

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**

VOLUME
26

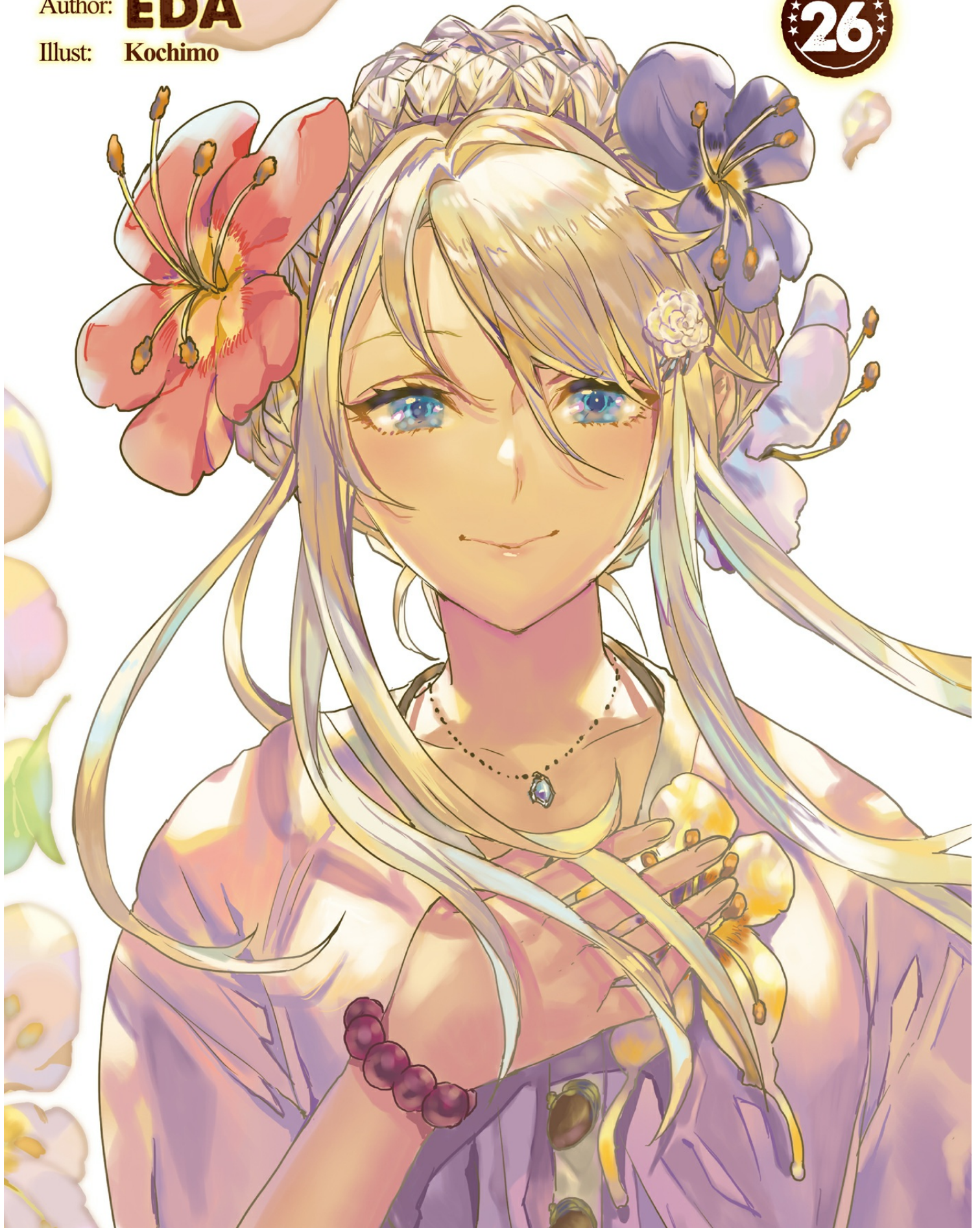



COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**

VOLUME
26

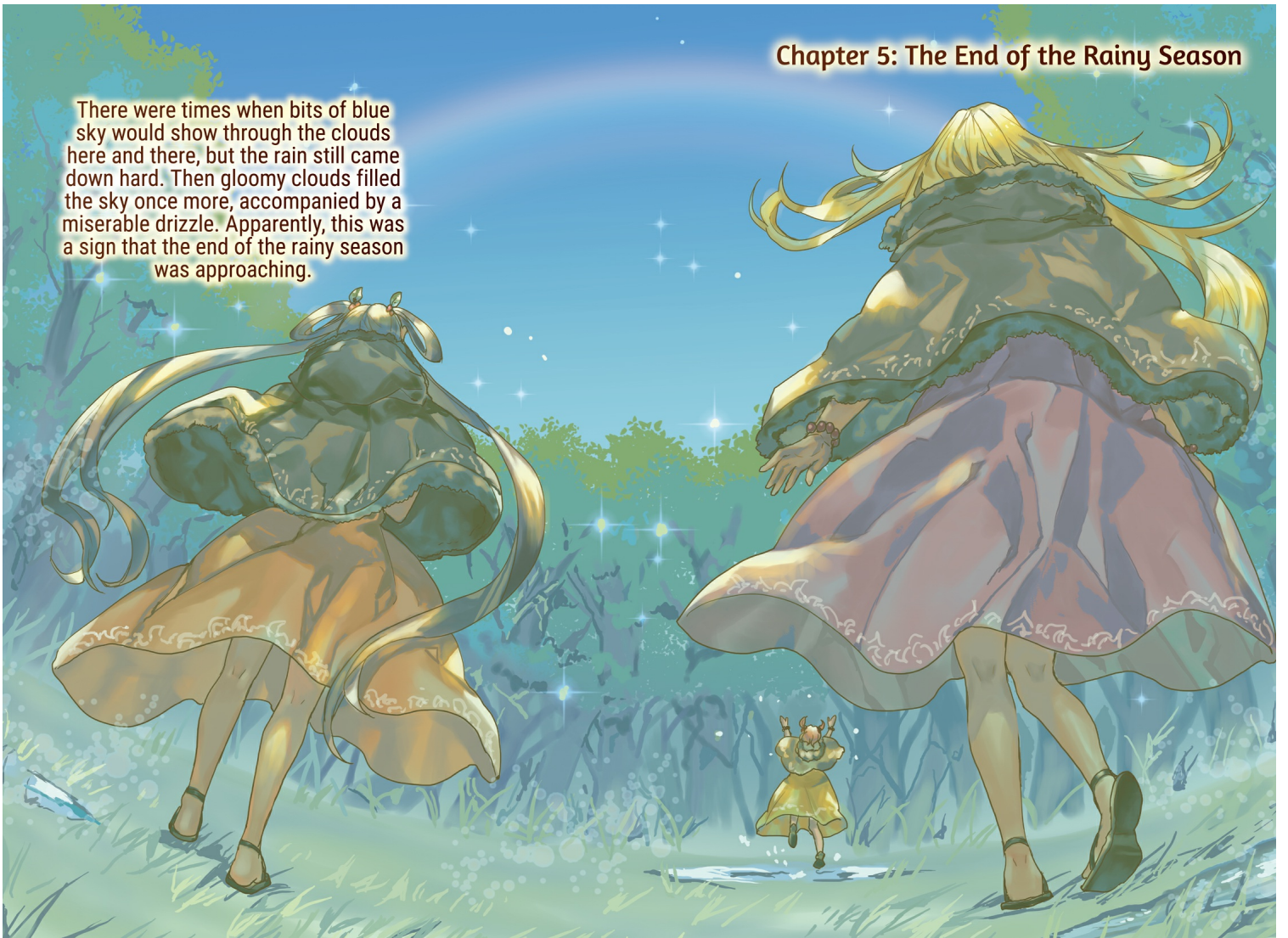




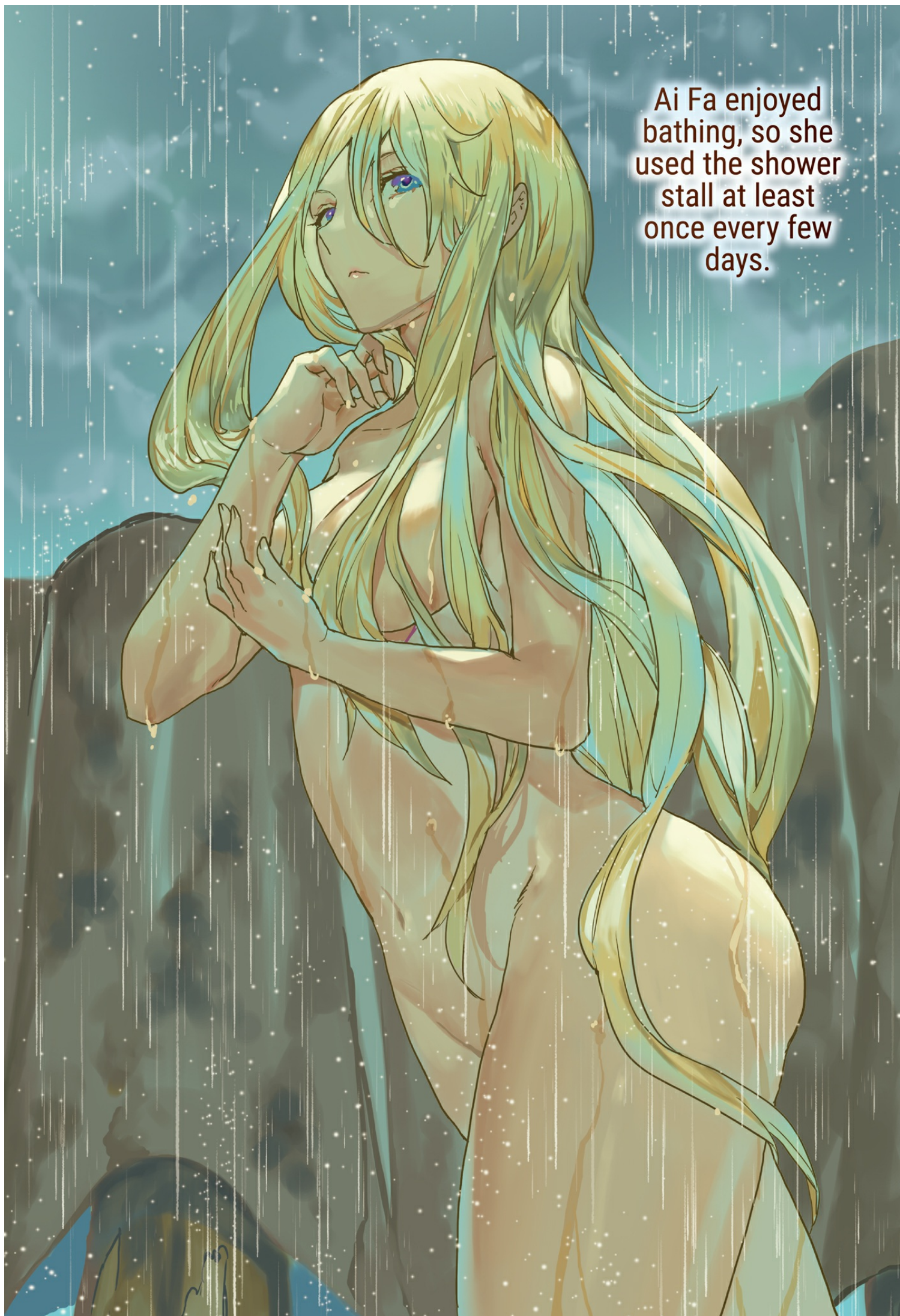
“This will be my first time working with these vegetables, so I’m going to need everyone to contribute with your knowledge and experience. I’m especially going to be relying on you, Mikel, since you’ve worked with them before as a chef in the castle town.”

Chapter 5: The End of the Rainy Season

There were times when bits of blue sky would show through the clouds here and there, but the rain still came down hard. Then gloomy clouds filled the sky once more, accompanied by a miserable drizzle. Apparently, this was a sign that the end of the rainy season was approaching.



Ai Fa enjoyed
bathing, so she
used the shower
stall at least
once every few
days.



Chapter 1: The Rain's Blessings

Chapter 2: An Unexpected
Disturbance

Chapter 3: The Fa Clan Head's
Birthday

Chapter 4: Another Sweet
Gathering

Chapter 5: The End of the Rainy
Season

Intermezzo: A Night in the
Daleim Lands

Group Performance: The Nature
of a Leading Clan Head

Group Performance:
Two-Headed Snake





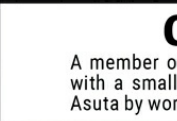
MENU 














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.
	Darmu Ruu The second son of the main Ruu house. He can be curt and rough at times and is emotional in general. He's slowly opening up to Asuta and company.		Ludo Ruu The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Reina Ruu The second daughter of the main Ruu house. An excellent chef. She also runs the Ruu clan's stalls alongside Sheera Ruu.		Rimee Ruu The youngest Ruu daughter. An earnest, innocent child who specializes in making desserts. 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.		Shin Ruu The young head of a Ruu branch house. He blames himself for failing to prevent Asuta's kidnapping, and after much training in the aftermath, he became one of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Shumiral A member of Silver Vase, a merchant group from Sym. 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.	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.	
		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.	
	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 dessert-making skills are constantly improving.		Yun Sudra A member of the small Sudra clan. Greatly adores Asuta.
Saris Ran Fou A member of the Fou clan, which is located near the Fa house. Ai Fa's childhood friend, and the mother of a single child.		Cheem Sudra A member of the Sudra clan. A skillful young man with a small build. He is deepening his bond with Asuta by working as a bodyguard.	

~ Townsfolk ~

	Myme Mikel's daughter. Following in her father's footsteps, she has put a great deal of effort into improving her cooking skills. Having been deeply moved by Asuta's cooking, she is experimenting with giba meat on her own.		Mikel A former chef from the castle town. He was injured during a robbery and is staying as a guest of the Ruu clan along with Myme.
	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.		Tara Dora's daughter. Nine years old. She is becoming close with Rimee Ruu, who is around her age.
	Odifia Eulifia's young daughter. Like an expressionless doll, she doesn't allow her emotions to show, but she is exceedingly fond of Toor Deen's sweets.	Dora A citizen of the Daleim part of the Genos domain. He sells produce in the post town. He has been deepening his ties with Asuta as they do business together.	
	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.		Eleo Chel Chiffon Chel's older brother. A slave from the northern kingdom forced to work in the Turan lands.
	Chiffon Chel Lefreya's maid. A slave from the northern kingdom. She always maintains a calm expression when entertaining guests.		Roy A young chef from the castle town. After being shocked by the quality of Reina Ruu's and Myme's cooking, he asked to become Varkas's apprentice.
	Shilly Rou An apprentice of the master chef Varkas. A strong-willed girl with a powerful sense of rivalry toward Asuta.		

~ Group Performance ~





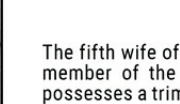
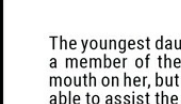
	Jiza Ruu The eldest son of the main Ruu house. He has a strict personality and highly values the laws of the forest's edge. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Gazraan Rutim The head of the Rutim clan. A calm-natured man with undeniable wisdom. Also a friend without equal to Asuta. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Yamiru Lea The former eldest daughter of the main Suun house. Currently a member of the Lea clan. She possesses both bewitching beauty and a strong intellect.		Rau Lea The Lea clan head. A hunter with delicate looks but a fierce nature. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Oura The fifth wife of the former Suun clan head, and currently a member of the Rutim clan. She is Tsuvai's mother, and possesses a trim appearance and gentle demeanor.		Tsuvai The youngest daughter of the former main Suun house. Currently a member of the Rutim clan. Short tempered and has quite a mouth on her, but thanks to her excellent calculation skills, she is able to assist the Ruu clan with their business.

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Characters](#)
4. [Chapter 1: The Rain's Blessings](#)
5. [Chapter 2: An Unexpected Disturbance](#)
6. [Chapter 3: The Fa Clan Head's Birthday](#)
7. [Chapter 4: Another Sweet Gathering](#)
8. [Chapter 5: The End of the Rainy Season](#)
9. [Intermezzo: A Night in the Daleim Lands](#)
10. [Group Performance: The Nature of a Leading Clan Head](#)
11. [Group Performance: Two-Headed Snake](#)
12. [Afterword](#)
13. [Bonus Short Story](#)
14. [Bonus Textless Illustration](#)
15. [About J-Novel Club](#)
16. [Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: The Rain's Blessings

1

I was now fully recovered from my brush with the terrible illness known as Amusehorn's breath, thanks to all the help so many people had given me, Ai Fa foremost among them. Things had been peaceful since I had returned to work in the post town, but of course, that didn't mean nothing had changed at all. No matter how peaceful your days might be, you would never experience the same one twice.

I had heard that the work to clear a path through the forest's edge was progressing smoothly, and apparently, there was an incredible amount of lumber being produced in the process, which was being transported out of the forest to be used in the construction of a fence to protect the Daleim lands. Northern slaves were being used to handle that task as well, though they were a different group than the ones who were working on the new road.

Of course, the Daleim county was much, much larger than the Turan county, so it would be incredibly difficult to wall it all off. Therefore, the current plan was to only build the fence where the Daleim lands bordered the forest as a test.

The amount of damage giba were causing in the Daleim lands had already decreased quite a bit over the last few months. The Suun clan had resumed hunting after having neglected their duty for so long, but I couldn't really attribute such a large change to that alone. There was also the fact that the smaller clans had been growing stronger thanks to all the money they were making from selling meat, which was allowing them to eat more appetizing meals than they used to. And if they were to eventually gain access to hunting dogs, which would make their hunts even more efficient, I had every reason to believe that the fields in Daleim would be getting even safer in the future.

At any rate, finishing the construction of the fence was a long-term goal. The

plan for now was to see how much work the northerners could get done during this rainy season and then slowly continue with the project after they returned to the plantations.

More important, though, was the forest clearing work, which was advancing steadily every single day, making so much progress that even Dari Sauti was surprised. The path was already long enough that it would take around three hours or so to walk from one end to the other.

The forest at the base of Mount Morga was so large that it would take several days to cross it on foot, but the hope was that the new path would cut that down to only a single day if you started at the Sauti settlement and went east from there. That would eventually take you to a rocky section of the forest, at which point you simply had to keep going northeast until you were out of the Morga region.

By the way, when the planners said that it would take a single day to complete the journey, they meant it would take from sunrise to sunset. The way I figured it, that amounted to around thirteen to fourteen hours of travel. There were thirteen of this world's hours between the rising and setting of the sun, so if the northerners had carved out enough of the path that it currently took three whole hours to walk it, that meant they were just under a quarter of the way done.

Considering the fact that we were already halfway through the brown month, it was possible that they were actually a bit behind schedule. The more work advanced, the harder it would be to carry the felled trees out of the forest, and since the rainy season only lasted for two months, it would be difficult to finish the job on time.

"But in the event that we do fall behind, we can simply bring more hands onboard. I imagine that the workers assigned to the fence construction will probably be transferred over to this project if the need arises," Polarth had said when he had come out to observe the worksite.

Well, it was the nobles' job to worry about the pace of the work. Ours was simply to watch over the workers and hope that the giba wouldn't attack them.

On a related note, there had been a meeting held in the castle town recently

between the house of Genos and the house of Turan—the latter of whom owned all of the slaves in the area—to determine how the northerners should be treated and handled.

Furthermore, a separate meeting between the nobles and the leading clan heads of the forest's edge had also been held at the same time. The three leading clan heads had gone to the castle town and spent several hours exchanging words with the mediator, Melfried, and his aide, Polarth. The Fou and Beim clan heads had also been present, and they had informed us about what had been discussed the following day.

One of the topics of discussion was a decree officially ordering the people of the forest's edge not to meddle on behalf of the northerners. The houses of Genos and Turan were in the midst of trying to figure out what the best policy for handling the slaves was, and while it was possible that the nobles would ask the people of the forest's edge for advice at some point, we were expected to silently remain on the sidelines until that time came. That was what it all boiled down to. It was just the lord of the land officially stating what we had already been told at the Sauti settlement.

A particular emphasis had been placed on the danger posed by the observers that the capital periodically sent to Genos. The nobles in the capital constantly worried about the possibility that a remote region like Genos could be plotting rebellion or grasping at independence, so every once in a while they sent some people out to make sure nothing like that was going on. The nobles of Genos were basically telling the people of the forest's edge to behave themselves so that we didn't give those observers any reason to get suspicious of us.

“As an example, you invited that chef Shilly Rou to the Ruu settlement, correct? Her bloodline traces its roots back to the independent settlers who originally lived here rather than to the kingdom. The first lord of Genos used his discretion to grant such individuals the right to retain their family names when they became citizens of Selva, when normally they would have been required to give their names up. That is the kind of thing that tends to rub folks from the capital the wrong way,” Polarth had explained at the meeting. At the time, the lord of the land had been a frontier count rather than a duke, and he had taken that step in order to ensure a peaceful coexistence with the people who had

already been living there. People who had last names, like Shilly Rou and Milano Mas did, were all descended from the independent settlers of that era. “It’s ancient history now, but the observers still sometimes refer to us as wild hinterlanders and the like because of it. If they thought we were acting unusually kind toward northerners, it could cause a great deal of trouble.”

Thanks to Polarth’s explanation, I had learned that nobles of Genos were seen as backwater nobles in the eyes of the kingdom as a whole. While Duke Marstein Genos and his son Melfried might have seemed like beings who lived above the clouds to the common townsfolk, from the perspective of the nobility in the capital, they were little more than crude barbarians from the far-off frontier. That being that case, what would those capital nobles think of the people of the forest’s edge, who lived on the fringes even within Genos? I really hoped we would never have to deal with those elites.

At any rate, the leading clan heads had accepted Melfried’s words. They’d had bigger concerns that needed to be discussed anyway, such as the poitan shortage. But since it had been decided that the house of Turan would shoulder the costs, we had no grounds to get involved in the matter any further.

“I don’t believe it was wrong of us to request to pay for the poitan. You should keep in mind that we have our own way of doing things,” Donda Ruu had reportedly said at the end of the meeting.

And so, with all of that going on behind the scenes, we arrived at the twenty-first of the brown month. It had been five days since I had returned to work, but this was one of our days off. The rainy season vegetables had finally hit the market the day before, and now, with the sun close to its highest point in the sky, we were gathering together in the Ruu settlement to hold our first study session in around a month and a half.

“Thanks for coming out, everyone! It’s been so long I’m feeling a bit nervous, honestly,” I said to kick things off in the kitchen of the main Ruu house. Aside from one rather unsociable member of the group, everyone’s eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

There were nine people in total who would be participating in the study

session. From the Ruu clan, we had Reina, Sheera, Rimee, and Mia Lea Ruu. Then from the small clans, there was Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and me. Lastly, Myme and Mikel, who were guests of the Ruu, were also attending.

A light rain was falling, and it was as chilly outside as always, but the heated enthusiasm in the kitchen was more than enough to overcome that. As I was enjoying the atmosphere in the room, I turned and shot a smile at the one unhappy-looking member of the group, Mikel.

“This will be my first time working with these vegetables, so I’m going to need everyone to contribute their knowledge and experience. I’m especially going to be relying on you, Mikel, since you’ve worked with them before as a chef in the castle town.”

“I’m just repaying the debt I owe all of you for letting us stay here. If you expect an old man like me to be of any help to you, you’re kidding yourself.”

“Jeez! You don’t have to act so mean all the time!” Myme said with a smile, smacking her father’s bulky chest. She looked really happy that we were relying on Mikel’s skills.

Mikel’s right leg still hadn’t fully healed from its fracture, so he was sitting on a wooden box and was the only person to be doing so. He was capable of walking now, as long as he used a cane, but naturally it was difficult for him to stand for long periods. Still, aside from the bandages wrapped around his shin, it looked like he was mostly back to his old self.

Around the time when I became bedridden with illness, the Ruu clan members had asked Mikel to teach them about making jerky. They had first learned the technique from me, and now they had a chance to study it under Mikel directly. Myme had been quite happy when she’d told me that he would be heading around to the subordinate clans to teach them too once his injuries healed up a bit more.

“I’ve mentioned this before, but most of the rainy season vegetables are quite difficult to work with. It’s not that they taste bad, but you can’t simply boil them in a pot and call it good. If you know how we can use them like we do with tarapa, tino, and pula, then I’d definitely like to hear what you have to say,” Mia Lea Ruu said, speaking for the Ruu.

Standing beside her mother, Rimee Ruu nodded along. “Traip still tastes like traip no matter what you do to it, and onda hardly has any taste at all. Oh, and I don’t like reggi too much either.”

“I know what you mean. We hardly ever use reggi in our house,” Sheera Ruu added.

“Yeah, a lot of people are fond of traip, but I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who likes reggi,” Reina Ruu agreed.

Toor Deen and Yun Sudra were listening to their words with great interest. Toor Deen used to belong to the Suun clan, where they mostly ate the fruits of the forest, while the Sudra were very poor, so neither of the girls had ever tasted the rainy season vegetables.

“Reggi, huh? That one takes some prep work before you can eat it,” Mikel replied while sitting atop his box, pointing at the leftmost vegetable on the table in front of me. There were three vegetables that were only grown and harvested during the rainy season: traip, onda, and reggi. Among the three, onda was the only one that seemed in any way familiar to me. Still, it seemed we were tackling reggi first, as it had become the topic of discussion.

The vegetable looked like a bright red stick. It was almost perfectly straight, and it had hairs growing out of it here and there. It was fifty centimeters long, with one end narrowing to a point, while the other was about three centimeters thick, and had a black cross section.

“Is this a root vegetable? It’s quite brightly colored for one.”

“Yeah. They grow in a flash when you plant them in soil that has a lot of moisture. Tino, on the other hand, goes bad with too much water, so a lot of folks swap them out during the rainy season,” Mikel stated with a sour look. “The simplest preparation method is to peel off their skin and soak them in water mixed with mamaria vinegar. If you leave them like that for a quarter of an hour, the earthy smell and the bitterness will go away.”

“You need mamaria vinegar? So then, that means it would have been impossible to prepare it properly in either the settlement at the forest’s edge or the post town before now,” Reina Ruu commented, sounding impressed. Mamaria vinegar had been sold exclusively in the castle town up until a few

months ago.

As for me, Mikel's explanation had suddenly dredged up a thought in my mind.

"Hold on a moment, please. Do you absolutely need to peel off the skin? I'm sure the people of the forest's edge have been eating it without doing that."

"The skin is removed because it's bitter and has a bad odor, though I'm sure it has lots of nutrients in it too."

"I thought so... But in that case, what is the vinegar for? Do you actually need it if you want to get rid of the bad parts of the flavor and smell?"

"The vinegar is to prevent it from turning black. If it both stinks and has a bad color, that makes it a lot less appealing to eat. And if you boil it without steeping it in water first, that black color will spread."

"Right, soups made with reggi always turn pitch black. And eating them feels like slurping muddy water," Sheera Ruu said. Then she turned toward me. "But Asuta, you're talking like you know something about this vegetable. Is it similar to one back in your homeland too?"

"Yes, that's exactly right. I've heard that preparation method before, so it finally clicked for me."

Peeling its skin off and steeping it in vinegar water—that was exactly how you prepared a great burdock. The bright red coloring had thrown me off, but honestly, its shape was quite similar too. I had been looking at gigo as something like a massive burdock before, but reggi was a lot closer in size.

"If the skin is also nutritious, I think most people of the forest's edge would prefer to leave it on. Besides, the Ruu clan uses all sorts of seasonings nowadays. Or is the smell and bitterness of reggi so bad that you can't cover it up even with seasonings?"

"What I meant was that if you peel the skin off and steep it in vinegar water, that should be good enough to allow anyone to eat as much of it as they need to. But if a chef is clever enough, there are ways to keep the nutrition without hurting either the flavor or appearance."

“If such a method exists, we would love to learn it,” Reina Ruu replied while leaning forward, a deadly serious look shining in her blue eyes.

After staring back at her silently for a bit, Mikel gave a little shrug. “If you want to avoid having it turn black inside, then you just have to finish cooking it before that happens. If the earthy smell bothers you, then you can choose ingredients that reduce it. If you don’t want a black broth, then you can add another color. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Finish cooking it before it turns black inside...? Why does reggi turn black in the first place, anyway? This one’s already starting to turn black on one end where it was cut,” Reina Ruu asked.

“But if you boil it, the reggi won’t turn as black as it did here at the cut, so when I handle reggi at home, I add it to the pot whole rather than finely slicing it up,” Sheera Ruu chimed in, starting a passionate discussion between her and Reina Ruu.

“Ah, I think we did that too. But when you don’t cut it up finely, the earthy smell and bitterness are much stronger, so my approach was to cut it in lots of different ways to see what would happen.”

I wanted to interject and add that perhaps the blackening came from oxidation, and that certain flavorings might go well with the reggi, but then I noticed the look in Mikel’s eyes and restrained myself. He was staring at the two of them as if he were searching for something.

“If we want a flavor to blunt the smell and bitterness of reggi...why not just boil it together with herbs that have even stronger smells?”

“But if you do that, you’d probably ruin the flavor of the reggi in the dish. Like, pula is bitter too, but that’s part of what makes it delicious.”

“Yes, I see. And reggi and pula are about equally tough, so if you make the dish too spicy as well, it would be pretty difficult to eat.”

Reina Ruu talked with Sheera Ruu as freely as she did with members of her own household. In a strange way, it made her look even younger than she actually was.

As my thoughts were wandering off on that tangent, Rimee Ruu energetically

added, “That’s it! Reggi’s shaped a lot like gigo, isn’t it?! So why not use it like gigo, then?”

“Like gigo? You mean, you think we should try grating it?”

“No, reggi’s real tough, so it probably wouldn’t feel good to eat it if it was all grated up. Besides, it’d probably turn black while you were doing that!”

“Then what were you suggesting, Rimee Ruu?”

“I love gigo in tau oil soup! And tau oil’s already brown to start with, so that should cover up the broth getting all black, right?”

“Tau oil...? But if you try to soften the earthy stench and bitterness of reggi using nothing but tau oil, it’ll probably end up incredibly salty,” Reina Ruu said, but then she suddenly looked up. “But it may be good as a boiled dish like the cubed giba meat stew or meat and chatchi dish Asuta makes rather than a soup. And we could add some sweetness with fruit wine or sugar too, which would counteract the bitterness even more.”

“Right, using sweetness rather than spiciness to soften the bitterness might allow more of the reggi’s flavor to shine through.”

The three members of the Ruu shared a look, and then together they all turned toward Mikel, who simply stared back at them, looking as sour as always.

“The flavor of tau oil and the sweetness of sugar would pair well with the flavor of the reggi. Adding spice would only layer one harsh flavor on top of another,” he said.

“Is that so? Then I’d like to try boiling it with the skin still on in tau oil and fruit wine!”

Reina, Sheera, and Rimee Ruu were all wearing happy smiles. Meanwhile, Myme was still standing in the same spot beside her father, looking a touch embarrassed as she watched them. Perhaps Mikel had taught her how to use reggi like that in the past. That was ultimately just a guess on my part, but I figured that if he had simply told us all the steps, those three definitely wouldn’t be enjoying themselves as much as they were now. As for Toor Deen and Yun Sudra, they looked a bit jealous as they watched the three Ruu clan

chefs smiling at each other.

“So, why don’t we go ahead and give the other ingredients a look too? Er, you said the Ruu clan hasn’t had any issues with using onda?” I asked.

“That’s right. Onda doesn’t have a strong flavor to it, so we’ve always just tossed it into a pot. It has a bit of a unique texture to it, but I would say most people don’t feel strongly enough to either love it or hate it,” Reina Ruu told me.

Onda looked very similar to a vegetable I already knew. They were white, skinny, and long, with each one being quite small, and they appeared to be sprouting from a faintly yellowish little bean. In other words, they looked exactly like bean sprouts.

“Apparently, onda were brought here from Jagar in the distant past. It should be possible to grow them outside of the rainy season as well, but people only really use them during this time of year in order to fill the space left by the absence of tarapa and tino,” Mikel explained.

“I see. Is this perhaps a vegetable that’s grown in a shed rather than a field?” I asked.

“Yeah. They need a lot of water to grow, so the rainy season is good for them.”

If the taste was also like the bean sprouts I was familiar with, then I knew that I would want to be able to buy them anytime, not just during the rainy season. I could use them in all sorts of dishes.

I turned to speak to Reina Ruu. “You’ve only used them in soups in the Ruu clan, right? Back in my home country, we used a vegetable that looked a lot like these in stir-fries too.”

“Huh? But won’t they burn right away if you try to cook them like that?”

“If that’s what happened when you tried it before, it’s probably because you weren’t using oil back then. All vegetables cook better at high temperatures if you use oil, not just onda.”

Since stir-frying some onda was easy enough for us to try right away, we went

ahead and did so using a pan that we oiled with giba fat. We only used salt and pico leaves to flavor them, but it turned out that onda were indeed as juicy as bean sprouts were, so that was all we needed to do to make them taste good. The bean-like part of their flavor was quite subdued, and when we bit into them, they crunched in a very satisfying way.

“Mmm, it seems to me that we could use these to make stir-fries delicious in a totally new way,” Toor Deen remarked.

“I suppose their juiciness wouldn’t stand out very much in a soup, but it’s kind of interesting how they’ve still got this much moisture after they’ve been fried,” Yun Sudra added.

“Yeah. They’d probably be even tastier if we stir-fried them with other vegetables too.”

The two girls wore satisfied smiles as they talked. I was sure they’d be able to make use of these onda back home right away in both soup dishes and stir-fries.

As for the final ingredient, it was a strange vegetable known as traip. With this one, I couldn’t even begin to guess what sort of vegetable it was. The skin was tough and pitch-black, it had netlike patterns of lines running all over it like a muskmelon, and it was round in shape. It looked to have a diameter of around twenty centimeters, and it felt quite heavy in my hands. Honestly, I thought it resembled nothing more than a small bowling ball.

“These are tough to cut through, so we’ve always simply tossed them into our stews whole,” Mia Lei Ruu commented.

“Huh?” I said in surprise. “You can cook them all the way through just like that? But the skin looks so tough.”

“Yeah. As it boils, the skin starts to crack. Then it breaks into pieces and the contents mix into the stew. The skin becomes soft and limp by the time it’s done too, so you can eat it as well.”

“I love traip! But Papa Donda doesn’t really seem to care for it,” Rimee Ruu chimed in.

“When you use it in a dish, everything ends up tasting like it. If you want to know if it pairs well with giba meat, I’m not sure how to answer that. But, I

suppose we were still using meat that wasn't bloodlet last year, so that definitely impacted things," Mia Lea Ruu concluded.

I was becoming more and more intrigued by the second. When I glanced over at Mikel, I found him indifferently stroking his stubbly cheek.

"That's because traip has such a strong flavor," he said. "In the castle town, you generally have to make it the core of your dish if you use it. That's why you see it more in side dishes than in entrées."

"Side dishes, huh? So it isn't very well suited to being used in combination with meat, then?" I asked.

"That's right. Of course, there are some folks out there who do pair it with meat for an entrée, but I'd say it's more often used in sweets."

As soon as he said that, both Toor Deen and Rimee Ruu reacted in an obvious and pretty adorable way. It was like watching the ears of a pair of kittens perk up.

"Now that you mention it, traip is the sweetest vegetable I know! Traip sweets, huh? That sounds really tasty to me!" Rimee Ruu said.

"Yeah. I didn't know there were vegetables that tasted sweet too. I'm really interested," Toor Deen agreed.

"You should start by just boiling one for a bit... If you're not careful, you could damage your knife when you cut it, so it's much easier to work with once it's been softened up," Mikel advised, so we went ahead and put an entire traip in some water and started heating it. Then, once the water started to boil, we put a lid on top. A quarter of an hour of boiling, or fifteen to twenty minutes, was apparently plenty, so we used the hourglass I had bought from the castle town to keep track of the time as we chatted about cooking.

When we removed the lid, the traip had split wide open, revealing its brilliantly yellowish-orange insides. Between the color and the smell, I finally realized what the identity of the vegetable was; it appeared to be something very similar to a pumpkin.

"If you want to use it in a soup, you can just keep on boiling it as is, but if you want to use it in a different kind of dish, you should take it out now," Mikel said.

After Mia Lea Ruu thought it over, we left half of the split traip in the pot and scooped the other half up onto a plate.

“I’ve never eaten a traip in this state. We’ve always simply let it dissolve into our soup until now,” Mia Lea Ruu said.

We each proceeded to give the traip a taste test using wooden spoons. Sure enough, the flavor was similar to that of pumpkin. A soft and crumbly texture and a sweet taste filled my mouth. The skin was still hard since we hadn’t boiled it for too long, and the flesh of the vegetable was a bit fibrous.

“If you continue to slowly simmer it at a low temperature, you can draw out even more sweetness. And if you want to use it in a boiled dish, you should cut it up and season it before you put it back in the pot.”

“I see... This definitely seems like it would be better on its own than with giba meat,” Yun Sudra commented. When it came to both dinners and products to sell, we always needed to consider an ingredient’s compatibility with giba meat.

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t say that they’re totally incompatible. If we season this to make it sweet and salty, and then boil it with minced meat, it could work as an entrée.” In the back of my mind, I was thinking of simmered pumpkin and minced meat. If the traip was already this good with only a little bit of seasoning, I was sure it wouldn’t be too hard to come up with a delicious dish that used it.

At any rate, if traip, onda, and reggi corresponded to pumpkin, bean sprouts, and burdock respectively, then I would definitely be able to get plenty of use out of them. Plus, we had a group of excellent chefs present, Mikel foremost among them. We didn’t have to rely on my knowledge from my old world alone; all of us were capable of helping the rest improve.

The first study session at the Ruu settlement with Myme and Mikel in attendance was off to a great start.

2

After that, around two hours passed by in a flash, and now the results of our

trial-and-error research were sitting on top of a table in the kitchen.

The four from the Ruu had prioritized ways to use the three seasonal vegetables in cooking for the stalls, while everyone else focused on dinners. Myme and Mikel were already familiar with the vegetables, so they served as assistants and backed us up as we cooked.

“For now, I’d say stir-fried onda would pair very well with the herb-grilled dish we serve at the stalls. I think it would be good with nanaar too.”

Just a few days ago, an herb-grilled giba meat dish with a wonderful aroma had been added to the menu at the stalls. Giba meat marinated in herbs from Sym and tau oil was grilled on a metal tray, then wrapped in fuwano bread. Since we could no longer use shredded tino, we added the spinachlike nanaar instead, and now Reina Ruu and the others seemed to have decided to add the bean-sprout-like onda as well.

“I was also thinking of marinating onda together with the meat and aria. That should help the flavors to harmonize.”

“Ah, this is nice. It counteracts the strong flavor of the herbs, but in a good way.”

The thoroughly boiled nanaar alone retained its original texture, while the onda added a satisfying crispness. Personally, I thought it was a great idea.

“As for the reggi, it seems like it would work okay in the offal hot pot if we just peel off a bit of the skin like you said, Asuta. The bitterness and the earthy smell of the skin really is quite strong.”

“Right. I went ahead and tried to prepare the skin like we discussed.”

Yun Sudra and I had used the burdock-like reggi and carrot-like nenon to make chopped reggi in tau oil and sugar. We boiled those two ingredients together with tau oil, sugar, and fruit wine, then finished by adding a small amount of sesame-seedlike hoboi seeds on top. It would work just fine as a side dish, but adding some minced meat would also probably be okay too.

“The flavor would, of course, be unbalanced if we tried to use the skin by itself, so we added the inner part of another reggi too. I’d imagine it would go pretty well with wine.”

“Yeah, since we didn’t make it too sweet. Neither the earthy stench nor the bitterness are very noticeable, and it’s delicious too.”

“Yup, it’s tasty! And the black color doesn’t bother me at all!” Rimee Ruu said.

Honestly, the reggi’s bright red skin was what felt the most novel to me. The surface was red, while the inner part was a grayish-brown. The nenon was orange, and the tau oil was brown too, which did a good job of darkening the color a bit.

“The tau oil’s color helps to cover it up, and we also boiled it right after cutting. As long as you don’t expose it to air for very long, it shouldn’t turn too terribly black,” I explained, figuring that they wouldn’t mind me simply telling them that. “The offal hot pot is delicious too. The earthy taste doesn’t bother me at all.”

“Yes, me neither. But some people can’t stand things that taste like dirt, and even this much would probably be enough to bother them, don’t you think?”

“Hmm, that’s true. Back in my home country, we had a vegetable very similar to reggi that we would steep in vinegar water, or we would lightly rinse it and then make sure to remove any scum that develops as it cooks. That way you don’t lose too much of the nutrition.”

“I see.”

“Even with a normal hot pot, you have to scoop away the scum as you boil it, right? Whether that scum is considered an off flavor or a source of nutrition comes down to the skill of the chef making the dish. In my opinion, there’s nothing wrong with removing as much scum as you can to make your dish as high quality as possible. But with reggi, I don’t think there’s any need to be that fussy about it.”

At that point, I sensed someone’s gaze on me and turned to find Mikel glaring in my direction from where he was sitting on top of his box. “Making a dish’s flavor and appearance as ‘high quality’ as possible is an obsession for chefs in the castle town. That’s why they steep reggi in vinegar water to prevent blackening, and they scoop out every last bit of black broth and throw it away.”

“Yeah, I figured as much. By the way, did you also use vinegar water to

prepare it, Mikel?”

“I did. But the blackened, earthy vinegar water can be used to provide a strong flavor and color, so I kept it on hand to add to other dishes.”

“I see. So there was another way of dealing with it,” Reina Ruu said, her eyes wide with admiration. “In that case, we could just steep it in water without any vinegar and then reuse that water to boil it. That would allow us to retain all of the nutrition from the reggi.”

“Let’s give that a try later. Offal hot pot has a fairly strong flavor to begin with, so we might be able to use the earthy water from the reggi in that without having to worry about ruining it,” Sheera Ruu suggested.

Reina and Sheera Ruu were more passionate about cooking than anyone else among the people of the forest’s edge. Of course, everyone present had quite a bit of passion, but those two really stood out when it came to inquisitiveness.

However, that wasn’t to say that the others weren’t passionate enough, and almost as if to prove that, Rimee Ruu energetically interjected, “All done! So, what do you think? I’d say it came out super tasty!”

Rimee Ruu had primarily been working under my supervision, creating a dish that was entirely new. Mia Lea Ruu had been assisting Reina and Sheera Ruu, and when she heard Rimee Ruu’s words, she turned and remarked, “Oh my, what a splendid stew! It looks so tasty!”

“It *is* tasty! Come on, give it a try!” Rimee Ruu said as she diligently scooped the contents of the pot out onto a dish. It was a stew made using the pumpkin-like traip.

The moment she took a bite of it, Yun Sudra said, “Wow, this is fantastic! I never would have thought that a stew made with traip could be this good!”

“I’ve never managed to make anything this good with traip. Rimee, what did Asuta teach you, exactly?” Mia Lea Ruu asked.

“Heh heh heh! This is a cream stew! I just tried making it with traip!”

I had come up with a dish similar to cream stew for the northerners, so Rimee Ruu had been able to learn the recipe firsthand. Today I had given her some

more detailed instructions on how to prepare it and helped her to understand how to integrate the traip.

By boiling traip in skim milk, you could make it into a kind of soup that could then be blended together with a completed cream stew, at which point you simply needed to adjust the flavor with salt and pico leaves. For solids, we kept it simple, with chatchi, nenon, and aria, and then we added two varieties of giba meat, cut from the ribs and shoulders.

“This is delicious. I tried some of the stew made for the northerners just the other day, and this is far better than that was,” Reina Ruu muttered, unable to hide her surprise.

“That’s because I made it with lots of cream instead of just milk fat. You can tell how much richer it is, right?”

“The traip and karon milk give it a lot of sweetness, but the giba meat doesn’t clash with it at all. You didn’t use any sugar in this stew, did you?”

“Nope, no sugar or fruit wine. The sweetness comes from the traip and karon milk alone.”

Everyone looked surprised to hear that, especially Mikel and Myme, the latter of whom immediately said, “This really is incredibly good! I’ve never seen anyone handle traip this well before! Isn’t it amazing, dad?”

“I think if I were to see this dish being served at a restaurant in the castle town, it wouldn’t surprise me at all,” Mikel said with a light sigh, glancing over at Rimee Ruu. “I’m stunned. I never would’ve imagined a girl even younger than Myme could come up with something this impressive.”

“Oh, I just made it like Asuta told me!” Rimee Ruu said, actually squirming in embarrassment for once. I took that as proof of how happy Mikel’s words had made her.



After everyone had sampled the stew, Reina Ruu whispered to me, “Um, you said you wanted to have the Ruu clan take full responsibility for selecting and preparing all the soup we sell in town, didn’t you? So are you not planning on selling this dish?”

“Huh? Yeah, that’s right. I came up with this so we could have it for dinner here at the forest’s edge.”

“Then...could we have permission to sell it?”

I was taken aback. “Of course. I don’t mind. But you were finally just about to stop selling myamuu giba so that the only recipes you’d be using would be your own. Are you sure you want to borrow another of mine?”

“I think it would be good to use rainy season vegetables as much as possible during this time of year. Besides, we’re not foolish enough to do something stupid like stubbornly trying to be your rivals,” Reina Ruu remarked with a mature smile. “After all, we still aren’t done taking lessons from you, Asuta. And I don’t think any of us would be able to create such a wonderful dish using traip on our own yet, so yes, I would like to keep borrowing your skills.”

“Then what about the offal hot pot and that original stew you came up with?”

“I’d like to sell those as well, on alternating days. The townsfolk do seem to really enjoy them.”

Well, in that case, I certainly had no objections.

“All right then. I already taught Rimee Ruu the basic method for making it, so why don’t you all keep experimenting with it until you get it to your liking? To be honest, it’s not a dish I’m all that familiar with, so deciding how much traip and other stuff we were going to use was pretty much guesswork on my part.” After saying that, I turned toward Mikel. “Also, there’s something I want to discuss with you, Mikel. Could you teach Reina and Sheera Ruu how to get stock from kimyuus bones?”

“From kimyuus bones? But you already know how to get a fine stock from giba bones, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I get the feeling that kimyuus stock would suit this dish better than

giba. Giba bone stock has a pretty quirky flavor to it, so I'm worried that it may ruin the overall taste."

"Hmm..." Mikel muttered as he thought about my request.

In the meantime, I turned back toward Reina and Sheera Ruu. "Honestly, I've been wanting to use kimyuus stock in cream stew for a while now. It should make the dish quite a bit tastier, I think. Even the stew we just had felt incomplete to me."

"Even that didn't feel complete to you?" Reina Ruu asked. Neither she nor Sheera Ruu were able to hide their surprise. And then they turned toward Mikel in sync. "Mikel, if you know how to work with kimyuus bones, would you be willing to teach us?"

"Now that I think about it, Myme's used boiled kimyuus bones in some of her own recipes, hasn't she? And one of those dishes also uses karon milk, so I'd imagine it shares a lot of similarities with cream stew," Sheera Ruu noted.

"If you want to make a first-rate stew, it's only natural to prioritize the stock over what's on the surface. The reason your stews have turned out so good is the excellent stock you've gotten from giba and vegetables," Mikel replied, patting Myme's small head with his hand. "If you want to learn how to work with bones, try watching her cook in the morning. If you take a little time to talk with her too, picking up on how it's done should be no problem for you."

