


COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: Kochimo

VOLUME
7





I WAS PREPARING A NEW
DISH FOR THE GREAT
SOUTHERN TREE: CUBED
GIBA MEAT STEW.

"HMM... WHAT A SWEET SMELL,"
NAUDIS STATED WITH A BIG SNIFF.



COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME
7



THE PEOPLE OF THE FOREST'S EDGE

**WERE FINALLY GROWING
ACCUSTOMED TO TOWN**

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Prologue

“Asuta, what is that?!” Ai Fa suddenly yelled out, seriously catching me off guard.

We were currently in the familiar vacant house at the Ruu settlement.

Once the chaos at the clan head meeting finally wrapped up, we hurried on back. Right now, it was midway between when the sun hit its peak and when it would set, so a bit after 3 PM by my estimation.

Since we hadn’t really gotten any proper sleep last night, I borrowed the bathing area to shake off the drowsiness, and was feeling rather refreshed as a result... But now, Ai Fa was standing imposingly in the middle of the room, her whole body trembling with anger.

“What’s wrong? What in the world has got you that mad?”

“How can you even ask?! I can’t believe you...!” Ai Fa stomped on over towards me, then as I stood there at a loss, she jabbed a finger at the middle of my torso. “I meant this wound! How did this happen?!”

“Ah, that... You see, it’s from when Doddo Suun kicked me last night. I was pretty surprised when I first took off my clothes, too.”

I also washed my t-shirt while bathing, so I only had on my vest. Because of that, the black bruise in the middle of my stomach was clearly showing. But still, I got sent flying by a man of the forest’s edge, so I was probably lucky to get off this lightly. If he had hit me in a worse spot, he could have easily broken ribs.

However, Ai Fa still looked mad.

“I never heard about that! You said everything was fine and that nothing happened, didn’t you?! Were you trying to fool me, Asuta?!”

“Huh? Something this small should still count as fine, right?! It doesn’t even hurt if I don’t pay attention to it.”

“...So if you do pay attention to it, then it hurts,” Ai Fa replied, sitting down on the floor so she could stare straight at my stomach from close up. “To think that

second son did such a thing... Damn! I should have dealt with him myself before he got handed over to Donda Ruu!”

“Ah, no, but I bit him on the back of his hand, so we were probably pretty equal in terms of how much damage we inflicted. There was no need for extra retaliation.”

Ai Fa bit her lip with regret, and gently touched the injury with her palm.

“Does it really hurt...? Do you need medicine?”

“No, not at all! It’ll disappear soon enough if you just leave it be. But thanks for worrying about me.”

“How frustrating...” Ai Fa muttered, pulling back her hand. Then, she wrapped her arms around my torso and brought her cheek up to my bruise.

I heard myself yelp “Gah!” in my head, and I was left unable to move. “I-I-I really am alright! You’re seriously worrying too much, here! This is practically just a scratch for a hunter, right?”

“You’re not a hunter. You’re a chef.”

“Well, I mean, that’s true, but still...”

Ai Fa put even more strength into her hug, and I felt like I was on the verge of dying in agony.

“I don’t like you getting hurt...” Ai Fa mumbled quietly. “When someone weak like you is injured, it makes me feel like I’m being torn apart... And it’s incredibly vexing to have failed to protect a member of my clan...”

“You shouldn’t feel like that. We should be grateful that both of us came out of that huge commotion with no serious injuries, right?” I somehow managed to reply, despite still being in something of a panic. “When I learned you were alright, I was overjoyed. If Diga had gone and done something to you, I probably would have lost my mind.”

“Right. If someone hadn’t given me that wine to wake me, I really may have been in a bit of danger,” Ai Fa said with a sigh, her cheek still up against my stomach. The feel of her warm breath sent a shiver down my spine. “The Suun clan no longer possesses the strength to harm us, but we do not know what

trials await us from here on out. Rather than growing conceited, we should be even more cautious than ever before.”

“Yeah, I’m fully in agreement there.”

So could you hurry up and let me go already? I thought to myself, only to be saved by a knock on the door behind me.

“Asuta, are you still not ready yet...?”

It was Vina Ruu.

After this, I had to go prepare for work tomorrow.

“Right! Hold on just a moment! Okay, Ai Fa, I’ve got to go to work...”

“Hmm...” she muttered, and only then very slowly removed her arms and stared up at my face. “Asuta, is there anything I can help with?”

“Um, I guess there’s probably something. But aren’t you tired?”

“I don’t exactly feel like sleeping when it’s so bright out. If you don’t have anything for me to help with, then I’ll go gather firewood instead.”

“In that case, help me out, if you don’t mind. I kind of...” I started to say, but stopped myself before I could finish with “want to stay with you, too.”

From tomorrow on we would be working separately again, so I wanted to spend even just a bit more time together until then. That was what was running through my head.

Ai Fa stood up, and with a very satisfied expression on her face, she replied, “Understood.”



Ultimately, it definitely took some serious effort to switch gears in my head.

Tomorrow I would resume business with the stalls, and the day after that I would begin working with the inn. And so, I had to reset my brain from having to deal with the Suun clan and instead focus on grappling with these new tasks.

“So in the end, we’re preparing a hundred of each of the dishes for tomorrow, right...? What are we doing first, though?”

“To start with, let’s get the giba burger patties ready. For 100 of them, we should need, um... 25 aria.”

I went ahead and grabbed the necessary ingredients from the pantry with Ai Fa and Vina Ruu’s help. Then I had Vina Ruu start dicing aria, which seemed to prompt Ai Fa to give an impressed “Hmm...”

“What is it, Ai Fa...?”

“Ah, I was just thinking that you’ve grown quite skilled at handling a knife. I had thought you were not that proficient at manning the stove.”

“Hmm...? Well, it’s only natural that I improved with all the chances I’ve had to help out Asuta... Plus, lately, manning the stove has started to feel fun...”
Vina Ruu replied, her luscious lips shifting into a smile. “Now that I think about it, you help out a lot around the kitchen, but you never pick up a knife... Is there some sort of reason for that?”

“Huh? Nothing in particular. It’s just because Asuta mans the Fa clan’s stoves. If I get involved, it would surely only make the food taste worse.”

“Ah... You do insist that you’re a hunter and nothing else, don’t you...?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

It was rare to see Ai Fa and Vina Ruu having this much of a conversation. If she had been talking with Lala Ruu I would probably break out in a smile and find it adorable, but something felt a little strange about this particular combination.

As that thought ran through my head, Vina Ruu went on the offensive and rather bluntly asked, “Hey... Do you really not intend on marrying anyone, Ai Fa...?”

Ai Fa had looked rather relaxed up until now, but with that she instantly pouted.

“I have no intention of becoming anyone’s bride. I believe I’ve already told Donda Ruu as such several times.”

“By now, he doesn’t care about that at all. Plus, after last night, it seems the Ruu and Rutim are friends to the Fa even without any bonds of blood...”

“If my bond with the Ruu has been corrected after being soured two years ago, then I would truly be glad.”

“Yes, that makes me happy, too... But still, you may have danced around the question, but did you really answer it...?” Vina Ruu pressed on, causing Ai Fa to furrow her brow even more.

“If I tell you I have no such intention, then I mean it. Why are you so fixated on this matter, eldest daughter of the Ruu?”

“Oh... Then if Asuta took someone else as a bride, you wouldn’t have any objections?”

“Hold on, Vina Ruu! What are you saying, all of a sudden?!” I interjected in a panic, causing Vina Ruu to giggle.

“It’s just a hypothetical. I understand that it would be a problem for you if Asuta married into some other house, but if the Fa welcomed in a bride, you shouldn’t have any issues with that, right?”

Timidly, I stole a glance Ai Fa’s way. And what I found was her standing there with a puzzled, childish expression on her face. Then, that expression suddenly turned my way.

“Asuta, do you have a woman you intend to take as your bride?”

“I don’t!”

“I see. So you don’t have one...” Ai Fa’s head then made a mechanical turn back towards Vina Ruu. “Eldest daughter of the Ruu, apparently he doesn’t have one.”

“That’s just for now though, right...? But who knows what could happen in the future...”

Ai Fa nodded, then turned back towards me.

“Asuta, will you have one in the future?”

“I won’t! I’ve said plenty of times that I have no intention of taking a bride, haven’t I?”

“I see. That’s true.”

“But people’s feelings do change, don’t they...? If someday a woman asks to marry Asuta and he shares her feelings, then could you give them your blessing as clan head, Ai Fa...?”

“Blessing...” Ai Fa muttered, blinking in surprise. “Blessing... A blessing, is it...?”

“That’s right. It’s only natural for a clan head to bless her clan member getting married, isn’t it?”

With that, Ai Fa shut down completely. It seemed she was thinking deeply about something... In fact, it was as if I could hear a hard-disk running in her head.

“Ah! It’s Ai Fa!” an angel of salvation called out as she descended upon us. It was the youngest daughter of the main Ruu house, Rimee Ruu. “Asuta, Vina, welcome back to you too! Hey, how did the clan head meeting go?!”

While stealthily wiping away a cold sweat, I returned that strangely nostalgic carefree smile with one of my own.

“Err, it would take pretty long to explain... It’s probably best to wait for Donda Ruu and them to come back before discussing the details.”

“Huh? Papa Donda didn’t come back with you?”

The three newly appointed leaders of the forest’s edge and the clans under them remained at the Suun settlement, attempting to settle a variety of matters. The only ones to come back were us and the women.

“I see. Still, I’m glad everybody’s alright! Hey, Ai Fa, come see Granny Jiba and let’s talk!”

“Ah, but I’m helping out Asuta with his work right now...”

“Eh?! But you and Asuta are heading back to the Fa house tomorrow, aren’t you? Then I won’t be able to see you again for a while! We weren’t able to talk yesterday, so I want to spend a whole lot of time with you today!”

Rimee Ruu clung to Ai Fa like a puppy.

Ai Fa looked like she hadn’t quite snapped back to her senses, though, so I smiled and said, “We’re fine here, so why not go? You must want to talk more

with Jiba Ruu, right?”

“I see... Well then, I’ll go for a bit.” Having said that, Ai Fa turned towards Vina Ruu with a bit of a mysterious look on her face. “Eldest daughter of the Ruu, about our discussion before...”

“Yes? What is it...?”

“I don’t really know, myself... It’s like I can’t quite gather my thoughts and feelings...”

With that, Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu departed, and I shot Vina Ruu a glare.

“Vina Ruu! What were you thinking?! Why did you ask something like that all of a sudden...?!”

“I mean, I just didn’t really like how Ai Fa was acting all nonchalant about stuff...” Vina Ruu said with a puff of her cheeks. “Me, you, Reina, and Darmu all have our own thoughts and concerns, so doesn’t it seem strange how Ai Fa alone keeps feigning ignorance...? It’s no fair...”

“I don’t really think fairness has anything to do with it...”

At the very least, Ai Fa needed some serious resolve to decide to live as a hunter. Despite being a woman, she decided not to marry and have children with anyone, instead choosing a life that would end out in the forest... There’s no way you could do that with half-hearted feelings.

“I don’t think I would feel this way if you and Ai Fa were at least connected by blood... But as is, I just can’t feel satisfied with things as they are...” Vina Ruu grumbled, looking a bit sad. “But still, I’m sorry... It’s not the sort of thing to be discussed while working, is it? I was in the wrong just now...”

Now I was the one left feeling guilty.

I was facing a lot of difficult questions in my life, but when it came to the issue of how to construct healthy relationships with Vina and Reina Ruu, I frankly had no idea how to solve it. And when it came to Vina Ruu in particular, I had gained a lot of platonic affection and trust in her through our work together in the post town, which I couldn’t help but feel awkward about.

I didn’t know if I should call her a female friend or a work buddy or what, but

at the very least, Vina Ruu had become someone very important in my life. If she happened to fall for another man and get married, I'm sure I would give her my blessing and feel as if a member of my family was being wed.

How is Shumiral doing, I wonder...? I suddenly thought, the silver-haired youth from Sym coming to mind.

In the same instant, Vina Ruu gave a sigh.

"You two are leaving tomorrow, aren't you...?"

"Yeah. We sure ended up imposing on you for quite a while."

"How sad... When I think of tomorrow and the days that follow, it makes me feel like I want to die..."

"Th-That's a pretty serious overreaction, don't you think?"

"No, it's not just about you... I also can't shake this nasty premonition I'm feeling..."

"A nasty premonition?"

"It seems likely that someone from the Suun will end up here, doesn't it...?"

I see, so that was it.

The members of the main Suun house had their clan names stripped from them and were to be sent off to join other powerful clans. Diga Suun... Er, I should say Diga, Doddo, and Tei were to join the Dom, while Yamiru would probably go to the Zaza or Sauti.

The remaining three, Oura, Tsuvai, and Mida, had done nowhere near as much harm, however.

"Doesn't it seem like there's a real chance that the youngest son will get sent to the Ruu...?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. Well, since the Ruu clan was the one to bring up the idea, I'm sure you'll end up taking in someone."

"Yeah..."

"And whichever clan takes Mida will definitely have to be awful strong in order to handle him."

“Yeah...”

“Still, Mia Lea Ruu didn’t seem half bad at dealing with him, did she?”

“Ugh... I really, seriously want to die...” Vina Ruu wailed, only stopping when a commotion came from out front.

Vina Ruu and I looked at one another, then sighed in sync.

As we exited the kitchen and headed into the plaza, we ran into what I had more or less expected. Donda Ruu and company had returned from the Suun settlement, and they were surrounded by the women of the branch families.

However, it seemed that not all of them had come back. I saw Donda and Ludo Ruu as well as Dan Rutim, but Darmu Ruu and Rau Lea weren’t with them. In total, this looked to be around half of the group that had gone to the clan head meeting.

And there were members of the Suun clan with them, too. Oura, Tsvai, and Mida.

Naturally, the women were making a fuss due to Mida’s unusual appearance. He had appeared at the Rutim banquet, of course, but it took more than seeing him just once or twice to get used to him.

“Good work, everyone. Man, you came back pretty quickly, didn’t you?” I called out to Donda Ruu as Vina Ruu froze up, only for him to look away like he found me a nuisance. Instead, Ludo Ruu answered in his place.

“We needed to bring these guys along with us, so we returned ahead of the others for now. Darmu and the rest stayed behind to keep an eye on the branch families, though.”

The Suun branch families... Around half of them would be taken in by houses they had strong blood ties to, while the rest would remain in the Suun settlement.

However, until the fruits of the forest grew back, the area around the Suun settlement would be devoid of giba, and they also hadn’t truly worked as hunters for over a decade. And so, they wouldn’t really be capable of handling the job properly. For that reason, it was important to both give them support

and also determine if they truly had the resolve to live properly as people of the forest's edge.

Now that the main house had been lost, it was up to those branch families to determine whether or not the Suun clan would live on. If they couldn't regain their strength as hunters, then the Suun name was sure to die off.

"Yamiru isn't around, huh? Which clan did she ultimately end up with?"

"Hmm? She's the only one they still haven't determined a place for. The Ruu and Rutim are too close to the Fa house, while the Zaza and Sauti seem to want nothing to do with her. For now, she's locked away in the main Suun house with men watching over her."

"I see..." was all I could say in response.

Yamiru was the brain behind all the wrongdoing, and so everyone was on guard around her. Maybe there was no helping that, but I still found it depressing.

"What's the gloomy face for, Asuta?! There're still plenty of pains left to deal with, but tomorrow I'm sending Gazraan over to the Suun settlement, so that should more or less take care of things. It's best to just leave stuff like that up to him!" Dan Rutim proclaimed with his usual hearty chuckle. Then, he gestured Oura and Tsvai on over with his thick fingers. "Us Rutim are taking charge of these two. We were short on women anyway, so it works out perfectly! And since the Rutim are friends with you two, I figured I should introduce them to you as the new members of the clan."

"Ah, so you two are joining the Rutim?"

That certainly sounded like good news to me. Tsvai Suun may have been older than she looked, but she was still just 12 years old, the same age as Lala Ruu. It would be far too unbearable for her to be ripped away from her mother.

Hearing Dan Rutim's words, Oura Suun gave a deep bow. There were dark clouds in her blue eyes, but they weren't muddy like they once were. Her gaze just looked incredibly sad.

Meanwhile, Tsvai clung to her legs while glaring intently up at me. I was the one whose words dealt the final blow to the Suun clan, so perhaps it was only

natural that she hated me.

Still, I certainly wished this mother and daughter pair happiness.

“Oh, Ai Fa. Good to see you looking well.”

That statement from Dan Rutim caught me off guard, and sure enough, when I turned to look I found that Ai Fa had appeared next to me at some point. Rimee Ruu was standing behind her, and the young girl was looking up at Mida’s massive frame and going “Whoa.”

Even further back was Mia Lea Ruu, who had a truly satisfied smile on her face. Reina and Lala Ruu must have been napping or something, as I didn’t see them.

“Well then, we’ll be excusing ourselves! Donda Ruu, I’ll be sending Gazraan to the Suun settlement tomorrow, and I’ll have him stop by here on the way.”

“Right. Then I’ll head back over again.”

“Alright, then we’re off!”

However, Mida stood firmly in Oura and Tsuvai’s path.

I couldn’t read what he was feeling from his little animal-like eyes, but he was staring straight at his former family.

“Oura, Tsuvai, you’re going...?”

“Yes... Take care, Mida,” Oura replied, placing her slender hand on Mida’s thick, log-like arm.

Tsuvai just stared silently at her massive former big brother.

As for Mida, his cheeks started to quiver.

“But I’m... I’m lonely...”

“Yes, I feel the same way... But there’s nothing to be done about it. We committed a crime, and now we need to atone for that.”

“I won’t be able to see Oura and Tsuvai anymore...?”

“That’s right. The main Suun house is gone. From now on, you’re to live as a member of the Ruu.”

So Mida really was being taken in by the Ruu, huh?

Vina Ruu was behind me, and I could feel her firmly gripping my clothing.

“I won’t get to see Yamiru, or Tei... or Diga, or Doddo...?”

“Yes, that’s correct. And if you happen to see any of us somewhere from now on, you mustn’t ask such questions. You’re a man of the Ruu now, so you have to follow what they tell you. Forget all of the rules of the Suun, and obey those of the Ruu, alright? If you do that... I’m sure you’ll be happier than ever before.”

“But, I want to stay with you and Tsuvai...”

Mida fell heavily to his knees, and looked up at Oura’s face from below.

With a sorrowful smile, Oura placed her hand on the small mountain’s shoulder.

“You’re a strong boy, Mida. I’m sure you’ll make a splendid hunter. And I know that you’ll be able to do what Zuuro, Diga, and Doddo weren’t able to. Live on as a member of the Ruu, alright...?”

“I...” Mida muttered.

I was taken aback, as suddenly tears started gushing from his overly tiny eyes.

“Hey, come on, give me a break,” Ludo Ruu said as he ran over our way.

In the next instant, Mida’s mouth opened wide and he wailed, “Waaaaaaaah...!” letting loose a monstrous wave of sound. High and low frequencies mixed and swirled together to an astounding degree, making for a truly cacophonous roar.

If window glass existed in this world, that may well be enough to blow it to smithereens. That was just how much of an explosion of sound Mida was making.

“Ugh, you’re so loud! We let you cry yourself out at the Suun settlement, didn’t we?! So cut it out already!” Ludo Ruu yelled while covering his ears.

Mida Suun just kept on sobbing, though, his wail drowning out that shout. The astounding amount of tears flowing down his cheeks were even starting to create a puddle on the ground.

“Shut up, you dummy!” Tsvai yelled and kicked Mida in the leg, but his tears still showed no signs of stopping.

My eardrums took some serious damage as soon as he started, and so I was now covering my ears with both hands, but I could still definitely feel a tightening in my chest. That was just how intensely Mida’s face displayed his sadness.

He was so plump that he looked inhuman, and he had seemed like he had no interest in anything but eating, yet now his face was a mess from his gushing tears. His fat was too thick for him to make proper facial expressions, yet right now he looked so heart-wrenchingly sad. He really did look like a baby.

“But... I’m sad... I don’t want to say goodbye to Oura and Tsvai...” Mida wrung out, trembling as he did so.

“Thank you, Mida... But there are no other paths left to us.”

Oura Suun wasn’t crying, but her face was still awash in grief.

Mida’s face started to distort with powerful emotion once again, but before he could resume his wail, an unexpected voice cut him off.

“Silence! You’re so large, yet you keep on wailing! Men shouldn’t go showing their tears to others so lightly!” I was probably the most taken aback of anyone. After all, it was Ai Fa of all people who stepped up to Mida and said all that. “Even though they were a group of scoundrels, they were still your family. I understand that, but sobbing won’t change your fate. If you are truly a person of the forest’s edge, then you should have at least a little pride!”

Mida turned and stared blankly at Ai Fa. And Ai Fa glared on back at his massive tear-and snot-soaked face with her wildcat-like eyes.

“You all committed crimes. Losing your family is your punishment for that. You must remember your sins... And you must live on in the only way you are permitted to do so.”

“But, I...”

“I know full well the sadness of losing all of the family that you have. It is a pain that feels like it will tear you apart, but it most certainly isn’t something

that can't be overcome." With wrinkles forming around her nose, Ai Fa brought her face in close to Mida's. "And your bonds with your family may have been severed, but none of you have lost your lives. If you live properly as a member of the Ruu, and these women do the same in the Rutim clan, it is possible you'll be able to see each other again in the future. So don't go wailing and sobbing when you still have that hope left to you!"

"I can meet Oura and Tsuvai again...?"

"You wouldn't be allowed to see the men or eldest daughter, but it's certainly possible when it comes to these women. After all, the Ruu and the Rutim are closely tied together," Dan Rutim chimed in. Even a man as lively as him couldn't help but look a bit down.

"I... want to see Yamiru and Tei, too..."

"That will be down to your determination. But don't go spouting such things before you put in any effort," Ai Fa said with a frightening glare, causing Mida to mutter, "Sorry..."

"Goodness. I never expected you to beat me to the punch, Ai Fa... You certainly are a splendid clan head," Mia Lea Ruu said with a smile, then she also walked up to Mida. "Even without blood ties, a clan member is still a clan member. And if you live properly as a person of the forest's edge, our clan head can grant you the Ruu name. I know you can't help but regret the past, but you must keep striving to better yourself."

Having finished speaking, Mia Lea Ruu pulled out a scrap of cloth and started wiping the various secretions from Mida's face.

"Well then, let's be off..." Dan Rutim said after looking over the pair with a satisfied grin, then he departed the plaza with the rest of his clan.

Mida was being taken in by the Ruu, while Oura and Tsuvai were joining the Rutim. Diga, Dodd, and Tei were being sent to the Dom, while Yamiru... Well, I was sure Gazraan Rutim would do something about all that.

The new leaders of the forest's edge would be the ones to interact with the lord of Genos now. And four days from now the merchant group from Genos under Kamyua Yoshu's protection was to pass through the forest's edge, so it

would certainly be necessary to officially announce the fall of the Suun clan before then.

There really was a mountain of problems to be dealt with. The leading clan had failed them, so now all of the people of the forest's edge needed to stand together and pick up the pieces in order to forge a better future.

"Well, I suppose it's about time we got started on dinner, too," Mia Lea Ruu proclaimed with a cheery smile, and so I returned to the kitchen along with a truly miserable Vina Ruu.

Chapter 1: Back to Business

1

Two days after the clan head conference, on the 12th day of the blue month, we managed to safely resume business in the post town.

“Long time no see, Milano Mas!” I heartily called out after circling around to the back of The Kimyuus’s Tail, only for the man to shoot me back his usual sour look.

“You certainly are loud for so early in the morning. And I sure wouldn’t call two days a ‘long time.’”

“Man, it feels a lot longer than that to me. Anyway, here’s to working with you again today.”

“Wouldn’t really call this ‘working together,’ either. Anyway, if you feel like working, then hurry up and take your carts already.”

“Right!” I replied as I stared straight back at Milano Mas’s annoyed face.

“What, you got some sort of problem with me?”

“Ah, no, of course not!”

The Suun clan may have been behind the death of Milano Mas’s friend, and they had fallen... But at least for now, there was no way I could reveal that to him. And even if I did, it couldn’t possibly clear away all his regrets. It wasn’t like the members of the Suun were judged for their crimes against the townsfolk, after all.

I really would like to clear that matter up, too... But seeing if the new leaders of the forest’s edge can form a proper relationship with the lord of Genos comes first.

As I walked along the stone path, I forced down the various emotions swirling around inside of me. Accompanying me was the usual group of Sheera, Vina, and Lala Ruu.

The wooden houses in a row, travelers and merchants walking the streets, huge toots birds pulling heavy loads... The stuffy heat coming from so many people being gathered together... Every last bit of it felt nostalgic to me. It really did feel longer than just two days.

“You look like you’re having fun, Asuta,” Lala Ruu teased as she helped push the cart. She looked like she was enjoying herself too, though, and both Sheera and Vina Ruu also seemed cheerful.

It was probably some sort of reaction to how serious things had been at the Suun settlement. Normally the post town would feel like enemy territory to the people of the forest’s edge, yet they weren’t showing that in the least. Their smiles alone were enough to seriously pick up my spirits.

And as we walked down the stone-paved path, a familiar voice suddenly called out, “Ah! Asuta!” It had come from the dark-brown haired, adorable, young Tara.

Her father Dora was also under his stall’s roof, smiling our way.

“Hey there, Asuta. I’m glad to see you looking well. Did you come by to buy something?”

“Ah, it’s been a while. I’ll take two tarapa, four tino, and 20 aria, please.”

“Got it. That’ll be eight red coins.”

It was a familiar, nostalgic exchange. Somehow, I felt like a powerful homesickness was melting away in my heart.

I guess doing business in town really does suit me well.

Of course, I was still a person of the forest’s edge, albeit a newcomer. For me, the most precious place in this world and the one I called home was the Fa house. Plus, even now a good portion of the townsfolk looked at the people of the forest’s edge with fear or scorn, not even trying to hide it.

Still, this post town had become like a second home, and the people I met here were incredibly important to me.

“Whoa, today’s looking pretty crazy too, huh?”

After getting today’s vegetables from Dora and continuing on, we found every

bit as big of a crowd waiting at the northernmost reaches of the stalls as what we saw on our busiest day of business yet, which had been four days ago.

But as the days passed, things had started to look less and less complex. The number of customers from the south and east had certainly increased, but on the other hand, there were fewer onlookers from the west hanging around.

It had already been half a month since we started this business. And so, seeing lines like this was no longer a rarity, and fortunately the customers from the east and south had stopped fighting with one another. Thanks to all that, there was no real value left for onlookers. And by now, there was just one guard left overseeing things, who was currently standing off to the edge of the road looking bored.

“Thanks for waiting! We’ll be starting to prepare shortly, so hold on just a bit longer!”

As we approached, the customers cleared a path for us. And without anyone giving a signal, they then formed neat lines of five in front of each of the carts.

“So, you’re finally here! I was getting sick of waiting!”

The front of the line for the myamuu giba stall was filled by the usual construction group, including Pops and Aldas. Pops was even shorter than me, while Aldas was tall enough to match up with folks from the east. They both had stern-looking faces, but I personally felt rather calmed seeing the odd pair again.

“Thank you for coming to our shop again today. And I’m glad to find you both looking well.”

“Oh, we’re doing alright, but Pops here has been awful noisy these past two days. He just kept saying how he wanted to eat giba meat, and it was a real pain getting him to calm himself.”

“This kid’s at fault for closing his shop for two whole days! Hey, you better not take a single day more off in the blue month, alright?”

“Yes, I intend to try my best in that regard.”

As we were having that conversation, I hurriedly heated up my metal tray. It

was a new tool in my arsenal that I had purchased six days ago, and it was made with iron from Jaguar. Since I formed my new contract on the eighth day of the blue month, I had been using it to prepare myamuu giba.

I dropped in some fat, fried up sliced aria, added loin and rib meat that had been marinating, heated it all up again, then poured more marinade over top. When I did, the aroma of fruit wine and the garlic-esque myamuu burst forth, and in turn got the waiting customers all worked up.

“Hey, is it still not ready?! I’m so hungry I feel like my guts are twisting themselves into a knot!”

“Just a little bit longer.”

Rather than moving the cooked meat to a wooden plate, I instead moved it to the edge of the tray. This method wasn’t something I could do with a metal pot. By moving the meat to the edge and only hitting the center with the fire, I could keep it warm without burning anything.

Then I placed some shredded tino atop the crepe-like poitan, and finally added the piping-hot aria to complete the dish.

“Here you are. That will be two red coins.”

After Lala Ruu accepted his payment and handed him the myamuu giba, Aldas shot me a smile.

“Hey, you start doing business with the inn tomorrow, right?”

“Ah, yes. That’s the plan.”

“That means we’ll be able to enjoy your cooking both day and night. That certainly has the folks staying at the inn excited.”

Thanks to the praise my cooking had received from Aldas and other customers from the south, the owner of The Great Southern Tree, Naudis, made the bold decision to offer my cooking for dinner.

I kept my hands moving and preparing myamuu giba all the while, but I also gave Aldas a bow.

“I really am grateful to all of you. I never imagined my business spreading in that way.”

“Hey, it’s not like we went and did it for you. We just wanted to get to eat tasty dinners, too.”

“That’s right! So if you go and prepare something that’s anything less than delicious, you won’t be getting off lightly.”

His words were certainly tough, but Pops was positively beaming as he held the myamuu giba with both hands. I broke out in a smile of my own without thinking, bowed and said, “I’ll strive my hardest to live up to your expectations.”

For a while after that, our stalls were a battlefield. There wasn’t much difference in how many I could prepare at once with the metal pot and the tray, so I went double and prepared 15 in each of them at once, but that still wasn’t enough. And so, after one more round to take care of the extra, we finally made it through the intense morning rush.

We then went on rotation for taking a break and snacking, at which point the members of the Silver Vase appeared. It made for yet another familiar, nostalgic occurrence.

“Asuta, it has been, some time.”

“Ah, welcome. Thanks for your continued business,” I said as usual to Shumiral, the leader of the group. And as always, the youth from Sym with his long silver hair put down his leather hood and gave a single, expressionless bow.

Unfortunately, thanks to the rotation, it wasn’t currently Vina Ruu by my side, but rather Sheera Ruu. Shumiral bowed to her as well, and she politely returned the gesture.

“So is it myamuu giba for you today?”

“No. We had that, before your time off. Today, is giba burgers.”

Though his speaking style marked him clearly as a foreigner, his pronunciation itself was absolutely flawless. The people of the forest’s edge still stumbled on words like “giba burger,” but maybe that was down to the difference in how aware they were of other cultures.

“Asuta, how is, the kitchen knife?”

“Ah, I’ve gotten really accustomed to using it. How should I put it? I feel like it’s sturdier than the ones I used back in my old home. I’m certainly grateful that a rookie like me was able to get ahold of something like this.”

“Asuta, you are, a rookie?”

“I am. That goes for my cooking skills of course, but this is also my first time having my own shop, too,” I replied while preparing the myamuu giba for the five members of the group ordering from this stall.

With that, Shumiral’s eyes opened wide for just an instant.

“Asuta, you are very skilled, at cooking. I believe, your dishes, are very tasty.”

“Thank you. I really am grateful to hear you say that.”

“Once you are, a full-fledged chef, just what will you make then...? I look forward, to it, so much it is, frightening,” Shumiral added, his eyes narrowing a bit this time. People from the east didn’t let their expressions shift, so to me, that looked like an incredibly gentle smile.

Then, as one of his comrades went and purchased the giba burgers, Shumiral slowly glanced over the surroundings.

“Is she, not around, today?”

“‘She’?” I said with a slight tilt of my head, then got his meaning, “Ah! If you mean my clan head, she’s busy with other work today. She actually doesn’t normally help with work at the stalls.”

“Clan head...?”

“The leader of my house. She is the clan head, and I’m a member of her clan.”

“I see,” Shumiral said with a nod. “Was your clan head, happy with, the stone?”

“Ah, right... Um, I think so, more or less,” I replied, obviously a bit shaken, and Shumiral narrowed his eyes again, looking like he was enjoying himself.

“I am glad. If anything else, comes up, please consult, with me.”

“Right, thank you.”

With that, the members of the Silver Vase departed, and in their place

another familiar customer approached with a smile.

“Hey, there. Looks like business is booming again today!”

She had dark-brown hair and ivory-white skin. Her slender body was covered with just a small top and long skirt, giving her a rather coquettish appearance overall... It was Yumi, the daughter of the inn known as The Westerly Wind.

“Hello there. It’s been some time. Are you alone today?”

“Yeah. I had all sorts of work to help out with all morning. I’m starving, so I slipped out for a bit,” she said with a grin, then she sniffed the aroma of the meat still heating on the corner of the tray. “It smells so good! You can’t get a scent like that just by adding myamuu and fruit wine. It smells way better than kimyuus manju. Giba meat must have a pretty nice aroma of its own, too.”

“Yes. And I believe giba meat and myamuu likely go quite well together.”

“That’s true. It’s not rare at all to find dishes that use myamuu, after all... You thought of how to flavor it and everything on your own, right? You really are amazing to figure out all that!”

“Ah, no. Honestly, I’m still nothing but a rookie as a chef.”

I heard that chefs only existed within the walls of the castle town, so that must have been why I was able to earn such a reputation with my level of skill. It of course still made me happy to hear, but I wasn’t going to let it go to my head.

“Hey, the sun still hasn’t hit its peak, but how many have you sold so far today?”

“Huh? Right, let’s see... I believe each of the stalls have sold between 40 and 50 meals by now.”

“50, in this little time?! That really is some pace... Oh, I’ll take three for today. No matter what it takes, I’m going to get my dad to give it a try.”

“Ah, your father?”

“He’s not worth being referred to so politely. He’s just a stubborn, hard-headed old man,” Yumi said while crossing her arms and pouting. “He says there’s no way giba meat tastes good, and that me and my mom’s tongues have

just gone funky from eating it. But today, I'll smash that hard head of his to smithereens, no matter what!"

"I-I see. Still, the older crowd of folks born in Genos sure do have a strong resistance to giba meat, don't they?"

"That's not it at all. My mom's a pureborn child of Genos, but my dad moved here when he was older. And it's only my grandparents' generation that's afraid of giba rather than the people of the forest's edge... My dad just says he can't stand them for whatever reason."

Being swept aside for "whatever reason" had to be rough. And I felt like Yumi was an invaluable ally to the people of the forest's edge, considering she was striving to overturn that despite also being a westerner.

"Your work with The Great Southern Tree starts tomorrow, right...?"

"Huh? Ah, yes."

"If I recall correctly, that's an inn regularly used by folks from the south, but a lot of people from the west stay there too. When your food gets served there, I'm sure more and more westerners will start eating giba meat," Yumi said, presenting a rather positive view of things. However, she kept on frowning as she did so. "But if it becomes perfectly normal to eat giba meat, then inns without giba cooking may be seen as behind the times, right? That's why I figure I've got to bust through my dad's hard head soon."

"That may be so... But still, it will probably be a good number of years before we could get to that point, don't you think?"

"Whether it's in a year or ten, it would still be bad. And actually, there's a danger of The Great Southern Tree stealing our customers here and now, so we can't just go and blow it off."

She certainly seemed to have a drive when it came to doing business. Apparently, Yumi had her act together as a daughter a lot more than I had been thinking. Perhaps even putting aside the question of giba, The Westerly Wind had a bright future ahead once she got married and took over the place.

"Well then, see you again tomorrow!" Yumi called out, then she strode off resolutely holding the three myamuu giba.

“Alright, looks like it’s about time to prepare some fresh meat! I’m counting on you, Sheera Ruu.”

“Right,” she replied with a nod, a serious expression on her face.

Tomorrow, for the back half of the work day I would be leaving the stall to go prepare food at the inn, and I would be putting Sheera Ruu here in charge of the myamuu giba.

The nervousness was clearly showing on Sheera Ruu’s face. She must have been thinking that because she was being paid more than the others for the job, she wasn’t permitted to mess up. When it came to work, she took things super seriously. But that was precisely why I felt fine leaving the task up to her.

“Well then, I’m getting started,” Sheera Ruu said, throwing some aria onto the tray.

Once that was all nice and soft, she added the giba meat, then used a wooden spatula to move everything around so it heated properly. She was preparing enough for ten people, and from what I could tell by looking, she seemed to have the right amount of aria and meat. She also appeared to be paying careful attention to the color and toughness, and she moved them to the edge of the tray as soon as they were done.

As Sheera Ruu intently watched, I grabbed one of the chunks of meat. She had cooked it... superbly.

“Perfect!” I said with a grin, and she replied with an even greater smile.

“I feel so truly blessed. I give my thanks to the forest for the fact that I met you, Asuta.”

“That’s a bit much. I mean, you were already this skilled to begin with, after all.”

“That’s not true. After all, it’s thanks to you that I’m now able to find even more joy and meaning in manning the stove. If you had never come to the forest’s edge, I would have kept on living feeling ashamed at my own powerlessness,” Sheera Ruu said, looking like she was gazing off far into the distance. “And from here on out, I’ll surely be able to live on with more and more pride. And so, I’m also grateful to Ai Fa for bringing you to us. I bless the

fact that you two met above all else.”

“Thank you,” I earnestly replied.

While some like Jiza Ruu wished me and Ai Fa had never met, there were also people out there who felt like Sheera Ruu, too. And since I could become either a powerful poison or medicine, it was important that I showed both sides how I chose to live my life.

With those feelings freshly renewed, I went to grab a knife to cut the tino, when I spied another familiar face. It was the capricious Kamyua Yoshu’s apprentice, Leito.

“Hello, there. I’ll take two, please.”

He was a small-framed young lad with flaxen hair, and as always he had a smile on his face. As I looked back into his light-brown eyes, I replied, “Hello. Thanks for your continued business. Is Kamyua busy today too?”

“Yes. He got back in the morning, and it seems he plans to sleep till the sun hits its peak. His big job is drawing near, so he’s busy with all sorts of preparations.”

Was he really that busy getting ready to guard that merchant caravan? Well, there would be no point to asking that question, and besides, I had work to do.

“Sorry about this, but in that case, could you pass along a message to him? I’d like him to make a bit of time after I finish with the stalls.”

“Oh, my. How rare, for you to have business with Kamyua,” Leito replied with his usual innocent smile, his eyes going wide. “I’m sure he’ll be delighted. I’ll make sure to let him know as soon as he wakes up. He should be staying around The Kimyuus’s Tail, too.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

With that, the youth disappeared into the crowd, which had really started picking up. Once he was completely out of sight, Sheera Ruu shot me a worried look and said, “Asuta, make sure you stay on your guard, alright?”

“Right. He’s insisted he respects the people of the forest’s edge, though, so it shouldn’t be dangerous... probably.”

“That ‘probably’ is worrying. As things stand, the forest’s edge can’t afford to lose you, Asuta. And besides, think of how upset Ai Fa would be if anything would happen to you. Please don’t forget that, no matter what.”

“It’s alright. I’m just going to go talk to him.”

Nothing about that was dangerous... at least for now. However, I had no idea how things would play out in the near future.

Now that the Suun clan had been overthrown, just how would relations with the Genos castle shift? And just how would that change affect us, since we have been doing business in the post town? Any guesses I could make felt like nothing but fumbling in the dark.

Still, if anything happened to me now, it would definitely set things back here in the post town. With just a bit more time, I may be able to impart the know-how needed to do business on their own to the people of the forest’s edge. At the very least, I couldn’t afford to die or disappear till then.

My life doesn’t belong just to me alone anymore.

I needed to be more careful and cautious than ever before, just like I had discussed with Ai Fa last night.

Even though the Suun clan had fallen, it wasn’t as if everything had been resolved. We still needed to make sure we formed a proper relationship with the castle, as that was also an important step in atoning for the sins of the leading clan.

“Well then, the sun will hit its peak soon. Let’s give it our all in the back half, too,” I called out to Sheera Ruu, who still looked a bit worried. Then, I turned with a smile and greeted, “Welcome!” to a new customer.

2

Ultimately, we wrapped up business for the day around two hours after the sun hit its peak.

We had prepared 200 meals the last time we came back from a break too, but back then we used up all of our normal business hours before selling out. This time, we were out around an hour and a half quicker. That must have been

because we took two whole days off in a row this time.

Regardless, it certainly made for a nice way to reopen for business. And so, I felt nice and satisfied as I headed on over towards The Kimyuus's Tail.

"Good work today, Asuta. Kamyua is waiting for you in the back," Leito greeted as I passed through the door to the inn after returning the stalls.

After saying hello to Milano Mas at the reception desk, Vina Ruu and I headed inside. I had asked Lala and Sheera Ruu to take care of the shopping for tomorrow, so that just left the two of us.

"Hey there, Asuta. Long time no see. Glad to find you looking well."

As always, Kamyua Yoshu was waiting for us at a table for six in the back of the restaurant. However, there were two other people there with him, which left me rather troubled. Their backs were to me so I couldn't tell what sort of folks they were, but regardless, what I had come to talk about couldn't really be discussed in front of strangers.

"Same here. And thank you for your purchase earlier. Um... are these people your acquaintances, Kamyua?"

"Yeah, we were just making a few arrangements for the job. I figured you would be coming a bit later, after all," Kamyua Yoshu replied with his usual complacent smile.

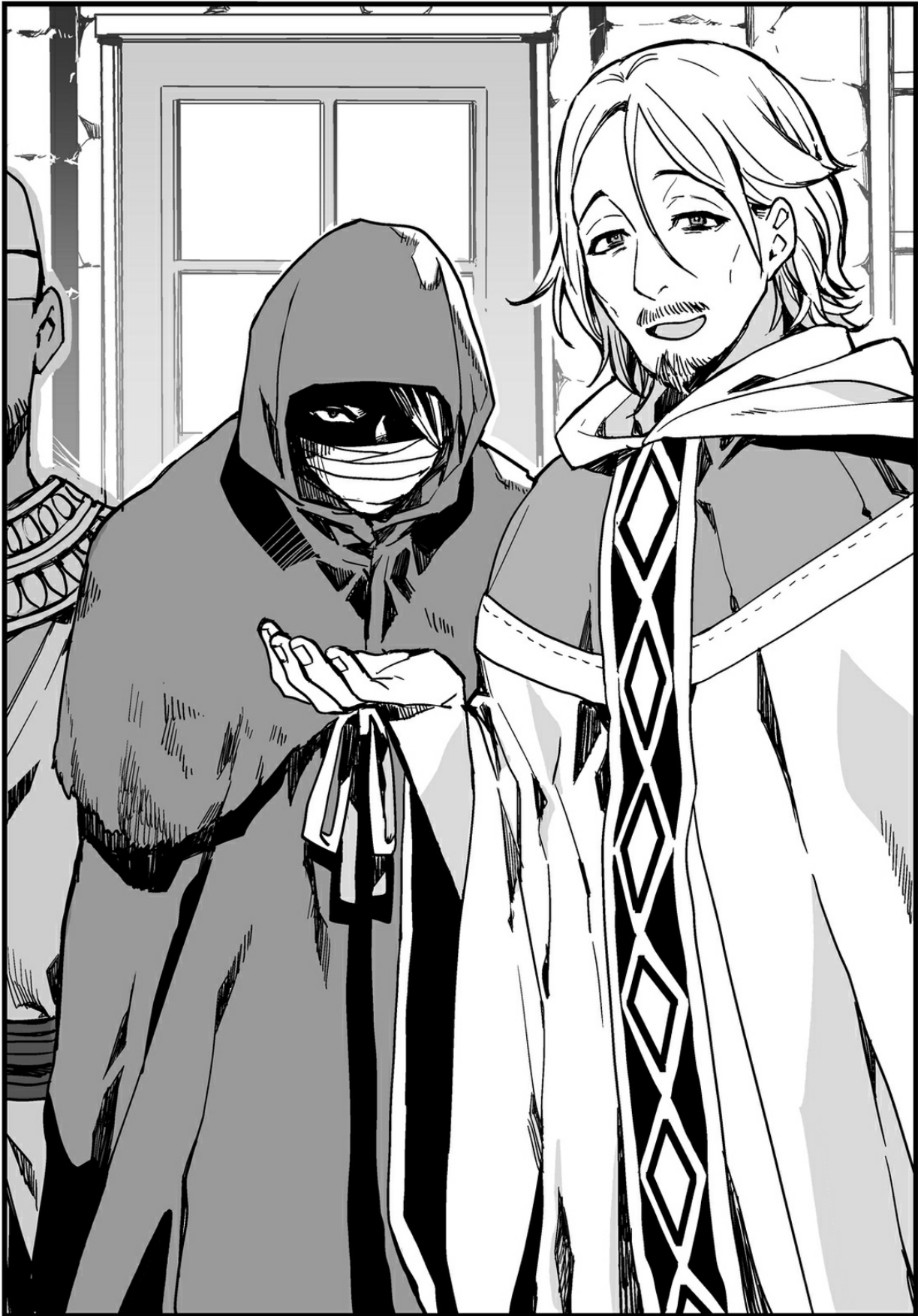
Well, there was in fact more than an hour left till our usual closing time, so Kamyua Yoshu wasn't really at fault here. And I certainly didn't miss the fact that he mentioned his job.

"Um, could you mean the guard work you've been talking about?"

"Yeah, that's right. The big job where we're passing through the settlement at the forest's edge to the eastern highway. Well, it's not like it has nothing to do with you, so I guess I should go ahead and introduce you."

Hearing that, the other two men turned around, and I instantly gulped. That was just how shocking one of the two appeared. Though with that said, I couldn't see his face at all, as he had even more bandage-like cloth wrapped around his face than Darmu Ruu once did.

“The one closer to you two is Haan of Dabagg, and he’s also in the bodyguard business. The guy further in Zasshuma, the leader of the merchant caravan heading for Sym. Ah, and this is Asuta of the forest’s edge, as well as one of the daughters of the powerful Ruu clan.”



The bandaged man was Haan of Dabagg. I had never heard of it before, but I assumed that Dabagg was the name of a place. He really had a strange air about him, and not just because his face was hidden behind bandages. No, it was the sharpness and coldness in his snake-like eyes that had me so on guard.

I had once compared Yamiru's eyes to those of a snake, but his certainly didn't have the same venom in them. They just looked frozen, as if they utterly lacked the warmth and emotion you would expect from a human being. Yes, his pale grey eyes had a merciless shine to them, like a guillotine's blade.

He seemed pretty tall and well built, wearing the same sort of long leather cloak as Kamyua Yoshu, though he also had a hood up like folks from the east wore. From what I could see under the cloak, his outfit looked incredibly normal, but there was no way he was any ordinary man.

"Oh? You're the owner of those stalls that sell giba dishes, aren't you? I've only seen you from afar up till now, but you're rather young, aren't you?!" the other man, Zasshuma, chimed in.

He seemed plenty shady, too. Kamyua Yoshu had introduced him as being in charge of the merchant caravan, but he looked more like the boss of a band of thieves to me.

He had rather sunburnt olive skin, his hair and beard were both dark brown, and his eyes were a bright tawny color. His height was average, and he also looked to have a pretty darn sturdy physique. As for his attire, he wore a sandy-colored turban on his head, a sleeveless vest, and cylindrical-legged pants. Plus, he had a number of jingling accessories around his neck and arms, so he gave the impression of being rather well off.

