clothes. Why not dress up like an actual noble from time to time?” Diel teased.

“What reason is there to dress up when I don’t have any business to attend to outside?”

“Is that how you see it? If I wore night-clothes like that all day, I feel like it’d make me super lazy.”

Chiffon Chel listened in on their conversation while the water was boiling.

This girl was the only one who could visit Lefreya without any guards. Up until recently, Diel had been required to bring guards in order to meet with Lefreya too, but she dealt in metalwork, not food. All of the business dealings between her family and the house of Turan had been transferred over to the house of Genos, so she couldn't plot anything with Lefreya even if she wanted to, and once that had been made clear, the restrictions on their ability to meet privately had been lifted.

That said, any other merchant who was in a similar position surely wouldn't even think of trying to meet with Lefreya at this point. Basically, she was in all likelihood the only person in all of Genos who wanted to meet with Lefreya without any interest in making a profit off of her.

"I brought you a gift today! Just to be sure, you haven't eaten your midday meal yet, have you?"

"The noon bell hasn't sounded yet, so of course I haven't eaten, though I'm also not feeling particularly hungry."

"Oh really? Well, when you see what I've got here, I'm sure it's gonna stir up your appetite."

Chiffon Chel returned with the tea, just in time to see Diel grab the cover flap of the large, flat satchel sitting on the table and flick it open, revealing a number of lidded wooden boxes stacked on top of one another.

"What is that? You didn't bring me food, did you?"

"I did! And this is a giba dish Asuta made, to boot!"

Chiffon Chel almost dropped the tea she was carrying. Lefreya's eyes also opened wide in astonishment.

"I happened to be free from work, so I ran over to the post town to get something to eat. Naturally, I bought enough for you too, Lefreya."

"I'm not allowed to spend coins without approval, you know."

"Stop acting like such a miser! We're only talking about a few red coins here. The folks in the post town are so lucky, getting to eat food this good for such a cheap price."

She lined up the stacked boxes along the length of the table, and placed the big satchel on the floor. Then she removed the lids from the boxes, and a fragrant aroma filled the room. There was a meat and vegetable sauté, round pieces of meat covered in tarapa sauce, and a strange dish that looked like thin wriggling strings.

“Um, this one’s called twice-cooked giba, this is a hamburger, and that’s carbonara. The hamburger’s sold between two bits of baked poitan usually, but it’d get all mushy like that, so I brought them separately.” Diel had the baked poitan wrapped up in a cloth bundle. They looked pretty much like white pieces of fuwano bread.

“Ah sorry, I wanted to split it up, so could you bring us some plates?” Diel asked, and Chiffon Chel did so. She also provided spoons and three-pronged skewers, at which point Diel tilted her head and said, “Huh? I don’t think you brought enough of those.”

“Oh, my deepest apologies. You would rather not reuse your utensils on multiple dishes so the flavors don’t mix, correct?”

“No, that’s not it. Did you really think the two of us could eat all of this by ourselves?”

Chiffon Chel stood there confused, not understanding what she meant.

“There’s enough here for you too, you know. If you don’t have an actual problem with it, you should sit down and have some with us.”

“Huh...? But I am simply Lady Lefreya’s maid. A maid and her mistress cannot share the same table.”

“It’s fine. This isn’t some stuffy formal banquet. And besides, I eat midday snacks with Labis all the time.”

Chiffon Chel remained frozen in place, utterly perplexed, until Lefreya finally said, “I do not mind. You take a seat as well, Chiffon Chel. Your job is to fulfill our visitor’s requests, is it not?”

“Yes...”

The old Lefreya would never have allowed a maid to sit beside her. Chiffon

Chel went and got a third set of utensils for herself, and then she sat down at the table to have a meal next to her mistress for the first time in her life.

“I’ve actually got something to tell you too. Asuta asked me to deliver a message,” Diel added while dividing up the food. “He wanted me to make sure you knew about your brother. You were apparently supposed to be told about him a while ago. Did the news ever get to you?”

“Yes... A servant from the house of Daleim conveyed the message. But why did Sir Asuta feel he needed to go to the trouble of confirming that?”

“Hmm? Well, from what I’ve heard, things were pretty hectic for Asuta during the revival festival. He said he hasn’t had a chance to talk to anyone from the house of Daleim for some time, so he was worried about you and wanted to make sure you knew and weren’t too upset.”

After moving to this new residence, the link between Chiffon Chel and Asuta had been severed. And even if that wasn’t the case, Chiffon Chel was a maid and a slave. She had no right to speak as an equal with someone like Asuta, who was a frequent guest of the nobility.

“He asked about you while I was bragging to him about how I was planning to come here to hang out with Lefreya. I had no idea you were an acquaintance of Asuta’s even though I see you every time I come here.”

“Yes...”

“So it’s no issue, right? You weren’t upset to learn your family’s alive, right?”

“Of course not,” Chiffon Chel replied. An unfamiliar feeling had welled up inside her when she learned her brother was safe, but it most certainly hadn’t been anything negative. And it was incredibly moving that Asuta had thought to send multiple messengers just to make absolutely sure that someone as lowly as her got the news.

“I am deeply, deeply grateful to Sir Asuta. If I could be permitted to ask something of you, I would like to let him know that.”

“Sure thing. It’s not like I head to the post town all that often myself, though. But the next time I go, I’ll make sure to tell him,” Diel said with a brilliant smile as she skewered some giba meat. A southerner like her had no reason to look

down on northerners. “Well then, let’s eat! I hurried over here as quickly as possible so it wouldn’t get cold!”

Lefreya had been listening silently as the other two talked, but now she raised her spoon as well.