"Thank you, Mikel!"

"Like I said, I'm just repaying my debt to the Ruu clan," Mikel replied, still looking as sour as ever. At least for now, that settled things in regard to the traip stew.

Now we only had a few more dishes to show off, all of which were meant for our people to have for dinner, like the onda stir-fry and the simmered traip with minced giba meat. And then, finally, we had the desserts, which had been Toor Deen's and Yun Sudra's sole focus during the latter half of our study session. Their experiments with traip had ended up producing quite a few different treats.

Since traip had a strong taste, there were all sorts of ways that it could be

used. You could knead it into a fuwano dough base or blend it with karon milk cream. You could also prepare a sweet traip sauce as a topping for chatchi mochi or steamed pudding. It really was every bit as versatile as the cocoa-like gigi leaves.

“So tasty! Teach me how to make this!” Rimee Ruu remarked.

In our group of nine, we had three girls with serious sweet teeth, and this was getting them really fired up.

Mikel, on the other hand, was grumbling, “I see. So that’s the girl who’s skilled enough to make a noble want to keep summoning her to the castle town. I wouldn’t be surprised if you get an offer to become their personal chef.”

He must have heard about that from Myme. Of course, his comment made Toor Deen shrink in on herself even more than Rimee Ruu had moments ago.

“By the way, what sort of noble was it? It’s not always a good thing to have someone too high up set their eyes on you.”

“Um, it was the granddaughter of the lord of Genos. She’s still only five or six years old.”

Mikel let out an astounded sigh. Now that I thought about it, Odifia *was* a direct descendant of the house of the duke. She was the first child of her father Melfried, so the person she married could easily become duke at some point down the line.

“Toor Deen, it sounds like you’ve caught the eye of a future duchess,” I commented tactlessly, causing Toor Deen to both go pale and blush at the same time. “Oh, I don’t think you need to worry about it so much. As long as Melfried’s around, Odifia won’t do anything too reckless. But I wouldn’t be surprised if ten years from now you’ll be getting called to the castle town every month to make desserts for her.”

The thought of a fifteen-or sixteen-year-old Odifia interacting with a twenty-one-year-old Toor Deen was one I really enjoyed.

“P-Please stop,” the young chef said, weakly clinging to my arm.

“Sorry about that. Still, all of these desserts are delicious. I think this baked

traip cream sweet is my personal favorite.”

“I love the chatchi mochi! Ah, but the fuwano one was really good too,” Rimee Ruu said.

“I don’t think I could possibly choose between them. Right now, though, what I want most is to show everyone how good they are as soon as I can,” Yun Sudra added.

Then, Reina Ruu turned my way with a cheerful look. “It looks like we’ll be able to make all kinds of delicious meals even during the rainy season with what you three have taught us. Asuta, Mikel, Myme, thank you all so much for today.”

“Yeah. I’d say it turned out real well for our first study session. Now we should be able to have meals we can be satisfied with, even if we can’t use tino or tarapa.”

“Indeed. We have a number of people in our household who were born in the brown month, so I’m glad that we’ll still be able to make better food for them than we used to,” Mia Lea Ruu added with a smile.

“Huh. So, what I’m hearing is, it’s already the twenty-first of the brown month, but you still have a lot of birthdays to celebrate before it’s over. Is that right?”

“Yes. For some reason, they’re all clustered together in the back half of the month. We have five birthday banquets ahead of us—for our clan head, Jiza, Ludo, Vina, and now even Kota.”

It was definitely unusual to have that many in the span of less than ten days.

As I was marveling over that little fact, Rimee Ruu came over and tugged on my sleeve. “By the way, Ai Fa’s birthday is real soon too! Did you know that, Asuta?”

“Oh, I only heard that it was in the red month. Do you know the actual date, Rimee Ruu?”

“Of course! Ai Fa was born on the tenth of the red month!”

The red month was the one that was coming up after the brown. That meant

that there were only around twenty days left until my clan head's birthday.

"We'll have to have a feast at the Fa house too, then. Thanks, Rimee Ruu."

"No problem! You have to make sure you celebrate with Ai Fa, though, okay?! By the way, when's your birthday, Asuta?"

That was a difficult question for me to answer. "Well, the method for keeping track of the date in my home country is different from how you do things on this continent. We didn't have a thirteenth month every three years, so I doubt it's even possible to make the calendars match up."

"Huh?! Then what're you gonna do? Are you gonna be seventeen forever?"

"No, that doesn't sound like it would be very workable. I was thinking of making my birthday the day I arrived at the forest's edge."

That would mean that my birthday was the twenty-fourth of the yellow month. Fortunately, Ai Fa had made sure to remember the date.

"I see! I was born in the yellow month too, so we match! That makes me kinda happy for some reason!"

"The yellow month comes after the red and vermilion months. Even ignoring the fact that we had a gold month this time, it still hasn't even been a year since you showed up at the forest's edge," Reina Ruu said admiringly. "And yet, you've managed to cause so much change in our lives. It makes me feel the need to thank the forest once again for bringing us together."

"I feel really blessed to have met all of you too."

With that, it was about time to wrap things up for the day. Everyone aside from Mikel got to work cleaning up. Mia Lea Ruu had said that she would take care of the washing, but I decided to go ahead and help her out with that.

"Every one of our households is sure to have a lively dinner tonight! Are you going to give lessons like this one to the women of the clans that live near you as well?" she asked me.

"Yeah. We've got prep work to do for tomorrow anyway, so they should already be gathered at our house. My plan is to teach them everything I can using the Fa clan's dinner as an example."

“We’ll have to find time to teach our branch houses and subordinate clans too! You’ll be coming here again the day after tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. Things with the Sauti seem to have mostly settled down, so I should remain available for the time being. It would be nice if I could stop by every other day like I used to.”

“That would certainly make us happy! Just make sure to take care on your way back.”

After that, we said our farewells and started heading over to our wagon.

However, before we could depart, Mikel called out to me, “Hey. Have you met with that Shumiral man recently?”

“Shumiral? No. The Ririn clan is located pretty far away, so I haven’t seen him since I recovered from my illness. Do you think there’s something going on with him that we should know about?”

“No, never mind. If anything is going on with him, I’m sure they’d tell the Ruu clan right away on their own.”

Thinking back on it, it was none other than Shumiral who had brought me and Mikel together. They were both currently staying at the forest’s edge, but I had still never seen the two of them together. Actually, had Mikel ever even met Shumiral?

“He visited our house once, but all I told him was that there was no point in trying to get a guy like me involved in anything and sent him away. I always thought he was an odd fellow, but I never expected him to change gods and ask to marry into the forest’s edge.”

“Yeah. I never would have imagined that you and Shumiral would both end up living at the forest’s edge back then.” Figuring this was a good opportunity, I decided to press on with the conversation. “Um, Mikel, I’m not sure if I should say this...but I’m really happy that you and Myme are living at the forest’s edge now. You might not be allowed to remain here as guests for years on end, but I hope that you’ll stay for as long as you can.”

“Hmph. Well, hoping doesn’t bother anyone, I suppose, so you can go ahead and hope away to your heart’s content.”

That was pretty much the reaction I'd expected from Mikel. But even so, my heart felt a bit lighter now that I had shared my wish with him. I was also confident that Reina, Sheera, and Rimee Ruu had become a lot more attached to Mikel after this study session.

"All right, I'll be going now. I'll be back again the day after tomorrow, so I hope I'll be able to count on you then too."

Pulling up the hood of my rain gear, I stepped outside into the light drizzle that was still falling.

3

After returning to the Fa house, we set about taking care of the prep work for tomorrow, and I also took some time to teach the women from the nearby clans how to handle the rainy season vegetables.

The Fou and Ran were a bit better off than the Sudra, but they had apparently only ever used onda in their cooking before. A big pumpkin-like traip was expensive, while the burdock-like reggi didn't have much appeal to them, so they hadn't eaten either in a long time. However, they had plenty of leeway in their day-to-day expenses now and were doing well enough to be able to purchase as much tino and tarapa as they wanted without having to think about it, so if I could show them that reggi and traip held a similar appeal, I was sure they'd be happy to buy those as well.

Furthermore, they hadn't bought any of the new ingredients that had been pouring out of the castle town for the last few months yet. They did regularly buy sugar and tau oil, which were ingredients that could dramatically change the character of a dish, but they weren't interested in paying for unfamiliar vegetables, mushrooms, or dried goods, which made me all the more motivated to show them how to use the rainy season vegetables properly, to fill the gap left behind by the lack of tino and tarapa. That was what I was thinking as I set about teaching them the basics.

"I see. So reggi can be made to taste good too. It could be worth giving it a try, definitely."

“The younger members of our clan don’t even know what reggi tastes like. It’s been years now since we last used it.”

The members of the Fou, Gaaz, and Ratsu were currently discussing what I had just shown them with cheerful expressions. The Liddo woman, whose clan was slightly better off than the rest, seemed to have a similar viewpoint.

“We occasionally buy traip in our clan, but it’s a real shock to know that there’s a way you can cook it to make it this tasty! I’ll have to buy a few along with some karon milk right away!”

“In that case, I’ll have to show you how to use it to make a delicious cream stew next. Would you mind showing up earlier tomorrow?”

“You’re holding lessons in the Ruu settlement every other day now, right?”

“Yeah. I’d like to invite chefs from the Dai, Ravitz, and Suun too if we could. It feels like if we dawdle too long, the rainy season will end before we can get anything done.”

“You’re awfully impatient, considering you just got over your illness. We still have over half of the rainy season ahead of us, you know,” the Fou woman said, her eyes narrowing in a kind expression. “At any rate, it seems like we’re going to be looking to you for lessons again, Asuta. But we’ll be sure to work hard for the Fa clan to pay you back for it.”

“Yeah. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

As sunset approached, the women headed back to their own houses.

I was careful to make sure the dinner I prepared didn’t get wet as I took it from the kitchen to the main house, where I waited for Ai Fa to return. She ended up coming back from the forest around ten minutes later.

“Welcome home, Ai Fa. Whoa, you got another big one today,” I said, turning toward the entrance to greet her.

Ai Fa nodded and replied, “Indeed,” as she lowered the giba to the ground. It looked like it had to weigh around a hundred kilos or so. Ai Fa was breathing heavily after carrying it all the way back in the rain, and she was coated in mud all over to boot.

“I’ll cleanse my body after skinning it and removing the innards. Sorry, but can dinner wait till after that?”

“You don’t have to apologize. How about I take care of processing the giba and you go clean off first?”

“But skinning and removing the innards is a hunter’s work.”

“That’s because it’s usually more efficient that way, right? But right now, it’s more efficient for me to help out.”

After thinking for a bit, Ai Fa nodded and replied, “I see... In that case, I’ll go and quickly wash up, and you can get started with the giba here.”

“Ah, no, take as much time as you want, please.”

I put on my rain gear, then grabbed the knife that used to belong to Ai Fa’s father and headed over to our detached kitchen building. It was a fine hut the men of the Deen and Liddo had built for us during their last break period. I stepped into the carving room next to the kitchen and found that Ai Fa had already finished hanging up the massive giba.

“All right, I’ll leave this to you, then,” she said.

“Okay. Don’t worry, I can take care of it.”

Her work now done, Ai Fa headed back outside to the improvised shower stall she had set up next to the kitchen hut—just some grigee poles stuck into the ground to act as supports for a giba pelt curtain, but it was enough to hide her naked body from others as she took a natural shower in the rain falling from the sky. Then she used a water jug to clean her feet.

Most of the time, she would just wipe the grime from her body inside, and then wash her hair in the Lanto River, but Ai Fa enjoyed bathing, so she used the shower stall at least once every few days. Apparently, back when she had been feuding with the Suun clan, though, she had refrained from doing so out of caution, in case Diga ever decided to show up out of nowhere.

I was just about finished with removing the innards and cleaning them using another jug of water when Ai Fa finally returned.

“I was terribly filthy, so it took longer than expected. You can leave the

skinning to me.”

“Right. I can’t do that anywhere near as fast as you.”

“Indeed,” my clan head replied with a nod as she took the knife, a relieved look on her face. She really did love being nice and clean. She was now only wearing a chest covering and waist cloth as she sawed away at the giba’s pelt. Though I was sure she had a spare long-sleeved top, she likely didn’t want to dirty it with giba blood and fat. She didn’t look the least bit cold, despite being lightly dressed, even though the sun had set and the temperature had dropped quite a bit.

After shooting Ai Fa one more sidelong glance, I returned to the house to get dinner ready. I wanted the meat to be nice and hot when she ate it, so I needed to reheat it.

Ai Fa returned before long, wiping a bit of filth from her body with a cloth, then put on her spare top and a long wraparound skirt. Her freshly washed hunting attire was currently hanging beside the stove to dry.

My clan head sat down right as I finished getting dinner ready to eat. I set out a number of small plates and bowls full of food, causing Ai Fa to tilt her head a bit and say, “Hmm? You seem to have prepared quite a few items today. Ah, I see that you decided to make use of the rainy season vegetables right away, yes?”

“Yeah, since I had a lot of different things I wanted to show the women from the neighboring clans.”

There was the cream stew I had taught Rimee Ruu how to make; a sweet and salty simmered reggi dish; simmered traip; a meat and vegetable stir-fry using onda and various other vegetables; traip stew; and soup made with onda, reggi, and tau oil. And on top of all that, for the main dish I’d made Japanese-style hamburger steak with sauce.

The hamburger steak itself used a tau-oil-based sauce and was topped with grated daikon-like sheema, but I paired it with a sauté of onda, reggi, and pseudo-brown-beech mushrooms, as well as fried traip. The skin of a traip was even tougher than that of a pumpkin, but you could still split it open, even raw, if you used the sort of thick knife that hunters carried around. From there, I

separated the inner part from the skin, sliced it up thinly, and fried it.

“Come on, dig in before it gets cold. You’re not too familiar with rainy season vegetables either, are you?”

“Indeed. I have at least tasted onda before, but ever since I lost my father, I only ever purchased aria and poitan.”

In that case, she was in pretty much the same position as the Fou and Ran. At any rate, after saying our premeal chants, we started our somewhat late dinner.

Naturally, Ai Fa went for the hamburger steak first. She never let her expression shift while eating, but she really did look happiest when she was eating that dish, and seeing her happy made me feel my happiest too.

“Hmm, so traip is like a sweet chatchi?”

“Yeah, I guess it is closest to chatchi in texture. It’s soft, flaky, and delicious.”

“Indeed. And it seems to go well with how this hamburger steak was flavored.”

Even if she wasn’t showing it in her expression, I could still sense the bliss she was feeling. There was a look of satisfaction shining in her eyes, which was enough to wipe away all the exhaustion I felt from the day.

“Reggi is an unusual vegetable. It’s quite stringy and seems to have a rather earthy aroma to it,” she commented.

“Yeah. Do you not like it?”

“I don’t think I can tell you how good it may or may not be in detail, but I would definitely not say this is a poor dish.” After giving that rather generous review, Ai Fa kept on silently eating, but when she sipped on the traip stew, her expression shifted just a bit. “This is delicious. It seems even sweeter than the traip from before too.”

“Yeah. When you slowly simmer traip, it gets even sweeter. Is it to your liking?”

“It is. As you said in the past, the people of the forest’s edge really do seem to have an affinity for stew. This tastes very good.”

In the past, dinner for the people of the forest's edge had mainly consisted of meat, vegetables, and poitan thrown into a single pot with some water, as that was what was quickest and easiest. As a result, they seemed to enjoy the taste of stews that were packed with condensed flavor from meat and vegetables, with gooey textures that were reminiscent of their old poitan stews while also being far tastier. Giba cutlets using lard were also very popular, which seemed to be thanks to how it condensed the delicious flavor of giba.

Aside from those general tastes that seemed to be shared by all of the people of the forest's edge, though, Ai Fa loved hamburger steak most of all. When Donda Ruu had first tried the dish, he had hated it and insisted it wasn't suitable for hunters to eat, and had declared that they needed the firm texture of grilled meat in their meals.

The people of the forest's edge had a general trend in terms of their tastes, though of course people had their own personal preferences too. I always sought to always keep both of those elements in mind as I tried to delight Ai Fa.

"This is only my first day working with these ingredients, so there's a lot of issues with the dishes, I know. If you have any thoughts about them at all, please don't hesitate to tell me."

"I naturally don't have any complaints. I am enjoying the experience of trying these new ingredients, though," Ai Fa replied, breaking out in an ever so faint smile. "None of the dishes felt overly strange this time, and I don't see anything to comment on. They're all delicious, Asuta."

"I see. Glad to hear it."

"Indeed."

After that, dinner wrapped up without anything else of note happening.

Only a little over ten days had passed now since I had regained consciousness after catching Amusehorn's breath, so I was still keenly aware of how precious it was for us to be able to spend this peaceful time together.

I was sure Ai Fa felt much the same. Though she acted like an awe-inspiring clan head, she had a gentle side as well. It was honestly a bit embarrassing the way the two of us were always trying to confirm that we were both happy

without directly asking.

“By the way, your birthday is on the tenth of the red month, right? Rimee Ruu told me today.”

“Indeed.”

“Just to confirm, would it be okay for me to give you some celebratory flowers when the day arrives? And if you have any other traditions for celebrating it, I’d really like to know that too.”

“There isn’t anything in particular. I simply need to give thanks to the forest that I managed to survive another year,” Ai Fa replied, then ate a bit more of the simmered traip and smiled once more. “Now that I think about it, I spent my last birthday alone.”

“Right, you lost your father soon after turning fifteen, didn’t you?”

“Indeed. Rimee Ruu arrived in the evening, but I sent her away without opening the door. So instead, she just threw a flower in through my window and declared that she would come back the following day,” Ai Fa said, her faint smile remaining as her gaze fell. “Rimee Ruu never stopped calling me her friend, despite how poorly I treated her. For two years, I kept coldly pushing her away.”

“That was because you didn’t want her getting wrapped up in your feud with the Suun clan, right? Rimee Ruu could tell how you felt, and that was why she didn’t give up.”

As I was speaking, I thought back on when I had spoken to Rimee Ruu earlier that afternoon. I remembered how she had earnestly smiled and told me that I should make sure to celebrate Ai Fa’s birthday properly. How much emotion had she been hiding behind those words? Just thinking about it was enough to make my heart ache.

“If it wasn’t for you, Asuta, I never would have repaired my ties with Rimee Ruu and would have died alone out in the forest.”

“I don’t think there’s any point in thinking about what might have been. Besides, you were the one who made the choice to take me to your home. You forged your own fate. And isn’t it thanks to your parents, Rimee Ruu, Jiba Ruu,

and Saris Ran Fou that you became the sort of person who would do something like that? We humans live by supporting one another. That's an absolute fact."

"Right," Ai Fa succinctly replied with a nod, but there was a gentle light in her eyes as she stared back at me. It was the sort of clear-eyed gaze I frequently saw from Granny Jiba. "You said you intended to mark the day you met me as your birthday, correct?"

"Yeah. I can't carry over the calendar from my own world, so that feels like the most fitting day to pick, right?"

"I suppose so. But it gives me a bit of a strange feeling to think that a year will have passed by when that day arrives." With that, Ai Fa was unable to hold herself back from breaking out in a cheerful smile. "It feels like time has flown by, but at the same time, it's hard to believe that it has only been a year. Still, one thing I can be sure of is that the time I've spent with you has been utterly irreplaceable."

"Yeah."

"I wish to spend all of my remaining days with you until the time comes for my soul to return to the forest. And when I am out in the forest, I will use all the strength I have to ensure that our time together lasts as long as it possibly can."

"I feel the same way."

Ever since I had recovered and no longer needed Ai Fa to sleep next to me, we hadn't touched at all. I had no idea how long that would continue...but at least for now, we still didn't touch as we enjoyed that blissful moment together.

And all the while, the rain never stopped falling.

Chapter 2: An Unexpected Disturbance

1

It was now the twenty-fifth of the brown month, four days after we had started holding study sessions at the Ruu settlement again, and it was also the day we started selling traip cream stew at the stalls. We made it by slowly boiling the pumpkin-like traip in karon milk, and then combining it with a separate cream stew. Reina and Sheera Ruu had learned from Mikel and Myme how to make kimyuus bone stock the day after that first study session, after which they had decided to sell the dish in the post town, since they were more satisfied with their new version.

The solid ingredients included the standard combination of aria, chatchi, and nenon. It was a combo we had used countless times, akin to using onion, potato, and carrot, which Reina and Sheera Ruu were sticking with because they had decided that it would be best not to keep adding ingredients carelessly once they had finalized the foundation of the traip cream stew.

For the giba meat, they went with two cuts, from the shoulder and ribs. The shoulder cut was mainly red meat, but it melted in your mouth after it was slowly boiled for a while, and the rib meat came with layers of abundant fat, so they were both well suited to the dish.

We had started using the rainy season vegetables in other dishes the day after the study session, but the traip cream stew unsurprisingly drew much more interest from our customers. Of course, it had been eight days now since tino and tarapa had gone off the market, so we'd had no choice but to make some major changes to our menu. Thankfully, the people who came by our stalls were happy to see new dishes being introduced one after another, even if they were a bit hesitant at times.

The Ruu clan's giba burgers switched from using tarapa sauce to a nenon-based one, and the myamuu giba was swapped out for herb-grilled giba. The

bean-sprout-like onda were used in the latter dish, while the giba offal stew had the burdock-like reggi added to it. And starting today, they had the traip cream stew as well, meaning all three of the rainy season vegetables were being used in their dishes.

As for the Fa clan's stalls, we primarily employed the new vegetables in our daily specials. We added a salty-sweet sauce to our fuwano wraps (formerly poitan wraps) and cooked the meat with onda and ma pula now that we couldn't use the cabbage-like tino anymore. However, there unfortunately wasn't much room to employ the rainy season vegetables in our giba curry and giba manju.

We were able to use them pretty extensively in our daily specials, though. On this particular day, we had ended up with an excess of liver, so we had gone with a pepe and liver stir-fry. Onda were quite useful when it came to stir-fries, and they didn't cost all that much, so we used a bunch of them and ended up with a dish with a lot of volume to it.

Of course, it wasn't just *our* menu that was changing. The inns were having to revise theirs as well. To give one example, The Kimyuus's Tail had previously been selling tino rolls (similar to cabbage rolls), which I had needed to come up with a replacement for in a real hurry. I had suggested that Milano Mas could sell either of my simmered traip or reggi dishes instead, but when I had him try them both out to see which he preferred, he simply grumbled that he couldn't choose between them so he would just have to sell them both. His plan was to offer them together, each in half the amount of a normal serving.

Both had been made with a tau oil and sugar base for a sweet and salty flavor. Reggi was more earthy and bitter than the burdock I knew, so to balance that out, I had added chitt seeds to give it a bit of spice. Of course, I had included some additional flavorings as well, like nyatta spirits and keru root, which were like refined sake and ginger, respectively, but fundamentally, my aim had been to recreate the sort of mild flavor I knew from back home.

We had also added reggi and onda to the giba soup with tau oil that was being sold by The Great Southern Tree, and switched out the arrabbiata giba sauté served at The Sledgehammer with a curry-flavored grilled dish, so I was trying out all sorts of things.

Also, though The Westerly Wind solely ordered giba meat instead of completed dishes, Yumi was seriously bummed out about the fact that she could no longer make giba meat and tino okonomiyaki. The loss of the cabbage-like tino was indeed a serious blow for the dish. Because of that, when we delivered their giba meat in the morning, I decided to mention an idea I'd had to her. It involved making something similar to buchimgae from Korea, since they no longer had a cabbage analogue to use. Perhaps I didn't need to fixate so much on suggesting a dish similar to okonomiyaki for her, but when I had tried making it at home the day before, it had turned out pretty good.

That said, it wasn't like I was all that familiar with buchimgae. I had probably only ever had it a handful of times. After all, I had been raised in the Tsurumi family, and we didn't exactly eat out very often. My old man greatly preferred Japanese and Italian-style dishes, as well as Japanese interpretations of Western recipes, so I hadn't gotten many chances to try other types of cuisine. As such, what I had ended up with was ultimately more of a buchimgae-style dish based on my shaky memory. It involved adding an egg to the poitan batter, then cooking long, thin slices of giba rib meat, aria, pepe, and nenon in it. In the end, it had turned out a fair bit thinner than the okonomiyaki.

I also hadn't had anything to take the place of gochujang, so the condiments had ended up sort of makeshift too. There had been no issues with reusing the Worcestershire sauce and mayonnaise that were usually served with okonomiyaki, and after adding a bit of spiciness with some chitt seeds, the final result hadn't been half bad.

"What do you think? Pepe has a strong scent and costs more than other ingredients, so maybe you don't have to force yourself to use it."

When Yumi bit into the sample I'd prepared, her eyes started sparkling. "Amazing! This is delicious! In fact, I think I might like it even more than okonomiyaki! Still, it's sad that the poitan isn't as fluffy anymore, and it doesn't have the crispness of the tino."

"Then you're saying you like it about as much as okonomiyaki?"

"Yeah! It's just what I've come to expect from you, Asuta!" Yumi replied, opening her arms wide to hug me, only to suddenly stop. "That was a close one!

I almost hugged you without thinking! You people of the forest's edge aren't supposed to touch each other when you don't need to, right?"

"Y-Yeah, especially where other people can see."

Yumi's stern-looking father was standing there behind her. This was the first time I had seen Sams in a while. He let out a snort as he kept a close eye on what his daughter was doing, and said to me, "You aren't going to earn even a single coin by doing this. Sure is kind of you."

"Cut it out with the tough talk. You were seriously worried when Asuta fell ill, weren't you?" his wife Sill chimed in with a laugh.

"Stop bringing that up already!" Sams shot back, getting even more sulky.

"Thanks, Asuta. A lot of our customers have been way happier with the okonomiyaki than with our ordinary grilled meat. This is a huge help," Yumi's mom told me.

"Oh, think nothing of it. But it makes me happy to hear you say so."

"Because of the rainy season, we've been getting fewer customers in general. A lot of them have gotten stingier too, since they're out of work, so we've gotta at least make sure we can give them a good meal," Sill said, and I strongly agreed with the sentiment. With far fewer passersby around, it felt as if the town had been robbed of its liveliness. It had been twenty days now since the start of the rainy season, and I was feeling its effects more strongly every single day. And with more than half of the season still to go, we all had to do what we could to avoid getting discouraged.

That covered the changeover in dishes.

As for the amount of consumers we were seeing, it was still about the same, but at least it hadn't gone down significantly since the first day of the rainy season, so we were still doing okay. The other stalls around us were trying out all sorts of things to combine the rainy season vegetables with other ingredients from the post town, but we seemed to be doing better than most.

"A fair amount of time has passed since all those new ingredients started showing up here, but nobody else has been making food on the level you all do. It makes me feel really grateful that you've managed to use the rainy season

vegetables to make food this good,” Dora said after visiting our outdoor restaurant and enjoying a meal under the canopy. Next to him, Tara’s eyes were narrowed from smiling in true joy. She had been thoroughly charmed by the traip cream stew that had gone on sale today.

“Hey, we have karon milk at home too! But is there a way for us to make cream stew this good without giba meat?” Tara asked.

“Oh, I’m sure there is. In fact, back in my home country, this dish was typically made using a kind of meat similar to kimyuus.”

“Ooh, really?! That sounds good. I’d like to be able to make tasty stew too,” Tara remarked, fidgeting restlessly.

Then Dora laughed and said, “Your mom and the other women are the ones who prepare our meals, though. You’re still little, so it’s too dangerous to let you mess around with fire.”

“Huh?! But Rimee Ruu is just as little as I am, isn’t she?”

“Rimee Ruu has her act together so well, it’s hard to believe she’s only eight years old. I’m sure if you work hard on the other things you have to do, though, sooner or later you’ll be ready to help the older women with the cooking,” Dora said to console his daughter, but Tara puffed up her cheeks in response.

“I wish we could visit each other’s houses again. But you and the other guys are all busy during the rainy season too, right, dad?” she said.

“That’s true. We’re busier than ever during the rainy season, so it’s difficult to be away from home for too long. But we’d gladly invite all of you over to our place anytime, Asuta!”

“Thank you. I’m still not back to full strength after my illness, so I’ll need a bit more time, but I would love to find a way to make that work,” I replied, and then decided to say a bit more for Tara’s sake. “I could also teach Tara’s mom and the other women of your house how to make a delicious stew. And you can make great karon milk stew even without any traip, so it’s a recipe you can use whenever.”

That finally brought Tara’s smile back, and she energetically replied, “Thanks, Asuta!”

With that, the two of them started walking away in their rain gear, and at the same time, a slender woman approached our stalls to take their place.

“You seem to be doing well today, Sir Asuta.”

“Oh, it’s you, Sheila. It’s pretty hard to tell people apart with all the rain gear. Thanks for stopping by.” It was none other than Polarth’s maid and Yang’s assistant, Sheila. Considering that she had come here on foot from the south, she must have been working for Yang today. “What’s up? We were already planning on stopping by your stall or The Tanto’s Blessing on the way back today.” That was what we typically did to hand over the giba curry that would then be delivered to Arishuna.

Sheila was both very polite and cheerful, and she gracefully bowed her head and replied, “I am aware of that, but it wouldn’t do for us to accidentally miss each other, so I decided to stop by your place. You see, I have a message for you from Lord Polarth.”

Whenever Sheila had a message to deliver to us, that usually only meant one thing, and sure enough, this time was no different.

“Lady Eulifia is once again asking to have a few of you from the forest’s edge man the kitchen for a tea party. My apologies for the hassle, but could you convey that message to the leading clan head, Sir Donda Ruu?”

“A tea party, huh? Then is Toor Deen’s presence being requested in particular?”

I saw Toor Deen shrink in on herself over in the neighboring stall, which was serving giba curry. Sheila briefly glanced at her apologetically and nodded to me again. “Yes. Lady Toor Deen was last invited to the gold month’s dance party. A month has passed since then, so we were thinking of asking for her assistance again. Would that be acceptable?”

“Ah, who, m-me?” Toor Deen timidly questioned.

“Yes. Even if the leading clan heads give their permission, you still have the right to refuse the request yourself, naturally.”

“I-I could never go against what the leading clan heads say. O-Oh, but I’m not saying that they’re heavy-handed or anything. I just mean that you can’t oppose

them without having a good reason to.”

Simply being called “Lady” seemed to be more than enough to make Toor Deen get all flustered on its own, so I decided to lend her a hand.

“I can’t imagine that the leading clan heads would accept their request if you’re against taking the job. So what’s your view of it, Toor Deen?”

“M-My view?”

“It sounds like Lady Odifia isn’t going to be satisfied unless she can invite you to cook for her once a month. If that’s too heavy of a burden, though, you *can* insist on spacing things out more.”

Sheila looked a bit worried to hear that, but I wanted to respect Toor Deen’s feelings on the matter. Despite what certain people had said to tease her during the study session with the Ruu clan a few days ago, Toor Deen had only just turned eleven years old, so being summoned by a noble caused her quite a bit of anxiety.

“I-I feel quite honored to be tasked with such an important job...but...” Toor Deen replied, looking up at me with a deeply worried expression. “B-But could I ask you...to come with me this time, Asuta?”

“Me? I’d be happy to come along, even if I wasn’t requested, but... Oh, that’s right, you made sweets for the dance party without me, didn’t you?”

“Y-Yes. But I don’t think I could make any fresh sweets without using traip...and I still don’t feel very confident in my ability to cook them on my own yet.”

She had single-handedly managed to prepare all of the desserts she had come up with when she had cooked for the dance party, but she was right that it would be nice to make something using traip, since it was the rainy season now.

“Lady Eulifia strongly wishes to invite Lady Toor Deen, Sir Asuta, and Lady Rimee Ruu. Does that work for you, Sir Asuta?” Sheila asked with a pleading gaze and a reserved smile. She was the type to clearly show what she was thinking on her face while still maintaining the appropriate decorum for a noble’s maid, and honestly, I was rather fond of her for that.

“Well, I only just recovered from my illness, and I’m not used to handling traip yet either, so I would appreciate a bit of time... Er, would it be possible to hold off until halfway through the red month?”

“Halfway through the red month? Could I ask for a specific date?”

“Hmm, well, taking the days when we won’t be open for business into account, I suppose...the fifteenth of the red month would be good.” Ai Fa’s birthday was coming up in the red month, and that was going to be a huge event for me, so though I felt apologetic about it, I wouldn’t put that second no matter how much Lady Odifia begged. “Also, could I participate as an assistant rather than as a chef this time?”

“As an assistant, Sir Asuta?” Sheila replied, sounding rather surprised. But embarrassing as it was to admit, I had ended up earning the lowest marks during the last tea party. When it came to making sweets, I simply had no intention of trying to compete.

“When it comes to making desserts, all I can really do is pass along what little I know to Toor Deen and Rimee Ruu. They’re the ones who have been perfecting those recipes lately, so to be honest, even if I personally prepared a sweet, I doubt I’d be able to come up with anything that could beat what the two of them will make.”

“I see. That certainly is surprising to hear.”

“By the way, will Yang be participating again?”

“No. This time, Sir Varkas’s apprentice Lady Shilly Rou has been invited.”

She had attended the last tea party as a guest, but now she would be a chef. Thinking back, the sweets she had prepared for the dance party were truly fantastic.

“So, the date requested is the fifteenth of the red month, and you would like to participate as an assistant, Sir Asuta. I will pass that along to Lord Polarth right away.”

“Right, but it’ll be up to the leading clan heads to make the final decision. I think we should be able to give you their answer in three days or so.”

“Understood. And my apologies for burdening you with these requests again and again.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. This is your job, after all.”

Personally, I didn’t feel as if this was a burden on either of us. And with her message delivered, Sheila went ahead and left to return to her own work with a bashful smile.

2

After finishing up work in the post town, we headed to the Ruu settlement for a study session. This would be our third one since we had started holding them again. Toor Deen and Yun Sudra, being such passionate learners, had both asked if they could keep participating, while the rest of our group would head back to the Fa house to prepare for the next day instead. That was the pattern we had established over the last few days.

As our wagon pulled into the Ruu clan plaza, Myme took off running to summon Mikel, while Reina Ruu guided the rest of us to the main house’s kitchen. After parking off to the side of the house and tying the tolos up under a tree so the rain wouldn’t hit them, we knocked on the kitchen door. However, the person who opened it was someone we really didn’t expect.

“H-Huh? What are you doing here, Darmu Ruu?”

“Am I hearing a member of another clan complaining about me being in my own house?”

“Ah, no, I wasn’t complaining or anything. It’s just really unusual to see you here.”

The second son of the main Ruu house, Darmu Ruu, was shooting me an expressionless glare. His sharp eyes reminded me of a wolf’s, with no need to add “starving” to that description. Even though the rest of his face was perfectly neutral, his intense gaze was harsh enough on its own.

“The men are on break from hunting work today. But I thought he would be bored just loafing around the house, so I dragged him out here,” Mia Lea Ruu said in place of her intimidating son.

Sheera and Lala Ruu were also present. When Sheera Ruu's eyes met mine, she quickly looked down at the ground, and her cheeks went slightly red. I had spoken to her once a while back about her feelings for Darmu Ruu, and she had gotten really flustered then too.

Toor Deen and Yun Sudra had come in after me, and they rather hurriedly bowed their heads, which was a perfectly natural reaction for them to have to his presence. Sure, they had been around Darmu Ruu many times while he was on guard duty, but I didn't have a particularly friendly relationship with him either, even though he and I were both men and I had known him a lot longer than they had.

"There are a lot more of you around now, though, so I'll be heading back to the house," Darmu Ruu said, turning to depart.

Lala Ruu quickly spoke up. "Huh? You're leaving? But even if you go back to your room, Ludo won't be there. Won't you be bored all on your own? Why not spend some time watching our work every now and again?"

"Even if Ludo's not there, somebody else will be."

"Jiza and Sati Lea are in the main hall with Kota. Papa Donda's in the middle of his midday nap, and Granny Tito Min's in Granny Jiba's room."

"Even so, if I watch you all cook, it'll just make me hungry."

"If you're hungry, then you can do a taste test. We're making all sorts of dishes, and we'll all be trying them out and comparing them!"

It was then that Reina Ruu seemed to realize something, and she said, "Oh right. We're not just studying things we can make for the stalls, but also for dinners at home. It would be really helpful to have a family member around to give it all a try."

Facing a pincer attack from his younger sisters, even Darmu Ruu had no choice but to fold. It wasn't clear if the deciding factor was his desire to get samples, not wanting to interfere with his older brother's family having some time together, or something else. But at any rate, he did ultimately relent, at which point Lala Ruu gave Sheera Ruu a stealthy poke in the arm, causing the girl's face to go even redder.

“There are a lot of you here today too,” Mikel muttered as he and Myme arrived. Rather than giving a proper greeting, he just glared at me. “A huge mountain of bricks showed up here around midday. It seems you’ve sent me another real pain in the ass of a job.”

“Ah, yeah. My order of bricks was finally ready, so I had the members of the Ruu clan transport them. Sorry for the bother, but I really do appreciate the help.”

Those bricks were meant for constructing a stone oven here at the forest’s edge, and I had asked Mikel for his help in doing so. After all, I was sure he was very familiar with the iron ovens he had used back in the castle town. He was also deeply knowledgeable about smoking food, as he had started selling charcoal to make a living after he had lost his ability to work as a chef, so he was especially well-informed when it came to handling fire.

I had already told him about what I was planning: to make an oven like the ones in the castle town, but out of bricks. I had asked him to give the idea some thought in advance when he had time, specifically about whether such a thing would be possible in the first place and if we would need any materials besides bricks and clay.

“It’ll be so convenient to be able to bake a whole load of poitan at once. If you need some folks to assemble those bricks and the like, we can handle that. We’re really looking forward to working with you, Mikel,” Mia Lea Ruu said with a smile.

“Yeah,” Mikel bluntly replied. Meanwhile, Myme was standing beside him with a huge smile on face over the fact that her father was getting another chance to show off.

“So, where should we begin? I think we’ve more or less covered the rainy season vegetables, but what do you all say?” I asked the group.

“I suppose you’re right. I never expected you could use reggi and traip in fried dishes, but they were both pretty tasty,” Mia Lea Ruu said.

“Granny Jiba really enjoyed the fried traip dish too. As long as you remove the skin, she can eat it with no problem,” Reina Ruu added with a smile. During the study session two days ago, we had tackled fried dishes for the first time in a

while.

“Speaking of which, there’s actually one fried dish I’d still like to try out. Why don’t we give it a shot, for a change of pace?” I was thinking of cream croquettes. There wouldn’t be any giba meat in them, so it was possible the men wouldn’t be too fond of the dish, but I suspected that they’d do really well if the inns sold them, and Granny Jiba would be able to eat them without a problem too.

Unfortunately, we didn’t have access to any ingredients we could use in place of crab, but the cream alone would probably be enough to surprise folks, and if we used the pumpkin-like traip, we could give them a bit more of a rainy-season flavor. We could also get a little playful with it if we wanted and try something with bacon or sausage too. Plus, the giba cutlets were really popular, so there was a good chance that the people of the forest’s edge would like that version more.

“Croquettes are that fried dish Ludo really likes, right? So what’s a cream croquette?”

“It’s one you make with karon milk. It probably wouldn’t work as a main dish, but it could be good as a side.”

And so, we started by making cream croquettes.

We sautéed some diced aria in milk fat, and once they were good and soft, we added fuwano flour and let the mixture cook for a bit. Once it was no longer all floury, we blended in some karon milk, adding it a little at a time and keeping it at a low boil until it became nice and gooey. Since there weren’t any refrigerators to be had, I figured it was best to prepare it on the thick side so it would be able to congeal at room temperature. Finally, we adjusted the flavor with salt and pico leaves, completing the filling.

“Hmm. This feels a bit plain. Let’s split it into three parts and add traip soup to one and minced giba meat to another.”

This was ultimately just a test, so I wanted to try whatever came to mind. We split the filling into three parts with everyone’s help, and soon the mellow aroma of boiled karon milk filled the kitchen.

“Once it’s been boiled for about this long, you simply have to let it cool off a bit. But with the weather being so chilly during the rainy season, that should go quicker than usual.”

In the meantime, we went ahead and prepared the bacon and sausages. For the bacon, we went with the usual thin slices, then prepared them with the same coating we used for cutlets. For the sausages, we boiled them a bit to soften them up first, then applied a tempura-like coating to them.

As we were working, a question popped into my mind, which I directed at Lala Ruu. “By the way, you said before that Ludo Ruu isn’t in his room. Did he leave to go somewhere in this rain?”

“Yeah, he went to the Sauti settlement with Rimee. She’s still providing lessons to the Sauti clan women.”

“I see. Rimee Ruu sure is an enthusiastic worker.”

I myself had only visited the Sauti settlement a few times after recovering from my illness, but since the new vegetables had gone on sale not long after, it seemed Rimee Ruu was continuing that operation. She only came to town once every three days, so it was easy for her to fit visits to the Sauti into her schedule.

“Well, it’s only because it’s the rainy season that we’re able to leave the house so empty this often. And I feel like it’s more fun to go somewhere rather than being trapped inside all day, even if it *is* raining.”

“Huh. I didn’t really get that feeling since I head to town practically every day, but I guess it’s different for the rest of you, huh? Is going into town once every three days not enough for you, then, Lala Ruu?”

“No. I’d say that’s about enough for me. I like spending time at home with my family too, after all.”

“Oh right, is Shin Ruu at his own house right now?”

“Why are you bringing him up?”

“No particular reason.”

“Shin Ruu left with Ludo and Rimee,” Lala Ruu said, leaning her head forward

and frowning seriously. It was a pretty adorable expression. “Oh yeah, and Vina went to the Ririn house. She said something about giving them cooking lessons,” she added in a whisper.

Hearing that, I whispered back to her so nobody else would overhear, “By the way, Vina and Darmu Ruu got into an argument because of Shumiral, right? Is that all okay now?”

“That didn’t make it past the day it happened. I think if they had raised any more of a fuss about it, Papa Donda would have sent them flying.” Lala Ruu stole a quick glance at her older brother, who was having a quiet conversation with Sheera and Mia Lea Ruu as they prepared the lard. “Darmu will be turning twenty when the yellow month rolls around.”

“Oh, really? That’s the same month as Rimee Ruu, isn’t it?” And it was the month of my new birthday too.

“In the Ruu clan, if we’re not married by the time we turn twenty, we start getting told that we’re taking too long. That’s why everyone pesters Vina about it. She’s twenty-one now, after all.” The main Ruu house had a full five members whose birthdays were in the back half of the brown month, and among that group, Vina and Jiza Ruu had both grown a year older over the past four days. “Apparently, Shumiral of the Ririn clan gave Vina another accessory. Vina seemed a little troubled about that because it kind of goes against our customs, but she looked really happy too.”

“I see. Still, it’s probably going to be a while longer before Vina Ruu can get married, right?”

“Yeah, that’s true. But that has nothing to do with how long Darmu is taking. He could marry pretty much anyone he wants to right now.”

It wasn’t my place to tell any of them what they should do, so I refrained from commenting. Still, it wasn’t like I disagreed with her, exactly.

“For the sake of argument, if Darmu Ruu were to take a bride from a Ruu branch house, where exactly would they live? Normally, everyone but the eldest son is supposed to move out, right?”

“Yup. He’d have to build a new house or marry into his wife’s home... But

Kota's still so little."

"Huh? What does Kota Ruu being small have to do with anything?"

"I don't really even want to think about it, but if Papa Donda's and Jiza's souls were to return to the forest before Kota's old enough to become a hunter, the main house wouldn't have an heir. If Darmu had married into a branch house at that point, that would leave Ludo to become the clan head."

That made sense, and it definitely sounded like a complicated issue. If Darmu Ruu married into Sheera Ruu's house, he would become a member of a branch house rather than the second son of the main house. And in that case, Shin Ruu would be his clan head.

"But if Darmu built a new home as the second son of the main house, then he could still return to become clan head if needed. If Darmu and Ludo both married into other houses, though... Umm, Vina would have to take the role temporarily until her own child is grown, I suppose."

"I see. So the Ruu clan's size can actually cause it to have issues all its own, huh? And now you're one of the leading clans of the forest's edge to boot."

It made sense that Lala Ruu had prefaced this little tangent by saying she didn't even want to think about it. After all, it was based on the possibility that Donda and Jiza Ruu would both die in the next ten years or so.

"Still, I don't think you have anything to worry about. I'm sure Donda and Jiza Ruu are going to stay good and healthy until Kota Ruu is fully grown."

"I think so too, though Papa Donda *will* be turning forty-three in a few days."

"I bet Donda Ruu will be doing just fine even when he turns sixty or seventy."

Lala Ruu shot me a dubious look, but then her eyes narrowed, looking calmer than I was used to seeing her.

"That's pretty easygoing of you, but I guess it's for the best that that's how you are, Asuta. It makes me happy for some reason."

"But isn't it only natural to feel that way? Everyone wants the people who are important to them to live long lives." It seemed like we had both gotten a bit serious thanks to the unexpected turns the conversation had taken.

At any rate, I returned my attention to the work in front of me, poking a wooden skewer through the cream croquet filling. Even after breaking the surface a bit, no steam came out.

“Looks like it’s about ready. This may be a little tricky to handle, so I’ll prepare a number of them to serve as an example.”

The filling had been cooled down to room temperature. I scooped some up with a large wooden spoon and shaped it a bit with my fingertips, then set about coating it.

The basic process here was the same as with cutlets and croquettes. First you coated it in fuwano flour, then dipped it in egg before coating it again in dried fuwano crumbs. The end result had a nice rounded shape.

“And that’s how you do it. Now let’s cook one with minced meat and the one with traip too.”

I had only added about as much of the minced meat as I would crab to a cream croquette, which meant I had kept it on the light side. As for the traip, I went with about twenty percent of the mass of the original filling. That was still enough to give it a distinctly orange color.

I had everyone practice with the plain and minced meat varieties, but surprisingly, the traip variety turned out to be stickier and harder to shape than the others, so I only had Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, Toor Deen, and Myme do those, since they were the most skilled.

“They certainly are hard to make. This one ended up being a bit misshapen,” Sheera Ruu complained.

“You’re so good at this, Toor Deen. But Rimee might be even better,” Reina Ruu noted.

“Ah, I can’t do it right! Sorry, mine’s turned into a sloppy mess.”

Myme was having a surprising amount of trouble. Her first try ended up falling apart, while Reina and Sheera Ruu just barely got a passing mark on theirs. Toor Deen, on the other hand, was actually doing about as well as I was.



“So you have things you’re bad at too, Myme? Sorry if this is rude to say, but I feel a little relieved to find that out,” Reina Ruu said.

“It’s more like the rest of you are too good at this! How are you able to shape yours so well?”

“Probably because we’ve had more practice with making croquettes and the like. The first time we made them, they came out so badly I wanted to cry.”

In that case, since Toor Deen hadn’t ever prepared croquettes before, did that mean her proficiency came from the pure dexterity of her fingers? The young chef ducked her head as if trying to avoid everyone’s gazes.

“Oh right. Toor Deen, you’ve spent the most time making sweets, so you’re really good at kneading fuwano dough, aren’t you? I thought you were just that much of a natural, but I guess it’s actually your experience coming in handy.”