"Sorry, but can we end it here for today? There shouldn't be any problems with the arrangements we've made up till now, right?" Kamyua Yoshu asked, at which Zasshuma replied, "Right," with a nod and slowly rose to his feet.

"Well, with Kamyua Yoshu the Northern Whirlwind and the Twin Fangs, Haan of Dabagg, on our side, we don't have to fear any possible threats! And we've got all the annoying talking out of the way now, so make sure to get plenty of rest before the day we head out."

With that urging from Zasshuma, the bandaged Haan also stood to his feet. As he did so he grabbed two blades leaning up against one of the log chairs, then hung both of them at his waist. Was that why he had that grandiose nickname of “the Twin Fangs”?

“Still, you sure are a pretty one! I know there are a lot of beauties among the young women of the forest’s edge, but you’re far beyond any I’ve seen up till now!” Zasshuma suddenly stated, leaning his face towards Vina Ruu. “How about coming back to my inn with me till tomorrow morning? Considering your looks, I could pay you ten white coins for that.”

“Do you really think you can buy a woman of the forest’s edge with money...?” Vina Ruu replied while glaring at the man with her incredibly seductive eyes.

Zasshuma didn’t seem to feel any shame in the least and just shot her back a big grin.

“As long as they agree to it, I’ll buy as many as I please. And if it’s a proper exchange for goods, then the hunters of the forest’s edge would have no reason to send my head flying over that, right?”

“Unfortunately for you, not a single woman at the forest’s edge would sell her body for coins...”

“I see. That *is* unfortunate! Well then, Northern Whirlwind, go ahead and contact me if anything else comes up!”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

With that, the disquieting pair exited The Kimyuus’s Tail.

Kamyua Yoshu shrugged his shoulders, then gestured towards the open seats.

“Man, sorry about all that. He’s actually not as much of a scoundrel as he looks, but he’s just way too driven by his desires. He doesn’t have the guts to do anything untoward to a person of the forest’s edge, though, so feel free to just laugh him off.”

“Right...” I replied, feeling rather dissatisfied with that statement as I sat down where Zasshuma had been seated.

However, rather than sitting, Vina Ruu stood behind me. That was because the people of the forest's edge had no custom of using chairs.

"Now then, what did you want to discuss? I couldn't help but feel elated when I heard you were coming to meet me," Kamyua Yoshu stated, his elbows on the table as he excitedly leaned forwards.

I stared straight back at his long, aloof face, then replied, "I'm afraid it's nothing to feel elated about. Today, I'm here as a representative for the three new leaders of the forest's edge, who have taken the place of the Suun. Will you listen to my message from the Ruu clan head Donda Ruu, Sauti clan head Dari Sauti, and Zaza clan head Gulaf Zaza, Kamyua Yoshu?"

"Well, I can't exactly turn you down after hearing that introduction..." Kamyua Yoshu said with a cheerful grin, then he took a sip of the zozo tea that was sitting on the table. "So, the Suun clan was finally stripped of its status? That certainly does make for a serious situation."

"Um, I'd just like to confirm up front, did you really not know of that?"

"Why would I? I'm not a person of the forest's edge, so I'd have no way of getting ahold of that information."

"But you spied on the wedding banquet without anyone noticing, didn't you? So I figured it was also possible you did the same thing with the clan head conference of two days ago."

"Hmm, I see. I'll be honest with you, here. I was aware that the clan head conference occurs once a year, and that it was being held on the tenth of the blue month. But since it was such a tense event rather than a party where everyone was getting drunk, I had no confidence I could stay hidden all the way to the end, so I didn't dare consider getting anywhere near it... I would never underestimate the people of the forest's edge that greatly, Asuta," Kamyua Yoshu stated, his expression still every bit as detached as always.

"I see," I replied with a nod. "Well then, let me continue on. It was decided that the Suun clan was unfit to lead the forest's edge, and they were stripped of that right. Now in their place, the Ruu, Sauti, and Zaza clans govern. There's still a chance the Zaza will yield that right to another of their related clans, but for now, those three lead the forest's edge, so please understand that fact."

“Yup, got it. As I said before, I’ve had serious doubts about the behavior of the Suun clan, so hearing that the people of the forest’s edge have taken decisive action against them makes me want to stand up and applaud.”

“I’m grateful to hear that... So, the new leaders of the forest’s edge will have to discuss things with the lord of Genos, but before that, we have to quickly deal with the matter of your job three days from now.”

“Yup, yup. We had arranged to have the Suun clan lead us through the settlement at the forest’s edge, after all. So what will happen with that?”

“Yes, well, to begin with, I’d like to confirm whether or not it would be possible to cancel it at this point.”

“That’d be tough,” Kamyua Yoshu replied, spreading his arms out in an exaggerated manner. “This is a large-scale plan involving both the Western Kingdom of Selva and the Eastern Kingdom of Sym. The lord of Genos himself is paying close attention to how it goes, so it’s not exactly something we can just stop at this point.”

I couldn’t help but mentally sigh at how ambitious that scale was, but it ultimately wasn’t all that complex. The thrust of it was that currently to come and go between Selva and Sym, the only option was to take a big detour around Mount Morga on the highway. But by passing through the settlement at the forest’s edge, it would be possible to greatly cut down on the distance.

“And let me add that there’s a barren desert stretching to the south of Morga, while the north is packed with bandits who attack travelers. Either of those makes for a harsh journey, and as such, this is a matter of critical importance to both nations.”

“Right...”

“If this experiment succeeds, it could well lead to the establishment of a new route. But as I said, last time anyone tried this it was a huge failure. All 30 members of the large merchant caravan made it safely through the settlement at the forest’s edge, but as they were passing through the forest towards the highway they were attacked by giba and all lost their lives.”

Had I heard that before? I felt like I had, but I didn’t remember the details. It

must have been a good while ago.

“Back then the people of the forest’s edge weren’t friendly enough to offer to guide them, and the merchants certainly weren’t properly prepared. And so this plan has been carefully constructed while reflecting on what went wrong last time. Those preparations took two whole months, so we can’t exactly go changing things now.”

“Understood...” I replied with a sigh. “In that case, I suppose there’s no helping it. And the leaders of the forest’s edge did say they didn’t especially wish to change the agreement, too. However, they also wanted to consider the option if there wouldn’t be any significant obstacles.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that,” Kamyua Yoshu responded with a smile, then took another sip of his zozo tea. “To be honest, the fact that the Suun clan was set to guide us had me more than a little concerned. So I’d actually feel real grateful to have another clan take up the task in their place.”

“Yes, about that... Your plan is to enter the forest from the south of the settlement, then push through to the highway, right? I heard that from Donda Ruu after he got it out of someone from the Suun clan.”

“Yeah. That’s because if we went north we’d pop out in the middle of the bandits’ territory. But by going from the south, it should be possible to make it to the highway while skipping past the desert region. I was personally thinking it would be a good route, too.”

“I see... To be honest, it’s possible that the Suun clan was planning to just halfheartedly suggest a route rather than putting in any effort. The ones living at the south of the forest’s edge are the Sauti and the clans under them, while the Suun live to the north and wouldn’t actually know the area.”

“Aah. So the Suun clan didn’t tell anything to those Sauti fellows, all so they could keep the reward money to themselves, huh? It’s sounding more and more like we got real lucky the Suun fell when they did,” Kamyua Yoshu stated, rubbing his stubbly chin. “By the way, are things stable at the forest’s edge? Even if the Suun clan’s crimes were made public, I can’t imagine them being the sort to just obediently accept their fate.”

“There aren’t any issues on that front. The new leaders of the forest’s edge

have taken responsibility for keeping them in line.”

The men of the main Suun house were set to be sent north this afternoon. Zuuro Suun would be placed with the Zaza clan, Zattsu Suun would go to the Jeen, while Diga, Doddo, and Tei would join the Dom.

There shouldn't have been any need to transport the previous clan head, Zattsu Suun, as he was so ill he couldn't even stand on his own. However, the members of the Suun branch houses feared him even more than they did Zuuro Suun, so he was to be placed on a sliding door and forcefully carried there.

“If he dies on the way, then so be it,” Donda Ruu had mercilessly stated. Unlike Diga and the rest, Zuuro and Zattsu Suun retained their clan names as they awaited their day of judgment.

The reason they weren't being punished immediately was to allow time to look into their other crimes, especially the detail of whether or not they harmed any townsfolk. But they most certainly weren't being forgiven. It was already a given that they would need to pay for the crime of pillaging the bounty of the forest with their lives.

The thought of it all cast a gloom over me, but Kamyua Yoshu just said, “I see, got it,” with a relaxed smile. “In that case, I'll need to make fresh arrangements with the Sauti, right? I'd like to take care of that tomorrow if at all possible.”

“Of course. If you could designate a time and place, I could pass that along.”

“Hmm... How about in front of your stall, when the sun hits its peak tomorrow? That way you can vouch for my identity, and the folks from the Sauti would feel more at ease too, right? Then we can move here to The Kimyuus's Tail afterwards to work out the details.” Then he swept back his blond bangs and added, “By the way, when were you guys planning on discussing all of this with Duke Marstein Genos? I'm certainly grateful that you're giving my work such priority, but shouldn't that come first?”

“Ah, yes, that's up to the leading clans, but I believe they're planning to head to the castle first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Gotcha... Of course, you already know how the Suun clan had their exchanges with the Genos castle, don't you? You won't mistakenly walk up to

the main gate, will you?”

I only just happened to overhear this, but apparently even the Suun clan weren't permitted to enter the castle town. Instead they stated their business to the guards at the rear gate, and that was then conveyed inside the stone walls.

“So ultimately, the Suun clan never met the lord face to face, either. That sure sounds fitting to how the folks behind those stone walls do things,” Ludo Ruu had groused at dinner last night.

“And it may not be necessary, but there's one more thing I wanted to warn you about... The man the lord appointed to negotiate with the people of the forest's edge is named Cyclaeus. He doesn't have so much as a mote of respect for hunters, so everyone should try to mind their tempers around him, alright?”

“Understood. I'll let them know.”

For natural-born hunters like Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza, this could prove to be a far harsher trial than even dealing with the Suun clan. Officially, the lord of Genos also ruled over the people of the forest's edge, so they wouldn't be permitted to defy his proxy, Cyclaeus, either.

“So, does that about cover it for today? I'll admit I'm real curious just what the Suun clan did that led to their downfall, but I get that someone from about town like me doesn't exactly have the right to pry. And so, I'll just try to sneakily get it out of the duke instead.”

“I don't think ‘someone from about town’ could approach the lord of the land like that, though...”

“I'm telling you, that all just sort of happened. I mean, you can never predict how bonds will form between folks... Though to be fair, me and Cyclaeus are probably the only two people in this whole world with direct ties to both Duke Marstein Genos and the people of the forest's edge,” Kamyua Yoshu said, breaking out in a grin like a Cheshire cat. Somehow, I got the impression that he was hinting we should ask him for help if things happened to go sour with Cyclaeus.

“Kamyua... Could I ask you one more question?”

“Yeah, what is it? And you don’t have to limit yourself to just one. Ask as many as you please.”

“I’ve now finished my role as a messenger. From here on, I’m talking to you on a personal level, as Asuta of the Fa clan. We may not be close enough to call each other friends yet, but there’s still one thing I’d like you to confirm for me.”

“I think of you as a fine friend, though. But what is it...?”

“Did you give Ai Fa your help on the night before last?”

“Hmm?” Kamyua Yoshu questioned, raising one of his eyebrows. “That would have been the night of the clan head meeting, right? Like I said before, I didn’t go anywhere near the forest’s edge on that day.”

“Is that so? I get that it may well have been impossible to peer in on the meeting itself with all the clan heads gathered there, but I would think you could manage to hide yourself out in the dark.”

In actuality, Ludo and Shin Ruu, and even Tsuvai had been watching us that night, so it surely wouldn’t have been hard for someone as elusive as Kamyua Yoshu to do so. However, he just shook his head, still wearing the same expression on his face.

“Like I’ve told you before, I want to build a friendly relationship with the people of the forest’s edge. That Donda Ruu fellow warned me that if I wasn’t careful with my actions he would send my head flying, and at the time you told me you didn’t need my help, too. And considering I wouldn’t stand to gain anything by going where the clan head meeting was being held, I went ahead and held back my overwhelming curiosity and just slept here at the inn.”

“I see... Sorry for asking you the same question over and over.”

“Hmm... I’ll admit it makes me sad to think you see me as such a huge liar, but what were you asking for, anyway? Was Ai Fa in danger, somehow?”

“Yes. And so if you were the one who saved her, I wanted to make sure I thanked you properly. I figured it wasn’t very likely, though.”

So in that case, was it really Tei Suun... er, Tei, who had Ai Fa drink that fruit wine so she would wake up? That pitiable man who gave his own daughter to

be the clan head Zuuro Suun's wife, then on top of that got used like a servant by the members of the main house?

"I see," Kamyua Yoshu muttered. At the same time, his purple eyes narrowed a bit and took on a strange, knowing shine. "Unfortunately, I'm not the one you're looking for. I've got no clue who it may be, but I hope you get the chance to thank them directly."

"Right, got it..." His gaze somehow reminded me of Jiba Ruu's and made me feel uneasy, so I decided to make a hasty retreat. "Well then, we'll be excusing ourselves now. I'll see you again tomorrow, when the sun hits its peak."

"Yup. I'll be secretly raising a toast tonight for the people of the forest's edge and the new life they're starting. And make sure you give my regards to Ai Fa too, alright?"

3

We finally made it back to the Fa house midway between when the sun hit its peak and when it set. I felt like I spent a good deal of time talking to Kamyua Yoshu, and yet we ultimately made it back an hour early.

"It's been a while since I last came to the Fa house..." Vina Ruu stated as she placed the bag of vegetables she had been carrying down by the door. I put my luggage down too, then was about to thank her and say goodbye, only for her to question, "Oh...? Hey, isn't it a little noisy around the back of the house...?"

"Ah, right. From today on, we'll be showing the men who live nearby how to bloodlet and dissect a giba properly."

It was still important for us to check it out, though, so Vina Ruu and I circled around back. And sure enough, Ai Fa and six men were waiting there. There was also a giba, around 80 kilos or so, dangling from the big tree next to the stove.

"Ah, you're back already, Asuta?"

"Yeah, we just got here... You sure were able to catch a giba quickly."

"Yes, the Fou and Ran men hunted it down. We won't know if they were successful in bloodletting it or not till we taste it, though."

Ai Fa's left arm still hadn't fully healed, so she wasn't able to carry out her work as a hunter. However, the day before yesterday we had promised to teach the nearby clans how to properly prepare a giba.

The Fou and Ran clans, huh? If I recall correctly, the Ran fall under the Fou... I thought to myself only for the smallest of the six men to suddenly turn my way. He wasn't just little, but also pretty darn slender, and seemed a bit on the older side. His blackish hair was rough and disheveled, and his black eyes looked somewhat gloomy. There were deep wrinkles to his dark skin, and his cheeks were heavily sunken with age.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, you're here rather early. Is it already time for you to start preparing dinner?"

"No, I've got to prepare the meals to sell tomorrow before I can get to that."

"I see. Still, it will be good experience for the women to watch you work, won't it?"

Despite his overall gloomy appearance, it seemed he actually had a pretty active personality. Fortunately, I got along just fine with folks like that.

However, there was one thing that bugged me just a bit: The slender man had just two tusks and horns dangling in front of his chest. It was rare for anyone from such small families to match the number Ai Fa wore, but just having two was certainly unusual. Even women generally wore three to ward off any disasters that may befall them.

At any rate, as those thoughts ran through my head I replied with a big nod, "That's true. I have to prepare a whole lot of food for work, so they may be able to gain plenty just by watching."

Then, the man turned towards Ai Fa.

"Clan head of the Fa, do you mind if I call for the women from my house before learning how to dissect? Despite appearances, I tend to move quite quickly. And so, I promise you that it won't take long."

"I don't mind. In that case, we'll skin the pelt before removing the innards."

"I'm very grateful," the small man said, then took off running. He wasn't quite

as quick as Dan Rutim, but he was indeed rather fast.

“What a restless man... Was he always that way?” the Fou clan head asked. He was also rather thin, but he was tall, too.

“That man wasn’t a member of the Fou?” I asked, only to get back, “No, he’s the clan head of the Sudra.”

With that, I finally remembered. The Sudra was one of the clans that approved of the business the Fa clan was undertaking, alongside the Fou, Gaaz, and Ratsu. I hadn’t been able to make out his face in the darkness of the ritual hall, but now that it came up I did recall spying someone that small.

“Still, how to prepare dinner, is it? You would go so far as to teach that, Asuta of the Fa clan?”

“Yes. But I have my work, so I can’t properly teach them by working them through the process. Still, just learning how to bake poitan should make quite a difference, wouldn’t you say?”

The Fou clan head’s expression shifted when he heard that.

“Poitan...? But it must take quite a bit of time to make poitan take that shape...”

“Well, compared to just boiling it in a pot it does, but if you used it as you have up till now it would wreck the dish no matter how successful you may be at getting rid of the stench of the meat.” Myamuu giba and hamburgers were dishes that took practice to make. But if they could just start by learning how to prepare baked poitan, then they could use that alongside the bloodlet giba meat to make a delicious dinner. “Preparing it doesn’t use the stove that much, so as long as you have the poitan and a pot, you could even do it here. It takes some time, but it really isn’t all that difficult.”

“The Fou clan wishes to learn how to prepare giba meat in order to change its taste and live more prosperously. That’s just to sell it for coins, though, not to use for our own dinner,” the Fou clan head replied, his eyebrows drooping as he did so. “However... If it’s not too much of a burden on you, could you teach the Fou and Ran women as well?”

“Of course. If I explain it to everyone at once, it wouldn’t be any trouble at

all.”

“Hey,” the clan head signaled to one of the men, who went off running.

As he left, Ai Fa tilted her head and asked, “Are you about ready to get started? My left arm is still not fully healed, so I would like to leave skinning the pelt up to you.”

“Of course. My apologies. We’ll get right to it,” the Fou clan head answered, then he and the other men drew their knives and gathered around the giba.

It really made for a moving sight, seeing various clan members gathered here at the Fa house and working together. They weren’t related to the Fa clan in the least, but there were only 500 people of the forest’s edge in total, so I really did feel it was best for them to join their strength together as much as possible.

Dan Rutim and Mia Lea Ruu had called me and Ai Fa friends. And Gazraan Rutim had stated that the people of the forest’s edge needed to reconstruct their bonds. If we could form bonds with the Fou, Ran, and Sudra like this and someday come to call each other friends, too, that would be fantastic. Despite the uncomfortable look on Ai Fa’s face, that was how I truly felt.

“I’m so glad the Suun clan fell...” Vina Ruu suddenly muttered, catching me off guard.

“Ah, you still haven’t left yet, have you? Good work today, Vina Ruu.”

“Hey, that’s kind of mean...” Vina Ruu said, hanging her head a bit and shooting me a reproachful glare.

“S-Sorry. I was a bit lost in my thoughts there... Anyway, Ai Fa, I’m going to go handle preparations in the house. When the Fou and Sudra women arrive, could you let them in?”

“Right.”

I shot one last backwards glance at the giba as its white, naked flesh was steadily being exposed, then headed to the house alongside Vina Ruu.

“Let me just say once more, good work today. I’ll be counting on you again tomorrow.”

“Why are you trying to drive me away like that...? You’re just awful, Asuta...”

“Eh? B-But you have work to do too, right?”

We wrapped up our business for today an hour early, so I had figured Vina Ruu would use that time to gather firewood. However, she was instead standing here fiddling with her chestnut-colored hair with both hands and seductively wriggling her body.

“I don’t want to go back home... That youngest son of the Suun is waiting there...”

“Mida isn’t the youngest, or even part of the Suun clan anymore. You may technically understand that, but I still think it would be a good idea to really keep it in mind...”

“I know that. I really do... But I just can’t make myself feel that way...”

Vina Ruu was completely overcome with dread. Despite appearances, she was quite tough inside and really had her act together, but she seriously looked to be at a loss. But since the one who decided Mida would be welcomed by the Ruu was her clan head, Donda Ruu, there was no hope of escape. But as I racked my brain on what to do about the matter, an unexpected group appeared from down the path.

“Long time no see, Asuta. So you’re back from the post town already?”

Standing at the head of the group was Gazraan Rutim. I couldn’t help but smile back at him when I saw that familiar, dependable face.

“Yeah, it’s been a while. I really wasn’t expecting to meet you here.”

I had been told someone would be sent to hear how my conversation with Kamyua Yoshu went, but I never figured it would be Gazraan Rutim.

I couldn’t exactly ignore the people standing behind him, either. After all, they were the Lea clan head Rau Lea and Yamiru.

“I had intended to wait for you at the Fa house, so I was surprised to find you back so early, myself. Did you manage to meet with Kamyua Yoshu?”

“Yes,” I replied to Gazraan Rutim while also paying attention to Yamiru, who kept looking downwards instead of my way. “It seems there really is no choice but to go forward with the job. And so, he wants to discuss arrangements

tomorrow if the Sauti clan is up for guiding them.”

I then went ahead and explained everything Kamyua Yoshu had said as accurately as I could manage.

After listening to all that, Gazraan Rutim replied, “I see,” with a nod of his head. “In that case, we should head to the castle in the morning, then after that meet with this Kamyua Yoshu fellow. That’s more or less what I had expected... I’ll be accompanying the three leaders of our people to that discussion, too.”

“Really? That’s seriously relieving to hear!” I earnestly stated.

However, Gazraan Rutim shook his head and replied, “That’s an overstatement. I’m still honored to hear you say it, but I’m nothing but a simple boorish man of the forest’s edge. I’m full of concerns about how to talk properly with people from the city of stone.”

Still, if it was just folks like Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza there, I’d be super concerned it really could end up as a bloodbath.

Plus, with this, Kamyua Yoshu and Gazraan Rutim would finally be meeting for the first time. Just how would that aloof guy appear to such a wise and earnest man of the forest’s edge? I could feel my heart beating faster just thinking about it.

“If I may ask, was it decided that you of the Lea clan should be selected to take in Yamiru?” I asked.

“Yeah,” the young Lea clan head responded with a firm nod. “However, that’s ultimately up to you... And be more careful with your words, Asuta.”

Ah, right. He forbid me from talking politely to him, didn’t he?

The first part of what he said was what caught my attention, though.

“Up to me? You’re not saying Yamiru should join the Fa clan, are you?”

“No, the opposite. The Lea settlement’s closer to the Fa house than the Suun. And so the other clan heads all rattled on about if it was alright or not to let someone who came after you guys once to live so close.”

I didn’t know where the Lea settlement was, but I had heard the clan’s women were learning how to cook from Ama Min Rutim, so it had to be close to

where the Rutim clan lived. And so, even if it was “close,” it would still be over an hour away.

Plus, it was hard to imagine Yamiru trying to do us harm again now that the main Suun house had fallen.

“I don’t mind at all. Plus, I don’t see this woman as being all *that* dangerous.”

Yamiru finally looked up, appearing a bit taken aback. Her blackish eyes were now staring intently at my face.

“I see... That’s just like Gazraan Rutim predicted,” Rau Lea said while ruffling his long blond hair and turning towards Yamiru. “In that case, the Lea will take charge of this wicked woman after all. So hey, if you do anything you shouldn’t, I’ll send your head flying on the spot, alright? I’m not the sort that’s soft on women.”

“H-Hold on... What’s going on here, Gazraan Rutim?” I asked.

In response Gazraan Rutim bowed his head and told me, “My apologies. The truth of the matter is, if you hadn’t given your permission for Yamiru to be taken in by the Lea, she would have had to go to the Zaza or Sauti... But rather than as a member of their clan, it would have been as a prisoner.”

“A prisoner?”

“Yes. It was agreed that Yamiru should be sent either to the far off north or south to keep her far from the Fa house, but neither the Zaza nor the Sauti wanted anything to do with her, and said if they were forced to take her they would have to bind her limbs and treat her as a prisoner.”

“What?! But that’s completely against the spirit of what Donda Ruu proposed, isn’t it?”

“They also said that if she acted obediently then they would grant her more freedom bit by bit... It was also proposed that the Ruu or Rutim could take her in, but many said she shouldn’t be in the same settlement as Mida or Oura...”

“And so the Lea were chosen, since we’re the next strongest after those two,” Rau Lea chimed in, his androgynous face breaking out in a daring grin. “I didn’t mind in the least, but the folks from the north and south got real noisy about it.

And so we ended up leaving the decision up to you, since you're the one who was actually harmed in all this. When we were walking here Gazraan Rutim said you'd definitely be fine with it, and that turned out to be just what happened."

"But deciding someone's fate on a single statement from me is a bit..."

"It's fine, isn't it? After all, a single thought from this wicked woman almost twisted *your* fate, right?" Rau Lea said, then he shot Yamiru a piercing glare.

"Hey, you, let me ask you one last time... Do you swear to live according to the laws of the forest's edge? Can you live properly, treating not just the Fa and Lea, but all of our people, as your comrades?"

Yamiru cast her gaze down for a moment, and then she looked my way. The smell of blood still drifted off of her, and so I just couldn't help but feel uneasy.

"Asuta... I tried to destroy the Fa clan. The ones who actually acted were Diga and Doddo, but I gave them the melemele leaves and told them what they should do. If you feel a hatred for my brothers, then it should also be pointed my way, shouldn't it?"

"I... wouldn't call it 'hatred.' I honestly did feel that way back then, but in the end Ai Fa and I came out of it just fine, so if you swear to never do such a thing again, then I'll have no reason to hold a grudge against you anymore."

Yamiru's dark pupils wavered, as if she was holding back some powerful emotion.

Her face remained as expressionless as always, but she no longer had the air of a poisonous snake about her in the least. Apparently, she only really looked that way when she was grinning.

"Hey, you've had enough time to think it over, right? If you don't intend on following our laws, then say so clearly here and now. My blade will go ahead and lay you to rest," Rau Lea stated, sounding rather impatient.

However, Yamiru's eyes remained fixed on me as she said, "I will obey what you all have said... though I don't believe I'm worthy of being saved."

"Hmph. I see you've still got as harsh of a tongue as always." Then, Rau Lea grabbed Yamiru's slender jaw and forcefully turned her beautiful face his way. "Well then, from today on you're Yamiru Lea. If you commit any crimes, as your

clan head I'll cut you down. Take that to heart and live an earnest life."

"You're granting her your clan name already, Rau Lea?" Gazraan Rutim said, sounding shocked.

Rau Lea just snorted, "Hmph," and pushed Yamiru's face away. "Being so particular is a pain and I hate it. The punishment's going to be the same either way if she commits a crime, so I can't see any difference in if I give her the clan name or not. And I'd feel awkward having someone as a member of my clan without it."

Did that wild nature of his come from his youth? Still, what Yamiru needed now was probably someone like this to give her a forceful push on the back or drag her along. And so, I earnestly said, "You have my thanks, Rau Lea."

With that, an incredibly swift blow hit me square in the middle of my forehead. Considering it had the strength of a hunter of the forest's edge behind it, I seemed to lose consciousness for a moment, as before I realized it I found myself collapsed on my back.

"I told you I'd hit you if you talked all polite, right? I'm not the sort of guy who can just ignore such rudeness twice in one day."

"Stop that, Rau Lea. What will you do if the Fa clan head sees...? Are you alright, Asuta?" Gazraan Rutim asked as he pulled me up. All the while, my field of view was swaying.

"Oww. I'm alright, I think... Hey! Even if you were gonna hit me, you could've at least held back, right? That felt like my skull was gonna shatter!"

"Yeah, that's it. Just talk normal like that," Rau Lea said, turning away and sticking out his tongue.

I had at first thought he was a bit more mature than Ludo Ruu, but I had to revise that. This guy was definitely more childish.

"Hey, why is it that Gazraan Rutim's allowed to act all politely even though he's clearly older, but I have to go through all this trouble? It should be okay for me to be at least a bit polite with you since you're a clan head, right?"

"Gazraan Rutim's the sort to talk like that even with a ten-year-old kid. He's

an oddball that can't even act familiar with the girl he loves.”

“Please stop that. Even I can feel embarrassed, Rau Lea,” Gazraan Rutim stated with a frown, looking unusually troubled.

Suddenly, a “Pfft,” sounded out from somewhere.

When the three of us turned to look, we found Yamiru looking at the ground. It was impossible to tell what sort of expression she wore, as she was covering her mouth with her right hand.

“Geez, you sure are a fearless—” Rau Lea started to say, only to swiftly turn around. Gazraan Rutim did the same almost simultaneously.

There was a group of people of the forest's edge gathered together roughly five meters away. Two of them were men, while there were four women carrying pots... The men were the Sudra clan head and the member of the Fou who ran to go get the women. And when I noticed they both had grabbed hold of the blades at their hips, I gulped.

“You're the clan head of the Lea, aren't you? So the Lea are to be the next enemies of the Fa after the Suun clan?” the Sudra clan head questioned in a gloomy tone.

I had no idea what he meant, but Rau Lea said, “Ah...” and slumped his shoulders. “You mean how I hit Asuta? Don't go misunderstanding, you fools. That was just me doling out a fitting punishment, since Asuta went and broke an agreement we had. That's not enough to even budge the bond between the Fa and the clans under the Ruu.” Then, Rau Lea suddenly put his right arm around my neck. “As you can see, Asuta knows that he was at fault, and he's got no problem with me either. If you get all that, then stop glaring already.”

The men of the Sudra and Fou then shot a probing glance my way.

I didn't have any recollection whatsoever of admitting fault, but I had no choice but to relent.

“Yes. Our relationship with the clans under the Ruu hasn't shifted, so you don't need to worry... Well then, shall we get started with the cooking lesson?”

With that, the men finally took their hands from their blades, and the women

breathed a sigh of relief.

And with his arm still around my neck, Rau Lea asked, “What’s this about a cooking lesson?”

“I’m going to be showing the Sudra and Fou women how to bake poitan. Would you like to learn too, Rau Lea?”

I was still angry at him so I had meant to provoke him with that, but instead, his eyes sparked as he replied, “How to bake poitan?! That’s great! That’ll spare us the hassle of heading to the Rutim house to learn! Hey, Yamiru Lea, go learn that here and now! Then you can pass it on to the other Lea women!”

“Me...?” Yamiru questioned, furrowing her brow. I got the feeling that she was becoming a lot more expressive now than she used to be. “In the Suun clan, it was the job of the branch families to man the stove. I believe I’ll be no more useful than a ten-year-old child.”

“Then that’s all the more reason you should practice. You’re a member of the Lea clan, not the Suun, after all.” Rau Lea then finally took his arm from my neck and instead gave me a pat on the chest. “Well, I’m counting on you. And I’ll cut her down then and there if she does anything she shouldn’t, so don’t worry.”

“That’s all well and good, but you didn’t bring any poitan, so you won’t be able to manage for dinner, right? After all, everyone else was planning to bake their poitan here for tonight.”

“What?! That’s no good!” Then Rau Lea turned to the folks from the Sudra and Fou clans in a fluster. “Hey! Sorry, but let me buy some poitan off of you all in exchange for these horns and tusks! I can even give you back the same number tomorrow! No wait, even more than what you give me!”

“How many poitan do you need...?”

“There are 19 members of the Lea clan! I’d want at least two for each of them!”

In that case, he would need nearly 40.

The Sudra clan head gave a sullen shake of his head, while the member of the Fou clan whispered to the women behind him.

“The Fou and Ran will give you the poitan. And it would take time to go to the post town and buy more, so if at all possible, we would like you to give us back the same amount.”

“Alright! Then I’ll put aside the matter of the horns and tusks and just get you back your poitan tomorrow! I’m in your debt, Fou and Ran clans!”

The women then took off back down the path.

Rau Lea broke out in a satisfied smile, while Gazraan Rutim gave a slight strained chuckle.

Yamiru was still looking down, meanwhile, with her long hair hiding her expression.

“I sort of feel like the punishment for the Suun clan was too light...” a voice quietly muttered from behind me.

I turned to look, and my eyes went wide.

“Ah, right. You still haven’t left, Vina Ruu...”

With that, my upper arm got pinched so hard it hurt, while Yamiru started her life anew as Yamiru Lea.

4

“Today was exhausting,” Ai Fa grumbled as she flopped down atop the rug after finishing dinner.

It was certainly unusual to see her like that, considering she generally stayed alert until it was time to sleep. And so, I asked, “Why’s that?” as I started cleaning up the mess. “You spent all day teaching the Fou and Sudra men how to bloodlet and properly dissect giba, right? Was someone especially hard to deal with?”

“That’s not it. They were all earnestly interested in learning, and didn’t look down on me for being a young woman... That’s what made it so unnecessarily tiring.” As she lay slovenly on the floor, Ai Fa let her hair down and added, “Lately, we’ve been dealing with nothing but powerful men from clans like the Suun and Ruu. It’s like I’ve lost my bearings...”

“I don’t think it’s very kind to the Ruu clan to lump them in with the Suun... Still, I guess even with the Ruu, you’ve only really had any interaction with the main house.”

I had interacted with hunters from the branch families before the Rutim banquet, and I got the same sort of feel from the Fou and Sudra folks. They were all the same sort of men of the forest’s edge: quiet, honest, and seemingly more than a little stubborn, but also incredibly serious when it came to their work.

“Thinking about it, the men from the main houses of large clans really do feel sort of unique. I wouldn’t want to call them haughty, but I guess I’d say they seem like they’re brimming with pride...? At any rate, I definitely wouldn’t want to make an enemy of any of them.”

“Hmm... It may suit me to face off against such an opponent with our pride on the line. But at least for now, I’m exhausted.”

She just sounded so worn out that I couldn’t help but break out in a chuckle, which caused her to ask, “What’s so funny?” and shoot me a glare.

“Ah, sorry. I guess that’s what they mean about being out of your element. I mean, I could definitely understand if Donda Ruu was the type that only truly showed his strength when placed in danger, too.”

“Don’t go lumping me in with that ruffian,” Ai Fa said with a pout, then she turned away.

By that point I had finished cleaning up, so I sat down beside her. Since I got back home early today, I actually managed to finish my preparations for tomorrow before dinner.

“That’s not what I meant. I was just figuring you were probably getting antsy after not having a chance to hunt for so long... Plus I’m sure it’s awkward having people rely on you and want to work together again, right?”

Ai Fa remained facing away, but now she shot me another annoyed glare out of the corner of her eyes.

“You look like you’re really enjoying yourself. Is it truly that fun to see me so powerless?”

“Whoa, you really *are* in a bad mood. And of course not.”

I was just glad to see Ai Fa forming proper bonds again after two years of isolation.

It was true that the powerful Ruu and Zaza clans and their like were quite harsh towards Ai Fa. That was likely because they were truly opposed to the idea of a woman being a hunter. However, the members of the smaller clans seemed to properly treat Ai Fa as the Fa clan head.

Currently the Fa clan was amassing a significant fortune by doing business in the post town, but even before that Ai Fa worked hard and properly carried out her duty as a hunter. The shiny white horns and tusks always dangling in front of her chest were proof of that. And these folks who constantly lived under the threat of starvation must have been painfully aware of just how difficult it was for her to keep on hunting without anyone at all to help her.

Even when using giba summoning fruit, trying to hunt the beasts on your own without the incredible strength needed would simply result in your own death. And so, Ai Fa’s sheer skill as a hunter was undeniable. Thanks to that, the men of such small clans respected her strength rather than looking down on her.

“Well, you’ll get used to living like this soon enough, too. The way I see it, having to live in fear of the Suun clan’s gaze, that’s what was abnormal, and now your life is finally returning to its proper path, Ai Fa.”

“That’s not true... The Fa house only ever held weak bonds with other clans, so I would have never gotten involved with so many people if I wasn’t teaching them about bloodletting and dissecting. And so, you brought all of this about, Asuta.”

“What, so I just made more of a hassle for you?”

“That’s not what I meant! I was saying the Fa clan has been incredibly fortunate to have you here!” she stated in a grouchy tone, despite giving me a compliment. But well, it would be plain embarrassing to hear her say something like that all nicely, so that was just fine.

“By the way, are you alright with how things turned out with Yamiru? Er, I mean, Yamiru Lea? I feel kind of uneasy with how it was decided just based on

my opinion...”

Hearing that, Ai Fa went, “Hmph,” and turned away again. She sure was moving a lot for someone who had supposedly lain down to sleep. “No matter what I may say now, it’s already been decided... Besides, that woman already accomplished her goal, so she shouldn’t prove dangerous anymore.”

Yamiru’s goal... That was the destruction of the Suun clan after all, wasn’t it?

Perhaps she looked even more dangerous than Diga or Doddo to folks who couldn’t sense that, but personally I couldn’t imagine her having any reason for wrongdoing from here on out.

“However, I also can’t understand how you can act so friendly towards someone who once tried to catch you in such a trap.”

“I-I wasn’t being overly friendly. I was just treating her like I would any other woman.”

“Oh? But you seemed to always be standing right next to her during the lesson.”

“That was because her skills were the most questionable. Though I suppose that makes sense, considering she had always left manning the stove up to the branch families till now.”

Ai Fa was still facing away, but I could feel her glare. And for whatever reason, I felt real uneasy as we sat there silently.

“Hey, I already mentioned this, but Yamiru Lea reeks of giba blood. Even today, I couldn’t breathe through my nose and it was just awful. So I really wasn’t beside her because I wanted to be.”

“So that all would be resolved if she just didn’t smell of blood... And she should be forbidden from performing that ancient ritual using giba blood from here on out, right?”

“What do you mean ‘resolved’? I can’t see any reason for you to be angry with me...”

“I’m not angry at all!”

“That’s sure not what your face and tone are telling me!”

What a seriously fruitless argument.

I guess it was a bad idea to bring up Yamiru Lea around Ai Fa when she was this exhausted...

“Well, from here on out she’ll be learning cooking techniques from the Rutim, so we probably won’t be seeing Yamiru Lea for a while anyway. But more importantly, there’s something I wanted to ask you, Ai Fa.”

“What is it? My head’s already starting to hurt a bit, so if it’s complicated, then just leave it for tomorrow.”

“It’s not complicated at all. You see, I was thinking of paying a bit more to the women helping out with the stalls. Could I get your permission as clan head?”

With that Ai Fa rolled over so that her whole body was now facing my way.

“I’ll leave that decision up to you, but could I hear your reasoning first?”

“Right. It’s been less than half a month since we started doing business, but the Ruu women have caught on shockingly quickly. And it’s not just Sheera Ruu, as Vina and Lala Ruu are also absolutely indispensable. But now I’m going to have another woman come help, and it just wouldn’t feel fair to pay them all the same, so I figured I could raise their payment in accordance.”

“You’re asking another woman to help?”

“Ah, right, I still needed to tell you that. You see, I made a bit of a mistake, myself.”

That was in regards to the work I’d be starting with The Great Southern Tree tomorrow. My plan had been to have Sheera Ruu take over the stall while I went to the inn in the early afternoon, but everyone warned me I should avoid acting on my own.

Even without the threat of the Suun clan, there were still ruffians wandering about the post town. If I were a trueborn person of the forest’s edge they would be too afraid of retaliation to lay a hand on me, but there was a fear they wouldn’t stop to think about that due to my appearance. In fact, Gazraan Rutim had also warned as such when I started up my business.

“I need to bring one of the women along with me when I head to The Great

Southern Tree, but that would leave only one person in each of the stalls. I just wouldn't feel comfortable with that, so I was thinking of bringing on someone else to help."

Ai Fa was still stretched out atop the carpet, tilting her head in a way that seemed to say, "And?"

"It would just be that short period in the early afternoon where I would need help, so I was thinking of offering half the pay for half the amount of time, so three red coins. But like I said, I wouldn't feel right treating that newcomer the same as everyone else, plus I felt like I was paying all of them too little to begin with, so I wanted to use this chance to revise the deal we have."

Back when I started doing business, those labor expenses were a serious concern. You really just couldn't ever tell how things would play out.

"Vina and Lala Ruu were at six coins to begin with, so I was thinking of raising that to nine, and I was already planning on bringing Sheera Ruu up to 12, so I'll go with 15 instead. What do you think?"

"I don't mind. Do as you please. However... Who are you planning to ask to help out? Another of the Ruu women?"

"No, it's a busy period for the Ruu as they're now suddenly one of the leading clans, plus Mia Lea Ruu had said we should spread the wealth around fairly, so I was thinking of asking one of the smaller clans like the Fou and Sudra. Actually, if I brought it up, the Sudra clan head would jump on the opportunity right away, don't you think? He'd probably say I should go ahead and have them help out starting tomorrow, even."

That small, gloomy-looking clan head seemed to have an unusually strong desire to improve his situation. The drive to escape from poverty sure was something.

"The Sudra clan head...? Apparently, that clan has already lost two infants to starvation. And from what I hear, their related clans have died out, so their only option left would be to have a clan they at least have weak ties to take the lot of them in."

"Really? Then I'd like to work with the Sudra even more, in that case. Of

course, I'd like to work with other clans too, if I get the chance."

Ai Fa went silent.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"We faced a good deal of danger along the way, but we really did gain a lot from the clan head meeting... Surely none would call you a poison to the forest's edge now," Ai Fa replied, her annoyed voice finally shifting into a gentler tone.

"I'm not so sure... I don't think Jiza Ruu and Gulaf Zaza quite feel that way just yet, for example."

"I see. Then perhaps I should instead say few would call you a poison."

I'd certainly feel grateful if that was the case.

However, there were still plenty of troubles waiting ahead of us.

It had been around half a month since we first opened the stalls for business. Our sales themselves were fantastic, but our goal of making it so that giba meat itself could be sold still seemed far off in the distance.

"Well, I'll keep on striving from here on out so that all of them will think better of me. First off, I have my new business deal starting tomorrow to deal with."

"Right," Ai Fa nodded, then sidled up next to me using her elbows. With that, she plopped back down and stared up at my face from up close and personal.

"So... Donda Ruu and the others are heading to the castle town tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Here's hoping things go smoothly for them, too. I'll certainly be counting on Gazraan Rutim's skills to help out there."

"Right... But still, since the people from the castle have only interacted with the corrupt Suun clan, Donda Ruu and the others are sure to come across as threatening. It all just makes my head ache..." Ai Fa said while stretching her left arm out towards me. I couldn't help but tilt my head as her slim fingers approached my nose, only for her to say, "Hand."

"Yup, that sure is a hand."

“No, I’m telling you to give me your hand.”

What did she want my hand for? I didn’t know, but I held out my right hand regardless, which Ai Fa then grabbed with a bit of impatience. Then, she brought it to her temple, where it came to rest under her blonde bangs.

“My head really has started to ache, so lend me your hand for now.”

I didn’t really feel my palm would be that effective at soothing her headache, but she soon closed her eyes and looked quite satisfied, so I could see no reason to oppose her.



Just when I thought she really must be tired and I should let her sleep like this for tonight, she quietly started talking again.

“It’s been some time since I last slept alongside you in the Fa house. It isn’t as if we were treated poorly at the Ruu settlement, but this really is my home...”

“Of course. You did spend 17 years of your life in this house, after all.”

“Right. And you are a member of this house too, Asuta. I can no longer even imagine living without you.” Ai Fa’s unexpected statement there caught me off guard, causing my heart to skip a beat. But even so, she quietly continued on, “However... my feelings about the thought of our clan growing further are... complicated... If that time comes, will I really be able to act properly as the clan head?”

“The clan growing...? What do you mean?” I asked, but then it hit me. “Is this about what Vina Ruu was saying yesterday? I’ve said it over and over again, but I really don’t have any intention of marrying anyone.”

Ai Fa didn’t respond.

I felt a powerful unease churning in my chest, and couldn’t help but continue on. “Plus, I mean... If you suddenly said you were taking a husband, I may just lose all hope then and there rather than giving you my blessing. So we’re the same, on that point.”

“I see...” Ai Fa muttered, her lips wriggling in a bit of a strange manner. “You really are an odd man.”

“Yeah, well right back at you,” I replied as I wondered if that was really the case. I was holding back my feelings for Ai Fa despite all the things constantly running through my head. And if I lost control for even a moment, I probably wouldn’t be able to rein in my emotions. That was why I ultimately chose the path of just being a part of her family.

But how did Ai Fa feel...? What sort of thoughts and feelings were running through her head when she said she didn’t want any more members for the clan?

Well, maybe it’s just that it’d be tough as clan head to have more people

relying on her...

But still, I felt a whole lot better with things being like this than if she said to go ahead and take whoever I want as a wife, so I could accept it.

As that thought ran through my head, Ai Fa started soundly snoozing away.

Chapter 2: Another Disturbance

1

For the following day, I decided to go back to the usual amount of 60 giba burgers and 90 myamuu giba. While staying at the Ruu settlement I had been able to get as much help as I needed, but now that I had returned to the Fa house, that was no longer the case. Thanks to purchasing the metal tray, I was able to raise my efficiency, so I actually could make more now. But since we sometimes still had leftovers after preparing this much, I decided to hold back.

If we ended up selling out and closing up early, then that wasn't so bad. After all, if things went well I could end up getting orders from other inns in the future, so I wanted to get in plenty of training and expand the menu I could prepare.

Sure enough, business progressed smoothly again today, and once we made it past the morning rush and were preparing for the rest of the day, a woman of the forest's edge approached the stalls.

"Huh? Why are you here? You're not supposed to start working till the sun hits its peak."

"Yes, but I wanted to get as much experience as possible, so I came early."

It was Li Sudra, the clan head's wife and the woman who would be helping with the stalls from today on.

She was slender, tall, and quite beautiful overall. Her dark brown hair hung down to around her chest, and her eyes were a dark blue. The clan head appeared to be somewhere in his mid-forties, while she only looked about half of his age.

"What about your work back home? You won't get paid any more for coming early, you know," Lala Ruu bluntly stated.

"I understand that, of course," Li Sudra answered with a gentle smile. "I finished all the work I needed to around the house. And since I was granted the

honor of getting to help out Asuta of the Fa clan, I want to strive to be truly of use as soon as possible.”

She was clearly much more elegant, but she seemed to be every bit as proactive as her husband. And at least for me, that was a very welcome trait for her to have.

“Well then, let’s have you start by learning how things work over in the other stall. Lala Ruu, I know we just rotated, but I’m going to head over there too.”

“Got it.”

Currently Lala Ruu and I were manning the giba burger stall. And so, as I moved to the myamuu giba stall, I called out to Vina Ruu, “Sorry, but Li Sudra showed up, so I’m going to take charge of the myamuu giba for the time being. Could you go handle the giba burgers again, Vina Ruu?”

Vina Ruu turned away with a standoffish look, then headed back to the giba burger stall. She had been acting like that ever since my blunder yesterday.

It was incredibly rare for her to let her personal feelings interfere with her work. I guess that just went to show how much I had screwed up.

And I was truly, painfully sorry for that.

“Sheera Ruu, this is Li Sudra. Like I explained this morning, she’ll be helping us out for the time being after the sun hits its peak, so I hope we can all work well together.”

“Right,” Sheera Ruu replied with a nod.

Li Sudra bowed back, saying, “I look forward to working with you.”