Still feeling somewhat bewildered, Chiffon Chel brought a bite of one of the giba dishes to her mouth. This was the first time in several months that she had tasted Asuta’s cooking. It was so delicious that she couldn’t help but sigh.

In her role as a poison tester, Chiffon Chel had tasted the work of more famous chefs than she could count, and Asuta’s skills were a match for any of theirs, in each and every aspect. And what was more, he actually seemed to have improved even further over the past few months.

This was the sort of food he truly wanted to make...dishes that featured giba meat from the forest’s edge. Asuta’s cooking was absolutely incredible, as was the giba meat itself. The dish had such an impact on her that her spoon almost fell from her hand.

The dish Diel had called hamburger was made by finely chopping up meat and then balling it back together and cooking it. When you bit into it, it immediately came apart in your mouth, and the fat and meat juices hidden inside blended together with the boiled tarapa, creating an indescribably delicious flavor.

Furthermore, even though the meat had been finely chopped up, it was still reasonably firm. More and more flavor seemed to keep bursting out of it as you chewed, and it felt every bit as invigorating as gyama or giant muffur bear.

The twice-cooked giba seemed to use a wide variety of seasonings. Chiffon Chel did not know what all of them were, but even so, it was undoubtedly delicious. It was sweet, spicy, sour, and salty, in addition to having a wonderful aroma. The chefs of the castle town valued complex seasoning, and this dish was both complex and perfectly balanced. The sweetness, spiciness, and sourness all felt essential for the dish.

The meat had been cut into bite-size chunks, and had an even nicer chewiness to it than the hamburger, while also feeling like it could start to melt on your tongue at any moment. The bits of fat stuck to it here and there made it even tastier, and the aria, pula, and nenon used in the dish also seemed to work with

the seasoning exceptionally well.

“Well? It’s really tasty, huh? The women of the forest’s edge made the hamburger instead of Asuta, but it’s just as good as it would have been if he’d been the one to make it, don’t you think?!”

“Yes... Giba meat truly is delicious.”

“Give this carbonara a try too! It’s easier to eat if you wrap it around a three-pronged skewer, like this!”

“Diel, isn’t this that pasta dish?” Lefreya asked.

“Oh, all dishes that have this wriggly stuff are pasta, but the name changes based on how it’s flavored. So, that would make this ‘carbonara pasta,’ I guess.”

“Hmm... That name sounds like one of those spells from Sym you hate so much.” Lefreya was pouting, but it was clear that she was enjoying Asuta’s cooking and the conversation with Diel. Lately, she had been eating noticeably less than she used to, but now her food was vanishing into her mouth as quickly as Diel’s was. She really was a gourmand, just like her father.

I don’t know why this Diel girl has gotten close to Lady Lefreya...but they almost seem like sisters of different ages, somehow. Their appearances, temperaments, and even the countries where they were born differed, but Chiffon Chel still felt that way. And when she thought about it a bit more, she remembered that Sanjura had eastern blood in his veins, and of course, she herself was a northerner. It had to be pretty rare for people from all four kingdoms to gather like this outside of Genos.

“By the way, that easterner Arishuna has Asuta’s cooking delivered to her in the castle town all the time! Isn’t that unfair?”

“I wouldn’t say so. And if you feel it’s unfair, why not simply make the same arrangement for yourself?”

“Huh? But I’m always getting invited to noble banquets. Even if I did have it delivered to me, I still wouldn’t have many chances to eat it! Why do nobles keep inviting guests over all the time like that anyway?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps they’re competing to show off how much wealth they

possess?”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll tell you what, I’d go running over to ask *them* for an invite anytime if they could ever manage to get Asuta to cook for one of their events,” Diel remarked while wrapping some poitan around a few pieces of giba meat and taking a bite. Then her eyes started sparkling, and she suddenly shouted, “That’s it! Why not invite Asuta here sometime?! Then we could all eat giba cooking together again!”

“It’s forbidden to invite people of the forest’s edge to the castle town without approval, and I lack the standing to make such a request of Duke Genos.”

“The standing? But aren’t you technically the head of the house of Turan?”

“In name only. My guardian, Torst, also hates to waste money, so I could never summon an outside chef to begin with.”

“Tch! And here I thought it was such a great idea.”

“First of all, Asuta would never want to cook for me anyway. I’m the daughter of an enemy of the people of the forest’s edge, after all.”

Diel looked back at Lefreya. She seemed to be hesitating for some reason. “Do you have a grudge against Asuta and the rest of them, Lefreya?”

“My father committed numerous crimes, so it would be misplaced resentment to feel that way.”

“I see. Then there shouldn’t be any issue, right? The people of the forest’s edge, Asuta included, believe that once a punishment is handed down, that’s the end of the matter. I’d be surprised if any of them are still holding a grudge against you or your father now.”

Rather than replying, Lefreya slurped some carbonara off of a skewer.

Seeing her friend’s childish behavior, Diel’s eyebrows drooped and she said, “Sorry. That was intrusive of me. I didn’t mean to bring all of that up again.”

“I never expect thoughtfulness from a southerner such as you.”

“What’s that mean? If you’re annoyed, then you should just let loose and get angry with me. Otherwise, how am I supposed to show you that I regret what I said?”

“I am a westerner, so I don’t simply give voice to every single thought that comes into my mind.”

“Jeez!” Diel grumbled, rustling her short hair. Despite their arguing, though, Lefreya didn’t seem to be as down as Diel had feared. The southerner had come on a day when Lefreya was craving companionship, so the happiness she felt from being able to see her friend was managing to overcome her annoyance. After all, Diel was someone incredibly precious to Lefreya.

Misplaced resentment, huh?