“R-Really? If I’ve gotten better thanks to all the work I’ve been doing, then that makes me glad.”

“I’m sure you have, with how much effort you put in.”

At that point, we had pretty much finished the cream croquettes. The bacon and sausages came next, and with those, everyone was able to prepare them with no issues.

“That sure looks like a lot of work. Do those giba cutlets take this much time to make too?” Darmu Ruu grumbled.

As the one closest to him, Sheera Ruu replied with a smile, “That’s right. But with those, you just have to cut up the meat, so they’re easy to prepare. It’s similar to bacon as well.”

“Well, they’re very good. The ones you make most of all, Sheera Ruu.”

“Huh?” Sheera Ruu said, her eyes opening wide as her face grew steadily redder. “Wh-When did you ever have a chance to eat my cutlets? It must have been a long time ago...”

“I don’t remember when it was, but I’d never forget how delicious they were.” Unlike Sheera Ruu, Darmu Ruu looked perfectly calm and composed. Actually, he probably didn’t even realize he had said anything noteworthy in the

first place. Rather than looking at Sheera Ruu, his attention was fixed on the ingredients lined up on the table in front of him.

Still, in a way, that was fortunate. Sheera Ruu's face was now bright red, and she wasn't able to hide behind her hands since they were coated in fuwano, so all she could do was desperately squirm in place.

"At times like these, I don't know if I should praise Darmu or chew him out," Lala Ruu whispered with a sigh.

"I think you should just leave him be," I replied wholeheartedly.

With all that done, it was finally time for the frying. For this part, I decided to focus my attention on Myme and Yun Sudra, as they were the least experienced. Toor Deen was able to really show her skills as well, since she helped me out with the fried giba at the stalls. When Mia Lea Ruu saw what she could do, she was obviously impressed.

"You're so little, and yet it looks like you're already as skilled as Reina and Sheera Ruu. How old are you again, Toor Deen?"

"I-I just turned eleven."

"Eleven? That's really something else. It's going to be a while before you have to worry about marriage, but I'm sure you'll make a wonderful wife someday, Toor Deen."

Toor Deen seemed to be ending up as the center of attention a lot today. Still, that felt fitting, considering the amount of effort she was always putting in. Even Mikel, who had been silent all this time, seemed to be staring in her direction quite a bit.

Even as they were talking, we were all frying up one piece of food after another. That included the three varieties of cream croquettes, the bacon cutlets, and the sausage tempura. The crackling sound of heated lard and the strong aroma it gave off filled the air, which naturally served to whet our appetites quite a bit.

"See? It was worth it to stick around, wasn't it?" Lala Ruu remarked with a smile.

“I won’t know that until I get to eat something,” Darmu Ruu coolly replied.

“Then give it a try! It’s sure to be delicious! Er, which ones did you make, Sheera Ruu?”

“Th-This is only a taste test, so shouldn’t they all be pretty much the same?” Sheera Ruu said.

“Never mind all that! Ah, there they are! There aren’t a lot of them, though, so you should split this one with me.” Lala Ruu skillfully used a wooden spoon to snatch up two of the completed meat rolls from the metal mesh where they had been sitting to drip off their excess oil. She then transferred them to a wooden plate, and I noted that they seemed to be minced meat cream croquettes.

“Ah, those are probably pretty gooey on the inside, so if you cut into them on the plate they could fall apart on you,” I warned as I saw Lala Ruu reaching for a knife.

“Oh, really? In that case, you can take the first bite, Darmu.”

Darmu Ruu expressionlessly accepted the plate. Even men and women who were fully grown were allowed to do such things if they were family.

“Take care not to burn yourself. It should be fine if you only bite off a little at a time, though,” I warned, earning me an annoyed glare from Darmu Ruu. Even so, he *was* careful as he bit into the cream croquette.

The real question, though, was how it had turned out. I was a little worried about having Darmu Ruu be the first to try it...but fortunately, my concerns were groundless. After chewing in silence for a moment, he suddenly tossed the rest of the cream croquette into his mouth all at once.

“Hey! I said we were going to split them!” Lala Ruu complained.

“There are still plenty left, so there’s no need to get worked up over it. How did it taste, Darmu?” Reina Ruu asked.

“Maybe it’s because I’m hungry, but it tasted incredibly good.” Darmu Ruu replied, and then he turned toward Sheera Ruu. “But it was also pretty mushy, and it hardly had any giba meat in it, so I don’t think it would be a good meal for

a hunter. Do you really think I would enjoy something like this more than I like giba cutlets?”

“F-Fried foods are incredibly delicious when eaten fresh. That’s probably why it tasted so good to you.”

“Is that right? I see,” Darmu Ruu said, crossing his arms. He appeared to be thinking about something.

In the meantime, the rest of us started trying the food as well.

First up were the plain cream croquettes, which were excellent in my opinion. As Sheera Ruu had said, fried foods were especially tasty when they were fresh. The coating was nice and crispy from being fried in the lard, and the wonderful filling was piping hot and gooey when I bit into it. The karon milk had an amazingly rich flavor and gave the dish a fantastic mellow sweetness.

“It’s almost like a sweet. If I look at it from that point of view, I think I really like it!” Yun Sudra declared with a smile.

Mia Lea Ruu agreed, “You’re right. It *is* like a sweet, and...you said you thought it could work as a side dish, right? Well, at any rate, it tastes quite good, considering it doesn’t have any giba meat in it.”

Next to Mia Lea Ruu, Reina Ruu tilted her head. “I feel the same way. I think it might actually taste more complete without giba meat than with it. But it’s possible that I only feel that way because I’m a person of the forest’s edge.”

“Yes, townsfolk would likely accept either of them without any issue,” Sheera Ruu added, then timidly held a pair of plates out to Darmu Ruu, offering them to him. “I-If you’d like, you can try these too, Darmu Ruu. These are normal cream croquettes, and these ones use traip.”

“Got it.”

As I watched that exchange out of the corner of my eye, I tried out the remaining two varieties.

The one with the minced meat really seemed to be lacking something. Was that because I could sense the difference between proper crab cream croquettes and these ones? It wasn’t like the meat didn’t harmonize with the

cream filling, but I was getting the feeling that a minced meat and chatchi croquette might have been a better choice.

The Ruu clan hadn't purchased any, but I knew that in the castle town you could buy a kind of dried crustacean similar to sweet shrimp. It was possible I could use those to achieve a flavor closer to that of crab cream croquettes, but they were pretty expensive, since they were delivered to Genos from the distant capital. Considering their price, using something like that in a side dish would probably be unthinkable for the people of the forest's edge. Besides, these cream croquettes were already pretty good. There was no need to fixate on the idea that they *had* to taste like seafood.

As for the cream croquettes with traip, they were just as good as the plain ones. It was seeming more and more like traip was highly compatible with karon milk. They were complementary, with each drawing out the sweetness in the other. This variety had come out good enough to serve as a side dish already.

And as I was thinking about that, I heard Darmu Ruu grumble, "These are both incredibly delicious."

"So those are more to your liking than the ones with minced meat?"

"Yeah. When you use giba meat poorly like that, it doesn't sit right with me. But this is delicious in a different way than giba cooking."

"You're pretty fond of sweet chatchi mochi too, aren't you, Darmu? By the way, that one you just ate was made by Sheera Ruu," Lala Ruu said.

"I see. You really are one heck of a chef."

Sheera Ruu blushed intensely, but she looked incredibly happy to hear that.

Mia Lea Ruu watched the two of them with a look of satisfaction, then turned toward Mikel. "Did the two of you have some as well? I would love to hear what townsfolk such as yourselves think of this."

"It was good. I'm sure they would enjoy this dish's trick a lot in the castle town too."

"Trick? Ah, you mean how it was all gooey on the inside? Yes, that certainly

was a surprise.”

“Even if you have a great trick, it’s useless if the flavor’s no good, but this tastes fantastic too. Fried dishes may be seen as out of fashion in the castle town, but I’m sure this one would become very popular there.”

Mikel’s perspective was a new one for me. To him, a hard coating around a semiliquid filling was considered a trick. It was a perfectly ordinary dish to me, but to those who were unfamiliar, it would probably seem quite strange indeed.

Furthermore, all of my dishes had seemed strange to the people of the forest’s edge in the beginning, so now they didn’t get particularly shocked anymore when I introduced them to something new like cream croquettes. They just found them interesting.

“These are really good! It really makes me want to try tackling more fried dishes! But my dad won’t allow me to,” Myme said, staring at her father with upturned eyes.

However, Mikel quickly shot her down, saying, “Hmph! If you think you can simply try things out willy-nilly and not run into any trouble, be my guest. I’m sure Asuta will teach you everything you want to know.”

“Jeez! If it’s not okay, then you should just say so! You’re so mean sometimes!” Myme said with a sulky look as she tugged on her father’s clothing. It was adorable to see her acting her age for once. She never did that kind of thing when Mikel wasn’t with her.

After that, we tried out the bacon cutlets and sausage tempura too. Honestly, they felt like they needed a bit more experimentation. The bacon cutlets were probably only a step or two away from being something outstanding. They just needed a little something more, like adding some sort of seasoning to the bacon, or a condiment.

As for the sausage tempura, it was neither good nor bad. It wasn’t like the flavor of the sausages was negatively impacted. However, there were plenty of other equally tasty ways to prepare them. But, well, if we served it together with several other kinds of tempura, I doubted anyone would complain about it.

Personally, I considered the plain and traip cream croquettes to be big

successes, the bacon cutlets to be not quite finished yet, and the minced meat cream croquettes and sausage tempura to be ones that I should put on hold for the moment. After gathering everyone else's opinions, we all seemed to be more or less on the same page, though opinions were split on whether the plain or traip variety was better.

"Well, I guess that concludes the first half. As for the back half, we still have the rainy season vegetables to look at, so—" I started to say, only to be cut off by a violent knocking on the kitchen door.

Darmu Ruu reacted quicker than anyone else, immediately calling out to Reina Ruu, who was over by the entrance, "Don't move. I'll answer it. You all stay back." Reina Ruu nodded and walked over to stand next to me, while Darmu Ruu slipped by her to stand in front of the door. "Who's there?" he demanded.

"Shin Ruu. I have a message for Mia Lea and Darmu Ruu."

The tension in the air instantly calmed. However, Lala Ruu still looked worried as she ran over to her brother. Darmu Ruu opened the door, revealing Shin Ruu standing there in rain gear.

"What's the matter, Shin Ruu? Did something happen at the Sauti settlement?"

"Rimee and Ludo Ruu are safe, but the western guards and northerners have been attacked by a starving giba." The room filled with tension again as soon as he said that. Shin Ruu was maintaining his usual calm expression, but he sounded a little out of breath. "The injured have been gathered in the Sauti settlement. The uninjured guards are heading to town to seek help, but the Sauti don't have enough personnel or medicine to handle this situation. Donda Ruu has decided that the Ruu will send both to assist them. Please, lend us your aid, Darmu Ruu."

"Understood. But what happened to the starving giba?"

"Apparently, they were able to deal with it somehow. There *were* over a hundred people present, after all."

Darmu Ruu gave a single nod, then turned toward his mother.

Before he could say a word, though, Mia Lei Ruu nodded and said, “Medicine, right? If we collect it from the branch houses too, we should be able to provide quite a bit. Sorry Asuta, but could we end things here?”

“H-Hold on! Could you take me to the Sauti settlement too?”

Darmu Ruu shot me a dubious look. “What would you even do if you went? They don’t need a chef.”

“I-Is it not enough that I just want to see how bad it is? And if there *is* anything I can do to help, I want to do it!”

“I’m not the one who needs to make that decision. My father is.”

And with that, the study session at the Ruu settlement came to an unexpected close.

My heart was pounding. I couldn’t help but think about Eleo Chel, Chiffon Chel’s older brother.

Is Eleo Chel okay...? Damn it! They were supposed to have been prepared to deal with giba, so how did this happen? I thought as I hurriedly grabbed my rain gear from the wall and threw it on, before running out into the drizzling rain.

3

We headed to the Sauti settlement in two wagons. Our entire group was composed of men, which was not what I would have expected, but the reason was that men often got hurt out in the forest, so they were more familiar with how to treat the kind of injuries we were going to be dealing with than the women were.

There were twelve men going in total, myself included. Pretty much everyone I knew from the clan was with us, aside from Donda Ruu and Mida. Jiza Ruu, Darmu Ruu, Shin Ruu, Ryada Ruu, and Jeeda were all present, while the other six were men from the branch houses whom I at least recognized.

I had told Toor Deen and Yun Sudra that they should head home without me and asked them to inform Ai Fa that I would have someone from the Ruu clan escort me back afterward. Just making the round trip between the Ruu and

Sauti settlements would take quite a while on its own, so there was no way I'd make it back before sunset.

"There should be around thirty people in need of treatment. A number of them are in serious condition, but all of the Sauti men are out hunting, and more importantly, their clan doesn't have enough medicine to go around," Shin Ruu had reported. "And to make matters worse, those townsfolk don't even know how to set bones, so when I left, Ludo Ruu was running around having to take care of all of that pretty much by himself. I thought about asking the Ririn or Muufa for help instead since they were closer, but I decided that the best thing to do would be to come all the way back here because the Ruu have the largest stock of medicine."

"Right. And we should still get there before the guards can make it back from the post town," I replied, trying really hard to not get impatient. A round trip between the Ruu and Sauti settlements took roughly two hours. Did that mean we were going to arrive too late to help some of the injured? I couldn't help thinking about that, and it was making me anxious.

"Why didn't Rimee return with you, Shin Ruu? There's no point in her being there now," Darmu Ruu grumbled.

Shin Ruu turned toward his cousin while brushing his damp hair back with his hand. "Some northern women she was giving cooking lessons to were injured, and she didn't want to leave their side. I'm sure she's doing whatever she can to assist Ludo Ruu in caring for them."

"I see. So those people from the castle are making even the women from Mahyudra work on clearing their path. It doesn't matter that it's an area without many giba around; it's still ridiculous to send women out that deep into the forest." I could clearly see the fire in Darmu Ruu's blue eyes despite the dim lighting.

It was then that Jiza Ruu spoke up after remaining silent for some time. "But how could such a catastrophe have happened in the first place? I'm sure the leading clan heads told the townsfolk about the dangers of starving giba and what could be done to deal with them, correct? And Dari Sauti must have deployed giba warding fruit."

“I don’t know the details myself. The guards were all in shock afterward, unable to even talk.”

“It sounds like they’ve angered the forest. If that was enough to scare them, they should just call this whole ridiculous project off,” Darmu Ruu muttered mercilessly.

Jeeda and Ryada Ruu simply remained silent.

Around an hour or so later, we finally made it to the Sauti settlement. As we pulled up, I spied a large number of people under the canopy erected over the plaza, though there were actually fewer than I had expected—only around fifty. The plaza was quieter than I’d thought it would be too.

“Aside from the injured and a handful of guards who stayed behind to watch over them, everyone else returned to town,” Shin Ruu said to no one in particular.

We brought our two wagons close to the covered area, and as we did, a small figure noticed us and started waving her hands.

“Hurry! We need bleeding and pain medicine over here!” Rimee Ruu shouted, as energetic as always. The many wounded people were lying on top of rugs, with Sauti women moving around between them to tend to their injuries.

As the wagons had already come to a stop, I hurriedly went to jump down to the ground, only to be stopped by a hand grabbing my shoulder from behind. When I turned to look, I found Darmu Ruu shooting me a seriously scary glare.

“Hey, I don’t care who, but make sure you stay close to one of us hunters. It’s possible that there’s someone with a grudge against the people of the forest’s edge lurking about.”

“Right, understood.”

As Darmu Ruu hadn’t had any interaction with the guards or the northerners before now, it was only natural for him to think that. As I stepped out of the wagon, I decided that I would stick close to him.

“Hey, you finally made it! Come on, this way! We’ve gathered everyone with the most serious injuries here!” Ludo Ruu called out from the center of the

crowd, waving his hands.

As we were walking over to him, I couldn't help but shudder. It was a horrifying sight, like I had walked into a field hospital. Around twenty of the wounded were just lying on the ground, moaning in pain. They didn't look like they were even capable of sitting up. Their wounds were covered in cloth, but I could see a lot of red soaking through. I even saw some folks with splints on their arms and legs. Contrary to what I had expected, though, everyone lying there was a westerner. In other words, they were guards.

There *were* northerners about, but only around five or six of them, sitting in silence. They had been injured as well, but none of them so badly that they were unable to keep themselves upright.

"Oh, you came too, Asuta? Well, whatever. We're fine here, just go help out Rimee," Ludo Ruu said while accepting a small jar from Darmu Ruu containing a type of antibleeding medication that had to be purchased in town. It was quite expensive, as it was made by combining several medicinal herbs using knowledge only the townsfolk had.

"Um, where is Rimee Ruu?"

"Over here. I'll come with you," Shin Ruu said, moving through the crowd of injured people while holding medicine and bandages.

Rimee Ruu was over next to a group of northerners. Two of them were women, and the remaining four were men as big and brawny as Donda Ruu. They also had bloody cloth bandages wrapped around their heads and arms.

There were only five guards watching over them, all of whom were looking pale as they silently kept watch. It seemed they still hadn't shaken off the terror of facing a giba.

"Thank goodness the medicine made it! Here, this will make the pain go away!"

"Thank you, Rimee Ruu," one of the northern women with a bandage around her head responded with a gentle smile. Then, her purple eyes turned toward me and opened wide. "You are Asuta of the Fa clan, aren't you?"

"Ah, yes. You must have seen me before in the kitchen."

The woman nodded and turned around to send a look at another of the northern patients. A massive mountain of a man sitting in the back then shifted.

“Asuta of the Fa clan... I didn’t expect, to see you again.”

“Oh! You’re Eleo Chel, aren’t you?!” I said loudly, then hurriedly covered my mouth when I realized what I’d done. However, the guards on watch just kept standing in place dejectedly, showing no signs that they were aware of what was going on around them. It seemed they lacked the will to even do their jobs at this point, though to be honest, I felt kind of glad about that as I continued speaking to Eleo Chel. “So you were injured too? Are you okay?”

“I am fine. My shoulder, the people of the forest’s edge, fixed.”

Eleo Chel had bandages wrapped around his head and torso, with the former looking quite bloodied, so he probably had a laceration there. His torso bandages were wrapped all around his right arm as well, making him look kind of like a mummy. In all likelihood, he had dislocated his right shoulder and the bandages were meant to fix it in place.

In spite of all that, he still had the same calm and yet strong light shining in his purple eyes that I had seen several months earlier, and I couldn’t detect even the slightest hint of pain on his stern face coated in blond stubble.

“Asuta, Shin Ruu, could you put some medicine on that guy’s wound? Ludo already did, but the bleeding was really bad,” Rimee Ruu called out while helping the women. Following her instructions, Shin Ruu approached Eleo Chel, and the men standing between them cleared a path for him to pass.

The northern man was all the more intimidating up close. He was easily as big as Donda Ruu and maybe even Ji Maam. His blond hair was curly and unruly, like his fellow countrymen’s, and his tanned face looked like it had been chiseled out of stone.

Shin Ruu silently unwrapped Eleo Chel’s head bandages, while the man’s attention remained fixed on me.

“This looks awful... Have you had pain medicine yet?” Shin Ruu asked, but Eleo Chel slowly shook his head. “You have a wound this bad and even dislocated your shoulder, but you haven’t been given anything for the pain?”

Well, I suppose that's no surprise, considering how short we were on it. Asuta, give him some medicine from that jar. Two spoonfuls."

"Got it. This one?" Looking inside, it was filled with a pitch-black concoction in a viscous, half-liquid state. This mixture was also an expensive one from town, far more effective than the romu leaves that could be gathered out in the forest. "Here you go, Eleo Chel. I have to warn you, this is gonna be pretty bitter."

Eleo Chel remained as still as a statue for a few moments, but eventually he opened his mouth, allowing me to insert the spoon past his sturdy-looking teeth.

After giving him one more spoonful in the same way, I glanced around and saw that Rimee Ruu had approached us and was holding out a ladle filled with water.

"Here. The pain medicine is bitter, so he should drink some water with it. When he's done, you need to wash the spoon in the jug and return it to the jar."

"Got it, thanks."

Eleo Chel silently took a drink of water from the ladle, then I used the remaining water to clean the medicine spoon and put it back.

Rimee Ruu, meanwhile, had started treating the other men. Though they weren't doing as badly as the guards, their injuries were impossible to miss. It was proof of their tenacious spirits that none of them were letting their pain show.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, I thank you," Eleo Chel suddenly whispered. His lips hardly moved at all when he said it, and his gaze was pointed elsewhere. "The food was, very good. They said, you made it, at first. We are all grateful to, the people of the forest's edge."

He must have been trying to prevent the guards keeping watch over them from overhearing. I had once been chided by the guards because I had spoken to a slave without a good reason, after all, so I leaned in close to his ear while acting as if I were helping Shin Ruu with something.

“I’m glad to hear that you liked it. Also, there’s something I wanted to tell you, Eleo Chel.”

The man remained silent.

“Your sister Chiffon Chel is still working in the castle town and is doing just fine. I managed to get a message delivered to her to let her know you were thinking of her.”

Eleo Chel’s boulder-like shoulders trembled ever so slightly when he heard that. “I appreciate, your intent. But isn’t that, dangerous?”

“Huh? Dangerous?”

“The Turan lands, and the castle town, having northerners talk. Isn’t it dangerous, if nobles, find out?”

His speech was pretty rough, more so than Shumiral’s was, which made it a little difficult to discern his meaning, but he seemed to be concerned that it could be dangerous if the nobles learned that northerners were secretly sending messages to each other between the Turan lands and the castle town.

“It should be fine. I asked a merchant from the south to deliver the message, so the western nobles shouldn’t have heard anything about it.” Also, Chiffon Chel’s mistress Lefreya seemed to sympathize with the northerners, so there was no need to worry about her. However, I held myself back from mentioning that, since it felt a bit risky to give him that information. We people of the forest’s edge needed to see how Duke Marstein Genos would respond to Lefreya’s actions first.

“Damn! When are the totos going to come pick us up? They didn’t forget about us, did they?” one of the guards muttered a short distance away from us.

“There’s no point in grumbling. You should just thank the western god that you still have your life.”

“We may have survived today, but who knows what’ll happen tomorrow. There’s still more than a month left in the rainy season, right?”

“Yeah, but all you can do is wait till we get rotated out. Or are you planning to quit because you’re scared of giba?”

“I didn’t say that...but I’m really getting sick of this job!”

One side of that conversation was steadily growing louder and louder, and yet Eleo Chel, Shin Ruu, and the other northerners weren’t paying them any mind.

“Only the nobles and the merchants from Sym are going to benefit from cutting a path through a place like this, right? It’s got nothing to do with us, so why do we have to risk our lives out here?”

“If Genos gets richer, all of us will benefit from it. Besides, what I’m trying to tell you is that nothing good will come of griping about it.”

“Oh, so if the nobles and merchants earn more, that means our pay is going to go up? I don’t remember anything like that happening before! Not in the last few years, at least!”

It seemed the guards had complaints and concerns of their own. I did my best to not pay any attention to what they were saying, but someone who had been listening suddenly came charging over from the center of the plaza.

“What are you two bellyaching about?! Stop chatting and focus on your job!” The man was a young guard with bandages wrapped around his head and his left arm in a sling, but he must have outranked the guards who were keeping watch, as they immediately and enthusiastically bowed to him. “The wagons should arrive soon to pick us up. And despite what happened, no one died, so we should be grateful to the western god. Besides, you made it through the attack in fine health, so stop complaining. Don’t forget that these people were injured in our place,” the man said, pointing at the northerners with his good arm.

I looked up, wondering what he meant by “in our place” and locked eyes with the man. As soon as I did, the guard’s eyes opened wide.

“Oh, so you’re here too?”

“Y-You’re Marth, aren’t you? It’s been a while.”

It was indeed Marth, the platoon commander whom I had met in the post town several times. His helmet was off and he had bandages wrapped around his head, so I hadn’t recognized him right away.

“We owe your people a lot after what happened today. If it hadn’t been for that young hunter providing care, I’m sure far too many of my comrades would have had their souls returned to the western god.”

“Yeah, I heard that a starving giba attacked you. It sounds like it was a huge disaster.”

“Hmph. It wouldn’t have turned out this way if we had stayed calm, but one of the guardsmen panicked and threw his spear at the beast. That made the furious giba charge us, and this is the result,” Marth said in annoyance. Then he looked behind me at Eleo Chel. “You’re the one who stepped in front of the giba first, aren’t you? If not for your efforts, several of us would have lost their lives then and there. In fact, we might not have been able to take down the giba at all without you and your compatriots, and the damage would definitely have been far worse.”

Eleo Chel offered no response.

“We will, of course, properly repay you for your efforts. All of you will be allowed to rest comfortably in the Turan lands until your wounds are healed,” Marth stated before turning the other way.

Thinking back on it, Marth had been the one who’d come to chastise Eleo Chel for slipping away from his logging work to meet with me several months ago. Marth himself likely hadn’t noticed, as northerners tended to look similar to one another, but it certainly was a strange twist of fate.

“So you all are the ones who took down the giba?” Shin Ruu whispered after he finished treating Eleo Chel. “I’m amazed you were able to kill it without swords. How in the world did you pull that off?”

“We had no swords, but we had, axes. And some hit it with, logs too.”

“So you took down a giba with axes and logs? That’s quite the accomplishment,” Shin Ruu commented as he started to treat another northerner. I was going to have to step away to stay with him, but I wanted to say one more thing to Eleo Chel first.

“You’ve had a real rough day, haven’t you? I’ll be praying for you to get better soon.”

At that, Eleo Chel's eyes turned toward me, and he replied in a solemn tone, "I am sad, that I must, take a break, from work. Food at, the forest's edge, is delicious. It is, much worse, in the Turan lands."

Then he leaned in closer to me so that the guards on watch wouldn't be able to tell what he was doing, and his stern, stonelike face broke out in an honest smile, almost like that of a child.

Chapter 3: The Fa Clan Head's Birthday

1

For the remaining five days of the brown month after the starving giba incident, work on the path through the forest's edge was temporarily halted. Dozens had been injured by a single giba, so the safety concerns surrounding the project became a matter of debate once again.

Apparently, the discussions eventually shifted to questioning whether a highway through such a dangerous area could even be used, but that was settled with the answer that it would be no issue in a tolos wagon. If enough width could be cleared to run tolos-pulled wagons through, the entire path could be traveled in three to four hours—as long as you didn't stop for a break—and the giba would pose no risk.

The real issue, ultimately, was how to continue with the construction. However, the final determination was that the incident had only happened because the fearful guard had provoked the giba, and if they had stayed calm, everything would have been fine. Giba were unable to jump higher than their own heads, so if everyone had evacuated into wagons or trees and used the giba-warding fruit provided by the Sauti clan, the situation could have been resolved without anyone getting injured.

In other words, the critical point was the mental state of the guards. They had become victims of their own fear after their first encounter with a terrifying giba out in the forest. Fortunately, no one had died, but a single giba had caused an incredible number of injuries and left the guards deeply shaken.

Naturally, if the nobles ordered the construction to continue, the guards had no right to disagree. But if the same tragedy repeated itself, it could easily result in fatalities. On top of that, if the guards became too afraid of giba, it would become difficult for them to keep watch over the northerners, so the slaves could end up escaping.

Furthermore, the northerners had proven they were perfectly capable of keeping their composure, even in a situation as chaotic as a giba attack. In fact, *they* were the ones who had taken the giba down in the end, not the guards. That information had only made the nobles feel more uneasy about what had happened.

After five days of meetings, the nobles finally decided that they would have to recruit hunters from the forest's edge for the worksite. Rather than being workers or guards keeping an eye on the workers, though, they would be there solely for protection. If another starving giba were to appear, they would take the appropriate measures to defeat it. That would be their one and only task at the worksite.

"Still, a giba ordinarily wouldn't come anywhere near an area with that many people making noise. The only reason that one did was because it went crazy from hunger, so bringing in hunters as guards now will probably be useless," Ludo Ruu had criticized.

However, what the nobles ultimately wanted was peace of mind, and they were willing to offer a lot of reward money to ensure that everyone at the worksite would feel at ease as they did their jobs.

"But we'd have to stand out in the rain from morning till night, wouldn't we? I can't imagine a duller job. There's no way I'd ever want to do something like that!"

Plenty of hunters probably felt the same way as Ludo Ruu, but this was an official job request issued under the authority of Duke Marstein Genos himself, and since the people of the forest's edge lived just within the boundaries of his domain, we were obligated to go along with it to the best of our ability.

"Still, we can't neglect our work as hunters, so the task will have to be given to clans who are taking a break."

That was the decision the leading clan heads ultimately came to. As for which clans were currently on break, that turned out to be the three clans under the Ravitz. The northern clans had just finished a break period at the beginning of the brown month, with the Suun clan's break starting shortly after that, followed by the Ravitz entering theirs a few days ago.

“Getting paid to stand around all day sounds like a nice and easy way to make money. Still, what an utterly ridiculous task they’ve given us,” the head of the main Ravitz house, Dei Ravitz, had apparently proclaimed when he’d heard.

At any rate, that meant the worksite now had its protectors for the next ten days to half a month. The Ravitz’s break period would end halfway through the red month, at which point the Sauti would take over for them.

As for the reward money, Donda Ruu had said, “For this particular job, it should all go to the clans who are doing the work, since the other clans won’t be putting in any effort,” and that had settled the matter. Of course, if the Ruu clan had been in a position to take the job, they probably would have insisted that the money be shared with all the people of the forest’s edge instead.

At any rate, with that, everything was finally settled. We chefs continued our work in the post town like always, with news steadily coming to us through the Ruu and Fou about how everything was playing out.

“What an absolute hassle. And it just had to happen when we were so busy celebrating.” That grumble had come, unusually enough, from Mia Lea Ruu. During those five days, the leading clan heads had been repeatedly invited to the castle town for meetings and had also had to scramble to find time to discuss matters among themselves—and as if that weren’t enough, the birthdays of Donda, Ludo, and Kota Ruu also fell within that time frame. Donda Ruu in particular was the head of the main Ruu house, so the celebration for his birthday had to be grander than that of anyone else in the clan.

However, we were currently right in the middle of the rainy season. Normally, the Ruu celebrated birthdays by holding banquets out in their plaza, but that would be difficult in these conditions, so instead they had a big dinner party early in the evening, after which there was a drinking party where the members of the branch houses and the heads of the subordinate clans came by to celebrate.

“In years that have a gold month, the end of the brown month falls right in the middle of the rainy season. In years without one, though, we’re usually able to hold all those celebrations outside in the plaza without too much difficulty.”

As she had mentioned, this year happened to have a leap month, as every

third year did. If not for that, the rainy season apparently wouldn't normally arrive until the red month.

The main Ruu house was an especially large structure, but there was still a limit to how many people it could accommodate at once, so guests had to keep coming and going rather than hanging around for a long period of time. That created a totally different set of issues for Mia Lea Ruu and the others in charge of managing the festivities to handle, compared to your usual banquet out in the plaza.

Still, that was a problem only the Ruu and their subordinate clans could solve. I hadn't attended, so all I knew about the five birthdays they had celebrated recently was what had come to me through the grapevine.

I had previously been invited to the birthdays of Lala Ruu and Granny Tito Min as a guest and chef, but the Ruu had started preparing the food for such celebrations completely on their own ever since. It made me feel a little left out in a way, but birthdays were generally meant to be celebrated with blood relatives alone.

The only birthday I had been invited to after that was Dan Rutim's. Of course, afterward he had told me, "I'm looking forward to next year too!" with a hearty chuckle, but he was just really broad-minded that way. Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim had also grown a year older in the months that followed, but I hadn't been invited to those celebrations. It wasn't that they were shunning me or anything. That was simply how they did things here at the forest's edge.

Toor Deen's, Mida's, and Tsuvai's birthdays had also passed recently, and I only knew about them because people had incidentally mentioned them to me in small talk. It wasn't the sort of thing that folks would go out of their way to bring up with members of other clans. And on a related note, at the moment, most of my attention was dedicated to the upcoming birthday celebration for Ai Fa.

We were finally heading into the red month, and with it, the back half of the rainy season. Now was the time for me to officially start preparations for my clan head's birthday.

It had now been ten days since work had resumed on the path through the forest's edge. This was the day Ai Fa had been born, the tenth of the red month.

I did have to work in the post town that day. Unfortunately, our day off had been the day before. Of course, it would have been possible for us to move our break to another day, but Ai Fa had told me, "That's not necessary. As long as you prepare a delicious dinner, that will be enough for me. Even if you do go out of your way to shift your schedule around, it's not like there's anything special that you need to do, right?"

She had been so solemn when she had said it too. But, well, birthdays at the forest's edge really were modest events. You had a nicer meal than usual, and your clan members offered you flowers. That was all it typically amounted to. The feelings conveyed were far more important than the event itself.

Soon after the beginning of the red month, I had consulted with Ai Fa on one matter in particular. Birthdays were meant to be held with blood relations. I understood that, certainly, but I suggested that it would be nice if we could invite some guests as well.

"What would you like to do, Ai Fa? I want to celebrate the day in whatever way you would enjoy the most."

The guests I was suggesting were Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba. I knew that Ai Fa terribly regretted how cold she had been when she turned Rimee Ruu away on her birthday last year, so inviting them now would help to soothe feelings on both sides.

However, my proposal turned out to be one my clan head really agonized over.

"But to bluntly drive her away last year only to invite her as a guest now... It would make me seem quite selfish, wouldn't it?"

"Rimee Ruu would never think that way. I'm sure she'd be overjoyed."

"Hmm... That may be so, but still..."

Ai Fa had been maintaining a stoic expression for quite a while, but now she looked like a worried child.

“Then, would you be willing to bring it up with Rimee Ruu for me? And if she looks at all upset about anything, you have to be honest and tell me so.”

“It’s fine. You’re a real worrier, Ai Fa.”

Naturally, she was worrying for nothing. The next day when I spoke to Rimee Ruu about it, she was pretty surprised at first, but that quickly turned into pure joy.

“Is it really okay? Doesn’t Ai Fa want to spend her birthday just with you?”

“The two of us spend every night alone together. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Then we’ll come! Granny Jiba’s gonna be real happy too!” Rimee Ruu said, tearing up a bit as she leaped at my chest. “This must’ve been your idea, right? Ai Fa never thinks to do stuff like this on her own.”

“Yeah. You know Ai Fa really well, Rimee Ruu.”

“Of course I do! She’s my best friend in the whole world!”

That night, I told Ai Fa everything I had noticed, holding nothing back.

She placed a hand on her brow and hung her head deeply. “I see... I’m truly glad to hear that Rimee Ruu wasn’t unhappy with me. Asuta...”

“Yes?”

“I’m deeply grateful for the consideration you have shown,” Ai Fa said, her voice ever so slightly trembling.

I suspected that she might be tearing up. However, I pretended not to notice and simply answered with, “Of course.”

And then, the day arrived.

We did run the stalls in the morning, but as one might expect, I skipped the study session afterward. Once I was finished with everything I needed to do for work, I headed to the Ruu settlement to meet up with Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba.

Donda Ruu had one condition for allowing the elder Granny Jiba to visit the Fa

house, and that was to have a man accompany us.

There was no real chance of us running into trouble within the settlement, but it would be too much of a violation of the customs of the forest's edge to send the elder and a young child to another house for dinner without anyone to accompany them. Jiza Ruu in particular was strict enough when it came to the rules that we had no choice but to accept.

As for the man chosen to go with us, it was none other than Ludo Ruu. Out of all the Ruu clan men, he and Shin Ruu had the closest friendship with the Fa, and since Ludo Ruu was part of the same household as Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba, he was the best choice for our escort. Donda Ruu had gone out of his way to give Ludo Ruu the day off as well, so we certainly had no reason to complain.

"I'm so happy that you arranged this for us, Asuta. Thank you, truly," Granny Jiba said with a gentle smile as she exited the house, clad in rain gear with Ludo Ruu holding her hand.

They would have to make a return trip, so they were taking Ruuruu's wagon. Granny Jiba had traveled to the Daleim lands and the post town recently, so I was sure that this short trip would be no problem for her. In fact, judging from how her steps looked as she walked, I felt like her legs seemed to have more strength in them than they had before.

"Well, I'll try to stay out of the way in a corner. But I can count on you for some tasty food, right, Asuta?" Ludo Ruu called out as got up into the driver's seat. And with that, they departed for the Fa house.

I dropped off Toor Deen and Yun Sudra next and then returned to the Fa house, where I found a whole lot of women waiting in our kitchen. That was no surprise, though, as I had asked them to handle the preparations for business tomorrow.

"Welcome back, Asuta. We just got finished with our work here."

"Thank you. You've really been a huge help."

I wanted to dedicate all of my time from here on out to cooking dinner, so I had asked them to come early in order to ensure that they'd be done by the time I returned.

With the cooking all finished, the women went about cleaning up. Even without Toor Deen and Yun Sudra there to lead them, they were able to complete the work smoothly thanks to the Fou clan head's wife taking charge.

"Excuse us... Oh my, it certainly is lively here," Granny Jiba said as she stepped into the kitchen, her group having arrived shortly after I did. At that, everyone stopped working and turned toward her.

"You are the Ruu clan elder, Jiba Ruu? I never imagined the day would come when I would see you with my own two eyes," the Fou clan head's wife remarked, giving a polite bow. As Rimee Ruu pulled back the hood of her rain gear, Granny Jiba smiled kindly at everyone in the room.

"You don't need to act so polite toward an old bag of bones like myself. Please, continue with what you were doing."

The women all bowed to her before resuming work as she had requested. However, I noticed that the younger women in the group kept stealing glances at her from time to time. Even putting aside her title as the Ruu clan elder, it was rare to see someone that old in general. Toor Deen and Yun Sudra had reacted in much the same way when they had first met Granny Jiba too.

"Okay, that should do it. We'll be heading out now, Asuta."

"All right. Seriously, thank you so much. I'll look forward to seeing you all again tomorrow morning."

"We'll be bringing *that thing* over around when the sun sets too," a Ran woman added. They had prepared something of a surprise themselves.

"I know, I know!" I replied with a smile, then I watched them all leave the kitchen. "Okay, time to get started on dinner."

"Yeah! Let's make all sorts of tasty food!" Rimee Ruu proclaimed, running over to me. She had been waiting for this moment. The two of us would be preparing dinner for Ai Fa together. That made inviting her all the more worthwhile. "We're starting with the prep for the stew, right?! We don't have much time, so we've gotta hurry up and get the kimyuus bones boiling!"

It was currently almost the lower third hour, which meant we had around three and a half hours until sunset. We would only just be able to make it in

time if we started work on the bone stock now, but I had decided that I didn't want to have the others take care of it for us. We needed to complete today's dinner with our skills alone.

"Jiba Ruu, do you really not want to go rest in the main house? The stoves are lit, so it isn't too cold in here, but I can't imagine it's all that comfortable."

"I'm fine. I came all the way out here to the Fa house, so I want to share as much joy as I can with you." Granny Jiba was sitting on a mat that was laid out along one of the walls. She had taken off her rain gear and was now wearing a shawl she had brought from the Ruu house, and Ludo Ruu was right next to her, stifling a yawn.

From what I had been told, this was apparently the first time Granny Jiba had visited the Fa house. Though they had been friends for quite some time, it went against the customs of the forest's edge for the Ruu clan's elder to visit a small clan without a good reason, and the distance had been an issue as well until recently. After all, a round trip between the Fa house and the Ruu settlement took around two hours on foot.

I recalled that Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu had happened to grow acquainted with Ai Fa while they were out taking walks. One day, when they had headed north from their home at the same time as Ai Fa had been going south from hers, the three of them had ended up running into each other somewhere in the middle, and ever since then, Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu would always go to the north on their walks, while Ai Fa would always meander south when practicing tree climbing, in order to intentionally increase the number of coincidental run-ins they had. It didn't take long for a bond to form between them after that. They didn't talk much about what sort of conversations they'd had back then, but when I imagined the still-young Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu acting like playful puppies, I felt all warm inside.

"It's been about six years now since you two met Ai Fa, right?" I asked as Rimee Ruu and I worked on the kimyuus bones together.

"Yes," Granny Jiba replied with a nod. "To think, it's been more than six whole years. Ai Fa was just about to turn twelve back then, and now she's turning eighteen."

“So Rimee Ruu was only two years old, and you were seventy-nine, right, Jiba Ruu? That’s amazing.”

They had been two, eleven, and seventy-nine... Normally, people who were that far apart in age would have a really hard time becoming friends, no matter how well they got to know each other. And yet, they *had* become friends, and even now, after more than six years had passed, they were still precious to one another.

“But then my legs started giving out on me, right around when Ai Fa lost her father. When she needed me by her side the most, I wasn’t able to be there for her.”

“That must’ve felt terrible for both of you, to have such awful luck hitting you at the same time.”

“Yes. But after that, I started to find my life here at the forest’s edge to be more and more difficult. As Ai Fa was suffering, all of my attention was focused on my own pain. I truly, deeply regret that fact.”

“I’m sure Ai Fa feels the same way. If her situation had been better, I’m sure she would have rushed to your side, even if it meant sneaking into the Ruu house.”

But since the two of them had been unable to do so, Rimee Ruu had been the only one capable of going back and forth between the Fa and Ruu houses.

Back in the present, the young girl was now swiftly scooping up the scum that was rising to the surface of the soup, and once she was finished, she turned toward her great-grandmother with a smile. “But now, we’re even closer than we used to be, and that makes me really happy! We had two really hard years, but the forest rewarded us after!”

“Yes, that may be so.”

Ludo Ruu had just been standing off to the side looking bored, but now he decided to join the conversation. “That’s right. Besides, if anyone was in the wrong, it was the Suun, don’t you think? If they hadn’t gone and meddled, Ai Fa wouldn’t have felt the need to cut her ties with every other clan.”

That was definitely true too. And if Ai Fa had never taken down Diga, Donda

Ruu wouldn't have set his eyes on her and asked her to marry Darmu Ruu. That incident had caused Ai Fa to distance herself further from the Ruu, so it was a chain of bad blood causing even more bad blood.

"But Diga and the others have been punished, so it's fine now! You don't need to keep getting all sad about the past anymore, Granny Jiba!" Rimee Ruu said.

"It is as you say, Rimee and Ludo. It seems like you young people are always showing me what the proper path forward is lately," Granny Jiba replied, breaking out in a smile. And it was true, Rimee and Ludo Ruu's earnestness and cheerfulness had proven to be really helpful time and time again.

"By the way, when is your birthday, Jiba Ruu? You haven't had one since I met you, right?" I asked, figuring I should clear away the solemn feeling hanging in the air by changing the topic.

"My birthday is in the vermilion month, which comes after this one. I believe the same is true of Reina."

"The rainy season will be over by then, so does that mean you're going to have a grand celebration?"

"Well, last year and the year before, I was so weak it didn't seem like I would be alive for much longer. I wasn't even able to eat proper food."

"But before that, we used to have big parties in the plaza! And you can eat lots of tasty food now, Granny Jiba, so we should bring everyone together again to celebrate!" Rimee Ruu declared.

"If everyone else can enjoy it, then that would make me happy too."

"Of course we'd enjoy it! We weren't able to go all out with our old man's birthday this year, so yours has to be that much bigger to make up for it!" Ludo Ruu said. The atmosphere in the room felt like it had instantly become charged with energy, as if a bit of the liveliness of the gigantic Ruu family had been shared with me.

If Ai Fa and I had spent her birthday alone together, I would have been perfectly satisfied with that, but having others with us to celebrate the occasion was undeniably wonderful too. That's what I was thinking about as I finished

what I was doing and got to work on the next task.

2

“Ai Fa’s a weird one, don’t you think?” Ludo Ruu said.

The atmosphere in the kitchen remained energetic the whole time we were cooking, which was unsurprising, considering that we had the chatty siblings Ludo and Rimee Ruu with us.

“She was the first woman to ever say she wanted to be a hunter, and on top of that, normally you’d never consider living alone like she used to without any family or any other clans related to you nearby.”

“Yeah. But now Lem Dom wants to be a hunter too,” Rimee Ruu noted.

“She still has lots of family members and blood relatives she can rely on, though. Besides, she’s actually bigger than me or Shin Ruu.”

“Ah ha ha, Ai Fa’s bigger than you too, Ludo!”

“Shut it, runt! She’s only a finger or two taller at most! And I’ve still got plenty of growing left to do!”

I was really enjoying listening to the two of them talk, and since their chatter was soothing my nerves, I decided to join in too.

“By the way, your birthday was a few days ago, right, Ludo Ruu? So you’re sixteen now?”

“Yeah. By the time I’m eighteen, I’ll be bigger than you and Ai Fa, Asuta!” Ludo Ruu declared in a huff. When he smiled, Ludo Ruu was as adorable as any girl, but as he continued to grow, I was sure that he’d eventually become just as handsome as Darmu Ruu, though for some reason, that thought made me feel a bit down.

“We had an amazing meal for Ludo’s birthday too! Those chatchi croquettes were delicious!”

“Yeah. We only eat croquettes once or twice a month. Hey, Asuta, do we really need to be *that* careful about eating too much giba fat?”

“Hmm... That’s something we’ll have to keep looking at over time, but it really isn’t good to eat too much fat, sugar, or salt.”

“Huh... I suppose it might make them taste better if you only get to have them every once in a while,” Ludo Ruu said from his position next to Granny Jiba, though he *was* fidgeting a bit in dissatisfaction. “Well, that’s enough about me! We’re here for Ai Fa! It’s better now that you’re here, Asuta, but before you came, she was expecting to live her life completely alone until her soul returned to the forest. That’s the part I really can’t believe! She didn’t just cut ties with the Ruu, but also all the clans that neighbor her, yeah?”

“That’s right, all because of her feud with the Suun clan. She didn’t want to cause trouble for anyone around her.”

“I can’t even imagine it, living like that for two whole years! It sounds so dull that I’d probably get sick of being alive if it were me!”

“Maybe, but Rimee Ruu did at least try to visit her every now and then.”

The young chef in question broke out in a bashful smile as she was boiling some traip in milk fat for the stew. Without a doubt, she was single-handedly responsible for keeping Ai Fa from being completely lonely during those two years. If not for her, my clan head would hardly ever have had a reason to speak to another human being at all during that period.

“So, you and Ai Fa still aren’t getting married?”

I was so surprised when I heard that, I almost flipped my pot over.



“Wh-What are you talking about?! You can’t just ask that out of nowhere, Ludo Ruu!”

“Hmm? I wasn’t trying to change the topic or anything. But if you and Ai Fa don’t get married and pop out a ton of kids, your clan’s gonna die off.”

There was nothing I could do to keep my face from turning completely red. I had never been hit with this topic so directly before.

“W-Well, nothing’s more important to Ai Fa than her work as a hunter.”

“She could just go back to being a hunter after having kids, like Bartha, though I guess she might not have time for that if she has a whole bunch of them.”

If nothing else, I wanted him to stop talking so directly about making babies. Perhaps sensing that, Granny Jiba chimed in after having been simply sitting and listening to us with a smile for a good long time.

“You shouldn’t be so nosy about the affairs of other houses. You hate being pressured to take a bride yourself, don’t you, Ludo?”