“When you get an order, Sheera Ruu will prepare the food. Li Sudra, I’d like to have you take the customer’s two red coins, then hand over the completed dish. Nobody has tried to pull a dine and dash yet, but please make sure they pay you first. And carefully observe Sheera Ruu as she works, so you can eventually cook this dish, too.”

“Understood.”

She didn’t speak a whole lot, but she seemed incredibly sincere, plus she didn’t seem to have any problems interacting with the Ruu women. She really

was giving off a favorable first impression.

It was then that we got yet another visitor from the forest's edge, Gazraan Rutim.

"Huh? You're really early, aren't you?"

Just like Li Sudra, Gazraan Rutim had been scheduled to show up around when the sun hit its peak.

After bowing to the two women next to me, he called out, "Asuta," to beckon me over. "The meeting with that Cyclaeus man from the castle wrapped up, so I decided to come see you. My apologies, but could I have just a bit of your time?"

"Right, got it... Well then, you're in charge for a bit, Sheera Ruu. When the next customer arrives, please go ahead and show Li Sudra how it's done."

It was sort of a strange feeling, seeing Gazraan Rutim here in the post town. And sure enough, just having a man of the forest's edge around was enough to put a great many passersby on edge. And so, we moved from the stall to the thicket behind it.

"My apologies for intruding on your work. However, I wanted to hear your opinion as soon as possible. Donda Ruu and the others are hiding themselves over by the highway rather than entering town."

"That's fine. I'll admit, I'm awful curious about how things went, too... What happened with that Cyclaeus guy?"

"Well, to be blunt, things seem rather troublesome. Cyclaeus said he believes we should hand over the entirety of the Suun clan."

"Huh?"

"Pillaging the bounty of Mount Morga is also forbidden by the laws of Genos. And so he said it made sense for Genos to pass judgment on the criminals who broke that law."

Gazraan Rutim's expression was every bit as composed as always. However, there was a serious fire burning in his pale blue eyes.

"That may be so, but still... He wants you to not just hand over the previous

and current clan heads to Genos, but all of the members of the main house?”

“No, he wants every last person who broke the law. He said that the full Suun clan, all 41 of them with the branch families included, should face Genos’s judgment.”

That went way beyond what I had been expecting.

After being taken aback for a moment, I felt a rage boiling up in my chest.

“So they overlooked the Suun clan’s wrongdoings till now, but suddenly they’re doing a complete about-face? What did the leading clan heads have to say about that?”

“Yes, well Gulaf Zaza felt so indignant he said maybe we should just abandon Morga.”

“What...?”

“He said perhaps there’s no value to offering our blades in the service to the lord of Genos. That maybe we should just look for a new forest, like our ancestors did 80 years ago.”

“H-He thinks you should abandon the Morga forest’s edge? But why would—”

“That was just how untrustworthy that Cyclaeus man felt. Of course, Gulaf Zaza just temporarily let his emotions get the better of him when he said that, but I can absolutely understand how he felt... That man looked at us as if he were staring at beasts.”

I was at a loss for words.

The representative for the lord of Genos seriously despised the people of the forest’s edge that thoroughly?

“Cyclaeus gave us ten days. We have to decide on a path forward by the 23rd day of the blue month.”

“You couldn’t possibly turn Yamiru Lea and the members of the branch families and everyone over to Genos at this point, right? That would be completely reversing the path forward the people of the forest’s edge had chosen,” I said, my voice subconsciously growing more emotional. “The folks from the Genos castle are the ones who unjustly protected the Suun clan. And

that's partly why the Suun fell as far as they did, right? So the thought of them treating all the members of the branch families as criminals, when they were forced to follow along, is simply unforgivable."

Townfolk suspected the people of the forest's edge of attacking travelers, abducting girls from about town, and pillaging fields. Milano Mas had also said one of them was responsible for his friend's death. And yet, no matter how much the townsfolk complained, the castle did nothing to look into those crimes.

In spite of all that, they were ready to sentence the whole of the Suun clan for this single indictment... That just wasn't right.

"If the people from the castle had just punished the Suun clan properly to begin with, then maybe the townsfolk wouldn't have needed to suffer. Then, perhaps they wouldn't hold such fear and scorn towards the people of the forest's edge. But they're leaving all those past crimes untouched and instead dealing with the Suun as if they were trying to cover up something with a particularly bad stench. That's not justice at all. It's nothing but dictators setting up a political purge while focusing only on what benefits them," I ranted, only to suddenly snap back to my senses. "Sorry... I got a little worked up, there. That was just my personal feelings on the matter, so please don't pay it any attention."

"No, I feel the same as you... And I also believe that what Ludo Ruu said was correct."

"Huh? What did he say?"

"You see, he said that back when you were attacked by Doddo and Tei at the Suun settlement, your eyes were like those of a hunter as you were worrying about Ai Fa. You have that intense, serious side to you too."

I sort of got the feeling that Vina Ruu had said something similar recently.

Had I obtained a bit of the intensity of the people of the forest's edge by eating nothing but giba meat day in and day out? Honestly, it didn't feel that way to me at all.

"With that said, it's important to keep on searching for a better path forward

without trying to suppress our feelings... And so, I truly hope that you will participate in the next discussion, Asuta.”

“Ah, but I’m not related to any of the leading clans or anything...”

“Yes. It wouldn’t be fair to make you shoulder so great a burden. I’m sorry for interrupting your important work,” Gazraan Rutim said with a refreshing smile, then he glanced over to the stalls where Sheera Ruu and the others were working away. “The townsfolk are paying people of the forest’s edge coins to purchase giba cooking. I had heard of your success here and there, but now I’m able to see it with my own two eyes... It really is hard to believe. I swear to you that we won’t let all your efforts thus far go to waste.” With that, he looked past me. “Well then, I suppose it’s almost the time we arranged. I’m grateful that you came all this way.”

I turned around in surprise, only for a tall shadow to step out of the thicket.

“Yup, same here. You kind of seemed like you were in the middle of something, but are you good to go now?”

Naturally, it was Kamyua Yoshu. And so, I shot his aloof grin the firmest glare I could manage.

“Kamyua, why do you always try to scare people like that? It’s rude, plus it’s a huge pain.”

“Ah, sorry. I wasn’t especially trying to surprise anyone or eavesdrop or anything. And honestly, there’s no way I could eavesdrop on an alert hunter of the forest’s edge anyway.”

Kamyua Yoshu moseyed on over in his usual manner, his long leather coat swishing behind him as he went.

Kamyua definitely won out when it came to height, but that wasn’t the case when it came to overall build. Gazraan Rutim had especially ideal proportions, even for a hunter of the forest’s edge, while the skinny Kamyua Yoshu looked like a praying mantis as he stood around three meters away.

“So, you’re Kamyua Yoshu?”

“Yeah. I make a living as a bodyguard here in the western kingdom. You’re...

not the clan head of the Sauti, right?”

Kamyua Yoshu had spied on Gazraan Rutim’s wedding banquet, so there was no way he would fail to recognize the groom.

However, Gazraan Rutim just calmly responded, “Yes. I belong to the Rutim, a clan under the Ruu, and my name is Gazraan Rutim. The Sauti clan head Dari Sauti has been waiting over there for your arrival.”

“Gazraan Rutim, is it? I’m honored to meet you.”

Gazraan Rutim’s blue eyes were like a calm ocean hiding a resolute strength deep inside, while Kamyua Yoshu’s purple eyes somehow contained the carefree nature of a child and the knowing gaze of an elder, and both pairs were now staring straight at one another.

Neither side showed any animosity or ill will, and they actually looked rather shockingly calm, but there was a strange feel in the air, as if two different unbelievably powerful beasts were feeling one another out.

“All three of the leading clan heads are over there, not just Dari Sauti. Would you mind taking this opportunity to talk with them?”

“I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity. This job is a pretty serious matter for the forest’s edge, too, so I’m sure they also want to get a feel for the sort of guy I am,” Kamyua Yoshu replied with a grin.

Gazraan Rutim shot him back a calm smile.

“Well then, let’s get going. Asuta, you have my thanks.”

“A-Ah, right.”

“See you later, Asuta. I’ll be sending Leito by at some point, so make sure not to sell out before then, okay?”

“Got it. But if you want giba burgers, you should probably make it sooner than later.”

With that, the two impressive opposites quietly departed.

For whatever reason, I was left feeling dumbfounded.

I really can’t help but feel nervous seeing Kamyua meeting men of the forest’s

edge. Gazraan Rutim is fine because that's just the kind of guy he is, but will things really go alright with someone like Gulaf Zaza?

When Kamyua Yoshu suddenly showed up at the Ruu settlement a few days before the Rutim banquet, that was already enough to make me feel like my heart was going to give out on me. Darmu Ruu's eyes, so much like those of a wounded wolf, had been burning bright as he kept his blade pointed towards Kamyua the whole time. And Donda Ruu stayed super calm, but the men of the branch families had looked incredibly on edge...

Ah, right. Back then, Donda Ruu had already heard about the plan for a merchant caravan to pass through the forest's edge.

That was precisely why Kamyua Yoshu had been strolling through the area. He had been looking for me and Ai Fa after meeting us in the post town, and went so far as to show up at the Ruu settlement. That was already more than 20 days ago now, huh?

Hmm...? A misgiving as fleeting as dandelion fluff popped up in the back of my mind. However, I had no idea whatsoever what was causing it. It felt like I had overlooked something important... As if something was said that I didn't think mattered that much as I was furiously rushing about trying to prepare for the banquet...

Who said what back then? Was it Kamyua? Donda Ruu?

No matter how much I racked my brain, I just couldn't find the answer. And so, I had to ultimately just give up and head back to the stall.

Since Kamyua Yoshu had shown up, that had to mean the sun would soon hit its peak. Li Sudra had only just arrived for her very first day, and yet I had left Sheera Ruu all alone with her.

I've got to focus on the tasks in front of me for now. And first off, that means preparing to work with The Great Southern Tree.

It left me feeling a bit ill at ease, but I couldn't help it if my memory refused to cough up the answer. And so, I decided to just leave it for after work calmed down and took off running back to the stalls.

However, I wouldn't recall the source of that misgiving until a few days later,

after everything had happened.

2

Fortunately, it wasn't especially hectic after that, and so Vina Ruu and I were able to leave for The Great Southern Tree on schedule.

"I've been awaiting you, Asuta," the inn's owner Naudis greeted us, wearing a gentle expression on his usually stern-looking face. His skin was an ivory-white, but he was short and stout with dark brown hair and green eyes, marking him as having mixed southern and western blood.

The Great Southern Tree was located further south than The Kimyuus's Tail, nestled among a number of other inns. It was a good bit bigger than Milano Mas's place, too. It was built with two floors, of course, but it had several times more rooms lined up along its width, and the restaurant on the first floor looked like it could handle nearly a hundred customers.

"The kitchen is this way. Go ahead and do whatever you need to until my wife comes on down."

"Right, thank you."

It was about the same size as the Ruu kitchen, probably around 13 square meters at most, but it was equipped with three stoves along the walls, hanging cooking implements, a shelf stuffed with tableware, and a large workstation. It really looked quite spacious, overall.

I naturally had permission to use the stoves and cooking implements as much as I pleased, as well as the water from the jugs and the available firewood.

As I spread out the contents of the bundle of ingredients I acquired in the morning, I called out to Vina Ruu, "Could you please light two of the stoves?"

We were given roughly two and a half hours to work. Naudis also said we could stay past that as long as we didn't interfere with the work that needed to be done for the inn, but we would need to get back to the forest's edge anyway so that I wasn't working Vina Ruu overtime, which meant we didn't have time to spare regardless.

“Ooh, those sure are big chunks of meat. Guess they need to be to feed 40 people, though,” Naudis chimed in. Apparently he intended to watch me work, as his gaze was fixed on my hands from across the kitchen. “So that meat came from a giba’s torso?”

“Yes. Back where I come from, we call this boneless ribs, as it’s meat removed from the creature’s ribs.”

Since the ribs were for 40 people, there were roughly 10 kilos of meat there. And they really were proper chunks of meat, as I had cut them up into six blocks. After I swept them clean of the pico leaves meant to preserve them, I then lined those cubes up atop the work station.

I also had 40 aria to garnish the 10 kilos of giba ribs. Plus, I had four bottles of fruit wine and an additional 20 aria to grill up. On top of that, I had six bottles of tau oil, a new ingredient I had obtained through The Great Southern Tree. That alone ended up taking up 27.5 percent of the costs of my ingredients. But though the tau oil was expensive, I was only using cheap aria in terms of vegetables, so it didn’t drive up the price too much compared to what I sold meals for at the stalls.

I was preparing a new dish for The Great Southern Tree: cubed giba meat stew.

Since it was a cubed meat stew, I would have loved to have daikon or boiled eggs to go in it, but unfortunately I wasn’t able to find any similar ingredients to substitute for those around the post town. Still, back at the Tsurumi Restaurant we actually used onions when making cubed pork stew. And since in this world we had aria, which were like onions with even higher nutritional value, I could see no reason not to use them. In fact, the high compatibility with aria was a big reason I picked this dish in the first place.

A few days prior, I had prepared a sample and had Naudis give it a taste. He seemed to really enjoy my cubed giba meat stew, made with plenty of tau oil, as he immediately gave his approval.

And so, I set about cooking.

I had already tenderized the meat to break the long fibers back at the house, so I picked up the cubes and headed towards the stove.

“Thank you. Looks like it’s already nice and hot.”

I guess that was professional cookware for you. At any rate, the pots in this kitchen were a size larger than the ones used at the forest’s edge, so I started off by throwing three blocks of meat into one of them.

“How exciting. And it’s giving off such a delicious smell,” Naudis said with a gentle smile.

To my other side, Vina Ruu was looking down at the water-filled pot, the same displeased expression still on her face. It felt like quite a while since I had actually heard her slow, seductive voice.

It had been decided that Vina Ruu would be the one to accompany me and also act as my guard instead of her younger sister Lala Ruu, but I never imagined I would end up getting her mad at me the day beforehand, or that that would linger all the way up to now.

As I agonized over how to improve her mood, I went ahead and checked how the meat was doing. By now, it had taken on a nice golden brown. Back home, what we always did next was to grill the meat’s surface just a bit more to seal in the deliciousness. Plus, by doing that, you could get rid of the excess fat. And since boneless rib was such a fatty cut, that made this step extra important.

“Hmm, I guess that about does it. And that pot’s come to a boil too, right?”

After cutting off as much of the excess fat as possible, I then took the grilled cubes of rib meat and gently dropped them into the boiling water.

I went ahead and dealt with the other three blocks of meat the same way, then scooped scum for a while.

Once the scum seemed to die down I moved down to a medium flame, then added some lilo leaves on top. That served to both take the place of an inner lid and also cover up the smell. Normally I would use green onions or ginger or something here, but sure enough, I just couldn’t find any ingredients similar to those. The garlic-esque myamuu had too strong of an aroma, so though up till now I only used lilo for jerky, it was finally time for it to take center stage.

Lilo reminded me of rather large fern leaves, and I soon packed the surface of the boiling water with them. If the meat came to the surface, just the exposed

bit would harden, which is why I needed to make a substitute inner lid like this.

From here it needed an hour of parboiling, so I could take my time with the rest of the preparations.

“Well then, I’m going to make the broth, so could you maintain the heat and keep an eye out so that the meat doesn’t push its way past the lilo, Vina Ruu?”

She was silent and utterly expressionless. However, I believed she wasn’t the sort of person to ever neglect her work.

Making the broth was incredibly simple. I just need to grate the aria, which I was using as a potherb. And fortunately, the tool I needed for that was here in this kitchen: a crustacean shell with a surface coated in fine spikes. It was milky-white in color, and was circular with a roughly ten-centimeter diameter. In all likelihood, it had come from some sort of crablike creature. I didn’t exactly know the details, though.

“By the way, does it look likely we’ll be able to purchase tau oil regularly?” I asked while grating down the 20 aria.

“Yes,” Naudis replied with a nod. “I asked a peddler about that. He was very surprised to hear we would be using three bottles in five days.”

That was no surprise. After all, tau oil was a rather pricey ingredient. A roughly one liter bottle, around the same size as a container of fruit wine, cost a whole ten red coins. And so, that meant spending 30 red coins on the stuff every five days.

Tau oil was a condiment made by fermenting tau beans, which were a local specialty of the Southern Kingdom of Jagar. It wasn’t produced here in Genos, so all of it had to be imported from Jagar, which was apparently where the high price came from.

Thanks to that, only inns with a great number of customers from the south like The Great Southern Tree dealt with the ingredient, as it was just too expensive. And so, even though it was a familiar everyday flavor in Jagar, it was seen as a luxury item here in the western kingdom.

However, this tau oil was an ingredient I couldn’t possibly just ignore. After all, it had an incredibly similar taste to soy sauce. To preserve it, it was kept as a

type of gooey paste and had a strong flavor of salt and alcohol about it. But aside from that, it really was exactly like soy sauce.

When I happened to encounter that tau oil for the first time here in The Great Southern Tree, I just about broke out in a dance of joy. If it hadn't been just before the clan head meeting, I'm sure I would have been so elated that even Ai Fa would get sick of me. However, I somehow managed to hold back my excitement, and instead focused my attention on creating a new dish.

A lot of folks from the south didn't seem fond of the quirky taste of giba meat. And a good number of them hated the texture of burgers, too. However, that apparently wasn't just down to disliking soft meat like it had been with Donda Ruu. Plus, they seemed to prefer stronger seasoning.

All of that information I had gathered led me to go with cubed giba meat stew.

"Now then, all that's left is to let the meat cook for a while, right? I'll go ahead and take care of a bit of my own work while I wait," Naudis stated, then he left the kitchen.

Having finished grating the aria, I checked how Vina Ruu was doing with the boiling pot. Sure enough, the meat had sunk down below the lilo. And the fire was right at a medium flame. It even seemed that she was scooping out any fresh scum that bubbled up.

As I patted my chest in relief, I stepped on over and stood next to Vina Ruu.

"Thank you. I finished preparing the broth, so let's switch. Ah, and Vina Ruu... I really am sorry about yesterday."

How many apologies did that make since this morning?

And yet, Vina Ruu still remained silent and showed no signs of so much as looking my way.

"I really didn't mean anything by it. It was just that I got completely distracted by Gazraan Rutim and Yamiru Lea and everyone when they showed up so suddenly."

There was no response.

“I wasn’t trying to ignore you, Vina Ruu. I was careless and a big fat idiot, but I hope you’ll at least believe that much. You have my deepest, most sincere apologies for hurting you that badly.”

With that, Vina Ruu’s displeased eyes finally turned my way.

“Do you really mean that...?”

“Yes! Of course I do!”

“Well, I suppose I’ve made it hard for you by being like this when I’m supposed to be helping out with work...”

“Ah, no, you’ve been handling all your work just fine, so you don’t need to worry about that... Actually, even ignoring the matter of work, I just can’t stand the thought of having angered you that badly. I’ll be more careful from now on, so could you find it in yourself to forgive me?”

“That would be tough to do all of a sudden... But if you let me slap you once, that might help me settle down a bit...”

“If it’ll make you feel better, then go ahead and slap away!”

As she stood in front of the bubbling pot, Vina Ruu puffed out her ample chest and said, “You shouldn’t go about thoughtlessly saying stuff like that. It would be one thing if you were a man of the forest’s edge, but with a foreigner like you, Asuta, my slap could easily knock a tooth loose...”

“E-Even so, I’ll take it. That was just how big of an idiot I was.”

“But why...? I shouldn’t matter at all to you, Asuta... You shouldn’t have any reason to go that far for a woman you don’t even intend to take as your bride...”

“That’s not true at all. Someone can still be important to you even if you don’t have romantic feelings towards them. In fact, I’d say that without those other motivations getting in the way, it should be easier to see how much someone really cares.”

Vina Ruu thoroughly furrowed her brows and stared at me with an even firmer look in her eyes.

“So you aren’t falling for my womanly charms in the least, then... I knew that,

but still... Even now that thought gets me a bit worked up, so I guess I will go ahead and hit you, just the once...”

Vina Ruu brought her slender fingers and palm up to my cheek.

Even though she wasn't a man, she was still an able-bodied person of the forest's edge. That meant at the very least she needed enough strength to carry things around during her daily work, so I was prepared for enough force to knock down a full-grown man who was better built than I was.

I checked out of the corner of my eye to make sure I wouldn't hit the pot even if I was knocked down, then gritted my teeth as firmly as I could manage.

Vina Ruu lifted her right hand up high... and then hugged me.

“That's what you went with?!”

“Oh, my... You reacted just like I expected... How boring...” she whispered as she squeezed my body tightly. It was like I had been caught by a giant madarama snake again.

Well, if this'll make Vina Ruu feel better... I thought to myself, only for that determination to be crushed in about three seconds flat.

“U-Um, Vina Ruu, don't you think that's about enough...?”

“No, not yet... I need to get at least a tooth's worth out of you...”

A sensation I couldn't exactly describe in polite company was pressing down on my body with incredible force. But just when I thought my nerves were on the verge of burning out, I was finally released from Vina Ruu's soft yet powerful grasp.

“I'll let you off with that, even though my heart is still torn to shreds...” Vina Ruu muttered as she tossed a piece of firewood into the stove.

Despite feeling like I was on the verge of collapsing, I went ahead and checked the contents of the pot. The water level had gone down quite a bit, so I would need to add some more.

As I transferred some water from a jug using a ladle, Vina Ruu called out in a depressed tone, “Hey, Asuta... It wasn't really your thoughtless treatment that hurt me.”

“Huh?”

“What really hurt me was the kindness I saw in your eyes when you were looking at that woman... The thought that you could be like that even towards someone who tried to kill you... It made me think that the way you looked at me must not have been anything special...”

At that moment, Vina Ruu’s face shook me to my core. She looked completely sad and helpless, like a young child abandoned by their parents... and also incredibly frail.

I half braced myself for Vina Ruu to break down sobbing, but she held back her tears to the bitter end, then gave a deep sigh as if she was breathing out all her sadness.

“Still, I’m sorry... I only approached you to fulfill my own desires to begin with, so I have no right to criticize you. I really felt like I was keeping that in mind, and yet... You were just so kind that my expectations crept up without me realizing it.”

“Should I have done more to distance myself...?” I foolishly pondered out loud, only for a frightening glare to shoot my way.

“Now you’ve gone and said something like that... My heart’s gone all smooshy like an overcooked aria...”

“S-Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize if you don’t know what you did wrong. And don’t you dare distance yourself from me, alright...?” Vina Ruu said while looking down a bit, then childishly started biting at her thumbnail. “You just don’t seem to be able to handle me well, so you should just stay as you are, and I’ll settle my feelings on my own... Don’t go reading too much into things and end up getting in my way, though.”

“Really...?”

“Yes... Maybe I’ll even come to enjoy being hurt by you...”

“I-I really don’t think you should be saying stuff like that!”

“Why not...? Everybody has different things that make them happy, right...?”

she said with her usual bewitching smile, causing me to quietly bow my head. “Well then, I’ll apologize for today, too. I’m sorry for failing to suppress my feelings during this important job. So will you forgive me...?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I’m the one who’s at fault.”

“If you’ll forgive me, I’ll accept any humiliation necessary...”

“I told you, I forgive you already!”

With that, our little tragicomedy came to an end, and a few minutes later, Naudis returned.

“Now then, is it just about ready?”

“Yeah, I think it may be.”

I pushed aside a bit of the lilo, then poked one of the meat cubes with the end of a grigee chopstick. The chopstick sunk into the meat with no notable resistance. Yes, it was definitely ready.

“Alright, let’s take out the meat and move the pot off the flame.”

I scooped all the lilo leaves and meat onto a wooden plate, then lifted up the pot with Vina Ruu’s help. Rather than lowering it onto the floor, though, we placed it atop a similarly sized pot full of water.

Instantly, there was an overwhelming sound as the heat from the pot caused a great deal of water to evaporate. Then we changed out the water and repeated the process three times before finally leaving the pot there to sit.

The meat had also cooled down in the meantime, so I went ahead and washed it off too. That was important to remove any excess fat clinging to it. Since the meat was already plenty soft, I took care not to damage the shape as I washed it, and then I wiped the moisture away thoroughly using a clean cloth. And so, I managed to successfully remove the fat.

Once the meat was nice and washed, I then cut it into cubes that were around five centimeters squared on each face. This step also required me to be meticulous so as to not ruin the shape.

Then, it was back to dealing with the pot. As it had been cooled and some time had passed, the fat had once again floated to the surface. Well, I say

‘cooled’ but the water was just room temperature so it may not have amounted to much, but it was still enough to cause some solidified fat to cling to the upper portion of the pot. And so, I removed all of that and transferred it into a leather bag I had brought along. Even if I wasn’t using it in today’s cooking, such lard was still valuable.

Then, I added the chopped up giba meat to two new pots along with the aria, which I had peeled the skin of, and sliced the top and bottom off. Since I had used ten kilos of meat and 40 aria, that was enough to fill up both of the large pots.

As for the broth I had removed the fat from, I added around 60% of a container of tau oil, four bottles of fruit wine, and the 20 grated aria. After giving it a thorough stir, I evenly divided it among the other two pots using a ladle.

Now all that was left was to heat it up over a low flame.

“Phew, looks like we made it in time, somehow.”

In total it worked out to two and a half hours of cooking, an hour of parboiling, and 30-40 minutes or so for heating it up at the end, which made for a pretty strict timetable. The step of washing the meat in the middle in particular took quite a bit of time. Well, I could surely get that time down as I repeated the process, though. But at least at the start, I was aiming more for precision than speed.

“Hmm... What a sweet smell,” Naudis stated with a big sniff.

Naturally, the kitchen was currently filled with the aroma of tau oil and fruit wine. It made for a different sort of sweet smell than myamuu. Even I couldn’t help but be spellbound by the scent, which called to mind my old home country.

However, I couldn’t just stay in a trance. I could no longer use lilo leaves or add more water at this point, so I had no choice but to keep on heating the stew once the meat started popping up at the surface.

Once the water boiled down to a third, I was finally able to stop continually watching over it. Then after 30-40 minutes it was at last good and heated,

completing the dish.

“Alright, I’ll cut off the flame for now, so just heat it up again before serving it to your customers.”

It sounded like an obvious instruction, but it was still a crucial step. With dishes like this, heating them back up after they cooled down for a bit brought out the flavor of the ingredients even further.

If refrigerators existed in this world, I would have liked to set it aside in one overnight, but there was no helping what you didn’t have, so I just had to let it sit out at room temperature for a bit. But there were still more than four hours till sunset, so that would allow some time for the flavor to seep in.

“Good work today. Here’s the payment I promised you,” Naudis said, holding out a small cloth bag.

I went to check, and sure enough there were eight white coins inside.

“Thank you. I hope you can manage to sell out, but I don’t know how it’ll go.”

“I’m not sure either. There’s the issue of price, too. But if it doesn’t sell as well as I would like, then I intend to bring it down to four red coins, just like my karon dishes,” Naudis replied, then he cheerfully brought over a wooden plate.

“Huh? You want to sample it? But you’ll only get the proper taste after letting it cool for a bit first...”

“Yes, I want to try it both now and later to compare... But to be honest, it’s more that I want to give it a taste as soon as possible now that it’s finally done.”

Well, I had already passed ownership of the dish over to Naudis, so it was ultimately up to him anyway. Looking ever so slightly more excited than usual, the inn’s owner scooped up one of the cubes of giba meat.

The meat was already wiggling back and forth atop his spoon. By this point, it was clearly soft enough that a spoon or chopstick alone could easily cut through it. And with the fat removed, it had taken on a gelatin-esque transparent appearance.

The tau oil and fruit wine had also seeped into the meat, hiding the true giba flavor under that strong seasoning... As that thought ran through my head, I

started feeling hungry.

“Well then,” Naudis said, then he tossed the chunk of meat into his mouth. As the layers of meat and fat separated, what an incredible deliciousness must have been gushing out.

And after plenty of chewing, Naudis gulped it down as if he felt reluctant to do so, then turned and faced me with an enraptured smile.

“It’s... It’s truly delicious. If this doesn’t sell, then it will be entirely my fault. You truly did some splendid work here, Asuta.”

3

With that, our work for that day once again came to a close.

There apparently weren’t any accidents while I was away and the stalls completely sold out, so we were able to return back home on schedule.

Once we made it back to the Fa house, I made sure to give Vina Ruu a proper farewell, then started the preparations for tomorrow and dinner. During that time, Li Sudra remained at my side so that I could teach her some cooking basics.

“Alright, then let’s start preparations. The women from the other houses should be arriving soon, so go ahead and use the stove first if you’d like.”

“Thank you. Um... Is it really alright to borrow your pot?”

“Yeah. It’d be a pain to have to run back to your house every time, right? So don’t worry about it.”

Ai Fa wasn’t around today. According to the schedule, she should have headed to the somewhat distant Ratsu and Gaaz settlements to teach them bloodletting and dissection techniques.

“Did a lot of clans end up asking the Fa to instruct them?”

“The only ones we’re teaching directly are the clans that are relatively nearby. But ultimately, 11 clans in total voiced their approval of the work we’re undertaking.”

And that was omitting those under the leading clans, too.

There were 37 clans at the forest's edge, and of them only 17 had no blood ties to the leading clans. In other words, now that the Ruu, Sauti, and Zaza took over for the Suun, now more than half of the clans had ties to their leaders.

And of those 17 clans without ties, 11 of them voiced their approval of the Fa clan. So since the Ruu clan which had a hundred people to their name also more or less agreed with our actions, that meant roughly half of the people of the forest's edge were on our side now.

On top of that, though the Sauti clan officially took a neutral stance, they also seemed like they had a favorable opinion of what we were doing. That just left the Zaza and related clan heads for us to strive to earn acknowledgment from by racking up results.

"How wonderful... The Fa have granted hope to all clans on the brink of destruction," Li Sudra said as she looked straight at me. "Even among those clans, the Sudra have been particularly close to falling. It's embarrassing to admit, but without the coins from today's work, the vegetables in our pantry would have run out in just a few days... Of course, the men are out even now chasing giba in the forest so that won't happen, though."

"Ah, is that so? Well, I'm certainly glad to hear I've been of help to the Sudra clan," I replied, right before a sudden knock on the door came. "Yes? Who is it?"

"We two are women of the Deen clan."

That wasn't a clan name that I recognized. Remembering names was a specialty of mine, but even I was getting overloaded by this point. And so, I just headed over towards the door while wondering if they were one of the nearby clans.

As I reached out, though, Li Sudra grabbed my arm.

"Asuta, the Deen are one of the clans under the Suun... Or the Zaza now, I should say."

A clan under the Zaza, huh? In that case, they must have also been opposed to our business in the post town, too.

On top of that, I hadn't yet had a chance to see just how such folks felt about the Fa clan, who brought about the Suun's destruction. As we stood there silently, there was a serious look of caution about Li Sudra, and so I gave her a nod and then moved close to the door.

"What business did you come here for? I don't recall having had any interaction with the Deen clan before."

"We came here to learn how to prepare dinner. Will you teach us?"

"Cooking lessons, huh? Do you have permission from the Zaza clan, then?"

"Yes. They did not forbid learning such things."

I see, so they had no intention of helping with business in the post town or the like, but they were interested in eating delicious meals, huh? I naturally welcomed that and saw no reason to refuse, though.

I still remained cautious, however, and only opened the door a crack after removing the bolt.

Just as they had said, there were two women standing there. One was an older-looking married woman, while the other was a young girl who was probably around ten years old.

A pot full of raw poitan was at their feet and there didn't seem to be anyone else around, so I went ahead and opened the door the rest of the way.

"Thank you for accepting us despite our sudden arrival. I am Jas Deen, the elder sister of the Deen clan head, and this is Toor Deen, another member of our clan."

"Toor Deen...?" I questioned, turning my gaze towards the young girl. Her dark brown hair wasn't all that long yet and hung down on both sides of her neck. She wore a bit of a timid expression, with her big eyes calling to mind a puppy. And she looked to be thinking about something as she was staring right back at me. "Ah, you're that girl from one of the Suun branch families! So you joined the Deen clan instead of staying at the Suun settlement, huh?"

"Yes. This girl's mother was the younger sister of the clan head and myself. Our sister has passed away, and so this girl and her father became a part of our

Deen clan,” the woman who called herself Jas Deen replied. She gave off a calm and composed impression, but I also sensed a strong will behind her intense gaze.

“I see. I’m glad to find you looking well. Sorry for not recognizing you right away even though it’s only been three days since the clan head meeting,” I called out, only for Toor Deen’s eyes to open wide. Then, those big eyes of hers started to tear up. “W-What’s wrong? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?”

Toor Deen quickly shook her head in response, though that made some tears fall to the ground.

“Asuta of the Fa clan, this girl has inherited the blood of the Suun clan, who tried to do you all harm. But now she has severed all ties with that clan and will live as a member of the Deen. Will you forgive her past crimes?”

“Crimes? I don’t remember Toor Deen doing anything to harm me, though.”

“But it is a fact that the blood of the sinful Suun clan runs through her veins. And the Fa of all clans surely has abundant reasons to hate the Suun clan.”

This was seriously reminding me of that conversation with Rau Lea and everyone from yesterday.

Jas Deen wore a solemn expression, but I replied, “No, the new leading clans decided the crimes of the branch families wouldn’t be called into question, and all of the clan heads agreed. And on top of that, I never felt any hatred towards the people of the branch houses to begin with. So I’ve got no reason to reject Toor Deen.”

“Is that so...?”

“Yeah. Plus, I spent a good bit of time with her in particular. Out of all those folks who had lost the will to live, I really felt like she was earnestly striving hard.” Hearing that, Toor Deen started to tear up again. Her expression was still just a bit stiff in a way that was unusual for a child so young, but the light had clearly returned to her eyes. That alone was enough to make me so happy I could feel a lump forming in my throat. “Toor Deen, you already made stew and baked poitan together with me, so I’d say you’ve got a head start. Learn as much as you can, then teach it to the other Deen women.”

“Thank you...” Toor Deen replied with a listless bow of her head, which Jas Deen then placed her hand atop. The older woman’s gaze remained intense, but that action clearly displayed her affection towards the young girl, who was like a memento left by her late sister.

“Well then, let’s get started. Ah, this is Li Sudra of the Sudra clan. And I believe the Fou and Ran women will be along shortly.” We had ended up talking away, but since we arrived back home on time today, I really needed to get started with preparations. And so, I invited the two women of the Deen clan inside and got to work. “For now, let’s review how to bake poitan. I’ll be working right here, so just speak up if there’s anything you don’t understand.”

“Right,” the pair with the pot replied, then they crossed in front of me. I saw the side of Toor Deen’s face as she passed by and went, “Ah,” without thinking. That caught her off guard, and she looked my way in surprise. “Oh, sorry about that. I just thought to myself that you don’t have a scar from when you were burned back then. That’s certainly good, isn’t it?” I said, shooting her a smile in the hopes of wiping that gloomy expression from her face.

Fortunately, she offered me a clumsy smile in turn.

“Thank you for what you did back then... Your concern and the kindness of that redheaded girl from the Ruu clan made me very happy.”

“Nah, I just splashed water over you in a panic. So save your thanks for Lala Ruu, alright?”

Those who remained at the Suun settlement and those who were taken in by other clans were all building new lives for themselves, bit by bit. It hadn’t even been three full days since the clan head meeting, but I really did feel that Donda Ruu’s judgment had been on the mark. I still had plenty of doubt regarding Diga and Doddo, but at least when it came to the branch family members who didn’t do anything but gather the fruits of the forest, there shouldn’t be any need at all for further punishment.

Could the people of the castle understand this state of affairs? Would they even try to begin with? That was the issue we had to focus on first.

As that thought ran through my head, I set about dicing up the aria atop my board.



“So after that, Gazraan Rutim came back over along with Dari Sauti, to explain the arrangements they made with Kamyua,” I told Ai Fa as I was finishing up the last of my preparations. “Apparently they’ll enter the forest’s edge from the post town using the path the Ruu clan generally takes, then pass through the Sauti settlement to the south before finally entering the forest. Supposedly after half a day they’ll make it through and come out in a rocky area. It will still take a few days after that to reach the highway, but giba don’t appear anymore once you’ve gone that far, and it’s outside the territory of the people of the forest’s edge anyway. And so, the plan is for the Sauti clan to guide them on that first day until they’re free of the forest.”

“Right.”

“But even if the merchant caravan leaves first thing in the morning, they won’t make it through the forest until it’s evening. It would be dangerous to head back at night, so the escorts will need to spend the night together with the merchants in the rocky area, which seemed to frustrate Dari Sauti. ‘The Suun clan sure accepted one pain of a job’ were his exact words.”

“Right.”

“Apparently the Suun clan planned to dump the job on Tei Suun... er, Tei. But Dari Sauti lamented that it would take half a day of marching through the depths of the forest while avoiding giba, which would require at least four men. But since there are more than 20 full-grown adults in the merchant group, there probably isn’t much risk of giba attacking.”

“Right.”

“Ai Fa... If the conversation is tiring you out, then you can just come out and say so.”

“What are you saying? There’s not any particular issue with what we’re discussing,” Ai Fa replied, despite the fact that she was lying even more sloppily than last night. She was on her stomach with her hair hanging in front of her face, so I couldn’t really make out her expression. I gave a bit of a sigh as I added the chopped-up myamuu and aria to a leather bag along with some fruit wine.

“Anyway, their meeting with Kamyua wrapped up without incident. I was really curious about what Gazraan Rutim’s impression of him was, but at least for now all he would say is, ‘He’s a truly mysterious man.’ Dari Sauti added, ‘I really just don’t care for folks from around town,’ too.”

“Right.”

“So, the Sauti were ultimately tasked with the job two days from now. And the three leading clan heads will be heading back to their settlements to gather opinions from the heads of their subordinate clans regarding that demand from the castle. Six men will remain at the Suun settlement to keep an eye out, but this feels like it’ll probably bring things to a close.”

“Right.”

“That’s all I have to report. Thank you for listening to all that.”

“It was nothing. I just let the stuff that made my head hurt pass in one ear and out the other,” Ai Fa stated, then listlessly continued on with one cheek against the fur rug, “The leading clan heads can go and worry themselves silly with all that. I already have my hands full with my own work.”

“Um, you visited the Ratsu clan today, right?”

“Right. And the Gaaz men came too, since they fall under the Ratsu. It tired me out even more than yesterday...”

“I see. But they all gratefully welcomed you, didn’t they?”

“They may have been grateful, but I found it unpleasant,” Ai Fa replied in an annoyed tone. I couldn’t see because of the angle, but she was probably pouting. “On top of that, one of the Ratsu men suddenly offered to take me as his bride.”

“W-What?”

“Then one of the Gaaz men said the same thing, and they got into a ridiculous fight. The furious Ratsu clan head got in the middle and put a stop to it, but our bonds with the Ratsu and Gaaz were almost ruined.”

“T-That does sound rough. So did those two give up in the end?”

“They went and said if I get injured again and can no longer be a hunter, they

would want me to give it another thought. I couldn't help but yell at them for that, asking if they *wanted* me to get seriously injured. It really was an unpleasant day..."

I had finally finished my prep work, so I washed my hands with water from the jug and then hurried over to Ai Fa's side.

"Did those men seem as nasty as Darmu Ruu? They aren't going to keep bugging you, are they?"

"You would have to ask them personally. I wouldn't know."

"No, but—"

"You're so noisy. If you're done with your work, then lend me your hand."

"Eh? My hand?"

I didn't really get it, but I went ahead and pressed my palm gently up against Ai Fa's temples like last night.

"Hmm..." Ai Fa muttered with satisfaction, proving that my judgment was correct. Somehow, it felt like stroking a peevish kitten's throat or something. "Just talking to so many people is tiring. I'm amazed you've been able to keep on working like that in the post town... Well, no, the Ruu women have been doing the same, so perhaps it's just down to my weakness."

"Hey, it's not like you to speak ill of yourself like that. Everybody has their strengths and weaknesses. Plus like I said last night, if you just give it time, you'll get used to it."

My words didn't seem to satisfy her, though, as she gave a sigh that was rather unlike her.

"I want to get back to my work as a hunter as soon as possible..."

She seemed sort of pitiful, somehow. And so, I ended up gently stroking her hair.

Normally that would earn me a body blow in response, but now Ai Fa looked satisfied as she closed her eyes and showed no sign of trying to brush off my hand.

“At any rate, I just need to be patient for a few more days. Once my arm heals completely and I can head into the forest again, I’ll be able to spend less time with other clans.”

“That’s a real negative way of looking at things. Still, I’m pretty exhausted today, too. I guess we should both turn in early tonight.”

“Right.”

“Guess it’s bedtime, then.”

I stood up and put out the candle, then laid down just a bit further from Ai Fa than before. For some reason, though, she sidled up alongside me.

“Asuta, why are you trying to sleep so far away?”

“Huh? This is our usual distance, isn’t it?”

“My head’s started hurting a bit again...” she suddenly said, grabbing my left wrist and bringing my hand up to her forehead.

That twisted my elbow to its limit, causing me to yell, “Ow, ow, ow! Hold on! Joints aren’t supposed to bend that way!”

“Then just put yourself in a more comfortable position.”

The only comfortable position for the situation would be facing her from up close. I figured that wouldn’t be so bad because it was dark and hard to see, but that didn’t turn out to be the case when I actually tried it. We were close. Seriously close.

“Um, clan head...”

“Be quiet already. I’m feeling sleepy.”

Ai Fa then gently closed her eyes, my palm lying on the side of her face with her own on top.

The only light for my eyes to rely on was the moonlight streaming in through the window, but that was enough for me to see her beautiful face and the contours of her sleeping body just fine.

It really does feel like I got a cat all attached to me or something...

I was well aware that Ai Fa must not have meant anything by it, but it really

did seem like we were getting closer and closer physically as the days went by.

That was proof that she saw me as family and didn't feel reserved around me, which made me very happy in and of itself... But I wish she wouldn't needlessly toy with my feelings like that.

She's so beautiful, charming, and straightforward with her feelings, so of course plenty of folks would want to marry her, I thought to myself as she peacefully slept away. Now that I think of it, Ai Fa earned the Suun clan's animosity right after turning 15, the age when she could get married. If not for that, she probably would have gotten such offers from the men around the neighborhood right away.

For whatever reason, I was having trouble calming myself down.

I said that it wouldn't be right for someone with my background to marry a woman from this world, but if some guy showed up and won Ai Fa's heart, just what would I do? The question had come to mind numerous times up until now, but I always just put it off.

I guess it would be an impossible wish, hoping things could just stay like this forever...

With that, I finally closed my eyes too, holding back the sigh welling up inside of me. With my vision blocked, I could sense the warmth on my palm and the scent coming off Ai Fa even more vividly.

Ai Fa hadn't handled giba summoning fruit for quite a while now. So by this point she didn't smell that differently than other women, with the scent of herbs and meat hanging about her... And yet, I could still tell it was her. Her warmth and scent made me feel relaxed. By this point, that had become an unshakeable truth.

As I was thinking such things, a powerful drowsiness fell over me.

I had heard that unpleasant news from Gazraan Rutim, carried out my first bit of work at the inn, taught the women cooking techniques, and worried about the future of the forest's edge in between all that... I had to be pretty exhausted, too. And so, I swiftly drifted off to sleep.

And then... Just how much time had passed since then?

When I came to, I felt a soft sensation over my mouth.

Not sure if I was dreaming or not I drowsily opened my eyes, and found the blue pupils of a wildcat staring back at me.

Ai Fa had brought her face up to the tip of my nose. At some point, my palm must have fallen from her temples. As for her hand that should have been on top of mine, it was now covering my mouth.

“Don’t talk. And don’t move either, Asuta,” she whispered so quietly I could barely hear it, drawing even closer.

I was taken off-guard and tried to sit up, only for Ai Fa to grab my shoulder with her other hand and push me back down to the floor.

“I told you not to move. Will you not listen to my instructions, Asuta?” she whispered again.

My upper torso was being held down while Ai Fa leaned over me from the side. And her blue eyes looked more serious than ever as she stared into mine. On top of that, the parts of her body touching mine like her palms, arms, and chest felt unusually warm.

“Don’t worry... Just do what I say, Asuta.”

Then, she brought her entire body over mine.

4

My heart was pounding in my chest like an alarm bell.

Ai Fa’s warmth and scent had stolen away my normal mental faculties. As she leaned over me... she stretched her arm out past my body, towards the wall.

“Don’t move... If you do, it will create a disturbance in the air,” she whispered quietly, returning to her original position. However, her one hand remained over my mouth. As for her other hand, it was gripping her sword, which had been leaning against the wall. “Until just a moment ago, someone was peering into this room through the window. Now, they’ve circled around to the back of the house.”



Ah, so that was it. I could feel the strength drain from my whole body as my stupid misconception was cleared away.

This was no time to relax, though. Just a few days ago we had been attacked in our sleep and ended up with our backs against the wall.

Just who was trying to do what this time? I couldn't even so much as sense anyone, so I had no idea.

"They're on the far end of the room to the left. That's exactly where the window is... Two years ago, the eldest son of the Suun broke that window's lattice and entered the house."

That was an incredibly ominous coincidence.

However, Diga had been taken away to the Dom clan at the northern end of the forest's edge, alongside Doddo and Tei. Plus, they were regarded as dangerous due to their actions up until now, so they were surely being granted even less freedom than Mida.

"I'm going to head outside to see what's going on. You wait here in the house. Once I leave, bolt the door while taking care not to make a sound." I couldn't talk right now, so instead I shook my head and gently grabbed hold of Ai Fa's wrist. In return, she blinked her eyes and looked a bit annoyed. "Our lives could be in danger if they use a strange herb again or try to set the house ablaze. Don't worry. At the most, there are two of them. And I'm not so helpless that they would get the better of me."

I stared back at Ai Fa with as firm of a glare as I could manage. This time, she shot me back a bit of a strained smile.

"Even if they happen to be more skilled than me, I'll lure them towards the Lanto River and knock them in. And besides, I couldn't move freely with you by my side. Just wait here and pray that things go well for me."

I silently stared back at her.

"It's alright. I swear to you, I won't pointlessly risk my life."

With that, Ai Fa finally removed her hand from my mouth. Then, with her now free fingers, she pointed to the center of her chest.

“I’m certain your prayers will ward off all possible disaster.”

The blue stone I had given her must have been dangling there.

Keeping a grasp on Ai Fa’s wrist, I finally stood up.

“I’m heading outside... Don’t make a sound, alright?” Ai Fa said with the daring grin of a hunter as she also rose to her feet. Her movements really didn’t so much as stir the air. I wasn’t a hunter, though, so I had to move as slowly and carefully as I could manage just to not creak the floorboards.

After she crept smoothly over to the door like some sort of wild animal, Ai Fa handed the loose bolt to me, then brought her face in close again.

“I’ll close the door, and then you’ll have to bolt it. No matter what, don’t set a foot outside until I call out to you, alright?”

With that Ai Fa carefully pulled the door open, glanced around the darkness, then slipped outside. The door closed once again, and I asked myself, *What in the world is going on?* as I bolted it shut.