If everyone felt that way, would the histories of Selva and Mahyudra still be stained by centuries of hatred? As she idly contemplated that question, Chiffon Chel wrapped some wriggly carbonara around her skewer.

Eventually, the noon bell rang outside the window as they ate. It seemed that time was still steadily marching onward, even here in this room isolated from the outside world.

3

It was now the following day, and once again, Chiffon Chel found herself tediously sitting there in the antechamber, surrounded by stone walls. Lefreya did not receive many visitors, and she also rarely ever left her room, so Chiffon Chel’s job typically only consisted of assisting the young lady with her morning bathing and delivering her two daily meals, along with brewing the occasional pot of tea.

In the past, she had been tasked with handling the washing, preparing banquet attire, and the like, so she had hardly ever had any time to rest, but in a way, it had been easier to constantly move around like that than it was to constantly stay still. Ever since Chiffon Chel had become Lefreya’s personal maid, her days seemed to be twice as long.

“When the other maids, have no work to do, they embroider and the like,” Sanjura called out, as he was also present in the room, relaxing. He, too, spent most of his time in the antechamber, unless either Lefreya called for him, or he was practicing his swordsmanship out front.

“Even if I did embroider something, what would I do with it?”

“I’m not sure. Wear it yourself, or give it to someone else, I suppose. I am a man, so I can’t say I really understand.”

“I see.”

She had spent a rather large amount of time with Sanjura by this point, but she still didn’t know the man very well. All Chiffon Chel knew was that Lefreya was more precious to him than anything. She didn’t even know why the young lady was important to him, or what sort of relationship he wished them to have. He just seemed to want to be by Lefreya’s side, and he polished his swordsmanship in order to protect her.

“Chiffon Chel, it feels like, you’ve been listless lately,” Sanjura added. “And after what happened yesterday, you seemed even more down. Are you worried, about your brethren?”

“No, I wouldn’t go so far as to call it worry.”

Their conversation didn’t carry on any further than that. Even after a day, Chiffon Chel still hadn’t been able to sort out her feelings. Whenever she thought about her brother and the others, her heart started beating faster, but asking herself if she was worried for their safety always gave her a feeling like that was not the reason.

The settlement at the forest’s edge was a dangerous place. She didn’t know just *how* dangerous it was, but at the very least, she had heard that the giba that lived in the forest of Morga were ferocious beasts. If slaves bound with chains were attacked, it would be all too easy for them to lose their lives. But if the people of the forest’s edge were lending their aid, there was no point in Chiffon Chel worrying herself any further. In fact, she even wondered if dying would actually be such a terrible thing, if the worst were to happen.

No matter how long slaves lived, they would still remain slaves. They didn’t get whipped much in this land, and they were given plenty of food and sleep, but that didn’t change the fact of what they were. They had no freedom to act as they pleased, they weren’t paid wages, and they weren’t even permitted to give birth. What difference did it make, really, if one were to die early, when the alternative was a life of being worked until you could work no more? That was

how Chiffon Chel saw it.

Her situation wasn't so terrible that she *wanted* to die, but she wasn't happy enough to have an active desire for her life to continue either. That was how the people of Mahyudra lived in this land. And Chiffon Chel had been painfully aware of that even before she had been separated from her brother and the others.

With her heart starting to beat faster again for some reason, Chiffon Chel looked up and stared at Sanjura. "Sanjura...before you were assigned to Lady Lefreya, the previous head of the house had you travel to various places around the country, did he not?"

"Yes, that's right."

"In that case...did you see northerners being used as slaves elsewhere too?"

"Yes, many times. But it was not very often, that I was sent to places, far from Genos. Northern slaves are common, farther to the north," Sanjura said with a kind smile. But in spite of his expression, it was difficult to tell what he was truly thinking. He wasn't expressionless like a citizen of Sym, but his smile still seemed to obscure his feelings a lot of the time.

"How were the northerners treated in those lands?" Chiffon Chel asked all the same. It had been quite some time since she had spoken because there was something she personally wanted to talk about, rather than just for work—possibly not since she last spoke with Asuta.

"Well, I did not approach, too closely, so I cannot say for certain...but they were usually, bound with chains, and made to work in fields. I also saw them, chopping wood, and in quarries."

"I see."

But then Sanjura suddenly turned his gaze up toward the ceiling. It looked as if he had just remembered something. "Now that I think about it...I forget the name, of the town, but there was one time, that I saw something rather unusual."

"Something unusual?"

“Yes. A pregnant northerner.”

Chiffon Chel gave a small gasp, but then she quickly rethought the conclusion she had jumped to and shook her head. “Westerners hate northerners, so I doubt this would happen very often...but considering how the older women among our group were sold off to another land for some reason, what you saw could have been a mixing of northern and western blood.”

“Yes, I thought the same thing, but that was not, the case.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Correct. I did not speak with her, so I do not know for certain...but the pregnant woman, looked profoundly happy,” Sanjura said, smiling once more. “There were several women cooking, for a group of men. And the other women, were congratulating the pregnant woman. They would not do that, if the father was a westerner, correct?”

Chiffon Chel wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“I have mixed blood, from the east and west. My mother, was separated from her family, and ended up living as a westerner. She was very gentle, but seemed to suffer greatly. Because my father commanded it, it was decided that I would be, a child of the western god.” The same smile still on his face, Sanjura’s eyes narrowed nostalgically. “That’s how it usually goes, even with friendly nations like, the east and west. A child between, the north and the west, would not be received happily. In fact, the other women, would find it difficult, to do so.”

Chiffon Chel still said nothing.

“However, I do not know if slaves, are permitted to have, children together.”