“I mean, if Darmu and Vina still haven’t gotten married, isn’t it weird for people to bug me and Reina about it?! Plus, I only just turned sixteen!”

“Mia Lea and the others have been worried about how your face doesn’t seem to be losing its childlike looks...but you’re still a fine hunter, so it wouldn’t be unusual for you to take a bride any day now.”

“That’s true. You’re the right age for it, so do you have a woman you like, Ludo Ruu?” I asked, trying to shift the topic and strike back at him. However, Ludo Ruu simply shrugged disinterestedly.

“I haven’t really thought about it. I’ve gotten several proposals, but none of them felt right.”

“Oh, my. That’s just like how things used to be with Vina, is it not?”

“Yup! Ludo’s popular with the girls. Even Tara said you’re really cool, didn’t she?” Rimee Ruu said.

“Huh? I never heard that runt say anything like that.”

“Of course she wouldn’t say it to you directly! You’re so clueless, Ludo!”

“Oh, am I?! I don’t think a runt like you should be talking like such a know-it-all!”

Fortunately, it seemed we had successfully deflected the course of the conversation.

On a related note, since I happened to be thinking about marriage, the talks between the Fou and Sudra about forming blood ties between them had apparently been progressing smoothly. This kind of thing—marrying and having children—was a huge deal for the people of the forest’s edge.

“By the way, have you been to the Rutim settlement lately, Asuta?” Rimee Ruu asked.

“Yeah, but only once so I could thank them for visiting me when I was sick. Ama Min Rutim’s stomach sure has grown, hasn’t it?”

“Yup! It’s still gonna be months before the baby is born, but I’m really looking forward to it!”

Among our neighbors, Li Sudra was also pregnant, and had been for longer than Ama Min Rutim. Her stomach hadn’t been noticeably different back during the revival festival, but it had become quite a bit bigger in the past two months.

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, huh? To the people of the forest’s edge, that’s unquestionably the right path to take.

I felt a bit guilty when that thought crossed my mind. If I couldn’t get together with Ai Fa, I wouldn’t mind spending my whole life single... That was the conclusion I had perhaps hastily come to.

As for Ai Fa, she had said that on the off chance she became unable to continue as a hunter and had to live as a woman, she would never want to marry anyone but me. I knew it wasn’t appropriate for me as a person of the forest’s edge to feel as satisfied about that as I did.

That said, I definitely didn’t want to see a future in which Ai Fa became seriously injured. I figured we would just keep getting closer, with the emotional bond between us becoming ever stronger as we continued to live in the same place.

However, right as I was thinking that, there was a knock on the door, almost making me jump in surprise, and a commanding voice came from outside. “I’m back.”

“Ooh, it’s Ai Fa! You sure are late!” Rimee Ruu said.

It was then that I noticed it was now pitch black outside the window. We were nearly finished with the cooking at this point.

Ai Fa opened the door, and Ludo Ruu let loose a wild, “Gyah! That’s a big one! You carried it back all on your own?!”

“Ah, Ludo Ruu. My apologies for troubling you with such a selfish request today.”

Ai Fa was breathing heavily as she offered that rather stiff response, and who could blame her? There was a massive giba lying on the ground by her feet that must’ve weighed at least a hundred kilos.

“Giba summoning fruit is less effective in the rain, isn’t it? It’s amazing that you still managed to catch that thing on your own!” Ludo Ruu noted.

“It isn’t as if there are fewer giba around during the rainy season... In fact, the number of giba seems to have risen slightly since the Sudra started going to the Suun settlement to hunt.”

“Oh yeah, those Sudra guys have been hunting with the Suun and Jeen, haven’t they? That’s pretty amazing too!”

“Of course, they’re only going once every five to ten days, and the Suun settlement was in the middle of a break period until recently. It’s possible that there being more giba around is just my impression, and I’m reading too much into this.”

Ai Fa’s breathing had already returned to normal as they were speaking. The hunters of the forest’s edge recovered really quickly.

“Still, look at what a mess you are! You’re covered in mud from head to toe! And these guys’ve almost got dinner ready too.”

“My apologies. I will deal with this giba after cleansing my body. Please hold on for a little while longer.”

“Well, how about you let me take care of cleaning the giba for you. There’s nothing wrong with me paying you back for the dinner, right?”

“Ah, no, but...”

“Come on, please! I’ve been smelling all this delicious food the whole time I’ve been here, you know. And that runt Rimee hasn’t let me do any taste testing at all! My stomach can’t take much more!”

With that additional bit of pressure from Ludo Ruu, Ai Fa finally accepted. “Very well, I will leave that to you. I apologize again for the trouble. I will be cleansing my body on the other side of this hut, so please be careful not to come too close if you go over there.”

“Yeah, I’ve got no interest in having my eyes plucked out! Whoa, this is heavy!”

Ludo Ruu had slipped his rain gear back on and was now dragging the giba away as Ai Fa glanced around the kitchen.

“Well then, I will see you all later.”

My muddled clan head swiftly departed. Was she still feeling nervous about Rimee and Jiba Ruu being here or something?

“It really is amazing that Ai Fa hunts all on her own! During the rainy season, our clan catches fewer giba for sure!” Rimee Ruu said.

“Yeah. I feel like she’s been catching as many as she did before the rainy season ever since I recovered from my illness. I think she’s pushing herself really hard to make up for all the time she had to take off from work because of me,” I responded.

“Oh yeah? I’m sure I don’t need to worry since we’re talking about Ai Fa, but still...I hope we’ll be able to buy hunting dogs soon!”

We were coming up on the two month mark since Shumiral had first brought hunting dogs to the Ruu settlement. It was pretty much already decided that the people of the forest’s edge would be purchasing more after all the good the dogs had done in that time. Once the rainy season ended, the plan was to have the Ruu foot the cost for buying several more of the animals, which would be

distributed to clans throughout the forest's edge so that more hunters would have a chance to try working with them.

Polarth and the other nobles had already been told about all this. There were a few merchants from Jagar who visited even at this time of year, so we were going to have them get in contact with other merchants who handled hunting dogs when they returned home.

"Hunting dogs are so amazing! Our hunters haven't been bringing back as many giba as they were before with the rainy season, but we were catching a whole ton of them before that!" Rimee Ruu said.

"I see. And I bet you're also looking forward to getting more of them because they're so adorable, right?"

"Yeah! When we get the new ones, I'm gonna name them!"

After we had that cute little exchange, there was another knock on the door.

"Asuta, it's Saris Ran Fou. I came to deliver what I mentioned before."

"Ah, please come on in."

Our new visitors were Saris Ran Fou, her child Aimu Fou, and one more woman, the Ran clan head's wife; they all entered the kitchen clad in rain gear.

"Thank you for coming. Ai Fa is currently cleaning herself off out back."

"I see. Then may we wait here?"

The two women walked over to a corner of the room, staying out of the way so they didn't get anything on the food. Aimu Fou was clinging to his mother's leg with his eyes wide open as he stared at Granny Jiba, who was seated along the opposite wall. When the Ruu elder noticed that, her eyes narrowed and she smiled.

"What a healthy-looking child. Is he yours?"

"Yes, this is Aimu Fou. You're the Ruu clan elder Jiba Ruu, correct?" Saris Ran Fou responded, pulling back the hood of her rain gear and bowing her head. As I carried out my preparations to plate the finished dishes, I went ahead and explained.

“Jiba Ruu, this is Saris Ran Fou, Ai Fa’s childhood friend. She’s the closest person to her among the nearby clans.”

“Ah, I see. Saris Ran Fou... Saris Ran... That name does indeed seem familiar to me.”

“Huh?” Saris Ran Fou looked surprised.

Granny Jiba smiled at her again with even more kindness. “Ai Fa has wanted to become a hunter since she was young, so I know that many of those around her saw her as an odd child and avoided her. But I remember she often spoke to me about the one close friend she did have.”

“She did? But I was always telling her that she should forget her wish and that it was foolish.”

“You said those things out of concern for Ai Fa’s future, did you not? She knew what the emotions behind your words were.”

Saris Ran Fou frowned and hung her head. “But...when the Suun clan started its feud with Ai Fa, I...”

“Ahhh, that doesn’t matter! Why does everyone get all sad when you’re talking about the past? You’ve made up with Ai Fa now, haven’t you?” Rimee Ruu asked with a smile. “Today’s a day for celebrating! You shouldn’t be looking sad! You should be smiling! Right?!”

“Yes, that’s true,” Saris Ran Fou replied with a sad-looking smile, right before the door opened.

On the other side was Ai Fa, now clean, dripping wet, and wearing her cloak. Her eyes immediately fell on Saris Ran Fou, who she was clearly surprised to see. “Saris Ran Fou, what are you doing here at this time of day?”

“Ai Fa. I came to give you something.” With that, Saris Ran Fou showed us what she had been hiding inside of her rain gear, and the Ran woman did the same. Ai Fa’s childhood friend was holding a giba pelt hunter’s cloak, while the Ran woman had a rain cloak with fur on the inside. The outside was dyed a beautiful red.

“As friends of the Fa, the Fou and Ran clans wish to present these gifts to you.

They were both made using pelts you gave us, Ai Fa.”

“A hunter’s cloak and rain gear?”

“Yes. The one you use now is a memento from your father Gil Fa, isn’t it? Normally, when one becomes a full-fledged hunter, the clan’s women gift them a hunter’s cloak made from a giba they caught, but the Fa clan doesn’t have any women to tan pelts.”

“You also gather firewood and herbs, don’t you, Ai Fa? You should use this when you do. Rain gear for women always has a hood.”

Ai Fa was left at a loss for words.

Saris Ran Fou smiled while holding up the hunter’s cloak. “Accepting a hunter’s cloak from another clan may not exactly line up with our customs. But we have all shared a festival of the hunt together, so it shouldn’t be an issue, right?”

“Besides, you were the one who caught these giba, so there’s no shame in accepting them back. Please, use our gifts well.”

Ai Fa closed her eyes, looking like she was desperately trying to contain some kind of emotion, before finally breaking out in a smile.

“I am deeply grateful to the Fou and Ran clans, and I shall gladly make use of these,” Ai Fa said, accepting the two gifts.

All the while, Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba were watching the exchange with smiles on their faces, and as Ai Fa held her gifts tight, Saris Ran Fou and the Ran woman looked at one another and smiled as well. It seemed that their surprise had made Ai Fa even happier than I had expected it would.



3

A quarter of an hour later, we were gathered in the main room of the Fa house.

Everyone was seated in a circle, with the celebratory meal lined up in front of them. The freshly cooked meat was giving off white steam and filling the air with a wondrous aroma.

“Ahem, today we’re celebrating the eighteenth birthday of Ai Fa, the head of the Fa clan. I hope that we all may continue to guide her, so she can live a life that will bring no shame to the Fa clan’s name,” I started out, following the customs of the forest’s edge.

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied with a calm nod, but then she tilted her head and looked a touch confused. “By the way, why are you speaking so stiffly?”

“Sorry. I’m bad at giving speeches like that.”

I also just kind of naturally took that tone when I had guests in front of me. But putting that aside, we needed to move on to the next step before the food started getting cold.

“I give you this celebratory flower, my clan head. Happy birthday, Ai Fa.”

“Thank you.”

“Happy birthday, Ai Fa!”

“Yeah, what she said.”

“Happy birthday, Ai Fa.”

Our guests also gifted Ai Fa flowers in turn. They created a beautiful combination of colors, with one each of blue, red, yellow, and white. My clan head adorned her hair and chest with them, and though she maintained a serious expression, I could see her eyes narrowing with joy. It had been two years since Ai Fa had last been given flowers like this. Or rather, since she had lost her father not long after turning fifteen, it was probably actually three years.

Anyway, I had one more present to give to my clan head. “Ai Fa, I don’t know if you’ll like it or not, but would you accept this too?”

“Hmm? You shouldn’t need to give me any gifts besides a flower.”

“Yeah, and I know you don’t like wasting money either, but I just really wanted to give it to you.”

It was a hair accessory I had bought in the post town. It had a flower motif that resembled a rose, with petals that were made out of some kind of awesome translucent stone. When light hit those petals, they took on a rainbow glow, making the accessory as beautiful as the glasswork that Ai Fa adored.

My clan head’s gaze wandered a bit, as if she wasn’t sure what sort of emotion she should show. But then, Granny Jiba smiled and called out, “It isn’t uncommon for a man to give a woman a gift *outside* of her birthday, you know. Everyone adorns their banquet attire with such gifts.”

“Yes, but I am a hunter.”

“You may be a hunter, but you are a woman as well. It’s a wonderful accessory, and it suits you so nicely.”

Ai Fa gave a little sigh, then turned her face away and closed her eyes. Taking that as acceptance, I placed the flower ornament above her temple.

“Wow, so pretty! It looks really good on you, Ai Fa!”

Ai Fa squirmed a bit, as if someone were tickling her, but then she sat up straight and said, “Now then, I thank all of you for gathering here today to celebrate my life. My friends Jiba and Rimee Ruu, and their clan member Ludo Ruu, I hope that you will enjoy this meal to the fullest.”

With that, we said our premeal chants, and then we finally started dinner.

“Man, I’m so hungry I could die! You could have at least let me do a little taste testing here and there!”

“Hmph! This meal is for Ai Fa, so we wanted her to be the first one to eat it!” Rimee Ruu retorted, and then she turned toward my clan head with a smile.

“Come on, give it a try! Asuta and I worked really hard to make it!”

“Of course,” Ai Fa replied with a smile of her own, accepting the plate.

Just as Rimee Ruu had said, she and I had put a lot of care into preparing the meal. Naturally, the main course was hamburger steak, and since this was a celebration, we had prepared multiple varieties. Actually, it might be more accurate to say we had prepared a number of different sauces to go with the small patties.

The first type was the normal demi-glace sauce; then there was one with grated sheema soaked in a tau-oil-based Japanese-style sauce; a white sauce we had prepared alongside the stew; grated aria and myamuu; a Western-style sauce made from a fruit wine base; and even a curry sauce that combined curry with kimyuus bone soup, making for six varieties in total.

The patties were on the small side, which meant that if they had been thin and flat, they would have been lacking in chewiness, so we had made them nice and round instead. We had also prepared a special hamburger steak in addition to all the others: Ai Fa’s favorite, hamburger steak with tarapa sauce and dried milk inside. Naturally, my clan head loaded up her plate with that one first.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to be able to get tarapa during the rainy season.”

“Yeah, but the castle town has tarapa sent in from other places. It’s not as fresh as the tarapa we buy from Dora, but we tried to make up for that with our cooking skills.”

It was a celebration, so I figured it was okay for me to be a little boastful. The tarapa they sold in the castle town were small and very sweet, so we had modified the flavoring to match. Simply put, we wanted to ensure that it would be just as amazing as the version Ai Fa was used to eating.

“I see,” Ai Fa said with a nod, carefully bringing a bit of hamburger steak to her mouth with a spoon. My clan head’s smooth cheeks moved slightly as she chewed, and then she narrowed her eyes in joy as she turned to look at me and Rimee Ruu.

“It’s delicious... You all should hurry up and have some too.”

Rimee Ruu looked as happy as Ai Fa when she heard that, and I most likely

had a very similar expression on my face.

“See? Ai Fa’s saying so too. Hurry up and let me eat,” Ludo Ruu muttered grumpily. Glancing in his direction, I saw that Rimee Ruu had confiscated his spoon and skewers.

“Yeah, it’s fine now. You can eat as much as you want too, Ludo!”

“You don’t have to tell me that! I’m hungry enough to eat an entire mountain’s worth of food!”

With that, the rest of us went ahead and started eating too.

We had prepared all sorts of other dishes in addition to the hamburger steak. Rimee Ruu had taken charge on the soup dishes, preparing traip stew and tau oil soup that included lots of reggi and onda.

It would be difficult to make any kind of raw vegetable salad without fresh tino available, so instead we had prepared a big pile of cooked vegetables. To do so, we had thoroughly boiled some carrot-like nenon, potato-like chatchi, paprika-like ma pula, and zucchini-like chan, then added a dressing made with sesame-seedlike hoboi.

I also wanted to have a nice, refreshing intermezzo, so I had whipped up an additional salad made with thin crispy strips of sheema and gigo. It certainly did its job when eaten with the dip made from dried plumlike kiki.

Then we had a simmered reggi and traip dish that was becoming something of a staple lately, which also contained bamboo-shoot-like chamcham. Naturally, chamcham paired quite well with Japanese-style sweet and salty flavorings.

On top of that, I had cooked a big, thick steak in addition to the hamburger steak. In fact, it was so thick that it had to be cut in half in order to be eaten, but chewing through tough giba meat was important for hunters of the forest’s edge, so I felt it was necessary to have some today.

For the sauce, I had gone with a simple one made from the overflowing juices from the cooked meat, as well as fruit wine, myamuu, and tau oil. To go with the steak, I had also prepared some mashed chatchi to take the place of mashed potatoes. Since Ludo Ruu was here, I had wanted to make sure that we

would have a chatchi-heavy dish too.

All of that was the result of Rimee Ruu and me working for roughly three and a half hours. Everyone was smiling as they ate, and with their joy washing over me, I dug in too.

“Granny Jiba, you seem to be eating quite a bit more nowadays,” Ai Fa gently commented.

After taking a bite of the hamburger steak with Japanese-style sauce the Rimee Ruu had cut for her, Granny Jiba smiled and nodded back. “Yes. Now, I think I eat about as much as Tito Min does. Everyone is astounded, considering how small I am.”

“I’m very glad to hear that.”

It was true that even if she was taking it slow, Granny Jiba was eating continuously at a steady pace. The only things I hadn’t seen her eat were the overly tough steak and the thinly sliced sheema salad. It was really heartening to see her demonstrate that she still had this much of an appetite, considering she would soon turn eighty-six.

Of course, Ludo Ruu was eating about five times as fast as her. The Fa clan’s poitan ration hadn’t seemed like it would be enough, so I had also made a decent amount of fuwano bread, but it felt like that would all disappear before too much longer as well.

“Ahhh, this is so tasty! I thought Reina was pretty much on your level at this point, Asuta, but I can really taste the difference in your cooking!” the young hunter said.

“You think so? When it comes to her specialties, I’d say Reina Ruu is already as skilled of a chef as I am.”

“Yeah! But when we have all these different dishes laid out in front of us, it’s obvious how incredible you actually are! Anything you make is good enough to die for, but if Reina served this many dishes at once, I’m sure only one or two of them would be this amazing.”

That was actually kind of insightful. Reina and Sheera Ruu were steadily polishing their skills with the dishes they sold, as well as variants of those

dishes, which meant that they were getting so good at those recipes that the gap between their specialties and their other dishes was pretty noticeable. Furthermore, Reina Ruu's biggest talent seemed to be in creating soups and stews, and the way she focused on them so much made the gap even deeper and more apparent in her case. However, I felt that in a way that actually proved how remarkably fast she was growing.

"Are you okay eating that much, Ludo? Don't forget, we've still got dessert after this!"

"Normal food and sweets are separate things. It's almost like they go to different places, you know?"

"Ah ha ha. Back in my home country, they called that a dessert stomach. There's supposed to be some sort of reason behind it too."

I vaguely recalled something about how it was caused by the secretion of hormones, but I didn't know the details. Not that Ludo Ruu was asking for a detailed explanation, of course. As long as he could eat Rimee Ruu's sweets, he wouldn't have any complaints.

We were all getting along incredibly well as we enjoyed our food. And the star of the day, Ai Fa, was heartily satisfying her appetite as she quietly watched the rest of us. We had eaten together with members of the Ruu clan numerous times by now. However, this was definitely the smallest number of them we had ever shared a meal with, and since the ones who had joined us today were Rimee Ruu, Ludo Ruu, and Granny Jiba, who we were especially close with, that ensured that things stayed nice and energetic. The atmosphere was full of the warm vibes of a family gathering. It was as if the members of the Ruu clan were sharing a bit of their natural liveliness with us. I had never once felt dissatisfied living with just Ai Fa, but I couldn't deny that there was a certain something in the air that we didn't usually have at the Fa house.

Was this what it had been like for Ai Fa back when her parents were still around? That was certainly the case for me. I felt as if tonight we had both been gifted with something we had lost.

"By the way, it's a celebratory banquet and all that, but you aren't drinking any fruit wine, Ai Fa," Ludo Ruu noted.

“Indeed. I haven’t had many opportunities to drink any lately. But if you want to have some, you can go ahead.”

“I’m fine. It’s not like I can’t drink the stuff, but I’m not all that big on it.” The young hunter scratched his head. “I’ve really been stirring things up for a while now, haven’t I? Sorry about that. I did say I was going to sit off in a corner while I was here. Am I being intrusive?”

“It’s not like you to show such consideration.”

“Well, I mean, it’s your birthday, Ai Fa. And Rimee and Granny Jiba were the ones you invited as guests, so I shouldn’t be bothering you all.”

“You aren’t being a bother at all. In fact, I’d feel more on edge if you were suddenly quiet,” Ai Fa replied.

“Hmm.” Ludo Ruu gave a little tilt of his head. “I guess you do look as though you’ve been enjoying yourself a lot tonight. You’re even prettier than usual when you’re like this, you know.”

“If you’re going to run your mouth like that, maybe I *should* have you sit in the corner.”

“Jeez, make up your mind already. I’m sure you feel the same way, right, Asuta?”

“H-Hey, don’t throw this on me.”

His sudden comment had shaken me, but Ai Fa simply shrugged, not looking particularly upset. It was true that with the brilliant flowers and hair accessory, Ai Fa was even more lovely than usual. And the bliss she seemed to be radiating only made her sparkle all the more.

After she slurped a bit of tau oil soup, Granny Jiba happily narrowed her eyes and looked around the room. “You’ve spent eighteen years in this house, Ai Fa. It certainly is a fine one.”

This house was a size smaller than the main Ruu house, and the houses at the forest’s edge were all built in the same style, so it wasn’t like there was anything particularly special about ours. The one thing that was kind of unique about it was the open display shelf the massive horn from the lord of the forest

was sitting on, the glass cup from Shumiral, and the glass plate from Radajid and the others.

There was a rain-soaked cloak and my rain gear hanging from the other wall, as well as the new cloak and rain gear Ai Fa had just received. Our bedding for two that we had purchased for the rainy season was folded up in a stack underneath them.

“What bloodline did the Fa come from originally, anyway?” Ludo Ruu asked while serving himself a bunch of mashed chatchi. Ai Fa shot him a questioning look in response. “The Fa must’ve had branch families and clans you were related to at some point, right? But there’s only one house here, and you don’t have blood ties with anyone nearby, so you obviously moved from elsewhere.”

“I see. That’s true, now that you mention it. But this has been the only house around here ever since I was young, and my father Gil never spoke of any clans we were related to.”

“Hmm... Our old man said he had no clue either. Do you have any idea, Granny Jiba?”

“I’m not sure... There were a great many clans at the forest’s edge originally, so I doubt anybody would have been able to remember most of them unless they lived close by.”

“Oh right, there were about twice as many clans when you were young as there are now. Yeah, that’s definitely too many to remember.”

Rimee Ruu had been eating the simmered traip dish with a smile, but now she stopped to stare blankly at her brother’s face. “Why are you acting so interested in all that, Ludo? You’ve never cared about stuff like bloodlines before.”

“Hmm? Well, if they’re even distantly related to some other clan, they could take that clan in as subordinates of the Fa, couldn’t they? Anybody would want to be under an amazing hunter like Ai Fa and an incredible chef like Asuta.”

“Huh?”

“Then things would be lively around here even if neither of them ever marries anybody else. Blond hair’s pretty rare, so it’d be interesting if you had blood ties

with the Lea. But the Rutim elder said the Lea and Fa aren't related."

It was true that aside from Ai Fa, the only blond people I could recall seeing were Rau Lea and Uru Lea Ririn. Still, it was a surprise to hear that Ludo Ruu had gone out of his way to ask the Rutim elder Raa Rutim about that.

Rimee Ruu set her plate down atop the rug and hugged Ludo Ruu's arm tight, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder.

"What are you doing? You're making it hard to eat," he complained.

"Yeah, but I think it's really amazing how you worry about Ai Fa and Asuta that much."

"Oh, stop making such a big deal about it. And don't cling to me like that."

In spite of her brother's protests, Rimee Ruu kept on happily clinging to him with a big grin for a good while longer.

As she watched the two of them interacting with each other, Ai Fa broke out in a faint smile of her own. "Even without blood ties, we have plenty of friends. That includes Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu, of course, but I think of you as a precious friend as well, Ludo Ruu."

"Really? I mostly just remember arguing with you a whole lot."

"Even so, you have shown friendship to the Fa clan for quite some time. That first night when Asuta manned the Ruu clan stove, you were the only man to give us a tusk as a blessing."

"Hey, that was almost a year ago!"

"No matter how many years may pass, I will never forget. That tusk hangs around Asuta's neck even now."

Just as she had said, the tusks hanging around my neck had all come from the members of the main Ruu house. There were ten in total, with one being from each of them, aside from Jiza, Darmu, and Kota Ruu.

"Still, I'm glad to hear that Asuta's not the only one of you who thinks of me as a friend," Ludo Ruu said while rustling his yellowish-brown hair. "You know, you really do look like a completely different person than usual tonight! I get why Rau Lea's always going on about how fine of a woman you are. It must be a

real pain having so many men asking you to marry them, huh?”

“If you keep running your mouth, I’ll put you in the corner even if you *are* my friend.”

“Why do you always get so upset about that kind of thing? It’s not like I think you’ll ever marry anyone other than Asuta, you know.”

Ai Fa then grabbed an empty plate.

“Are you gonna throw that at me?!” Ludo Ruu quickly guarded his head with one arm, since Rimee Ruu was still holding on to the other one.

Even that little squabble just added to the fun we were having.

My clan head would surely never forget this night for the rest of her life, and even though my memory was nowhere near as good as hers, I knew the same was true for me. This was the first time I had ever celebrated her birthday. I was indescribably happy, and that feeling was indelibly etching itself deep into my heart.

Chapter 4: Another Sweet Gathering

1

It was now the fifteenth of the red month, five days after Ai Fa's birthday, and as promised, we were heading to the castle town in order to man the kitchen for a tea party.

Today was a day off for the stalls. Tea parties in the castle town were held around when the sun hit its peak, so we couldn't accept that kind of request if it took place on a business day for us.

On top of that, the hunters accompanying us as guards had to take time off from work as well. Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu were the ones filling that role this time.

"The Ruu clan hunters took a break five days ago, right? Are you the only one off today, Ludo Ruu?" I asked.

"No, everyone else is resting at home too. It's not good to push ourselves too hard during the rainy season."

Perhaps surprisingly, the Ruu seemed to take more time off from hunting than any other clan I knew of, and not just during the rainy season. When several of their people were injured in a short span of time, or their hunts were consistently seeing poor results, they were always proactive in deciding to take time off for rest.

Even so, the rate at which they caught giba was top tier, in the same class as the northern clans, so they really deserved praise for how efficient they were. They rested when they needed rest, and worked hard when it was time to work. The Ruu clan under Donda Ruu's leadership seemed to be very good at judging that sort of thing.

"Yeah, that's the kind of prudence I expect from the Ruu clan. I suppose that's also why you accepted the idea of using hunting dogs so readily. Donda Ruu's really something else. He's steadfast, but can be flexible in his thinking too."

“Hey, you won’t get anything out of praising him when he’s not even here,” Ludo Ruu said with a wide grin as the totos carriage taking us into the castle town swayed along in the rain. “You’ve been heading into the forest every day, right, Ai Fa? This should be a good chance for you to take things easy for a bit.”

My clan head, who was sitting silently between me and Rimee Ruu, shrugged with a composed look on her face in response. “I did not hunt in the forest for a long time during Asuta’s illness and recovery. I still have yet to make up for the hunting I should have done then, and I haven’t noticed any buildup of fatigue so far.”

“That’s seriously impressive. Even our old man takes a bunch of days off during the rainy season.”

“That is because Donda Ruu is a leader responsible for a great many people. Even if he himself is not tired, if he believes his people require rest, he will put their needs first. That is what a clan head should do.”

“So, if you were leading another weaker hunter, would you decide to rest more often?”

“I believe I would. But there’s no point in imagining such things.”

“Oh sure there is. Someday, you and Asuta could end up pumping out lots of —”

“Aaah!” I shouted, cutting Ludo Ruu off.

Ai Fa looked at me in surprise. “What is it? Did a bug bite you, perhaps?”

“N-No, nothing like that.”

As I tried to come up with an excuse for yelling so suddenly, I shot Ludo Ruu a desperate glare. The young hunter simply turned his head toward me from where he was sitting on the other side of the carriage and stuck out his tongue.

“So, what are Asuta and I supposed to pump out?”

“Oh, well you see—”

“Hey! Can’t we change the subject already?!” I shouted again.

A puzzled voice then called to us from the outside of the carriage, where the

driver's seat was. "Is something the matter? If you're feeling unwell, we can temporarily stop the carriage."

"No, we're fine!" I shouted back even though there was no need to be so loud, then I moved over to sit next to Ludo Ruu so I could whisper in his ear. "Hey, didn't Jiba Ruu tell you not to muck around in other clans' business?"

"I can't help it if watching you two makes me feel super impatient. You obviously like each other, right?"

"Can't you just drop it? I'm begging you here. Our circumstances cause us all kinds of problems that other people of the forest's edge don't have to deal with, you know."

As we whispered back and forth, a displeased look crossed Ai Fa's face. "Hey. You two look to be enjoying yourselves together, and that's all well and good, but I can't say I appreciate you cutting me out in the middle of a conversation." If there hadn't been other people watching us, that statement probably would have been accompanied by a frown.

Rimee Ruu then smiled and wrapped Ai Fa's arm in an embrace. "You know, I've really been looking forward to today! I'm so happy I get to spend all this time with you again, Ai Fa!"

Rimee Ruu was a very perceptive girl, and she seemed to be trying to cover for her brother's rudeness. I was really grateful for it too. Meanwhile, Toor Deen was watching all of us with a troubled smile from a few seats away.

The five of us were the full group that would be participating today. Other than swapping out Shin Ruu for Ludo Ruu, it was the same lineup as the last tea party. Once again, we had received a request that if we were bringing hunters, they should be young ones who didn't look too intense, which was why Ludo Ruu had been selected.

Considering the young noblewomen who had fallen for Shin Ruu last time, we had deliberately not brought him again. Instead, he was probably spending some quality time with his family and Lala Ruu. And as for Ludo Ruu, he seemed to be quite pleased that on top of being trusted to protect his little sister, he was also going to have an opportunity to do some taste testing.

The totos carriage eventually came to a stop and we stepped down to the ground in front of a white palace. This was the same White Bird place where the last event of this kind had been held, but this time the carriage was parked in a spot where a stone awning jutted out, so we didn't need to put on rain gear.

We were guided inside, just like last time, which naturally meant that our first stop was the customary visit to the bathhouse. Since it was split into separate rooms for men and women, we separated from the girls there. We washed ourselves and stepped into the changing room, where we found the same sort of clothing as before: white chef's attire for me, and a white officer's uniform for Ludo Ruu.

"So this is what they made Shin Ruu wear, huh? It sure does look uncomfortable," Ludo Ruu said, though he did seem to be enjoying himself.

Once he finished changing, I found that the dapper outfit suited him surprisingly well. Despite his childish nature, Ludo Ruu had some fine facial features. I wouldn't go so far as saying he looked like a young noble lord, but the clothes definitely didn't clash with his appearance.

Shortly after we exited the changing rooms, a maid led the women out as well. Ai Fa was dressed in the same sort of officer's uniform as Ludo Ruu, while Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen wore apron dresses that made them look like tiny maids.

When he saw his adorable little sister, Ludo Ruu broke out laughing, "Bwa ha ha! You look so weird dressed like that! It's like a kid trying to dress up as an adult!"

"Ludo, you dummy! You could at least compliment me!" Rimee Ruu shot back, her cheeks puffing up. She had been dressed like this back at the Daleim dance party at the end of the gold month too.



Ludo Ruu continued to laugh as his gaze turned toward my clan head. “That suits you oddly well, Ai Fa. You look handsome but also really pretty. I imagine you’d be really popular with both men and women.”

Ai Fa offered no response.

Then Ludo Ruu redirected his attention to Toor Deen. “That looks good on you too! I could easily see myself mistaking you for someone from the castle town.”

Toor Deen gave a weak, troubled smile in response. Rimee Ruu, meanwhile, puffed up her cheeks again and kicked her brother in the leg several times.

“We ask that you come this way and greet the noblewomen now,” the maid Sheila said as she approached us. She must have helped Ai Fa to get dressed again, judging from how satisfied she looked when she glanced at my clan head out of the corner of her eye. She then beckoned us down the hall.

At tea parties, it was customary for us to introduce ourselves before we got to work. Though actually, I didn’t know if that was an official custom here in the castle town or just Eulifia’s personal preference, but at any rate, that part went the same as last time too. However, the tea party *was* being held in a different location within The White Bird. Before, it was outside in a garden, but today they were indoors. Though there was a roof over the garden, it still wasn’t a good place for hosting a tea party in the rainy season. The weather might have felt like autumn to me, but for them, this was the coldest and harshest part of the entire year.

For that reason, the room’s fireplace was lit, and the noblewomen had shawls and lap blankets with stylish embroidery to help guard against the cold. Other than that, though, they were wearing the same kind of light clothes they had worn before the rainy season.

“Welcome, dear guests from the forest’s edge. We have been eagerly awaiting this day.”

There were seven noblewomen seated around the large round table, but unlike last time, I recognized all of the attendees. Of course, we had been told who would be there in advance.

First, we had Melfried's wife Eulifia and their young daughter Odifia. The southern metalworker's daughter Diel and the eastern star reader Arishuna were present as well. The head of the house of Turan, Lefreya, was also in attendance, even though she was supposed to stay away from social events. Eulifia had probably made special arrangements to allow her to be here.

Those five had all been at the last tea party, while the two remaining ladies—Polarth's mother Littia and his wife Merrim—were new this time. They had been invited to replace the young noblewomen who had fallen for Shin Ruu. There would be no cross-class romantic feelings blooming here.

"It has been some time, Asuta. And you are...Ai Fa, correct? We were introduced at the dance party, but I must say, I barely recognize you like this," Littia—a small and plump middle-aged lady with a kind demeanor—said with a relaxed smile. I had become acquainted with her at the Daleim dance party.

"You two were dressed like this at the dance party as well, were you not? You look quite adorable," Merrim said with a smile directed at Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen. She was also on the small side, with a cute and youthful appearance, wearing a light pink dress that looked really good on her.

Ludo Ruu was the only one who was meeting them for the first time. He had come along to the dance party as a bodyguard, but he had never entered the main hall where all the noble guests had gathered.

Eulifia smiled at Ludo Ruu elegantly before saying, "You are the leading clan head Donda Ruu's third son, are you not? I have not heard your name, but I have seen you a number of times now."

"Oh yeah, I come to the castle town a lot as a bodyguard, like at that swordsmanship tournament, and a couple times before that... I don't really do politeness, though. Hopefully that won't be a problem."

"Of course, I do not mind. The leading clan head Donda Ruu certainly has been blessed with many children," Eulifia remarked, bringing her hand to her mouth and smiling with even more elegance. She had now interacted with all three sons of the main Ruu house. I suppose one could say that no other woman from the castle town was as well-connected to the people of the forest's edge as she was.

Now that the noble ladies seemed to have said all that they wanted to say for the moment, Diel spoke up as if she had been waiting for her chance. “It’s a relief to see you looking healthy, Asuta. I’ve been busy with work lately, so I haven’t been able to make it out to the post town, but I was really worried about you.” Though Diel was acting proper and ladylike, as she always did when she was surrounded by noblewomen, the relief in her green eyes still came across clearly.

I bowed my head and told her from the depths of my heart, “I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“I feel, the same way. I am very glad, to see you, are well,” Arishuna chimed in. As an easterner, she was certainly harder to read than Diel, but I had no reason to doubt the sentiment she expressed. It had been a long time since I had seen either of them.

“I hear you were still having giba cooking delivered to the castle town while Asuta was suffering from his illness, easterner,” Diel said, glaring at Arishuna out of the corner of her eye.

“Yes,” the star reader replied with an expressionless nod. “To put it, more accurately, the giba cooking, continued to be delivered to me, without interruption. I only learned, of Asuta’s illness, later.”

“Ah, right, Toor Deen here kept our business operating along with the other women while I was away,” I replied, and Toor Deen hurriedly bowed her head.

“Is that so?” Arishuna asked, slightly narrowing her eyes. “The giba curry, tasted the same, as Asuta’s. You are, a wonderful chef, Toor Deen.”

“N-No, it’s not like I made it all on my own. I don’t even come close to measuring up to Asuta.”

“But for today, you and Rimee Ruu are the chefs, while Asuta is your assistant. I am greatly looking forward to seeing what sort of treats you will provide us with,” Eulifia interjected with a smile. “Of course, Odifia is even more elated than I am. Do you have anything to add, Odifia?”

“Yes. Thank you for coming to the castle town today. I’ve been really looking forward to eating your sweets.” The young Lady Odifia was completely

expressionless, like always. However, her gray eyes were firmly fixed on Toor Deen. Honestly, this whole event was undoubtedly the result of the young noblewoman's desperate pleas to eat Toor Deen's sweets. But since the girl was as expressionless as an easterner for some reason, the only thing Toor Deen could respond with was a flustered bow.

As she patted her beloved daughter on the head, Eulifia smiled at us yet again. "We would like to rank today's dishes with points as well, but it is once again simply for our amusement, so pay it no great heed. The young Rou lady is participating as a chef today, so I suspect this shall prove to be a wonderful tea party."

That seemed to be our signal to leave, but I feigned ignorance and called out to the final attendee, who had remained silent all this time.

"It's been quite a while, Lady Lefreya. I'm glad to see that you're doing okay."

This was the first time I had seen Lefreya in some time. She still looked like an adorable French doll, and had a prim and proper expression on her face. Her reddish-brown eyes calmly glanced in my direction...but what she said next was not directed at me. "Eulifia, am I permitted to speak to Asuta without constraints?"

"Yes, of course. Our husbands Melfried and Polarth serve as mediators with the people of the forest's edge, so Lady Merrim and I will be listening in their place, which should prevent any potential worries for Duke Genos."

"I see," Lefreya stated, her gaze drifting downward for a bit before she looked back at my face, and then silently stood from her chair. "Asuta of the Fa clan, man of the forest's edge. And you as well, Rimee Ruu of the Ruu clan. I would like to express my gratitude to you, as the head of the house of Turan."

"Your gratitude?"

"Indeed. Thanks to the delicious food you have prepared, the work the northerners of Turan have been doing has greatly improved and is far more satisfactory than before. Your efforts will doubtlessly strengthen my lands far into the future. As such...I am incredibly grateful to the two of you." Lefreya grasped the frills of her skirt and bowed in a manner befitting a noblewoman. The two of us bowed back to her as well. It was the first time we had seen such

a gesture from her since the time when we had cooked for her father. “It may be unnecessary to say this, but...my maid who is also a northerner is grateful for your actions as well, for the joy you have brought to her people.” Then, having finished her statement, Lefreya returned to her seat.

I suspected that last part was what she had actually wanted to convey to us. But considering her position, it wouldn’t be a good look if she were to highlight her slave’s gratitude as the most important thing.

“By the way, I heard that the slaves remaining in the Turan lands have started using the recipes we created as well,” I commented.

“Indeed,” Lefreya replied with a nod. “There were two women who were unable to return to the forest’s edge after being injured. They instructed the other women, and now all of the northerners are eating the dishes that you concocted.”

In that case, Eleo Chel was still able to enjoy cream stew and fuwano manju even though he was now back in the Turan lands. I breathed a sigh of satisfaction, remembering his honest smile. Meanwhile, Rimee Ruu was grinning widely as she listened to our exchange.

“Well then, we ask that you proceed with preparing the sweets,” Eulifia urged with a composed smile.

We all bowed once more, then exited the parlor.

“There sure were a lot of soldiers hidden behind that cloth in the back of the room, huh?” I just barely heard Ludo Ruu whisper to Ai Fa as we headed down the hallway toward the kitchen. “And I’m sure that Sanjura guy was with them. I can’t imagine anyone from the castle picking a fight with us at this point, but I still feel a little on edge.”

“It’s nothing to worry about. That Sanjura man would not be able to get the better of you now.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I am pretty confident that I’m stronger than I used to be.”

While the two of them were talking, we arrived at the kitchen.

Sheila opened the doors for us, and a sweet aroma instantly wafted through

the air from the other side—the scent of some sort of boiling fruit. Within the kitchen, I spied Shilly Rou and Roy, who I hadn't seen in some time. Or actually, I couldn't say for certain who they were, as they had white masks covering their faces, but I was pretty confident based on their statures.

As we stepped into the kitchen, the one that I thought was Roy, who was tending to a boiling pot, called out, "Hey. It's been a while, hasn't it? I heard you got seriously ill, but you're all better now, huh?"

"Yes, thank you. I seem to be back to full strength now."

"Glad to hear it. Varkas was extremely worried about you."

At that point, the figure I assumed was Shilly Rou shot a piercing glare at us as she kneaded fuwano on a nearby workstation. "Could I ask you to save the chatter until after we're done working? If you aren't able to give the flames your full attention, then switch with me."

"Taking my eyes off them for a single moment won't cause anything to burn. And let's not pretend that you weren't just as worried as Varkas was."

"I-I most certainly was not!" she said, though what little skin I could see through the round holes in her white mask was definitely turning red.

I quickly bowed to her and said, "We'll wait to say hello until after we're all done, then... And I'm terribly sorry to have worried you."

"I-I told you, I wasn't worried in the least!"

Since I was well aware of Shilly Rou's personality, I didn't let her words get to me.

At any rate, though, we had to get started preparing the treats for the noblewomen.

2

A little over an hour later, we returned to the tea party with three kinds of sweets. The majority of the noblewomen had obvious sparkles in their eyes, with the only ones I couldn't read being Arishuna, Lefreya, and the young Lady Odifia.

“I can’t say I am familiar with any of these. I look forward to seeing how they taste.”

“Well then, let us compare them while keeping who prepared what a secret. That shall allow us to judge them more fairly.”

We were then asked to wait in a separate room while the noblewomen sampled what we had made for them. However, this was what I had been looking forward to most, as it was an opportunity for us to do some sampling of our own.

We were guided to the neighboring room where we found Roy, who had gone there directly from the kitchen. As he was officially just an assistant, they apparently didn’t think it was necessary for him to be there when we delivered what we had made.

“Sorry for the wait... I’m only an assistant myself, but for some reason they decided I should do something different than you.”

“You may be acting as an assistant, but you’re still their teacher, aren’t you? I’m not even an official apprentice, so our standings are totally different.”

Even now, Roy was assisting Shilly Rou and the others with their cooking in an unofficial capacity. That was the only way he could study their cooking techniques after Varkas had refused to take him on as an apprentice.

“Besides, Shilly Rou was the one who prepared everything from start to finish. Considering I was only doing the odd chore for her here and there, it would make even less sense for me to present myself to those noblewomen.”

Despite his words, Roy didn’t sound like he was being self-abasing. For now, he was solely interested in polishing his own skills. That was why he had asked to visit the settlement at the forest’s edge when he found out how skilled Reina and Sheera Ruu were and started to admire them. His drive to improve himself as a chef was really admirable.

“Well then, let’s get started with the taste testing.”

Shilly Rou seated herself next to Roy, so we sat on the opposite side of the table. Ludo Ruu also sat, while Ai Fa just stood diagonally behind me.

“I’m surprised to see more fried pastries here today,” Roy muttered as he looked at the samples that had been divvied up onto several plates. He was referring to Rimee Ruu’s traip cream croquettes. This time around, she had prepared the dish as a proper, full-fledged confection.

The outside was the same as always. It was made by coating the filling in fuwano flour, dipping it in beaten eggs, sprinkling dried fuwano crumbs over the surface, and then frying it. This was how both cutlets and croquettes were prepared.

As for the filling, she had added sugar to it in order to increase its sweetness. She had also topped them with a new sauce I had taught her how to make that used cacao-like gigi leaves, sugar, and karon milk. So, basically, it was a substitute for chocolate sauce.

Of course, while I was their instructor, Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen were the ones who had perfected the flavor. I had simply told them about chocolate sauce and pointed out the ingredients I thought they would need. They had taken care of the rest.

Naturally, Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen had used fat separated out from karon milk in order to make milk fat and cream for the dish. Figuring out how much of each of those to use, as well as how much sugar, had been a joint effort between the two of them. However, Rimee Ruu had finalized the flavor of the cream croquettes by herself. She had worked very hard on picking her ingredients and adjusting the amount she used of each ever since learning the recipe at the study session, in order to make it uniquely hers. There was no way I could make a better dessert cream croquette than her at this point.

Also, the color and consistency of the substitute chocolate sauce made it look like the croquettes were covered in Worcestershire sauce, which I secretly found rather amusing. A long time ago, my childhood friend Reina had once urged me to prepare chocolate-flavored gyoza and takoyaki, and this reminded me of that little prank.

However, there was no one here I could share that amusement with. In a land like this one that had never seen croquettes before, this was just a simple fried treat. Even Roy and Shilly Rou only saw them as unusual because of how

different they were compared to the kind of food one usually encountered here in Genos.

“You served a fried sweet before too, but this one looks completely different,” Shilly Rou noted, aiming a deadly serious look in my direction. At the previous tea party, I had made donuts filled with arow jam, and Shilly Rou had attended as one of the guests.

Roy had actually seen donuts long before that, back when Lefreya had abducted me. It was a bit of a funny coincidence that both of them had tried my donuts on separate occasions.

“It’s a little embarrassing to admit this, but I’d say that Rimee Ruu’s sweet is much better than the one I made last time. I just hope you guys from the castle town like it. So, what do you think?”

Shilly Rou silently pulled a plate toward herself, and Roy grabbed a small knife to cut his croquette, which made Rimee Ruu quickly shout, “Ah!” I figured she was going to tell them the same thing she had told the noblewomen. “Um, you should bite into it directly instead of cutting it on the plate! Otherwise, the insides will all spill out!”

I hadn’t really seen them speak before, but Roy had been invited to the welcome banquet held by the Ruu clan, and they had worked in the same kitchen several times during our visits to the castle town. That was probably why instead of giving her a doubtful look, he simply said, “Oh, really?” and accepted her advice.

“Yeah! I made them small, so you should be able to eat them in one bite. And they’ve probably cooled off by now, so they won’t burn you! I think they’re even tastier when they’re freshly fried, though!”

“Hmph,” Roy snorted, switching his knife out for a fork. He stabbed through the center of his croquette, sniffed it, and then popped it into his mouth.

Next to him, Shilly Rou was already looking quite surprised. “Did you intentionally make it this soft?”

“Yeah! Isn’t it tasty? It’s called a cream croquette!” Rimee Ruu replied with a smile, knowing no shyness, and she popped hers into her mouth. Her joy when

she tasted her work made her even more adorable. “Well, what do you think? I’d say they came out really good!”

“Yes, they’re delicious... Also, it’s surprising to see you employ such trickery.” The back half of that comment was directed at me.