The threat of the Suun clan was gone now, so why was the Fa house getting uninvited guests? Could it be one of those men from the Ratsu and Gaaz who proposed to Ai Fa?

Regardless of who it was, they couldn’t be up to anything proper if they were peering into someone else’s home this late at night. At any rate, after bolting the door, I crept over near the stove, relying on the moonlight to guide me.

Atop a board sat my cooking, vegetable, and everyday knives. I grabbed the blade that Ai Fa’s father had left behind and hung it from my waist.

It’s fine... No matter who it is, they won’t get the better of Ai Fa so easily.

Just as that thought passed through my head, a man cried out, “Gyah!” from behind the house. That was followed by the dull thump of something hitting the wall, then a groan that called to mind an animal being strangled.

After that, it went silent.

I worked up my nerve and lit a candlestick with lana leaves, then headed towards a door further into the house. Naturally, I picked the furthest left of the three. The room was a storage area for firewood that was drying, lumber, saws,

and other such things that we didn't use all that often. I opened the door slowly so as not to make a sound, then stepped inside.

The window was all the way in, on the opposite wall. I approached and held up the candlestick, only to see the side of Ai Fa's face from unexpectedly close, a hunter-like glare blazing in her eyes.

"So you came, Asuta... Well, that's fine. In that case, hand me that candlestick." Following her instructions, I passed it to Ai Fa through the lattice. Her gaze was fixated on one point in the darkness and she held her blade at the ready, so she took the candlestick with her free hand. "Don't come out here no matter what, Asuta. There's no guarantee that these fools were acting alone."

"R-Right. But are you okay? And what fools do you...?" I started to ask while grabbing onto the wooden lattice, when my gaze was drawn to follow Ai Fa's.

Out in the dark, I could see someone cowering. It was a man, and he seemed to be pretty well built. He didn't have a pelt cloak, but the swirling patterns on his clothing marked him as a man of the forest's edge.

"You shameless fools. I never imagined even you would go and do something so stupid. You've gone and trampled all over your final chance at atonement."

"No, you've got it all wrong! We didn't mean you any harm at all!" a young man's voice yelled, clearly having lost all restraint. The voice was hoarser than I remembered, making it sound like it had come from a different person entirely... but there was no way I would ever mistake it.

"What... What are you doing here?!" I shouted, my voice coming out even angrier than I had expected.

In the darkness, I could see that curled-up man twitch in surprise, and then he replied in a sorrowful tone, "P-Please, believe me. We honestly didn't run away with that in mind... W-We came to save you... And to have you save us, too!"

Though he was down on his knees, he looked up towards Ai Fa and tried to crawl her way. Without hesitation, Ai Fa thrust the tip of her blade right in front of his nose, causing the large man to wail, "Gyah!" and fall back.

With that, the pale moonlight illuminated his face... It was noticeably more gaunt than I remembered and was coated in dirt and tears, but that was

undoubtedly the face of the former eldest son of the main Suun house.

“Fools... There’s no reason you deserve salvation. If you can’t even properly carry out your work as hunters, then you should simply die out in the forest.”

“No, I’m telling you, you’ve got it wrong! We didn’t run away from the Dom clan... Well, I guess we did, but still, it’s not what you think! I’m begging you! Please save us!”

“I don’t get what you’re saying. Asuta, there should be a bundle of vines in that room. Pass it to me. I’ll bind their limbs and then hand them over to the Dom clan.”

“Hold on! If you send us back to the Dom clan like this, they really will take our scalps!” he yelled in a terrified panic, his eyes making it look like he was on the verge of losing all sanity as he glanced around the darkness. “B-But alright! If you want to bind us, then go right ahead! We won’t resist! And we won’t run from the Dom again, either! You absolutely have my word! But before that, please just listen to what we have to say... And let us in your house as soon as possible! If he followed us, he may kill you too, Ai Fa!”

“Who is ‘he’? You should be the only ones here at the forest’s edge who would try to do us harm.”

“T-That’s not true! He must hate you two for destroying the Suun clan! So if you don’t want to die, then hurry up and let us in! He’s seriously a monster... No matter how strong you may be, there’s no way you could hold him back!”

“Tell me who you mean, already. Your words have been completely incoherent.”

The former eldest son of the main Suun house, Diga, finally broke out in a smile as he sobbed, and in a weak, trembling voice replied, “Zattsu Suun... The former clan head, Zattsu Suun! We ran away from him! I’m begging you! Please, let us in your house before he catches up to us!”



Ultimately, we ended up welcoming our uninvited guests into the house.

There were two of them in total: Diga and Doddo. I hadn’t been able to see

from where I was standing, but apparently Ai Fa had knocked Doddo over with a strike from the flat of her blade, then stepped on his back.

Anyway, our uninvited guests were currently seated on the ground, limply hanging their heads. Naturally, their arms were tied behind their backs and their legs were similarly bound, with only thirty centimeters of give. With that, they would be able to walk, but couldn't run.

On top of that, they were unarmed from the start. They had run from the Dom clan with no blades or hunter attire, just the clothing on the backs.

"Zattsu Suun was being held by the Jeen clan as a prisoner, wasn't he? So what do you mean by saying you want to be saved from him?" Ai Fa questioned, glaring at Diga and Doddo while sitting with one knee up in the air.

"Z-Zattsu Suun is the one who took us away from the Dom. He set fire to their settlement, and while they were running around in a panic, he came to save us... And so we fled the Dom clan together with him and Tei Suun..."

"Oh, so you ran away of your own will, then?"

"W-We didn't exactly have a choice! He told us to either run away with him or stay there and die! If we defied him, he would've killed us then and there! That's the sort of bastard Zattsu Suun is..."

That "bastard" was his own grandfather, though. It would be one thing for someone like Tei Suun from the branch families, but it was strange to refer to someone so closely related to you like that.

"But that Zattsu Suun man was terribly ill, wasn't he? From what I heard, he was little more than a heap of dried skin and bones, and nobody was sure whether or not he would even survive the journey to the Jeen settlement."

"Yeah, for the past few years, he had grown so weak that he couldn't even walk on his own... But when he learned that the Suun clan had fallen, that must have resurrected him... He still looks like skin and bones, but those eyes... T-Those eyes were like they used to be, back before he fell ill. He would have died before long, but now he's gotten back all the strength he used to have..." Diga said, his body starting to tremble once again.

Next to him, Doddo silently stared at the floor.

Both of them had emaciated cheeks, their faces were filthy, and dirt and leaves clung to their bodies all over. There wasn't even a speck of the haughty pride they used to exude left in them. Had their spirits been worn down over the course of just three days, or were they *that* afraid of Zattsu Suun...? Honestly, it was probably both.

"Zattsu Suun said he would place the Suun clan back in charge. That he would bring judgment crashing down on the fools who betrayed us, and make us the leaders of the forest's edge again..." Doddo chimed in. He sounded subdued and gloomy. Was that really his voice? That tone made him seem like an entirely different person, even more so than his gaunt appearance.

"T-That's right! I thought for sure he was thinking of saving the rest of the family and leaving the forest's edge... B-But then he started going on about that insanity..."

"If you thought it was insane, then shouldn't you have told him as such when he came to you?"

"W-We said everything we could! We told him that folks from the Ruu clan were still at the Suun settlement, and that all the clans under us had joined together with them, and that we couldn't possibly fight back against them now!"

"And then... he laughed," Doddo added, his voice trembling helplessly. His dark blue eyes had once looked like those of a mad dog as he glared at us, but now he was clinging to us for help.

"He said the four of us were plenty, then he cackled like some sort of demon. He laughed like a madman, saying we could just rescue the clan head Zuuro and everyone else once we took back our right to lead and restored the proper order to the forest's edge..."

"A-And so, we ran away while he was sleeping!"

"It sounds like that man's mind has been addled with illness, too. What could he do with a mere four men?"

"H-He couldn't do anything, right? All we could think of was attacking you all or the Ruu clan head," Diga said, glancing back and forth at me and Ai Fa with a

truly pathetic look in his eyes. “I-If he learned how the Suun clan fell, then he’ll surely want revenge against the Fa clan most of all for revealing our crimes, right? So that’s why we...”

“So you’re saying you came to warn us of this danger, then? In that case, why didn’t you just knock on the door to begin with?”

“Y-You two hate us, don’t you? We figured you wouldn’t open up if we did that, so we decided to look for a way to sneak in...”

“Did you really believe you could earn someone’s trust like that?” Ai Fa retorted in a harsher tone, causing Diga to curl up in a ball and shriek.

“Eek!”

It was utterly absurd, but by this point it felt more pathetic than anything. At least, that was the impression that I got.

Ai Fa rustled her hair, which was still down, and shot me an irritated look.

“What do you think, Asuta?”

“Huh? Well, let’s see... There’s one thing I’d like to confirm first. What happened to Tei?”

“T-Tei Suun said his fate was tied to Zattsu Suun’s. So we left him behind...”

“Is that true?”

“I-It really is! Even when Zattsu Suun was laughing like a madman, he just watched with that same vacant gaze as always. By this point, he probably isn’t even capable of forming his own thoughts...”

I got a bit angry hearing that, since it was the members of the main house who pushed the branch families to that point.

And I still hadn’t gotten a chance to ask Tei about that matter with Ai Fa yet. Was he the one who saved her on the night of the clan head meeting?

Had he become a threat to the forest’s edge again in spite of that?

With such complex emotions swishing around inside me, I continued on, “In that case, how did Zattsu Suun escape from the Jeen clan? He and Zuuro Suun were being treated as criminals and were constantly watched, right?”

“I-I’ve got no idea about all that, but... Z-Zattsu Suun’s face and clothing were dyed red with someone else’s blood, and he had a sword. There’s no way one or two men could possibly stop that monster...”

A skeleton of a man standing in the midst of a blazing settlement, coated in the blood of the people of the forest’s edge... The thought alone was enough to send a chill running down my spine. As for Diga, his teeth were chattering and he had gone pale.

“A-At night, they tied our arms together and bound us to a pillar. But the house we were in also caught fire, and the Dom women removed our bindings. We hurried outside in a panic, and that’s when Zattsu Suun appeared...”

“He told us to run away with him or die where we stood, then he thrust blades at us. The whole settlement was ablaze, so that had all the men’s attention, but I think a number of the women must have seen him...”

Doddo seemed to have a bit more of his wits left about him than Diga.

I gave a deep sigh, then turned back towards Ai Fa.

“Well... I figure they’re probably more or less telling the truth. If they wanted to attack us, they would have brought Tei along, right?”

A completely unarmed Diga and Doddo would never be any match for Ai Fa. But if Tei had come along and had a blade, how would that turn out...? I didn’t want to imagine it.

As for Ai Fa, she looked completely and utterly calm. I’d even say she would be glad to find that Zattsu and Tei Suun really had followed after these numbskulls and showed up here.

She was confident for sure. I just couldn’t help but think that I didn’t want to see Ai Fa cutting someone down, though.

Knowing nothing of those thoughts running through my head, Ai Fa just kept glaring at the pair.

“So, what were you two even intending? We really have no choice but to hand you back over to the Dom clan.”

“T-That’s fine! But could you at least tell the Dom that we weren’t the ones

who set their settlement on fire, and that Zattsu Suun threatened us and left us with no choice but to flee...?”

“There’s no way I would say such a thing. Unless the Dom women happened to overhear your conversation, there’s no way to know what really happened.”

“Ah! But then the Dom really will kill us!”

Ai Fa placed her elbow atop her raised knee, rested her cheek on her hand, then gave a heavy sigh.

“Do you two have no pride whatsoever? You once heaped abuse upon us, so how can you bow your heads and tearfully say such things to us now? If I were in your position, I’d want to peel my own scalp.”

“A-Are you still angry about the past? If so, then I’ll apologize as much as it takes! I was just completely taken with your charm! I really did want to take you as a bride back then! And I didn’t intend in the least to ever cause the two of you harm!”

“Oh? But didn’t you say something about dumping me down into the bottom of the valley if I didn’t marry you?”

“W-We’d never kill one of our people! That was just an empty threat! I’m begging you! Please believe me!” Diga said, bowing so deeply his forehead touched the carpet.

Ai Fa scratched her head again, then shot Doddo an intense glare.

“Then what about you, former second son? You pointed your blade at Asuta and the Ruu men, didn’t you? And the mark left by your violence remains on Asuta’s stomach even now.”

“I-I was at fault...”

“What fault is that?”

“I-I drank and got a big head... When I didn’t like someone, I couldn’t just leave them be... I had a short temper...” His voice sounded seriously gloomy. He really reminded me of a wild dog that was wasting away to nothing. And those eyes of his were intently staring at us through his loose and disheveled hair. “Y-You probably won’t believe me when I say it at this point, but... I really do feel

grateful that I didn't harm you when the booze was spurring me on... I-I'm not a strong enough person to kill someone and then just go on like nothing happened..."

Those words had a powerful impact on me. This may well have been a once in a lifetime chance to determine what these hopeless men were really like.

"Diga, could you raise your face, too?"

Diga slowly did as I said. His face was flat, and looked childish in an unflattering way, contrasting with his large frame. Meanwhile, Doddo had gone from looking like a wild dog to a shriveling old hound instead. He had been small to begin with, and now that he had lost his ferocity, he looked so pathetic it was hard to imagine that he really was a man of the forest's edge.

Zattsu Suun's escape was a serious matter. The plan was to have Zattsu and Zuuro Suun atone for their sins with their lives, and on top of that, that intention had already been reported to the Genos castle. If he wasn't captured tonight, it would obliterate the reputation of the people of the forest's edge with them.

Thanks to that, I couldn't imagine the Dom and Jeen clan heads forgiving Diga and Doddo. The same would be true with Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza. That made it all the more important for us to suss out the intentions of these massive fools.

"Diga, earlier you said you would never kill one of your fellow people of the forest's edge, but what about if it was someone from town?"

"Someone from town?" Diga repeated with a tilt of his head, reminding me of an especially dense bull. "W-Why are we talking about the town, all of the sudden? I don't get what you mean at all..."

"I mean, to the people of the forest's edge the townsfolk are like your enemies, right? So I figured maybe you could hurt someone like that without feeling bad about it," I said in as frivolous of a tone as I could manage.

Ai Fa's eyes narrowed and she looked suspicious, but fortunately she ultimately stayed silent.

"H-Haven't you been doing good business with the townsfolk? And wait, don't

you come from a town to begin with...?”

“I did, but I wasn’t born in Genos. To be honest, I’m disgusted by the way they look down on the people of the forest’s edge. And most of the folks who buy my cooking come from the south and east, anyway.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is... B-But I don’t really know. I don’t go to town very often...”

“Eh? Why’s that?”

“I mean... They’re frightening, aren’t they...?”

With that I completely forgot I was acting and let loose a loud, “Huh?”

Both of Diga’s shoulders twitched, so I had seemingly scared him with that.

“T-They shoot us such awful glares just because we’re people of the forest’s edge, you know? And if you go and walk on your own without being careful, you never know who could drag you into the shadows and do something to you... So I haven’t been to town in years...”

His statement left me at a loss for words. However, I calmed myself and now turned towards Doddo.

“Then what about you? When we first met you in the post town, you were trying to draw your blade on one of the townsfolk.”

“I hate the people from there... They’re all enemies to the forest’s edge.”

“Uh-huh. So that’s why you kidnapped women, attacked travelers, and pillaged fields?”

“Huh?” Doddo questioned, his small eyes opening wide.

Now that I thought of it, he had a rather grim-looking face that reminded me of a lion dog statue, but since he was Diga’s younger brother, he must have been around my age. And with his eyes going wide like that, he finally looked it.

“I’ve got no interest in the women around town. And why would I steal from the fields? If I did that, the guards wouldn’t just overlook it.”

“No, but what about from fields that aren’t protected by the guards?”

“I would never know where those are. And besides... We’ve been filling our

stomachs with the bounty of the forest, so why would we go steal food from town?”

“Hmm? But there’s a lot of talk about town of people of the forest’s edge doing that stuff.”

“They must be talking about way in the past, then. That must have been before we started taking food from the forest, back when we were little kids.”

“Yeah, back then we ate aria and poitan like everyone else,” Diga nonchalantly chimed in.

I see... I thought to myself. It was true that Dora had never mentioned when that stuff happened. And if it was just ten years and some change ago, then it wasn’t all that long in the past. If people of the forest’s edge pillaged fields back then, it wouldn’t be strange at all for rumors of such things to still persist. It was possible Dora had suffered from such acts back when he was young, too.

That wasn’t a matter for me to be thinking over on my own right this second, though. After all, if I just asked Dora later, I could probably more or less work out the timeframe.

“Are you trying to figure out who did that stuff...?” Doddo asked, his gloomy gaze facing my way. “In that case, it was Zattsu Suun. Our father Zuuro was afraid of souring our relationship with Genos above all else, and Diga and I hate the town. Zattsu Suun is the only one who would try to do that stuff to the townsfolk.”

“Hmm. So you intend to pin all the blame on the former clan head, do you?” Ai Fa questioned in a chilly tone, causing Doddo’s face to pathetically freeze while Diga powerlessly hung his head.

“You’ve already gone and exposed the greatest crimes that we’ve committed. We’re just saying we had no reason to kidnap women from around town or steal food or whatever. I don’t really care if you believe us about that or not, though... It’s not like the lord of Genos has the guts to pass judgment on the people of the forest’s edge, anyway.”

That wasn’t true. In fact, just a few hours earlier Gazraan Rutim had advised that we shouldn’t leave those crimes unresolved.

However, these two were unaware of that fact. That must be why they didn't feel such a strong need to defend themselves against those accusations. And so... It was possible everything they were saying was true.

"Hey, more importantly, about the Dom—" Diga started to pathetically whine, only for a violent knocking on the door to sound out.

Diga and Doddo froze in place as if they had been petrified, while Ai Fa grabbed the sword laying by her side.

"Clan head of the Fa, if you're still alive, then wake up! We're from the Dom clan!"

The tension drained from me when I heard that shout brimming with anger, while Ai Fa gave a small sigh. However, Diga and Doddo's faces became even more pale and corpse-like.

"Some men of the Suun set fire to the Dom settlement and fled! Are you still alive, clan head of the Fa?!"

"I'm fine! I'm coming to the door now!" Ai Fa responded with a voice like a taut leather whip. Then she stood up, only for Diga and Doddo to stare up at her with eyes full of despair.

With a firm stride, Ai Fa approached the door.

"You have my gratitude for coming so late at night to warn us of this danger. You said men of the Suun clan had fled, but who precisely did you mean?" Ai Fa asked through the door. With that, the man on the other side seemed to regain a bit of his calm.

"So you're alright after all, then? That will help preserve a bit of the Dom clan's honor... The ones who fled were the three men entrusted to our Dom clan, as well as the former clan head who was being held by the Jeen. The Jeen man watching the previous clan head had his throat bit and torn and his blade stolen. From there, he fled from the Jeen and set fire to the Dom settlement, then set his three brethren free!"

"Hmm... So for now, it seems they weren't lying..." Ai Fa quietly muttered while crossing her arms.

“Did you say something? And is your clan member fine, too? If so, then you can get back to resting. We men of the Dom clan will protect the Fa house. We will wash away this disgrace with the blood of those traitors from the Suun clan!”

So those frightening men wearing giba skulls had come in full force, huh?

Diga started violently trembling once again, while Doddó’s head sunk down deeply and it looked like he had given up on everything.

After shooting them an unconcerned glance, Ai Fa called out, “I’m grateful for your concern, but there’s something I have to tell you first. I captured the former first and second sons of the Suun clan by my own hand.”

“What?!” the angry voice bellowed again, and the door violently jolted.

“Agh...” Diga moaned, then he fell prostrate.

“Is that true?! Those traitors are in there?! In that case, open this door immediately, clan head of the Fa!”

“I will shortly. So please, don’t destroy my door, man of the Dom. However, before I do so, I have a question I wish to ask. They don’t seem to have come here to take our lives. Apparently, they fled in fear from Zattsu Suun, the very man who helped them escape from the Dom settlement.”

“Stop messing around and open up! Hand them over to us!”

“I will, of course. But you will hand them over to the leaders of our people so their fates can be properly deliberated, rather than immediately chopping their heads off, won’t you? They insist that the former clan head threatened them with a blade and forced them to flee. So if they had a change of heart and returned on their own, then wouldn’t that do a bit to absolve their crimes?”

“They sullied the Dom’s pride and trampled over our trust! There’s nothing left but to send their heads flying! So hurry up and open this door already!”

“If that’s the case, then I won’t open it. If that is the consensus the Dom have come to, then call for the three leading clan heads. Then if I hear enough to satisfy me, I’ll open the door,” Ai Fa stated, turning away and looking back towards us.

At some point, Diga and Doddo had turned just their heads to be facing Ai Fa. Thanks to that, I could only see the backs of their heads from where I was sitting, but Ai Fa had her arms crossed and was clearly annoyed.

“What’s with that look?! Don’t look at me with those eyes!”

5

The next morning, or actually before dawn even broke, the forest’s edge entered a state of high alert. The bad news of Zattsu and Tei Suun’s escape had spread from the north down through the entirety of the forest’s edge.

The villainous fiend was enough of a monster to tear out a man’s throat with his teeth and set fire to a settlement. By this point, nobody could possibly call such a man one of their comrades. Tei Suun was given back his clan name and an order was given that both he and Zattsu Suun were to be taken in dead or alive. And so, as soon as dawn broke, half the men of the forest’s edge dispersed into the forest while the other half stayed to guard their homes.

In addition to those who needed protection, there were also those who needed to be watched. Naturally, that referred to the Suun and the former members of that clan. There was a non-zero chance that the villains were plotting to take them away. And so the men of the branch families in particular were locked up in their houses and restricted from moving about as they pleased.

That didn’t just go for those who remained in the Suun settlement, either. The men taken in by related clans were treated the same. Their allegiances had been acknowledged and they had been granted freedom, but it was hard to say how they would respond if Zattsu Suun stood before them once again. It just made sense to keep that concern in mind when considering how Diga and Tei Suun had acted.

However, Toor Din’s father and the like were also included in all that. They had gained a new clan and started down the path towards living as proper men of the forest’s edge, and yet now they were being bound and dragged back to the Suun settlement. It made my heart ache to think how that father and

daughter must have felt.

The former members of the main Suun house were also moved to where it would be easy to keep an eye on them. That meant the Ruu house for Yamiru Lea, Oura, Tsvai, and Mida. Diga and Doddó had just barely managed to avoid having their heads sent flying, and instead were treated as prisoners and transported to the Zaza house along with Zuuro Suun. Then, a great many men were gathered at the Suun, Ruu, and Zaza settlements to protect the members of those clans while keeping an eye on those criminals, while also plotting a counterattack against Zattsu and Tei Suun.

As for our Fa house... it was decided that we would dare to keep doing business in the post town, all while being guarded by the elite of the forest's edge.



"Hey, what's this all about?" Milano Mas questioned, looking over our group with a hostile gaze.

That came as no surprise, though. There were notably more people with us today, and those additional members were all hunters of the forest's edge.

Ultimately, there were four people selected for guard duty: Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Shin Ruu, and Rau Lea. Those young, gentler-looking hunters were chosen so as to not get the townsfolk all worked up, but apparently seeing men with blades in and of itself was enough to throw people for a loop. As Milano Mas glared at Ludo Ruu and the others, his eyes were filled with what looked like full-on animosity.

"Sorry. There's some circumstances behind all this..."

"Circumstances? What sort of circumstances are those? You shouldn't need swords to do business, right?"

"Well, I'd imagine there will be an official notice from the castle soon anyway, but some criminals from the forest's edge escaped and are on the loose," I replied, only for Milano Mas's eyes to open wide in shock.

"Criminals... from the forest's edge?"

“That’s right. They’re two men who broke the laws of the forest’s edge, and they haven’t been found yet. We got on the criminals’ bad side in the past, so that’s why these guys are accompanying us as bodyguards.”

Normally, we wouldn’t be doing business at all on such a day. But we were ordered by the elites of Genos not to go on break, so we ended up coming to the post town after all.

“If you were to halt your business now when these criminals from the forest’s edge are loose, it would simply lead to unwarranted suspicion. If you have the resolve to stop business in spite of that then that’s all well and good, but otherwise I believe you should continue on much the same as you have until now,” Cyclaeus, the representative for the lord of Genos, had apparently stated.

I only sort of got his logic there.

“Cyclaeus may be planning to capture those two on his own. After all, he said he wanted to officially punish Zattsu and Tei Suun for breaking not just the laws of the forest’s edge, but also those of Genos,” Gazraan Rutim had explained with a distressed look on his face after returning from the meeting between Cyclaeus and the leading clan heads. “The townsfolk are protected by the guards, so feel free to keep going about your business. But if that’s not possible, then stay in the forest’s edge and don’t think of trying to open your shop in town. That’s more or less what Cyclaeus was saying.”

In other words, he was scheming to have us act as bait. And if we refused, we would be banned from working in the post town.

Seriously, what is that Cyclaeus guy thinking? I thought to myself in frustration, only for Milano Mas to idly mutter, “Criminals from the forest’s edge... So people of the forest’s edge are being pursued as criminals, huh...?”

“That’s right. By the time the sun hits its peak today, their names and appearances should be released to the public.”

Apparently, it had been decades since a person of the forest’s edge was last wanted as a criminal. And in recent years, the rumor was that the castle would cover for them even if they committed a crime. That was how the death of Milano Mas’s friend had been left unresolved.

Just how was the innkeeper feeling at the moment? Was he glad to see people of the forest's edge being treated as criminals? Or was he feeling frustrated, wondering why his friend's death was left unresolved for so long? If it were me, I'm sure both those contradictory emotions would be swirling strongly inside of me.

After staying silent for a moment, Milano Mas stifled his emotions and gave our group another once-over.

"I get what's going on now. So, the folks from the castle ordered you all to keep on doing business, then?"

"Yes. I personally thought it would be best to hold back till the commotion died down, though..."

"Hmph. So it was a fancy way of telling you to be bait, then. Certainly sounds like something those guys from the castle would come up with."

With that, Milano Mas departed.

When we circled around the back of the inn, we found the two stalls in their usual place, then I exchanged a glance with Ludo Ruu.

"Man, I thought he'd make a big fuss, but he was surprisingly calm. I guess no matter how much he may not like it, there's no going against the folks from the castle," the youth stated with a disappointed shrug of his shoulders. Now that I thought of it, he had met Milano Mas once.

While stifling a sigh, I went ahead and gave the order to head out. "Well then, let's get going. If we're late, we could cause the customers to fret."

With that, we took off down the stone path.

The information about the pair of criminals shouldn't have been publicly announced just yet, but we were still getting a lot more stares than normal. We may have gone with a younger, less threatening group, but hunters were still hunters. And so, we got looks more of fear than scorn from all around.

Is it really alright to be doing this...?

I just couldn't wipe that thought from my mind.

It just wasn't possible to tell how that fiend Zattsu Suun would act, after all.

No matter how much he struggled now, the Suun clan would never regain their right to lead. In that case, it seemed like there was a high chance he would come after his long-time adversary and new leading clan the Ruu, the Zaza who abandoned them despite falling under them, or the ones who exposed their crimes, our Fa clan.

So was it really alright for us to be here in the post town? Didn't that endanger the townsfolk?

Thinking logically, it wouldn't be possible to march into the post town right in the middle of the day and attack us. Instead, they would need to attack us on the path between the forest's edge and the post town.

However, I questioned whether someone who would injure his brethren of the forest's edge and set fire to a settlement would be capable of properly thinking through his actions. Even if we were protected, if any of the townsfolk got wrapped up in it... The thought alone was enough to cast a gloom over me.

Milano Mas, Dora, Tara, Shumiral, Pops, Aldas, Yumi, Naudis... I had formed bonds with all of them, and so if I brought disaster their way, I wouldn't be able to bear it. Honestly, I had never imagined I would end up having to open the stalls while being weighed down by such heavy emotions.

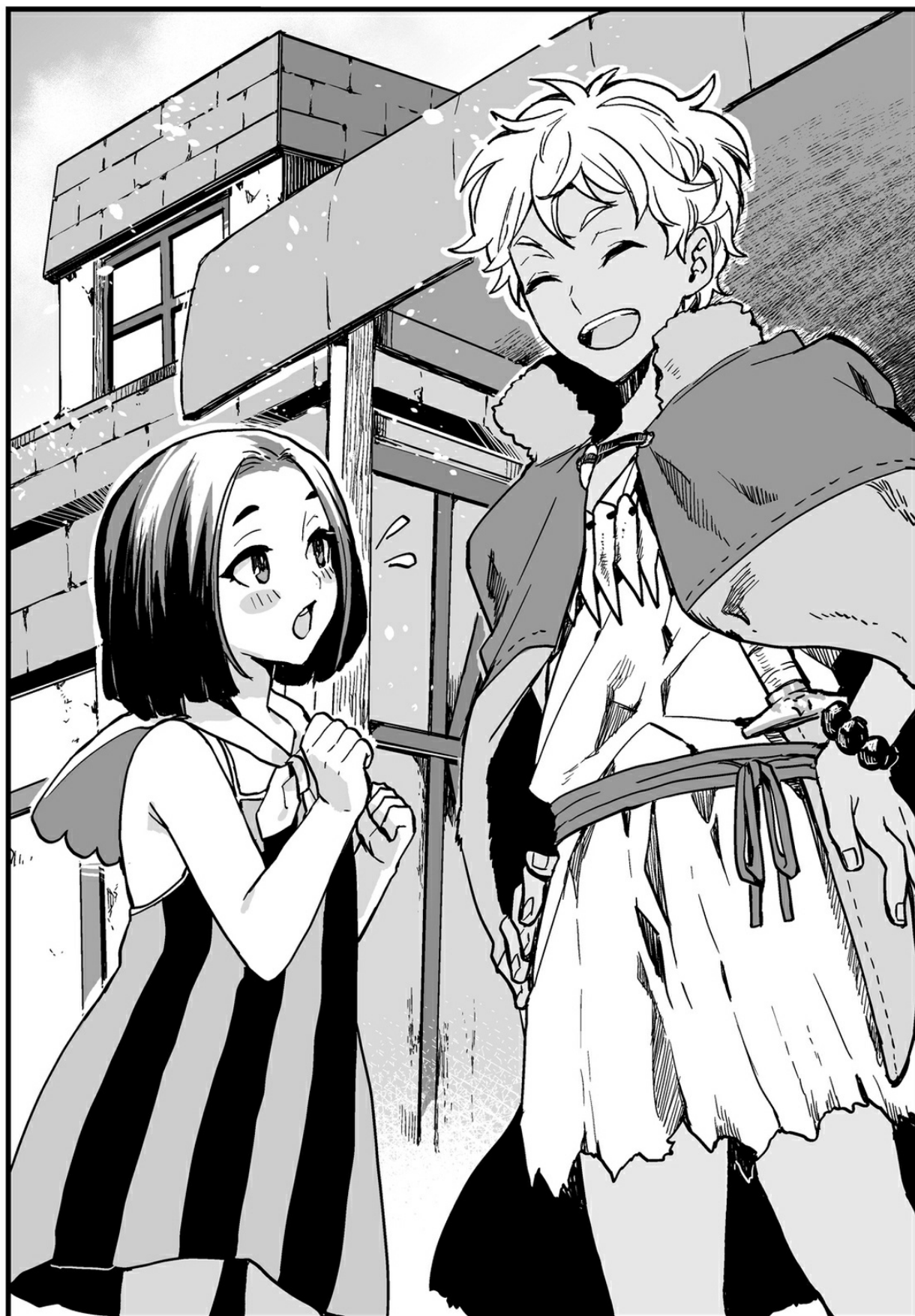
It was then that there was suddenly a surprised "Ah!" It was Tara, sitting in her usual spot next to her father.

"Hey there, Tara. You too, Dora. I'd like to buy some vegetables again today."

"R-Right. If the same as yesterday is alright, then it will be eight red coins."

The extra hunters in our group had caused him to go a bit pale, but he still said that with a smile.

Tara didn't look quite that scared, though. However, she was nervously staring at Ludo Ruu.



“Ah, you’re that runt from a while back. I see you’re just as tiny as always,” Ludo Ruu said with a grin, causing Tara to timidly smile back.

“U-Um, I talked with Rimee Ruu a bit before. You’re her big brother, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I heard about that. She wouldn’t stop talking about it at dinner. I guess runts get along well.”

As I watched that heartwarming reunion between the youths out of the corner of my eye, I leaned in close to Dora and said, “Um, it’ll be announced by the castle soon, but...” With that, I gave him a rough synopsis of what was going on, causing him to go even more pale.

“T-That’s a serious issue. Criminals of the forest’s edge, huh...?”

“Right. They shouldn’t have any reason to harm townsfolk, but if you see a man who’s wasting away and looks like a skeleton or a man with grey hair, please don’t go anywhere near them.”

“G-Got it. They must be awful vicious for the folks in the castle to recognize people of the forest’s edge as criminals. I’ll take care not to let Tara walk around on her own today.”

“I’d be glad if you could let your acquaintances know, too. By the way, there’s something else I wanted to ask you about...”

With that, I went ahead and tried to clear up my doubts from last night. Which is to say, exactly when those wrongdoings by the people of the forest’s edge occurred.

“Eh? When was it...? Ruffians still cause trouble around town, though, don’t they?”

“You’re talking about someone getting drunk and drawing a blade in town, or wrecking a stall they don’t like, right? But what I want to know about is those more serious crimes like kidnapping women or stealing crops.”

“Hmm, let’s see... Well, it was quite some time ago that our crops were stolen. I think it was before Tara was even born. As for the rest, I’ve only heard rumors... I think you might need to ask someone from the castle to hear the

specifics.”

“Someone from the castle?”

“Yes. A lot of people have given up, but I would still say most of those incidents were reported to the guards.” That might prove difficult. After all, the folks from the castle surely wouldn’t want to reveal their past misdeeds of hiding the wrongdoings committed by people of the forest’s edge. “Hey, Asuta, don’t go sticking your nose into any serious trouble, alright?” Dora said as he grabbed hold of my arm. “I know full well by now that you aren’t all bad people. And at least for me, that’s plenty. Just leave dealing with criminals to the guards and go about your business like you have been.”

“Thank you. It makes me very happy to hear you say that.”

What he had said was nothing special, but it really did fill my heart with joy.

Once we left Dora’s stall, our destination was just a stone’s throw away. And even from where we were standing, it was clear that a crowd was already forming. On top of that, there were also a good number more guards standing around than usual.

“Whoa, that’s a pretty nasty mood hanging in the air, isn’t it?” Lala Ruu whispered into my ear.

There certainly was an uneasy atmosphere lingering about. It looked like the crowd gathered there was starting to get worked up and hound the guards.

As we approached, a guard with a tassel atop his helmet that seemed to mark him as the highest-ranking one present yelled out, “Hey, you’re late!” We had left the Fa house a good bit earlier than usual today, but as we had to come to town after stopping by the Ruu settlement, we didn’t arrive till around 30 minutes past when we usually did.

With that said, though, it was a stall owner’s right to set their business hours. There was no logic behind a guard reprimanding us over such matters... But rather than bringing that up, I just said, “Sorry,” with a bow of my head. “I’ll start preparing right away, so please hold on for just a moment.”

With that, something strange happened. All of a sudden, about a third of the people gathered scattered as if fleeing, seriously catching me off-guard. Plus, all

of those folks who left were westerners, and their faces showed clear animosity and fear.

After watching that, the six guards present also turned to leave.

“This puts an end to the matter. You don’t have any further complaints, do you? If you cause too much trouble, we really will arrest you,” the leader of the guards said to the remaining customers.

With a clear look of discontent on their faces, the customers then watched as the guards departed to the north. Normally, they would head towards their station to the south instead, so maybe they were currently tasked with guarding the northern entrance to the post town. Would it be possible to guard against an assault from those vicious criminals with just six men, though? Admittedly, we just had the four bodyguards, but I couldn’t imagine those six guards being anywhere near a match for them.

“Hey, there. Sorry for causing a fuss. Just don’t pay it any heed and go ahead and get working, alright?” Aldas said with a chuckle as he approached the stand.

While feeling relieved that Ai Fa and the others weren’t overtly shooting him a glare, I went ahead and asked, “What exactly happened, anyway?”

“You see, we were waiting in front of your spot like always when those guards came. Then they said some criminals from the forest’s edge had escaped, and that they might approach your stalls so we should leave if we valued our lives.”

“Really...?”

They ordered us people of the forest’s edge to continue doing business, but then warned the townsfolk they should leave. So that Cyclaeus guy really did just want us as bait and didn’t give a damn about any discord between the forest’s edge and the post town, huh?

My mood just kept getting gloomier and gloomier.

“So we just ignored them and lined up like always, but some folks from the west who were passing by heard that and started saying they shouldn’t let such dangerous people into town. That led to some of our men from the south losing their cool and lashing out at them, which turned into a whole big commotion.” I

could feel my heart sinking as I listened, but Aldas kept on shooting me a hearty grin. “Don’t go making a face like that. We intervened, so nobody ended up getting taken away by the guards. We yelled out that if they caused too much of a fuss they wouldn’t be able to eat your delicious cooking anymore, which got all our men to settle down. The only ones who wouldn’t calm down to the bitter end were those folks from the west.”

“Hmph. Those westerners really have no guts at all. It’s easy enough doing business with them, but at times like this I just can’t stand them,” Pops chimed in, popping out from behind Aldas’s large frame. “They may be vicious criminals, but there are just two of them, right? Why should I have to hold off on eating delicious food because of them? The whole idea is ridiculous.”

“I really wish you’d consider your position at least a little more, Pops. If you get taken away, then we won’t be able to keep doing business, you know,” Aldas said with a strained chuckle.

Pops just gave a hearty, “Hmph!” in response, then said, “We’ve got something way more important to discuss, anyway! Hey, kid!”

“Y-Yes?!”

“We had your cooking at the inn! It cost seven red coins when adding in the cost of the fruit wine to go with it!”

“Huh? But wasn’t it supposed to be five red coins for a meal?”

“One bottle of fruit wine wasn’t enough! Seriously, what was with that meal?!”

“Did you not like it...?” I asked, worrying that was the case.

“Of course I liked it!” Pops responded even louder than before.

“Quiet down a little, Pops. We don’t want the guards coming back, do we?”

“Who cares about them?! Hey, you should have used tau oil like that to start with! Seriously, what the heck?! Do you just enjoy toying with us or something?”

“T-That wasn’t my intention at all. Until I stopped by The Great Southern Tree, I didn’t even know that tau oil existed.”

“What? Then you made that delicious of a dish the very first time you tried using the stuff?” Aldas questioned, his eyes going wide in amazement.

I shook my head while chopping up the tino for garnishing.

“No, you see, there’s an ingredient that’s a lot like tau oil back where I came from, which is why I chose that dish. Was it to your tastes?”

“It sure was. For us, tau oil is the taste of home... No wait, I can’t say I ever tasted a dish that delicious back home,” Aldas said with a wide grin.

“Hey,” Pops chimed in from beside him, leaning forwards. “Now that I think of it, I still don’t know your name. I’m Balan of Nellwea.”

“I’m Asuta of the Fa clan, from the forest’s edge.”

“Asuta of the Fa clan, is it? Asuta... If you ever come to Jagar, make sure you visit Nellwea. If you say you know Balan the construction worker, most of the folks there will know who you mean.”

“Huh? R-Right...”

“And if you ever need a house built, you better get in contact with me. We’ll build it for cheaper than any other construction group, and do a better job, too,” Pops said while crossing his arms, then arrogantly puffed up his chest. “So, when are you going to be ready to get cooking? You made us wait longer than usual, so I’m starving!”

“Ah, yes! Right away!”

Pops and his group really were just the same as always. Actually, I got the feeling that they were in an even better mood than usual now that I had started doing business with The Great Southern Tree.

The line behind them looked unchanged, too. So this incident with Zattsu Suun wasn’t that big a deal to the broadminded folks from the south and the calm, quiet easterners, huh?

However, the gap between them and the citizens of the west only seemed to be growing wider.

Dora and folks like him went so far as to worry about me, and there didn’t seem to be much of a change in attitude from the people who had already

eaten giba meat. But for those who still felt distrustful towards the people of the forest's edge, this was sure to be a pretty serious incident.

Still... Once you decide to do something, you've got to follow through.

There were criminals out there from the forest's edge. Maybe what we needed to do was to display our own innocence personally while clearly acknowledging that shame. To show them that there was nothing shady about us.

Surprisingly, though that may have just been part of Cyclaeus's official stance on the matter to cover everything up, it was true that the people of the forest's edge also shared some responsibility for overlooking the Suun clan's corruption. Looking at it that way, perhaps it was a trial given to them... A path to atonement.

"Asuta... Can you really make delicious food with such a brooding look on your face?" Ai Fa whispered into my ear. "There's nothing for you to worry about. If those fiends appear, we'll take care of them in a heartbeat."

At some point, Ludo Ruu and the others had fallen back to the thicket behind us, leaving only Ai Fa by my side.

As I stared back at her resolute expression, I responded, "Got it," with a nod. "Well then, Sheera Ruu, you're up."

"Right," Sheera Ruu called back as she added aria to the tray, and with that our business for the day kicked off.

6

A bit before the sun hit its peak, Li Sudra arrived just as we had arranged. And she had four Sudra men along with her, too.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. I look forward to working with you again today," Li Sudra stated, her expression the same as always.

However, the clan head was standing next to her, looking seriously nervous.

"Clan head of the Fa, those villains still haven't shown themselves, have they?"

“That’s right. And I’m glad to see you all doing well.”

“Right. From here on, we’ll be risking our lives to protect our comrades,” the Sudra clan head with his sunken cheeks stated, a light shining brightly in his eyes. Seeing that, his wife Li Sudra broke out in a gentle smile.

“Clan head, if they see a daring hunter of the forest’s edge with such an intense expression on his face, the townsfolk will be too scared to approach. Please, restrain yourself.”

“Hmm? I don’t believe we can afford to be so relaxed. The former Suun clan head was nothing but skin and bones and was on the verge of death, yet he managed to take down a Jeen man, and from what I saw at the clan head meeting, that man from the branch families is also quite skilled. We must be prepared to lay down our lives if need be.”

The Sudra clan head was shorter than his wife, and he didn’t have all that impressive of a physique, either. In fact, it may even be a bit rare to see a man his age so lacking in that regard. However, his generally gloomy face clearly displayed his do-or-die resolve. Under the circumstances, it would have been perfectly reasonable to choose to hold back from helping out with work until Zattsu and Tei Suun were captured, but rather than doing so, he went so far as to volunteer to help with guard duty.

These were the only four men of the Sudra clan, and so they dropped the rest of their women off at the Ruu settlement on their way.

“Clan head of the Sudra, the men of the Ruu are over there in the thicket. The plan is to divide the tasks of keeping an eye on the highway and also guarding against attacks from behind, so please start by talking to them,” Ai Fa stated.

The Sudra clan head replied, “Understood,” with a nod, then he and his men headed in the direction she had indicated. Before long, Vina Ruu and I would have to head over to The Great Southern Tree, so Ai Fa’s group of four would keep guarding us while the four from the Sudra would remain here to keep an eye on the stalls.

Just when the Sudra men disappeared from view, the members of the Silver Vase approached in their place.

“Welcome. I’m grateful that you came out even on a day like this.”

“Yes, I saw, the wanted posters... Are you, alright, Asuta?”

“Yes, we’re just fine. You all should make sure to take care, though. I’m sure this was included on the posters, but the criminals who are on the run are incredibly dangerous.”

“We, will be fine. I worry, about you all, Asuta. The guards said, there is a risk, of you being, attacked.”

Perhaps because of that, we had a remarkable decrease in western customers. Even the number of passersby seemed to be less than usual. Dora had stopped by with Tara, but Yumi and the rest of our regulars hadn’t shown up yet. The fear and unease folks from the west were feeling probably wouldn’t let up until the villains were captured.

“Thank you. We really will be fine, though. After all, we have a number of reliable hunters on guard duty,” I told him with a smile, but I couldn’t spy any shift in Shumiral’s serious gaze.

His eyes then turned towards Ai Fa, who was standing next to the stall.

“Clan head, I am the leader, of the Silver Vase, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino.”

“Hmm?” Ai Fa questioned. She had been keeping a watch on the road from between the two stalls, but now she shot Shumiral a quizzical look. “By clan head, do you mean me? I don’t know you at all, though.”

“I heard of you, from Asuta. Could I get, your name?”

Ai Fa furrowed her brows and seemed even more doubtful as she looked Shumiral up and down.

“I’m Ai Fa of the Fa clan. I’m sorry, but I really don’t have time for idle chatter.”

“Ai Fa... It is, a good name. Are you, protecting Asuta?”

“Yes. It’s a clan head’s duty to protect the members of her clan,” Ai Fa replied, her gaze shifting back towards the road. Her role here was to keep an eye out and make sure nobody suspicious was approaching us by blending into the crowd.

“Please take care, of Asuta. He is, very important, to me.”

With that, Ai Fa shot Shumiral another fleeting glance.

“I will protect Asuta, regardless of whether or not anyone asks me to.”

Shumiral’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly and he murmured, “Thank you,” before looking over towards the neighboring stall. Vina Ruu was there working hard, just like always.

Shumiral really did see her as someone special, didn’t he? However, he didn’t let any of those inner feelings show today, instead simply leaving once he got the dish he had ordered.

“That guy from Sym really was worried about you, huh? Did you form some sort of special bond in the past?” Lala Ruu questioned as she stood beside me and helped with the giba burgers.

“Nah, nothing special happened between us. If I had to say, he’s just one of the customers who buys my cooking.”

“Hmm, that’s strange... Still, I guess that’s how your bonds with our Ruu clan got started. So maybe it’s not so strange after all.”

Right, my bonds all came through my cooking.

I was especially close with Shumiral, but Aldas and Pops were important to me too, even if I only just learned the latter’s real name of Balan today.

We may have only talked to each other a few minutes out of each day, but we still shared bonds. And those bonds grew stronger bit by bit as we interacted more and more. Interactions like that were surely why someone like me was able to keep on living here in this other world.

A bit later, just when it was about time to head out for The Great Southern Tree, three more people of the forest’s edge approached: Gazraan Rutim, Dari Sauti, and another one of the men from the Sauti clan.

“Ah, hey there. How did things go with Kamyua Yoshu?”

“It seems the plans for tomorrow truly can’t be changed. That was just as we expected, but he also said that they didn’t need any guards.”

“He said that?”

Tomorrow was finally the day of the big job involving the merchant Zasshuma and the caravan he led. Of course, I had assumed they wouldn't be able to cancel their plans thanks to circumstances on our end, but what did it mean that they were saying they didn't need any guards?

“Since there is no telling what actions Zattsu Suun may take, we offered to have all of the Sauti men escort them. However, since they were only asking the people of the forest's edge to show them the way, it came back to the initial agreement of just four men.”

“But... isn't that dangerous?”

“Hmph. There are only two of those villains, so even with just four of us we shouldn't be in any danger. Still, we offered to increase the number of men we're sending to just be safe, but they blew it off as us worrying too much. I really just can't stand folks from town,” Dari Sauti chimed in.