“This is just a rumor...but I’ve heard that some places in this country do allow such things.”

“I see. Then perhaps that, was one of those places.”

This discussion was making Chiffon Chel feel even more uneasy. Underneath her cold exterior, she could sense her emotions raging wildly—feelings that had been lurking inside ever since she had heard from Asuta that her brother was alive, and that were now growing more and more intense.

It was then that she heard the light sound of a bell ringing beyond the door. Lefreya was calling for her.

“Excuse me,” she said, bowing to Sanjura. Then she opened the door. Lefreya wasn’t on her usual couch, but was instead standing near the window. The little window was barred with latticework, which ensured that it would be impossible for someone to escape through it, even putting aside how difficult it would be to reach it. Additionally, this was the third floor, so no one would be able to meet with her in secret from the outside either.

“Do you want something, Lady Lefreya?”

“Yes,” Lefreya replied, but she didn’t move for a long moment. When she finally did, it was to slowly turn to face Chiffon Chel. “I wish to take a bit of a walk. Could you let Sanjura know as well? Once you do, I shall need you to help me change.”

“Understood. Please hold on a moment,” After passing the message along to Sanjura over in the antechamber, Chiffon Chel moved over to the wardrobe in the corner of the room. “Lady Lefreya, what sort of attire do you wish to wear?”

“Anything will do. Just make it as simple as possible.”

Chiffon Chel thought for a bit, then handed a pale yellow dress and a shawl with Sym-style embroidery over to Lefreya.

She began by removing the white robe Lefreya was wearing, exposing the even paler skin underneath, almost as white as that of a northerner. It must have been so pale because she had been stuck in this room for so long.

Chiffon Chel then smiled awkwardly when she realized that her own fingers had grown even whiter still. That was no surprise, as she had been confined within stone walls like these for much longer than Lefreya. Even before coming to this residence, the only chances she’d had to feel the sunlight on her skin were the times when a guest would ask her to show them around the garden.

But westerners have finer skin than northerners. It’s almost as if she is made of clay.

Now that she had turned twelve, her body was also steadily growing more feminine. Not that long ago, Lefreya had looked like nothing more than a young

child, but at some point her body had gained some modest curves, and even a small amount of charm. The hair that she had chopped off to atone for her crimes had regrown until it was almost shoulder-length now, and her nose and cheeks also looked a bit less childish. She was like a flower bud that was about to bloom and reveal its beauty.

If she grows into a fine woman, takes a husband, and transfers control of the family to him, perhaps then Lady Lefreya will be able to live more freely than she does now.

Chiffon Chel neither pitied nor hated Lefreya. The young lady had been quite hot-tempered in the past, but her behavior had seemed almost cute when compared to the things Ciluel had done, and she, at least, had never whipped Chiffon Chel. Moreover, the way she started to shrilly cry out whenever she so much as thought about her father—the only family she had ever known—always made her seem very much like a small injured bird.

If you cannot leave it freely, even a sturdy stone house is no different than a cage. Lady Lefreya and I are both nothing more than caged birds, Chiffon Chel thought to herself as she put the yellow dress on Lefreya, then wrapped the embroidered shawl around her mistress. She had thought that the young lady would at least need some sort of hair accessory as well to complete her outfit, but Lefreya had flatly refused it.

After passing through the antechamber and exiting into the hallway, they found Sanjura standing next to two soldiers, who were there to escort them. The soldiers took up positions in front of and behind Lefreya, and their group then descended the stairs and stepped outside.

The residence was one that had been built for nobles to make use of as needed. Powerful nobles were able to build fine manors in the castle town for themselves, but knights and government officials typically lived in public housing complexes like this one, along with their families. Branch families of some noble houses like those of marquises and counts also tended to reside in such places.

To their right, they could see Genos Castle standing there in all its glory, but Lefreya turned her back to it and started walking toward the garden.

It was forbidden for her to leave the residence without permission from Torst. The place was surrounded by stone walls with vines hanging all over them, and the gate was guarded by soldiers. The garden was full of flowers some noblewoman had planted, and was wide enough for a totos to comfortably run around in it. It was currently the early afternoon, so there was no one else around at the moment.

As she walked along the stone path that ran around the perimeter, Lefreya eventually called out, "Sanjura, could you give us a bit of space? I would like to have a discussion."

"A discussion? With whom?"

"Who else could I mean but Chiffon Chel?"

Chiffon Chel was shocked, but Sanjura just smiled. "Understood. I'll have the soldiers, step back as well."

The soldiers looked suspicious, but they were surrounded by stone walls, and there was no way she would be able to use Chiffon Chel to start any sort of conspiracy regardless, so Sanjura and the soldiers all walked ten or so steps away, deciding to keep watch from a spot where they couldn't overhear the conversation.

"What is it, Lady Lefreya? What could you possibly have to discuss with one such as myself?"

Lefreya kept on silently walking for a short while, with Sanjura and the soldiers following them, always remaining the same distance away. Eventually, though, she opened her mouth around halfway through a lap around the large garden space.

"Chiffon Chel, a member of your family is being made to work in the Turan lands, correct? How exactly are you related to them?"

"He is...my older brother."

Lefreya lightly bit her lip upon hearing that. Even though the two of them were still walking along the path, her gaze was directed down at her feet the whole time.

“But you were already working in our manor even back when I was little, were you not? How long has it been since you last saw your brother?”

“I started serving the count five years ago. I have not seen my brother or any of my other brethren since then.” Chiffon Chel had absolutely no idea why Lefreya wanted to know that, though.

In a depressed voice, the girl repeated, “Five years... So you were captured as slaves five years ago?”