“Yeah, Mikel said the same thing. It wasn’t all that strange of a dish back in my home country, though,” I replied, trying Rimee Ruu’s outstanding work myself.

Since they couldn’t be served piping hot, the croquettes had been cooled to room temperature. However, the coating was still crispy, and the traip and karon milk filling readily liquefied in my mouth. The level of sweetness and the amount of the gigi sauce were also perfect.

It was based on my original cream croquette filling, which meant that it also had finely chopped aria in it, but the sweetness from the traip, karon milk, and sugar was far more assertive, so anyone who tried one of her croquettes would definitely think it was a dessert item, whether they were familiar with cream croquettes or not. The aria did give the flavor some more depth, though.

“Hey, why didn’t you use giba fat in these?” Ludo Ruu asked from the end of the table.

“Hmm?” Rimee Ruu tilted her head. “I’m not sure how to answer that, but Asuta said I could use giba fat or reten oil, whichever I wanted. And when I tried them both, I thought the reten oil was better.”

“Huh. Well, it’s not like it’s an issue or anything.”

Reten oil was an ingredient similar to olive oil. Giba lard did have a surprisingly mild flavor, but apparently she had decided that the even lighter taste of reten oil was a better fit for dessert-style cream croquettes. And naturally, I had no objections.

“Hey, you try it too, Ai Fa,” Rimee Ruu called out, thrusting a plate at my clan head.

Still standing, Ai Fa took her croquette and ate it in one bite. “This is extraordinarily sweet,” she said.

“Huh? Really? But I didn’t use that much sugar!”

“I don’t exactly know what makes a dessert good or bad, but I’d say that was more than delicious enough.” There was an affectionate light shining in Ai Fa’s eyes as she patted Rimee Ruu on the head.

“Eh heh heh!” the young chef laughed happily.

“Nobles would probably really like this dish. I thought for sure that Shilly Rou would easily win this time, but I’m not so confident anymore,” Roy said with a faint smile, making Shilly Rou glare at him.

“Roy, I am manning the kitchen here as Varkas’s apprentice. I ask that you refrain from making light of this job.”

“Don’t go flaring up at every little thing. It’s still a fact that your sweets are incredibly well-made.”

The sweets in question looked pretty intriguing to me. They were small and round, kind of like dango, and came in a set of red, yellow, and green, with fine golden honey in a net pattern on top. There was also a thin layer of milky white sauce underneath them.

“What beautiful colors. It almost feels like a shame to eat them,” I said, which made Shilly Rou redirect her glare at me.

“We won’t get anywhere if you don’t eat. Or do you mean to say you don’t feel like trying them?”

“Of course not. They look delicious.”

Shilly Rou seemed to be even more irritable than usual, probably because she was still on the job, so I pointedly picked up my fork, hoping that being compliant would soothe her at least a little. Everyone else followed my example and went for one of her dango things as well.

When I stabbed my fork into the first one, I found that despite appearances, the honey on top was actually kind of solid. It had undoubtedly been a liquid while she was cooking, but the fine layer of golden honey had clearly hardened as it cooled. That meant there had to be more to it than just drizzling pure panam honey over the dumplings.

As my fork stabbed through the hardened honey, it cracked without a sound, with some of the pieces falling onto the plate. I did my best to swipe them back up, along with some of the white sauce, then popped the colorful ball into my mouth.

I had gone with the yellow one first, and when I bit into it, an eggy flavor filled my mouth. Apparently, the color had come from kimyuus eggs. I found its texture to be very pleasant. It was nice and springy, but not as viscous as the mochi I was familiar with. You never really encountered food with this kind of consistency in Genos. Even with a fuwano base, it wasn't a texture you could create without adding additional ingredients. That alone was honestly enough to impress me.

On top of that, the flavoring was also fantastic. The core of the dumpling's flavor was the egg, which was supported by the sweetness of the hardened honey and the white sauce. On top of that, there was another faint flavor ever so gently tickling the back of my nose... It seemed to be from the ginger-like keru root.

As for the honey, she had most likely added sugar to it and then boiled it. Sugar had a high relative density, so I figured that would cause it to harden. The white sauce seemed to have a karon milk base, and was very thick and fatty. Had she also used reten oil, perhaps? It definitely had some real depth to it, which was rousing my curiosity, making me wonder what it would taste like on its own.

The keru root had probably been added to either the honey or the sauce, since it was highly compatible with sweet flavors. I had put it to use in myamuu giba and stews, and now Shilly Rou had utilized it in her dumplings. It provided a crucial accent that enhanced the overall taste, clearly asserting that there was more to this dish's flavor than sugar. Paired with the wonderful texture of the dango, I found it quite delicious.

"It's really good! And all of them taste different too!" Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed. It seemed she had already finished eating all three varieties. "I think I liked the red one best. What about you, Ludo? And you, Toor Deen?"

"I guess the yellow one for me," Ludo Ruu replied.

“For me... I think they’re all very good, but I believe the green one appealed to me the most,” Toor Deen answered.

As I listened to their responses, I went ahead and tried the other two flavors. When I did, I was surprised to find how different they both were.

The red dango seemed to have several different kinds of fruit sauces mixed into it. It had a berrylike sourness alongside a citrusy taste, and a mellow sweetness on top of that. It was a truly mysterious flavor, like a composite of strawberry, lemon, and peach. I guessed that she had used arow, sheel, and minmi together somehow.

Among those three, the red coloring must have come from the arow berries. If you ate the dango on its own, all that sourness would probably be a little overwhelming, but it harmonized fantastically with the honey and sauce.

I tried the green one last, and found that it tasted kind of like tea leaves. It reminded me of the aroma I often smelled in the bathhouses of the castle town that was similar to Japanese mugwort, and was slightly bitter. It wasn’t *too* bitter, though, and had a rather distinctive flavor that also paired well with the honey and sauce.

In other words, even though the yellow, red, and green dumplings tasted so different from one another, the presence of the honey and sauce greatly improved all of them. The sourness and bitterness were elevated by the sweetness, and vice versa. It was the kind of dish I had come to expect from one of Varkas’s apprentices, with its numerous flavors brought into an amazing harmony thanks to the skill of the chef who created it.

“It’s delicious. The skill you showed at the dance party was already incredible, but I think this is even more impressive,” I said earnestly. Shilly Rou gave an expressionless nod in response. “These dumplings have a really unique texture. What did you add to the fuwano to get them like that?”

“Gigo, though it would be more accurate to say I added fuwano to a gigo base.”

“Gigo? I’ve mixed gigo into poitan dough myself, but I didn’t think you could use it to create a texture like this.”

Gigo was an ingredient similar to Japanese yam. We were all very familiar with how it could be used to make dough bind together better, but there must've been some kind of special cooking technique that she used to make it so mochi-like.

"Varkas only makes things like this as desserts to serve at the end of a meal, and usually doesn't prepare them on his own. I suspect Shilly Rou is actually even better than he is in this particular field," Roy stated.

"Most certainly not," Shilly Rou calmly replied. "However, I pride myself on never serving anything that will bring shame to my position as Varkas's apprentice."

For some reason, her gaze was now directed at Toor Deen. Was that because Toor Deen had won first place at the previous tea party? The young chef shrunk in on herself as if trying to escape that piercing stare.

"You used traip too, didn't you?" Roy casually said to her as he picked up his final plate. "I get the desire to use it during the rainy season, but it could lessen the impact of your dishes if you both prepare something with the same main ingredient."

"Really? But they're entirely different kinds of sweets."

"I suppose that's true. That first one had a really curious appearance. You can tell this one is different just at a glance."

There was a set of small clay bowls shaped like teacups sitting on the plate, which I had previously used for steamed pudding. They were currently holding a different kind of pudding, which was glossy and brilliantly orange due to the traip it had been made from.

"You know, this is a dish that's going to be served to nobles, so I think it's important to consider how you present it... Wouldn't it be better to hand it out on plates instead of keeping it in these cheap-looking containers?"

"Hmm, but it clings to the sides of the containers, so I thought it would be difficult to get it all out."

"In that case, you could have dug it out with a rounded spoon to transfer it to the plates. There are plenty of methods you could have considered."

Toor Deen and I hadn't really taken the time to think about that. But even if we had, I didn't know if we would have done as he had suggested. This dish was a kind of pudding, so it felt more natural to me to have people scoop it out themselves to eat it.

"Well, Toor Deen put everything she had into making it, so I can at least guarantee its flavor."

With an indifferent "Hmph," Roy scooped up some pudding with his silver spoon and took a bite of it. The instant he did, his eyes shot open wide.

Seeing his reaction, Shilly Rou visibly worked up her resolve and grabbed her own spoon. A few moments later, her eyes were wide open as well.

Meanwhile, Toor Deen was watching the pair with an upturned gaze. "H-How does it taste?"

The pair took a second bite without responding. And then they ate the rest of the contents of their bowls without making a sound. Since the bowls were pretty small, it took less than ten seconds for them to completely finish their helpings.

"Hmm. I see..." Roy muttered, leaning against the back of his chair as he set his empty bowl down on his plate. Meanwhile, Shilly Rou leaned forward to peer inside the empty container.

"U-Um..."

"Hmm? Oh, it was delicious. You utilized the sweetness and the flavor of the traip perfectly. The light and soft texture goes perfectly with the flavor as well," Roy replied, scratching his head. "I'm at a bit of a loss for words, actually. I thought I had a firm grasp on how skilled you people of the forest's edge were, but it feels like I've been smacked on the head with a bludgeon all over again."

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"It was fantastic. Seriously, that was the most delicious dessert I've ever tasted," he said. Shilly Rou shot another harsh glare at him, moving only her eyes, but he simply remained in his reclined pose and smiled listlessly. "Hey, I can't help it. I'm just saying what I honestly feel. Not that I know for sure what the nobles will think of it."

“Yeah, Toor Deen’s sweet was incredibly tasty!” Rimee Ruu said earnestly, cutting through the tension hanging in the air. She had been blissfully savoring her helping up until a moment ago. “Asuta taught me how to make it too, but I just can’t do it like she can. It’s all jiggly like pudding, *and* it’s super delicious!”

“Well, it *is* a kind of pudding, after all,” I replied, starting in on my portion as well.

I myself didn’t know what the technical definition of a pudding was, so I wasn’t sure whether the label could accurately be applied to this dish, but we *had* prepared it using a method that was quite similar to how I had made steamed pudding before. The main difference was the addition of a lot of traip and a little bit of fuwano flour.

Her first step had been to blend some milk fat into a bowl of soft boiled traip before adding sugar, eggs, and karon milk. After carefully straining the mixture, she then slowly sprinkled the fuwano flour in, taking care to not let lumps form. Once that was done, she poured a little more karon milk into the container, and lastly, she steamed the whole thing. That was all there was to it.

However, it took a ton of twists and turns for her to arrive at that point. Initially, I had proposed that Toor Deen could make a pan-grilled fuwano sweet using traip instead. Things like hotcakes were one of her specialties, after all, and that felt like a perfect fit for the pumpkin-like traip, so I had suggested that she could make something along those lines that was traip-flavored, and top it with some panam honey or fresh cream.

That was what Toor Deen had been aiming for at first, but as she sought to make her new dessert taste better, the proportions between the ingredients kept changing more and more. In particular, she had greatly decreased the amount of fuwano flour she used, while greatly increasing the amount of karon milk. Before long, it became clear that there was too much moisture in the dish for her to be able to cook it on a metal tray.

In the end, we decided to try steaming it instead...and when I tasted the result, it once again reminded me just how fantastic Toor Deen’s palate and cooking instincts really were.

Since she had used traip and fuwano flour, it wasn’t quite as smooth as

ordinary pudding. But of course, it was still far smoother than any pastry could ever be. Honestly, it would probably be most accurate to call it a pudding cake.

In addition to its moistness, it also had the sort of weighty mellowness that was inherent to traip. The closest thing to it that I could recall from my memory was probably sweet potatoes.

The sweetness and the flavors of the various ingredients all melded together as it smoothly slid down my throat. But because of its thickness and density, it had a rather nice chewiness to it as well. It felt like something that would pair well with tea too. That was a big difference between it and pudding.

“You look quite satisfied, eating that sweet,” Ai Fa said from diagonally behind me, though she was actually leaning forward far enough to peer over my shoulder.

“Yeah, this is really delicious. I think you should give it a try too.”

“But I feel awkward about using ingredients wastefully.”

Ai Fa had told the girls not to make anything for her, and Toor Deen had followed her wishes. Rimee Ruu, however, had outright ignored them.

Overhearing our conversation, Rimee Ruu looked over at us and said, “You want to try it too, Ai Fa? Then you can have a bit of mine! Come on, say ‘ah!’”

“No, you’re enjoying it so much that it would feel wrong for me to take even a single bite from you,” my clan had replied, her piercing gaze stabbing into my cheek more and more. According to the customs of the forest’s edge, the only ones here who could share leftovers with Ai Fa were Rimee Ruu, a small child, and me, her clan member.

“Would you like some of mine, clan head?”

Rather than bothering to respond, Ai Fa simply opened her mouth slightly. Apparently, there would be no need to get a clean spoon.

As I prayed in my head for us not to attract too much attention, I scooped up some pudding cake and brought it to my clan head’s mouth. As she chewed away, she then stood up straight.

“I see. This is also extremely sweet...but it is startlingly delicious.”

“Y-Yeah. I think so too,” I replied, stealing a glance around the table. Rimee Ruu wasn’t paying any attention to us as she continued to eat her pudding cake, and Toor Deen was observing Shilly Rou and Roy with worry written all over her face. And as for the castle town chefs, they were whispering back and forth to each other with serious looks in their eyes. The only person who seemed to have noticed what we had done was Ludo Ruu, who of course had a huge grin on his face.

I sent him the most forceful glare I could manage in an attempt to say “Just leave it be” as I ate the last bite of my pudding cake. I didn’t see any need to make a big deal out of Ai Fa and I having a bit of indirect contact there, and yet that didn’t stop my heart rate from spiking big time.

Then there was a knock on the door, and Sheila stepped inside.

“The sampling has concluded. We ask that all chefs please return to the other room.”

Well then, what would the results be this time?

The six of us, excluding Roy, headed back to the room where the noblewomen were waiting for us.

3

“All of the sweets prepared today were simply outstanding. Once again, allow me to express my gratitude for making our time together so wonderful,” Eulifia declared to start things off.

The majority of the noblewomen happily nodded along. Of course, though it was probably repetitive to mention this, I still couldn’t tell what Arishuna, Lefreya, and Odifia were thinking.

“Allow me to stress once more that you should not concern yourselves too much with the results of our taste testing. Not a single one of us was at all dissatisfied with anything you made. Just like with sword fights between gentlemen, there is glory in winning, but that does not mean there is any shame in losing. Shilly Rou, Toor Deen, and Rimee Ruu, you are all chefs that do Genos justice. In fact, there are likely few who could measure up to you when it comes

to making sweets.”

I felt like the preamble was longer this time compared to the previous tea party. Perhaps Eulifia had a hunch about how the results would be received. That was what I had to think, based on how she was talking.

“Well then, Sheila, please go ahead and make the announcement. Who won today’s excellent tasting competition?”

“Right away... The seven noblewomen present were each given three points to award as they pleased. The dish that received the most points shall be the winner of this competition.”

We weren’t too familiar with such events, so the explanation must have been for our sake. Since there were seven noblewomen present and they each got three points, that meant there were twenty-one points in total, and that was what the chefs were competing over.

“Now then, allow me to proceed with the announcement. First place for today’s taste test...goes to Lady Toor Deen, who received thirteen points.”

Somebody breathed a deep sigh. Toor Deen was fidgeting a lot, and was obviously trying very hard to suppress her desire to hide behind me.

A moment later, I was surprised to feel Shilly Rou bump into my shoulder on my other side. I turned my head to look at her, and the chef muttered, “My apologies...” as she straightened up. Though the look on her face remained the same, she had gone very pale.

“As for the breakdown, Lady Odifia gave her dish three points, Ladies Eulifia, Lefreya, Merrim, and Arishuna gave it two points, and Ladies Littia and Diel gave it one point.”

That was an even more overwhelming victory than I had anticipated. Toor Deen had earned thirteen points out of the twenty-one available, which was more than half. On top of that, all seven participants had awarded her points.

“So that really was Toor Deen’s work. I thought that might be the case, from the way the look in Odifia’s eyes changed... Ah, but just so there are no misunderstandings, let me say that Odifia was *not* told in advance which dessert Toor Deen made,” Eulifia said.

Odifia—who, much like Lefreya, bore a striking resemblance to a French doll—had her expressionless gray eyes firmly fixed on Toor Deen.

Meanwhile, as it was their first time participating, Littia and Merrim were looking at the young chef with admiration.

“I can understand why Lady Odifia adores her so. That sweet was truly fantastic,” Littia said.

“Indeed. When Yang hears about this, he will likely be even more disappointed that he was not invited today,” Merrim agreed.

Turning bright red, Toor Deen bowed and replied, “Thank you very much.”

After watching their exchange, Sheila returned her gaze to the parchment she was holding. “Sharing second place are Ladies Shilly Rou and Rimee Ruu, who each earned four points.”

“My, is that so? How did that break down, exactly?” Eulifia asked.

“Lady Shilly Rou earned two points from Lady Littia and one point each from Ladies Eulifia and Merrim. Lady Rimee Ruu earned two points from Lady Diel and one point each from Ladies Lefreya and Arishuna.”

Not only had they earned the same number of points, the points had been given to them in the same pattern.

“Thank you so much!” Rimee Ruu energetically called out, while Shilly Rou silently bowed her head.

“We shall have to be fair in dividing up the reward money as well, in that case. As the first place winner, Toor Deen shall be given the promised amount of fifty white coins, while Shilly Rou and Rimee Ruu will be given thirty-five white coins each.”

Since they had summoned the people of the forest’s edge for this, and we were very busy, they had made the prizes especially large. Since Toor Deen had won twice now, she had been awarded fifty white coins twice as well. The little chef’s eyes were shut tight as the joy of her win washed over her.

Gulaf Zaza had ordered the Deen to distribute half of that money to the clans that were related to them, while allowing them to keep the other half, but that

didn't change the fact that Toor Deen had earned a sizable boon for her family and many others.

"All of the sweets, were delicious. So much so that I would, like to eat them, every single day," Arishuna stated in a voice that I couldn't read any emotion from.

The star reader's comment made Odifia's small shoulders tremble a bit. "I want to eat Toor Deen's creations every day too... Mother, can we really not make Toor Deen a chef at the castle?"

"No, we cannot, Odifia. The people of the forest's edge cannot live in the castle town."

"Even if she can't live in the castle town, I still want her to be a chef at the castle. I wish to be able to eat Toor Deen's sweets every single day," Odifia replied. Her expression remained unchanging, but I could see in her eyes that she wanted this now more than she ever had before.

"One cannot be a chef in the castle without living in the castle town. How many times have we had this conversation now, Odifia?"

"But I wish to be able to eat Toor Deen's sweets every day," Odifia repeated, her gaze shifting to aim at Toor Deen once more. "Why won't you become a chef at the castle, Toor Deen? Do you hate me?"

"N-No, most certainly not."

"I really like you because of the way you make such delicious treats. I want to live in the castle together with you." Odifia's expression still wasn't changing, but I noticed that she had started to kick her legs up as she remained seated in her chair. That fidgety behavior was the closest thing to acting like a normal little girl that I had ever seen from her.

"Please don't be concerned about this, Toor Deen. Duke Genos has ordered that the people of the forest's edge must not be given unreasonable demands, so we have no intention of pressuring you in any way," Eulifia said with a troubled smile, patting her daughter's head. Odifia just continued to kick her legs.

Toor Deen glanced at me, and I gave her a nod before turning back to Eulifia.

“Could I make a proposal, Eulifia?”

“Oh? Whatever might that be?”

“The leading clan heads have already given their permission for this... Toor Deen, would you mind explaining the details?”

“Oh, r-right... There’s no possible way that I could move to the castle town and become a chef at the castle...but what would you say to having someone deliver my sweets to you?”

Odifia’s legs immediately froze, and Eulifia’s eyes opened wide as she remarked, “My, are you saying you would make desserts for Odifia back at the forest’s edge?”

“Y-Yes. Asuta has cooking delivered to Arishuna in the castle town every day, after all...so I thought maybe we could send you my sweets in the same way. O-Of course, you *would* need to pay for them.”

“We will naturally pay you an appropriate amount for your services. You truly wouldn’t mind?”

“I-I wouldn’t. It would be difficult to do it every day, but I’m sure I could manage if it was once every three days.”

Odifia’s legs started swinging back and forth again, but now they were reminding me of a puppy wagging its tail. Her little hand was restlessly tugging on her mother’s dress as well.

“I am grateful to hear that. Would it be less effort to have the sweets delivered rather than being invited to the castle town like this, perhaps?” Eulifia asked.

“N-No, that wasn’t what I...” Toor Deen started to say, shooting me a desperate look. I nodded once, then took over the explanation.

“It’s a great honor to be invited to the castle town. However, it’s a little difficult to come out here once a month. But if we increase the amount of time between visits, I’m sure Lady Odifia’s displeasure will grow just as much, so we figured that if we could have a snack delivered for her once every three days, that would take a lot less effort on our part, and make everyone much happier.”

“I see. Would once every few months be too much of a hassle, though? There are others besides Odifia who wish to eat Toor Deen’s sweets, after all. And of course, they would want to eat them freshly made, I would imagine,” Eulifia said with a smile. Her suggestion was pretty much exactly what I expected her to say.

“Yes, I think Toor Deen should be able to handle that no problem. I’m sure the leading clan heads would have no objections either.”

“I’m quite glad to hear that. Thank you very much, Toor Deen.”

Toor Deen bowed, but was fidgeting with her apron as she did. Seeing that, Eulifia turned to her daughter and said, “Odifia, Toor Deen and the people of the forest’s edge are going well out of their way to do this kindness for you. You mustn’t take that for granted. If you forget to show proper gratitude, your father and grandfather are sure to revoke this agreement immediately.”

I had to wonder if a six year old would really be able to understand something like that, but Odifia hopped down from her chair without any assistance. She slowly approached Toor Deen, and grasped the other girl’s hand. The little noble girl only came up to around the young chef’s stomach.



“Thank you, Toor Deen.”

“O-Of course. As long as it makes you happy, I’m glad,” Toor Deen said with an awkward smile. “Also, um...I made a little extra of my sweet, so if you would like, you could bring it back with you to have after dinner.”

Though she showed no reaction on her face, Odifia’s small body bent backward. It seemed like she was just winding up, though, as the next thing she did was shove her face into Toor Deen’s stomach. Her hand let go of Toor Deen’s to grip the older girl’s skirt instead.

“U-Um, my apron is probably a little dirty...”

“I love you, Toor Deen,” Odifia declared, cutting Toor Deen off as she rubbed her face against the chef’s apron. Then, a moment later, she stepped back from the young chef, and sure enough, she was just as expressionless as before. She was so stoic that you would think she was trying to mimic an easterner or something.

“I shall do everything I can to ensure that this does not cause trouble for you people of the forest’s edge,” Eulifia casually stated. “I will spread the story that this was simply a case of giving in to the demands of an unreasonable child. Otherwise, many more nobles may ask to have cooking delivered from the people of the forest’s edge.”

“I appreciate that, but won’t that damage Lady Odifia’s reputation?” I worriedly asked, only for Eulifia to respond with a chuckle.

“Well, it *is* the truth, so there is no helping that. We need to make it clear that such selfishness will not be tolerated from anyone other than young children.”

Diel had been silently watching us talk for a while, but hearing that made her shoot a teasing look at Arishuna. “Only you and Lady Odifia are allowed to be so selfish. Should I take that to mean that you’re as unreasonable as a six-year-old girl?”

“Do you think so? Asuta is the one, who told me, that he would deliver, me food,” Arishuna replied, tilting her head like an elegant Siamese cat. “Besides, I do not mind, if I am, thought of as, unreasonable. If Asuta’s cooking, is delivered, to the castle town, that is enough, for me.”

“Hmph,” Diel muttered. She was still smiling, but she had a little twitch in her cheek. If she hadn’t been at a gathering of noblewomen, she probably would have exploded with anger at that point.

At any rate, our role seemed to be approaching its end. Odifia returned to her seat, and Eulifia said, “Now then, this has been a truly wonderful tea party. The prize money will be delivered to the other parlor shortly, so would you mind waiting to get changed until after you receive it?”

“Of course. Thank you.”

“Well then, please lead the chefs to the—”

Eulifia had been just about to direct that we be ushered out when a piercing sound filled the air. The teacup Lefreya had been holding had fallen onto the table and shattered into pieces.

The ceramic shards scattered, and since the cup had still been about half full, the tea inside splashed all over the front of her dress, the dark yellow liquid producing a huge stain on the white fabric.

“My, how awful. Are you all right, Lefreya?”

“Yes. I carelessly allowed it to slip from my hand. But the tea was cool, so I am fine,” Lefreya replied with a composed expression, so I breathed a sigh of relief. The other noblewomen’s faces all shifted from shock to relief as well.

“Your outfit was ruined, though. Take care not to let the shards injure you.”

“Of course. I shall have my maid come clean it. Are you there, Chiffon Chel?”

That caught me off guard.

A tall, graceful figure then emerged from behind the curtain that Ludo Ruu had said was hiding a large number of soldiers. She was a woman from Mahyudra even taller than me, with curled honey-colored hair and purple eyes: Chiffon Chel.

“My apologies, but could you clean this up? And as my dress is now wet, she will require something to wipe it off with.”

“Of course,” Chiffon Chel calmly replied as she approached. Sheila also came running over, pulling out a tea towel from somewhere as she went.

“I cannot apologize enough for breaking such a fine teacup. I am so sorry, Eulifia.”

“Pay it no mind. I just ask that you take care not to be injured.”

The shards from the cup were quickly disposed of in a jar another maid brought over. Chiffon Chel then accepted the tea towel from Sheila and did what she could to clean Lefreya’s dress.

It had been several months now since I had last seen her. Ever since she had been sent along with Lefreya to her mistress’s new residence, I hadn’t had any more opportunities to meet with her.

However, she hadn’t changed in the least in all that time. She was still calm, gentle, and incredibly elegant. However, she didn’t look in my direction at all, the side of her face turned toward me as she concentrated on cleaning Lefreya’s dress.

“My apologies for the commotion. Please, go ahead and return to the other parlor now,” Eulifia said, directing a smile at us.

However, rather than leaving, I worked up my resolve and asked, “Um... That’s Chiffon Chel, right? I actually became acquainted with her some time ago.”

“Oh? But she has been a maid of the house of Turan for several years, has she not?”

“Yes. But, well...she looked after me during my stay at the count’s manor.”

In other words, when Lefreya had abducted me. That was the only time a person of the forest’s edge had ever spent more than a few hours in the castle town.

Eulifia’s eyes opened wide as she remarked, “My... I was not aware of that. Then this must be your first time seeing one another in quite a while, yes?”

“Yeah. She did serve as our guide a number of times back when the house of Turan still owned the manor noble guests use, though.”

With that, Chiffon Chel finally turned to look at me. Her face was every bit as white as Diel’s, and she was smiling in a way that was somehow fairylike.

“I am honored that you remember one such as myself, Sir Asuta. It certainly has been some time.”

“Yeah. I’m just glad to see you looking well.”

I felt my heart rate steadily increasing. I could hear Melfried’s directive that we should not involve ourselves with northerners in my head. But even so, there was something I absolutely had to tell her, regardless of all those annoying political matters. Besides, I was sure that what I was about to say wouldn’t do anything to worsen the position the northerners or the people of the forest’s edge were in anyway.

Trusting that assumption, I went ahead and started explaining the events that had recently transpired. “Last month, there was an incident in which a large number of guards and northerners were attacked by a giba. I was actually one of the people who helped care for the wounded afterward.”

“My, is that so?” Eulifia interjected, sounding terribly interested.

“Yes,” I replied before continuing. “While I was helping out, I happened to run across Chiffon Chel’s older brother. He had injured his head and shoulder protecting the guards.”

Chiffon Chel closed her eyes and quietly said, “I see... I was only told that a few of the northerners were injured. So, my brother was one of them.”

“Yes, but he was doing just fine. A platoon commander from the guards even praised his actions.”

That was probably all she needed to know for the time being. I would have Diel secretly convey the details later.

At any rate, Chiffon Chel maintained the same exact tone as she said, “Thank you. But you need not trouble yourself on my behalf anymore, Sir Asuta.”

“I know. We’ve been warned not to involve ourselves with northerners, after all.”

I had directed those words at Eulifia. She was not just elegant, but clever as well, so she immediately smiled at me.

“Even my hard-headed husband would not find fault with a pair of northern

siblings worrying about one another. You are a kind man, Asuta.”

“U-Uh, well...thank you very much.”

“You don’t have to act so polite. Perhaps I should not be saying this, but the ones you truly need to be cautious around are the observers from the capital,” Eulifia said, and then her smile grew bigger and happier. “At any rate, we should leave such troublesome matters to the gentlemen who hold the proper posts to deal with them. Thank you for your efforts today, Toor Deen, Rimee Ruu, and Shilly Rou. I am already looking forward to our next opportunity to meet.”

This time, we really did get the signal to leave, so we bowed to the noble women one more time before we left, and I noticed that Chiffon Chel was bowing to us as well.

“I was a bit concerned about what you were going to say, Asuta,” Ai Fa whispered into my ear as we exited into the hall.

“Sorry about that. But what I said shouldn’t cause us any trouble, right?”

“If anyone finds that worth starting trouble over, then that is their problem,” Ai Fa replied, and I was finally able to relax.

Casually strolling along with his hands joined behind his head, Ludo Ruu injected himself into our conversation. “I definitely remember that woman too. She’s got the same kind of seductive charm as Vina, so it’d be hard to forget her.”

“Right, you and the other hunters who’ve done guard duty for us have all met her a number of times now.”

“If the northern women sent to the forest’s edge weren’t forced to do manual labor, would they all be as pretty as her too? It sort of feels like a waste.”

The maid and guards escorting us all pretended that they weren’t able to hear what we were saying. They likely wanted nothing to do with any talk of northerners.

I was sure I wasn’t going to have many opportunities to meet with northerners in the future either. The work at the forest’s edge would finish in half a month, and it was unlikely that I would be able to speak with Chiffon Chel

again outside of events like this. I had been able to see Lefreya a couple times over the course of the last few months, but I hadn't met with Chiffon Chel then either.

Is it possible that Lefreya spilled the tea on purpose so she could summon Chiffon Chel? I had no way of knowing for certain, and I couldn't exactly ask her either, but Polarth had let me know that Lefreya seemed to care about Chiffon Chel a lot, and that was enough to satisfy me as to the northerner's continued well-being.

While I was thinking about that, we arrived back at the neighboring parlor. Shilly Rou and Roy were led to a separate neighboring room from us, and so I called out to them one last time before we split up.

"Good work today, Shilly Rou. Send my regards to Varkas and the other apprentices."

The chef stopped at the door, but did not respond.

"Huh? Is something wrong?"

Shilly Rou was glaring at us with eyes that had an intense inner glow. "I refuse to let myself lose to you all." It felt sort of like this was the first time I had really heard her speak in a while.

Then her brown eyes suddenly dimmed, and tears started streaming down her cheeks. She wiped them away with the sleeve of her chef's uniform, but her slender shoulders were visibly trembling.

"I absolutely won't let you beat me!"



With that loud final shout, Shilly Rou disappeared through the door. I stood there dumbfounded, and Toor Deen was incredibly flustered.

“Wh-What should I do? Did I make Shilly Rou mad?”

“No, rather than mad... Yeah, I’d say she was just frustrated.”

“Shilly Rou’s dumplings were really tasty, though,” Rimee Ruu chimed in with her usual earnest smile. “Still, if it were Reina, I’m sure she would have started crying too. Reina and Shilly Rou are pretty similar, after all!”

“Huh? Hmm, maybe... Reina Ruu’s emotions *can* be pretty intense, but...” Toor Deen said.

“If she lost to a chef from the castle town when it came to cooking giba, Reina would *definitely* be so frustrated she would cry. But I don’t worry that much about winning or losing!” Rimee Ruu concluded.

Shilly Rou and Reina Ruu were highly competitive and deadly serious when it came to cooking, while Rimee Ruu only wanted to make people happy. Personally, though, I supported both stances. In my case, I felt like both of those impulses motivated me in equal measure. *I hate to lose too, after all, so I’d definitely be frustrated if my cooking scored badly.*

In all honesty, I probably wasn’t very well suited to participating in tasting competitions. My self-esteem wouldn’t take a hit when it came to something outside my field of expertise like desserts, but I wouldn’t want to have my cooking skills compared to someone else’s otherwise.

What makes me happiest is when Ai Fa finds something tasty, I thought, turning toward my clan head, only for her to suddenly look startled and step back. Then she leaned in to whisper in my ear with a scary look on her face.

“Asuta, I know I told you that you needn’t hide your feelings, but you shouldn’t let things show on your face so blatantly outside of the house.”

“Huh? What sort of face was I making?”

Ai Fa just silently poked my head, which was actually the first physical contact we’d had in quite a while.

At any rate, that was pretty much the end of our second tea party in the

castle town. There was now around half a month left in the rainy season.

Chapter 5: The End of the Rainy Season

1

After the tea party in the castle town came to a successful close, our next few days at work passed quietly.

Our menu using the rainy season vegetables received a favorable reception, with both the stalls and inns doing relatively well. Apparently, Milano Mas and Naudis were actually seeing even more customers now than they'd had at the start of the rainy season.

The number of passersby we were getting in the post town was about the same as it had been for the last several weeks, though—far fewer than what it had been before the rainy season, due to there not being any travelers entering or leaving town for the time being. But over the course of the last two months, I had steadily gotten used to things being that way. The liveliness of the past felt like a distant memory at this point.

We also visited Dora's house in the Daleim lands on the twentieth of the red month, five days after the tea party in the castle town. Since our afternoons were good and open, we had chosen a day before a day off for that.

After finishing up work at the stalls, everyone who was planning to join us headed straight for Dora's house. The basic plan for the day was to prepare dinner alongside the women from Dora's family, though there was a bit more to it than that. The real reason for our visit was both to treat them to a meal made with giba, and to impart the recipe for cream stew made with traip.

Part of our group would be staying the night, while the rest were going to head back after dinner. We had a large number of people coming to this dinner party, so we felt it would be a bit too much to ask them to put all of us up for the night. Dora, of course, had said not to worry about it, but since we knew that the farmers had a lot of problems to deal with during the rainy season, it was kinda hard for us to take him at his word on that. In fact, a big part of our

motivation for coming was to reward them for all their hard work with some delicious food.

All in all, six of us were coming directly from the post town—me, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, Reina Ruu, Rimee Ruu, and Sheera Ruu—with Ryada Ruu and Bartha also meeting up with us to serve as our bodyguards. The Ruu had recently taken time off—five days ago and ten days ago—so they couldn't do so again today, which left us with those two for guards, as they were pretty much always available.

Also, even though they normally never worked the stalls at the same time, Reina and Sheera Ruu were both with us today. Since it was the day before a day off, there was no need to do prep work for tomorrow, so we were able to have the two of them join us in town without it causing any problems.

Ai Fa would be coming later, around when the sun set (after finishing her hunting work), accompanied by Granny Jiba and some others. Rimee Ruu and Granny Jiba in particular had been really insistent about being part of this visit to Dora's house. Naturally, the two of them also wanted to stay the night, so Ai Fa and I ended up being a part of that group as well. Since it was rare to get the chance to sleep in the same place as the two of them, I had gone to my clan head to persuade her that she should take the opportunity to do so. Ai Fa's mouth had kept on shifting as I spoke to her, but in the end, she had accepted.

When our first group arrived at Dora's place in the rain, we were met by the smiling women of his household, who we hadn't seen in some time, and then we headed over to the kitchen right away.

"It's really been a while, hasn't it?" I said. "Since the Ruu clan's banquet back in the silver month, I believe."

"That was three months ago now, huh? I was really shocked when I heard you were suffering from Amusehorn's breath...but you're looking all better now, Asuta," Tara's mother said to me.

The other women were Tara's grandmother and her eldest brother's wife. The mother and wife wore radiant smiles, but the grandmother's expression remained as dour as always.

The other old person in their family, Dora's uncle, was quite elderly, but he

was nowhere to be seen, since he still helped harvest and cultivate onda during the rainy season. As for Dora himself, he had headed over to his fields right after wrapping up business in the post town, so Tara was the only other person around. The young girl had swiftly grabbed Rimee Ruu's hands upon seeing her, and the two of them were now smiling brightly at each other.

"I heard you're going to teach us how to make something delicious using traip and kimyuus meat today. Tara's been going on and on about it for days now."

"Yeah. If you end up liking it, I hope that you'll try making it yourselves."

The only real lessons I had given them were when I had shown them how to make condiments like ketchup and mayonnaise when I last visited. That was because I had thought it would be pretty arrogant of me to barge into someone's house and try to tell them how they should cook.

Still, they could make delicious cream stew even without using giba meat, and Tara had been very eager about the prospect of her family learning how to prepare it. It had been several months now since we had first started interacting with them around the time of the revival festival, so I thought it wouldn't be too presumptuous to teach them one recipe.

"There sure are a lot of you. It would probably be difficult to fit all of us in the kitchen at once, so what should we do?"

"Well, if it's okay with you, I figure we can switch out personnel based on what we're doing at the moment. We'll have four of us in the kitchen at a time, while the other two wait outside."

"Hmm, but won't the two who are outside be bored?"

"If you like, you could talk to them out here while they wait."

When I said that, the grandmother, who had been listening silently up until this point, suddenly went all wide-eyed. In Dora's household, the mother and wife were always the ones who prepared dinner.

"Were you speaking to me just now?" she asked. "There's no fun to be had in talking with an old biddy like me."

"That's not true at all. If you don't mind, we have all kinds of questions about

the Daleim fields and vegetables that we'd love to ask you," Sheera Ruu proposed with a graceful smile. "There's so much that we don't know when it comes to vegetables, so we would be very grateful if we could borrow your knowledge."

"Yes, and I'd like to ask a lot more about your lives here in the Daleim lands too," Reina Ruu added. She and Sheera Ruu were set to be the first ones on standby.

"So, would you be willing to speak with us for the next hour or so? That should be about how long it'll take to finish the prep work for dinner."

After that, we left the two young Ruu women in the main hall with the two guards and the grandmother, while the rest of us entered the kitchen. Of course, there were still seven of us between our four and the three from Dora's household, so it was quite crowded.

When the mother noticed Tara had come along into the kitchen with Rimee Ruu, her eyes widened and she remarked, "My, you accompanied us to the kitchen, Tara? It's dangerous being around the stoves."

"But there's work to do that doesn't need fire, so I can help with that!" Tara answered with a joyful smile.

It was hard to deny the girl anything after seeing a smile like that, so smile lines formed around her mother's eyes as she replied, "Oh, very well."

"In that case, let's start by boiling the kimyuus bones!" Rimee Ruu loudly proclaimed, acting as the teacher for the group. As it happened, a big part of why Toor Deen and Yun Sudra wanted to join us today was so that they could learn how to work with kimyuus bones. Up until now, they had only heard about the lesson Mikel had given the Ruu clan on the topic secondhand.

Since she had taught people how to make cream stew before at the Sauti settlement, Rimee Ruu was pretty much an expert on the topic at this point. She even played a big part in preparing the stew the Ruu clan served at the stalls, alongside Reina and Sheera Ruu. Though her official position was the same as Vina and Lala Ruu's, Rimee Ruu was already one of the leading figures in running the Ruu clan's business.

We proceeded to boil a bunch of kimyuus bones under Rimee Ruu's guidance, while also boiling traip and making milk fat from karon milk, which we had told Dora to have his family set aside last night. We had Tara shake up the bottle filled with the separated fat, and she looked like she was really enjoying herself as she did.

"My, what are you doing there?" the mother suddenly called out in a fluster.

Ryada Ruu had just walked by the latticed window clad in a hunter's cloak fitted with a hood. He stopped and looked over at us through the drizzling rain. "It is my duty to guard you. I've heard that outlaws never attack during the day, but still, there's no point in having two guards inside the house."

"But aren't you cold? The Daleim lands are safe enough, and thieves and outlaws wouldn't come out in this rain to begin with."

"I used to be a hunter, so I'm accustomed to the rain. There's nothing for you to worry about." With that, Ryada Ruu disappeared from view, dragging his right leg a bit as he went.

"He used to be a hunter, but now he's not? He looked like such a fine, strong man, though," the mother muttered with a look of concern.

"Right," I replied with a nod. "The muscles in his leg were injured, so he retired from hunting. But there's no way he'd have trouble dealing with outlaws."

"Hmm... Giba hunting is quite a difficult job, isn't it? I have a lot of respect for your people for how you're able to bring them down."

"Still, he was such a fine-looking gentleman. You don't see folks like him in town very often," the brother's wife chimed in.

Her mother-in-law's eyes opened wide as she remarked, "My, it's pretty rare to hear you say such things! I feel bad for my son, if you're comparing him to a fine man like that."

"Th-That's not what I meant. Do you really think I'd fall for someone who has to be at least as old as my parents?"

"Ah, right. He did look quite young, but I suppose he probably is about the

same age as me and my husband. I'd feel really bad if I compared him to *my* man, though, so I won't even try," the wife remarked, and the pair shared a chuckle. Naturally, they were just joking around. I was glad to see that they were comfortable enough around the people of the forest's edge to say stuff like that in front of us, though.

We kept on boiling the bones and chopping up vegetables after that, though we took a bit of a break from the latter task in the middle, since finishing the bone stock would take around two hours. Once those two things were done, we would be finished with the prep work for the cream stew.

During that gap when we weren't cutting vegetables, we had Reina and Sheera Ruu swap in so they could get started on the giba meat. I remained in the kitchen, while Toor Deen and Yun Sudra stepped out. All that was left to do with the bones was scoop off the scum, so Rimee Ruu and Tara also took a break.

Considering how shy Toor Deen was, it was good that she would have Bartha with her out there to give her a bit of backup. Rimee Ruu and Tara being around would really liven things up as well.

"Hello there. Things weren't too awkward out there, were they?" the mother asked.

"Not at all," Reina Ruu replied. "We were able to learn about a lot of things that should be useful to us. It was a little rough for Sheera Ruu, though."

"Ah, Reina Ruu, um..." Sheera Ruu muttered, her face going red as she tugged on Reina Ruu's arm.

Turning to send her cousin a look, Reina Ruu gave a little "Hee hee."

"What was rough? Did that old woman say something rude to you?"

"No, but she asked when Sheera Ruu was going to wed, since her twentieth birthday is coming up. People at the Ruu settlement get on your case about not getting married by that age too."

"Oh, you're single? You look like such a lovely young lady that I assumed you must have long since been wed," the mother remarked as she looked Sheera Ruu over. "But then again, your body does seem to be a little girlish. Your hips

are narrow, so I could see you having a bit of trouble delivering a child.”

Sheera Ruu hung her head, her face turning scarlet. When she saw that, the mother laughed and said, “Sorry about that. Still, men are sure to come flocking to a fine girl like you. Just make sure you stand up for yourself. Don’t lose your head and let some random guy catch you in his net.”

“Right...” Sheera Ruu replied in a terribly faint voice. Then she shot Reina Ruu a reproachful look. The latter simply smiled impishly in response. It was as if she had decided to take up the role of a rascal in the absence of her younger brother and sister. Honestly, it was rare to see her act so playful.

“By the way, Sheera Ruu is the daughter of Ryada Ruu from before,” I added.

“My,” the mother remarked, her eyes opening wide once more. “I said something rather rude with your father right over there. I didn’t mean anything by it, so I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“O-Of course.”

“You’re a pretty one and a great chef, so I’d love to have you marry my younger son. It’s a bit sad that there can’t ever be any talk of marriage between you, no matter how well you get along.”

“That’s true. We see the forest as our mother, so it’s quite difficult for us to marry outsiders,” Reina Ruu said with a reserved smile.

Even so, Shumiral had become a member of a clan at the forest’s edge, and Yumi dreamed of marrying into our people. A year ago, that would have been unthinkable, but if we kept forming bonds with outsiders, maybe those barriers would eventually come crashing down. Only the gods and the forest knew what the future held for the people of Genos and the forest’s edge.

“Well then, let’s get to cooking. Since we have the opportunity, I was thinking of preparing a dish we don’t serve at the stalls,” Reina Ruu said, and we got back to work. Outside the door, I could hear Rimee Ruu and Tara happily laughing away.

A little before sunset, everyone else who was expected to visit Dora’s house arrived. The late group included five people: Ai Fa, Granny Jiba, Ludo Ruu,

Darmu Ruu, and Cheem Sudra. Ludo and Darmu Ruu were there to serve as guards for the members of their family who would be staying the night, while Cheem Sudra would escort everyone who was leaving back to the forest.

That added up to a total of thirteen guests from the forest's edge. It was a crowd of around the same size as the ones we had for our visits during the revival festival. Furthermore, there were eight members of Dora's house present, and Granny Mishil had been invited as a special guest as well. Dora had extended an invitation to her when he heard that Granny Jiba would be attending.

"Hmph, to think that we'd end up meeting again before either of us kicked the bucket."

"Yes, so we are... I'm happy to see you again, Mishil."

The two were extreme opposites, but here they were talking to one another. There were two large tables in the main hall, and the people of the forest's edge and folks from Daleim were all interspersed around them.

"All right, let's dig in! I sure am glad we're having soup, after being out in that chilly rain!" Dora called out, kicking dinner off. After the people of the forest's edge said their premeal chant, everyone picked up their utensils.

Reina and Sheera Ruu had prepared cubed giba meat stew, croquettes, and minced meat cutlets.

Cubed giba meat stew was a special sold at The Great Southern Tree on only one day out of every ten. And as for the fried dishes, croquettes and minced meat cutlets took too much effort to make for us to serve them at the stalls. The croquettes had at least made an appearance at the welcome banquet, however. Those dishes had been prepared out of consideration for Dora and Tara, who were regulars at the stalls, as well as Granny Jiba, whose teeth weren't very strong.

Then there was the traip cream stew that Rimee Ruu prided herself on. The dish only used kimyuus meat, so it was going to be a new experience for Dora and Tara as well.

Finally, Dora's family had prepared a variety of side dishes, including a stir-fry

and a stewed dish with lots of the Worcestershire sauce, ketchup, and mayonnaise we had taught them how to make. They had been made with large amounts of the rainy season vegetables—traip, reggi, and onda—so personally, I was really looking forward to trying them.

“So this is the dish Tara’s been excited about. I finally get why she was making such a fuss!” the older brother commented with a relaxed smile.

The younger brother, meanwhile, looked even more excited as he slurped on the soup. “It’s really good, even though it doesn’t have giba meat in it. Doesn’t that mean you and the others should be able to make it too, mom?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. We could probably handle the bones and traip, but the karon milk seems a bit tricky.”

“I’m begging you here, please try to find a way. Before the rainy season ends and we can’t use traip anymore.”

“Oh, you can make a delicious version of this that doesn’t need traip. Actually, it was more like we came up with this version after we tried adding traip to see if it would work,” I interjected while enjoying the delicious flavor myself. “If you ever forget the steps or the amounts to use, feel free to reach out any time. We see Tara and Dora on a daily basis, so we can pass a message along through them whenever.”