He was taller than Gazraan Rutim, and in terms of physique he seemed like he would even be a match for Donda Ruu. He had a gentle looking face, but when combined with his large body his appearance seemed a match for his heavy responsibility as one of the three leaders of his people. As for his age, he must have been just a bit older than Gazraan Rutim.

At any rate, though he usually gave off a pretty mild impression, he seemed to be just a bit irritated by the situation. It really must have been draining dealing with Kamyua Yoshu under such circumstances, though.

“They must have their own sort of pride and dignity, too. It's the job of those bodyguards to protect the merchant caravan, so they probably don't want anyone else interfering.”

“I don't like it. Maybe they're thinking they'd like to take down those fiends by their own hands, just like the folks from the castle.”

Could that be the case? With the impression I had, I couldn't imagine Kamyua Yoshu and Cyclaeus having a very friendly relationship. Did Kamyua Yoshu also have a desire to take down those criminals from the Suun clan, though...? It was honestly a mystery what that aloof man was really thinking.

“At any rate, there are apparently 18 in the merchant caravan and five bodyguards. They shouldn’t have any need to fear a mere two criminals. And also... they said even if those villains were to harm any of the merchants or products, the responsibility for that would fall to them as the bodyguards, so we shouldn’t worry about it.”

“I see. If Kamyua Yoshu said all that, then maybe there really isn’t any need to worry.”

Kamyua Yoshu, and that man with the bandaged face, Haan of Dabagg. And there would be three more of their peers, plus four men of the forest’s edge led by Dari Sauti, so it certainly wouldn’t be easy to get the better of them.

“Well then, we still need to report back to Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza, so we’ll be heading back to the forest’s edge. Asuta, please take care,” Gazraan Rutim finished with a firm gaze my way, then he departed along with Dari Sauti.

“Well then, we should get going too. Take care of everyone, alright, Sheera Ruu?”

“Right. Please take care.”

With that, I, Vina Ruu, Ai Fa, and the three hunters who were hanging out in the thicket headed away from the stalls. Along the way I purchased the vegetables I needed, and then we made for The Great Southern Tree, getting much harsher stares than usual as we went.

“We’ve still got to decide our roles. I guess we’ll need one each at the front and rear doors, another keeping an eye on the surrounding area, and one to enter the building.” Somewhat surprisingly, the one to act as the leader of the guards was the youngest person present, Ludo Ruu. “We’ll leave the front entrance to Ai Fa, but I guess it doesn’t matter who else goes where.”

“Hold on. Why do I have to take the front entrance? I wanted to be the one to go inside.”

“Hmm? But if one of us men is standing out front of the inn, folks from the west won’t approach. That guy who runs the place already didn’t look pleased, right?”

We had already stopped by to discuss the matter with Naudis in the morning.

Which is to say, we told him we wanted to have these bodyguards from the forest's edge around just in case something were to occur.

"No, but... I mean, I'm a hunter wearing blades, too. Being a man or woman shouldn't make much difference in the scorn the westerners show us."

"That's not true at all. There's no way a woman with a pretty face like yours would get avoided anywhere near as much as us men."

"You say that, but you all have soft, womanly faces too, don't you? And I'm taller than you, too."

All of a sudden, there was a tension in the air. However, Rau Lea chimed in with a chuckle, "You sure say some funny things. But I'm even taller than you, clan head of the Fa. I'd get bored just standing around, so I'll take the task of keeping an eye on the surroundings. You all can decide the rest without me."

"Height has nothing to do with it! Plus there's hardly any difference between me and you anyway, Ai Fa!" Ludo Ruu wasn't letting it go so easily.

"...But I'm still taller."

"I'm about the same height as the Fa clan head."

"Shin Ruu, you jerk! You're calling me a runt too?!"

"I didn't say that. And you're a better hunter than I am, anyway."

As that argument wore on, we arrived at The Great Southern Tree.

"I don't like entering buildings around town, so I'll take the rear," Shin Ruu said, retreating from the conflict.

"I'll blow into a grass whistle if I see anything," Rau Lea added before also disappearing. That just left Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu shooting each other seriously hostile glares.

"Um, since Asuta understands the ways of the town better than anyone, why not have him decide...?" Vina Ruu proposed, sounding a bit astounded.

"He'd just choose Ai Fa, though!" Ludo Ruu childishly wailed.

It wasn't good to be doing this in front of the inn. And so I felt a need to speak up, but I couldn't help but have a heavy heart when considering how that would

make Ai Fa feel.

“If you’re letting me decide, then I believe it really would be best to have Ai Fa stand outside... What do you say?”

As expected, Ai Fa stood there aghast.

“But... why...?”

“I mean, my reason’s what Ludo Ruu said before, and since a lot of folks from the west apparently use this inn, I’d like to avoid worrying them as much as possible. That was why we had you stand by the stalls before too, right?”

“That’s... That’s true, but...” Ai Fa muttered, clearly downhearted. Then, she turned her listless gaze towards Ludo Ruu, shooting him an apologetic look. “I see... I was the one only valuing my wants over our needs, here. I’m sorry for trying to push through with that rather than treating the matter logically.”

“Hmm? Ah, you don’t have to go apologizing over it or whatever.”

“However... It is still a fact that I’m taller.”

“Shut up about that, already! What does it even matter?!”

“It doesn’t. That was just me being a sore loser.”

With that, Ai Fa walked along the wall, then flopped down when she was about three meters from the inn’s entrance. Rather than just having one knee up she was cradling both of them like a child and shooting a gloomy gaze out over the road.

“I’ll keep an eye on the highway from here, Asuta...”

“Right!”

“Give it your all...”

“...Got it.”

For some reason, it felt like a powerful sense of guilt was crushing me.

As I pushed open the door to the inn and slipped inside along with the siblings from the main Ruu house, I held back yet another sigh, like I had been doing again and again all day.

“Ah, Asuta, I’ve been awaiting you,” Naudis greeted with a gentle smile from the reception desk. He had already met the men this morning, and it was only Ludo Ruu with us now anyway, so he didn’t look all that nervous. “Well then, I’m counting on you again today. Actually, I’m honestly relieved just by being able to welcome you so casually.”

“Sorry about all this. We’ve made a real commotion for you due to our personal circumstances. At any rate, I’m really grateful for you accepting this matter with the guards.”

“Ah, no, since there are dangerous criminals prowling about, I actually find it reassuring. You can’t rely on the town guards to deal with people of the forest’s edge, after all.”

Still, if I had just been banned in the first place, that would remove any threat of an attack by Zattsu Suun. In spite of that, Naudis had said he wanted me to continue as planned. I certainly felt bad about the whole situation, but to be honest, I was actually more glad that he chose to look at it the way he did.

“I didn’t have the time to tell you this morning, but your cooking was a big hit last night. I sold every last bit of it.”

“Ah, I’m relieved to hear that. You were selling it at five red coins per dish, weren’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right. I also sold some without fuwano and with half the meat for two red coins, just like you suggested. Thanks to that, even customers who wouldn’t pay five red coins for something they never tasted had no concerns ordering it,” Naudis said with a very satisfied looking grin on his face.

I smiled right back at him as I opened up the bundle of giba meat I had left with him.

“By the way, what was the ratio of customers like? Did folks from the west order it too?”

“Of course. By now there are plenty of customers from the west willing to come here out of an interest in giba cooking. I don’t know how that will go from here on out, though...”

I wasn’t sure of that, either.

The stalls had seen a dramatic drop in western customers. If that was because they were afraid of getting wrapped up in something, then that shouldn't have much of an impact on business here at the inn. However, if this incident was causing animosity towards the people of the forest's edge to flare back up, that could prove rather serious.

"Well, we just have to be patient until those criminals are caught. But just the number sold to the customers from the south was pretty good, so I certainly intend to keep on working with you," Naudis said before departing. He looked the same on the surface, but maybe he really was feeling on edge about being in the same room as Ludo Ruu after all.

"Man, it sure is boring waiting around for someone who may never even show up. But I can't let my guard down, so my shoulders are getting all stiff," Ludo Ruu complained while giving a big stretch. "If it's just for a day or two, coming to town can be pretty interesting. But if this goes on for like 10 or 20 days, I'm going to get completely sick of it. And those guys from the Sudra will end up running out of food."

"It wouldn't end up dragging out that long though, right? If it did, it'd be a problem for me too."

"But there's always a chance they end up dying before they show themselves, isn't there? Like if they run into a giba in the forest and it takes them down, then they'd end up munched in no time. Then we'd be stuck doing this forever."

Ah, that really could happen. In fact, it would normally be seen as seriously dangerous to spend the night out in the forest. Plus, Zattsu Suun was sickly and Tei Suun wasn't exactly young, and they shouldn't have been properly equipped in the least. With all that in mind, it seemed rather likely that they would die out in the forest without anyone knowing. Would that mean that we would spend the rest of our lives vigilantly on guard against phantoms?

Just how much trouble would Zattsu Suun have to make for us before he was satisfied? As I kept my hands moving with the cooking, I recalled the ominous words Yamiru Lea had once spoken: "Zattsu Suun was a man who was like a bundle of poison."



After two and a half hours, our work at The Great Southern Tree came safely to a close.

We had yet to receive any news, good or bad. By the time we made it back to The Kimyuus's Tail, the group from the stalls had already wrapped up their business and completed the shopping for tomorrow.

"We had some meals left today. We sold all the giba burgers, but we only hit around 80 for the myamuu giba."

Rather than hearing about how the sales went, I felt like I should be congratulating them on making it safely through the day. Still, it was hard not to feel a bit down.

At any rate, we still needed to return the stalls, so I reached out to open the door, only for an angry voice to sound out from the other side before I could do so.

"I'm telling you, you should stop renting out stalls to them! If they just didn't come to town, that'd settle everything, right?!" I froze in place without thinking. Naturally, he was talking about us. "The folks from the castle are way too soft on the people of the forest's edge to begin with!"

"I don't want to get mixed up in their problems!"

"If you didn't rent them stalls they wouldn't be able to do business, so you should just give them back what they paid and be done with them!"

I didn't recognize any of those masculine voices yelling out their complaints.

At any rate, after a moment of silence, Milano Mas responded. "Even if I ended my contract with them, they'd just get their stalls from The Great Southern Tree. And someone from the castle gave them permission, so nothing will come from us complaining."

"Still, that doesn't mean we've got to just willingly follow along, right?!"

"Do you want their fee that badly?"

"And I mean, you should hate the people of the forest's edge more than anyone, right?"

In the next moment, a tremendous bang resounded through the air. Someone must have punched a table or wall or something with all their might.

“My relations have nothing to do with what I’m feeling right now! The ones pissing me off at the moment aren’t the people of the forest’s edge, but you lot! If you’ve said your piece, then hurry up and get out! You’re interfering with my business!”

Hearing that, I backed away from the door in a hurry.

The door swung open both ways, and it soon slammed outwards, only for the men who came stomping out to suddenly go, “Gyah!” and freeze in place.

There were over ten people of the forest’s edge lined up there just outside the door. Just how scared must they have felt at the moment? The men were all dressed like merchants, and their faces twisted into looks of despair as they started trembling.

However, I was the only one who eavesdropped on their conversation, so everyone else just shot them blank looks.

“Sorry, but I’ve got business inside, so could you let me through?” I asked in the flattest tone I could manage, only for the men to dash away as fast as they could.

After watching them leave, I once again went to walk inside, only for the door to swing open and Milano Mas to step out with his usual sour expression plastered on his face.

“What, so you’re done? Don’t stop in front of the shop like that. You’ll obstruct my business.”

“Right, sorry.” We didn’t need this many people just to move the stalls, so the four bodyguards and I moved them around back as Milano Mas directed. “Um... Is it alright to keep getting the stalls from you from tomorrow on?” I asked while pushing the stalls, only for Milano Mas to shoot me a glare out of the corner of his eye.

“If you do something questionable and break a stall, you’ll have to pay a fee for that. That’s like I explained to you from the start. There shouldn’t be anything else I need to explain, though.”

“Got it... Thank you.”

Naturally, that statement just earned me an annoyed, “Hmph,” back.

When we arrived at the storeroom behind the inn, for some reason we found a certain tall, skinny, aloof-looking blond guy waiting there for us.

“Hey, there. Good work today. Thanks for the delicious meal as always.”

“Hey, what are you doing back here?” Milano Mas asked in a gruff tone, but Kamyua Yoshu just shot him back a relaxed grin.

“You see, I decided to wait here because I didn’t want to miss Asuta and his group. And if I decided to take it easy in the dining hall, I’d drift off in no time at all.”

This was my first time seeing Kamyua Yoshu today. Since he was saying he had my cooking, though, he must have gone and made a purchase while I was over at The Great Southern Tree.

“I’m glad I got this chance to see you, Kamyua. I heard you’re leaving early in the morning and won’t be back for two months at the earliest, after all.”

Two months... Seeing as I’d been here in this world for less than 50 days, that certainly felt like a heck of a long time to me.

I honestly couldn’t judge whether it was good or bad that Kamyua Yoshu would be disappearing just as the relationship between the forest’s edge and Genos was growing more and more complicated. But either way, it was an unmovable fact that he was leaving. And so, those of us left behind would just have to rack our brains over how to handle things.

“Ah right, I heard that you refused an offer to add more men. Do you really feel there isn’t any danger?”

“Huh? Yeah, of course! A mere two criminals are practically nothing! And actually, there isn’t any reason for madmen trying to flee the forest’s edge to attack us in the first place.”

“But the fact that they’ve gone mad is why you never know what they might try, right? Plus... I think there’s more than a little chance that the merchant caravan you’re guarding will be attacked.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” Kamyua Yoshu asked, his eyes sparkling with curiosity, but I was a bit concerned about Milano Mas’s presence. It wasn’t like it had nothing to do with him, and he didn’t seem to enjoy hearing about criminals from the forest’s edge. For now, though, he seemed to be feigning ignorance as he checked over the stalls for any damage.

“A bit back, I heard something unusual from a member of the Suun clan. That people live to earn coins, and that since the Suun were the most affluent clan, their head was the greatest hero of the forest’s edge... I figure that biased point of view was passed down through the main house, all the way back from the previous clan head.”

“Uh-huh... So a large caravan stuffed with treasure would make the perfect prey, huh? I see, that certainly is an interesting thought.”

“It would be good if that was all it ended up as, but the wanted man who was the previous clan head apparently said he would restore the Suun clan’s right to rule. That might well have meant getting ahold of as much fortune as possible, rather than attacking the opposing Fa or Ruu clans.”

“Ah, I see. But could they really regain their authority like that?”

“Of course not. The previous clan head is likely the only one thinking that. In fact, a great number of the people of the forest’s edge think that any wealth beyond what’s needed for a basic living is completely unnecessary.”

“How truly intriguing. I wish I could have talked to you a whole lot more before departing for Sym, Asuta,” Kamyua Yoshu said with a bit of a sad smile. “But I get it. There’s a real chance those villains from the Suun will attack the merchant caravan. I wouldn’t be so forward as to say I’m itching for the chance to put my skills to use, but us bodyguards do make a living through combat, after all. So a nice uneventful trip honestly wouldn’t be all that interesting for me.”

With that, his purple eyes glanced over the hunters of the forest’s edge. Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Shin Ruu, and Rau Lea... And all of them were keeping a careful watch on the aloof man in turn, not letting their guards down in the least.

“You know, it’s possible one of us folks from around town will end up cutting down the former leader of the forest’s edge. You all won’t hold a grudge against

us for that, will you?”

“Of course not. It would be a bit vexing, but we wouldn’t just tell you to sit down and let them kill you... Plus, you could probably cut anyone you wanted in two, right?” Ludo Ruu replied.

“That’s not true at all,” Kamyua Yoshu replied, waving his lanky arm as if to brush away the idea. “If possible, I would try to take them in alive. But well, the others are wilder than I am, so I’m certainly glad to hear you say that... Still, there really is still a chance they’ll come after Asuta and everyone, so let’s pray we all make it through this safely.”

“Right. I’ll look forward to reuniting with you in two month’s time,” I replied, at which point Milano Mas finally stepped away from the stalls.

“There aren’t any scratches on them. So if you’re done here, then hurry up and get lost.”

“Got it. Thank you.” For some reason, Milano Mas didn’t look my way. While worrying that he really hadn’t wanted to hear all that about the criminals, I turned back towards Kamyua Yoshu. “Well then, Kamyua, take care on your journey.”

“Yup, you take care of yourself, too. And I’ll see you again sometime, Ai Fa.”

Ai Fa shot him back an unfriendly-looking nod, bringing our farewell to Kamyua Yoshu to a sudden close.

If something were to happen to either of us this could prove our final farewell... but somehow, it just didn’t feel real to me.

Once that was over we returned to the highway, only for someone to push through the crowd and run over our way. Ai Fa immediately went to move in front of me, but it soon became clear that it was no criminal, but rather Yumi from The Westerly Wind.

“Sorry, Asuta! My stupid dad wouldn’t let me visit your stalls today!” she yelled out as she approached, only to stumble from the momentum and grab onto my chest.

“Huh? W-What’s this about your father?” I questioned, very much conscious

of the chilly stare of Ai Fa's narrowed eyes.

"I'm telling you! There was some sort of commotion about criminals from the forest's edge, right? Thanks to that, my dad wouldn't let me leave the house! I finally managed to slip out when he left, but you're done with business for the day, right...?"

"Y-Yes. We hit our closing time."

"Right. But I... Gyah! What's with you all?!" Yumi questioned, finally noticing Ludo Ruu and the others and gripping my chest even tighter.

We hadn't met up with the rest of the group yet so there were only four hunters standing there, but apparently that was plenty enough to frighten Yumi and put her on edge. She was normally so tough, but now her hands gripping my T-shirt were trembling ever so slightly.

"I-It's alright. They're all with me. Um... this is one of the regulars at the stalls. She's the daughter of the owners of an inn called The Westerly Wind."

Ludo and Shin Ruu wore puzzled stares, while Rau Lea had a sour look on his face. As for Ai Fa... She was expressionless, except for the incredibly frigid glare coming from her half-closed eyes.

The frightened Yumi timidly glanced over the group.

"T-They're all your comrades, Asuta? Sorry, I was just a bit surprised. This is my first time seeing so many men of the forest's edge at once..."

"Well, it's true that men of the forest's edge don't come to town very often... So, what were you trying to say?"

"Hmm? Ah, right! I wanted to apologize for not making it to the stalls today! I'm really glad I caught you, Asuta." With that Yumi finally moved back, though she was still grabbing the fabric of my T-shirt as she stared up at me, a bit of a serious look in her eyes.

"Apologize...? But that's nothing to apologize over, is it?"

"Still, I'd hate it if you misunderstood! I'm not looking at you all differently because of something some other people of the forest's edge did wrong! And hey... You'll open your stalls tomorrow too, right? You won't go disappearing on

me, will you?”

“Y-Yeah. At least, that’s the plan...”

“I see. Thank goodness... Still, there are a lot of hardheads like my dad out there. But there are also folks like me who totally get it! So don’t go hating the post town over this, alright?”

“As long as there are people here to say stuff like that, I’ll be just fine.”

Hearing that, Yumi broke out in a big grin.

The glare from Ai Fa was painful, but even so, I felt a soothing sensation deep down in my heart.

With that, the 14th day of the blue month came to a peaceful close despite the turbulent premonition hanging in the air... And that day arrived at last. The 15th day of the blue month, when a group of over 20 merchants would pass through the settlement at the forest’s edge on their way to the Eastern Kingdom of Sym.

On that day, I would finally meet that man face to face. The root of all the Suun clan’s evils and the cause of their corruption... The former clan head, Zattsu Suun.

Chapter 3: A Star of Bad Omen

1

The 15th day of the blue month.

It was a day that would end far from tranquilly, but it started just the same as the day before.

With that said, the forest's edge was still under martial law. When we awoke with the rising of the sun, picked up what we needed to wash, and opened the door, four Dom men were standing there, having watched over the Fa house all night. They had lit fires on all four sides of the house and taken turns sleeping as they guarded against an assault by the criminals.

"Good morning. We have to clean up after last night's dinner."

The four men wearing giba skulls just silently nodded back.

The previous night, I had treated them to the leftover myamuu giba from the stall. However, the men of this clan from the far north were known to be especially stern even among the people of the forest's edge. And so, I couldn't even spy the anger at Zattsu and Tei Suun for sullyng their pride, as it was hidden as always beneath their stony, expressionless faces.

One of the four remained to watch the house, while the other three accompanied us to the washing place. As they had been attacked by Zattsu Suun and let Tei Suun escape, they volunteered themselves to guard the Fa house in order to recover their honor.

It was a given that they strongly desired a chance to mete out punishment to the criminals by their own hands. And so they also kept on guarding the Fa house during the day, so we were able to go work in town without worrying about it being set on fire or anything being poisoned while we were away.

Once we finished with our work for the morning we headed to the Ruu settlement, where we met up with the others and then set out for the post town. For us, that part of the route was the most dangerous, but fortunately we

made it to town without running into any unforeseen misfortune, and were able start our work without any problems.



I guess Kamyua's group is right in the middle of the forest around now... I absentmindedly mused while cooking meat on the metal tray.

If they left Genos when the sun rose, it would take around 40-50 minutes to reach the Ruu settlement, then it would be about two hours before they hit the Sauti homes to the south. So around now, they should be blazing a trail through the forest.

Then they would travel along from the south to the east of Mount Morga, and make it through the forest in half a day. It was a seriously intense schedule. And yet, it was just the start of a long journey that would last for two months before they returned.

Where will Zattsu Suun show up...? Or will he end up dying out in the forest without anyone knowing, like Ludo Ruu said...? I thought to myself, a sigh unintentionally slipping out.

Then from next to me, Lala Ruu grumbled with a bored look, "Man, there sure aren't many customers. Somehow it almost doesn't feel worth doing all this..."

"That's not true. And besides, it's not like our sales are going to drop off *that* dramatically."

With that said, it sure wasn't lively at the moment. The fact that our sales hadn't changed all that much was ultimately down to the fact that we didn't have many customers from the west to begin with.

Even so, Dora did stop by while holding a firm grasp on Tara's hand, and they bought enough for the pot and cloth sellers too. And then, Yumi also stopped by just like she had promised. So for now, I had to keep on working while praying in my mind that they didn't get wrapped up in anything.

"Ah, welcome!" I greeted with a smile far brighter than I was feeling inside, as a group of customers approached as if to cheer us up. It was the whole of that merchant group from the east, the Silver Vase. However, when Shumiral approached and pulled down his hood as always, he for some reason silently

stared at my face.

“Um, do you want five of each as usual today?”

“Yes,” he replied with a small nod, then went silent again.

What was going on? Maybe I was just imagining things, but I felt like I could sense some sadness in his gaze.

“Is something the matter, Shumiral?”

“No... It’s just, I heard something.”

“Huh?”

“That your food, is being served, in an inn, for people of, the south.”

“Ah, do you mean The Great Southern Tree?”

Silence, and more sad eyes.

At this point, even I had a sense of what was going on.

“U-Um, you see, the owner of that inn has mixed blood of the south and west. So he heard about the reputation of our stalls and offered a job to me, so he could serve my cooking in his inn...”

“I would feel blessed, to be able, to eat your cooking, for dinner.”

“T-Thank you. But ultimately, it all falls down to the inn owner’s feelings...”

“Is it a problem, if the inn owner, is a westerner?”

“W-What?”

“The owner of, The Sledgehammer, is a westerner. Do you hate, people of the west, Asuta?”

“N-No, not at all. I even have westerners as customers here at the stalls, and I’d like Genos and the forest’s edge to form a better relationship.”

Shumiral leaned forwards ever so slightly.

“The owner of, The Sledgehammer, wishes for, the same thing. Could you not, serve dinner, at The Sledgehammer?”

“I-Is that the name of the inn you all use? If I could get work there too, I

would certainly welcome it...”

“I will talk, to him. The Sledgehammer’s owner, will surely, be overjoyed. And we, will feel blessed, as well.”

“I’d be happy too if it works out. I’m honestly grateful that you always bring me such wonderful offers, Shumiral.”

Shumiral fell back, then hung his head a bit.

“I let myself, get worked up. I am, embarrassed.”

That was him getting worked up? That would mean I was worked up from morning till night.

“Could I ask for a bit more time, though? Ultimately, I’m pretty restricted under the current circumstances. I’m in no position to wander around the post town as I please...”

“That is fine. The disaster, will end.”

“Eh?”

“One of, my comrades, reads the stars. He said, the star of bad omen, will disappear.”

“Reading the stars...? So, a fortune teller? I’d certainly be glad if that turns out to be true.”

Now that I thought of it, the Eastern Kingdom of Sym was called the country of magic and shamans. So I guess it wasn’t so strange for someone from there to tell fortunes using stars.

“It will disappear, without fail. The disaster, will vanish. The movements of the stars, are absolute.”

“I see. Well then, if those criminals are captured while you all are staying in Genos, then please, go ahead and talk to that—” I started to say, only for Shumiral to shake his head and cut me off.

A heavy silence fell over us, and he seemed to appear a bit impatient despite how unusual that was for him.

“No. The star of ill fortune, will disappear... today.”

“Today?”

“Yes, today. It will vanish, today,” Shumiral said, leaning forwards again. “Asuta, please take care. When a strong star, disappears, the surrounding stars, can get wrapped up, in it. Many fates, can be twisted... Weak stars, can get involved, when a disaster, is felled.”

How could I express what I was feeling at the moment? It felt as if I had sensed someone walking over my own grave... An indescribable chill was creeping up my spine, and my body unwittingly trembled.

“I will talk, to The Sledgehammer’s, owner. I look forward, to when the disaster, is gone,” he said, his eyes narrowing as if to comfort me, and then he left along with his comrades.

“He’s just as mysterious as always, huh?” Lala Ruu said with a grin, but I wasn’t smiling.

There was an excessive unease lingering about me.

A star of ill omen would disappear, impacting the fates of a great many people... What a seriously ominous statement. It would be great if that applied to Zattsu Suun, but it was also terrifying.

I’d be grateful if he could get caught rather than dying alone in the forest, but still...

What if that resulted in a great number of casualties? Zattsu Suun was bedridden for years, so did he still have the strength left for something like that?

Even in spite of that fortune I couldn’t comprehend, I was starting to feel more and more uneasy.

“Ah, a totos...” Lala Ruu nonchalantly muttered. Sure enough, there was a lone easterner heading north with a totos in tow. “There sure was a lot of commotion this morning. I mean, there were totos walking along through the settlement at the forest’s edge. That had Rimee seriously worked up.”

“Oh, so the merchants had totos pulling their wares? Did you see that too, Lala Ruu?”

“Yeah. They were passing by just when I finished all my washing and stepped outside. They all had a bit of a nasty air about them, somehow. Like, they all had their faces hidden like folks from Sym.” Lala Ruu was always so energetic and fearless, so I couldn’t help but calm down a bit as I talked to her. It really was reassuring seeing how not just her, but all the Ruu women seemed to be going about their business as usual rather than fearing an attack by Zattsu Suun. They certainly had more guts than I did, if nothing else. “Still, it felt wrong for townsfolk to be walking through the settlement at the forest’s edge all haughty like that. I hope that’s the first and last time it happens...”

“But it’s not the first time, right? Didn’t a merchant caravan heading for Sym pass through the forest’s edge once before?”

“Ah, right. But I don’t remember anything from that far back. I mean, I was just two years old back then.”

“Huh? The last time was really that far back?” I asked, a bit taken off guard.

“Yup,” Lala Ruu replied with a nod. “That was when the older of Shin Ruu’s younger brothers was born, so it should be exactly ten years ago. That means I was two, so there’s no way I would ever remember anything from them.”

“Ah, I see...”

What was it? Why exactly was that jumping out at me? I mean, it shouldn’t matter how many years ago that was. It shouldn’t matter at all... But it was making me feel really uneasy.

Ten years ago, a large merchant caravan passed through the settlement. But whether because the people of the forest’s edge didn’t do enough to guide them or they simply weren’t properly equipped, they were attacked by giba and every last one of them lost their lives. All of them died out there in the forest. And they weren’t people of the forest’s edge, but citizens of Genos.

Then maybe...

The vague unease in the back of my mind was starting to take shape, but it was still fuzzy.

This wasn’t the first time I felt this way. In fact, something similar happened just the day before yesterday. But back then, Zattsu Suun was still being held by

the Jeen clan. So it didn't have anything to do with him, and I had instead been shaken by that meeting between Gazraan Rutim and Kamyua Yoshu. That then reminded me that I had been thinking of the time that aloof man visited the Ruu settlement over 20 days ago...

Oh yeah, and if I recall correctly, Kamyua was talking about the merchant caravan back then... Or no wait, was it Donda Ruu? At any rate, somebody mentioned it. So, that was ten years ago...

I had completely forgotten all about that. After all, back then I felt some story from years ago had nothing to do with me.

That still shouldn't have changed, though. It really shouldn't have. What did it matter whether it was five years ago or ten?

But... there was just one thing that differed between then and now: Through completely unrelated means, I had learned about someone else from Genos who had died ten years ago. In other words, Milano Mas's friend, who was also his wife's older brother. I didn't even know his name, but I believe I had the time frame correct.

Could... he have been a member of the merchant group?

But according to Milano Mas, he was killed by a person of the forest's edge. Apparently, the proof was that he was gripping a giba horn and tusk necklace.

And if I recall correctly, he was supposedly found dead at the bottom of a cliff...

Thinking about it, there weren't any cliffs around the post town. And the only ones I knew of big enough to kill someone... were in the forest of Morga.

So Milano Mas's friend was a member of the merchant group after all, and he died in the forest? And he wasn't attacked by a giba, but rather by a person of the forest's edge.

Ten years ago... That was right around when Zattsu Suun handed over his position as clan head. But at any rate, if someone went and did something that awful, it would have been him rather than Zuuro Suun. Even if he was already sick at that point and couldn't do it himself, he could have always given the order to someone else.

Could that “someone else” have been Tei Suun?

The pieces were slotting together and forming a picture I really didn’t want to see. However, I was still missing some of them. But it was already enough to make it clear that there was a real possibility that Zasshuma’s merchant caravan would get attacked.

That feeling of unease inside of me just wouldn’t die out.

“Hey, are you alright, Asuta...?” Lala Ruu asked, suddenly poking me in the side and causing my heart to skip a beat. “We have a customer. If you’re feeling bad, though, do you want me to make it?”

“N-No, I’m fine. Hold on just a moment...” I called out, only to be surprised yet again. It was none other than young Leito standing there with a smile in front of the stall. “H-Huh? You stayed behind in Genos, Leito?”

“Yes. I was ordered to stay behind, as the job this time around is a dangerous one. That’s just awful, isn’t it? I’m going to be left alone for two whole months,” he said with an innocent smile and a cute tilt of his head. “So just the one for me today, alright?” he added as he held out two red coins.

“Thank you for your continued business. Still, just how have you been living, anyway...? Were you born in Genos?”

“That’s right. But I don’t have any family or anything, though,” the flaxen-haired youth stated, wearing the same smile as always. “My mother died after giving birth to me, but my family had ties to The Kimyuus’s Tail, so I’ve been allowed to stay there. Then Kamyua showed up two years ago as a guest, and I got him to agree to take me on as his apprentice.”

“Ooh! Then did Milano Mas adopt you?”

“No, he’s just been kind enough to give me a place to stay. But since I formed my bond with Kamyua, I’ve started paying to stay as a guest.” That was certainly a far harsher childhood than I had imagined. Was that why he always had such a mature air about him? “Milano Mas has been very good to me. But I’ve always wanted to see more of the world, which is why I wanted to stay with a wanderer like Kamyua. I mean, staying with him, you would gain the strength needed to live on your own whether you wanted to or not.”

“I see... But isn’t it going to be rough, being on your own for two months?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I was on my own to begin with, after all.” Leito still wore a smile that made you feel he couldn’t hurt a fly as he said that. “My father was the leader of a big merchant caravan. But he lost his life in an unfortunate accident ten years back, and my mother followed soon after him... I had only just been born, though, so I don’t have any memory of either of them.” I almost dropped the giba burger I had just finished making into the pot. And as that happened, Leito’s light brown eyes were staring straight at my face. “So you didn’t know after all, huh? Well, it’s not like Kamyua explicitly told me not to mention anything, so it’s fine.”

“Leito... Then Milano Mas’s friend was...”

“Yes. You mean the older brother of Milano Mas’s wife, don’t you? He was an important business partner to my father, apparently. I’m sure Milano Mas overlapped his wife and my mother in his head and felt pity for me. Honestly, he seemed to dote on me more than his own daughter.”

I was at a loss for words.

“Please, don’t make a face like that. I didn’t have any parents to begin with, so I don’t know what it feels like to have them,” Leito said with his usual innocent smile as he took the giba burger from my hands. “Well then, excuse me. I’ll keep stopping by every day, alright?”

With that, Leito disappeared down the road. As I watched him leave with a look of astonishment still half-fixed to my face, I could swear I heard the final piece clicking into place in my head.

Kamyua Yoshu had known from the very start that a person of the forest’s edge could have been behind the incident with the merchants from ten years ago. And he had formulated the plan to try it again despite that.

That may have been exactly why he didn’t let Leito accompany them. He didn’t want the boy to meet the same fate as his father...

Ah, but the circumstances are totally different between then and now. Even if the Suun clan caused that incident ten years ago, the only ones who could try something like that now are Zattsu and Tei Suun. With just the two of them,

they couldn't possibly attack a caravan protected by four hunters and five bodyguards, right...? And if even if they tried, they would just get taken down...

The puzzle in my head was finally complete, but my conclusion hadn't changed in the least. And yet, the unease in my chest still hadn't settled.

And so, while still feeling troubled by that sensation, I kept on working as the time slowly passed.

2

Once again, our business for the day ended without incident. Yes, our business ended just fine.

However, that group arrived just afterwards. It was after we had finished work with the stalls and The Great Southern Tree and had met up in front of The Kimyuus's Tail, just as we had done yesterday.

The first one to notice anything was Ai Fa.

"There's some sort of commotion from down the street..." she stated, pushing me off to the edge of the road and moving to cover me. I still hadn't sensed anything at all, but Ludo Ruu and the others silently had the women step back and glared with hunters' gazes towards the south.

"W-What is it? What's going on?"

"I don't know. But there's a disturbance in the air... and it seems to be drawing closer."

But we were right smack in the middle of the post town. Zattsu and Tei Suun couldn't possibly just come striding in among the crowds in broad daylight, right?

"Then shouldn't we return the stalls as soon as possible and leave the post town?"

"For now, don't move. It doesn't seem like the criminals have launched an attack. But this is—" Ai Fa started, suddenly halting mid-sentence. I could spy a great deal of caution and suspicion on her face.

Then... it showed up.

The passersby who hadn't noticed anything all suddenly stopped and moved to the side of the road in a hurry.

There was a low rumble that felt like the prelude to an earthquake fast approaching.

Somewhere in the distance, a young girl let out a shrill shriek.

"What's that...?" I questioned, putting my hand on Ai Fa's shoulder and leaning forward without thinking. However, she didn't budge in the slightest, so all I could manage was peering over her shoulder.

A strange group was approaching from the south, down the highway. There were quite a few of them, too. They all wore hooded leather cloaks, and they were walking at a relatively relaxed pace.

I could see totos heads popping up among them, too. There were two of them, and they looked to be pulling a large carriage.

Still, the road was around ten meters wide, so it should have been simple to go around them and continue on your way. However, everyone was moving to the side of the road, then stopping and holding their breath as the group passed. That was just how much of a strange air was hanging about them.

"Sorry about this! But you're in no danger, so don't worry! Just don't get close enough to come within arm's reach!" the muscular man at the head of the group said with a hearty chuckle.

Hearing that voice only made me feel even more taken aback. They were around seven or eight meters away and all had hoods up so I couldn't see their faces, but I recognized that deep voice. It belonged to someone who shouldn't be here... The leader of the merchant caravan heading for Sym, Zasshuma.

Did that mean the other hooded men were the other merchants? But they were all supposed to be in the middle of the forest by now.

And there seemed to be enough people, but there were only two totos as far as I could see, and they didn't appear to have any other luggage with them.

On top of that, I finally realized that the strange air I had been sensing was

coming through my nose. There were two scents in particular hanging about. One was a sweet smell like that of some overly ripe fruit, while the other was a nasty stench like rusted metal.

That's...

The smell of giba summoning fruit... and blood.

I was left utterly dumbfounded, but as I stood there in a daze, the group kept on approaching. Sure enough, the man out in front was Zasshuma. I could spy his familiar dark brown beard and large mouth from beneath his hood.

And looking at him now, I noticed that his cloak was coated in dark red blood.

“Ooh, you’re that stall’s owner, aren’t you?” Zasshuma questioned, suddenly turning my way and stopping. The other men behind him followed his lead and slowly turned to face us.

Zasshuma had a grin on his face, but there was an overbearing aura about the other men.

“So you’ve got hunters with you today in addition to that sexy girl from before, eh? I’m sure the people of Genos are quaking at the sight of so many people of the forest’s edge coming to town at once.”

“You’re Zasshuma, right...? Um, what’s going on here...? Didn’t you all set off on a journey towards Sym?”

“That was our intention, yeah. But our goods got wrecked, so we had no choice but to slink on back! We can’t exactly do any business by heading to Sym empty handed, now can we?” Zasshuma stated with a cheerful smile. He had a villainous-looking face like the head of a group of bandits to begin with, but now that he was grinning like that while coated in blood, he seriously didn’t look even slightly like a merchant.

On top of that... I spied a long sword dangling by his hip. And he didn’t seem intimidated in the least even when facing over ten people of the forest’s edge.

I did my best to smile back at his utterly undaunted expression, only for him to continue on, “Anyway, this is the result of a just and official purge, following the laws of Genos! You all may be people of the forest’s edge, but you’re still

under Genos rule, so don't go getting any funny ideas."

"An official purge...?"

"Well, I suppose this works out just fine... There's no way we would mistake such a face, but since you lot are from the forest's edge, you can confirm it for us. Consider this a last farewell, I guess," Zasshuma said with a hearty chuckle, then nodded back towards his men.

The totos had been right in the middle of the cluster, but now the men split up to stand in front of and behind them.

With that, I was left completely at a loss for words.

There were three men standing behind the carriage being pulled by the totos.

One of them was Kamyua Yoshu. He had a hood up too, but there was no mistaking that lanky body of his, or his distinctive hook nose and blond stubble.

The second man was Haan of Dabagg. For some reason he wasn't wearing a cloak, so his bandage-wrapped head, plain cloth attire over his robust physique, and twin blades dangling at his hip were all in plain view. And his chilly, almost reptilian gaze was apathetically fixed on us... on these people of the forest's edge.

Then, there was one more man standing between the two of them. He was worn down to skin and bones and his clothes were practically rags, giving him the impression of a living skeleton.

This was the former head of the Suun clan, Zattsu Suun. I had absolutely no doubt as to that.

He really did have a gruesome appearance from having wasted away so thoroughly. I could make out the shape of his skull, his eye sockets looked hollow, it was like his cheeks had been shaved away, and his mouth was full of rotten yellow teeth. He had sparse black hair and deep wrinkles, his skin was coated in filth, and I couldn't help but question if I was really looking at a living being.

His arms, legs, neck, torso... every last bit of him had shriveled up, reminding me of withered branches. And around his spindly wrists were iron chains

binding him to the rear of the carriage. As for the rags clinging to his body, I could just barely spy a swirling pattern under all the filth.

He must have been rather tall to begin with. But now, he didn't even seem to have the strength to stand up straight, as his waist and knees were heavily bent. It was thoroughly unpleasant just to look at him, as it felt like I was looking at a corpse that had crawled from its grave.

"This man is indeed the criminal from the forest's edge known as Zattsu Suun, isn't he? He threw some strange fruit at us, and then all of a sudden we were being assaulted by giba! That's why we got so many injuries, had our goods ruined, and lost most of our tolos. We managed to catch him alive, but none of the kingdoms have laws lenient enough to forgive such crimes!"

With Zasshuma's words there, I finally realized what was inside the carriage being pulled by the tolos. Seated in the roofless vehicle were men coated in their own blood. Some were like unmoving corpses, while others wailed in anguish, but they all looked to be in an awful state.

There were six men sitting there, out of the 23 total in the group. The rest of the men stood silently surrounding the carriage and criminal. Their leather cloaks were likely dyed red with the blood of the giba they fought.

Giba summoning fruit... I see, so that's how he attacked the caravan...

At the very least, I knew that he wasn't lying. After all, that powerful sweet smell was clearly lingering in the air. Heck, when it was this strong, Ai Fa was probably noticing it too.

"What happened to the Sauti clan... To the men of the forest's edge who were escorting you?" I asked, still in a bit of a daze.

"Ah," Zasshuma replied with a grin. "They plunged right at the giba, of course. But there were way too many of the beasts. The four of them got seriously wounded, so we carried them back to their settlement. It was a truly unfortunate result, but the people of the forest's edge are tough, so I'm sure none of them will die from it."

"Then what about Tei Suun...? Was Zattsu Suun here acting on his own?"

"That grey-haired old-timer got cut down by Twin Blades over there. Then he

fell to the bottom of the valley, so the mundt are probably chowing down on him around now. Even if he somehow survived, he won't be making it out of a place like that alive. As of today, there's no more need to fear those criminals from the forest's edge!"

"Tei Suun...?" a voice that sounded as if it was echoing from the depths of hell questioned, causing everyone present to tense up. With that, Zattsu Suun slowly lifted his heavily hanging head. "Where did Tei Suun go...? We need to regain the Suun clan's lost honor by our own hands... Tei Suun...?"

"I'm shocked. You still have the strength left to talk, you damn walking skeleton?" Zasshuma questioned, wiping the slightly eerie grin from his face and turning towards Zattsu Suun. "Your buddy died out there in the forest! And you've only got tonight left to live, too! But go ahead and keep on chasing that dream that'll never be fulfilled till then!"

"What are you saying, you damn corrupt man from the city of stone...? All of you have forgotten your debt to the people of the forest's edge, and every last one of you will meet with a merciless end!" His eye sockets were sunken in so far that it was like I was looking at a skull, but there was an eerie black flame burning in them now. Then, he broke out in a wicked grin, his desiccated skin cracking as he did so. "You can't even hunt a giba by your own strength, so why do you look down on us...? It's because that's the only way you know how to hold onto your pride! You fragile children of Selva! You disgusting people of the city of stone! May you all be damned!"

"Hmph. You've gotten awful cheeky all of a sudden, you criminal. What does that make you then, since you tried to steal away our goods? You've got no right to talk about pride, you scum!" Zasshuma shouted, unease showing clearly on his face. Perhaps he was being overwhelmed not by the contents of what Zattsu Suun was saying, but rather by the intensity and wickedness dripping from the man's tone.

Honestly, I was feeling that way, too. There was a terrifying strength about him that made it hard to believe he really was on the verge of death. The monstrous intensity and twisted convictions that had frightened Diga and Doddo so badly were now thrust in front of our very eyes.

“It doesn’t matter what you say, you accursed city dweller... After all, your fortune was built upon our blood and pride! You ungrateful fools! You crafty thieves! Your peace and tranquility is protected by our efforts!”

“That’s enough! You’re the shameless fool who tossed aside his pride!” a voice as strong as steel rang out, cutting off Zattsu Suun’s curse. It had come from Ai Fa. “You monopolized the reward money, pillaged the forest, and neglected your duty to hunt, so how dare you talk of pride!”

“Oh... You’re that female hunter... That means you’re also the head of that shameless clan that has been pandering to those fools of the city of stone in order to amass a fortune...”

Zattsu Suun’s gaze was like a will-o’-the-wisp made of swirling hatred, and now it slowly turned Ai Fa’s way.

As for my clan head, she returned that frightening look with a glare of her own from her burning, blue, wildcat-like eyes.

“I’ve done nothing to merit being called shameless by the likes of you! You’ve chosen your path in life poorly, former clan head of the Suun!”

“No, you’re the one heading down the wrong path... The people of this town are our enemies! They are unforgivable criminals! Those disgusting bastards trapped us in the prison known as the forest’s edge, thinking only of their own peace and tranquility!”

“The forest is our god! You’re not fit to call yourself a man of the forest’s edge if you would dare refer to it as a prison of all things!”

“You fool... A forest we can’t collect a bounty from is no god! Our ancestors were tricked! How can you call us hunters when we’re told we must head into the forest and earn our coins like we’re told, or otherwise starve and die?! The pride of the people of the forest’s edge was crushed and trampled upon 80 long years ago! You all have just been risking your lives to earn coins under the name of giba!”

Ai Fa was gritting her teeth so strongly I could hear them. But before her lips could open again to angrily shout, Ludo Ruu jumped into the conversation.

“Seriously, what have you been gabbing on about? No matter what you say

now, you're the one who went and committed crimes. So you're the one to sully the pride of our people."

"You're wrong... I've been trying to recapture our past pride... But Zuuro wasn't able to carry on my ambitions... If I only hadn't fallen ill, we would be a strong, prideful people once again by now! We would be living proper lives where we lived only in the forest and ate of its fruits, not having to pander to anyone else!"

"What are you, stupid? How do you figure the right way for our people to live is by attacking and robbing travelers?"

"But despite all that, those fools from the castle couldn't cast judgment on us! Even ten years back, they had to pretend they didn't notice! They lack the strength to hunt giba on their own, so ultimately they can't do anything to the people of the forest's edge!"

Those words flashed through my mind like a bolt of lightning. So... he really had committed the same crime ten years ago, after all. And he had been completely successful back then, too.

He had set giba on the merchants to kill them all, stole their goods, and then was able to go on laughing without ever being judged for those crimes.

"If we had just stored up a bit of power now, we could have grabbed hold of unshakable freedom! But all of you had to go and ruin it! You accursed Fa and Ruu clans! If you would have just stayed out of our way, the Suun clan could have led the people of the forest's edge down the proper path!"

In that very moment, a sword in a leather sheath came swinging down upon Zattsu Suun's back. Having been struck, the man let out a beastly wail and collapsed down upon the road.

The one to swing the blade had been Haan of Dabagg.

"You scum," the bandaged man spat as he lifted his sword once more, only for Kamyua Yoshu to calmly interject.

"We have no right to pass judgment on a captured criminal. Or do you want to go and ruin our accomplishment with your own hands, Haan?"

Haan's chilly reptilian eyes glanced back at Kamyua Yoshu, and then he silently returned his blade to his hip.

"Zasshuma, I can't see any further point to this back and forth. This man is ill, and his mind no longer seems to even be functioning properly. So we should hurry up and hand the troublemaker over to the castle as soon as possible, right?"

"Y-Yeah... That's true," Zasshuma replied, shooting Zattsu Suun one last hateful look before moving north again.

"Can you stand? If you don't, the skin's gonna get peeled off your knees as you're dragged along," Kamyua Yoshu stated, causing Zattsu Suun to slowly rise.

Then, the man suddenly started laughing like a devil.

"You vile townsfolk and shameless false hunters who betrayed our Suun clan! Go on hating one another and fall together! Unavoidable discord and despair is all that awaits you in your future! A curse to the western god Selva and southern god Jagar! We chose our gods poorly twice now!"

With that, the men around him hid him from view once again and his cackling ceased, leaving a gloomy silence hanging in the air.