“No. We lost our homeland thirteen years ago. We spent eight years elsewhere in Selva before being brought here to work in the Turan lands.”

Lefreya fell silent.

“Why are you asking about this? There’s nothing strange about westerners purchasing northerners as slaves.”

“But my father was the only one who used slaves here in Genos. No one else would ever go out of their way to purchase them this far south.”

“Yes. It takes over a month by totos to travel between Mahyudra and Genos, after all. Few would put in such time and effort.”

Lefreya stopped walking and looked up at Chiffon Chel’s face. She was raising her eyebrows, like she often used to do back when she had been a young tyrant. But now, her pale eyes were showing nothing but unease and sadness.

“Chiffon Chel, you must hate me and my father greatly. You were purchased and brought here as a slave, and then we ripped you away from your family too.”

“Hate you...? I wouldn’t say that. The soldiers who burned our home down, captured us, and made us slaves belonged to a distant part of this country that has nothing to do with Genos”

“But my father is the one who pulled you away from your family.”

What was going on here? Unable to understand Lefreya’s thinking at all, Chiffon Chel tilted her head.

“It’s true that my heart became hollow after I was separated from my brother. But if you’re asking me whether the two of us were happy back when

we were working together, well...I don't think I could answer that with a yes."

"So, as long as you are slaves, your lives will be full of suffering regardless of whether or not your family is by your side?"

"Perhaps...? It's hard to say for sure. At this point, it's difficult for me to remember what my life was like before I was a slave."

Lefreya pursed her lips tightly. That was also something she had often done in the past, but now she looked like she was holding back tears. "I have been separated from my father, the only family I have... But that was the result of the crimes he committed, so there is no one for me to hate. If he had not been a count, he surely would have lost his head after everything he did."

"Yes."

"But you didn't commit any crimes at all, correct? And yet, you still had both your home and your family taken from you, so how can you say you don't hate us for that?"

Chiffon Chel brought a hand to her chest and thought. Something was bubbling up deep within her frozen heart. However, she didn't think that it was hatred.

"I do not feel hate. I probably lost the ability to hate other people a long time ago."

"Then what am I supposed to do about this?" Lefreya asked, sounding like a spoiled child. Her eyes were starting to tear up a bit. "If you had said you wished to return to your brother, I could have told Torst to make arrangements to allow you to do so. But if that won't bring you happiness...then I don't know what else can I do to make this better."

"Why... Why are you saying such things, Lady Lefreya?"

"Because nothing's more precious than family, right? It's absolutely unforgivable that we would tear your family apart when you haven't done anything wrong?"

Lefreya had lost her entire family. But losing them had shown her how important family truly was, possibly for the first time in her entire life. Months

ago, she had ordered two of her attendants to abduct Asuta and bring him to the castle town, where she kept him until a female hunter calling herself Asuta's family saved him from that predicament. Lefreya herself had ripped an innocent man away from his family, and now she was crying at the thought of the pain she had caused. Was this also the will of the western god?

That indescribable emotion was growing stronger and stronger within Chiffon Chel's chest. It almost felt as if her body was physically straining to keep it contained.

"Think it over again, Chiffon Chel. Don't you want to return to your brother? Life in the Turan lands may be difficult for slaves, but at least you would be with your family there, right? Wouldn't that make you at least a little happier?"

"I..."

"Or should we summon your brother to the castle town? That would be a little...no, quite difficult indeed, but if that is what you wish for, I shall petition Torst and Duke Genos to allow it to happen, even if I have to lick their boots to get them to agree."

"Wh-Why are you so concerned about the fates of my brother and me, Lady Lefreya?" Chiffon Chel asked, losing her composure and trying to step back, only for Lefreya to grab ahold of both of her hands. There were now tears streaming down her smooth white cheeks. Lefreya was crying, despite looking angry at the same time.

"You and Sanjura are all I have now. I cannot bear the thought that tragedy has befallen one of you because of my father and me. I don't want to lose you, but...more than that, I want you to be happy."

"But...I am a slave who was purchased for coins."

"That has nothing to do with it! To me, all that matters is that you're my maid!"

Chiffon Chel could spy the soldiers stirring out of the corner of her eye, but they made no move to approach. Sanjura must have stopped them. She was utterly bewildered. It felt as if Lefreya's intensity was causing the emotions swirling about in her chest to flare up in response.

“What can I do for you? What would bring you the greatest happiness? Ask me for anything, anything at all! I may not have any power left, but I wish to atone for my father’s crimes however much I can!”

“I... I have lost all human emotion... I can’t even tell happiness and misery apart anymore,” Chiffon Chel replied, squeezing Lefreya’s hands back. They felt so very, very small, and yet there was an incredible amount of warmth in them. “But thanks to you, Lady Lefreya, I finally realized... What I want most is to be human again, like you.”

“What do you mean? Say it in a way I can understand!”

“Right... I did not know if returning to my brother would bring me happiness...and I hated that doubting part of myself so much I could not stand it... I learned that he was alive and well, but I did not know if I should feel joy or sadness because of that. I hated myself, and the state of the world.”

A muddy stream burst through the cracks in Chiffon Chel’s frozen heart, but the ice was still holding together. Those thirteen years of hardening wouldn’t be broken through so easily.

Chiffon Chel didn’t feel anger, sadness, or joy, but she shouldn’t have just accepted that as fact. If she didn’t know what happiness was, she should have been doing everything she could to find out.

Like Asuta had done and Lefreya was trying to do now, she should have fought against the fate that had been thrust upon her as hard as she could. Rather than yielding to the flow of destiny, she wanted to grab ahold of as much happiness as she could. No... She wanted to regain enough of her human emotions to desire that in the first place.