“We might end up asking you questions every single day at first!” Dora warned with a hearty chuckle. Then, when he took a bite of the minced meat cutlet on his plate, his eyes shot open wide. “This is delicious too! I thought it was a giba cutlet, but when I bit into it, it was like a hamburger!”

“Right, that dish is called a minced meat cutlet. It’s difficult to make a lot of them, so we haven’t had a chance to sell them at the stalls.”

“They’re all so shockingly good! I feel like all of my exhaustion from work is being wiped away just like that! It reminds me of the day when we were invited to the Ruu settlement.”

The day he was referring to was the time when we’d held a friendship banquet for them—the tenth of the silver month, if I recalled correctly. It had been more than three months since then. Dora’s family from the Daleim lands,

Yumi and Telia Mas from the post town, Mikel and Myme from the Turan lands, Roy and Shilly Rou from the castle town, and even the traveling performers from the Gamley Troupe had all come as guests. When Dora brought it up, memories of that lively night came rushing back.

Seated next to Dora was Ludo Ruu, who was happily chowing down on his favorite: the croquettes. Rimee Ruu and Tara were sitting beside one another next to him, looking adorable.

Reina Ruu was sitting with Granny Jiba, who was quietly chatting with Granny Mishil and the other old folks. Sheera, Ryada, and Darmu Ruu were also contributing to the conversations that were going on around them from time to time.

Dora's sons seemed to have really hit it off with Barthia and Yun Sudra, who they were seated across from. And next to Yun Sudra was Cheem Sudra, who was displaying a serious appetite despite his small figure.

As for me, I was seated between Ai Fa and Toor Deen across from the two wives. Though the women on either side of me were silent, the ones across from me were chatting away, so I was really enjoying myself.

"We owe this wonderful time we're having tonight to you recovering from your illness so well, Asuta," Dora loudly declared after drinking some fruit wine. "Oh, but it's not like I'm ignoring everything our friends from the Ruu and the other clans have done. But if something had happened to Asuta, I don't think any of us would be feeling very festive."

"Don't go dragging the mood down with such a grim subject. Have you been drinking too much?" Dora's wife interjected from the seat behind his at the other table, elbowing her husband in the back.

"I haven't even finished a single bottle. As if that would be enough to get me drunk. I'm just trying to say that I was really worried about Asuta!"

"Everyone here feels the same way. There's no need to go shouting about it like that."

I felt terribly grateful to hear that. More than a month had passed since I had come down with that illness, and I had fully recovered now, but I hadn't

forgotten how blessed I was that things had turned out so well. I was able to enjoy moments like this one because I was back to good health now.

“You really did make the rainy season vegetables into something delicious, just like you promised, Asuta. This time of year can be a real pain, but it feels like it’s been surprisingly fun this time.”

“Yeah. It’ll be over in around ten days or so, right?”

“Yes. The rains might linger for another five days or so longer than that, but there’s only half a month left at worst. It’s almost time to say farewell to this vexing weather.”

It was certainly true that there was a lot of trouble that came with the rainy season, not the least of which was the terrible illness I had suffered from. But even so, it wasn’t like it was all bad. As I looked around at everyone enjoying the meal, I strongly felt that way once again.

2

“Okay, now let’s bring out the desserts! Will you help me out, Tara?”

“On it!” Tara replied, rising to her feet. Toor Deen and Yun Sudra also silently got up out of their seats. Those four had worked together on the night’s final course.

“So, you were just helping out today?” Ai Fa whispered into my ear. That was often how my clan head spoke to me when we were at a table surrounded by many people.

“Yeah. We could only serve a limited number of dishes, so I figured I shouldn’t insist on taking the lead from the others. Still, they were all dishes I could easily have made myself. I’m surprised you could tell.”

“Of course I could tell. I eat your cooking every day,” Ai Fa replied before biting into a minced meat cutlet. The dish had some similarities to her beloved hamburger steak, and was also fried in the giba lard that was so popular at the forest’s edge, so it was only natural that she would be fond of it. “But you needn’t worry. It isn’t as if I’m displeased because we aren’t having your cooking tonight,” she added, perhaps because I was still staring at her. But

really, I was just enjoying sitting beside her in a chair once more after so long. So long that it felt like I was experiencing it for the first time again. However, I refrained from commenting so as to save myself a kick in the leg.

In the meantime, the girls returned from the kitchen holding a large tray. Atop it sat enough traip pudding cake and chatchi mochi with traip syrup for everyone.

The pudding cakes in clay containers and the chatchi mochi that were on a single large plate were all dished out, and the empty plates were removed so that they wouldn't get in the way. As they often worked in the outdoor restaurant, Yun Sudra and Rimee Ruu were thoroughly accustomed to waiting tables.

"Oho, so you've made sweets as well? I haven't had any since the banquet at the Ruu settlement," Dora said.

"Does this use traip?" Tara's second brother asked. "It has such a beautiful color!"

"They look delicious. I've been looking forward to this most of all," the wife of Tara's eldest brother added.

Dora's family were all reacting to the desserts, men and women, young and old alike. As they hadn't participated in the Ruu banquet, Granny Mishil and the old folks had no experience with sweets, so they peered suspiciously into the pudding cake containers.

"I told you to take it easy on the fruit wine. Tara, take that back into the kitchen and fetch some chatchi tea for your father," Dora's wife ordered.

"Got it!"

"Hey, I only just started drinking. And this looks so good!"

As soon as the four waitresses returned to their seats, everyone picked up their spoons. And then, voices full of surprise and joy filled the room.

"Ah, this is even tastier than what I had before! I never would have dreamed that you could make something like this with traip."

"The ones from the big plate are great too. I thought I was completely full, but

I feel like I could still eat a thousand of them.”

“Here, Granny Jiba. This is the pudding cake Toor Deen made. It’s even more delicious than our dessert.”

“Ah, you’re right. The sweet you and Rimee made was delicious too, Reina, but this is truly spectacular.”

Even among the guests from the forest’s edge, half of them hadn’t tasted Toor Deen’s sweet before. The men—Darmu Ruu, Ryada Ruu, and Cheem Sudra—had been rather untalkative so far, but now all of them had their eyes wide open in surprise.

“Well? Isn’t it delicious, Darmu?” Rimee Ruu called out from her seat some distance away.

“Yeah,” Darmu Ruu replied with a nod. “It’s actually shocking. I’d love to see what sort of face our old man would make if he tried it.”

“That’s for sure! Toor Deen got first place in a tasting competition with this pudding cake, after all!” Rimee Ruu almost sounded like she was bragging about her own accomplishment there.

When he heard that, Dora tilted his head and asked, “A tasting competition?”

“Yeah! The nobles in the castle town do it as a, um, what was it again...?”

“A bit of amusement. They compare dishes and assign points based on what they find most enjoyable. It’s a sort of game for the nobles.”

Dora’s eyes widened. “S-So this is the exact same sweet that those nobles ate?”

“Yeah, that’s right. The chatchi mochi’s been served in the castle town multiple times as well, just with different flavorings.”

“Well, I suppose that makes sense. The nobles *have* been eating the food you all make for some time now, after all. Still, it’s a strange feeling to realize it now.”

Then Dora’s wife chimed in. “That’s for sure. I’ve never even seen a noble up close, but here we are, eating the same food they do. It feels odd.”

“It’s pretty late to be realizing that. But this is proof of how amazing the people of the forest’s edge actually are, isn’t it?” the older brother remarked with a generous smile. “And those dishes were made using the vegetables we produce, right, Asuta?”

“Yeah, of course. In fact, we made sure to bring our own traip last time. Their flavor can differ a lot, like with tarapa, so we didn’t want any issues on that front.”

“Well, considering that there are nobles who actually come to your stalls to buy your cooking, I guess that isn’t really a surprise.”

Dora and his wife nodded along with smiles as they continued to snack on pudding cake and chatchi mochi.

Now that they mention it, that is a bit unusual, having folks from the castle town and the Daleim lands eat the exact same dishes only five days apart. And in both instances, the food had brought happy smiles to almost everyone’s faces. Despite how different their lifestyles were, they were the same in how they all enjoyed eating delicious food.

I wondered how Toor Deen was reacting to all of this and turned to look for her. It didn’t take long for me to find her, and right away I noticed that she was tearing up a bit, her half-eaten pudding cake in front of her. She must have felt something similar to what I had, only far stronger. The pudding cake she’d made had brought joy to her comrades from the forest’s edge, friends from town, and nobles from the castle town, all alike. That was the greatest happiness one could experience as a chef.

Once the big plate of chatchi mochi was also cleared away, dinner finally came to a close. After some more enjoyable chatter as we digested, Reina Ruu called out, “Well, I suppose it’s about time for us to return to the settlement. Thank you so much for sharing this wonderful evening with us.”

“Oh no, we should be the ones thanking you. Still, is it really okay for you to leave right now? The rain seems to be letting up, but it’s pitch black out.”

“Yes. The moonlight should be plenty, and even if it is cloudy, we do have torches.”

Over half of our group from the forest's edge hurriedly set about preparing to leave. Only Ai Fa, Rimee Ruu, Granny Jiba, Ludo Ruu, Darmu Ruu, and I would be staying.

"Please take care, Darmu Ruu," Sheera Ruu quietly said as she grabbed her rain gear from the wall.

Darmu Ruu questioningly furrowed his brow and turned her way.

"The Daleim lands aren't that dangerous, and even if bandits happened to sneak in, they would be no match for hunters of the forest's edge."

"Yes, of course, I know that. But still, please take care."

With that, Darmu Ruu's brow unfurrowed and he nodded, replying, "Sure. You take care too. You shouldn't be in any danger since you'll have Ryada Ruu and Bartha with you, but don't let your guard down until you make it back to the settlement."

"Right. Thank you," Sheera Ruu replied with a happy smile.

After watching that exchange play out, Tara's mother whispered into my ear, "Looks like things are going well over there. Guess she didn't need us to say anything after all."

Apparently, Sheera and Darmu Ruu just gave off that sort of impression, even to those who didn't have any prior knowledge of how things were between them. At any rate, I made sure that the pair from the forest's edge wouldn't notice as I replied, "Right."

After that, the members of the Ruu clan got into Jidura's wagon (driven by Ryada Ruu), while Toor Deen and Yun Sudra hopped into Fafa's wagon with Cheem Sudra in the driver's seat. Only a few moments later, they were on their way back to the forest's edge. And as for the rest of us, we were guided up to the bedrooms on the second floor.

"You don't need us to wake you up tomorrow, do you?"

"No. We'll probably all wake up when the sun rises."

"Well then, goodnight to you. And Tara, don't go causing them any trouble, okay?"

“I won’t!” Tara energetically replied, holding Rimee Ruu’s hand in her own. Seeing that, her mother headed back downstairs, and Tara turned toward Ludo Ruu. “Hey, you’re sleeping in a different room today, right, Ludo Ruu?”

“Hmm? Yeah, that’s right. You’ll have Ai Fa in your bedroom, after all. I’m not allowed to sleep in the same room as another house’s women.”

“Aww, that’s a shame. I wanted to talk lots more with you too.”

“Oh? Shouldn’t having Rimee there be plenty for you?”

“No way! Sure, I’m really happy to have Rimee Ruu here, but I don’t get to see you very much, Ludo Ruu!”

Now that I thought about it, I had heard Tara say that she thought Ludo Ruu was cool before. Still, coming from a nine-year-old girl, that was totally harmless.

At any rate, Ludo Ruu simply shrugged, looking a bit sleepy. “Well, I’m pretty much ready to call it a day here. Take care of Granny Jiba and Rimee, okay, Ai Fa? Of course, we’ll be in the room right next door anyway.”

“Right. And you take care of Asuta.”

“Between me and Darmu, he’ll be totally fine no matter what happens. Let’s get to sleep,” Ludo Ruu said with a big yawn, reaching for the door to the bedroom. But then, he seemed to remember something and turned back toward me. “Oh, but you’re not going to bed right away, are you, Asuta?”

“Huh? No, I am.”

“Really? Isn’t the Fa clan custom to chat with each other before sleeping?”

This wasn’t the first time I had been in a similar situation with Ludo Ruu, which was how he knew about that. Still, I was pretty sure I had left the bedroom without giving a reason for doing so last time, but it seemed he had figured out what I was doing all on his own.

“It’s not like we have any sort of set custom about that. But now that you mention it, there is something I forgot about that I have to discuss with Ai Fa.”

“Hmm,” Ludo Ruu hummed, raising a single eyebrow and looking like he wanted to say something more. However, he seemed to sense his brother’s

gaze being directed at him from behind, so he silently headed into the bedroom instead.

“Well then, goodnight!”

“Goodnight, Asuta!”

“I will see you tomorrow, Asuta and Darmu,” Rimee Ruu, Tara, and Granny Jiba said before heading into the neighboring bedroom as well. There in the dark hallway, Ai Fa calmly stared at me.

“What do you wish to discuss?”

“Well, it’s not like I have any specific business to take care of or anything. I just don’t feel like I can relax if I don’t talk to you before going to sleep.”

“I see,” Ai Fa replied, leaning up against the wall. There was moonlight streaming in through the windows, but it was rather weak, perhaps due to clouds getting the way. At this distance, I couldn’t really make out the expression on Ai Fa’s face.

“Um, do you mind if I come a little closer?”

“Why do you feel the need to always ask about such things?”

“I mean, didn’t we decide to exercise self-restraint when it comes to touching each other?”

Ai Fa seemed to sigh in the darkness. “Getting close and touching are two totally different things, aren’t they? I see no reason to make such a fuss about it.”

Having gotten permission, I went ahead and moved a bit closer to my clan head. I found it a little hard to feel at ease, standing there in the dark all alone with Ai Fa in someone else’s house. Actually, it felt kind of fun in a way, like we were a pair of naughty kids, sneaking around and having clandestine meetings away from prying eyes.

However, Ai Fa was just looking back at me with her usual measured gaze. We hadn’t had time to take it easy and simply talk since this morning. And as that thought crossed my mind, my chest started to feel hot.

“Dinner was really fun today.”

“Indeed.”

“Working in the castle town is fun too, and more than exciting enough for me, but I enjoy visiting Dora’s house just as much, for totally different reasons.”

“Indeed.”

“The rainy season will be over in another ten days or so. A lot has happened in the last two months, huh?”

“It is not as if the rainy season is on a set schedule that makes it come to an abrupt end at exactly two months. You shouldn’t turn your mind away from it until it’s actually over.”

“I wasn’t turning my mind away. But tomorrow’s a day off, so I’ve gotta unwind at least a little... But I guess it’s not like you have tomorrow off too, though. Sorry for just letting my thoughts spill out like that.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I tend to be less careful with my words before going to sleep as well. Perhaps more than usual tonight, since I’ll be sleeping beside Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu,” Ai Fa said with a faint smile. That alone was enough to warm my heart. “Sleeping in someone else’s house does make me feel a little on edge, but I am happy to have the opportunity to chat with them for a while...and thanks to you, I’ve managed to deepen my bonds with them even further.”

“You mean by inviting them to your birthday? I’m really glad to hear you say that.”

“Asuta, you...” Ai Fa started to say before suddenly holding her tongue. I waited for her to continue, but she didn’t say anything further.

“What is it? You don’t have to hold back. Please, just say it.”

“No, I’ll drop it. It’s nothing we need to discuss now, when the rainy season hasn’t even ended.”

“It has something to do with the season? I don’t mind if you want to talk about something that’ll be happening in the future.”

“When the time comes, I’ll say it then. There’s no reason to rush into it now.”

I didn’t really get it, but since Ai Fa’s voice had remained calm, it probably

wasn't anything seriously troublesome, so I didn't feel the need to push her to tell me about whatever it was.

"By the way, Granny Jiba's birthday is next month, right? Do you think we'll be summoned to the Ruu house for it?"

"That's up to Donda Ruu to decide. If I can give her a celebratory flower, though, that'll be enough to make me happy."

"Yeah. Well, I'll be satisfied if they at least summon us to their next festival of the hunt. Actually, the Ruu clan should be holding one fairly soon, right?"

"Indeed. It should occur during the vermilion month at the latest."

Festivals of the hunt and break periods came roughly three times a year, and by the time we entered the vermilion month, it would be four whole months since their last break.

"That's a surprise. Actually, has it already been four months since the sun god's revival festival? It feels like time has been passing faster and faster lately."

"No doubt that's because of how fulfilling those months have been for you." Ai Fa moved away from the wall and took a single step toward me. Considering I had already moved closer myself, that meant there weren't even thirty centimeters separating the two of us now. "Compared to the two years before I met you, I feel like time is flowing at least twice as fast now. Actually, even that might not cover it."

"I see. Well, if you've been enjoying your time with me that much, then I'm glad."

"As if I could feel any other way about it," Ai Fa replied, looking into my eyes. And then she broke out in a smile. "It has been incredibly fulfilling, and quite hectic too. I am certain that my parents would never have guessed that I would someday enter the castle town, or be invited to dinner in the Daleim lands."

"Ah ha ha, that's for sure."

"And I think I find that part gratifying as well. All of this change in my life has come about thanks to meeting you, Asuta." I was getting a great sense of calm and composure from my clan head. No matter how much Ludo Ruu might tease

me for it, I really did need to take some time to talk to her like this at least once per day. “The two years between losing my father Gil and meeting you felt incredibly long. I intended to lead a life that I could be proud of as a hunter...but even so, each day felt as if I were crawling through mud. I was deeply unhappy back then. That is painfully clear to me now.”

“Yeah.”

“I have gained you as a clan member, and reforged my bonds with Rimee Ruu, Granny Jiba, and Saris Ran Fou. On top of that, I have even made a few new friends, such as Ludo and Shin Ruu. All of you are the reason I can say I am happy now.”

“I think that everyone has the right to be happy like that.”

“I see. In that case, I feel as if I have been especially blessed,” Ai Fa said with a smile that reminded me of a kitten having its neck scratched.

After smiling like that for a while, she pointed at the door beside her. “Well then, I believe it’s about time for us to get some rest. Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu may well have fallen asleep while we’ve been out here talking.”

“Right. I hope you get to chat with them for at least a little while before you all go to sleep,” I said, though I felt more than a little reluctant to part. But I already got to spend time alone with Ai Fa every night, so I refrained from trying to monopolize her now. I knew that having an opportunity to talk with her would make Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu just as happy as I currently was.

“Well then, goodnight. See you tomorrow, Ai Fa.”

“Indeed.”

After smiling at me one last time, Ai Fa disappeared beyond the door.

With the memory of that charming expression filling my chest with joy, I reached for the door to the bedroom where Ludo and Darmu Ruu were waiting.

3

Five days later, we got the news that the path through the forest’s edge had been fully cleared. They had originally been expecting it to take until the very

end of the red month, but it was now only the twenty-fifth, so they had finished with a good five days to spare.

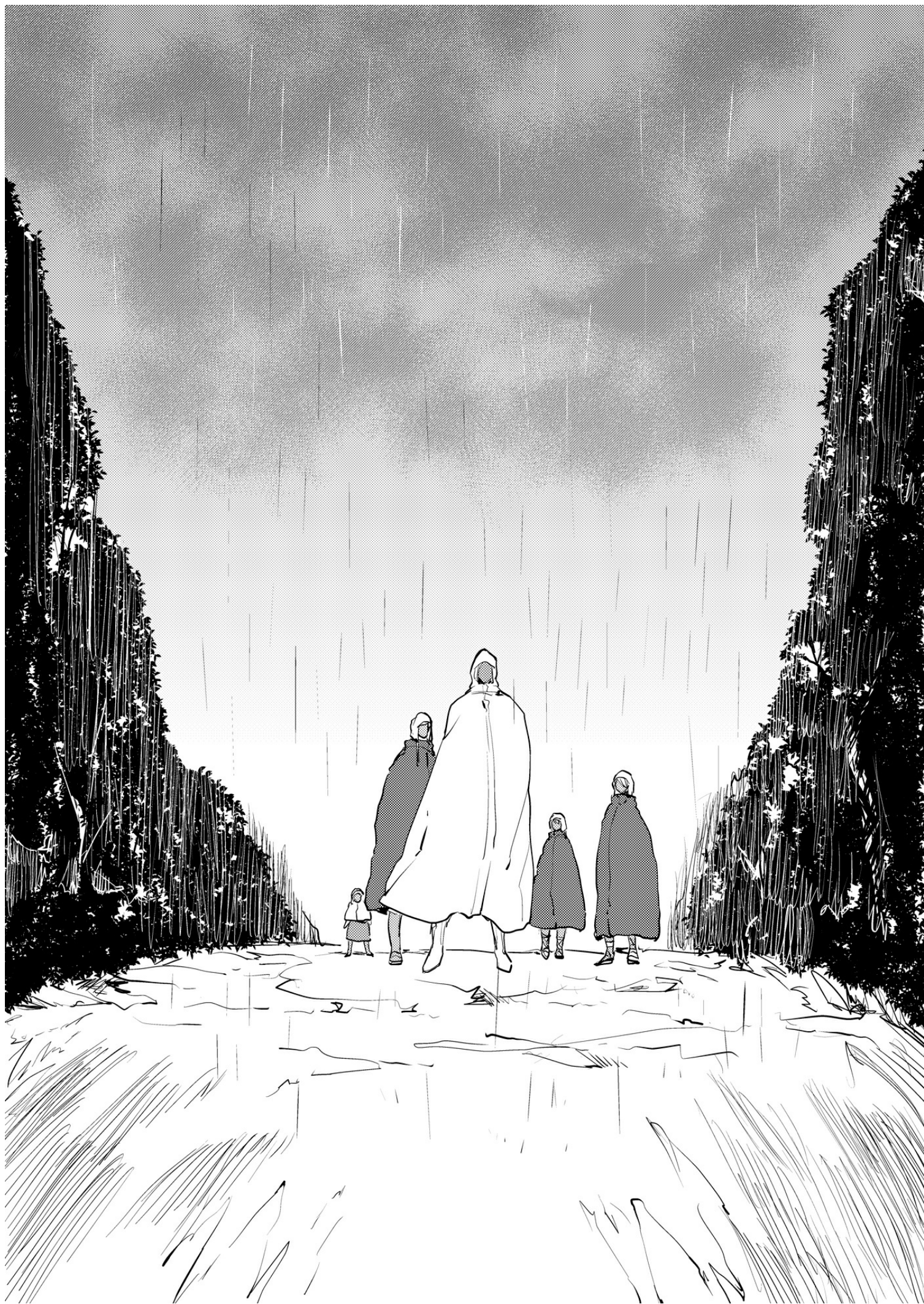
The reason the work had gone so quickly was that after the giba attack and all the injuries resulting from it, dozens of northerners had been added to the project. Prior to that, they had been falling behind schedule a bit, so it had been decided that more people were needed. And with hunters of the forest's edge providing protection from further attacks, everything had gone smoothly from then on.

As the leading clan heads had decided, those hunters had come from the Ravitz in the first half of the month and the Sauti in the back half. Only one starving giba had shown up during that time, and the Sauti hunters who had noticed it swiftly drove the beast away, with most of the people at the worksite not even realizing it had been there.

The next day—the twenty-sixth of the red month—was a day off from work at the stalls, which I wanted to take advantage of to go see the newly completed path, planning to visit early in the morning so that Ai Fa could come with me. And so, after we took care of the minimum amount of chores that we absolutely needed to do, we set off in Gilulu's wagon.

The new road stretched off into the distance in either direction, like it was just natural for it to be there. It was a good bit wider than the path stretching from north to south through the settlement at the forest's edge, so that wagons of any size could easily pass one another. We were at a three-way intersection where the road met the path that headed north toward the settlement, with one branch going west to the southern extreme of the Daleim lands, and the other extending east with a gentle curve toward the rocky area that created an open space in the forest of Morga, beyond which it eventually arrived in the Eastern Kingdom of Sym.

“They also said they're going to make a fence or something blocking the path to the settlement. It'd be a real hassle if travelers wandered in, after all,” Ludo Ruu said. He'd previously told us that he would like to come along too if he managed to get up early enough, so we had stopped by the Ruu settlement at his request. Rimee Ruu, Jiza Ruu, Shumiral, and Giran Ririn all joined us as well.



“At the end, of this path, is the center, of the continent. It is an area you pass, while traveling between, Sym and Aboof.”

“Aboof is the name of a city in the western kingdom, isn’t it?” Giran Ririn asked.

“Yes,” Shumiral replied with a nod. “Aboof is on, the northeastern border, of the western kingdom. It takes a month, to go from Genos, to Aboof.”

“Hmm... And it takes two months to travel from Genos to Sym, doesn’t it? So if you use this path, how much would that speed things up?”

“I do not know exactly, but it would be, at least ten days. Also, you could avoid, traveling through, the harsh, desert region. There would be, a greater risk, of bandits, but there are many, post towns, so it would not, be a difficult journey.”

“Ooh, so there are still towns out there past the forest of Morga? I didn’t think anyone lived between us and Sym,” Ludo Ruu chimed in, but then he tilted his head. “Huh? But didn’t you just say that Aboof was at the northeastern end of Selva? And Genos is at the southeastern end from what I’ve heard.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Then who owns the towns farther east than that? Were they built by Sym rather than Selva?”

“They are, a mix of Sym and Selva. Independent settlers, control them, rather than the western kingdom.”

“You’re talking about those folks who’re sometimes descended from westerners and sometimes from easterners, but they don’t belong to any kingdom, right? I don’t really get what that means, honestly.”

“The independent settlers, devote their souls, to the four great gods. But they do not, swear loyalty, to any kingdom. Was that not how, the people of the forest’s edge, used to be?”

“You mean back when Jiba Ruu and our ancestors lived in the black forest? I believe that place was supposed to be a part of Jagar territory, but we didn’t

have any contact with the outside,” Giran Ririn remarked.

“Yes,” Shumiral replied with another nod. “Back then, the people of the forest’s edge, were independent settlers. But when you moved, to Genos, you became, citizens of the kingdom. Genos is a town, that recognizes, the king of Selva, and belongs to, the kingdom.”

“Hmm. So then, does that mean we could have avoided having to deal with nobles and all of their nonsense if we had moved elsewhere?”

“Yes. But I, do not believe, such an abundant forest, exists outside of, the lands of, the kingdoms. That is why, your people chose, the forest of Morga.”

It was true that there couldn’t be many forests in the world capable of supporting such a large population of hunters. There had been over two thousand people living in the black forest when it was lost to the fires of war. On top of that, they were a people who had likely lived hidden away in the forest for hundreds of years, so even if they technically could have called themselves independent settlers, they undoubtedly wouldn’t have known what the significance of that was. It probably hadn’t even occurred to them that they could look for a new home outside of the territory of the four kingdoms.

“Mount Morga is a sacred land that people have been forbidden from setting foot on since ancient times, and the forest’s edge at its base is filled with vicious giba. That is why a path has never been cleared through this abundant forest until now,” Jiza Ruu stated in a low voice as he stood there solemnly in the rain. “Our ancestors undoubtedly came here looking for a land where they could live as hunters. Even if they could have lived freely elsewhere, they would never have chosen a place other than a forest as their home.”

“That’s for sure. It’s not like I wish I was born somewhere else either. Besides, dealing with the townsfolk and everyone from the castle hasn’t been all bad,” Ludo Ruu said with a big grin.

Rather than replying to him, Jiza Ruu turned to face Shumiral. “Shumiral of the Ririn clan, I understand that your work as a merchant has taken you to many places around the continent. Allow me to ask you...is there truly no forest outside of the territory of the kingdoms that can support this many people?”

“There is not. All abundant forests, fall under the control, of the kingdoms.”

“In that case, even if we decide the nobles and the people of the capital are not to our liking, we have nowhere else to go.”

Ludo Ruu reacted to those words from his brother. “Were you thinking of leaving Morga or something, Jiza? I suppose there was some talk about that back when we were fighting with Cyclaeus.”

“The first one to suggest it was Gulaf Zaza. I do not approve of casting Morga aside...but as one who will eventually inherit the role of leading clan head, I believe it is important for me to properly understand the state of the world.”

Was he bringing that up because he was concerned about the observers from the capital that Melfried and the others had mentioned? Things were currently going well with Marstein, the lord of Genos. But the people of the capital held an even higher position than he did, and we didn’t know what they would think of the people of the forest’s edge. That concern had been on my mind ever since we had gotten involved with the northerners.

“At any rate, we simply need to follow the path we believe is right. The rest comes down to the forest’s guidance.”

“It’ll be fine. When we’re having this much fun, this has to be the right path!” Ludo Ruu declared.

Shortly after that, we turned around and went back the way we came. The newly cleared road that no one had traveled down yet sat there underneath the steadily falling rain, a white mist hanging in the air.

Afterward, I heard a number of additional details regarding the newly cleared path through the forest’s edge.

Firstly, no one was allowed to use it for the moment, the reason being that even once you got past the forest of Morga and the rocky area, you would still have to travel for a full day to reach the next post town. It wasn’t clear if unprepared travelers could make it there safely, and if some kind of unfortunate incident resulted in deaths, that would be a black mark on the honor of Genos, which the castle really wanted to avoid after all the work that had gone into clearing the path.

That was why they were planning to wait until the Sym merchant group known as Black Flight Feathers returned from the western capital, so they could be granted the honor of being the first travelers to use the new road. After all, their leader Kukuluel was the one who had proposed the plan to clear a path through the forest's edge in the first place. They were one of the largest merchant groups in all of Sym, so they would have no trouble making it through safely. And then they would inform the people of Sym about the new path that had been cleared.

Once that happened, Radajid and the rest of Silver Vase were sure to take that route for their next trip to Genos. Of course, they were probably still right around the midpoint of their trip back to Sym right now. In fact, it was likely that they had only recently left the area where the rainy season was happening. But if this meant their future trips were at least a little easier, I was happy for them.

Then there was the matter of the fence in front of the path to the settlement. Apparently, the castle town had made a number of suggestions about how it should be constructed. However, the topic was apparently of little interest to the leading clan heads. After all, no matter how sturdy of a fence they made, people would still be able to get around it and into the settlement by simply stepping a short distance into the forest at either end. Besides, there was already a path from the forest to the farms fairly close by, and it wasn't like there was a law preventing entry in the first place.

Basically, only the folks from the castle town thought there was any need to be concerned about the fact that the new road that had been carved through the forest was right next to the settlement. Once it started seeing general use, then there *was* a possibility that somebody with bad intentions could more easily slip into the settlement, but the intruder would be the one in danger in that situation. Still, everyone involved did want to avoid the trouble such an incident would cause.

Furthermore, the hunters headed out into the forest during the day. If some outlaws sneaked in during that period when only women, young children, and the elderly were about, that would be a lot more serious. On top of that, if their brethren were endangered, the hunters would seek retribution. If that

happened, it could lead to the outside world coming to fear the people of the forest's edge once more.

Thinking back, Melfried had asserted in the past that the people of the forest's edge needed a lawful way to display their strength to the world at large. When we started doing business in the post town, it became clear that our people weren't vicious barbarians, and the townsfolk grew less scared of us. Prior to that, though, the townsfolk had been downright terrified of the people of the forest's edge, which had the side effect of ensuring that none of them would ever try to infiltrate the settlement and cause trouble. It was important to make sure that even if that fear abated, other folks would know not to mess with the people of the forest's edge. That line of thinking was what had led to Shin Ruu participating in the swordsmanship tournament.

Another part of the issue was that security wasn't even really a concept for the people of the forest's edge. Our houses didn't have locks installed, a fact that had been quite surprising to Myme. They were only equipped with bolts, which generally weren't used except at night. Locks just hadn't been seen as having any purpose, as even the poorest people of the forest's edge would never do anything as foolish as trying to rob someone else.

Because of all that, it had also been suggested that perhaps we should order locks from the castle town for our houses. At the very least, the Sauti and their subordinates could give them a try, as they were located closest to the freshly cleared path. Then even if thieves did sneak into the settlement, they would have to leave empty-handed. The folks from the castle town also argued that if the bandits got shut down right away like that, they probably wouldn't bother trying other houses.

At least for now, though, that matter had been put on hold. Apparently, there were plenty of other topics that were still being hotly debated in the castle town, with other proposals including setting up a guard station in front of the fence, or even making it outright illegal to intrude upon the settlement.

"They went to all that trouble just to clear a path through the forest's edge. I have no clue how much wealth it will earn them, but it certainly was quite an undertaking," Dari Sauti had said at a meeting between the three leading clan heads. Baadu Fou, who had also been also in attendance, had passed that along

to me, and judging from the expression on his face, he must have been in agreement.

A few days after that, I got some more information about the goings on in the castle town from a very different source: platoon commander Marth of the guards. He had been given time off due to his injuries in the giba attack, and had been coming by our stalls regularly since then.

Perhaps as could be expected, I didn't recognize him right away when he first visited the stalls. Without his armor and helmet on, he just looked like an ordinary westerner. I only managed to figure it out a few moments before he gave his name because his left arm was in a sling under his rain gear.

"Ah, it's been a while. How are your injuries doing?"

"Hmph. You can tell just by looking. I broke my left arm, so I'm not going to be on duty for some time."

Despite that, he *was* a platoon commander, so he was still getting paid at least a little, and he would be reinstated right away once he healed. There were a number of people who had been injured worse than him, though, and they had ended up having to retire from the guards.

"Rather than learning their lesson, now they're planning to construct a guard station inside the forest's edge. As if anyone would willingly accept such a dangerous posting."

"I see. I hope that they'll put enough thought into it to ensure everyone's safety."

"They're also planning to construct a new post town on the far side of the forest of Morga. The amount of greed they're displaying is astonishing to me."

I was seriously surprised to hear that too. This was the first I was hearing about the nobles considering such a wild idea.

"A-A new post town? If it's on the other side of the forest of Morga...then it would have to be beyond the rocky region too, right?"

"Indeed. It takes a full day after passing Morga to reach the first post town run by independent settlers, so if they do build a town in between, the number

of travelers passing through it would be more than enough to make it. People have already been sent out to search for water sources and places where fields could thrive.”

“So after the path, they’re working on a town? I have to admit, I’m impressed.”

“Yeah. Practically speaking, Mount Morga is Selva territory in name only, but what they’re planning will effectively expand the kingdom beyond it. If it really does happen, maps the world over will need to be redrawn.”

The implications of that were more than I could wrap my head around. And I was certain the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge were simply going to shrug and dismiss it all as not being their problem.

“Well, it has nothing to do with little people like us. If it seems like we’re going to get wrapped up in it somehow, we can worry about it then.”

“Like *us*?”

“What, are you trying to say you’re of higher status because you’ve got ties to nobles?”

“No, of course not. I’m just surprised to hear you put yourself on the same level as the people of the forest’s edge when you’re a soldier of Genos.”

Marth made a face like he had swallowed a stone or something. “Don’t pounce on people’s words like that. And don’t you have work you should be getting back to?”

“Huh? But weren’t you planning to order something?”

“You think I have nothing better to do with my money than to line your pockets?”

“I mean, you came all the way out here, so I figured it was at least partially for a meal. Sorry if I jumped to the wrong conclusion.”

The look on Marth’s face soured even more. “I was taking a walk because I have too much time on my hands. I’ve never bought food from your stalls before, have I?”

“Yes, but up until now you’ve always been on duty. If you were planning to

eat later anyway, why not have something now?”

Marth’s frown deepened again, but rather than leaving, he hesitantly looked over the row of stalls.

“If you’d like, you could try a sample. Um, how about a soup dish? It should warm you up on a cold day like this.”

I was in charge of the daily specials—deep-fried giba for today—which couldn’t be made in advance. Leaving the stall to Toor Deen, I stepped away and guided Marth over to the traip cream stew stall.

“Hey, I didn’t say so much as a word about eating anything. I’m living off my pension right now, so finances are tight.”

“Our cooking isn’t all that expensive. And a taste doesn’t cost anything. Please, go ahead.”

As I pulled Marth along, I found Rimee Ruu manning the stall.

“Oh, you’re on today, Rimee Ruu?”

“Yeah! I traded places with Morun Rutim! Ah, you’re that man I met at the Sauti settlement, aren’t you? Are your injuries healing okay?” Apparently, Rimee Ruu remembered Marth’s face. And since she tended to leave a pretty strong impression on people, he hadn’t forgotten her either.

“Aren’t you that girl from before? I owe you and your older brother a great deal.”

“I was just helping Ludo out. I’m glad you’re feeling good enough to walk around!” Rimee Ruu’s smile was as warm as the sun itself in the drizzling rain.

“Rimee Ruu, would you mind serving Marth here a sample?”

“A sample? It’s been a long time since we’ve done one! I’ll add some meat on top, then!” Rimee Ruu replied with a smile, serving up a small amount of stew on a dish with a bit of giba rib on top. Then she placed it on the counter with a spoon. “Here you go.”

Marth looked suspicious, but he went ahead and grabbed the spoon, then brought the bit of giba meat and orange stew to his mouth...and let out a strange sound. “Gyuh. So this is giba cooking?”

“Yeah! Isn’t it good? If you want to eat enough to fill you up, it’ll be three red coins, but a half size is only one and a half! A half size is around this much, and it comes with a bit of fuwano bread,” Rimee Ruu explained as she scooped up a ladle’s worth of stew.

Marth gulped. “Th-Then I’ll take a three-coin helping.”

“Do you just want stew? A lot of customers will go with half stew and then purchase a different dish as well.”

“B-But I don’t know what is what.”

“The neighboring stall serves giba burgers, which are made with really soft meat! Asuta is selling giba curry, giba manju, and a fried dish. Aside from the giba curry, they should all pair well with the stew.”

Marth gave a troubled glance around. When his eyes met mine, I saw that his face had gone red under his rain gear. “Wh-What is that look you’re giving me?! I’m free to eat whatever I please, am I not?!”

“Of course. Thank you for the purchase.”

And so, Marth finally ended up purchasing giba cooking.

If I recalled correctly, I first met him nine months ago on the day I had been abducted by Lefreya. Back then, I hadn’t known his rank or even his name. He had been stubbornly avoiding giba cooking all that time, but now he was finally having some. Looking at it one way, you could call this another twist of fate brought about by the rainy season.

The days continued to pass by after that until we arrived at the thirtieth of the red month. The weather had been unstable all morning. There were times when bits of blue sky would show through the clouds here and there, but the rain still came down hard. Then gloomy clouds filled the sky once more, accompanied by miserable drizzle. A few hours later, blue sky would make an appearance again, and it would all repeat.

Apparently, this was a sign that the end of the rainy season was approaching. Short and heavy squalls were a common feature of Genos’s normal weather patterns.

On top of that, the temperature seemed like it had been steadily creeping upward over the course of the past few days. Long-sleeved clothing now felt like too much while we were working with fire, and Ai Fa had stopped wearing her long waist wrap indoors.

“The rainy season is coming to an end, huh? It feels like the last two months really flew by,” I said after dinner during our usual pre-bed chat. Back at Dora’s house, Ai Fa had chided me for getting ahead of myself when I had brought that up, but I was sure she wouldn’t have any objections at this point.

As she leaned against the wall with her hair down, sitting on top of her bedding, my clan head nodded and replied, “Indeed. Tomorrow is the beginning of the vermilion month. We will likely have a few more days of rapidly changing weather, but the end of the rainy season is definitely not far away.”

“I guess the traip and onda will be gone soon too. Thankfully, we’ve got enough in stock to last us for another half a month or so.”

“As long as the tarapa and tino come back, I’ll have no complaints. But thanks to all of you, I’ve had nothing to complain about during the rainy season either.”

Ai Fa had a really soft feel about her today. Back when I had been recovering from my illness, she had made the deliberate decision to act more strict, but she seemed to have loosened up again and was now a lot closer to her usual self. That also felt like a sign of the rainy season coming to a close.

“Then once the vermilion month ends, we’ll finally be back to the yellow month. It’ll officially be a full year since I first came to the forest’s edge,” I said, worrying I might get called out for getting ahead of myself again. As I said that, a bit of a shadow appeared over Ai Fa’s gentle expression. “What’s the matter? Are you worried about something?”

“No. But do you remember how I stopped saying something back at Dora’s house?”

“Yeah, of course. It was pretty unusual for you.”

“Indeed. The red month still hasn’t come to a close, so perhaps this is premature...but keeping it to myself makes me feel uncomfortable, so perhaps

now is the right time for me to say it.”

“Hey, there’s no need to hold back. You know, the way you’ve been acting lately has been feeling less and less like you, Ai Fa. What in the world is going on?” I turned to face Ai Fa, sitting cross-legged on the neighboring bedding. She sat up and faced me as well. However, she had her legs neatly folded beneath her and her back was straight, which was unlike her. “You seem sort of formal somehow. It’s not something bad, is it?”

“No, it is not. I don’t believe it is, at least. I still cannot say for certain.”

“You’re making me really curious here. Whatever you want to tell me, I’ll listen until you’re done, so just go ahead and say it.”

“Very well. It involves your birthday. Were you planning to invite anyone to the house for the occasion?”

I tilted my head a bit. “No, I don’t have any plans like that yet. But why are you worried about something like that?”

“Well...I’m sure there are countless people who would like to celebrate the birthday of someone as popular as you. The members of the Ruu, Rutim, Lea, Ririn, and all of our neighboring clans, for example. Don’t you agree?”

“You think so? But birthdays are generally meant to be celebrated just between clan members, aren’t they?”

“For my birthday, you invited Rimee and Jiba Ruu, and we held our festival of the hunt alongside our neighboring clans. There is no taboo against doing such things, so people wouldn’t consider it to be *that* strange.”

She was definitely right about that, but I still had no clue what Ai Fa was getting at. “Well, nobody’s said anything to me. After all, my birthday’s still nearly two months away.”

“Then it’s possible someone could make such a proposal sometime in the next two months?”

“I haven’t got a clue. Honestly, only a few people even know that I’ve set the twenty-fourth of the yellow month as my birthday in the first place.”

Ai Fa cast her gaze downward, clearly still worried about something.

I leaned forward and stared at her face. “So, what do you really want to say?”

“Well...you see...if possible, I would like to request that we celebrate on your birthday with just the two of us, alone, as clan members.”

“Ah, I see. Yeah, I’d be happy with that,” I reflexively replied.

Ai Fa brought her face close to mine and asked, “Is that truly how you feel?”

“Y-Yeah, it is. Why would I lie about that?”

“Yes, lying is indeed forbidden. You really do feel the same as well,” Ai Fa said, closing her eyes and giving a big sigh.

Pushing down the bliss I was feeling, I smiled and said, “What’s the matter? Have you been worrying about that all this time? I hadn’t intended to invite anyone over for my birthday, and I really am thrilled to hear that you want to spend it with just the two of us.”

“But getting to spend time with Rimee and Jiba Ruu on my birthday made me so happy, and you are the one who made that happen, so if you had said you wish to invite guests for your birthday, I wouldn’t have any grounds to complain.”

“I don’t see an issue with that. You’re my clan head, so you can complain about whatever you like.”

“As if I could simply disregard my clan member’s feelings about something like this. But if you wish to do the same, I’m very happy to hear that,” Ai Fa said, suddenly breaking out in a smile of her own. It was like seeing the sun peek out from behind a dark cloud. “Your birthday is also the anniversary of the day when you first came to the forest’s edge, and the first time we met, so I couldn’t help but want to spend it alone with you.”

“It makes me really happy that you see it that way.”

“No, I’m the one who has the greatest reason to be happy,” Ai Fa said, tilting her head a bit. There was still a brilliant smile on her face. It looked like she had temporarily let the strictness that was demanded of her as a clan head fall away so she could dote on me without reservation. In short, she looked absolutely adorable.

“In other words, if someone proposes anything like that to you in the future, you don’t intend to accept it?”

“Y-Yeah, you can look at it that way.”

“I see,” Ai Fa replied, bringing her hand to her mouth and smiling again. Each and every thing she was doing was so girlish that my heart was starting to pound like a jackhammer. “I’m happy. So very happy, Asuta.”

“Y-Yeah. Me too. Thanks.”

“And I shall take care of preparing dinner on your birthday so that you may spend the day relaxing.”

Now it was my turn to tilt my head with a “Huh?” However, the smile on Ai Fa’s face didn’t shift.

“It wouldn’t make sense to have the person being celebrated prepare the celebratory banquet, so for that day alone, I should man the kitchen and prepare the meal.”

“U-Um, have you cooked anything at all in the last few months, Ai Fa?”

“You should know the answer to that question just as well as I do, yes?”

In other words, she had not. Back during the sun god’s revival festival, Ai Fa had helped out with sales at the stalls for a brief period, but that was the only time I could think of when she had been even tangentially involved in cooking.

“D-Don’t push yourself too hard, okay? Preparing the meal for myself wouldn’t break any taboos, would it?”

“It isn’t a matter of taboos. It’s what I want to do. Of course, it will come out far worse than if you cooked instead,” Ai Fa admitted, but then she gave another joyful smile. “However, preparing a celebratory meal for family is something I haven’t been able to do in so long. That is another reason I would be happy to do this for you.”

“I see,” I replied as the unease I was feeling inside melted away. No matter how poorly it might turn out, Ai Fa wanted to cook for me. I would have to be a real blockhead to let my worries get in the way of how happy that would make both of us.

“I’m really looking forward to it. The next two months can’t pass quickly enough.”

“Two months, huh? I might have gotten rather ahead of myself, but still, I’m glad that I spoke up about this.”

As we sat there illuminated solely by candlelight, we exchanged soft smiles.

The red month and the rainy season came to a close...and ahead of us, we had many more lively, bustling days to enjoy.

Intermezzo: A Night in the Daleim Lands

On the night when a large number of people of the forest's edge visited Dora's house in the Daleim lands, Ai Fa stepped into the women's bedroom after talking with Asuta, and found that the three others who had entered the room before her had not yet fallen asleep. In fact, they were seated on top of their bedding and were merrily chatting away.

"You three certainly are lively. You aren't tired, Rimee Ruu?"

"Not one bit!" Rimee Ruu replied, turning toward Ai Fa with a blissful smile on her face. She was a bundle of energy to begin with, and she looked especially enthusiastic about being able to spend the night with her friend Tara and the elder Jiba Ruu. "We all get to be together, so it'd be a waste to just go to sleep! Right, Tara?"

"Yeah! I've really been looking forward to having everyone over!" Tara was a small girl the same age as Rimee Ruu, whose eyes were shining every bit as brightly as her friend's. "Have a seat here, Ai Fa! Come talk with us!" Tara called out, patting the bedding.

Rimee Ruu turned and gave the girl a confused look. "By the way, I noticed how you talk all casually to Ai Fa. And you do the same with Asuta, right?"

"Yeah. Is that weird?"

"Not really, but you're a bit stiffer around Ludo, don't you think? Is it the same with other people too?"

"Yeah, you may be right! But Asuta and Ai Fa are the first people of the forest's edge I ever talked to, so they feel special somehow."

As Ai Fa sat down atop the bedding, she turned toward Tara and tilted her head.

"But there should only have been a few days at most between when you met us and when you met Ludo Ruu. In fact, you may have spoken with him before me."

“Huh? Really?”

“Indeed. I am not a very friendly person, and I tried to speak with townsfolk as little as possible back then.”

And now Ai Fa was going to sleep beside Tara, who was from town. Back then, she never would have imagined that fate would eventually bring her to this point.

“But you saved me, Ai Fa! So you really are special!” Tara declared, beaming at Ai Fa.