With Zasshuma at their lead, the cloaked group resumed swaying along. It was then that Kamyua Yoshu gave a stretch and glanced our way. He had his hood down so I could see his face, but rather than his usual aloof smile, he looked somehow apologetic... Like he was begging us to forgive him with that sad, strained expression.

"I guess with this, the Suun clan really is finally done for..." Ludo Ruu muttered with a shrug of his shoulders.

I turned to look his way, only to suddenly freeze mid-turn. The onlookers standing off to the side of the road were all shooting us a strange look. Their eyes were full of more fear, anger, suspicion, and bewilderment than ever before, as if they were staring at some sort of animal they had never seen.

Zasshuma's group had already disappeared down the highway, but nobody was moving from where they stood. They just stood there, staring intently at us. It was as if they were afraid if they turned their backs we would cut them down,

so they were left frozen in place.

As I was looking at them, a hand suddenly slapped down onto my left shoulder, causing me to almost leap out of my skin.

When I turned around, I found Milano Mas standing there. Now that I thought of it, we were still right in front of The Kimyuus's Tail.

"M-Milano Mas...?"

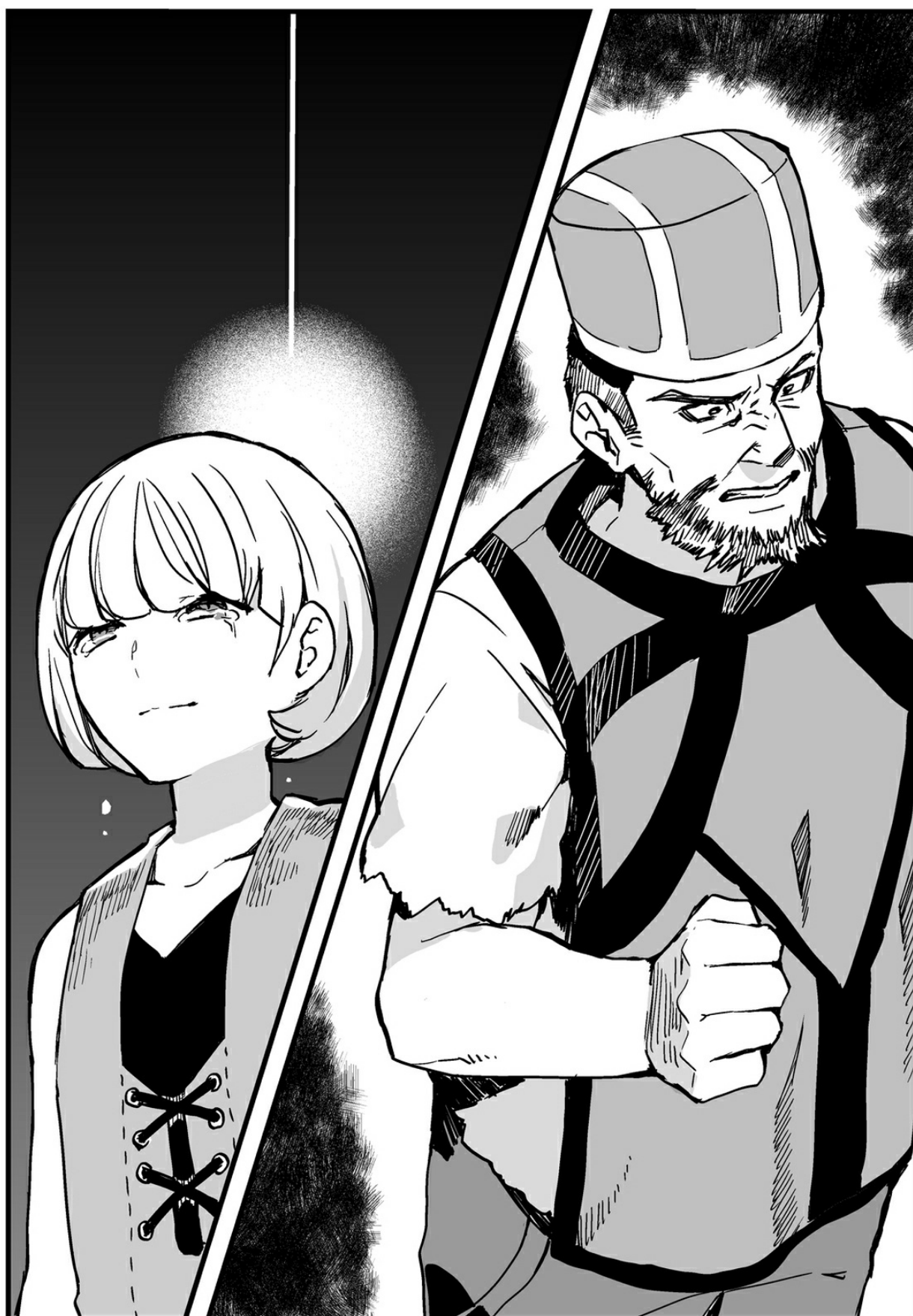
"Stop talking, and just hurry on out of here." The emotions blazing in Milano Mas's eyes were no less than those of the surrounding crowd. In fact, there was an even greater hatred blazing away in them. "I'll put the carts away. Just take your belongings and leave already. If not, there's no telling what may happen..."

"Ah, no, but..."

"Don't misunderstand. I don't give a damn about you all," Milano Mas muttered, his hate-filled eyes fixed to the north. "He's the one who murdered my friend..." he added in a voice so quiet I almost couldn't hear it.

It was then that I finally noticed Leito standing beside Milano Mas.

The boy wore a gentle smile on his face. It was the same innocent expression as always, and he was staring silently to the north. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking inside... but there were obvious tears sliding down his smooth cheeks.



A few hours later, the news of Zattsu Suun's death was delivered. Donda Ruu had gone to the castle as the representative for the three leaders, and so he was the one to bring that report back to the forest's edge.

Apparently, after being imprisoned in Genos castle the man passed away in the midst of interrogation, before night even fell.

Just as the fortuneteller from Sym had predicted, the fell star had vanished. And it had done so swiftly, as if sneering at those who remained, twisting a number of fates along the way.

3

"Apparently, Dari Sauti and his men who helped guide the merchants suffered rather significant injuries. Fortunately, no one lost their lives, but two of them won't be able to head out into the forest for a while," Gazraan Rutim reported to us after we ate dinner at the Ruu settlement.

The threat presented by the criminals had rather suddenly vanished. However, we couldn't just go and feel outright happy over that, considering the circumstances. And so, in order to receive as much information as possible, Ai Fa and I decided it was best that we stay here with the Ruu rather than heading back home.

"I don't know the exact numbers, but it seems they were attacked by over ten giba. In all likelihood, Zattsu and Tei Suun coated themselves in the juices of the giba summoning fruit and led the beasts there. Then they threw giba summoning fruit at the men of the merchant caravan, shifting the giba's attention that way."

Well, that was pretty much what I had imagined.

Still, it was hard to imagine someone sane using their own body as bait to lure out over ten giba.

"Four hunters wouldn't have a chance against that many giba. It's honestly pretty amazing that nobody ended up dead," Ludo Ruu chimed in, and Gazraan Rutim gave a firm nod in response.

“Still, from what I heard, Dari Sauti deeply regrets not having captured both Zattsu and Tei Suun. The envoy from the Sauti said that once his wounds have healed, he will come to offer an apology.”

“He doesn’t need to worry about all that. Still, in a way, it feels like it may have been less of a pain if that walking skeleton just died out in the forest after all...”

There were currently eight people left in the room. Me and Ai Fa, Gazraan Rutim, and Ludo, Donda, Jiza, and Mia Lea Ruu, as well as Granny Jiba.

Considering how weak she was, it was incredibly rare for Granny Jiba to hang around like this. However, when she heard the news of Zattsu Suun’s death, she volunteered to take part in this gloomy meeting.

“The biggest issue seems to be that ‘Tei Suun’ man not having been secured. What did Dari Sauti have to say about that matter?” Jiza Ruu asked Gazraan Rutim in place of his silent clan head.

“Yes, well, Dari Sauti said he also saw that bandaged man cut down Tei Suun. Having suffered a deep wound to the chest, Tei Suun grabbed onto the man’s cloak, but then he was kicked down into the valley.”

“Hmm... But if no one saw his corpse, then we have to treat him as still being alive. Even a man on the verge of death could set fire to a settlement or do harm to the women of our clans. So ultimately, we can’t stop using bodyguards completely, it seems,” Jiza Ruu stated, his narrow eyes glancing towards me and Ai Fa. “Asuta, do you intend to head into the post town tomorrow as well?”

“Yes, I’ve at least completed the preparations to do so. After all, the folks from the castle still seem to be insisting on that... But I think we’ll have to be even more careful from tomorrow on.”

By his presence, Zattsu Suun had incited greater fear and wariness in the townsfolk than ever before. After all, that unforgivable criminal had gone and thrown about accusations at the city of stone.

I didn’t feel that everything that fell star of a man had said was wrong, either. I honestly believed that the relationship between the Genos castle and the forest’s edge was distorted and based on deceit, all the way back to its starting

point 80 years ago.

However, those words shouldn't have been coming from Zattsu Suun's mouth. It was a problem that needed to be resolved by the people of the forest's edge who had spent so many years enduring such suffering. But when a criminal who harmed others, set flame to homes, and assaulted travelers to steal their goods said such things, it just made people angry and incited fear. And so, the townsfolk not only felt mad at the criminal heaping abuse on them, but also afraid of the people of the forest's edge in general. Plus, even if there were folks who felt they maybe had been unjustly discriminating against them, they would surely only feel even more worried. Worried that the people of the forest's edge must hate them, that is. That even if they looked calm and reasonable, hatred and frustration towards the townsfolk was swirling about inside of them.

In actuality, that wasn't the case at all. For better or worse, the people of the forest's edge didn't seem to have much interest at all in the folks of Genos. They focused more on sacrificing for the sake of their honor, so there didn't seem to be much perception among them that they were being unjustly treated at all.

However, Zattsu Suun had clearly held a deep-seated grudge. Was that because as the leader of his people, he had contact with the people of the castle? It seemed like his anger at the humiliation he faced had crystallized into resentment. And that was behind what happened today, ultimately.

The bond shared between Genos and the forest's edge had gotten entangled into a big, complicated snarl over the past 80 years. We had been trying to slowly, carefully untangle it, only for Zattsu Suun to come along and swing down the blade of his deep-rooted convictions.

Under those circumstances, heading to the post town would be even more dangerous than it had been yesterday or today.

"Zattsu Suun... He chose the wrong path to walk..." Granny Jiba whispered. Ludo and Jiza Ruu both opened their mouths as if to say something, but ultimately they kept silent. "He must have believed his actions were necessary to salvage the pride of our people... That the right course was for us to sever

the bonds we formed with Genos 80 years ago and instead live freely...”

“Hmm? But by only harvesting the fruits of the forest and not even bothering to hunt giba, he completely discarded his pride as a hunter, right?”

“But it’s Genos that is troubled by the giba multiplying, not the people of the forest’s edge... If not just the Suun clan but all of our people acted as such, the fields of Genos would be decimated by the giba...”

“I see. Then that would show Genos just how important the people of the forest’s edge really are. Zattsu Suun really was an unforgivably shameless man... Well, even if he had remained the leader of our people, I’m sure no one would have obeyed such an order anyway,” Jiza Ruu stated, not seeming overly moved by the subject. He likely prided himself on the fact that he would take up his blade in order to oppose such a decree.

And yet, the people of the Suun clan had gone and obeyed that unthinkable order.

Perhaps Zattsu Suun intended to infect the rest of the forest’s edge with his convictions, bit by bit. First the Suun, then his subordinate clans like the Zaza and Dom, followed by the smaller clans, and lastly those who opposed him, the Ruu. Then he could tell Genos if they went against him they would stop hunting, effectively taking their fields hostage and putting them on more than equal footing.

If Zattsu Suun hadn’t fallen ill and instead had remained in charge, just how far would his influence have stretched...? I certainly couldn’t just laugh the idea off.

“I feel the same way, Jiza... However, it’s not as if Genos’s way of doing things is absolutely correct either, is it...? Living in the forest alone, surviving solely off of its bounty... That’s how we lived in the black forest of the south. And it seems Zattsu Suun felt that returning to that lifestyle was the proper thing to do...”

“It sort of sounds like you’re covering for that skeleton bastard, Granny Jiba. You’re not saying his way of thinking was right, are you?” Ludo Ruu questioned, furrowing his brow a bit.

Granny Jiba’s eyes were half hidden by her heavily drooping eyelids, but they

slowly looked over everyone present.

“That’s what I want to ask all of you... What do you feel, having heard Zattsu Suun’s words...?”

Donda Ruu was seated next to the elder, and after taking a swig of fruit wine, he was the first to respond.

“If he seriously couldn’t stand Genos’s way of doing things, then he should’ve chosen to abandon Morga like the Zaza clan head said. A true hunter would never hoard reward money and assault travelers to steal their fortune.”

“I feel the same as our clan head,” Jiza Ruu added, and Ludo Ruu also agreed, “Yeah, me too.”

After a moment of silence, Gazraan Rutim chimed in.

“Still, it’s not so easy to make the decision to abandon our second home here at the Morga forest’s edge. There would be a chance we would become wanted as traitors who abandoned the western kingdom, and on top of that it’s hard to imagine us changing the god we serve would be accepted a second time... That’s why I believe it is important for us to find a proper way to live here.”

“You’re just as stiff and formal as always, I see... Asuta, Ai Fa, what do you two think?” Ludo Ruu asked, causing Ai Fa to tilt her head a bit.

“If he absolutely couldn’t stand the people of the castle, then his only options should have been beating them in a fight or abandoning the forest. But I personally wish to live as best I can here at the forest’s edge, obeying the laws set down by Granny Jiba and our other ancestors.”

“I’m in agreement with Ai Fa. I’m not fond of the townsfolk, but I quite enjoy living here,” Mia Lea Ruu chimed in while attending to Granny Jiba.

Hearing that, Ludo Ruu said, “It’s not like I want to abandon the forest’s edge or anything,” with a bit of a pout. “What about you, Asuta? I feel like we all know without asking, though...”

“Yeah. I feel the same as everyone else... If I were to add anything, it would be that I really do believe Zattsu Suun was wrong in his methods. He couldn’t lead the people of the forest’s edge like that.”

“Hmm? Isn’t that pretty much what my old man said?”

“Yes. But there’s also the matter of him plundering the blessings of the forest. If he wanted to lead his people to live freely, then he should have properly explained his thinking to everyone. I’ll admit that as a newcomer, I’ve wondered why people have to go so far as to starve themselves in not touching the fruits of the forest.”

I felt powerful stares coming from head on and to my right. In other words, the clan heads of the Ruu and my own Fa house had rather serious looks in their eyes.

For the time being, I faced Donda Ruu, taking extra care with my tone.

“That said, even I can’t accept Zattsu Suun’s excuses in the least. And that’s probably not just because he acted like a bandit, but also because the members of the Suun branch houses looked completely and utterly miserable... I’m certain that Zattsu Suun was a leader who only knew how to control people through fear. He believed his thinking was correct, and that he needed to force others to obey. Using methods like that, no matter how proper your convictions may be, you won’t ever be able to lead things down the right path... Or at least, that’s what I believe.”

“Zattsu Suun’s convictions were proper...?” Ai Fa questioned, a frown on her face.

I shook my head, worrying all the while that perhaps I had given her a headache.

“No matter how much unjust discrimination someone may be facing, I still believe it’s absolutely wrong to attack travelers. But finding that treatment wrong and thinking the people of the forest’s edge should have more freedom... If someone voiced those concerns at the clan head meeting or something and everyone agreed, couldn’t that lead to a proper path forwards? If that’s the case, then I can’t help but find it incredibly unfortunate that things didn’t go that way.”

“Yes... It truly is unfortunate...” Granny Jiba quietly muttered. “Zattsu Suun’s father had been a truly splendid hunter... That was why when the leading Gaaz and Reema clans fell, our Ruu clan freely yielded the position to the Suun, and

the wild Dom and Zaza followed them... Zattsu Suun must have only inherited his father's pride and ambition, but not that man's strong concern for his comrades... How truly, truly regrettable..."

"What we care about isn't the past but the future, elder," Donda Ruu uttered in a low voice, then turned back towards Gazraan Rutim. "Is that all the Sauti messenger said? Then all that does is prove that what Ludo and the rest heard in town was the truth."

"No, there was one more matter we can't simply overlook... Most of the carriages pulled by the totos fell off the cliff, but Dari Sauti saw one of the bags that fell from them get trampled by a giba right in front of him, which caused the contents to come spilling out."

"What, was a corpse stuffed in there or something?"

"No. It was just full of sand, apparently."

Donda Ruu furrowed his brow, looking suspicious.

"Nobody would pay coins for plain sand. Are you sure it wasn't some food or something that just looked like sand?"

"I asked the same question, but the second the giba appeared, the merchants drew their blades and let the totos and the carriages loose, then started boldly fighting away. And they didn't seem concerned at all about their goods that had fallen to the bottom of the valley once they had driven off the giba and captured Zattsu Suun, instead preparing immediately to return triumphantly to town... Did they perhaps never intend to head to the eastern kingdom to begin with?"

"What exactly are you saying...?"

"I'm asking if it's possible that they were just pretending to be merchants in order to lure out Zattsu Suun... Kamyua Yoshu said they were a group of 18 merchants and five bodyguards, but apparently Dari Sauti couldn't even tell which were which."

"Hmph, I see. Now that I think about it, they were all walking along just fine on their own two legs. There were only five or six of them at most wailing away atop that carriage. It's unnatural for plain old merchants to be doing just fine

while the Sauti men were that seriously injured,” Ludo Ruu stated, and Gazraan Rutim gave another nod.

Jiza Ruu then chimed in, “But this plan to pass through the forest’s edge on the way to the eastern kingdom was established two months ago, was it not? Even if it was all a fabrication, we heard about it over 20 days ago. Back then the Suun clan still hadn’t fallen yet, so things don’t seem to add up.”

“Yes, I don’t quite understand that myself, but perhaps they hurriedly worked out their next move when they heard of Zattsu Suun’s escape. That Kamyua Yoshu man certainly seems like he would easily be capable of that much.”

“No...” I interjected. If I said this, I risked making Kamyua Yoshu the target of Donda Ruu’s fury. But as a person of the forest’s edge, it was something I needed to say. “It would actually be rather unnatural to suddenly shift such a huge plan, wouldn’t it? In that case, it seems more reasonable to consider it having been a trap for the Suun clan from the very start. In all likelihood... they had some sort of proof that it was a person of the forest’s edge who attacked the merchant caravan ten years ago.”

“What do you mean...?” Gazraan Rutim questioned, his calm yet firm gaze moving my way.

Ah, so that was it... I pondered as he looked my way, completely overwhelmed by my own train of thought.

Kamyua Yoshu must have suspected from the very start that the Suun clan was behind that incident ten years ago. I had thought knowing the truth didn’t change anything and forced down my unease over the matter, but I had been mistaken.

Something like this had been behind everything.

Kamyua Yoshu hadn’t been cautious of an attack by the Suun. No, he had in fact crafted his strategy to invite one.

While feeling indescribably despondent, I continued on, “An acquaintance Kamyua and I share has ties to that merchant group from ten years back. And that man was convinced the culprit had been a person of the forest’s edge... Up until today, I didn’t know that the man he was talking about who had lost his

life back then was part of that caravan, but Kamyua must have.” Then, I turned towards Donda Ruu, whose eyes were silently blazing away. “Do you remember, Donda Ruu? Over 20 days ago, Kamyua visited the Ruu settlement and talked about that merchant caravan. Back then, he said something that implied he already suspected the people of the forest’s edge, didn’t he?”

“Do you really think I’d ever forget someone insulting our people, kid?”

“I remember that conversation, too,” Jiza Ruu interjected. “Father, you mentioned how all the merchants who tried to pass through our settlement ten years back were killed by giba. Then that Kamyua Yoshu man questioned if it had really been done by giba.”

“That’s amazing. That was so far back that I don’t remember it at all,” Ludo Ruu said with a shrug of his shoulders.

I had completely forgotten that exchange, too. If I had remembered it sooner, could I have prevented what happened today...? I couldn’t help but curse my carelessness at that thought.

“The Suun clan surely attacked them in the same manner back then. And normally, they would have been successful this time too... If they were up against helpless merchants, that is.”

But they weren’t merchants accompanying those carriages, though. They were likely all bodyguards or other such skilled fighters. And their luggage wasn’t goods to sell in Sym, but just plain old sand. It had all been a trap laid for the Suun.

“To begin with, the only ones from the Suun clan able to make a move at the moment were Zattsu and Tei Suun. Normally, you wouldn’t expect two men to go and attack a merchant caravan all on their own, right? And it would be even more unnatural to suddenly change their plan just to entrap them. I’d say the more unexpected event would have to have been the Suun clan suddenly having their authority stripped away after they had spent two months setting up this plan.”

“I see...” Gazraan Rutim whispered, while everybody else stayed silent. It seemed the people of the forest’s edge couldn’t even imagine going so far in plotting to take down someone else.

“If that incident at the clan head meeting had never occurred, then the Suun would still be in charge of the forest’s edge right now. If they recreated the same circumstances from ten years ago, then they would face the same sort of attack. That was what they must have figured when forming their plan. In fact, they may have been left feeling real down when we beat them to the punch in overthrowing the Suun... Still, they couldn’t exactly go and act like the plan with the merchant caravan never happened, and there was still a chance of the criminals coming after them, so I guess it made sense to keep going forward.”

“But under whose orders, exactly, was that plan formed, anyway? The lord of Genos had been halfheartedly ignoring the Suun clan’s wrongdoings up until now, so why suddenly decide to bring this blade down on their necks?” Gazraan Rutim questioned in an urgent tone, but all I could do was shake my head.

“I don’t know all that... But at the very least, I find it hard to imagine Kamyua constructed such a large-scale trap all on his own. He would have needed to go through the castle to ask the Suun clan to take on the job, which would require deceiving the lord of Genos, too. So I think it makes sense to figure the lord was cooperating in some form from the very start.”

Had the lord of Genos come up with the idea and tasked Kamyua Yoshu with carrying it out? Or did the plan come from Kamyua Yoshu and he requested the lord’s assistance?

At the very least, it seemed clear that the lord of Genos was involved in one way or another.

“So that’s how the castle does things, huh?” Donda Ruu grumbled, his eyes burning bright. “They would go so far as to deceive us in order to capture those villains from the Suun clan? If they had just talked to us from the start, then the Sauti men wouldn’t have been left so helpless.”

“I’d imagine... that would have been difficult. Dari Sauti was asked by Kamyua Yoshu to act as a guide. However, it was by his own will that he chose to face the giba,” Gazraan Rutim calmly responded, looking straight into Donda Ruu’s beastly eyes.

“But the Sauti men drew their blades because they thought they were dealing with defenseless merchants, right? If they knew they were all guards or

whatever from around town, that would have been a completely different situation. Plus, they rejected the offer for the Sauti men to accompany them in full force, didn't they?"

"...Yes."

"And even now, they're not allowing the Fa clan to take a break from their work. That's because they want to lure out that Tei Suun man if he's still out there on the verge of death, isn't it? Every last thing they say seems to be an outright lie. When they go that far to hide their intentions, how can we trust them in the least?" Donda Ruu asked, crushing the fruit wine container in his hand. The bit of red liquid left inside stained his fingers and the carpet spread across the floor.

"Donda Ruu... No, leader of the Ruu clan and the forest's edge, please rein in your temper. The future of our people is decided through your actions."

"You don't need to remind me of that. But the ones to decide the path our people take are me, Gulaf Zaza, and Dari Sauti. In the next eight days Genos has given us, we need to make up our minds."

Donda Ruu was like a raging demon, with every bit as much force behind his words as he had shown the night of the clan head meeting.

I had to speak. "Donda Ruu, could I also add just one thing? I also can't accept the castle's way of doing things, but you said before that Kamyua insulted you, right? What do you think now in regards to that?"

Donda Ruu's blazing blue eyes shifted from Gazraan Rutim over to me.

I gulped, took a deep breath, and then continued on.

"What Kamyua said around 20 days ago turned out to be the truth. Was he trying to provoke the people of the forest's edge on top of that... or provide a warning? That with the way things were going, they would pass judgment on the Suun clan first... But back when you heard Kamyua's words, you thought there couldn't possibly be such thieves among your people, and took it as a groundless insult, didn't you?"

"What are you trying to say...?"

“That the one to betray your trust from back then and sully the pride of the people of the forest’s edge wasn’t Kamyua, but rather Zattsu Suun, right?”

“Asuta, are you still trying to cover for that man at this point?” Jiza Ruu asked with a different sort of intensity behind his words than Gazraan Rutim, causing me to break out in a sweat. Even so, those words still needed saying.

“That’s not my intention. What I’m saying is that we didn’t realize Zattsu Suun’s crimes reached that far. And both the castle and the forest’s edge are at fault for letting him stay free for so long, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’re saying we’re the same...?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. But I believe it’s necessary to carefully determine who bears how much responsibility for what happened today... And at least when it comes to the incident from ten years back, it wasn’t the people of the forest’s edge or the castle that were harmed, but the townsfolk. Can you really say the castle is fully responsible for that?”

If they shouted back, “Who cares about the townsfolk?!” at that, my very identity as a person of the forest’s edge may have crumbled on the spot.

However, Jiza Ruu just gave a small shake of his head and responded, “We failed to judge the Suun clan up until now because we weren’t able to get ahold of proof of their crimes. And so I honestly don’t want you to lump us together with the castle, who didn’t judge them despite possessing that crucial evidence.”

“Yes, so...”

“I understand. Our clan head Donda also said it was our crime to have failed to pass judgment on the leading clan for their corruption. And yet, I still wish to say that I simply can’t see myself ever trusting the people of the castle.”

Then, Jiza Ruu’s narrow eyes turned towards his father.

Donda Ruu, meanwhile, had been shooting me a glare this whole time.

“I get what you’re trying to say... We’ll take that into account too when deciding on a path forward,” the clan head stated, and then a heavy silence fell over the room.

It wasn't long, though, before Granny Jiba sadly added, "If we had only done more to form a proper bond with Genos, it never would have come to this..."

"That's not true!" Ai Fa angrily responded. "It's because you all struggled so hard to carve a path that we're here now! It's the job of us living now to overcome these current difficulties! And... that includes you too, as one of the people living and struggling in the present. I simply can't believe that it's right for you to be grieving and moaning as such."

"That's true... There are things that need to be done rather than lamenting like that..." Granny Jiba's wrinkly face seemed to break out into a gentle smile. "Thank you, Ai Fa... I was still far too caught up in my memories of the past..."

The angry look on Ai Fa's face remained as she turned away in a huff. However, I was sitting there in the direction she looked, causing our gazes to meet.

"What are you looking at...?"

"My clan head, of course."

As I saw Ai Fa's cheeks turn red in the dim light, she struck me upside the head.

And with that, this sudden meeting in the dead of the night came to a close.

4

After that, we decided we would talk with Yamiru Lea and everyone else gathered here at the Ruu settlement before returning to the Fa house. Or to be more accurate, we jumped on board when Gazraan Rutim expressed an interest in doing so.

And so, we passed through the plaza illuminated by a bonfire and headed for the vacant house we had stayed at in the past. The place was being guarded by the young head of one of the branch families, Shin Ruu.

"We would like to share some words with those inside. Donda Ruu has already granted us his permission," Gazraan Rutim stated, and Shin Ruu replied with a nod and then knocked on the door.

“It’s Shin Ruu. Members of the Rutim and Fa clans are requesting to meet with you. If you agree to that, then open up.”

After a moment of what seemed like hesitant silence, the door swung open from the inside. Yamiru Lea showed herself soon after, and in that instant, an overwhelming smell of herbs assaulted my nostrils.

“What business do you have with us? Have Tei Suun’s remains finally been located...?”

“No. We just wish to ask you some questions regarding the main Suun house.”

Yamiru Lea smoothly stepped back, giving a small sigh as she did so.

We stepped in one by one, while Shin Ruu remained outside and closed the door.

“Oh, so it’s you guys?” a familiar shrill voice questioned. Within the dwelling, the former members of the main Suun house had been gathered once again after having been sent to new clans.

In other words Yamiru Lea, Oura and Tsvai who had been sent to the Rutim clan, and Mida, who had joined the Ruu.

“Sorry for stopping by so late at night. We just want to ask a few short questions, so I promise it won’t take long.”

As Gazraan Rutim and Ai Fa were removing their leather footwear, I looked over the group for the first time in several days.

Oura and Tsvai were seated along the wall to the right, huddled close to one another. Having let us inside, Yamiru Lea walked over to the opposite wall and took a seat. And the small mountain of flesh known as Mida sat right there in the middle of the wall directly across from us.

“So what is it that you want? We’ve already told you anything and everything we know. And now that the previous clan head is dead, there shouldn’t be anything to worry about anymore, right?” Tsvai asked in her usual shrill voice that reminded me of a chirping little bird. She was smaller than you would expect from her age, and her hair was pulled back into an onion-like shape. But

at any rate, she seemed a lot more lively than the last time I saw her.

As for everyone else, Oura was placing her arms around her daughter's slender shoulders while casting her gaze downwards, Yamiru Lea was somewhat slovenly leaning up against the wall, and Mida... he was the only one where I honestly couldn't tell what he was thinking as his abnormally small eyes stared straight at me.

"It would seem that Zattsu Suun has indeed passed away, but Tei Suun's whereabouts remain unknown. And so we would like to ask once again just what sort of man he is."

Gazraan Rutim moved to a spot where he could equally look at all of them, then took a seat. Ai Fa and I, meanwhile, sat down a bit behind that reliable man's back.

"We've already said everything there is to say about that, too! Grandpa Tei stayed by the previous clan head's side way too much, and ended up as a fool who can't even think for himself! He'll do anything he's ordered but he can't do anything on his own! He's just a clay doll of a man!" Tsuvai hysterically wailed.

But both Tei and Zattsu Suun were her grandfathers, tied to her by blood. They had fled the settlement at the forest's edge and ended up as criminals. If she valued her blood ties at all, then her feelings on that matter should have been more complex than anyone else's.

"It's just as Tsuvai says... My father Tei served at the previous clan head's side from a young age, so his soul must have been tainted more than anyone else's. And so, as long as no one from the main house gives him an order, he shouldn't be able to carry out any wrongdoing of his own will..." Tsuvai's mother and Zuuro's wife Oura added in a monotone voice. Her eyes, every bit as muddy as her father's, were full of a powerful sadness as she stared down at the carpet.

"It's not that we're doubting what you've told us. But what if Zattsu Suun had left Tei Suun with some sort of order while he was alive? Would he still carry it out even now that Zattsu Suun is dead?"

"I'm not sure... If he's learned of the former clan head's passing, it's possible he could ignore that order. But why worry about that...? My father Tei has already lost his life, hasn't he?"

“We don’t know. The simple fact is, his body still has yet to be found, so we must treat him as if he is still alive.”

Gazraan Rutim had to be suppressing his own emotions in order to question the surviving family like that. But at the very least, he seemed to have no intention of reprimanding them for using terms like “grandpa” and “father” when they had severed all ties.

Even if officially they were no longer connected, it didn’t change the fact that they were tied by blood. And seeing how Oura and Tsuvai seemed so feeble gave me a particularly heavy heart.

It was then that Mida suddenly let out a sluggish, “Ah...! You’re that man who made that yummy food. And you’re the woman who scolded me. Why are you here...?”

I felt so dejected that I almost collapsed on the spot.

However, my beloved clan head, seated with her one knee up in the air, just calmly stared back at Mida.

“You only just noticed now? You really do have a rather poor head on your shoulders... Still, it’s good to see you doing the same as always.”

“Yeah... Hey, why are you two here...? When I look at you, my stomach gets all rumbling...”

That last “you” probably referred to me. I can’t say I especially welcomed the conditioned reflex.

“We came to hear about Tei Suun, too. What did you think about him, Mida?”

“Tei Suun... I liked him... I liked him most after Yamiru and Oura and Tsuvai...”

“Shut up, you dummy!” Tsuvai wailed.

“I’m really happy to see Yamiru and Oura and Tsuvai again, but if Tei Suun is dead, then that’s sad... Where did he go...?”

“Hey, don’t cry,” Ai Fa sharply stated, and Mida’s trembling instantly stopped.

“I won’t cry... So don’t scold me, alright...?”

“If you don’t cry, then I’ll have no reason to,” Ai Fa replied with a surly look.

Yamiru Lea had been silent till now, but she suddenly gave an artificial sounding laugh.

“I see you’re already capable of getting Mida to do as you say, head of the Fa clan. Are you capable of conversing with animals as well?”

“You treat your former brother like a beast? Really, you should rein in your abusive language... And why do you smell so strongly of herbs, anyway? It’s hurting my nose.”

“If you have an issue with it, then why not complain to the men next to you? That splendidly built eldest son of the Rutim, in particular,” Yamiru Lea answered with a slovenly shrug of her shoulders.

Naturally, Gazraan Rutim’s eyes opened wide in surprise as he asked, “What’s this about me?”

“It’s because that cheerful father of yours went and said something to the Lea clan head. I believe it was that no one would take me as a bride with the stench of giba blood clinging to me... Thanks to that, the Lea clan head ordered me to rub juice made of lilo leaves onto my skin whenever I bathe.” Then, while brushing up her elaborately styled dark brown hair, she shot me a chilly glare. “And when he heard Asuta there likely smelled that stench, that seriously spurred him on. I’m the one who has her nose going funny from the stuff, though... Did you really smell such an odor from me, Asuta?”

“Er, well, yeah... Thanks to my line of work, I have a very sensitive nose.”

“Hmm...” Yamiru Lea muttered, still glaring at my face as she combed her hair.

As I stared back into those haughty-looking eyes, though, an annoyed Ai Fa chimed in. “It seems you’re a surprisingly earnest woman, seeing how you’ve continued to keep your word even after being separated from the Lea clan head. Has your sullied soul been cleaned up a bit by being granted the Lea name and receiving assistance to one day be married?”

“You’re the ones who ordered us not to defy anyone, aren’t you? I can’t see any logic behind you complaining about me keeping my word. And I can’t imagine a female hunter like you being qualified to speak to me about

marriage.”

A storm was starting to brew in the room. Fortunately, though, the ever-reliable Gazraan Rutim was there to mediate.

“More importantly, Yamiru Lea, what are your thoughts on Tei Suun? If he happens to still be alive, what sort of actions would he be most likely to take?”

“Only the man himself would know that... But if you go thinking of him as an ordinary man of the branch families, I’m sure you’ll suffer for it.”

“What does that mean?”

“Tei Suun spent more time together with the former clan head than even the members of the main house, and had his soul carefully corrupted... Do you know why he was always with me, Diga, and the rest?”

Naturally none of us present knew what she was getting at, so Ai Fa, Gazraan Rutim, and I could only respond with silence.

Yamiru Lea’s face broke out in a grin that appeared far from amused as she regained just a bit of her former cold-hearted aura.

“It was by order of the former clan head. That man saw through Zuuro’s lazy nature, and so he had Tei Suun observe our actions in order to determine who should be the next clan head... Tei Suun was ordered to never disobey our demands, but he was in actuality acting as the former clan head’s eyes all the while.”

“Then you’re saying a woman like you was considered as a possible clan head...?”

“It was more than just possible. At the rate things were going, I was sure to be the next one to take on the role. Though officially, the idea would be for me to marry and my groom to take the title... At any rate, Diga and Doddó weren’t even the slightest bit capable of leading our people, so I’m certain Zattsu Suun intended to leave the task to me and my spouse.”

That information was a shock to me, too.

Just what would have become of the Suun clan if that future had come to pass? If Zattsu Suun, who tried to control the Suun from his sickbed, gave the

clan head seat to Yamiru Lea, who had secretly hoped for her clan's destruction...

With a shake of my head, I swiftly cleared away that pointless train of thought.

At any rate, I was certain it wouldn't have been a bright future no matter how things went. Maybe that wouldn't have been the case had Zattsu Suun at least died, but until then, the burden Yamiru Lea would have had to bear would have been overwhelmingly heavy.

"That was just how obedient of a servant Tei Suun was to Zattsu Suun. Even when Zattsu Suun fell ill and became unable to move, that man acted as his hands and feet... And so, if Tei Suun happens to still be alive, make sure not to let him anywhere near me. If Zattsu Suun happened to leave an order that the Suun bloodline must be carried on, he would surely come after me rather than my father or brothers."

"This is my first time hearing that Tei Suun was that thoroughly tied to Zattsu Suun... And about the matter of you being the next clan head, too."

Gazraan Rutim's words caused Yamiru Lea's grin to grow deeper.

"I didn't think it was necessary to mention, so I simply didn't say anything. If you don't like that, then go ahead and punish me as you wish. How about sending me to the Jeen or Dom as they burn with rage at the shame they faced, rather than leaving me with the Lea?"

"Ah, hold on, Gazraan Rutim..." I hurriedly interjected.

I couldn't imagine Yamiru Lea did that for her own protection. No, instead she must have held her tongue for Tei Suun's sake. So that once Zattsu Suun was properly punished, Tei Suun's soul would finally be freed.

However, before I could say anything else, Gazraan Rutim shot me a look that said I should hold back.

"I have no intention of condemning you. Nobody would have expected such an ill man to escape on his own, regardless of whether or not they had heard that information, and so it would have done nothing to change what happened. And even if Zattsu Suun did see you as his successor, that was purely down to

his intentions, and wouldn't make your crimes any greater." Yamiru Lea's cold grin vanished, and in turn Gazraam Rutim now gave a gentle smile. "Besides, you are already a member of the Lea clan. I'm certain Rau Lea wouldn't simply accept the idea of you being given to the Dom or Jeen... Yamiru Lea, Zattsu Suun is now gone from this world, so you should also be free of his wicked spell."

"It would certainly be nice if it were that easy to forget that man..." Yamiru Lea muttered, bowing her head deeply enough that her long hair hid her expression. "Tei Suun and I should be the same, there... But if Zattsu Suun really did die without leaving behind any orders, then Tei Suun would finally be able to sacrifice himself, obeying his own will."

"His own will...?"

"His will to have someone bring his life to an end as soon as possible."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

Oura just sadly stared at the floor, while Tsvai clung tight to her mother as if to offer her support. Mida looked around with the same absentminded expression as always, while Ai Fa remained silent with a sour look fixed on her face.

After a bit more staring at the listless Yamiru Lea, Gazraam Rutim suddenly rose to his feet.

"My apologies for imposing for so long... I'd imagine you all will surely be allowed to return to your proper clans in the near future. I know you'll be forced to put up with these constraints until then, but I hope you all continue to strive to live as proper people of the forest's edge."

Nobody replied.

Following Gazraam Rutim's example, Ai Fa and I also stood.

"You're leaving already...? Hey, I don't even know your names, though..." Mida abruptly called out, only for Ai Fa to turn around and shoot him a dubious look.

"If you can't even remember someone's face, will you really be able to recall

their names when told them?”

“If I don’t know someone’s name, then I’ll forget their face... I’m Mida, of the Ruu clan.”

“Yes, I certainly haven’t forgotten you... I’m the head of the Fa clan, Ai Fa.”

“And I’m Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“Thanks... I’ll see you again, won’t I, Ai Fa and Asuta...?”

“If we share a bond, then it’s certainly possible,” Ai Fa stated, swishing her cloak as she turned her back to Mida.

Then, Mida called out timidly one last time, “Ai Fa... Asuta... If you find Tei Suun, please don’t kill him... Tei Suun is actually really nice...”



After saying farewell to Gazraan Rutim, as he was spending the night at the Ruu settlement, we took off down the dark trail at the forest’s edge.

We had each borrowed a candlestick at least, but it was still my first time traveling the path during the night. I had been taught soon after first arriving at the Fa house that giiz and mundt prowled at this hour, but that didn’t mean that I knew what to be looking out for.

“Don’t leave my side, Asuta. As long as you keep that in mind, you won’t be in any danger,” Ai Fa stated, her voice sounding a bit tense.

If I didn’t let my guard down, I wouldn’t be in danger... But putting it another way, I would be if I wasn’t careful. Mia Lea Ruu had insisted we stay at the Ruu settlement up to the bitter end, but Ai Fa kept stating that wouldn’t work if we couldn’t use the vacant house.

Fortunately my fear of the dark wasn’t as bad as my acrophobia, so I didn’t end up looking as pathetic as when I first had to cross that rope bridge. Still, that didn’t stop things from feeling pretty darn eerie.

Naturally there weren’t any streetlights to be seen, and on top of that, hardly any moonlight made it through the forest on either side of us. And so if the candles went out, we would be surrounded by darkness bad enough that we wouldn’t be able to see right in front of our faces. If Ai Fa weren’t by my side, I

doubt I would be able to keep on striding forwards like we were.

“Today certainly has been an unbelievable day...” Ai Fa muttered as we walked. “Zattsu Suun was captured, then he died... In a manner of speaking, that’s all that happened, but the circumstances are every bit as dangerous as they were on the night of the clan head meeting.”

“Yeah. For better or worse, he was once the leader of the forest’s edge, after all. Was he as fierce of a warrior as Donda Ruu until his illness weakened him?”

In the end, that man had wrung out every last ounce of his power in order to curse the world. He wanted anything and everything to crumble.

And we would surely need to use all our strength to resist the black hole left behind by that fell star.

“Just how will your business go from tomorrow on...?”

“Hmm... I guess we won’t know till we head back into town. If we screw up now, it could ruin everything. So honestly, I’d prefer to take time regardless of what those folks from the castle say...”

“That is the trial we face,” Ai Fa stated while staring straight ahead into the darkness. “It is a test we must pass, as we have failed up till now to form a proper bond with the townsfolk and overlooked the corruption of the Suun clan...”

“Yeah. I think so too.”

As we chatted away, the fear and unease I felt from the darkness of night started to lighten up.

However, Ai Fa still remained firmly vigilant. When we were around half an hour out from the Fa house, she suddenly stopped in place and handed me her candlestick. Then, she grabbed the handle of her sword and faced to the left.

“Who’s there? Step into sight.”

So it wasn’t a giiz or mundt, but a person?

Feeling instantly nervous, I thrust out a candle in that direction.

There weren’t that many people who could be waiting for us like this. And

sure enough, it was a familiar grey-haired man who soon came swaying out of the darkness, looking like a ghost.

“Tei Suun...”

The powerful smell of blood and giba summoning fruit filled my nostrils.

Tei Suun was standing there in the midst of a grove of trees.

So, he was alive after all... However, I couldn't confirm the wound he had supposedly received from a blade. That was because for some reason he had on a long cloak of the sort worn by townsfolk rather than the attire of a hunter of the forest's edge, and it was hiding his body. Perhaps he had stolen it from Haan of Dabagg. Apparently he had grabbed onto that bandaged man before falling from a cliff, according to what Gazraan Rutim had said.

At any rate, Tei Suun really was standing there in that cloak. With his grey hair, beard, dark blue dead-fish eyes, and his wrinkled face without a shred of emotion... and a short sword held in his right hand, peeking out from under the cloak.

“Hmm... So the former clan head Zattsu Suun requested the heads of our Fa clan rather than the Ruu, did he? Well, I suppose it's a lot less of a pain compared to having you show up in town,” Ai Fa said, the flames burning bright in her eyes as she glared at him. And yet, her expression remained calm and composed. “Still, if you're a hunter, then you must understand. Currently, you lack the strength needed to do me any harm. If you have even a sliver of pride left as a man of the forest's edge, then toss aside your blades and yield to me.”

“I'll do that... But not right now.”

His voice sounded just as emotionless as it had the last time that I heard it.

Had this man really taken a fatal slash and fallen off a cliff? I mean, he honestly looked no different than when I last saw him.

However... I couldn't spy any bloodstains on the cloak Tei Suun was wearing. And yet, a strong stench of blood was hanging about him. The inside of his cloak may well have been drenched in blood.

“Fa clan head Ai Fa, and clan member Asuta... I did not appear in front of you

now in order to do you harm. Instead, I wish to make a request of you.”

“A request?”

“Yes. That is why I waited for you here. Well, in truth, I only saw Dom men hanging around the Fa house, so I was on my way to the Ruu settlement. But it would be difficult to approach you there, so I’m glad to have been fortunate enough to encounter you here instead.”

“Were you always so quick with your words? You certainly have more energy left than I had expected, it seems.”

“That’s not true at all. My life will be used up soon enough. But before that, I wish to see one more matter through.”

“Hold on. Before that, allow me to ask you one thing. Are you already aware of the former clan head Zattsu Suun’s passing?”

Tei Suun looked like a marionette as he gave a brief nod.

“I am. The Dom men were talking loudly about that matter. That was why I felt it even more important to meet with you.”

“Hmph, very well. Then let’s hear that request of yours.”

What Tei Suun said next, however, caught me completely off guard.

“I would like to be able to eat your cooking, Asuta,” Tei Suun stated in a flat, almost robotic voice.

“My cooking? W-Why do you want to eat it...?”

“You’re bringing prosperity to the forest’s edge with it, and I hear that you’re trying to use it to bring about a more proper bond with Genos. I strongly wish to confirm myself if such things are truly possible.”

“But, that’s...”

“If you can grant that wish, I will discard my blade and do as you say. And I will swear to use what little time I have left for the sake of our comrades.”

What he was saying may well have been fitting for a man of the forest’s edge. However... I just couldn’t sense any human emotion in his words in the least.

His dark blue eyes looked gloomy and muddied, and there was no expression

on his pale face. The members of the Suun branch families had looked frail, but over time they seemed to regain more human gazes and emotions. Yet Tei Suun had remained exactly the same.

“On the night of the clan head meeting, I was granted a chance to taste your cooking. But I was distracted that night, and was unable to sufficiently sample your strength. I wish to know it before I die, and learn full well if all of my actions up until now were mistaken.”

“Then we should head back towards the Ruu settlement... I believe it would be easier to talk this over with them than the Dom, after all,” Ai Fa calmly stated, but Tei Suun shook his head.

“No. The Ruu clan head will never forgive me. And if you force him to accept this, it could destroy the bond between the Fa and the Ruu... Besides, I have decided that the town of Genos is where I shall die.”

“What?” Ai Fa questioned, her eyes narrowing as her gaze grew more intense.

Tei Suun continued on in the same tone as before, “Tomorrow when the sun hits its peak, I will visit your shop. Please allow me to eat your cooking then, Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Do you really think you’ll make it into the post town, with such heavy wounds?! You’ll be captured either by men of the forest’s edge or the guards before you ever make it to Asuta!”

“I will be fine. With this attire, I will at the very least be able to walk around town without arousing the suspicion of the guards,” Tei Suun stated, pulling up the leather cloak’s hood.

Well, it was true that most wouldn’t imagine a proud man of the forest’s edge pretending to be one of the townsfolk.

That wasn’t the issue here, though.

“What exactly are you plotting? We couldn’t possibly fulfill such a suspicious request,” Ai Fa questioned, gripping her blade’s handle tighter and lowering her hips.

However, Tei Suun didn’t so much as budge in the slightest.