“Lady Lefreya. What I want is for my brother and my brethren to live happy lives. And I wish to be happy myself as well.”

“Right... Then what should I do?”

“Well, there is no way that anyone from Selva would ever release us, even if they wished to do so. Northerners take westerners as slaves as well, so it would be pointless to ask to be the only ones freed. And as long as the war between our nations does not end, releasing slaves would be the same thing as aiding

the enemy, which makes any kind of request like that impossible to grant.”

“Right.”

“But perhaps something can be done to allow northerners to live happily even in the western lands. I’ve heard that there are a few towns where some slaves are permitted to earn wages and have children. A number of slaves from those towns were sold to the Turan lands, but they found living here to be more than they could bear, so they tried to escape and were executed. I think that proves that they used to be happy enough that they were willing to risk their lives to get that happiness back, does it not?”

“Right,” Lefreya repeated with yet another nod. The young lady seemed to be desperately trying to understand what Chiffon Chel was trying to convey, and what she wanted.

“Travelers from all sorts of places gather here in Genos. I’m sure it would be possible to learn from them about why those other lands give slaves wages and allow them to have children. If managing slaves in that way is profitable, and Duke Genos could be made to see that...then perhaps the slaves of the Turan lands would also be permitted to live that way.”

“Is that your desire, Chiffon Chel?”

“Yes. My brother and the others lack the strength to flee the western kingdom at this point, so what choice do we have but to try to find happiness here?” Chiffon Chel asked, managing a natural smile. That was the first time she had smiled without having to make a deliberate effort to do so since she had said farewell to Asuta. “My brother and my other brethren have no way to make their words reach the ears of the nobles. But you are here by my side, Lady Lefreya, and you’ve already taken the huge step of promising to aid someone like me. I am the only northern slave in the whole world whose words can reach the nobles of Genos. I do not know if this is the right thing to do, or if it will bring us happiness. But if I am not happy now, then I want to do everything I can to become happy someday.”

“Naturally,” Lefreya replied with yet another nod. Her eyes were still filled with tears, but they were shining brighter now than ever before. “You are a slave from Mahyudra, and I am a noble in name only with no power

whatsoever, but if we muster all our strength and think it through, perhaps we can find a way to shift fate ever so slightly. Torst, Duke Genos, and Polarth of the house of Daleim are the kind of people who will not balk at anything they believe will benefit Genos. If we use that fact to our advantage, then improving the lives of your brother and the others should be entirely possible.”

“Yes... But do you truly wish to expend such effort for one such as myself?” Chiffon Chel asked, causing Lefreya to smile with her eyebrows still raised. It was impossible to tell if she was happy, angry, or sad at this point.

“You and Sanjura are all that I have left. A mistress who cannot even look after two servants is more useless than a broken sword.” With that, Lefreya wiped away her tears with the back of one small hand, then used the other to grab ahold of Chiffon Chel’s hand and started walking. “With that decided, let us return to the room to plan. We’ll have to talk Torst into it first, and then perhaps we should make contact with Polarth... Ah yes, the swordsmanship tournament will be happening soon as well. I could speak with Duke Genos directly there, and his heir’s wife, Eulifia, has always paid an unusual amount of attention to me. We may be able to get things moving sooner if we approach the problem from that direction.”

“Lady Lefreya, please don’t act recklessly.”

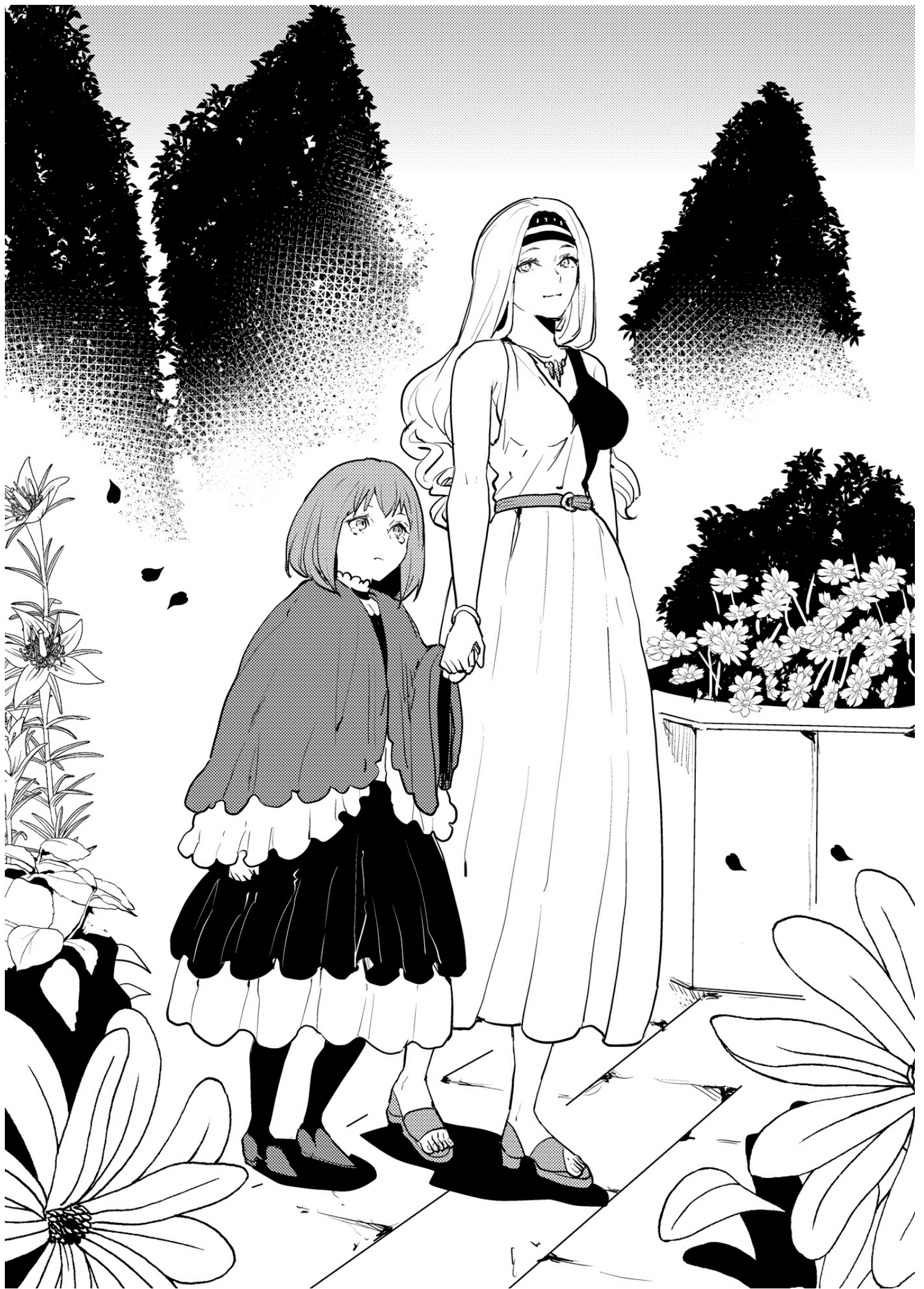
“Why not? I’m just like a little bird that’s been kept beyond the end of its usefulness, so if I do not chirp as loud as I can, no one will ever look at me.”