Rimee Ruu leaned forward. “A drunk man from the Suun clan almost trampled you, right?! And then Ai Fa saved you!”

“Yeah! Asuta protected me, and Ai Fa took care of the bad guy!”

“Huh?! But Asuta’s so weak because he’s a chef! I’m glad he wasn’t trampled too!”

“Yeah! Ai Fa looked super cool!”

The pure look in Tara’s eyes as she made that declaration left Ai Fa at a loss. She had trouble dealing with young children other than Rimee Ruu, and she wasn’t particularly fond of having other people heap praise on her.

“I simply couldn’t overlook a member of the Suun clan acting so atrociously, but you need not think anything more of it. You should instead try to form deeper bonds with Ludo Ruu and the others.”

“I really like Ludo Ruu! But I started getting along with everyone from the forest’s edge thanks to you and Asuta. So you’re special!”

“No, it was Asuta’s efforts that led to all of that. I had nothing to do with it.”

“That’s not true,” Jiba Ruu finally interjected. “We were able to form bonds with the townspeople thanks to both you and Asuta. The reason Asuta has been able to do so much is because you have been there to support him with all of your strength.”

“In that case, we can’t ignore the efforts of the Ruu clan either. Without their assistance, he never would have been able to start running those stalls.”

“Hmm. But now, many other clans are also helping Asuta with that, so I would say the Ruu clan’s assistance was of little importance.”

“That isn’t true at all. The other clans only started to join in because they were following the Ruu’s example.”

“Even so, the role you played was still more important, Ai Fa. The Ruu wouldn’t have taken the step of aiding him if you hadn’t done so first, after all.”

Ai Fa broke out in a strained smile. “I cannot possibly win an argument with one as wise as you, Granny Jiba. But I simply wish to say that I am not someone who should be treated as special.”

“Yes, the fact that we have been able to find and follow the proper path forward for our people is thanks to all of us working together. In that regard, nobody should be treated as special. But you are still special to Tara, Ai Fa.”

Tara then tugged on Ai Fa’s arm with an apologetic look on her face. “Did I make you feel bad, Ai Fa? I’m so sorry if I did!”

“No, that’s not it. But why do you talk to Asuta and I as if we were family in the first place?”

“Huh? But don’t you talk to people you like as if they’re family at the forest’s edge?”

“No, we have no such custom for doing so with anyone outside of our immediate family.”

“Ah ha ha! But you say Granny Jiba too, don’t you, Ai Fa?” Rimee Ruu pointed out.

Ai Fa was stunned by the sudden strike that had poked a big hole in her logic. It was true that Ai Fa had no blood ties to Jiba Ruu, so she didn’t have any reason to be addressing the elder like that.

“You call her Granny Jiba because you really like her, right? So what’s wrong with Tara talking to you like you’re family?”

“Yeah. Do you really not want me to, Ai Fa?” Tara said with a sad look on her face as she clung to Ai Fa’s arm. Even Ai Fa couldn’t raise a complaint at this point.

“It’s not as if I’m firmly opposed. It just sounded odd to me because I am not accustomed to hearing it.”

“Then you don’t mind if I keep talking to you like that?”

“If that’s what you wish, I have no reason to refuse.”

“Hooray!” Tara cheered, the smile returning to her face.

Rimee Ruu looked happy too. “You really do love Ai Fa, don’t you, Tara?! I never noticed, since I don’t see you two talking that often!”

“Yeah, but Ai Fa’s just so cool! She has such a pretty face, but she’s really strong too!”

“Yup, Ai Fa’s cool and pretty and strong, for sure!”

Stuck between the two excited young girls, Ai Fa had to hold back a sigh.

Now that I think about it, something similar to this has happened before in the post town.

Rimee Ruu was a precious friend of Ai Fa’s, and it was impossible to hate Tara, so Ai Fa was truly happy that their bond had grown to be this strong. However, she did hope they would leave her be and have fun with each other instead.

“Hee hee, this makes me feel so happy,” Rimee Ruu said as she wrapped herself around Ai Fa’s other arm.

“What exactly are you so happy about?”

“I mean, I love both you and Tara! So it makes me really happy that Tara likes you too!”

“Yeah! I love you Rimee Ruu, and you Ai Fa, and you Granny Jiba! Oh, and Asuta! You love Asuta too, don’t you, Ai Fa?”

The unexpected strike made Ai Fa hesitate once more. Her cheeks heated up, and her heart started pounding in her chest. But she tried her best to suppress those reactions, and managed to reply, “Indeed. Everyone cares deeply for their family, don’t they? And there are only the two of us in the Fa clan.”

“Then everybody loves each other, right?! I’ll work hard so that you’ll love me too, Ai Fa!”

Tara and Rimee Ruu then carried on excitedly, and as they did, Jiba Ruu gave Ai Fa a kindly look...which only made her feel all the more embarrassed.

Why am I letting a child's words get me so out of sorts? Ai Fa thought, but she still found that she couldn't calm herself down.

In her mind, she could see Asuta, who she had just been talking to, and he was smiling at her, which made her chest feel incredibly tight. At last, he had shaken off the last vestiges of his illness and was back to his usual energetic self.

Ai Fa loved Asuta from the bottom of her heart. Not simply as a precious family member, but as someone she would absolutely marry if she could. On top of that, Asuta had told her that he felt the same way. They had promised that if she ever stopped hunting, they would wed...and that no matter what happened, they would always keep the other in their thoughts. Remembering that made Ai Fa feel so much joy and embarrassment that it seemed it would tear her apart.

Rimee Ruu and Tara had long since moved on to getting all excited about some other topic, but Ai Fa's heart was still pounding, and the heat in her cheeks showed no signs of abating.

What in the world? To have the topic brought up again so soon...

Since the bedroom was only illuminated by a small candle, it was very dimly lit. Even so, Ai Fa let her hair down so that the others couldn't see the color of her face. Then when she removed her hair band, Tara excitedly proclaimed, "Wow! Your hair is so pretty! I really like it a lot, Ai Fa!"

"Apparently, it's rare for westerners to have this hair color..."

"Yeah! It's really nice! Are you still not going to get married to Asuta yet, by the way?"

This time, embarrassment caused Ai Fa to twist away. "I-I am a hunter, so I cannot treat marriage so casually!"

"Oh, really? My dad's been worrying about when the two of you will finally get married too."

With the heat in Ai Fa's cheeks intensifying to a mighty blaze, she couldn't

think of a response.

Then, with a resolute look on her face, Rimee Ruu called out, “Hey Tara, you shouldn’t get too involved with the affairs of other houses! That’s a rule at the forest’s edge!”

“Oh, really? Did I make you mad, Ai Fa?” Tara said with another worried look, causing Ai Fa to scratch her head.

“I’m not mad, no! But as Rimee Ruu said, I would like you to refrain from meddling.”

“Got it! I’ll just think it in my head, then!”

The Tara that Ai Fa thought she knew was supposed to be a much shyer girl than this. But because of the excitement of having everyone over tonight, she seemed to have far more energy than usual.

Rimee and Jiba Ruu were both looking at Ai Fa now, the young girl with a smile, and the elder with her eyes narrowed affectionately.

Hiding her burning cheeks with her hands, Ai Fa glared back at them. “Why are the two of you staring at me like that? Please stop saying such things about us.”

“Yeah, okay. We don’t want to make you upset. But you look kinda happy too, and that means so am I!” Rimee Ruu declared.

“Yes. It’s as if you’ve become a child again, Ai Fa. Seeing you act like this is absolutely adorable,” Granny Jiba added.

“J-Just stop, already!” Ai Fa responded in a manner that was truly childish indeed.

And so, the curtain fell on that night in the Daleim lands, accompanied by a surprisingly raucous commotion.

2

A few members of the Gamley Troupe, including the man himself, were off in a dimly lit corner of the plaza without any mats, enjoying fruit wine and food.

However, the two people who were with the leader of the group were wearing their cloaks with the hoods up, concealing their faces. One was that strange creature Zetta, and the other was the person Rolo had referred to as Old Man Rai.

“Boss, these people have come to talk with you,” Rolo called out.

“Hmm?” Gamley murmured as he turned her way. He was every bit as unusual as his companions. He was missing an eye and an arm, though that wasn’t really particularly noteworthy. Serious injuries such as those were hardly unheard of at the forest’s edge. And he was wearing a number of jangling accessories despite being a man, but that was also a common sight when it came to people from Sym and the nobles of Genos. Rather than his appearance, it was the aura he gave off and the light shining in his single eye that set him apart from ordinary folks.

“I’m Rau Lea, clan head of the Lea, who fall under the Ruu. Yamiru Lea here is a member of my clan. We heard you’re leaving Genos early tomorrow morning, so we came over to say our final farewells.”

“Oh? Well, thank you very much,” Gamley replied with a grin, holding the bottle in his right hand up high. He was sitting on the ground and leaning up against a tree in a spot where he could observe the entire plaza. There were a number of wooden plates with a variety of dishes atop them lined up at his feet, perhaps carried over by his troupe members, so he seemed to be doing just fine.

“For a man who looks like he really knows how to enjoy a party, you sure did pick a secluded place to hide away in.”

“Yeah. We perform for a living, so we couldn’t survive without big celebrations like this one. But we don’t get invited as guests very often, so a lot of us don’t know what to do with ourselves when we’re not performing,” Gamley said, taking a swig of his fruit wine. “Once the musical performance is over, I’ll show off my fire again. Can you look after these two while I’m gone, Rolo?”

“Uh, yes, understood.” Rolo had sat down and was nibbling on some meat from one of the plates. Beside her, Rau Lea stared at Zetta.

“You went out into the forest with the hunters too, didn’t you? From what I’ve heard, you have a real strange appearance. What exactly are you?”

Zetta was already mostly concealed by his hood and cloak, but when he was addressed, he shrunk in on himself to become even more hidden from view. Seeing that, Gamley chuckled and patted him on the head.

“Zetta’s parents were a black ape and a human. You’re free to believe that or not, as you please...but he’s a timid fellow, so please forgive him for being unfriendly.”

“He’s timid? But I heard he was quite daring when he was out on the hunt and when those bandits attacked.”

“He’s every bit as capable a fighter as Rolo and our black ape, but he has trouble dealing with anyone who isn’t his enemy.”

“I see. I suppose there are all sorts of people out there.”

It was then that someone started singing over in the center of the plaza, in a voice that was clearly audible over the din. It belonged to Neeya, the minstrel. Rau Lea turned to look in that direction with annoyance on his face and furrowed his brow a bit.

“I think I just heard the Gaaze mentioned.”

“Yes, he did indeed say that name.”

The song was one that recollected events from several hundred years in the past. It was a tale of a people known as the Gaaze fleeing from Sym and encountering the people of the white queen in the black forest. A strange shiver ran through Yamiru Lea as she listened.

The Gaaze had been the leading clan before the Suun. After moving to Morga from the black forest, they had died out along with their subordinate clan, the Reema, and the Suun had come to rule the people of the forest’s edge after that.

If the people of the white queen were a tribe from Jagar, it would match with the legends told at the forest’s edge... So, had the people of the forest’s edge been born from a mingling between Sym and Jagar after all? Yamiru Lea was so

shaken by the possibility that it was honestly surprising to her. *Our ancestors were called vagabonds until they arrived at the forest's edge. And I suppose when they did, they decided to end their nomadic ways and live as hunters again from then on.*

Even after Neeya's song came to a close, Yamiru Lea just couldn't regain her composure.

However, Rau Lea, seated next to her, snorted skeptically. "Hmph. What a suspicious fellow. How can he tell a story from hundreds of years ago like he saw it with his own eyes? Lying is a crime, after all."

"Oh, is that a rule at the forest's edge? Unfortunately, it's a minstrel's job to talk big like that."

"I see. Sounds like a fitting role for that guy," Rau Lea said dourly, and then he leaned over in Gamley's direction. "Still, those performances you all put on sure are amazing. What kind of things can these two do?"

"Zetta is training in acrobatics, while Railanos sees the past and future by reading the stars. What do you say? Do you want to have him read your fortune?"

"Fortune-telling, eh? The people of the forest's edge have no need for such things," Rau Lea said bluntly, and Gamley responded by smiling in amusement.

"It's true that the stars' guidance is of no use to those without doubts or worries. I can certainly see why a resolute hunter of the forest's edge might consider it worthless."

"Right. But it's still a fine job—a good service to provide for those who seek it out. It's not like I'm trying to belittle star reading or anything," Rau Lea added. It was unusual for him to try to explain himself so carefully, but perhaps he was feeling apologetic for how he had acted before. Gamley, meanwhile, just nodded with a smile and held out a fresh bottle toward him.

"Well then, why not share a drink as proof of our friendship? You know, I think it's delightful, how bright and courageous you people of the forest's edge are. Not that I'm trying to bring up that song again or anything, but I'd say that's something you have in common with southerners."

“Hmm. So you lot have traveled to Jagar and Sym too?” Rau Lea asked while accepting the bottle.

“That’s right,” Gamley replied with a nod. “We’re planning to head to Jagar once we leave Genos. And we were in Sym before this. Now, Sym’s got a lot to recommend it, but the people there don’t smile at all, so it feels so much more worthwhile to ply our trade in Jagar.”

“Yeah, those folks from Sym don’t seem to even know how to make proper expressions. But then again, there are a lot of people like that here at the forest’s edge too, and I’m plenty fond of them,” Rau Lea remarked with an amused smile, glancing up at Yamiru Lea. “Are you just going to keep standing there forever? It’s not like you’re in banquet clothes, so you shouldn’t have any problem with sitting on the ground.”

“Yes...that’s true,” Yamiru Lea replied, kneeling down beside Rau Lea. Gamley and Rolo both smiled, while the remaining pair kept their heads lowered.

“You all spend your lives constantly going from place to place, don’t you? How does that feel?” Yamiru Lea then asked.

“How does it feel? Well...I don’t think that’s something I can explain simply. In some ways it’s the best, and in others it’s the worst,” Gamley said with a grin as he skewered some meat. “Still, this is the only way that we can live. Just imagining what it would be like to live in the same place for years on end makes my head hurt.”

“I see.”

“Do you have an interest in the nomadic life? We’d gladly welcome a beautiful girl like you into our ranks.”

Yamiru Lea gulped without thinking.

However, Rau Lea just laughed. “Our people can’t live away from the forest. We spend our lives here, and this is where our souls will return to. That’s our way of life.”

Yamiru Lea stared at her clan head from the side. He looked as graceful as any woman, yet he had a bold, resolute smile on his face. His light blue eyes shined with a strength fitting for a hunter of the forest’s edge. He could be a bit short-

tempered and childish, but he was managing to lead the Lea clan successfully at the young age of only seventeen. That made him around the same age as the Dom clan head, from what Yamiru Lea recalled. The two of them were also similar in their daring nature and lack of restraint too.

Their resoluteness seemed dazzling to Yamiru Lea, and it was something she was deeply jealous of. It was a strength the people of the forest's edge had that allowed them to believe with certainty that what they were doing was right, and to proudly, boldly charge forward down the path they thought was correct without any hesitation.

Yamiru Lea lightly bit her lip as she stared at the old hooded man. He hadn't moved at all as he quietly sat, leaning against a tree. Honestly, he looked more like a lifeless decoration than anything.

"Railanos, was it? Do you require payment in order to read stars?"

Rau Lea turned to look at her dubiously, and Gamley seemed amused as he played with his beard. "We can't accept any coins at a banquet we were invited to as guests. If you wish, I will do any reading you please."

"You're interested in star reading, Yamiru? You sure are an eccentric woman," Rau Lea said. At the same time, Sheera Ruu started calling out that the whole-roast giba was ready, so he rose to his feet, his eyes sparkling with anticipation. "Well then, I'll go grab us some meat. You guests can wait here."

"Ah, I'll assist you," Rolo chimed in, and the two of them departed, leaving just Yamiru Lea and the three troupe members. She then moved closer to the old man and sat in front of him.

"In that case, could you tell me my fortune—the future that lies ahead of me?"

"Very well," the man said, his hand emerging from his cloak. In it he held a necklace made up of transparent stones.

"Could I ask for your name and age, and the month in which you were born?"

"My name is Yamiru Lea. I am twenty-one, and I was born in the green month. Do you not need the day of my birth as well?"

“Oh, the people of the forest’s edge remember the day as well? It’s rare to find westerners who keep track of that,” Gamley remarked.

Still facing the old man, Yamiru Lea nodded and replied, “Yes. We celebrate that date as our birthday alongside our clan members. But as you say, westerners do not have any such tradition.”

“Yes, and southerners don’t either. But your star can be read more accurately with that information.”

“How fortunate. I was born on the thirtieth of the green month.”

“The thirtieth of the green month,” the old man repeated while fiddling with the jangling necklace, his lightless eyes fixed on Yamiru Lea. Apparently, he was blind. His gaunt face, his cheeks and forehead included, had strange patterns drawn across them.

“You fall under the snake star...and rather unusually, it is the two-headed snake star.”

“The two-headed snake?”

“Yes. It is a star of ill omen, which invites calamity that shall throw the world into chaos.”

Yamiru Lea gripped her skirt around her hips as a chill ran down the back of her neck.

“And this star was born of the even more calamitous fire dragon star. They are both stars of misfortune that greedily devour the fates of others.”

Yamiru Lea was dumbstruck.

“However, the fire dragon star that gave rise to the two-headed snake star has perished. The grand lion star led a great many others to snuff it out. What a brilliant shine.” The old man’s eyelids that hid his sightless eyes fluttered slightly. “The grand lion star led the wolf star, the dog star, the leopard star, the hawk star, the cat star, the monkey star. This brought forth a radiance akin to a meteor shower, wiping out the fire dragon star. And this is...a black abyss?”

“A black abyss? I’ve never heard of such a thing in a reading before,” Gamley muttered in a low voice. He must have been taking care not to interfere with

the old man's revelations.

"A black abyss...? No, a black star...? Ah, my apologies, I was mistaken..."

"Mistaken?"

"I cannot read this black abyss. It is a star that is not a star at all, so there is nothing to be said about it. However, it did bring about the chance encounter between the grand lion and the dragon, which led to the dragon star's destruction."

"But I'm the snake, not the dragon, correct?" Yamiru Lea asked in a whisper.

"Yes," the old man replied in a hoarse voice. "The two-headed snake lost its father, the dragon, as it devoured its own tail. It is akin to a ring of repeating agony, an unending death."

"Repeating agony?" Yamiru Lea almost let a laugh escape her. It was as if something wicked sealed away deep in her chest were trying to wriggle free—a mix of tremendous terror and pleasure coiling around her heart.

"So repeated agony and an unending death are to be my fate?"

"No," the old man replied, his fingers fumbling with the jangling necklace. His gaunt face was damp with sweat. "Since this is a two-headed snake, it cannot form a perfect loop. It has two heads, but not two tails."

"I don't understand. I want to know the ultimate conclusion to all this, whatever it may be."

"There is no conclusion to tell."

"There isn't? Then what exactly have I been listening to you for?" Yamiru Lea sensed that something was wrong with her cheeks. Perhaps she was grinning? She didn't want to smile, yet her lips had gone and pulled back all on their own. It was a truly strange sensation, like her whole body was convulsing.

"The circle has collapsed. The head that ate the tail and the tail eaten by the head have broken off and fallen into the dark depths. All that remains is the other head. Instead of a two-headed snake, it is now a single snake head."

"But isn't the snake star itself related to death and rebirth?" Gamley quietly interjected, and the old man nodded in response.

“This snake head shall shed its old skin and be reborn. It will take time, as it lacks a body, but it should eventually shine brighter than it ever did before. But until that old skin is shed, I cannot read this star’s future.”

“Is the snake head a star of misfortune?”

“No,” the old man answered. “The two-headed snake is such a star, indeed, but it is no longer that star. It is merely a simple snake head, more helpless than a tiny newborn snake, unable to even move on its own. A weak star that laments its own powerlessness.”

Yamiru Lea listened silently as he continued to speak.

“But the dog star beside this snake star shall protect it...until the day that it reclaims its powerful glow.”

Just then, someone suddenly tapped Yamiru Lea’s shoulder. Having been half entranced by the star reader’s words, she barely managed to stop herself from shrieking as she turned around.

“What are you so surprised about? Here, I brought some whole-roast giba.”

It was Rau Lea, holding a huge plate with both hands. Yamiru Lea almost fell to the ground, but she caught herself and slowly shook her head.

“You’re still doing that star reading thing, huh? You really are an eccentric one.” After setting the plate down, Rau Lea flopped to the ground. Then he leaned in close to Yamiru Lea’s face and said, “Hmm? What are you crying for, Yamiru?”

“I’m doing no such thing. I ask that you refrain from suggesting such nonsense.”

“But there are tears running down your face,” Rau Lea retorted, reaching out a finger. He gently touched Yamiru Lea’s cheek beneath her eye, making her pull back with an angry frown, but shockingly enough, the tip of his finger was indeed slightly damp. “Old man, what in the world did you say to Yamiru? Depending on your answer, I may need to have a word with you”

“Stop that, clan head. This man did nothing wrong. I simply got a bit of dirt in my eye.”

“Really? It’s a crime to lie, Yamiru,” Rau Lea said, bringing his face in closer. His light blue eyes were shining, strong and bright like the stars in the night sky.

Yamiru Lea quickly wiped her eyes and smiled. “I mean it. Have I ever lied to you before?”

“You lie all the time. Do you not get how much that worries me?” Rau Lea asked in a firm tone, grabbing her shoulder tightly. “Lying is a crime, but more importantly, there’s no reason for you to lie in the first place. You should just speak your mind honestly. If your words are mistaken, I’ll correct you, and if you’re right and make someone else angry, I’ll protect you. So don’t hide your heart from your companions.”



“You can’t even imagine how difficult that is for me.”

“Of course I can’t. But I at least get that you’re suffering, Yamiru.” His light blue eyes were staring straight at Yamiru Lea, as if they were looking right into her core. They were the wild, merciless eyes of a hunter of the forest’s edge. Yamiru Lea didn’t understand how he was always able to keep looking forward. He was so dazzling that she found it difficult to face him head-on.

Yamiru Lea gave a small sigh, and slapped her clan head’s hand off her shoulder. “Even if we are clan members, it isn’t proper to touch a woman not related to you by blood so lightly. That is a greater crime than lying, is it not?”

“You sure do like to run your mouth. But if that’s how you want it, you shouldn’t worry me so much,” Rau Lea grumbled as he lowered his hand. However, Yamiru Lea could still feel its heat on her shoulder.

That repulsive wriggling feeling deep in her stomach had completely vanished, as if it had been a bad dream. The old man, meanwhile, returned his necklace to its place within his cloak and stared at the ground once more, as lifeless as a statue.

More helpless than a newborn snake, unable to even move on its own... That was undoubtedly the truth. Yamiru Lea was likely weaker than anyone else at the forest’s edge. Or were Diga and Doddo still struggling just as much, unable to find their own paths forward? Without knowing the right path to take, one could never truly have peace of mind.

“Sorry for the wait. I brought some fruit wine too,” Rolo said as she returned.

“Well done!” Gamley cheerfully called out. “All right, why don’t we celebrate our meeting with the people of the forest’s edge once more? How does that sound to you all?”

“Yes, I’ll have some,” Yamiru Lea said, accepting a bottle from Rolo.

“What’s that? You’re drinking too? It’s been a while since I’ve seen you drink fruit wine, Yamiru,” Rau Lea remarked, pouting a bit as his eyes opened wide in surprise. Yamiru Lea just stuck her tongue out a bit at him.

“I simply feel like it today. I don’t think you have any right to complain about

that, considering how often you get full-on drunk.”

Rau Lea did not respond to that, though his expression did change.

“Why are you making such a strange face?”

“Well, it kinda shocked me, how childish you looked for a moment there. It was really cute. And it wasn’t just childish, it was sexy at the same time.”

“If letting your thoughts spew out like that is supposed to be an appropriate way to act, I’d rather take my own path.”

Yamiru Lea took a sip of fruit wine. The strong alcohol in the drink burned her throat. It had indeed been a while since she’d last had any, so there was definitely a chance that she could end up drunk by the end of the night.

But now that I think about it... What sort of animal was a dog, again? Yamiru Lea pondered that question while staring at her frowning clan head.

Lively sounds still filled the air from behind their group. Having eaten their fill of whole-roast giba, the troupe members had resumed their musical performance as well.

It seemed it would still be quite some time before the night’s festivities came to a close.

Group Performance: The Nature of a Leading Clan Head

1

The soul of Dogran Ruu, the former head of the Ruu clan, had returned to the forest roughly fifteen years ago.

At the time, Jiza Ruu had been only eight years old, but anyone over the age of five was recognized as a proper person of the forest's edge, so he had been allowed to be present for Dogran Ruu's final moments alongside his family and the heads of the branch houses.

Dogran Ruu had been laid down in the main hall, and was groaning in pain. It wasn't from illness, however. No, Jiza Ruu's grandfather had suffered a serious injury hunting giba, and it seemed his soul would soon return to the forest.

The man had not yet reached the age of fifty and was still strong enough to make it into the top eight in the contests of strength held between hunters. Yet now, Dogran Ruu was on his deathbed. His leg had been pierced by a giba's horn, after which he had been slammed into a tree, resulting in broken ribs that had damaged his internal organs.

Apparently, he had told the hunters to leave him out in the forest, as there was no saving him. But the Ruu hunters had carried him back home even so. Since it would take some time for him to die, Jiza Ruu's father Donda Ruu had declared that his family should come to say farewell.

"Hmph... I've shed so much blood, and even breathing is a struggle... It seems dying isn't an easy thing to do..." Dogran Ruu eventually wheezed sluggishly, his voice slipping out between his gritted teeth. The blood that ran down from the corner of his mouth as he did so was wiped away by his wife Tito Min Ruu with a cloth.

There were fifteen people gathered in the main hall. They included six

members of the main house: the eldest son who would inherit the post of clan head, Donda Ruu; his wife, Mia Lea Ruu; their children Jiza and Vina Ruu; Dogran Ruu's mother and the elder of the clan, Jiba Ruu; and the man's wife, Tito Min Ruu. The rest were all heads of the branch houses and subordinate clans. Jiza Ruu's siblings who weren't five years old yet were being watched by women from the branch houses in their bedrooms.

"Donda... As of today, you will be the head of the Ruu clan... In that role, you will guide our five subordinate clans..."

"Yes," Donda Ruu replied in a low voice. He was currently twenty-seven years old, and not only was he skilled enough to make it into the top eight in contests of strength, he had even defeated his father many times in recent years. He was most certainly capable enough to inherit control of the Ruu.

Donda Ruu's blue eyes blazed like an inferno as they remained fixed on his dying father.

With his eyes still firmly shut, Dogran Ruu continued, "I was going to turn fifty soon... That's a fine enough age to meet my end out in the forest... But I'm certain you will be able to lead our people with greater strength than I have..."

"I shall."

"My one regret is that I couldn't strike down that accursed Zattsu Suun with my own hands... You're more hot-blooded than I am, so I'm sure that must be even more vexing to you..."

"That's not true. I believe that you led our clan better than anyone else could have, father."

"Ha ha... So even you can be high-minded at a time like this, eh...?"

Despite how pale Dogran Ruu had become, he was still able to force himself to smile fearlessly. But as he did so, a large amount of fresh blood gushed forth from his mouth. Tito Min Ruu once again wiped it away, while Jiza Ruu held young Vina Ruu's trembling hand. The girl had only turned five a few days ago.

"Tito Min... It seems this is as far as I go... The new clan head's wife Mia Lea will take over leadership of the women... Please, continue to watch over everyone..."

“I understand. You have nothing to worry about.”

Tito Min Ruu gripped her husband’s hand tight. Though there were tears in her eyes, she maintained the same gentle smile she always wore.

“My mother and former clan head, Jiba... Please guide the young clan head with your strong spirit and exceptional wisdom...”

“Yes... I never imagined I would tend to you at your deathbed... But I promise, I shall continue to support the Ruu clan until my body gives out...”

Jiba Ruu was already over seventy years old, but her small frame was still as full of vitality as any woman. She stared at her son with kind eyes that were partially hidden behind drooping eyelids but still seemed like they could see through anything and anyone.

“And Jiza... Is Jiza here...?”

“I’m here. So is Vina.”



Jiza Ruu moved forward to look directly at Dogran Ruu's face. His grandfather's bright red hair curled like whirling flames. However, there was no life left in his stony visage, and his breathing was steadily getting weaker.

"As the oldest son, you will someday inherit the seat of clan head from Donda... Burn my death and Donda's way of life into your eyes...so that you can guide the Ruu down the proper path..."

"It's okay now, Dogran. Everyone understands," Tito Min Ruu said quietly, running her fingers through her husband's red hair.

A single tear fell from her eye and landed on her husband's forehead...and then Dogran Ruu's soul returned to the mother forest, a satisfied smile on his face.

When people of the forest's edge lost their lives, their bodies were returned to the forest along with their souls. Whether man or woman, the tribe's custom was to bury their remains among the trees.

No one knew where their souls went after returning to the forest. Did they dissolve into the forest and grant their people new strength, or were they reborn as another person or a beast? That all came down to the will of the forest, so there was no point in thinking about it, according to their traditions.

Dogran Ruu's body was returned to the forest as custom dictated that very night. In order to ensure that mundt and giiz wouldn't dig up the hole, it had to be dug deep into the earth. Sometimes a hunter's cloak and blade would be handed down to his children, but in this instance, they were buried with him.

A large number of torches were lit so that giba wouldn't approach, and the men worked together to dig the hole. As they did, the women and children made short statements collectively eulogizing the departed, celebrating his forty-nine years of life.

And then, the following day arrived. The morning sun rose as if nothing had occurred, blanketing the Ruu settlement in dazzling light.

No matter how much sadness and grief they felt, people of the forest's edge

were not permitted to neglect their daily tasks. It was only natural to be sad after losing family, but there was no point in making a show of it. Seeing such a thing would surely not bring peace to the soul of the departed either. And so, those who were left behind hid their grief for the loss of their loved one deep inside themselves and kept on earnestly striving to live their own lives. That was the way of things for the people of the forest's edge.

That was why Jiza Ruu was now carrying out his morning work rather than spending time with his family. That meant drying out the pico leaves the women had picked on sheets in front of the house. Without pico leaves, meat couldn't be preserved, so this was a very important task. Jiza Ruu felt pride at having been given the job as he laid out the small leaves atop the sheets.

It was then that a man approached: Ryada Ruu, the head of a branch house.

"Jiza Ruu, is Donda still sleeping?"

"Oh, Ryada Ruu... Yes, there's still time until the sun hits its peak, so I believe he should be resting in his bedroom."

"I see," Ryada Ruu responded, his composed gaze fixed on Jiza Ruu.

Ryada Ruu was Donda Ruu's youngest brother, but they didn't look alike at all. He was still only twenty years old and had a slender build with long blackish-brown hair. Despite the sharp look in his eyes, his expression was always calm and composed, and Jiza Ruu had never seen the man get worked up.

"Do you have some business with my father? If you do, I'll wake him up."

"No, that won't be necessary," he said before going quiet. In addition to being a composed man, he was also not particularly talkative.

Ryada Ruu had taken a wife at the age of seventeen, and had left the main house when Jiza Ruu was five. He'd had a child soon after that, with his oldest daughter soon turning five and his next child on the verge of turning one. The main house had more children than that, though, so the branch houses worked together to help raise them all.

"Is your youngest brother Ludo Ruu doing well? I heard he was quite a small baby."

“Yes. Jiba and Tito Min are always smiling about him and saying he’s little but full of energy, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I see,” Ryada Ruu replied before going silent again. Jiza Ruu had always appreciated how quiet of a man he was, but today, it was a bit concerning.

“What’s the matter, Ryada Ruu? From the look on your face, something seems to be worrying you.”

“No, not exactly... There’s just something that’s weighing on my mind a bit,” Ryada Ruu replied. Then he nodded and said, “Yes, I believe I would like to speak to Donda before heading into the forest after all. My apologies, but could you wake him?”

“Yes,” Jiza Ruu said, standing up and running off toward the main house. When he opened the door at the entrance, a baby instantly started crying out. It was Ludo Ruu, who his mother was holding. The two-year-old Reina Ruu was asleep in a woven basket, while the five-year-old Vina Ruu and four-year-old Darmu Ruu were staring at her as she slept. Jiba and Tito Min Ruu seemed to have gone outside to handle some work.

“Oh my, what are you doing here? There’s always a chance that it might start raining out of nowhere, so you mustn’t step away from the pico leaves, Jiza.”

“Ryada Ruu is watching them, so it’s fine. He asked me to wake Papa Donda.”

“I see. Donda is in the bedroom, but he should already be awake. Vina, could you go fetch him?”

“Yeah,” Vina Ruu replied before taking off toward the bedroom. It seemed Donda Ruu really was awake, as it didn’t take him very long to show up.

Donda Ruu was even taller than Ryada Ruu, and his build was a fair bit more robust. The two brothers had been born seven years apart, with another brother and a sister separating them. That meant the gap between them was about as big as the one between Jiza Ruu and his youngest brother Ludo Ruu, so the young boy couldn’t help but wonder if he and his brother would eventually have a relationship similar to that of his father and uncle.

“Ryada Ruu is calling for you. He says he wants to talk before heading into the forest.”

"I see," Donda Ruu replied, sitting down in the entranceway and putting on his leather footwear. He had the same strong light as always shining in his blue eyes, and his taut and strict-looking face was unchanged as well. However, he seemed to be extra untalkative, undoubtedly because he had lost his father Dogran Ruu just yesterday.

When Jiza Ruu exited the house alongside his father, they found Ryada Ruu standing in the same place, silently staring down at the pico leaves.

"What sort of business do you have with me so early in the morning, Ryada?"

"I just wanted to have a bit of a talk with you." Ryada Ruu's eyes turned to glance pointedly at Jiza Ruu. But rather than moving elsewhere, he seemed to decide it would be fine to continue with what he wanted to say. "Donda, what do you intend to do?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. I'm talking about the quarrel with the Suun," Ryada Ruu said, his tone remaining perfectly calm. "I went to the Suun settlement for the clan head meeting last year, and saw Zattsu Suun with my own eyes. Honestly, it surprised me that he was such a formidable man."

"Hmph, so seeing our infamous leading clan head in the flesh made you timid?"

"Of course it did. That man, he's stronger than anyone in the Ruu. Stronger than our father Dogran, or even you. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen him myself."

Those words shocked Jiza Ruu. The eight-year-old boy had earnestly believed nobody at the forest's edge could be stronger than Dogran and Donda Ruu, or the other hunters under the Ruu who made it to the top eight.

"On top of that, the Suun have blood ties with the northern clans. Our subordinate clans, the Lea and Rutim in particular, have become much stronger over time...but they're no match for the Zaza and Dom."

Donda Ruu offered no response.

"I know full well that if the crime from five years ago truly occurred, we

cannot simply leave the Suun be. I understand our father Dogran's regrets painfully well. But I don't believe brandishing our blades in a blind rage is the proper path forward. If we lose this fight, the women and children left behind will have no way to live on."

"I'm fully aware of all that."

"Are you really? The fate of six clans rests on your shoulders. The Ruu, Rutim, Lea, Min, Maam, and Muufa. Around eighty of our brethren belong to these clans, and your every action determines what will become of them all."

"Do I really look like I'm that thirsty for blood, Ryada?" Donda Ruu asked with a dauntless grin. However, there was profound anger swirling about in his blue eyes. "Our father Dogran wished to bring stability to the forest's edge, not destroy it. And if the Ruu took up blades, it wouldn't just be our subordinates, but the whole of the settlement at the forest's edge that would fall to ruin. The fight would never end until either every single hunter who follows the Suun draws his last breath, or every hunter who opposes them does."

"Yes, and that is why our father Dogran sheathed his blade and turned a blind eye to the crimes of the Suun. But our current clan head isn't our father. It's you, Donda. Can you overlook the Suun's crimes, just as he did?"

Donda Ruu suddenly grabbed Ryada Ruu by the chest and spat back, "As if I could do that! The Suun aren't fit to lead our people! Zattsu Suun is a despicable bastard who cast aside his pride as a hunter! How could I ever accept such a man being the leading clan head!"

"But Donda..."

"But even so, what good would it do at this point to try to rehash something that happened five years ago? I'm certain that they abducted that Muufa woman, but there was no clear proof, so our clans laid down their blades. If we pick them up now, the clans who don't fall under us will simply ignore us. And we have no hope of winning like that." Donda Ruu then roughly pushed Ryada Ruu away with a "Hmph!"

Ryada Ruu stared at his brother, his emotions not shaken in the least. "So, what do you intend to do, Donda?"

“That should be obvious. We’ll continue to build our strength until they commit another unforgivable crime. We need to become strong enough to beat the Suun and the northern clans. Then we can finally wipe away the regrets of our father, whose soul returned to the forest with this travesty left unresolved.”

“Patience may be the word that suits you least of all, Donda,” Ryada Ruu said, prompting Donda Ruu to give him an angry shove on his chest.

“Is that any way to talk to your older brother?”

“Well, I have to say I’m impressed. We just lost our father last night, yet you’ve already found your resolve as our new clan head,” Ryada Ruu said with a smile. It might have been the first one that Jiza Ruu had ever seen on the man. “I’m sorry for underestimating you. I swear on my pride as a hunter that I shall abide by your words. As the head of the main Ruu house, show us the proper path forward, Donda.”

“Hmph,” Donda Ruu snorted, and then he glanced down at Jiza Ruu. “What’s with that blank expression, Jiza?”

“I’m burning my clan head’s way of life into my eyes, just as the previous clan head Dogran told me to do. That’s all.”

“Can you really see properly when you have your eyes narrowed like that?” Donda Ruu bluntly muttered, and then he rustled Jiza Ruu’s hair.

It was the first time in a while that he had felt his father’s hand, and it felt unbelievably large and full of strength.

2

Time continued to pass, and as it did, the young Jiza Ruu came to understand a great many things.

The leading Suun clan were a heinous lot, and the previous clan head Dogran Ruu had been sharpening his fangs for years in order to someday pass judgment on them. But the Ruu still lacked the necessary strength, and there was no clear proof of the Suun clan’s crimes. He had been forced to sit and endure at the clan head meetings that were held each year, and in the end he had left this world filled with regret, with Donda Ruu inheriting his post as clan head.

Even so, Donda Ruu kept on biding his time. Eventually, the Suun would commit a crime they couldn't talk their way out of, and before that happened, the Ruu would have to gain enough strength to surpass both them and the northern clans. He had properly taken up the path that the previous clan head Dogran Ruu had laid out.

Around five years after Donda Ruu became clan head, Zattsu Suun fell ill and his son Zuuro Suun became the next leading clan head. Unlike his father, Zuuro Suun seemed to lack any strength whatsoever as a hunter. He had definitely inherited his father's arrogance and despicable nature, but it was easy to imagine even the youngest Ruu hunter sending his head flying without much trouble at all.

Even so, Donda Ruu didn't budge. Even if the Suun had lost the strength, the northern clans under them were only growing more and more powerful.

With the changing of the leading clan head, the Suun had also grown more cautious. Actually, more than that, they seemed to be noticeably afraid of the Ruu. Any sort of failure on their part would result in the leading clan head Zuuro Suun throwing away his pride and bowing his head to make sure everything wrapped up smoothly. Even so, they kept up with their evildoing in the shadows, causing the members of the smaller clans and the townsfolk to suffer.

"The northern clans might actually get fed up with the Suun before we're ready to take up our blades," Donda Ruu said once, but he still didn't make a move. He wouldn't strike until there was clear proof, so that he could bring stability rather than ruin to the forest's edge. In order to see his vows through, he displayed such self-restraint that it was as if he were made of steel, which Jiza Ruu had long felt was something that Donda Ruu had inherited from his father.

Over time, his younger brothers had matured into splendid hunters, and he felt that both of them had each inherited something invaluable from their father.

The second brother, Darmu Ruu, had inherited their father's blazing ferocity. He would never allow anyone to oppose him and had an intense temperament that would burn down everything that stood in his way. On top of that, it was

said that he looked the most similar to how their father did as a young man.

The youngest brother, Ludo Ruu, seemed to inherit Donda Ruu's potential as a hunter. Naturally, due to the age gap between them, he still couldn't measure up to his older brothers in contests of strength. However, making it into the top eight at the age of fifteen was a feat neither Jiza nor Darmu Ruu had managed. And despite the fact that he had an exceptionally slight build, he managed to bring down just as many giba as his older brothers.

And what had Jiza Ruu inherited? He felt that it was probably his strong spirit and self-discipline. Or put another way, perhaps it was the weight of having been born the eldest son of the main house.

However, as things would turn out, the Suun clan eventually fell without anyone needing to take up arms, and the Ruu became one of the new leading clans. That meant that becoming the head of the main Ruu house now entailed not only being burdened with the future of the subordinate clans, but of all of their people.

A misjudgment could very well bring ruin to the people of the forest's edge. Just like the Suun had been gradually leading them to their downfall, the character of a leading clan head could have a major influence on the fate of their people as a whole.

Jiza Ruu needed to be resolved to endure the weight of having to live his life more properly than any of his comrades.

Darmu and Ludo Ruu seemed to be worse at controlling their emotions than most. Their fierce spirit was undoubtedly part of the Ruu bloodline, as their sisters also exhibited the trait, and the clan head before the previous one, Jiba Ruu, had apparently had a burning hot temper in her youth.

Jiza Ruu had apparently inherited the calmness that Ryada and Shin Ruu possessed instead. Ryada Ruu had originally been a member of the main house himself, after all. He was also Jiba Ruu's grandson and Dogran Ruu's son. Clearly, both raging spirit and stoic calm were fundamental parts of the Ruu clan's nature. It wasn't as if people only had one side to them. Both of those aspects could undoubtedly exist within the same person, like how Ryada Ruu had a fierceness to him while Darmu and Ludo Ruu could be calm as well. And

that also went for Jiza Ruu.

He most certainly wasn't the type to lose control of himself easily. In fact, he was well aware that he had a tendency to hide his own ferocious spirit from others. It wasn't as if he couldn't understand when his younger brothers got angry or happy, but he did feel that they lacked the ability to restrain themselves. For his brothers, though, that was fine. No matter how wild they might be, it was no issue as long as they didn't stray from the proper path. In fact, Jiza Ruu even found that side of them charming. However, Jiza Ruu didn't have the leeway to simply act as he pleased. No matter how much something might shake him, he always needed to stop and think in order to figure out the best way to respond.

Donda Ruu was already forty-two years old. There were only a few years left until he would be as old as the previous clan head had been when he had perished in the forest. Furthermore, he had become clan head at the age of twenty-seven. Jiza Ruu himself would soon turn twenty-four, so it wouldn't be long before he reached that age as well.

On top of that, Donda Ruu had been seriously injured in the fight with the lord of the forest. Fortunately, it seemed he would be able to regain his strength as a hunter given time, but if he had made a single misstep during his confrontation with the beast, Jiza Ruu could easily have already been forced to succeed him as leading clan head.

As he was now, could Jiza Ruu properly guide his people? He really couldn't say for certain. However, there was no escaping his destiny. As long as he didn't perish before his father, he would undoubtedly inherit the post one day, and he felt like he needed to develop so much more of the right kind of strength before that day came.

"Um, did you fall asleep?" a young woman worriedly asked, rousing Jiza Ruu from his thoughts.

When he turned to look, he found two girls standing there, both of them daughters of innkeepers from the post town.

"Did I look like I was sleeping?"

It was currently the tenth of the silver month, the day of the friendship banquet for which a large number of people from all walks of life throughout Genos had been invited to the Ruu settlement. Jiza Ruu had withdrawn to the edge of the plaza some time ago, where he had been looking over the festivities without truly seeing them while getting lost in his thoughts. But he hadn't even been seated, much less lying down.

"I mean, you haven't budged in the slightest for a while now, so I thought maybe you hunters from the forest's edge could sleep while standing up," the girl whose shoulders and stomach were exposed like a woman of the forest's edge remarked with an amused laugh. He was fairly certain her name was Yumi.

The other girl looked rather timid, and she was staring up at Jiza Ruu with a shy smile. Her name was Telia Mas, and as he well knew, she had been a victim of the crimes committed by the Suun.

"We actually have a little something to discuss with you," Yumi said while thrusting the large plate she was holding at Jiza Ruu. Telia Mas also had a similarly sized plate. Atop them sat the baked poitan sweets and chatchi mochi that his younger sister Rimee Ruu and a few of the others had made.

"Can we give these sweets to the little kids?"

"Little kids?"

"Yeah. The kids under five are all in one of these houses, aren't they? I feel bad for them not getting to enjoy this feast, so we figured we could at least bring them some sweets."

That certainly was an odd request. Jiza Ruu stroked his chin as he looked down at the girls. "There's no need for you to worry yourselves about such things. Only those who have reached the age of five are acknowledged as truly belonging to our people here at the forest's edge."

"Huh? Isn't that a bit cold? If you're not at least five, you don't get to eat any feasts?"

"All of our people were raised as such, so I don't see any reason to treat the children differently now."

"But your son Kota Ruu is one of those kids, isn't he?! If we bring him these,

I'm sure it'll make him happy."

"He may be my child, but that does not mean I can give him special treatment. That would be unfair to everyone else."

Yumi made a loud "Tch!" with her tongue. "You're so strict! You're the oldest son of the main Ruu house, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Then you'll be the next leading clan head! So can't you just change those old-fashioned traditions if you decide it's the right thing to do?"

Jiza Ruu was truly stunned. "The laws and customs of the forest's edge are not to be treated so lightly. Though children are not considered to be proper members of our people until the age of five, we still treasure them before that. They are not allowed to participate in banquets, but they are also not tasked with doing work around the house. That is simply how we protect our children."

"Then can't you overlook us giving them sweets? Wouldn't you be glad to see Kota Ruu happy?"

Jiza Ruu gave a small sigh and shook his head. "I would not go so far as to say that sharing food with them would be breaking a taboo. But I cannot simply declare it acceptable to give them food that's been prepared for family and guests. If you really wish to do this, you should seek permission from our clan head Donda."

"Jeez! You're so inflexible! Okay, got it. So we just have to ask the leading clan head? Come on, Telia Mas, let's go!"

"Uh, right."

Yumi hurriedly turned back toward the center of the plaza, but Telia Mas timidly bowed to Jiza Ruu first.

"I'm sorry. Yumi can be a bit impulsive, but I'm sure she didn't mean to offend you. She came up with this idea because she thought Kota Ruu was way too cute."

"Yes, I believe I understand that much. And no parent would be offended by someone trying to be thoughtful on behalf of their child."

“I see. I’m glad to hear that. Well then, please excuse me.”

With one last bright smile, Telia Mas headed off after Yumi, leaving Jiza Ruu with some complicated feelings about their encounter.

It was only natural that there would be differences in opinion when interacting with townsfolk. Even more so when those townsfolk were being invited to one of their banquets. Though the girls hadn’t meant any harm with their request, as the people of the forest’s edge continued to form bonds with more and more outsiders, complicated issues such as this were sure to continue cropping up.

It has been six and a half months now since Asuta, Vina, and the rest began doing business in the post town. No one would have ever expected that our ties to the townsfolk would grow this deep in such a short period of time.