“In that case, please cut me down here and now. I shall struggle in an unsightly manner, sacrificing myself in the only fitting end to the life granted to me by Zattsu Suun as a member of the Suun clan.”

“Why is there a need for you to come to the post town?! The Ruu men will be there too, so what difference would it make over just heading to the Ruu settlement?!”

“It’s because I wish to fall to you all in the Genos post town, while the townsfolk watch. I want them to see me being judged by people of the forest’s edge. That is the only way I can atone for my crimes.”

“That’s nonsense... I have no idea what you’re even saying.”

“The townsfolk hate the people of the forest’s edge. That is because of the countless crimes perpetrated by members of the Suun clan. And now that Zattsu Suun has died, I’m the only one left who can atone for that... I’m the only man left who did Genos harm, following his orders,” Tei Suun emotionlessly stated. “After I eat your cooking and cast aside my blade, you can do with me as you like. You may cut me down then and there, or hand me over to the guards. Either way, it will be a case of people of the forest’s edge judging one of their own for his crimes in front of the townsfolk. That’s what is most important... Now that I have been cut by the blade of a man from the city, I can not afford to be aimless in how I approach my death.”

“Have you seriously gone insane? You can’t possibly expect me to believe your words.”

“I suppose that’s true. But it’s precisely because of my desire to regain my sanity that I brought this request to you.”

The sharp look in Ai Fa’s eyes clashed in the darkness with Tei Suun’s nihilistic gaze.

Worrying that my clan head may move to cut him down at any moment, I interjected, “Um... It would be incredibly difficult to accept your request. I don’t even know if I’ll be able to properly open the stalls tomorrow to begin with, and even if I can, the Ruu men will be there guarding us. And since we value our bonds with their clan, we can’t exactly go about deceiving them. Plus even if we tried, there’s no way they would fail to recognize you.”

“I don’t mind if it’s the Ruu men who cut me down. It would just be a great boon if it is done by people of the forest’s edge where the townsfolk can see... However, until I observe your strength firsthand, I will have no choice but to keep thrashing in my death throes till the bitter end as a member of the Suun.”

“But, I mean, no matter what your intentions may be, if you cause a commotion like that in front of my customers, it’ll just incite more fear in the hearts of the townsfolk.”

“Yes. That’s why I believe it would be ideal if I could be captured by people of the forest’s edge and handed over to the guards. Something like that should instead help to ease the concerns of the townsfolk.”

Something about all this just felt way too affected. I’d imagine anyone, not just Ai Fa, would find it hard to believe.

“I’ve told you everything that I needed to... I’ll leave the final decision up to the two of you.”

“I see... In that case, I have no choice but to capture you here and now.”

Ai Fa’s hips lowered further. Tei Suun gave an emotionless nod in response.

“Then I will shamefully struggle in response... However, I don’t believe I could defeat you, so I will flee instead.”

“Do you really believe you can escape me in such a powerless state?”

“It may well be impossible. If you were to leave your clan member alone here in order to chase me, that is.”

With that, Tei Suun started swaying away.

“Hold on! Don’t you dare move!”

“No, I’ll flee. And after that, I’ll come to the post town tomorrow when the sun hits its peak. Please, cut me down there.”

Tei Suun was now far enough away that the light from the candles no longer reached him.

I could hear the sound of feet trampling on dirt, then Ai Fa moved to chase him, only to turn around and stare back at me with regret burning brightly in

her eyes.

“Damn! What in the world is that man thinking?!”

In the end Ai Fa was unable to leave the spot, and Tei Suun once more completely disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 4: Mania in the Post Town

1

“Don’t worry about it so much, Ai Fa,” Ludo Ruu of all people surprisingly called out as we were heading to the post town the following day. “It’s not like you could’ve ditched Asuta and gone off to play hide and seek. If you did and Asuta got munched by a giiz or something and died, that’d be a serious issue, right?”

It was the same group of four stall workers and four guards as yesterday.

As we headed down the slightly declining path, Ai Fa remained silent and sullen-looking.

“It’s not like my old man or Jiza had any complaints, either. If he’s going to show up again today, then we’ve just got to nab him when he does. Plus it’s not like he can use giba summoning fruit to lure the beasts all the way into town, so it should be an easy win for us hunters.”

Naturally, we revealed everything that happened last night to our fellow people of the forest’s edge rather than trying to conceal anything. The Dom men even went ahead and formed a late-night search party, but nobody was able to find any trace of Tei Suun.

“At any rate, there’s no point in worrying. We’ll capture him without any of the women or townsfolk getting so much as a scratch. That should be easy enough, considering we’re just up against one man.”

Ludo Ruu sounded even more laid back than usual as he walked at the head of the group.

“And if he’ll actually cast aside his blade, then let him enjoy Asuta’s cooking one last time. He shouldn’t have any complaints that way either, right? Not that we’d listen to his complaints, though... So don’t get so down, Ai Fa.”

“I’m not feeling particularly down at all...” Ai Fa responded with a pout, seemingly unable to put up with it any longer.

Instantly, Rau Lea chimed in from his position sandwiched between the women, “What’s with that expression? You can make a face like that? You’re reminding me of a little kid, there.” Almost immediately, Ai Fa shot him back a glare of warning from her wildcat-like eyes. “Man, no matter what sort of face you’re making, though, it seems to suit you. Looking closely, you’re quite a beauty. If you weren’t a hunter, I’d want to offer to take you as my bride.”

“Cut it out, Rau Lea. You seriously don’t know how to restrain yourself,” I hurriedly interjected.

But Rau Lea replied, “What’s that?” with a tilt of his head. “The Lea clan doesn’t make a habit of holding back around friends. If I want to take a woman as my bride, then I’ll just tell her that.”

“No, but...”

“Don’t worry. I can’t go and marry a hunter, anyway. After all, I’ve got to have lots of kids as clan head. If you want to be my bride, then you’ll have to give up on hunting.”

“Ai Fa didn’t say a single word about wanting to marry you, though,” Ludo Ruu chimed in with a chuckle, which brought the topic to a close. Normally I would find it reassuring seeing how nonchalant and relaxed they were acting under the circumstances, but I had felt a tightness crushing my chest since yesterday.

That man... Tei Suun... Just what sort of person is he, really?

He was a man of the branch houses who lost his family and came to live with the main house.

Oura’s father and Tsuvai’s grandfather.

Yamiru Lea and Diga’s hands and feet, compelled to do awful things.

And also... the previous clan head Zattsu Suun’s close associate.

No matter how many times I went over his profile, I didn’t feel any closer to grasping Tei Suun’s nature.

The only positive points I had to go on were the fact that he may have interpreted Diga’s order in a way that allowed him to save Ai Fa, and that he put

down his blade ridiculously quickly when up against Dan Rutim.

He wants someone to bring his life to an end as soon as possible...

That was what Yamiru Lea had said.

Perhaps that was the way she had once felt, too. But ultimately, she chose to live on as a member of the Lea clan. Yet even though Diga and Doddo had fled, ultimately Tei Suun remained with Zattsu Suun. And not only that, he also dirtied his hands helping the man in his final act of wrongdoing.

Was that all part of his self-destructiveness? He saw Zattsu Suun fall and chose this path so he could also meet his end...? Was that it?

“Hey, hold on...” Rau Lea suddenly warned, holding up his arm.

We were on a path at the edge of the forest, surrounded by greenery. It was a narrow trail, cleared solely to connect the settlement to the post town. There were short yet lush trees on either side, and the 2-3 meter wide path continued on into the distance, winding significantly as it went. It was impossible to look far ahead with all the vegetation, but we had been walking long enough that we would probably start seeing the liveliness of the post town soon.

“What is it? I don’t sense anything.”

“Yeah, in the forest off to the left and right... But don’t things seem more turbulent in town than usual?”

I couldn’t hear anything at all. Vina Ruu and the other women looked confused, too.

However, the hunters all nodded in agreement.

“Now that you mention it, I can sense a large crowd getting all worked up.”

“Did Tei Suun slip up and get caught?”

“I’ll go take a look,” Shin Ruu called out from the rear, then disappeared down the road only to reappear less than a minute later. “There are folks gathered at the borderline between the town and the forest. They aren’t showing any sign of moving our way, but there seem to be a lot of guards there, too.”

“How many is a lot?”

“There had to be over ten guards, and around a hundred townsfolk.”

What in the world was that all about? The easiest scenario to imagine really was that Tei Suun had been captured and onlookers had gathered around.

“We can’t head into town like this. What’ll we do, Asuta?”

“Right... How about if Ai Fa and I go check it out? That should get the townsfolk less worked up.”

And if Tei Suun really had been captured, then I felt we needed to try to talk to him before he was taken away to the castle.

“Right. But if things look dangerous, then turn around immediately, alright? Then we’ll just take it easy and wait for them to disperse.”

“Understood,” Ai Fa stated with a nod.

With that, we set off down the same path that Shin Ruu had just taken. After around thirty seconds of walking the gently curving trail, the sight that the young hunter had described came into view. We were still at a good bit of a higher elevation, and so we ended up looking down on the scene.

The wooden stalls were all lined up in a row. And in the open space behind them, over a hundred people were gathered. It was if they were standing there specifically to block us from our goal.

Now that I thought about it, ever since Zattsu and Tei Suun escaped, there were always two guards stationed there. But now, there were over ten of them. And on top of that, a number of the townsfolk were clearly arguing with them.

“It doesn’t appear that Tei Suun has been captured...” Ai Fa noted.

“Yeah. In that case... are we the source of this commotion?”

It was certainly possible. In fact, if Tei Suun wasn’t involved, then that was about all I could think of.

“What should we do? Would it be bad if we headed down there in that case?”

“But we can’t simply turn around without learning what’s going on. After all, Tei Suun will still head into town whether we’re there or not.” Ai Fa’s intense gaze was pointed my way. “We should try asking the guards. If they tell us to

head back to the settlement then we'll have no choice but to obey, but at any rate, we can't make a proper move without knowing the circumstances... But if those folks move to attack, then we'll fall back immediately."

"Got it."

So, Ai Fa and I took off walking carefully forwards again, keeping an eye out for an attack from the side as we went.

Before long the trees started to thin out, and we came into their field of view... then in the same instant, the murmuring from the crowd was replaced with an angry bellow. The torrent of noise was intense enough that it made my ears buzz.

Ai Fa instantly stopped in place, and the spear-wielding guards formed a wall, but the townsfolk didn't seem to be pushing our way. And so, we started walking again.

As we approached, I managed to make out some of the words being shouted. They seemed to come in two varieties: "Get out!" and "No, stay!"

And as we got closer, shouts of, "Gah, stop this ruckus! It's a serious crime to cause a disturbance in town! Do you all want to be exiled from Genos, eh?!" and the like could be heard from the guards.

"Don't mess with us! If you think you can kick us out, then just try it!"

"You guards make a living off our coins too, don't you?!"

"If you call yourselves guards, then do your jobs properly when it comes to catching criminals!"

"Who are you calling criminals?! The criminal was captured yesterday, wasn't he?!"

Many from the crowd were busy hounding the guards. But the rest of the group was made up of townsfolk squabbling among themselves, it seemed.

The majority were from the west and south. Though their skin colors differed, their faces were all now red as they grabbed at each other's chests and shouted. And there were folks from the west shooting each other threatening glares, too.

Then there were tall, slim folks from the east just standing silently around them all. In terms of numbers, they seemed to be about equal to the westerners and southerners. Some of the folks from the west seemed to be chewing them out, but the easterners never raised their voices or shoved anyone, instead simply calmly responding.

“The people of the forest’s edge hate the folks of Genos! You shouldn’t let such a dangerous group into town!”

“Don’t go blathering such selfish nonsense! They didn’t do a single thing wrong!”

“Yeah! Or is it the way of westerners to go around slandering innocent folks?!”

“Shut up! You outsiders shouldn’t go talking big!”

“If you’ve got a problem with how things are, then why don’t you all just leave Genos?!”

“Eh?! You want to ban us from coming and going? Then why even have a post town?! If you can’t stand outsiders, then you should build a stone wall around it!”

We had stopped around seven or eight meters away from the crowd.

Their violent emotions were enough to bring the cool morning breeze to a raging boil.

“The people of the forest’s edge are all our enemies!”

“What are you, stupid? Or are you planning on hunting giba yourself, eh?!”

“You’re from Genos, but you’re covering for the people of the forest’s edge?!”

“They’re Genos citizens too! They’re also children of the western god of Selva! So anyone who slanders them is a despicable traitor!”

“Calm down and disperse, already! We really will arrest all of you!”

“Just go ahead and try it!”

There was no longer any need to ask anyone what was going on. Those who defended the people of the forest’s edge were clearly clashing with folks

coming after us.

All of the folks from the south seemed to be on our side. Meanwhile, the majority of the westerners seemed to be criticizing us. However, there were a few among their number who opposed the critics.

The numbers in the crowd seemed to be growing by the second, too. There were continuously new people streaming in from between the buildings and down the road, drawn by the commotion. In short, things were growing completely out of control.

As I stood there dumbfounded, Ai Fa wore a seriously sour expression on her face.

Should we try to defend our own innocence? Or would it be better to not say a word and instead just turn around here and now?

It was easy to imagine how either of those options could cause the commotion to grow even further, though.

“Asuta and his people didn’t do anything wrong! So why should they have to be driven out of town?!” a girl’s familiar voice called out from among the shouts flying about. That was Yumi, without a doubt. However, I wasn’t able to spy where she was in the crowd.

“Just let us eat already! I’m completely starving!” yelled out Balan, otherwise known as Pops.

Perhaps Shumiral was also watching sadly over the commotion, his hood pulled over his head.

What should we do...?

Normally, it would make sense to retreat for the moment.

We were being half forced by the castle to keep doing business, but if we went ahead and just followed that blindly now, it could well lead to a decisive fracture between the townsfolk and the people of the forest’s edge. So it made sense to fall back and try to talk the matter over once more with the folks from the castle.

But if we just turned and ran without any explanation, the folks advocating for

the people of the forest's edge could explode with even greater anger. So just what should we—

“Cut it out already! What business do you all have interfering with someone else's business?!” a large man's voice resounded, overpowering all the other shouting. Naturally that didn't quiet everyone, but at the very least, most of the front line directly hounding the guards held their tongues and turned his way. “What did the people of the forest's edge do to you all?! Only folks who were actually harmed should open their mouths! But the rest of you should shut up and stay silent!”

“What are you saying?! They attacked a merchant caravan just yesterday!”

“These folks didn't attack anyone, though! And the guy who did was captured! So what do you all have to complain about?!”

The large man arguing on our behalf was Milano Mas.

As he stepped into sight from the whirling crowd, his back was to us as he looked over the people present, and then bellowed even louder, “If a criminal comes from a kingdom, then are all that nation's people also criminals?! Are you trying to say Genos has never produced a single sinner of its own?! Are all of you ready to shoulder the crimes of others and get hanged for them?!”

“You damn traitor! Anybody covering for the people of the forest's edge should get the hell out of Genos!”

“I'm not covering for anyone! I'm just lecturing you idiots who think it's proper to cast judgment on folks who've done nothing wrong!”

“Let's go, Ai Fa,” I said as I grabbed my clan head's arm. “We can't let Milano Mas keep standing in the line of fire like that. We've got to go persuade everyone.”

“I doubt I possess the words needed to convince any townsfolk.”

“Then just protect me. Someone may try to slug me, after all.”

“I can certainly handle that task,” Ai Fa replied with a daring smile.

With that, Ai Fa and I took off down the path, only for a voice like thunder to proclaim, “Silence!” and decisively quiet the seething crowd.

Over a hundred people simultaneously held their breath in the face of that overwhelming shout.

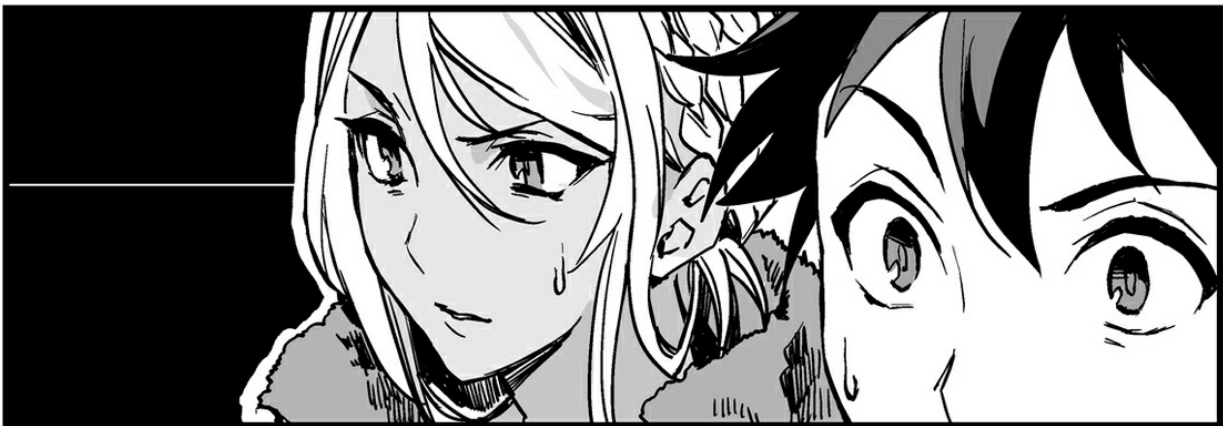
I could maybe see Donda Ruu or Dan Rutim pulling off the same trick. However, the men who appeared had undoubtedly come from within the walls of stone.

A different sort of murmuring than before now dominated the crowd, and the densely packed throng split in two in a way that called to mind Moses parting the Red Sea. And then, ten soldiers strode down that freshly cleared path.

They were clearly of a higher status than the town guards as they were clad in beautiful milky-white leather armor, and the swords at their hips were held in matching leather sheaths. On top of that, they held long-handled pikes.

I had never seen anyone dressed in such dazzling attire here in the post town before. They also wore metal helmets that guarded their noses and cheeks, chest plates bearing the crest of the western kingdom, short cloaks that seemed to be meant for show, and gauntlets that reached from the backs of their hands to their elbows. Outside of the helmets, almost everything was made of leather, but metal pieces covered their joints and the like. And everything from their sheaths to their long leather boots was finely adorned, giving them a sort of heroic beauty.

Then, a man stepped out slowly from the center of the group and stood before the guards. Even among the well-built soldiers dressed in white, he seemed especially tall and gallant. He was undoubtedly the leader of the group. His helmet had a sort of crest with tassels hanging from above it, he was the only one with a long cloak, and instead of a pike he had two swords. There was a sparkling yellow gemstone like amber holding his cloak in place, and his white leather armor was even more beautifully decorated.



“Guard captain, what is this commotion about?” the man asked in a chilling, grave voice. Sure enough, he had been the one to yell moments ago.

One of the guards blocking the path to the forest’s edge stepped forward in a fluster.

“A-Ah, Lord Melfried... What is the captain of the ducal guard doing in a place such as this?”

“I’m the one asking questions, guard captain.”

With that, the plump captain of the guard started to tremble.

“T-Thanks to the incident with the criminal from yesterday, the townsfolk have grown fearful of the people of the forest’s edge. And since a group of them came to do business here in town, that led to this commotion.”

As they had that conversation, the townsfolk remained perfectly silent.

There was an awkward line now dividing the bustling town and the wild forest. The group of soldiers really didn’t seem to fit on either side. No, they seemed more like they belonged in the city of stone.

It didn’t hit me immediately when I heard the term “captain of the ducal guard,” but they really must have been trueborn residents of the Genos castle town, which stood surrounded by those stone walls.

“There was a proclamation just two days ago that the people of the forest’s edge were not forbidden from doing business in the post town, and that hasn’t been revoked,” that Melfried man stated, then he turned to look at me and Ai Fa. His exaggerated helmet covered a good bit of his head, so it was hard to make out the expression on his face too well. However, that little was plenty for me.

When I glanced to the side, I found Ai Fa furrowing her brows in displeasure.

In that case, he really is... I thought to myself, instinctively clenching my fist.

Showing little interest in us, Melfried then turned back towards the guard captain.

“Or are you saying those people committed some sort of crime?”

“N-No. They only just came here, and haven’t said a word yet.”

“Then the townsfolk are clearly the criminals here for causing this disturbance. You are tasked with protecting order in the post town, so why are you letting them go free?”

“B-But, there are so many of them...”

“Numbers have nothing to do with it. A crime is still a crime,” the man clad in white stated as he drew one of his blades.

With that, a number of townsfolk screamed and tried to retreat.

“Criminals who have threatened the peace and tranquility of Genos, allow yourselves to be bound. If you resist, then I will deal with you personally as captain of the ducal guard.”

This was totally nuts.

Seeing that, I hurriedly ran the remaining seven or eight meters, still holding on to Ai Fa’s arm as I went.

“Please, wait! Did these people really commit that serious of a crime? At least from what I saw, nobody here resorted to violence, right?”

“A-A mere person of the forest’s edge shouldn’t dare speak to him so lightly! This is Duke Marstein Genos’s first child and captain of the ducal guard, Lord Melfried!” the guard captain shouted, his face going completely pale.

Duke Marstein Genos’s first child... In other words, the eldest son of the lord of Genos, huh?

Even so, I couldn’t just keep silent. After all, Milano Mas was standing right next to that man with his drawn sword, his eyes still burning bright with hostility and looking like he was ready to resume angrily shouting at any moment.

“This commotion started because we went and carelessly showed ourselves! We should have waited patiently until we saw that they had calmed down! These townsfolk had a suitable enough reason to feel the way they did, so please forgive them!”

“No matter the circumstances involved, a crime is still a crime. And you all

aren't barred in the least from coming to town," Melfried said in a low voice, not bothering to look our way.

As I stared at the side of his indifferent face, I desperately continued on, "Causing a commotion in town is a crime, right? I get that. But in that case, shouldn't you be passing judgment on the people most behind this?"

"The ones most behind this commotion, you say...?"

"Yes. I'm talking about that merchant caravan led by Zasshuma, who marched that terrifying criminal proudly through the post town. If he hadn't exposed everyone to that villain on the verge of losing his sanity, then surely the peace and tranquility of the townsfolk never would have been disturbed."

To everyone else, it may have just sounded like I was trying to push off blame. However, I didn't care. Just as long as my feelings were properly conveyed to the people in question. So that they could know I felt this all happened because they hadn't planned properly.

"You certainly have a silver tongue on you," Melfried stated as he sheathed his blade.

Looking a bit dumbfounded, the guard captain hurriedly yelled out at the townsfolk, "Disperse, already! If you don't, we really will arrest you!"

Everyone looked clearly displeased, but sure enough they started slowly walking back into town.

Then, Melfried turned to face me fully.

"Man of the forest's edge, crimes are still crimes, and those who commit them remain criminals. Whether they be people of the forest's edge or townsfolk, anyone living in Genos must abide by its laws."

"I believe that idea is absolutely correct, in and of itself."

Melfried's face looked younger than I had been picturing. He had to be in his mid-twenties at most. He had a sturdy lower jaw and a well proportioned face, was quite tall, and looked like the very portrait of a noble overall. His skin was an ivory-white, while the bit of his bangs I could spy from under his helmet were a light brown... and his grey eyes had a frigid, reptilian light to them.

And so, though it came after a significant delay, we ended up going through with opening our stalls for business.

If it weren't for the matter with Tei Suun, we surely would have turned right back around. After all, it seemed the people of Genos really did need some time for their raging emotions to calm.

Still, that just made it all the more important to catch Tei Suun as quickly as possible. In order to put both the people of the forest's edge and the townsfolk at ease... and so that he could rest easy, too.

Tei Suun may well have wished for destruction. However, I didn't wish that fate upon him. If he could at least avoid a death sentence, then maybe he could be granted the chance to turn his life around.

But if he just kept fleeing without taking time to heal such severe wounds, he'd end up dying out in the forest. If there was any chance left that he could start over, no matter how small it may be, then I didn't want him to give up. Perhaps that sounded hypocritical, but that was how I truly felt.

"Man, westerners are just plain hopeless! I've had it with them! Even a newborn kimyuus wouldn't be such complete and utter cowards!" Balan grumbled while stuffing his cheeks with myamuu giba.

Aldas was unusually eating a giba burger, and he somewhat listlessly said, "Cut it out, Pops. If the last incident proved anything, it's that the more of a fuss we cause, the more problems it makes for Asuta. Looking back at it, we should've just left those ranting westerners be."

"What?! Then who'd take responsibility if we couldn't eat this delicious food anymore, eh?! Besides, at least when it comes to today, you clearly lost your cool more than I did, Aldas!"

"That's what I'm regretting now. Why do we have to be so short-tempered?" Aldas said with a slump of his shoulders, seeming quite unlike his usual self. "We're getting this delicious food in the end, after all, so what point was there to us making a fuss? Still, if someone from the castle had come out from the

start, it wouldn't have turned into such a big ordeal."

"That's for sure! The guys from the castle are even more cowardly and lazy than the townsfolk, but I've got to at least praise the ones who showed up today."

That seemed to be his earnest perspective as a southerner.

Still, it honestly wasn't all that different than when they were covering for the Suun clan. I didn't know exactly what the people from the castle were thinking, allowing us to keep doing business, but the ruling today must have caused the townsfolk to think, "The people of the forest's edge really do get favorable treatment."

"Hey, you're not going to skip work for tonight's dinner, are you?" Pops asked with a glare my way.

"I'm not. Naudis actually requested that I not take time off, too," I replied.

"Right. I've got no issues, then... But if anything else troubling pops up in the future, you better not hesitate to rely on us southerners, Asuta."

"Yes, thank you."

I couldn't exactly go and do such a thing lightly, but I really appreciated the thought.

After Pops's group left, the members of the Silver Vase showed up to fill the void.

"Asuta, I am glad, you are alright," Shumiral stated, a pensive look in his eyes.

As Sheera Ruu handed him a completed myamuu giba, I accepted his coins and said, "Thank you. So you were there among all that commotion, too?"

"Yes. But we, were powerless."

"Ah, but that's a problem between the people of the forest's edge and Genos, so it's up to us to resolve it."

"Asuta, I believe, the people of the forest's edge, would fit well, in the eastern kingdom."

"Huh?"

“The western kingdom, doesn’t value, the people of the forest’s edge. It is strange, to not value, one’s comrades.”

“But the people of the forest’s edge don’t see the citizens of Genos as comrades, either. I don’t believe it’s just one side that’s at fault, there.”

When I said that, Shumiral listlessly cast his gaze downwards.

“My thoughts, were lacking. I am embarrassed.”

“T-That’s not true at all! I’m glad to hear that you were worrying about me that much. I really mean that.”

However, there was no way it would be easy to pack up and move to the eastern kingdom. Just as Gazraan Rutim had hinted at, if they were to all abandon their giba hunting, they could very well end up as enemies of the western kingdom. Even someone from another world like me was painfully aware of just how dangerous that would be.

“The fell star, has vanished. Will there be peace, or decay? I am worried.”

“Right. But we’ll be using everything we have to try to twist fate in the proper direction.”

“If peace comes, then I will bring, the matter we discussed, to The Sledgehammer’s owner.”

With that, Shumiral also left, and our flow of customers came to an abrupt halt.

There was less than an hour left till the sun would hit its peak, and the flow of passersby was steadily increasing, but it was readily apparent that people were feeling hesitant to approach. Even the westerners who defended us may have been afraid to actually come up to the stalls. Afraid that if they were our customers, they could get wrapped up in an incident like what happened earlier.

“My apologies for the wait, Asuta,” Li Sudra stated as she approached.

It could be an issue if she ended up approaching at the same time as Tei Suun, so I asked her to arrive early today. And I added an extra red coin to her pay for the trouble, too.

The Sudra clan head accompanied his wife as always, and he cast his gloomy gaze out towards the road.

“The air feels more turbulent than usual, somehow. I can’t stand the look in the townsfolk’s eyes.”

“Well, we’re right on the heels of what happened yesterday, after all. I think it would be wise to do our best not to stir anyone up.”

“Hmph. I’d keep away from them even if you didn’t tell me to. They’re nothing but cowards, anyway.”

That statement caused me to feel just a bit discouraged. So even friendly clans that approved of the Fa clan’s business felt that way about the citizens of Genos...

By selling giba meat, they could live more prosperous lives. That was why they had promised to help us out, but it seemed they didn’t much sense how important it was for them to reach a mutual understanding with the people of Genos.

In all likelihood, the Ruu clan hadn’t hit that point yet, either. It seemed the basic stance for the people of the forest’s edge was, “Who gives a damn if they love us or hate us?”

Live with pride, not fearing what others think. Don’t care how others evaluate you. Have confidence in the path you’ve chosen... That was the unique way of thinking characteristic of the people of the forest’s edge, which was both a powerful strength and weakness for them.

I felt that honest and pure way of life they had was incredibly precious. However, the way that they kept away from people different than them and treated them as corrupt was exactly what invited the downfall of the Suun clan and the discord with Genos, wasn’t it?

That was precisely why Donda Ruu’s words were both unexpected and like a sign of a new era when he stated that rather than cut down the members of the Suun clan for their crimes, we should share in their atonement.

But this whole commotion had been waiting right after. If Zattsu Suun just hadn’t escaped... Well, I guess there’s no point complaining about that now,

though, I thought to myself as the Sudra clan finished getting into formation.

Li Sudra and the youngest of the men remained at the stall, while the other three fell back to the thicket. They had done the exact same yesterday and the day before, but we had already discussed in advance how they should move to encircle Tei Suun should he appear.

With that, our preparations were complete. No matter when Tei Suun showed up, we could deal with him immediately.

The real concern was the townsfolk. The number of passersby was a little on the low side, but there were still a lot of them compared to in the morning. And up through yesterday there were usually five or six guards hanging around, but now I only saw two of them to the north.

It was probably for the best that there weren't many guards, but what about the passersby? They would see Tei Suun, the great criminal of the forest's edge, dressed as one of them as he approached, and then he would be captured by our hands.

Would it just result in more opposition from folks feeling like the people of the forest's edge went and caused another incident? Would it incite fear in them, seeing hunters running wild?

I wasn't confident in the least that we really had chosen the correct path.

"Asuta..." Ai Fa quietly whispered.

I turned and saw that she was staring north from her position between the two stalls. After following her gaze, I suddenly gulped. That group clad in white from this morning was now heading our way from up the road.

The north... that was the direction the castle was in.

What, so they didn't just retreat back into their castle?

Just like this morning, there were ten of them. And sure enough, their leader Melfried was standing at the head. That group of soldiers in white armor was solemnly heading down the stone highway back into the post town.

After receiving a salute from the guards positioned to the north, they kept on moving towards the lively southern part of town, not paying our stalls so much

as a glance. Melfried's grey eyes just kept on looking straight ahead as they passed.

"Could they be on guard against an attack from Tei Suun, too?" Ai Fa whispered into my ear after giving her position to one of the young folks from the Sudra. "It's rare for people from the castle to roam around town like that. This could prove a bit troublesome."

"Yeah, it'd be a disaster if they ran into Tei Suun."

That guy with the reptilian gaze would surely have no problem just cutting Tei Suun down in the middle of the road. After all, he himself had failed to finish off the criminal just yesterday.

"That man has the same air about him as the eldest Ruu son..."

"Hmm? You're saying he's like Jiza Ruu?"

"You don't think so? He has an iron conviction that the law is all that matters."

"Hmm... I'd say Jiza Ruu has a more human feel than him, though..."

But if Jiza Ruu ever opened his narrow eyes wide, maybe his pupils would look every bit as cold... The very thought sent a chill down my spine.

The captain of the ducal guard and the first son of the lord of Genos, Melfried... Also known as Haan of Dabagg, The Twin Fangs.

It sounded like a joke that such a nobleman would be hiding his face behind filthy bandages to play at being a bodyguard, but it was no laughing matter. And there didn't seem to be any mistaking that, either. His firm build, two longswords, ivory-white skin... and on top of that, he had the same voice that Ai Fa and I had heard call Zattsu Suun scum.

Plus, there were those chilly, reptilian grey eyes. Others may feel differently, but I didn't believe it would be possible to run into two folks with gazes like that in a single town.

Still, it's hard to believe that the son of the lord is acting as Kamyua's partner... Ah, maybe it's the other way around? Did Melfried come up with the plan, and then got Kamyua to help out? At any rate, it's just plain awful.

At the very least, this seemed to be proof that Kamyua Yoshu hadn't concocted the whole plan with the caravan on his own, as he indeed had help from the castle.

What was Kamyua Yoshu doing now, and where? That damn professional liar...

The people of the forest's edge are in a seriously precarious position. If we act poorly, the relationship with Genos could get even worse, to the point where it wouldn't even be possible to fix it. Is that what Kamyua was intending? Or was all this unexpected for him, too?

Would I get another chance to talk to that aloof guy? I mean, it wasn't like I seriously hated him or anything. It's just that I honestly felt, in my bones, that I couldn't trust him, so I had to keep a degree of distance from him.

But if it turned out everything Kamyua Yoshu had said about respecting the people of the forest's edge was a big old lie... That would surely put us in opposition to him.

And yet... If they hadn't gone and set that trap, Milano Mas and Leito's frustrations and regrets may have never gotten cleared away...

That thought caused me to feel even more gloomy.

I wanted Kamyua Yoshu to be more of a man of the town than the castle. If that was the case, then even if we ended up on opposite sides, I could avoid having to hate him.

"Asuta, there are only three giba burgers left. What should I do...?" Vina Ruu asked in her usual tone.

"Just three, huh? That was surprisingly quick. Since the sun'll be hitting its peak soon, we should go ahead and make some more now while we have the chance."

With that, I left the myamuu giba stall to Sheera Ruu and Li Sudra, then headed over to the giba burger stall. In the same instant, Ludo Ruu approached from the thicket to the rear.

"Huh? What is it, Ludo—"

“He’s here.”

Those two words alone were enough, at least for everyone but me.

Vina and Lala Ruu silently left the stall and headed over to Sheera Ruu and Li Sudra. The four Sudra men then moved to surround them and the entire myamuu giba stall.

Ai Fa stepped out in front of the giba burger stall, while Ludo Ruu remained at my left. Then, Rau Lea and Shin Ruu also walked up to my left side.

There must have still been around a half hour or so till the sun would hit its peak. And yet, Tei Suun had arrived.

That’s him, huh...?

There was a well-built man in a hooded cloak of brown leather taking almost mechanical steps our way. He had pulled his hood down far enough that it was hard to make out his face, like how folks from Sym wore them. However, I could still see his lower jaw, and the skin color matched that of the people of the forest’s edge.

His steps were confident enough that it was hard to believe he was heavily wounded. That must have been how he was able to pass through the bustling southern road without arousing suspicion from the passersby as he headed towards the giba burger stall.

He was now less than two meters from Ai Fa. Rau Lea stood directly across from her, to Tei Suun’s right, while Shin Ruu circled around behind him. I took just two steps back, and then Ludo Ruu slipped into that space.

With that, Tei Suun was now surrounded on all four sides. Everyone had a hand on their knives, and were clearly prepared to cut him down at any moment.

Tei Suun’s lowered face then lifted and stared my way over Ludo Ruu’s shoulders. As always, his eyes were muddied and reminded me of a dead fish.

“I arrived a bit early, it seems. The number of guards around turned out to be less than I expected.”

“Yeah, but there are soldiers from the castle doing rounds about town in their

place. And it wouldn't be strange in the least for them to come back this way at any moment."

"I see... I don't have any coins on my person, but would it still be possible to eat your cooking?"

"We have conditions," Ludo Ruu replied. "Hand over your blade. If you do that, we'll let you eat Asuta's cooking. As the youngest son of the main Ruu house, Ludo Ruu, you have my word."

It was then that one of the guards to the north called out in a flustered tone, "Hey! What are you all up to over there?! Don't go acting all suspicious!"

Without the slightest hesitation, Ai Fa shot Tei Suun a piercing glare and then responded, "This man is the wanted criminal from the Suun clan! We wish to hand him over to you, so please prepare yourselves!"

"T-The criminal?! Don't be stupid! That man was slashed and left in a state where even if he was alive, he wouldn't be able to move properly!"

"I don't know anything of all that! But this man truly is here, standing in front of us! And we would like to hand him over to Genos alive if possible!"

"G-Go call for backup...! And you all better not let him escape, alright?!"

One of the guards then took off flying south down the road, while the other just stood there and stared, not taking a single step our way.

Meanwhile, a number of passersby stopped in place, their faces full of fear and bewilderment.

"So, now what? It shouldn't be long till the guards come streaming our way. Make up your mind as to how you wish to use the time left to you," Ludo Ruu stated, and Tei Suun slowly lifted both arms in response.

Ai Fa, Rau Lea, and Shin Ruu all had the eyes of hunters as they watched over the scene.

Tei Suun then removed the clasp at his neck, and the long cloak he was wearing fell to the ground.

And in that very instant, I gasped.

Tei Suun was clad in the familiar attire of the forest's edge, with those beautiful swirling patterns. However, it was slashed all the way from his right shoulder to his left flank, with a horrifying wound unmistakably showing through the hole. The truly massive injury was held roughly shut using fibaha vines.

"How are you still able to stand...?"

"It's because I'm still not permitted to die just yet," Tei Suun emotionlessly replied as he reached for the knife at his hip.

As the gazes watching him grew even sharper, he dropped it at Ai Fa's feet, still held in its leather sheath. Without a moment's hesitation, Ai Fa kicked it over towards the Sudra men.

With that, Tei Suun was left completely unarmed.

Ai Fa, Rau Lea, and Shin Ruu all took another step towards the man. There was no need to get any closer than that, as they could now easily draw their blades and cut him down in a moment.

"So, can I now have some of your cooking?"

"Yeah..."

After looking Ludo Ruu in the eye to confirm, I stepped out in front of the stall.

There were now only meters between me and Tei Suun, with a big metal pot in the middle. However, he wasn't making any questionable moves, so the four hunters didn't swing their blades for the moment.

As I strongly prayed in my head that things wouldn't come to that, I grabbed hold of a poitan. Then I added diced up aria and tino on top, scooped a patty out of the pot, poured on plenty of tarapa sauce, and finally placed another poitan on top.

"Sorry for the wait."

I then passed the giba burger to Ludo Ruu, who handed it in turn to Tei Suun.

Showing no emotion whatsoever, Tei Suun quickly took a bite.

Would that really be enough to satisfy him?

Tei Suun mechanically chewed away, and the giba burger disappeared in no time at all. And as that was going on, the number of onlookers seemed to steadily grow. However, there was still no sign of the guards or soldiers.

“So are you satisfied now?” Ludo Ruu asked.

“I am,” Tei Suun replied, closing his eyes. “It was absolutely delicious. I can certainly understand how Mida Suun became so fixated, as well as how people of the west would go so far as to pay coins for such food.”

“In that case, place your hands behind your back. We’ll bind you before handing you over to the guards.”

“Very well. However, I also must apologize to you before that, Asuta of the Fa clan. You see, it was actually a lie when I said I wished to eat your cooking in order to confirm your strength.”

“Huh?”

In that moment, I felt my heart weirdly leap out of my chest.

However, Tei Suun’s eyes remained closed, and his intense face broke out in a gentle smile.

“The truth is, I simply wished to eat your cooking one more time before I died. The food I ate on the night of the clan head meeting... It filled me with awe... And so I apologize from the depths of my heart for deceiving you and making you go through all that trouble.”

“No, that’s—” I started to reply, but I didn’t make it through that sentence.

Just when I felt ready to breathe a sigh of relief, the world went dark.

I had no idea what was going on.

However, I heard Ai Fa angrily shout, “You bastard!” Something broke, someone screamed, there was a firm metallic clang... It was a whole lot of sounds all at once. I could clearly tell something had gone wrong, but I wasn’t able to move freely.

After that moment of darkness, my vision recovered, and things looked

entirely different than they had mere seconds ago.

Now, rather than seeing Tei Suun with a gentle, satisfied smile, I was staring at Ai Fa brandishing a knife. Ludo Ruu, Rau Lea, and Shin Ruu were there too. And their eyes were all blazing with uncontrollable rage.

A pot had fallen near Ludo Ruu's feet. Was that the one I had been using? There was tarapa sauce spilled all over the ground...

And behind the hunters, I could see the terrified faces of the townsfolk... They weren't all westerners, either. There were folks from the south and east, too. I could even see some regulars. Out of the corner of my left eye, I could see Tara on the verge of tears, and Dora holding her little shoulders as his own face went completely pale.

I wanted to look at them closer, but I wasn't able to move my face. That was because someone had their hand around my throat from behind.

The grip was strong enough that it felt like it could snap my neck at any moment, but restrained just enough not to strangle me.

Then, a voice dripping with hatred exploded right next to my ear.

"All of you are sickening traitors! I'll give you one last bit of payback for destroying the Suun clan!"

The voice was cracking, and made him sound like a different person entirely, but that had undoubtedly come from Tei Suun.

3

"I can't believe this! How are you not dead?!" Rau Lea yelled, his eyes brimming with rage. "Our blades clearly sliced you! Are you seriously human?!"

"Hmph. I simply used a taboo leaf. I suppose you all know nothing of that, though, since you pay no heed to the bounty of the forest." His voice was cracking and filled with a mad joy. It really sounded like a different person entirely, but it was definitely Tei Suun's voice.

He had completely taken us off guard. With his resolve to die... No, with his firm conviction to do so.

An even denser smell of blood than yesterday was streaming into my nostrils. I tried to look down as best I could with just my eyes, and found a disturbing amount of blood pooling by my feet. There were four hunters present, and they most definitely carried out their duty. There was no doubt in my mind that Tei Suun was suffering from fatal wounds.

However, it seemed that Tei Suun's convictions had surpassed such matters of common sense. Apparently, he was now standing in the thicket behind the stalls, and he had a firm grip on my throat.

Just what sort of battle had occurred for things to end up like this? I had no idea whatsoever.

However, it wasn't as if I had lost consciousness. No, it had all happened in an instant when I blinked. Tei Suun must have leapt over the stall and charged me like a beast, while three hunters sliced into his back.

But how had he avoided Ludo Ruu, who was positioned so as to guard me? I hadn't seen it, so I could only speculate, but I could make some assumptions from how the boy's broken blade now lay on the ground, while he was now gripping his hatchet. As he leapt my way, Tei Suun must have grabbed hold of the pot from the stall and used it to block Ludo Ruu's attack. Now that I thought back, I did recall hearing the sound of clashing metal, so that would explain how the youngest Ruu son's blade had broken.

Once I thought things through that far with my somewhat stunned brain, Tei Suun started talking again in that hateful tone.

"I can't go and die until I've properly punished you all for pointing your blades at the Suun clan, the rightful leaders of our people! It's only fitting that I take this brat who destroyed us with me when I go!"

"That's insane! You're the ones who broke the laws of the forest's edge, so you've got no right to call yourselves the leading clan! Just let Asuta go and die already, you stubborn bastard!" Ludo Ruu shouted, looking no less angry than Rau Lea.

However, Tei Suun answered with laughter every bit as devilish as what had come from Zattsu Suun yesterday.

“The laws of the forest’s edge and the town have nothing to do with this! The great Zattsu Suun was trying to grant us new laws and a new order in place of them! You damn fools just weren’t able to understand his grand intentions! You’re all weaklings unable to do anything but serve the townsfolk! You freely gave away our one and only means of resisting them!”

“I’m tired of hearing that crap! You talk about new laws and order, but you bastards just skulked around like bandits!”

“We simply tried to take back the fortune that was unjustly stolen from us! We wished to get ahold of our just reward for risking our lives to protect the fields of Genos! The ones who should be ashamed are the citizens of Genos, who wish to keep us trapped at the forest’s edge while they line their pockets!”

Was that voice seriously coming from a man who had suffered fatal wounds? I mean, it was every bit as loud and enthusiastic as Donda Ruu’s.

There was also an unbelievable amount of strength in the fingers grasping my neck. For some reason Tei Suun only had his right hand on my neck, but if I tried to move in the least those fingers would crush down on my neck as if to punish me. And as pathetic as it was to admit, I had to stand there like a fool and just listen to the exchange.

“So damn stubborn! So are you saying that’s reason enough to play at being petty criminals?! It’d be better to just die than to resort to something so shameless!”

“Then go ahead and die! Get stabbed to death by a giba out in the forest! Die feeling grateful for those mere few coins you get for your horns and tusks! That’s the fate Genos gave to the people of the forest’s edge, after all!”

“You bastard...!” Ludo Ruu cursed, his eyes burning even more intensely.

I then noticed that the other three had moved to encircle us.

The three hunters were all holding bloody blades. Rau Lea looked furious and Shin Ruu was expressionless, but both of them had fires burning bright in their eyes. And as for Ai Fa... Ai Fa’s blue eyes were blazing brighter than anyone present, but she also wore the greatest look of grim resolve I had ever seen.

That expression seemed to pierce my very heart, and at last my mind shifted

back to reality.

“P-Please, hold on, Tei Suun... You really believe that Zattsu Suun’s teachings were correct...?”

With that, even more strength pressed down on my throat.

“What, are you begging for your life, Fa clan chef? No matter what you say now, I will never forgive you for your crimes! By conspiring with the Ruu, you brought our Suun clan to ruin!”

“No, but—”

“For eighty years, we obeyed the unjust laws thrust upon us by Genos! How many do you think starved to death during that time?! And yet we remained forbidden from touching the bounty of the forest, and kept on earnestly hunting giba! It’s the same for our newborn children, long suffering elders, and hunters who are injured fighting giba... Even without anyone keeping an eye on us, none of them lay a hand on the fruits of the forest, and they just keep on foolishly following those laws till they starve to death! Genos killed all of them! I absolutely cannot accept that as being our proper fate!”

“I don’t agree with that either! That’s why I started doing business here, to bring prosperity to the forest’s edge!” I desperately wrung out, despite the fact that my throat was being crushed.

Tei Suun exploded with laughter once again.

“What foolishness! Why should we need to take such a detour when there’s fruit overflowing right in front of our very eyes?! If we could just partake of the bounty of the forest, we’d have no need for coins at all! That’s the proper way to live for people who take the forest as their god!”

“But that would leave the western fields to be overrun by giba! The people of the forest’s edge are also citizens of the western kingdom, so wouldn’t the proper way of living be for everyone to support one another?!”

“That was why we needed even greater strength! And we would obtain it if no one were to starve any longer! With that our five hundred brethren could grow to over a thousand, allowing us to hunt more giba than ever before! And in turn, no giba would attack those fields even with us taking as much as we

please from the forest!”

So that really was it... I thought to myself.

At his core, Zattsu Suun was driven by the same principles as me, Ai Fa, and Gazraan Rutim. By the desire to bring greater prosperity to the forest’s edge...

“Then... Then why did you neglect your duty to hunt giba for these past ten years? Nobody would approve of attacking travelers and pillaging fields, but if you had at least kept acting as hunters and properly explained the importance of gathering strength... If you had explained the need to gather the bounty of the forest, then at least some of the clans may have agreed, right? Then if you talked things over with Genos and got permission to harvest from the forest, everyone would have praised the Suun as a great leading clan!”

“You fool! That’s no different than licking Genos’s boots like we’ve done till now! We must instead shatter the false way of life they’ve given us to pieces!”