Chiffon Chel ended up smiling again at the thought that she and Lefreya felt the same way about how they had been spending their days.

Only the gods could decide whether her frozen heart would ever break free, or if she and her brother would find happiness, but at least she had chosen a path forward for herself. She had nothing left to lose, and there was also someone else trying to walk that path alongside her. If the approach they were taking was the wrong one, then the western and northern gods could simply stand in their way and stop them.

Hundred of years had passed since Selva and Mahyudra started fighting. In all that time, had a western noble and a northern slave ever stood hand in hand like this before? As she pondered that thought, Chiffon Chel found herself

smiling with more and more vigor.



Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-fifth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

Yes, we've finally arrived at volume twenty-five. I know I say this every time, but it is thanks to all of you that I was able to make it this far, so I'd like to thank you from the depths of my heart.

As a reader, I personally prefer longer series, so I've been really satisfied with how much of this I've been able to write. Both long and short stories have their charms, but I particularly enjoy the shifting and intersecting relationships you see in massive series.

There are a huge number of characters in this series, but the setting hardly changes at all, which feels kind of odd to me. Despite the huge amount I've written so far, we've only left the main setting once, for the trip to Dabagg. Honestly, I find that a bit astounding. Still, Asuta is going to continue putting down roots in Genos from here on out, forming and deepening bonds with all sorts of people, so I hope you'll all keep on watching him.

In order to change things up a bit despite the fixed setting, this volume features the start of the rainy season. Genos doesn't experience four seasons, so this is the one and only climate shift that occurs there. In this first part, something rather serious happens to Asuta, and I hope you'll be looking forward to seeing everything play out, that included.

The intermezzo story this time around is also set during the rainy season, and it stars Yun Sudra. When it comes to bonus stories, I generally try to center them around characters who don't shine enough in the main story, but I feel like Yun Sudra and Toor Deen show up quite a bit. I used to think the same thing about Lala Ruu, but I admit I've been neglecting her recently. I'm fond of all of my characters, though, so I hope you'll enjoy Yun Sudra's charms and inner thoughts from a perspective you don't get to see in the main story.

As for the Group Performance stories, they focus on Kukuluel and Chiffon

Chel. Kukuluel has only had a single brief appearance in a minor role so far, so I'm a bit worried about whether all of you will even remember him. At any rate, I wanted to show how Genos had changed from the point of view of a character who has almost no connection to Asuta.

Chiffon Chel's story, on the other hand, covers her whole life thus far, similar to the ones that focused on Tei Suun and Reina. The Group Performances are just like that sometimes. I feel like this kind of story creates a totally different sense of immersion compared to the main tale, so I hope that you will all be able to enjoy it.

Now then, I believe I've more or less covered the contents of this volume, but I still have a couple pages to spare. Since afterwords are printed on the extra pages that always end up being there because of how books are bound, sometimes I end up not being able to write everything I want to, and sometimes I actually run out of things to say.

So for a bit of amusement, I decided to throw together a quiz.

This series has a huge number of characters, but there are quite a few forgotten ones who were unfortunate enough to never have another chance to appear again after their parts of the story were done. Who exactly are the following characters?

1: Malotta

2: Jimon

3: Zylus

Anyone who remembers all of them clearly has a far better memory than me, the author. When I went through the roster of my precious characters, I couldn't remember any of them.

By the way, Malotta was from volume seventeen, Jimon volume twelve, and Zylus volume thirteen. I've considered having Zylus show up again, but that still hasn't happened yet. Still, there is a chance that you'll see him again someday if the right inspiration strikes me.

At any rate, it looks like I've managed to fill up all the pages I needed to now.

Thank you for playing along with that pointless diversion.

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!

May 2021,

EDA

Bonus Short Story

The Joy of the Rainy Season

“The rain just never stops,” Lala Ruu absentmindedly muttered as she watched the unending drizzle.