Jiza Ruu recalled what Donda Ruu had said before the banquet. Interacting with the townsfolk in the wrong way would weaken the people of the forest’s edge, just like how the Suun had strayed from the proper path when interacting with the nobles. But if they hadn’t deepened their ties with the townsfolk, it would have been nearly impossible to uncover the full truth about how far the Suun’s wicked acts had gone and how involved the nobles had been in those crimes. It was only thanks to their interactions with townsfolk such as Telia Mas’s father, the vegetable seller Dora, Kamyua Yoshu, and Melfried that they had been able to learn the truth.

And that, in turn, had brought about the Suun’s downfall. The struggle with the Suun that had been going on since the time of the previous clan head, Dogran Ruu, had ended bloodlessly without any need to draw blades. That had undoubtedly been the best path they could have taken, and that was why Donda Ruu had said he wished to keep on following that path into the future.

However, Jiza Ruu still had serious concerns. Naturally, he had celebrated the judgment that had been passed on the Suun and the nobles without the need for violence. But were the people of the forest’s edge now walking a path filled with even more hardships?

So far, things had just barely managed to work out well. However, there was no guarantee of that continuing into the future. Jiza Ruu was concerned that by

straying so far from the customs of the forest's edge, they could be inviting an even greater calamity.

For example, there was the plan to carve a path through the Morga forest's edge. If that came to pass, it wouldn't take long for a great many travelers to start using it.

Melfried had said that it was important for the people of the forest's edge to make their strength known, to ensure that no issues occurred. He had definitely been correct about that, of course. Melfried was a man who possessed steely, unshakable convictions. Jiza Ruu had never expected to find a man among the nobles who valued the law and logic so highly.

But even so, what would they do if something terrible did happen? The planned path would pass right alongside the Sauti settlement. Unfamiliar townsfolk would be passing very close to their settlement in large numbers during the parts of the day when the hunters were out in the forest, leaving only women, young children, and the elderly about. Just one person with wicked intentions could do irreparable harm to the Sauti.

Up until this point, everything had played out more or less for the best. However, it wasn't as if there hadn't been any danger. Arrows had been shot at the leading clan heads during the meeting with Cycлаeus, and Asuta had been kidnapped by a noble. Also, in both the Gamley Troupe's tent and the town of Dabagg, bandits had attacked several of the people of the forest's edge. Those difficulties had all been overcome, but that might not always be the case.

Without thinking, Jiza Ruu had started looking out over the plaza again.

Asuta and Ai Fa were happily enjoying their food under the bright light of the bonfires. Seated beside them were that chef from the castle town, Roy, and one of the traveling performers, Pino.

The Fa clan brought all of this to pass.

The path walked by the people of the forest's edge had shifted greatly in this past half year, and Asuta and Ai Fa had undoubtedly been the ones to cause those changes. If Asuta had never come to the forest's edge, or if Ai Fa hadn't accepted him into her clan, this path their people were following would never have opened up to them. Jiza Ruu had previously considered those occurrences

to be threats and had warned Asuta about his behavior. Even so, the chef had refused to back down, and his participation in the clan head meeting had directly resulted in the downfall of the Suun. Donda Ruu had determined that the path he had shown them was the correct one, and as a result, all of the people of the forest's edge had accepted him and were now walking that path together.

However, Jiza Ruu would be the next leading clan head. After Donda Ruu retired, it would be up to him to decide what path his people should take. Would Asuta turn out to be a medicine or a poison for the forest's edge? Would his actions bring about prosperity or disaster? As the leader of his people, Jiza Ruu would need to determine that.

However, at this point, even Jiza Ruu was coming to accept Asuta. He didn't know exactly when he had started to feel that way. All this time, he had stood alongside his father, cautiously keeping an eye on Asuta's actions. Just like Gulaf Zaza was trying to have Sufira Zaza do now, he had watched Asuta resolutely in order to determine if the chef's actions were bettering his people or harming them.

Virtually everyone in the Ruu and their subordinate clans now accepted Asuta and Ai Fa. Darmu Ruu seemed to have taken issue with them a good bit, but that had been due to his own personal concerns. It wasn't as if he had acted with the future of the forest's edge in mind.

Even at this banquet, Jiza Ruu's family and the members of the subordinate clans looked truly happy. Thanks to Asuta, they had learned how wonderful it was to have good food to eat and had formed new bonds with the townsfolk, both of which seemed to be positive changes. Certainly, nobody who was in attendance here tonight would object to what the members of the Fa clan were doing.

On an emotional level, Jiza Ruu felt that that was only right. Asuta's and Ai Fa's actions had brought great strength and joy to the Ruu. Even Jiza Ruu couldn't deny that fact. Those feelings had been budding in his chest ever since the day he had first eaten that giba cutlet dish.

However, Jiza Ruu would be the next leader of his people. He couldn't let

emotion alone sway him. No matter how much joy he and his people might feel, he needed to stop and properly assess whether it was truly right or not.

Donda Ruu had a far fiercer personality than Jiza Ruu did, but for nearly twenty years he had buried his regrets and endured the actions of the Suun clan. Had he not been bound by the responsibility of being the eldest son of the main Ruu house, Donda Ruu could have easily taken up his blade at any time. But he had suppressed those feelings for the sake of the Ruu clan and the very forest's edge itself. As his father's successor, Jiza Ruu couldn't let his emotions override his reason.

If the time comes when I determine that the Fa's actions are bringing depravity or calamity to the forest's edge, I will... Jiza Ruu thought to himself, only for another figure to approach him. It was a hunter about as big as he was, with a calm and gentle look in his eyes—the young Rutim clan head, Gazraan Rutim.

"What's the matter, Jiza Ruu? You don't seem to have said a word for some time now."

"Ah, I've just been doing a bit of thinking."

"I see. Where's Sati Lea Ruu?"

"It's Sati Lea's turn to look after the young children."

"I see," Gazraan Rutim repeated, and then he moved to stand alongside Jiza Ruu.

Gazraan Rutim seemed to have grown even stronger and calmer since inheriting the seat of clan head from Dan Rutim. Jiza Ruu would surely still beat the man in a contest of strength between hunters, but he seemed to possess some kind of mysterious fortitude that couldn't be measured through such an event.

"Are you still feeling hesitant, Jiza Ruu?" Gazraan Rutim asked while looking in the same direction as his companion. "You seem to be looking at Asuta and Ai Fa as if to determine whether or not they are friend or foe. If they will be medicine for the forest's edge, or poison."

"As the next leading clan head, isn't that only natural?"

“Yes, it certainly is.” Unsurprisingly, Gazraan Rutim’s voice was perfectly calm. Jiza Ruu couldn’t help but feel that he was a man who could keep complete control of himself in the truest sense. “But the answer to that question exists inside you and you alone. That is why Donda Ruu interacts with them the way he does, wouldn’t you agree?”

“What’s this about my father?”

“Though he has fully accepted the Fa clan, Donda Ruu has not used the word ‘friend’ in relation to them. That is likely due to his personality, of course. However, I’m sure he also doesn’t want to do anything that might constrain the paths you have to choose from, Jiza Ruu.”

“My paths,” Jiza Ruu muttered.

Gazraan Rutim then turned to face him. “If the clan head Donda Ruu were to use that word, it would bind the Ruu in the future. However, Ai Fa and Asuta are still young, so you will be working with them as clan head for much longer than he will. That is why I believe Donda Ruu is trying to ensure that you will have the chance to decide the future of the Ruu clan, Jiza Ruu.”

Jiza Ruu stared silently at his fellow hunter.

“Do you remember the day when Asuta said he wished to do business in the post town?”

The sudden question caught Jiza Ruu off guard. However, he could recall that day quite clearly, even now. “I remember that you accompanied Asuta and Ai Fa to the main Ruu house. Darmu had recently received multiple head injuries, so it was only my father, Ludo, and I who met with you.”

“Yes, that was the day. Asuta asked for the Ruu clan’s assistance so he could do business in the post town, and Donda Ruu said that he would accept the request, but that he would take Asuta’s right arm if he were to betray the trust of the people of the forest’s edge.”

“I remember.”

“I believe he said those words for your sake as well. Without such a weighty vow in place, I’m sure you wouldn’t have been satisfied with the outcome. And he likely also wished to convey to you how much resolve one must have when

seeking to deviate from the customs of the forest's edge."

"Are you saying my father had already accepted the actions of the Fa on an emotional level even back then?"

"Yes, but that's just my guess. However, I do believe that he might have placed such heavy restrictions on Asuta in order to show you the proper path forward as clan head."

His gaze still fixed on the plaza, Jiza Ruu said, "I see. I doubt anyone really ever knows what my father is actually thinking, but it's true that back then I found the actions of the Fa to be dangerous. Without such weighty conditions in place, I'm sure I wouldn't have accepted him allowing Asuta to employ women from the Ruu clan. It wouldn't be surprising at all if my father managed to pick up on that."

"Yes, I think so as well."

"I believe that was the right decision to make, as clan head of the Ruu. And though we weren't a leading clan yet at that point, he already understood that we needed to serve as an example in place of the Suun, so he couldn't call a foreigner like Asuta a friend lightly. Of course, Dan Rutim declared that the Fa and Rutim were friends without the slightest hesitation."

"Yes, that's the sort of man my father Dan is. Still, I don't think he was wrong to do so. After all, I called Asuta a friend before he did."

Jiza Ruu slowly turned to face Gazraan Rutim directly.

The other hunter was smiling softly, as he often did. However, there was a different sort of light in his eyes than the shine that had been there in the past. Though he was calmer and kinder than any other hunter, those eyes showed that he had the resolve to act decisively. They were as keen as the eyes of a great raguul hawk, flying through the air while fixated on its prey far below on the ground.

"It seems you've already decided on your own path, Gazraan Rutim."

"Yes. And I have no hesitation whatsoever on this matter. I shall forever be a friend to the Fa. No matter who may try to forbid me from saying so."

Jiza Ruu had no response to those words.

“But at the same time, the Rutim fall under the Ruu. I want the Rutim to stay on the path we’re currently on, with the Ruu as our parent clan and the Fa as our friends,” Gazraan Rutim said, his smile growing even gentler. “You may believe it’s too early for anyone to say this to you...but I sincerely believe that there’s nothing to worry about, Jiza Ruu.”

“Nothing to worry about?”

“Yes. You *are* going to inherit a great responsibility as leading clan head, but it will not be your burden alone. You have family, subordinate clans, and companions. A clan head leads his people, and they give him their support in return. That is how the people of the forest’s edge have always lived. The Suun strayed from that path and fell to ruin, as is only proper. I believe we owe that to the forest’s guidance.”

Once again, Jiza Ruu had no response.

“There’s nothing to worry about. You don’t have to do this by yourself. You have five hundred comrades by your side. Please, don’t forget that.”

Jiza Ruu continued to silently stare at Gazraan Rutim’s smile until yet another set of figures approached them: Jiza Ruu’s youngest sister, Rimee Ruu, and a girl from town, Tara.

“What have you been up to, Jiza?” Rimee Ruu asked. “The whole roast giba’s almost all gone.”

“Ah, right.”

The girls were such close friends, it was almost like they were sisters. They were holding hands as they walked closer, and Tara’s brown eyes were sparkling as she stared up at Jiza Ruu.

“Um, my older brothers were saying they’d like to talk with you more...if that’s okay,” Tara said.

Jiza Ruu was taken aback, and Gazraan Rutim chuckled.

“You managed to form ties with them in the post town and the Daleim lands, right? You may not have many more opportunities to see them in the future, so

I think you should spend as much time getting to know them as you can while you still have the chance.”

“That’s right, so why don’t we all eat together?” Rimee Ruu suggested, wrapping her free hand around Jiza Ruu’s fingers. Tara then timidly grabbed his other hand.

And so, Jiza Ruu stepped back into the plaza that was filled with dazzling light, where it looked like his comrades were truly enjoying the banquet as they bonded with their guests from town.

Group Performance: Two-Headed Snake

1

“Sorry for taking so long, but I have your food here,” Oura called out, carrying a large number of plates. Mida was also standing behind her, holding at least twice as many plates as she was. Seeing that, Yamiru Lea moved to the edge of the mat she was sitting on so the two of them could sit as well.

It was the tenth of the silver month, the day of the friendship banquet when people from town were invited to the Ruu settlement. Though darkness had descended upon the world around them, the plaza was illuminated by a number of brilliant bonfires. In front of the largest of them—the ritual fire—two traveling performers were having contests of strength with the hunters.

“They’re amazing, aren’t they? I never imagined there would be anyone out there who could compete with hunters of the forest’s edge,” Oura said while laying out the plates.

Tsuwai then stuck her head out from behind her mother. “I’m astounded by how you only got meat dishes. I was just starting to like poitan too.”

“Mida brought the poitan. Could I have that plate, Mida?”

“Yeah...” Mida replied, his cheeks trembling. He had shed a decent amount of excess fat over time, but he was still too rotund to simply set the plate down next to his feet.

“Oh my, those townsfolk left?” Oura asked.

“That father and daughter pair left not long after you two. They’re chefs as well, so they didn’t feel like waiting around for food to be delivered,” Yamiru Lea answered.

She had been asking about Myme and Mikel, who were residents of the Turan lands. Asuta’s group had also dropped by after Oura and Mida had stepped away, but they had left even sooner, leaving only a handful of women of the

forest's edge sitting on this particular mat.

The Min and Muufa women noticed Mida's arrival and moved aside to make space for him, since there still wasn't enough for him to sit in with his huge frame after Yamiru Lea had changed positions. Mida's eyes blinked on his plump face, and then he said, "Thank you..."

"Ah, think nothing of it," the Min woman answered with a giggle. Both of those women had been helping out with business in the post town, so neither of them felt any need to avoid Mida at this point, even though he was a former member of the Suun.

"You brought back quite a lot of food. Are you not going to take part in the contests of strength, Mida?"

"Contests...?"

"Over there, with those traveling performers, see? That big one has already sent three hunters of the forest's edge flying."

Sure enough, that massive man named Doga was grappling with one hunter after another in front of the ritual fire. After absentmindedly staring that way for a bit, Mida's cheeks trembled once more and he replied, "But I'm hungry. I'm sure I can't beat that guy when my tummy's this empty."

"Oh, then what about trying once you're full? I'm sure you could win then."

"Right," Mida answered, not sounding especially interested as he sat down atop the mat.

Tsuwai gave a little snort as she looked at his huge body out of the corner of her eye. "Hmph, you're able to talk pretty casually with other women now, huh? Just a little while ago, nobody would talk to you at all."

"Mida's made it into the top eight in the contests of strength between hunters twice now. He also played a big role in that whole ordeal with the Sauti clan and the lord of the forest, so everyone related to the Ruu is proud to call him one of their own now," Oura calmly said, but Tsuwai only shrugged in response. Meanwhile, Mida was reaching out for some herb-grilled rib meat, his eyes sparkling all the while. "I'm sure you'll be granted the Ruu clan name soon, so keep doing your best, Mida."

“Right. I’ve gotta do my job as a Ruu hunter.” Mida still had a bit of trouble with making proper facial expressions, but there was a happy light shining in his little eyes.

Yamiru Lea gave a small sigh before turning to Oura. “Rather than worrying about Mida, what about you, Oura? Or should I say, the two of you?” she asked, keeping her voice low enough that Tsuvai couldn’t overhear.

“What do you mean?” Oura questioned, bringing her face closer.

“It isn’t proper to only spend time with your former family during such banquets, wouldn’t you agree? It’s one thing with Tsuvai, since you both fall under the Rutim, but Mida and I belong to different clans.”

“But...times like these are the only chances we get to see one another. And Mida and Tsuvai both look so happy.”

“I’m asking if it’s truly acceptable to be focusing so much on your short-term happiness like this. Tsuvai in particular still seems to be rather spoiled.”

Tsuvai was currently eating some of the food that had been brought over while noisily chatting away at Mida. From an outsider’s perspective, it might have looked like she was being hostile to him, but it was abundantly clear that the pair were both enjoying being able to talk for the first time in a while.

“Tsuvai is still only twelve, and Mida is just fourteen. They aren’t even permitted to marry until they’re granted a clan name anyway, but regardless, can’t we forget about all that until they turn fifteen?”

“But you’re twenty-seven... Actually, aren’t you twenty-eight now?”

“Yes, I turned twenty-eight in the violet month. But what does that matter?”

“At that age, you should still have plenty of time to have more children.”

Oura’s eyes opened wide. She looked like she truly hadn’t expected that. “What are you saying, Yamiru Lea? My husband Zuuro Suun’s soul hasn’t yet returned to the forest. He’s still off somewhere atoning for the crimes of the Suun clan.”

“But you had your clan name taken and your blood ties severed, so you can no longer call Zuuro Suun your husband, correct? In which case, shouldn’t you

carry out your duty as a woman of the forest's edge?"

"You say that, but you still haven't married anyone yet, Yamiru Lea, even though you are permitted to wed at any time," Oura remarked with a gentle smile.

Yamiru Lea roughly tousled the bangs hanging down over her face. "The clan head of the Lea, being the sort of man he is, simply gave me his clan name before I had done anything to atone for my crimes. Your Rutim clan is far more reasonable, so they've rightly refrained from doing so."

"Yes, but Tsuvai and Mida still need you and me, Yamiru Lea. They always carry out their work properly as members of the Ruu and Rutim, so at times like this, I want to let them do as they please. And neither Donda Ruu nor Gazraan Rutim see that as them acting improperly."

Yamiru Lea had no response to those words.

"Even so, thank you for worrying so much on our behalf. The fact that their older sister is such a kind person is the reason Tsuvai and Mida don't want to give you up."

"I'm no longer their sister."

"That's true. Still, that doesn't change anything. I don't want to lose my bond with you either," Oura said, narrowing her eyes and staring off into the distance. "I wonder how Diga and Doddoo are doing. Are they carrying out their work properly under the Dom clan? And what about the members of the branch houses still at the Suun settlement, and Zuuro Suun?"

That was a topic Yamiru Lea and the others were forbidden from inquiring about, as their blood ties had been severed.

It was then that the noisy Lea clan head Rau Lea returned. "Hey there, Mida! So this is where you were, eh?! It's almost our time to shine!"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"None of the hunters who've challenged those traveling performers have been able to knock them to the ground! So now it's up to those of us who reached the top eight in the Ruu to bring them down! If we let them walk away

victorious, it'll be a disgrace to all hunters of the forest's edge!"

"Yeah...?" Mida replied, seeming like he didn't really understand what was going on. But after shoving the rest of the giba meat he was eating into his mouth, he stood up.

"All right!" Rau Lea cheered out in high spirits, and the pair headed over to the performers. Rau Lea challenged the girl that was dressed in male clothing, while Mida took on the mountain of a man.

"Wow. That guy with the shiny head is even taller than Mida! Mida's wider than him, but he still might get beaten, huh?" Tsvai commented, scooting over to Yamiru Lea and Oura now that Mida was gone. Though she was short tempered and had quite a mouth on her, Tsvai very much feared being alone. The unusual environment in the main Suun house had somehow resulted in her and Yamiru Lea having personalities that were complete opposites.

Twelve... So Tsvai is twelve now...

Yamiru Lea vaguely pondered what sort of girl she had been at that age. As she was twenty-one now, that would have been nine years back.

Nine years ago, Tsvai had been three, Mida five, and Oura eighteen. It had been about a year since Zattsu Suun had fallen ill and Zuuro Suun had inherited the title of leading clan head, and also since the vicious man known as Migi Suun had perished.

That was back when it was beginning to become normal for us to pillage the fruits of the forest, and the members of the branch houses started steadily losing the will to live.

Zattsu Suun had become terribly ill, and Migi Suun—who had once been just as feared—had no longer been among them either, yet the dark cloud hanging over the Suun settlement hadn't cleared up in the least. Instead, everyone had grown all the more nihilistic and had started questioning if Zattsu Suun's grand ambitions had come crashing down, becoming uneasy as to whether the northern clans would remain fully obedient, and if the Ruu could truly be defeated.

Amid all that, the members of the main house had begun living for pleasure.

Zuuro Suun had stood at the head of them all, and Diga, Doddo, and Tsuvai had believed his path had been the right one, becoming lazy in the process. Tei Suun and Oura, who had been brought in from the branch houses, had started to look like they had the eyes of corpses, while Mida became little more than a beast as he immersed himself in enjoying food and little else. Even confined to his sickbed, Zattsu Suun's influence still hadn't abated, so everyone had just kept on steadily rotting away, trapped in the cage known as the Suun clan.

Yamiru Lea herself had been no exception. The former leading clan head Zattsu Suun had been more of a living poison than a man. First he had corrupted the members of the main house, then the branch houses had fallen too. In time, his malice would have swallowed the northern clans as well, followed by the small clans, and eventually even the Ruu. At the age of twelve, Yamiru Lea had already understood that quite clearly.

Either that or the Ruu would destroy the Suun first. I believed those were the only two possible paths.

However, the Suun had not been destroyed. The members of the main house had been stripped of their clan name, but the branch houses remained members of the Suun clan. Even now, there were dozens of people belonging to those families living at the Suun settlement. The pillaged fruits of the forest would have recovered by now as well. With the Ruu and the northern clans showing them the way, were they now properly carrying out their work as hunters? She didn't know, but whether they were doing well or doing poorly, at least there would be nobody calling for their destruction at this point.

Well, I'm sure they're managing to get by, despite their suffering. And it's clear that those who used to be their subordinates, like Toor Deen, are living exactly the way they're supposed to.

The members of the main house who now fell under the Ruu were also living proper lives, more or less. Mida was finally starting to distinguish himself as a hunter, while Tsuvai and Yamiru Lea were helping out with work in the post town. No doubt Oura had her own work at the Rutim settlement that she was taking care of as well. Seeing that satisfied look on the older woman's face, Yamiru Lea fully believed that she was finally free of Zattsu Suun's curse.

Even Yamiru Lea was getting along just fine at the Lea settlement. Oura had always been kind, and since she and her daughter Tsvai had been allowed to remain together, it should have been easier for her to thrive in her new situation.

However...

Zattsu and Tei Suun had lost their lives.

Zuuro Suun had been sentenced to hard labor that was said to be worse than death, and was off somewhere in the western kingdom serving that sentence. He would not be permitted to return to the settlement at the forest's edge for ten years.

Why did they alone have to face such harsh punishments? Even now, Yamiru Lea was unable to fully wipe that thought from her mind.

Zattsu Suun had been the root of all this evil. For the sake of his ambitions, he had tempted his fellow people of the forest's edge down the path to destruction, so it was only natural that he would need to pay for his sins with his life.

Then you had Tei Suun, who had assisted in all sorts of wicked deeds as Zattsu Suun's right-hand man. At the time, Yamiru Lea hadn't had any way of knowing what sort of deeds those had been, precisely, but he'd had the same sort of ominous feel and smell of blood about him as Migi Suun. When everything had been exposed last year and she'd heard he had killed townsfolk in secret, it had all made perfect sense.

Tei Suun had always seemed like he had wished to meet his end, so Yamiru Lea believed it had been through his own will that he had met the same fate as Zattsu Suun. As such, nobody could have prevented what had happened to those two.

The issue was Zuuro Suun. There was no denying that the man had committed serious crimes after inheriting the role of leading clan head. And yet, Yamiru Lea had serious misgivings about everything that had happened with him.

Zuuro Suun had inherited his father's position because he had been the eldest

son, simple as that. However, Zattsu Suun had been plotting to have Yamiru Lea succeed him instead. The idea had been to have her marry Migi Suun when she turned fifteen and then set her up as the de facto ruler of the Suun. The right to that inheritance was supposed to have belonged to Diga, but marrying him off to a subordinate clan would have taken care of that issue. And as for Zuuro Suun, an injury received in the forest that robbed him of his ability to hunt would have forced him out of his position as well.

That had been Zattsu Suun's plan, which Yamiru Lea had been told about at a young age. After Migi Suun perished, she had been instructed to find a husband suitable to serve as leading clan head. And Zattsu Suun's curse had continued to fall on her even then, with his decree that she would not be permitted to marry anyone he did not approve of.

You... You can properly carry on my will. My blood is thicker in your veins than in anyone else's, Yamiru.

When she remembered that man's terrifying appearance, face gaunt as a skeleton with black flames burning in his eyes, Yamiru Lea shuddered.

I have more of that horrifying man's blood in my veins than anyone else. It just doesn't make sense for my punishment to be lighter than Zuuro Suun's, does it? She thought to herself, right before a tremendous round of cheering filled the air. Rau Lea and Mida had taken down the traveling performers.

Rau Lea was standing tall and giving a beastly victory cry. It must have been a very close match—he looked even happier than when he had won the contest of strength at the last festival of the hunt.

Rau Lea then held out his hand and helped pull the girl he had beaten back up to her feet, and then the two of them headed over toward the mat where Yamiru Lea was sitting.

"Did you see that, Yamiru?! I beat this girl when nobody else could!"

"Yes, splendid work." In actuality, she had been lost in thought and hadn't seen any of it, but it felt like saying anything else would lead their conversation in an annoying direction.

Lying is a crime at the forest's edge, isn't it? Yamiru Lea thought. She really

hadn't changed at all.

And then that thin, lanky girl was pulled forward and presented to her.

"Still, she was super strong! I'm shocked that there's another woman other than Ai Fa who's this strong! Go ahead and give her some fruit wine!"

"Ah, no, I'm quite clumsy, so I'd prefer meat if you..." the girl started to say, but then she let out a strange cry of "Hwah?!" Her eyes had already been big to begin with, but now they were open even wider. "Y-You're so beautiful! This is the first time I've seen a woman even prettier than Nachara!" she said. A luminous blush was rapidly overtaking her slender face. "Ah, s-sorry! I only just met you, and here I am shouting strange stuff like that... I really am a fool."

"It's rare to find someone who would call themselves a fool! But you're a woman yourself, so if you want to heap praise on one another, it's no issue here at the forest's edge!" Rau Lea remarked, sounding like he was in a great mood as he patted her on the shoulder. It went against their customs to touch a woman unnecessarily, but it seemed he had forgotten about those rules. "If it's meat you want, then have as much as you please! Yamiru, get a plate for her."

Yamiru Lea shrugged, then held out a plate with rib meat that looked like it could be eaten by hand. "Th-Thank you!" the girl replied, bowing multiple times before grabbing the smallest piece of meat. All the while, her eyes remained fixed on Yamiru Lea with rapt attention.

"By the way, what's your name again? I remember hearing something about a knight king..." Rau Lea said.

"P-Please don't bring that up! I'm Rolo."

"Rolo, is it? What an amusing name. At any rate, you did a great job of entertaining us with those skills of yours, so go ahead and enjoy the banquet as much as you like!"

"R-Right, thank you."

That Rolo girl kept on stealing glances at Yamiru Lea as she started pecking at the rib meat.

She seemed like a rather silly girl who resembled a tolos in many ways. She

was tall for a woman, but she was lanky and had bad posture, which made it difficult to believe she possessed strength equal to or even greater than that of most hunters of the forest's edge. Really, she seemed so undependable that observing her felt like looking at a child who had simply grown larger without learning proper judgment.

Meanwhile, the traveling performers had started playing music in front of the ritual flame once more. There was a beautiful woman playing the flute, a small man banging on a drum, and a pair of twins using metallic pole-like instruments. And just like at the banquet in the Daleim lands, the girls from town and women of the forest's edge were starting to dance at a leisurely pace.

"Ooh, the women are dancing? Why don't you join in on that too, Yamiru?"

"How many times must I tell you that I'm bad at physical activities like that?"

"But you're so pretty that it's a waste not to dance! And I want to see you do it too."

Yamiru Lea gave a halfhearted shake of her hand, skipping the effort of even opening her mouth.

With a "Tch!" Rau Lea turned toward Rolo instead. "By the way, where are the other traveling performers? I haven't seen them at all tonight."

"The troupe leader's group is over there enjoying fruit wine. As for old man Rai and Zetta, they're not fond of such festivities."

"In that case, I guess I should go greet them! We'll be heading back to our own settlement after the banquet wraps up, after all, so this will be farewell," Rau Lea said, holding out a hand toward Yamiru Lea. She just stared at him, tilting her head a bit.

"What is that hand for, clan head?"

"What do you mean? You're coming with me. You've already talked plenty with Tsvai and everyone, haven't you? So you should deepen your bonds with other folks a bit too."

Yamiru Lea thought for a bit, and then she slapped his hand away.

"I may be bad at physical activities, but I'm perfectly capable of standing on

my own. Farewell, Oura and Tsuvai.”

“Yes, see you later,” Oura replied with a gentle smile, and Tsuvai just silently nodded. It seemed that someone had dragged Mida off elsewhere, so this would be a good chance for the two of them to deepen their bonds with others as well. There were a huge number of their relatives and guests gathered here, after all.

After that, Rolo started leading Yamiru and Rau Lea over to Gamley’s group. However, they had only taken a few steps when another traveling performer moved into their path.

“Ah, if it isn’t Rolo. That was a rather tasteful performance for you. I think it’s been quite a while since I last saw you run wild without any armor on.”

“C-Cut it out, Neeya... Ah, this is our minstrel, Neeya.”

It went without saying that Yamiru Lea remembered the man. He had made several passes at Ai Fa at the stalls and then had later thrown Asuta all out of sorts with a strange song.

He wore an unusual hat on his head and an odd instrument on his back...and when he saw Yamiru Lea, he loudly called out, “Ah, another beautiful woman! There are so many beauties here at the forest’s edge, but you’re in another class altogether. I am a minstrel, by the name of Neeya.”

It seemed that he had no memory of Yamiru Lea. He must’ve only had eyes for Ai Fa when he’d been at stalls. She didn’t feel any need to introduce herself to him, though, so she simply bowed in response.

“Ah, you’re so seductive it’s almost sinful! Oh beautiful woman, may I offer you a song?”

“There’s no need. I can’t say I have much appreciation for the value of such gestures.”

“Oh, the value of a mere song pales in comparison to your beauty. A single smile from your lips would be more than payment enough. But before that, why don’t we enjoy a bit of fruit wine together? Just the two of us, if at all possible.” The man’s voice was oddly saccharine and nasally. His singing voice had been quite beautiful when she had heard it that night, but she felt no charm

whatsoever from the voice she heard now.

“Hey, weren’t you infatuated with Ai Fa before? That’s what I heard from Ludo Ruu,” Rau Lea interjected, turning to face them. Neeya gave him an annoyed glance out of the corner of his eye.

“Ai Fa is that beautiful woman hunter, correct? She is like an elegant leopard, while this woman possesses the beauty of a mysterious snake. My heart soars freely, and cannot help but feel charmed by both of them.”

“I see. Here at the forest’s edge, we call that being faithless.”

“Hmm? What a rigid way of living.”

“Rigid or not, it’s the custom at the forest’s edge,” Rau Lea replied, raising his left arm. An instant later, his fist hit the musician square in the forehead, and the man let out a “Gyah!” as he tumbled backward. “Besides, Yamiru here is a precious clan member of mine. I ask that you not act like that toward her.”

“What are you doing, clan head?” Yamiru Lea asked in astonishment, grabbing ahold of Rau Lea’s arm. The hunter thrust out his lower lip like a child in response.

“His voice and words were annoying me for some reason. Besides, I can’t overlook someone acting like that toward the two most beautiful women at the forest’s edge, you and Ai Fa.”

“Even so, you shouldn’t simply hit him out of nowhere. These people are guests of the Ruu clan, aren’t they? Didn’t you hear Donda Ruu say not to cause trouble?”

There were a large number of people around, and many of them were staring blankly at the commotion. Rolo was rustling her own hair wildly with both hands in a fluster, while Neeya was holding his head and groaning, “Ugh...”

“But I used my left hand, so it shouldn’t have been *that* painful.”

“That’s not the issue here,” Yamiru Lea said, sighing deeply.

Then a small vermilion figure smoothly slipped through the crowd and approached them. It was that girl Pino who Asuta and Jiza Ruu had formed ties with. “Oh my, what’s all this about? Has one of the members of our troupe

been misbehaving himself?”

With the same look as before on his face, Rau Lea turned to face her. “That man was trifling with my clan member, so I hit him.”

“My, it seems that we’re the ones at fault for this disturbance, then,” Pino replied, giving the crouched Neeya a whack on the head.

With tears in his eyes, Neeya wailed, “What was that for?! Nothing I did could possibly have justified him hitting me! Rolo saw the whole thing!”

“Quiet, you blockhead minstrel. Did you already forget that the leader said not to cause any trouble?” Pino questioned with both hands on her hips, leaning in to glare at Neeya’s face from up close. “Besides, how many times has the way you treat women caused an issue at this point? This happens so often that I’m not going to bother listening to your excuses anymore, and if you think the leader and I will just keep letting it slide, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“H-Hey, why do you always treat me like a villain?!”

“How can we not when you always *act* like one? You *are* a complete and utter fool, after all.” With that, Pino stood, and fixed Neeya’s hat that her blow had knocked askew. “Now then, you have work to do, don’t you? We got the leading clan heads’ permission, so get ready to show off that voice you’re so proud of. That’s your only redeeming feature, after all.”

“Hmph!” With a childish snort, Neeya left straightaway without looking back once.

As she watched him go, Rolo slid closer to Pino. “U-Um, Pino, well...”

“Don’t worry about it. I know you’re not equipped to keep that blockhead under control. Sorry for the commotion, folks. Please, continue enjoying the banquet!” Pino said to the surrounding people of the forest’s edge, looking around at them with an enchanting smile. Then her gaze stopped on Yamiru Lea’s group. “You don’t mind letting him go, do you? Allow me to apologize in his place.”

“There’s no need for that. We’re the ones who laid a hand on him,” Yamiru Lea said. Then she directed a pointed glare at Rau Lea, who rather reluctantly bowed his head.

“Yeah, you’re right, I was probably a bit too quick to lose my temper there. But still, he didn’t apologize to us, so I have no intention of apologizing to him either.”

“That’s fine. We can just exchange bows and call it settled,” Pino said, bringing her hands together in front of her and bowing deeply. When she raised her head, though, she was grinning. “Well then, I have someone I need to go speak to, so please excuse me. I leave the rest to you, Rolo.”

As the last one left, Rolo timidly approached the pair from the Lea clan. “U-Um, do you still wish to greet the other members of the troupe?”

“Of course. I’ll do my best to keep my short temper in check from now on, so please show us the way.”

Rolo smiled in relief. It was a surprisingly charming expression, overflowing with childlike innocence.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-sixth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

It's currently August 2021 as I'm writing this afterword, right before the seventh anniversary of the day I started writing the series. I truly am grateful I've had the opportunity to work on it for seven whole years, and that I've amassed this many volumes. I very much appreciate the continued support all of you have shown.

Looking way back, it was a single dream that first led me to write the series.

At the time, I had already published other stories on the website Shosetsuka ni Naro, but they hardly got any reaction from readers, so I was trying to come up with a new series that would be a better fit.

I came up with all sorts of ideas based on the two data points that isekai-slash-reincarnation series seemed to be the main genre on the site and that cooking series had been popular lately, but nothing really clicked...and then, I ended up having a dream.

Normally, I hardly ever remember my dreams. I remembered them fully as a child, but when I became an adult, only vague images would ever remain. In my dreams, I would visit a bookstore I was a regular at, a hideout, a lake in an unfamiliar forest, or maybe some nostalgic place, but I would only vaguely remember afterward. I got into reading through Ranpo Edogawa's *Boy Detectives Club* series, and the famous quote "The living world is a dream, the nocturnal dream is reality" left a strong impression on me, so I'm kind of ashamed of my forgetfulness.

Anyway, at this point I hardly remember the dream I had that night at all, other than that it was a dream of living a survivalist life out in the forest. After I awoke from that dream, that image remained stuck in my mind and pushed me toward creating this series.

Looking back, there isn't much left in terms of those survivalist elements, but even so, I've found I'm able to write this story more easily than anything I wrote before. And now, I've been writing it for seven whole years.

I'm remarkably lacking in knowledge about all things spiritual, so I believe that dream was the result of me subconsciously thinking of ideas for a series rather than it being some revelation from the heavens. But the reason behind it doesn't matter. To this day, I truly feel grateful for the dream I had that night which led me here.

Now then, that was quite the diversion.

This volume carries on from the last one in its depiction of the rainy season. Out of all the events that occur in it, we ended up using Ai Fa's birthday for the front cover. It makes me happy to see her so full of joy.

Because of that, I also went ahead and made the intermezzo story for this volume one from her point of view, something I haven't done in a while. I hope you enjoy seeing some of the girlier feelings that Ai Fa has swirling around inside her heart.

We also have two group performances in this volume that are more on the serious side. Hopefully, you'll enjoy getting to take a look into the differing burdens faced by the two starring characters.

Both of the stories center on the friendship banquet held back in volume twenty-two, so I would have liked to publish them earlier if it had been possible, but for various reasons, they ended up being delayed until now. Still, I feel like it all worked out nicely in the end, since they pair well with the contents of the main story in this volume, and my editor agreed on that point.

With this, the second round of group performances, which were published right after the contents of volume twenty-two in the web version, have come to a close. There were seven of them in total, adding up to enough text to fill a volume all on their own. Thank you so much for reading them.

However, since we're on volume twenty-six now, the third round of group performance stories is already fast approaching. I sincerely hope that all of you enjoy the main story, group performances, and intermezzos equally.

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!

August 2021,

EDA

Bonus Short Story

The Snake Star and the Dog Star

“Hey Yamiru, it’s the sun! I can see the sun!” Rau Lea, the young Lea clan head, excitedly shouted as he jumped into the kitchen through the door.

Yamiru Lea, who was baking poitan alongside the hunter’s mother, replied indifferently. “Hmph. The sun sometimes shows itself even during the rainy season. It’s nothing to raise a commotion over at this point.”

“The sunlight looks totally different now, though! That’s gotta mean that the rainy season will be over soon! You should come out here and take in some of this warmth, then I’m sure you’ll understand how I feel!”

“As you can see, I’m in the middle of some important cooking work right now.”

“Never mind that, just come out front! If you wait too long, the sun’s gonna hide behind the clouds again!”

Yamiru Lea gave a small sigh. However, Rau Lea’s mother then smiled at her and said, “It’s fine, you can leave for a bit. I can handle things here, so by all means, go keep our clan head company for a while.”

“That sounds like a much more troublesome task than manning the stove.”

“Stop babbling and get out here already!”

Rau Lea grabbed Yamiru Lea by the arm and tugged. She was weaker than most women, but even if she hadn’t been, there was no resisting a hunter’s strength.

“Hold on, can’t I at least put on my rain gear?”

“The sun is out, so there’s no need for that! C’mon, this way!”

Rau Lea dragged Yamiru Lea along over to the kitchen’s exit, and instantly the two were awash in white light. The sun really was bright enough to make one

forget that it was still the rainy season.

“Well? Isn’t it great? It’s actually warm enough to make these rainy season clothes feel stiflingly hot!”

“I get it, so would you please let go of my arm already? I’ve told you again and again, though we are clan members, we are not connected by blood, so you should not go around touching me unnecessarily.”

“You’re really strict about that rule, and *only* that rule, aren’t you? Do you hate me touching you that much?” Rau Lea asked with a childish frown, finally releasing Yamiru Lea’s arm. The sunlight streaming through the clouds was illuminating him brilliantly, with his blond hair—a rarity at the forest’s edge—shining especially bright.

Rau Lea had graceful facial features, just like his mother’s. However, the expressions he made were always either fittingly fierce for a hunter, or extremely childish. Even among the hot-blooded clans under the Ruu, he was definitely unique.

“Hmm? What is it? Is there something on my face?”

“No. I was just thinking about how much you look like your mother.”

“Oh yeah? I only ever see my face when I’m looking at it in the river, so I don’t really know it too well, but people have been telling me that since I was young,” Rau Lea said. Then he looked Yamiru Lea up and down with his light blue eyes. “You’re either the first or second most beautiful woman in all of the forest’s edge, Yamiru. Was your mother this beautiful too?”

“I have no idea. My mother died soon after I was born.”

“Well, someone must have told you about her, though, right?”

“Nobody at the Suun settlement would ever bring up such topics with me in casual conversation,” Yamiru Lea replied bitterly.

Despite that, Rau Lea still looked cheerful as he replied, “I see! Well, I’m sure you resemble your mother too, since you clearly don’t look anything like your father Zuuro Suun! She must have been quite beautiful, so I wish I could have seen her at least once!”

“You really don’t know the meaning of the word restraint, do you?”

“Hmm? What do you need restraint for when you’re talking with family?” Rau Lea asked with a tilt of his head, seeming honestly confused.

Back on the night when the townsfolk had been invited to the Ruu settlement for a friendship banquet, Yamiru Lea had asked the Gamley Troupe’s star reader Railanos to tell her fortune. Over three months had passed since then, and in that time, the forest’s edge had acquired hunting dogs. That man Shumiral, who was asking to marry the eldest Ruu daughter Vina Ruu, had brought them from the western capital.

This clan head of mine really does look like a dog sometimes. That was certainly the case right now, with that look of confusion on his face and his head tilted to the side. And when the hunting dogs played with the young children of the forest’s edge, it greatly reminded her of Rau Lea’s childish side.

I’m sure they’re also the same in how they look like completely different beasts when they’re on the hunt for giba.

Even so, there was of course no guarantee that someone born under the dog star would be doglike. However, Yamiru Lea had been born under the snake star and people had long said that she was cold like a snake behind her back, so she couldn’t help but feel on edge.

The dog star will protect the snake star until it regains its strength, huh?

Yamiru Lea recalled how Railanos had declared that in a hoarse voice. But sensing her thoughts growing increasingly enraptured by those words, she hastily shook her head to drive them away.

Why am I still thinking about that? Star reading is hardly something we people of the forest’s edge should care about.

“What’re you shaking your head for?” Rau Lea then asked, looking confused again. “That surprised me. If something’s bothering you, you shouldn’t hide it from your clan head.”

“Nothing’s bothering me. And why should I open up to someone like—” Yamiru Lea started to say, only for something chilly to drip onto the tip of her nose.

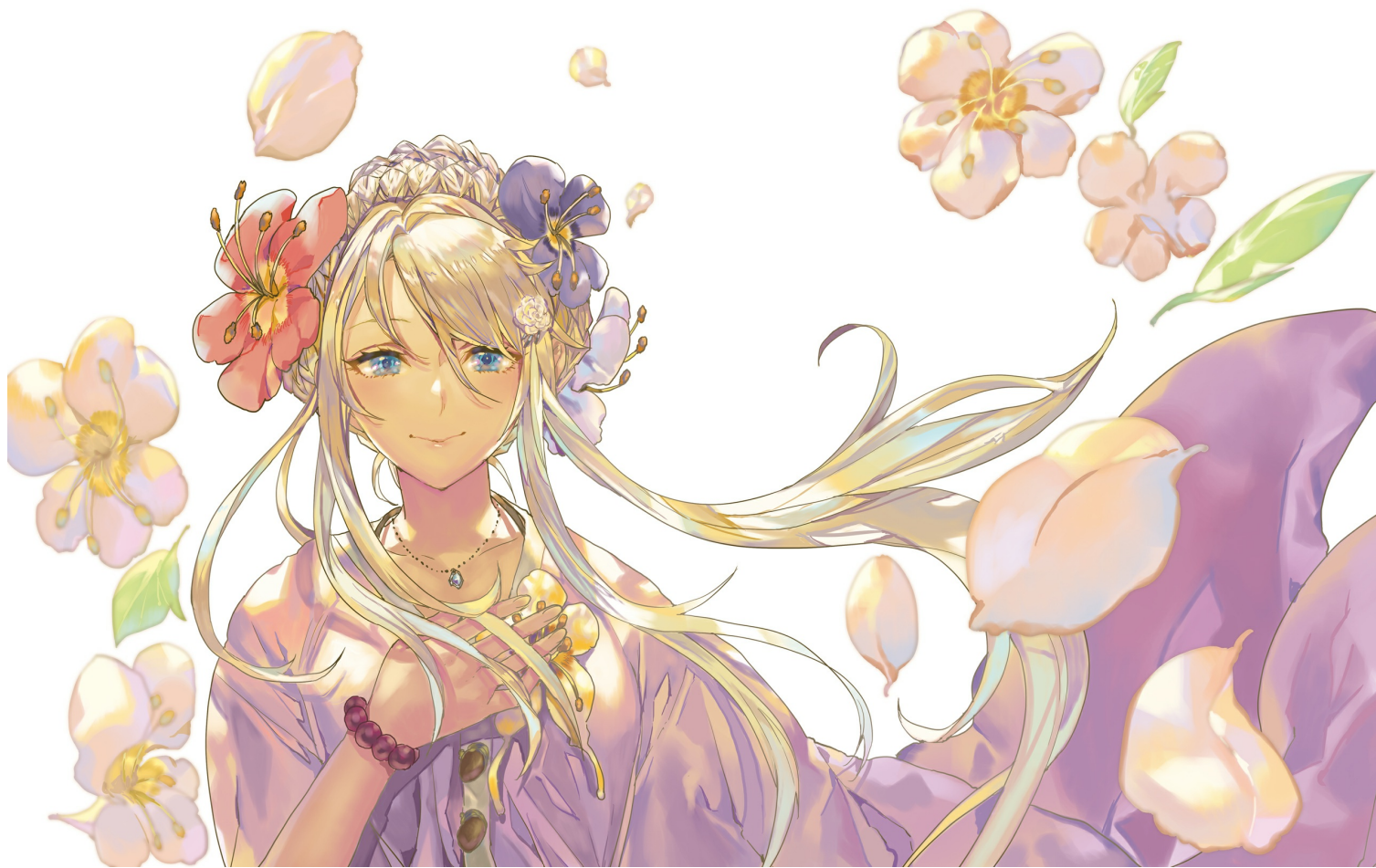
Despite how bright the sunlight had just been, the sky had turned cloudy again in no time at all, and in the next moment, a sudden downpour started to fall upon the pair. Yamiru Lea sighed heavily, while Rau Lea gave an amused laugh.

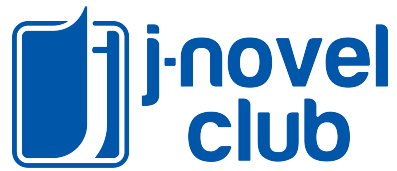
“This is why I wanted to get my rain gear.”

“Yeah. But don’t you think this rain feels a lot more pleasant than the damp, gloomy rain we had before? That must be a sign that the rainy season will be ending before too much longer.” Rau Lea said with a chuckle, sweeping his blond bangs back. As the heavy rain ran down his graceful face, he shot Yamiru Lea a smile. “I was just thinking that it was getting a bit too warm around here, so in a way, that was honestly perfect timing! Ooh, and you look even sexier than usual soaked in the rain, Yamiru Lea!”

“Quiet, you,” Yamiru Lea replied, unintentionally letting a laugh escape her. She was usually very particular about keeping her appearance prim and proper, so her getting caught in the rain and soaked as if she were a careless child must have been quite a comical sight.

And as Yamiru Lea started to laugh, Rau Lea’s laughter grew louder in turn. Rather than trying to flee from the rain, the pair just kept on laughing together, looking for all the world like a pair of innocent young children.





Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 27 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 26

by EDA

Translated by Gwendolyn Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 EDA Illustrations Copyright © 2021 Kochimo Cover illustration by Kochimo

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: December 2024