“Hey, you didn’t answer Asuta’s question, you shameless criminal. Why *did* the Suun clan neglect its duty as hunters?” Rau Lea pressed.

“That’s because of you bastards under the Ruu,” Tei Suun spat back. “You’ve been baring your fangs at the Suun clan for 20 years now. And so we needed to start by gaining enough strength to overcome you! Otherwise, the other clans would fear your wrath and pay our words no heed. And so, we were steadily, quietly amassing power while protecting our people and fortune!”

“That’s ridiculous... So you’re saying that’s why you didn’t work as hunters, and instead spent ten years playing at being bandits and idly enjoying yourselves? So what did that get you, then? Just a handful of coins, and the complete loss of your pride and strength as hunters as your clan weakened, right?”

“That’s...! That’s because Zuuro Suun lacked the strength needed to carry on Zattsu Suun’s great ambitions! If Zattsu Suun had only stayed healthy, by now we would all be living proud, proper lives!”

“Then you should be hating the former clan head for falling ill before he could bring that ambition to light, and his successor for being so pathetic. Instead, you just kept blathering about that ambition as you fell to greater and greater

depths of depravity, didn't you?" Then, with a ferocious expression still on his face and the look of a hunting dog blazing in his eyes, Rau Lea tilted his head. "Plus, everything you're saying just sounds like excuses. I mean, nobody but you and Zattsu Suun have been blabbering about that 'great ambition' this whole time. So in the end, it was just you two worrying about that nonsense, right?"

"Yes, that's true! In these past ten years, all others who knew of Zattsu Suun's great will passed away! Zuuro Suun was the only other one aware of it, but he grew utterly corrupt! And so... And so, there was nothing left for the Suun clan but destruction!"

"Then it makes even less sense for you to hate the Ruu and Fa, doesn't—" Rau Lea started to say in an astonished tone, only for shrieks and murmuring to sound out from the crowd.

Those white-clad soldiers, the ducal guards of Genos, had arrived.

"So you were still alive after all, criminal. A filthy monster like you stepping foot into the town of Genos is a crime worthy of certain death."

The group of ten soldiers were confidently marching forward, their leader Melfried standing at the head of the group.

However, Ai Fa stood in their way.

"Hold on! What are you planning on doing?!"

"That much should be obvious. We will punish this criminal."

"You fools! Asuta has... My clan member has clearly been captured! If you approach carelessly, you'll just cause him to be harmed!"

"I of course have eyes, too. Worry not, woman of the forest's edge. I'll send that criminal's head flying before he can do anything improper."

"As if you could manage such a thing! You clearly underestimate the strength possessed by hunters of the forest's edge!"

With her back to us, Ai Fa lifted her blade.

Melfried's grey reptilian eyes somehow grew even chillier.

"You raise a blade towards me, woman of the forest's edge? That is a difficult

crime to forgive.”

“That’s insane! Don’t you see how he’s smiling away calmly despite how heavily he’s wounded?! What if he snaps Asuta’s neck while you’re aiming for his head?!” Ludo Ruu shouted, also turning Melfried’s way.

In the same instant, Tei Suun started laughing like a devil once again.

“That’s perfect! Kill each other! That’s exactly what you should have been doing this whole time! Until one side destroys the other, the hatred between the people of the forest’s edge and the citizens of Genos will never vanish!”

“That’s enough, Tei Suun. Your words don’t have so much as a shred of logic behind them. You’re just wailing away to distract us from the terror you’re feeling at being unable to accept your own death, aren’t you?” Shin Ruu rather calmly chimed in.

However, Tei Suun’s laughter showed no signs of stopping.

“There’s no fear in my heart! The Suun clan has already met with its fate! So all that’s left for me is to take this unforgivable traitor down with me!”

“Doing that won’t save your soul. Let go of Asuta.”

“Oh, I will! After I’ve snuffed out his life, that is!”

As Tei Suun kept cackling away, Melfried drew his blades. Not just the one, but both of them. And as he held those silver swords in each of his hands, he stared coldly ahead at Ai Fa.

“Step aside. Otherwise, I will have to cut you down as well.”

“I have no intention of crossing blades with anyone from the castle... I’m begging you, please step back,” Ai Fa replied, her voice trembling with emotion.

The soldiers behind Melfried also gripped their pikes tightly.

I could almost hear the air around us come to a boil...

And then, a familiar aloof voice completely blew all that away.

“Cut it out, already. There’s no point to you guys fighting each other.”

It was a tall, lanky man in a long leather cloak.

The man had appeared as if out of thin air, and stood there ruffling his unkempt blond hair.

“This is no time for you to be getting involved. Please keep out of this, Kamyua Yoshu,” Melfried answered while still keeping his eyes fixed on Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu.

But as he trotted on over, Kamyua Yoshu just stated, “That’s not true at all,” in a voice utterly lacking in tension. “You and Ai Fa are both my precious friends. It’s pretty cruel to say I’ve got nothing to do with you two fighting, Melfried.”

“Then do something about this woman of the forest’s edge. I have a duty to uphold the law and keep order.”

“That’s true. But I owe the people of the forest’s edge, too. After all, I went and did something pretty sneaky to them. And so, I feel I truly need to make it up to them for that,” Kamyua Yoshu stated, coming to stand between Ai Fa and Melfried. In that position, it would be impossible for him to dodge if either one of them swung their blade. And then, without so much as lifting his arms out from under his cloak, Kamyua Yoshu turned his back to Ai Fa and us so that he was facing the captain of the ducal guard. “I already fulfilled your request, right? So this time, please listen to mine... It’s only right that we let the people of the forest’s edge settle this themselves.”

After a few seconds of silence, Melfried returned his left blade to its sheath.

Kamyua Yoshu said, “Thanks,” then turned towards my clan head. “I leave the rest to you, Ai Fa. Please, save Asuta.”

Without saying so much as a word, Ai Fa did an about face and approached us.

“Tei Suun, I understand that you are filled with regrets. But what good would it do to take Asuta down with you? Doing so would accomplish nothing... In fact, adding to your crimes will only make it harder on your family,” Ai Fa very calmly stated.

“What ‘family’?!” Tei Suun spat. “Anyone who dared yield to the Ruu while holding the Suun name is no family of mine! The only man I call my ally is Zattsu

Suun, who lost his life while overflowing with regret!”

“Is that how you truly feel? That ‘great ambition’ is more important to you than your bonds of blood?”

As she talked, Ai Fa did something bizarre. She spread her arms out wide, then indicated for Rau Lea and Shin Ruu to step back. After a second of hesitation, the pair obeyed.

Ai Fa casually lowered her knife, then took a few steps more towards us.

“What are you doing? If you come any closer, I’ll crush your clan member’s neck... Well, I don’t believe my life will last much longer anyway, though, so you can’t change how this ends no matter what you do.”

“Do you hate Asuta that much? All he’s done is try to bring prosperity to the forest’s edge. He has given that goal his all, so that none of our people will have to starve to death any longer. If the Suun clan held the same ambitions, then can you not see the ones to inherit that task are Asuta, the Fa clan, and the Ruu?”

“All you’re doing is wagging your tails at your masters from Genos! No matter how much prosperity such methods may bring, they will never give us back our pride!”

“That’s not true at all! I... No, all of us want to live together in harmony with Genos, not just follow them obediently! Our hope is to live together under the same laws as comrades, rather than try to trample all over what exists now!” I desperately interjected while staring into Ai Fa’s eyes. I felt I had to, considering the grim resolve readily apparent on her face.

“Comrades, you say? You would call Genos our comrades after how they have unjustly oppressed us?! You fool! Genos is an enemy we must force to submit!”

“I don’t believe that! And I can’t imagine Ai Fa and these folks from the Ruu do, either! The people of the forest’s edge have obeyed the law of their own will, so even if it’s unjust, no one has felt like they’ve been oppressed! If the Suun clan alone holds such regrets... Then they must have come from the castle.” There were folks from the castle standing right nearby, of course, but I couldn’t continue on without saying that. “The Ruu, Zaza, and Sauti will take up

those frustrations in your place. They're acting as the leading clans instead of the Suun now, and will be the ones to interact with the castle. And so those regrets held by the Suun clan alone will then be felt by the whole of the forest's edge. And yet, we will strive with all our might to form proper bonds with them, rather than submitting. And so... Won't you please entrust us with the future of the forest's edge?"

"What are you, stupid...?" Tei Suun questioned, his voice positively dripping with hatred. "What do I care for the future of the forest's edge?! I'll soon be dead! Zattsu Suun has already passed, too! Ruin and despair is the only fitting fate for a world where the Suun clan has fallen! The forest's edge, this town, and the castle can all be destroyed for all I care!"

No good, huh? I thought to myself, gnashing my teeth.

It may not even be possible to wipe away Tei Suun's hatred with my words.

"Then take my life as a final souvenir..." Ai Fa muttered powerlessly.

As my eyes went wide with shock, she took yet another step forward.

"I told you, don't come any closer! Do you really think you can make an opening by stating such nonsense, clan head of the Fa?"

"That's not my intention at all. I simply have no intention of shamelessly living on after my clan member faces such harm in front of my very eyes... If you're going to kill Asuta, then do the same to me!"

"Ai Fa! What are you saying?!"

It didn't suit Ai Fa at all, saying something like that while choking back tears.

And no matter how hard of a situation she had been placed in, to choose death... That was something the Ai Fa I knew would *never* do.

As she hung her head in despair, Ai Fa dropped the sword at her hip to her feet. Then, she moved the knife she was holding to her left hand and flipped it so the handle was pointed our way.

"You can take my life using this blade. If at all possible, I would prefer it that you kill me first... I don't wish to see Asuta die."

"Stop! Don't come closer! I won't play into your crafty plot! You intend to

hand that blade to this brat rather than me, don't you?!"

"What are you saying? Asuta is no stronger than your average woman. No matter how injured you may be, you should be able to easily grab the blade before him, right?"

As Ai Fa went to step forward again, Tei Suun wailed, "Stop right there! My right arm can't move! Your blades must have severed the muscles in my right shoulder. So thanks to that, I can only take one of you down with me! I'll be strangling this brat to death soon, so if you want to die so badly, then stab yourself in the throat!"

"I see..." Ai Fa muttered. "So you truly can't move your right arm after all, Tei Suun."

In the next instant, Tei Suun's intense grip on my neck finally loosened. Ai Fa leapt forward in the same moment, and she ripped my body away from the crazed man.

Then, somewhere far away, there was a shrill shriek. It must have come from the crowd gathered by the side of the road.

Ai Fa collapsed to the ground, still cradling me.

Then, while pressing me to the earth, she lifted her torso and slashed at the empty space behind her with her knife, now held in a proper grip.

It seemed that caution was completely unnecessary, though. As he leaned up against a tree, a great deal of blood gushed forth from Tei Suun's throat and left shoulder, and he collapsed on the spot.

"What... the...?" I muttered without thinking as I slowly sat up.

Ludo Ruu's group, Kamyua Yoshu, and Melfried all hadn't moved. And yet, Tei Suun sat there positively drowning in blood.

I foolishly thought for a second maybe this was all a nightmare rather than reality... But then I noticed a small figure emerge from behind the tree Tei Suun was leaning against.

"You shameless fool... Your Suun clan cast aside their pride to live without hardship, so what would you know of the pain of losing your child to

starvation?” Shockingly, it was the Sudra clan head of all people. That small, gloomy looking man flicked the blood off his knife before sheathing it, then he turned towards the captain of the ducal guard. “The criminal from the forest’s edge has been dealt with. Did I break any of your laws in the process?”

“The order given was for that criminal to be captured dead or alive. None of our laws will judge you.”

“I see. Glad to hear it,” the Sudra clan head muttered, not sounding proud of his victory in the least.

He must have slipped away from the myamuu giba stall when he saw Ai Fa and the others grab Tei Suun’s attention, then slowly, carefully moved around to the thicket while hiding his presence. Then, he sliced the criminal’s shoulder from behind, and while Ai Fa was securing me, slashed the man’s throat.

“Clan head of the Fa, thanks to your quick wits, I was able to get the jump on this fiend. To think that he really wasn’t able to move his right arm...”

“I also have to give you my gratitude for saving my clan member’s life. I can never thank you enough for that,” Ai Fa solemnly replied as her left hand firmly gripped my right.

That warmth and strength felt incredibly precious to me as I slowly rose to my feet.

Then, together with Ai Fa, I walked over towards Tei Suun.

Was there really this much blood within a single human body? At any rate, as he sat in that overwhelming dark red pool, Tei Suun’s expressionless face stared blankly into the distance. As always, I couldn’t sense any emotion from him, and his eyes were cloudy like those of a dead fish.

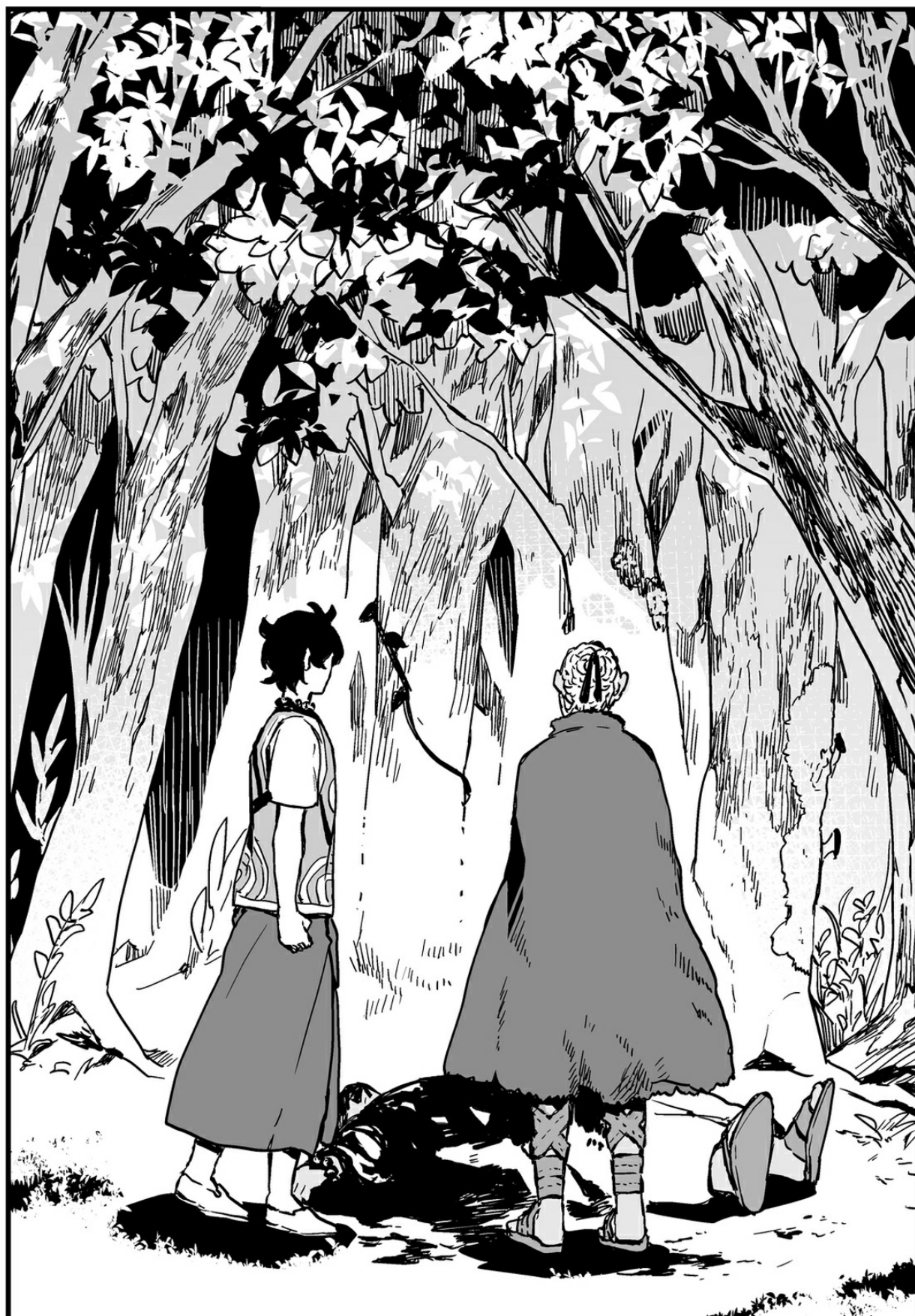
What sort of expression had he worn just moments ago when he was spitting out those hate-filled curses? I hadn’t been able to see, and I honestly couldn’t even imagine.

“Tei Suun...” Despite the fact that it meant getting coated in blood, I kneeled down next to the man. As the light steadily faded from his murky eyes, he listlessly glanced my way. “On the night of the clan head meeting, were you the one who helped Ai Fa?”

As if refusing to answer, Tei Suun closed his eyes. However, before the weak movements of his chest completely ceased, he slowly opened his eyes once again. And then, his blood-soaked face broke out in the same gentle, satisfied smile he had worn after eating the giba burger.

“At last, I’ve carried out my final task...”

Those were the last words spoken by Tei Suun, a man born to a branch family of the leading clan, who spent fifty years being trifled with by a man overflowing with wicked strength.



Epilogue

“I’m seriously sorry...!”

It was now the afternoon of the following day, the 17th of the blue month.

I was in the midst of preparing dinner in the Fa house, and Kamyua Yoshu was deeply bowing his head.

Ai Fa was sitting with one raised knee and an angry look on her face, while I stared at the top of the man’s blond head as I checked the taste of the soup.

“As you guessed, that merchant caravan was a scheme designed to entrap the Suun clan. It wasn’t a lie that there were only five bodyguards, but the remaining 18 were all a mishmash of mercenaries and other such experienced fighters. The whole thing was a plan schemed up by the captain of the ducal guard, Melfried.”

“Outside of who came up with the idea, that was pretty much exactly what I had figured. So the elites of Genos really were intending to do away with the Suun clan after all, huh?”

“Hmm... It was ultimately more Melfried’s personal decision, actually. His father Duke Marstein Genos gave his tacit consent, but the cabinet minister Cyclaeus didn’t know anything of the plan,” Kamyua Yoshu stated, finally raising his head.

“Huh,” I replied, adding just a pinch of salt to the soup. “So the elite of Genos aren’t exactly a monolith, then? But isn’t that one heck of a backhand, to jump to that after overlooking their lawlessness for so long?”

“Well, you see, that was all down to the mistake of granting Cyclaeus full authority on the matter, while Melfried heavily values justice and the rule of law, and wanted to bring the blade of judgment down on their necks. Meanwhile, Duke Genos just sort of watched it all play out with an awkward grin.”

“That’s all he did? Sure sounds like the lord of Genos has it easy.”

“He’s kept plenty busy with other matters. Plus, once he entrusted the matter

to his cabinet minister, it wouldn't look great if the duke had to go and blatantly overrule him," Kamyua Yoshu responded with a carefree shrug of his shoulders, but then he noticed Ai Fa's chilly gaze and curled back up. And yet, no matter how meek he acted, the man still seemed every bit as sketchy as always. "I was in a pretty tough position, too. Just as Melfried was begging for me to help out, I met the two of you, and then I had that talk with Donda Ruu at their settlement. And that just firmed up my impression that the Suun were the only corrupt clan at the forest's edge, and the rest of you were a proud people... That all left me more than a little uneasy."

"Uneasy? Why's that?"

"Well you see, I was afraid that even if we were successful in exposing the Suun's crimes, it could lead to the rift between Genos and the forest's edge growing even deeper... Like, the townsfolk growing more afraid of you all, while spurring on the ill will towards Genos people of the forest's edge have. It looks like the biggest mistake I made was underestimating what a proud people you were." I really wanted to respond to that, but I was more interested in confirming Kamyua Yoshu's intentions at the moment, so I held my tongue. "And so you see, I pleaded to cancel the plan! I really did! But Melfried just wouldn't listen. He said that a crime is a crime, and criminals had to be punished. 'No matter what complaints the people of the forest's edge may raise, justice is on our side!' Honestly, he's a lot more hot-blooded than he looks."

"Right. Well, I wouldn't say that way of thinking is wrong, exactly."

But what was it? For some reason, I just couldn't bring myself to sympathize with that man.

I found that doubt frustrating, but Kamyua Yoshu's following explanation helped to clear it up.

"It's not like if something's not wrong, it's right. What Melfried finds just is incredibly one-sided. All he seeks is what's 'right' here and now. He casts aside the past and future, and only thinks of the very instant in question. What caused that crime to occur, and what sort of future will be born from passing judgment? Those are factors he doesn't even consider... I'd say that can make

things easier, but it's also incredibly dangerous," Kamyua Yoshu said while staring off into the distance and sitting there in his cloak. "To put it more simply, the one to look the other way on the Suun clan's crimes till now was Cyclaeus. He blew off his responsibility, but Melfried had no authority nor duty related to that, so him butting in to cast judgment would just cause trouble. But Melfried's only goal was to judge the crime, rather than trying to assert the validity of his actions. As long as the criminals get judged, that's enough to satisfy him."

That sort of fastidiousness may fit in well with the people of the forest's edge...

But at any rate, there were still a number of points I wasn't satisfied on.

"Please hold on. In that case, why didn't the folks from the castle let us take a break from our work with the stalls? Was it really to use us as bait to draw out Zattsu and Tei Suun? If so, then wouldn't that mean they wanted to capture the criminals badly enough to put us and the townsfolk at risk?"

"Ah, no, the one to give that order was Cyclaeus. Melfried hasn't been granted any authority in regards to the people of the forest's edge. In fact, he saw how dangerous that all was and took his ducal guards out to patrol the post town, even though that isn't their usual duty." After saying that, Kamyua Yoshu's eyebrows drooped apologetically. "You've probably already figured this out, but I'm the one who ignited Melfried's justice-seeking heart about the matter. I earned favor with him through his father Duke Genos, and I told him all I knew about the twisted relationship between the Suun clan and Cyclaeus... and I told him how the warped bond between Genos and the forest's edge needed to be corrected. From there, Zasshuma, who is a bodyguard rather than a merchant, was brought on board as an advisor and the current plan was put together. I was the one to bring it up to start with, but I wasn't capable of leading such a large group and all that, so I stepped back to just being a participant and quietly watched things play out."

Somehow, that course of action felt very much like him. "Onlooker" really did seem to be the role that best fit this aloof man.

"But then I talked to you and Donda Ruu, and I started having some serious

concerns. That's why I figured suggesting you do business in the post town was the least I could do to make up for my actions, seeing how I couldn't reveal the truth to you."

"Eh?"

"My thought was that if you could create a bond between the forest's edge and town, that could leave at least a bit of hope. That perhaps you could relieve at least a little of the fear from the townsfolk and animosity from the people of the forest's edge. That was what was running through my head when I brought up the idea. But I also honestly do wish for the people of the forest's edge to live more prosperous lives like I said before, too."

If Kamyua Yoshu hadn't made that suggestion to us... Then I never would have met Milano Mas or Naudis, or even Balan and Shumiral's groups. And I wouldn't have ended up manning the stove for the clan head meeting either, so I wouldn't have revealed the Suun clan's crimes.

By this point, I had difficulty trying to even imagine such a future.

"You were trying to plot out what would be most convenient for the folks inside the stone walls, right...? I can understand that. But—"

"To the people of the forest's edge, a big fat liar like me is totally unforgivable, right?" Kamyua chimed in, stroking his narrow, stubbly chin. "Well, I don't especially mind being hated, anyway. Even if they detest me, my deep affection for the people of the forest's edge won't change in the least. But if that leads directly to a distrust of Genos, that'd be a real issue. The hunters of the forest's edge are so honest and pure that I could see them yelling, 'We'll leave Morga behind and head to some other forest!'"

"Were you eavesdropping again?"

"I wasn't! Did someone seriously say that? That's certainly troubling... And the leading clan heads have all already met Cyclaeus a number of times, too. That must've made them feel even more distrusting of folks from the castle."

I still had yet to meet that Cyclaeus man, personally. Was he truly unrelated to this whole incident...?

"Um, there's something I'd like to ask you. Before, you said ignoring

Cyclaeus's authority and exposing the Suun's crimes would just cause trouble. So is that why you ignored Cyclaeus and came up with this crazy plan to corner the Suun clan?"

"Huh? I mean, in order to expose Cyclaeus, first we had to take down his accomplices, the Suun clan."

"What...?"

I got the feeling I had just heard something completely nuts.

"Ah, had I not brought that up yet?" Kamyua Yoshu questioned while scratching his head. "You see, there's no evidence. It's just that there are two or three of Cyclaeus's political opponents among those who were harmed by people of the forest's edge. Officially they were attacked by bandits, but since it happened over ten years ago, we haven't been able to find any clear proof."

"That's..."

"And apparently, there was an incident where a girl was kidnapped from a farm village and sold to slavers. Plus there was that matter with the merchant caravan ten years back. It wouldn't be possible for the people of the forest's edge alone to turn the goods they stole into coins. In that case, doesn't it make sense to think they had someone assisting them from inside the walls of stone?"

"If you know all that, then why haven't you passed judgment on him?!"

"Like I said, there's no proof. That's why we absolutely wanted to capture the criminal Zattsu Suun alive before Cyclaeus could get to him... But unfortunately, all we could get out of him were curses, and he didn't speak a single word of what we wanted to hear."

I was stunned into silence.

"But on the other hand, Zattsu Suun clearly stated right in the middle of town that he attacked the merchant caravan ten years back. And so, Melfried figures we'll just have to use that point to try to go after Cyclaeus from here on out."

"So you're planning to expose Cyclaeus's crimes now?"

"Of course. If he's guilty, then Melfried's blades are sure to come swinging.

And also... since we're talking about a treacherous retainer from within the castle walls, I'll have no reservations about giving my all to help out," Kamyua Yoshu stated, then he broke out in a grin like a Cheshire cat.

Seriously, what was with this guy...?

It was then that I turned to my clan head, who was shooting Kamyua Yoshu a seriously suspicious look.

"Hey, Ai Fa, what do you think of Kamyua?"

"Hmm?"

"I mean, he's kept deceiving us for over ten days and exposed Dari Sauti and his men to danger, so do you want to call him a big fat liar and a sneak for that?"

"Ah, hey, could you at least leave that sort of talk for when I'm not around...?"

"I don't especially feel as such," Ai Fa swiftly, calmly responded. "We knew this man couldn't be trusted from the very start, and as for the matter with the Sauti men... From what I hear, they simply carried out their duty as hunters faced with giba. The ones worthy of hatred are those villains who spurred on the beasts in the first place."

"Hmm. But Kamyua's group probably turned down the request to take on more escorts from the Sauti clan because they wanted to be the ones to catch the criminals. With that in mind, wasn't that pretty cowardly?"

"Ah, like I said—"

"But they were unable to discuss the circumstances, correct? They also would have been unaware as to what sort of clan the Sauti are. They likely couldn't discard the possibility that they were secretly collaborating with the Suun clan, plus if they were surrounded by over ten hunters, the fiends may have given up on their attack... It was clearly all done out of their desire to catch the criminals."

Feeling satisfied, I turned back towards Kamyua Yoshu.

"Just like the folks from the castle aren't a monolith, the people of the forest's

edge all have their own different ways of thinking, too. And if we want to maintain the bond between us, then we have no choice but to talk, sharing our emotions and reasoning.”

“Talk...? Who should be talking to whom?”

“Us, and you all. The people of the forest’s edge and the citizens of Genos. Kamyua Yoshu... You say you don’t mind if we hate you, but you also stated that you won’t insist Melfried’s way of doing things is correct. Plus, the people of the forest’s edge don’t generally have any interest in folks from the town or castle. There’s no way we can form proper bonds with things as they stand, right?”

“Hmm?” Kamyua Yoshu pondered, tilting his head.

As I stared him straight in the face, I continued on, “To start with, I believe you should have a frank discussion with the leading clan heads. If you can gain the bare minimum of trust that way, then maybe drag Melfried along to the meeting with Cyclaeus scheduled for a few days from now.”

“Melfried? To the meeting? That’s crazy talk, Asuta! Melfried’s right in the middle of sharpening his blades in order to expose Cyclaeus’s old misdeeds!”

“That may be so, but the people of the forest’s edge already know that your merchant caravan was a fake, as well as what happened ten years ago. Those two points will absolutely have to come up... And without you and Melfried present, doesn’t it seem likely that the discussion wouldn’t go anywhere?”

“Oh, my! You couldn’t be saying you want me to be there too, right?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Back where I come from, they had a saying that silence is golden. But there are times where you won’t get anywhere without speaking up, too. I believe that it’s necessary to exchange words if we ever hope to truly understand one another.”

I didn’t believe hopes and prayers alone would be enough.

I truly felt there were times when you needed to bare your heart, no matter how unsightly that might seem. And it may just have been Tei Suun’s actions yesterday that taught me that.

He was practically acting as Zattsu Suun’s lawyer as he constantly proclaimed

how the Suun clan's way was correct, while the people of the forest's edge present angrily argued back. It wasn't just me, either, but Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Rau Lea, and Shin Ruu... Those true-born hunters fought back against Tei Suun with their emotions and thoughts.

As a result of all that, the townsfolk got to hear their voices. And it was likely their first time hearing the thoughts and feelings of the people of the forest's edge.

After Tei Suun's corpse was carried away and the soldiers released us, Dora and Tara had suddenly come running up to us. Both the father and daughter were sobbing away. At first I didn't know what was going on, but after a bit they calmed down enough that Dora managed to choke out the words while wiping away his tears.

He said that he hadn't known the people of the forest's edge lived like that, and that they hadn't shown anywhere near enough gratitude, and that he was embarrassed to have looked down on them before meeting us.

The people of the forest's edge never touched the fruits of the forest, even if it meant starving to death. It seemed that fact had left Dora feeling seriously overwhelmed. As someone who made a living by tending his fields, the idea that the people of the forest's edge were being compelled to live such lives to protect them was surely unbearable for him.

We couldn't exactly continue running the stalls for the day after all that, so we just wrapped up our work with The Great Southern Tree and then headed back. But we decided to timidly head to town the following day (in other words, today) and found that the place seemed peaceful once again. The westerners didn't all greet us with smiles, of course, and a lot of folks still looked at us with marked fear and bewilderment. And yet, it felt like something had clearly changed.

The shift was hard to put into words, and it felt different than even before the incident. It was like they were staring intently at the people of the forest's edge in an attempt to figure something out... The gazes pointed our way now were clearly filled with more than just fear and discrimination. There was something else there, too.

It felt like the question, “Just who are these people, really?” was constantly being silently asked of us.

The townsfolk now understood just how much resolve the people of the forest’s edge had when it came to carrying out their task as hunters. And in turn, the people of the forest’s edge now knew just what awful actions their brethren had taken that incited such fear in the townsfolk.

The real fight starts now, I thought to myself. Could the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk truly come to understand one another? Was it possible for them to become good neighbors when their temperaments were so very different? We were finally standing at the starting line for figuring all that out.

With that in mind, it was important to strive to bring the folks from the castle to that same point, too.

It was possible to give up whenever. And so I felt it was important to give it our all and aim to reach a mutual understanding until we hit that point. If after everything it turned out we just couldn’t get along at all, then we would have no choice but to go our separate ways. But until that time came, we just had to keep plunging forward no matter how rocky the trail. So as to not let the death of Tei Suun, that man who kept acting as an accomplice to Zattsu Suun’s evil to the bitter end, go to waste.

“Asuta...”

“Hmm?” I questioned, turning to look Ai Fa’s way only to find her shooting me a disquieting glare.

“When will we be able to have dinner? I’m starving.”

“Ah, sorry about that. I just need to cook up the hamburger.”

Ai Fa then nonchalantly lifted her right hand and covered her mouth. In all likelihood, she had been unable to stop herself from breaking out in a smile when she heard the word “hamburger.”

“Well then, I guess it’s about time for me to get going. I’ll treat that proposal from you as my homework, Asuta. And sorry for bothering you while you’re busy.”

With that, Kamyua Yoshu slowly rose to his feet.

As I kept preparing to cook the hamburger all the while, I said, “Huh?” and turned his way. “You’re not going to eat with us, Kamyua? But I prepared enough for three...”

“Eh? You’re inviting me to dinner? Under these circumstances?”

“I mean, considering when you showed up, I figured that had to be what you had in mind.”

“Even I’m not that shameless...”

“So then you really are leaving?”

“No! If you’re willing to treat me, then I’d love to take you up on that!” Kamyua Yoshu shouted out in a fluster, then his eyes suddenly narrowed. “It somehow feels like you’ve grown awful reliable over these last few days, Asuta. You’re like a completely different person compared to when I first met you.”

“I don’t know about all that. But well, I guess it would be strange not to have grown at all after what I’ve been through,” I replied while staring back into Kamyua Yoshu’s unusually colored eyes. “From the very first moment we met you, you were a key person in our lives, Kamyua Yoshu.”

“Eh? What’s this now? That’s way too much praise for an undependable wanderer like me, isn’t it?”

“Even so, if we had formed a closer relationship with you, then maybe things wouldn’t have turned out so badly. I had tried to maintain the proper distance, but if I had trusted you from the bottom of my heart... And if you had trusted me just as much, then maybe there wouldn’t have been so much bloodshed.”

“I already trusted you as much as I possibly could, though.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me the truth about that merchant caravan? Why didn’t you mention the tragedy that happened to Milano Mas and Leito’s relatives? If you had revealed that much, then at the very least, the Sudra men wouldn’t have needed to shed blood pointlessly, right?”

Unusually enough, my words seemed to cause Kamyua Yoshu to hesitate with a, “Hmm...”

“You had no choice, though. Plus I didn’t reveal much of anything about the circumstances with the Suun clan to you, so we’re in the same boat there. However...”

However, if we had trusted each other a bit more and pooled our resources, maybe we could’ve found a way to just take down Zattsu Suun. That was the one point that I seriously regretted.

“Were Tei Suun’s remains allowed to be buried at the forest’s edge...?” Kamyua Yoshu finally asked. His slightly droopy eyes narrowed a bit and looked incredibly clear.

“Yeah. His former family buried him at the outskirts of the forest. Why do you ask...?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just figured it would be a lot better that way than having him buried by the city of stone as a criminal.”

“Kamyua, if we’re going to have a more trusting relationship from here on out, then you really should speak your mind rather than treating silence as golden... So let me just come out and say, I really have trouble handling it when your eyes make it look like you see through everything like that.”

Kamyua shrugged his shoulders under his long cloak, the same look still in his eyes.

“That’s an awful thing to say. It’s not like I’m clairvoyant or anything, you know.”

“At any rate, the folks from the Genos castle and the forest’s edge need to have a frank, open conversation. Would it be possible to drag Melfried along to that meeting?”

“Well, I certainly can’t say it’ll be easy. Still, I’ll give it everything I’ve got, in my own way. It’s for the sake of friendship between Genos and the forest’s edge, after all,” Kamyua Yoshu responded with a big grin.

As that was going on, Ai Fa tugged away at my sleeve. It was like her eyes were screaming at me, “Is dinner still not ready yet?!”

While pondering about the path forward for Genos and the forest’s edge, still

fraught with trouble, I set about preparing dinner for my beloved clan head and the aloof guy who may just end up a very close friend of mine.

Intermezzo: The Ruu Clan Chef “Why the long face, Reina?” Lala Ruu questioned while baking poitan for dinner.

As she boiled up a giba soup, Reina Ruu listlessly replied, “It’s nothing...”

“Come on, that can’t be true. Did I do something to make you angry?”

“No, not at all. Why should I be mad at you, Lala?”

“I mean, you’ve been shooting glances over my way the whole time we’ve been cooking. I figured I must have done something to upset you.”

“Upset me...? I was just thinking how skilled you had gotten at manning the stove,” Reina Ruu replied with an unintentional sigh, causing Lala Ruu to angrily raise her eyebrows.

“See, something really is bugging you, isn’t it? If you’ve got something to say, then just come out and say it.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not like that... It’s just, I’m a teensy bit jealous of you and Vina...”

“Hmm? Jealous? Why’s that?”

“You got so skilled by helping Asuta out each and every day, right...? So isn’t it only natural to feel jealous?”

The anger on Lala Ruu’s face was replaced with puzzlement as she replied, “Hmm? Vina and I help run the stalls, but it’s not like we’re cutting up meat and vegetables. I don’t think that’d do anything to help raise our cooking skills...”

“But you’re so much better at it than you used to be. You worked so skillfully back at the clan head meeting, too.”

“Really? Well, I’d certainly be glad if that were the case,” Lala Ruu answered with a big grin that showed the whites of her teeth.

“Right. And Sheera Ruu is really amazing, too...” Reina Ruu muttered with yet another sigh. “She must have grown so skilled by now that I couldn’t possibly

compete... Oh, how I wish I could help with Asuta's work, too..."

"Are you really just saying that because you want to polish up your cooking skills?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I was figuring maybe you just wanted to be with Asuta."

"T-That's definitely not it!" Reina Ruu insisted, her face going deep red. "Of course, it would be nice to work alongside Asuta... But that aside, I really do just want to improve my cooking skills! That's not a lie! It really isn't!"

"You don't have to get so worked up over it. Besides, I think that's totally natural," Lala Ruu stated, shrugging her shoulders while piling the now-baked poitan onto a plate. "Besides, you're still way better at manning the stove than we are, so why do you need to improve? I mean, Ludo already says the food you make is the best, too."

"But I still can't measure up to Asuta at all..."

"Why do you have to compare yourself to him? I mean, there's no beating Asuta to begin with. He's one of a kind."

Reina Ruu was left at a loss. That was just how unexpected she found her sister's words.

"But you'd like to get better at manning the stove too, right, Lala...? Wouldn't it be amazing to get so good at cooking that even Asuta couldn't beat you?"

"Eh? I mean, I do think it'd be nice to be a little more skilled at cooking meat. But there's no way it'd ever be possible to get as good at Asuta... But that's how you feel, Reina?" Lala Ruu said, sounding a bit astounded and scratching her red hair. "You sure have some pretty amazing thoughts rolling around in your head. But if you ask me... I think I'm more jealous of you and Sheera Ruu, since the food you can make is already plenty tasty."

"Huh?"

"At any rate, don't go getting so worked up over it and worry everyone. I can definitely attest to your skills," Lala Ruu uttered in an irritated tone, then picked up the now empty pot with a grigee pole. "It's still bright out, so I'm going to go

ahead and handle some washing. Don't doze off and ruin the food, alright? Everyone's looking forward to your cooking, after all."

With that, Lala Ruu left the kitchen, only for Reina Ruu to sigh yet again.

So that's what Lala thinks? But I'm still so inexperienced...

Reina Ruu wanted to grow capable of creating far more delicious dishes. Just how much satisfaction would it bring to be able to make food that wouldn't lose out to Asuta's...? That thought had been running through her head for weeks now.

However, the chance to help out with work in the post town just hadn't come her way. And during that time, Sheera Ruu's skills were making remarkable progress, to such a degree that Asuta would now leave the stalls to her and step out. There was little doubt in Reina Ruu's mind that the girl had easily surpassed her by now. That thought caused her heart to fill with gloom and regret.

Sheera Ruu was a precious member of her clan. They were fairly closely tied by blood, as she was the daughter of Donda Ruu's younger brother, and she seemed to be growing a lot more lively and cheerful as her skills at manning the stove grew. While that made Reina Ruu glad, she also couldn't help but feel a painful frustration.

If she had been able to receive more instruction from Asuta, she would surely be a better cook than she was now. Maybe she would even be able to keep up with him... Or was that thought disgraceful and arrogant?

At any rate, Reina Ruu couldn't bring herself to just cast aside those feelings.

Just like Lala Ruu had said, she really did want to be together with Asuta. She had even thought that she would like to welcome him into the Ruu clan if at all possible. Then they could walk that same path as family. The nights she was enraptured by such thoughts and unable to sleep were certainly far from few.

But more than that, or perhaps precisely because of it, Reina Ruu wanted to become strong enough that she wouldn't lose to Asuta. She wanted to stand beside him and see the same sights. Perhaps more than wanting to get a hold of him, she wanted to *become* him.

I still can't see a thing. But I want to be able to do those same things that

Asuta makes seem just natural. Perhaps he's the one I'm really jealous of, rather than Sheera Ruu...

Just what sort of feeling was that?

She adored him so much she could feel her chest tighten, but she was envious enough that it was like a fire was burning in the pit of her stomach. The thought that she was such a wretched person really did make Reina Ruu feel a bit like crying.

But still, that was ultimately just the sort of person she was.

Lala Ruu tended to be thought of as rather wild by the people around her. And Vina Ruu was considered such a strong person. But a spirit every bit as fierce as theirs lurked inside Reina Ruu.

The desire not to lose to anyone... Perhaps that was what was driving her emotions at their core.

Does Asuta ever have such thoughts...? She pondered as she tossed fresh firewood into the stove.

It was just then that Rimee Ruu returned to the kitchen.

"We're all done with our cooking! Huh? Where did Lala go?"

Rimee Ruu had been grilling meat on the outdoor stove along with their grandmother, Tito Min Ruu.

Reina Ruu listlessly turned to face her younger sister, still stirring the contents of the pot as she did so.

"Lala went to go wash a pot. I'll be done here soon too, so could you prepare the plates?"

"Yup! Got it!"

Rimee Ruu darted about, and in no time at all there were enough plates for everyone piled up atop a board. Now all that was left was to carry this pot into the house and portion it out for everyone.

With that work done, Rimee Ruu walked over next to her older sister.

"Mmm, it smells tasty! Did you use that tau oil stuff in it?"

“Yes. Asuta said it should go well in soup, after all.”

“It’ll probably be real yummy! Hey, can I try a taste?”

“Huh? But dinner’s so soon.”

“But papa and everyone aren’t back from hunting yet. And I’m already starving, so I can’t wait,” Rimee Ruu said, tugging at her sister’s clothing as she did so.

With a bit of a strained smile, Reina Ruu replied, “Just a small plate then,” causing her sister to proclaim, “Yay!”

For tonight’s soup she had added aria, chatchi, and tino, as well as salt and tau oil for flavoring. And of course there was plentiful giba meat in it too, so it shouldn’t have felt lacking in the least.

Tau oil really was an amazing ingredient. Apparently, it was what was known as a “seasoning.” You couldn’t make a dish with just the tau oil itself, but adding it made other foods even more delicious. It really felt like some sort of magic potion.

For just one bottle of the oil, it cost ten whole red coins. That would be enough for ten containers of fruit wine, 40 poitan, or 50 aria. But she wanted to use it badly enough that she went and begged her mother and father until she was given permission to purchase it.

If Reina Ruu happened to go and make a poor dish using it, then she likely wouldn’t be allowed to buy any more. Thanks to that she had been doing careful taste tests and using the tau oil very sparingly. But a few days had passed by now, so her parents weren’t exactly likely to rebuke her at this point.

“Here’s the plate! It’s fine if it’s just a teensy bit, but could I get some meat and vegetables in there too?”

Reina Ruu gave a nod, then scooped a bit of giba soup onto the small plate.

Seeing that, Rimee Ruu broke out in a big grin and then took a bite.

“It’s so good! The soup you make really is the best, Reina!”

“That’s thanks to the tau oil. Anyone could make something this delicious with that ingredient, right?”

“That’s not true. I always thought your giba soup was the tastiest.” After tossing a bit of giba meat into her mouth and chewing slowly to savor it, she added, “Plus, Asuta said it too, right? That tau oil has a strong smell and taste, and the flavor changes when boiling it, so it can be tricky to use. So I don’t think just anyone could make such a yummy soup with it.”

“But it’s still not enough to measure up to Asuta...” Reina Ruu stated glumly.

“You think so?” Rimee Ruu replied with a little tilt of her head. “You and Sheera Ruu will probably be able to make cooking just as tasty as Asuta’s eventually, right? That’d probably be impossible for Vina and Lala, though.”

Reina Ruu was stunned, and stared at her youngest sister’s little face with disbelief.

“B-But we’re talking about Asuta, right? It goes without saying that I couldn’t, but I think such a thing would be beyond even Sheera Ruu.”

“That’s not true. After all, you two love cooking just as much as Asuta, don’t you?” Rimee Ruu said with a big smile. “A while ago, Ludo said that proud hunters are strong. That people who enjoy their job and take pride in it are powerful... So I’m sure that you and Sheera Ruu will end up just as good at manning the stove as Asuta!”

Reina Ruu was at a loss for words.

And as she just stood there, Rimee Ruu came up beside her again.

“I’m trying hard too, so you better do the same, Reina! We’ll all try our hardest to get better at manning the stove!”

Still unable to come up with a proper response to that, Reina Ruu just placed her hand on her little sister’s head. As she stared at the girl’s brilliant smile as bright as the rising sun, she could feel the heavy gloom clouding her heart give way to a different emotion entirely.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the seventh volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

Assuming this volume is released on schedule, 2016 will already be halfway through.

I know I always say it, but it really surprises me how quickly time flows by.

At any rate, this series has managed to make it up to its seventh volume during that time. And that's all thanks to everyone's support, for which you have my deepest gratitude.

Now then...

The content this time was too much for one book, so it ended up needing significant revisions. In terms of the story there weren't any big changes, but I needed to condense things by around 60 pages. That's definitely the biggest I've needed to do so far.

Since I was that far over it seemed like it could have been quicker to just split it into two books, but I really wanted to wrap things up within the volume considering the contents.

Compressing the text is a task that's both enjoyable and painful for me. But I would certainly feel grateful if you found all that pain and pleasure resulted in a good book.

As for the intermezzo bonus chapter, it ended up being told from Reina Ruu's perspective. I've written a number of extra stories in the web version from other points of view, but this was her first time. Actually, now that I think about it, it's my first time writing from the perspective of any of the daughters of the main Ruu house, aside from Rimee Ruu back in the first volume. Perhaps it's tricky to write for them in a way, because they're such central characters in the main story.

Now that I've come this far, I think I'd like to try writing bonus chapters for Vina and Lala Ruu, too.

This time around, the two inn owners also got illustrated. As I'm quite fond of old-timers, that certainly made me happy to see. One of the other older male characters also got a design too, but thanks to the composition he ended up getting completely cut out. He won't be showing up next time around, but I look forward to the day when the spotlight shines his way once again.

Now then, next time is finally the eighth volume. I won't touch on the contents so as to avoid spoilers, but I recall especially enjoying writing it.

Last volume and this one were particularly serious stories, so you may well be starving for bright, fun content by now. The overall feel may not change, but I'd say there will be a lot more warm and friendly-feeling elements next time around.

The overall nuance and composition also takes on more of a short-story feel, which is how I've been primarily writing the web version lately.

Still, the contents should be just like always in the end, so I hope you'll enjoy it just as much as you have up until now.

And this is a bit of a digression, but next time I'll have some extra pages to spare, so right now I'm pondering if I should add in a bonus story from the web version that hasn't been published yet, or if I should go for an extra large new tale like I did in the second volume.

Now then... As always, let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

May 2016,

EDA

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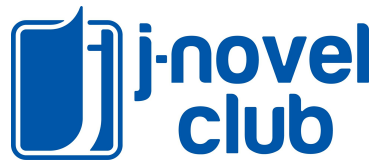
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 7

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner

Edited by Adam Fogle

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VOLUME
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