Lala Ruu’s younger sister Rimee Ruu was there as well, sitting on the ground with her arms around her knees and staring out at the hazy scene. The two of them were currently just inside the entrance to the kitchen of the main Ruu house. All of the stoves were lit, so even with the door open, they were quite warm. The room had to be hot in order to remove the moisture from the boiled poitan, and keeping an eye on the flames was the only task the two of them currently needed to attend to.

“Ugh, this is so boring! There’s nothing fun at all about just making sure some fires don’t go out!” Lala Ruu suddenly and bluntly exclaimed.

“Ah ha ha,” Rimee Ruu laughed. “But if the sun doesn’t come out, then this is the only way we can dry out the poitan. We have to do this if we want to have yummy food, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know! But standing around like this makes me feel like I’ve got so much energy I don’t know what to do with it all!”

“Then why not play outside?”

“I’d get soaked! Ugh, I wish the rainy season would hurry up and end already!”

“It only just started, though. Do you really hate rain that much, Lala?”

“Of course I do! Nobody likes rain!”

“Huh? Really? I think it’s pretty okay.”

Lala Ruu stared incredulously at her sister’s earnest smile. “Seriously? What’s there to like about rain?”

“Hmm, I guess I’d say...when the rain’s falling, it gets real quiet, and the color of the forest changes. That makes it kind of fun to look at, don’t you think?” Rimee Ruu said, going back to staring at the world outside.

Lala Ruu followed her sister’s gaze. All she could see from the kitchen was the soaked ground and the towering greenery beyond it. The light rain cast a hazy, whitish veil over the area, almost as if the world was covered in gossamer threads. But the soaked ground and tree branches were darker than everything else around them, giving the scene a much starker sense of contrast than it usually had.

The forest of Morga normally seemed to be so full of energy and life, but at times like these, it looked as if it was in a deep, deep slumber. The only sound Lala Ruu could hear was the pattering of raindrops on the roof and the firewood crackling in the stoves. It was almost like the entire world was sleeping. She was gripped by a sudden feeling of loneliness, as if all of humanity had died out, aside from her sister and herself.

“Ugh, this isn’t fun at all! It’s just dreary and tedious!”

“Ah ha ha, you sound like a little kid, Lala.”

“*You’re* the little one here! Jeez, would somebody do something about this rain already!”

“I don’t think anyone can do anything about that,” Rimee Ruu replied, and then she tilted her head. “Hmm? It sounds like the rain’s getting lighter.”

“Huh?! Really?!” Lala Ruu said, leaning excitedly out the door.

The rain had already been light, but Lala Ruu could tell that it was definitely stopping, and as the last of the droplets seeped into the ground, white sunlight suddenly began streaming down from overhead.

“Wow, it actually stopped! Do you think the forest of Morga heard your wish, Lala?”

“Who cares?! This is great!” Lala Ruu exclaimed, leaping through the doorway and letting the sunlight wash over her whole body.

It was weaker than normal sunlight, no brighter than it would have been at

dusk on a clear day despite the sun being near its peak, but it was strong enough that Lala Ruu could clearly feel its warmth on her face and the tips of her fingers.

“What are you two up to? The sun’s out, so hurry up and douse those fires. We need to move the pots outside,” their mother Mia Lea Ruu called out as she exited the main house and started walking over to them. Their eldest brother Jiza Ruu’s wife Sati Lea Ruu was following after her.

Lala Ruu rushed back into the kitchen and together with Rimee Ruu she went around taking care of the fires while the older women carried the pots out front one after another.

“The shadows from the detached structure will get in the way over here. We should set them out in front of the main house.”

Lala and Rimee Ruu each picked up a pot and followed after their mother and their brother’s wife into the wide plaza in front of their house.

The women from the branch houses were bringing their pots full of poitan out to dry as well, along with their laundry and pico leaves.

The young children from the branch houses followed soon after. The ground around the plaza was soaked, but the kids didn’t care about that at all. They immediately started running around and splashing in puddles.

“Oh right, what’s Granny Jiba up to?” Rimee Ruu asked.

“Huh?” Mia Lea Ruu questioned with a tilt of her head. “Our elder is in her room. She should be taking her midday nap around this time.”

“Then I’ll go get her. She’s been wanting to take a walk.”

“Ah, don’t force her to get up if she’s asleep! It’s easy to fall ill during the rainy season, you know.”

“I know!” Rimee Ruu said energetically. She ran into the entrance hall of the main house, and then reemerged faster than you could count to ten, leading the elder Jiba Ruu by the hand.

“Granny Jiba was awake! She said she was just thinking about coming outside!”

“Ah, I see... Don’t push yourself too hard, Jiba. The ground’s still wet even if the rain has let up.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll be careful. Ah, how wonderful to feel the sunlight again.” As she stepped outside, Jiba Ruu’s already naturally narrow eyes narrowed further as she stared up at the dimly lit sky.

Lala Ruu hurried over to join them. Rimee Ruu was still very small, so she was worried that if Jiba Ruu slipped, it could easily result in the two of them falling down together. When she reached the two of them a moment later, Rimee Ruu smiled at her from the other side of their great-grandmother.

“Hey Lala! I just remembered one more thing I love about the rainy season!”

“Hmm? What crazy nonsense are you going to start spouting now?”

“Well, when the sun finally shows itself after it’s been hiding behind the clouds for a long time like this, it makes me feel really happy! If it was bright out all the time, then I’d forget what it’s like to be happy just to see the sun!” Rimee Ruu replied, smiling from the depths of her heart.

Jiba Ruu looked like she was as delighted with the change in the weather as her great-granddaughter was.

Seeing her precious family members in such high spirits, Lala Ruu naturally broke out in a smile of her own.





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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 25

by EDA

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