

Author: Fuurou
Artist: Yuki Nekozuki

4



So You Want to Live the SLOW LIFE?

A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[A Wedding Piece by Piece](#)

[Renovation and the Wonders of Poultry](#)

[The Big Wedding](#)

[After the Wedding](#)

[Plum Work: The First Stage](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series](#)

So You Want to Live the Slow Life? A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds,
Volume 4

Fuurou

Translation by Zihan Gao

Illustration by Yuki Nekozuki

Title Design by Arbash Mughal

Editing by Charis Messier

Proofreading by A.M. Perrone

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

So You Want to Live the Slow Life? A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds,
Volume 4

©2023 Fuurou

English translation rights reserved by

Cross Infinite World.

English translation ©2024 Cross Infinite World

All rights reserved. In accordance with U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or

by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, email the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at the email below.

Cross Infinite World

contact@crossinfworld.com

www.crossinfworld.com Published in the United States of America Visit us at www.crossinfworld.com

Facebook.com/crossinfworld

Twitter.com/crossinfworld

crossinfiniteworld.tumblr.com

First Digital Edition: August 2024

ISBN-13: 979-8-88560-142-9





A Wedding Piece by Piece

A breeze brought in humid air from the windows as it swept into the prayer alcove. An elderly man sat on his knees before the Buddhist altar, lit incense sticks, then pressed his palms together in prayer. Then, after a conversation with his old friend—my great-grandfather—Mr. Kaōin left with a slightly more peaceful smile than usual. I didn't know the exact thoughts that led to such a smile, but...he looked satisfied, as if he'd finally put a heavy burden to rest.

As for me, I forced my aching body to budge and tidy up the tea set before resuming my battle with housework.

The day went by peacefully.

During my chores, I thought back to Mr. Kaōin's visit. Since the wedding dress pamphlets had arrived and the dress could be delivered as soon as the following week, it meant that our wedding might end up being that soon. I'd been told that the bride and groom didn't have to make any preparations for beastfolk weddings—our assembled relatives would arrange the food and entertainment. In general, the couple assumes a more passive role.

That being said, it would be difficult for the groom's family—*my* family—to prepare anything in our case, so I had to shoulder that part. But Techī's family, or to be more specific, her parents were sharing half of that load with me.

A normal wedding would be held in a large venue which our families would organize, but Techī had voiced a different opinion, and that was part of the reason our wedding would be held at this house. Since that was out of the way, the only things left were meals for all the participants and entertainment to liven up the atmosphere.

We were pretty good on the entertainment front. Kon and the other kids were participating, and they had promised they'd take care of that for us. I was confident they could bring in cheer and joy. *So yes, we should be ready to hold the ceremony without issue at any time.*

As for my relatives, they'd applied for permission to enter the Wilds and had already finished the necessary examinations. *Yeah, I think I can safely say that everything is ready once we decide on Techí's dress.*

And that wasn't going to be an easy decision. What design should we choose? What color? We wanted plenty of time to ponder those questions, and depending on how things proceed, we might have to wait for two weeks for the dress delivery.

While such thoughts swirled in my mind, my hands were busy moving the cordless vacuum. But I was soon pulled out of my pensive thoughts by an ominous premonition—or rather, a nasty noise that was hidden among the roaring of the vacuum. I turned the device off.

The motor of the vacuum *had* been deafening, so there was a high chance that I'd heard wrong. However, considering the time of year, it was better to be safe than sorry. With that thought, I put the vacuum cleaner to one side and headed to the cleaning closet where we stored cleaning tools.

From inside, I retrieved a can with a familiar label. I opened it, took out its contents, turned the can lid upside-down, then placed the lid onto the can. On the lid, which served as an incense dish, I set up the dedicated metal fixture. Once that was ready, I slotted the contents I'd removed onto the tip of the metal fixture—those familiar with it might have already guessed, but yes, it was a mosquito-repellent incense coil. With a lighter that had also been inside the can, I lit the incense coil. Smoke began to rise.

In Japan, canned mosquito coils are a classic, irreplaceable part of our summers, especially in the countryside. The mosquito coil was actually invented in Japan back in the 1900s, in the Meiji period, and a certain plant called Dalmatian chrysanthemum—the Japanese name is literally “bug removing chrysanthemum”—was the active ingredient. The company the inventor couple founded is still around a hundred years later, selling their specialty to this day.

I took a sniff of the scent that wafted my way. “Ahhh, this is the scent of summer,” I muttered to myself.

We were still in the middle of our rainy season and not quite in the midst of summer yet. But whenever I caught a whiff of mosquito incense mixed together

with the smell of tatami and plants in my great-grandfather's house, it felt like summer flowing in and painting over the landscape. It was a unique blend of scents that reminded me of my summer holidays when I was a child.

Just smelling it resurrected the bubbling enthusiasm of my childhood days—my adventurous spirit—and it even summoned something uninvited, like the mischievous prankster within me.

“Now, all we need's a wind chime, and it'll bring the summer mood right into this place,” I mused.

Wind chimes are the undeniable symbol of summer. During my summer holiday visits to this house, they had always, without fail, welcomed me with peaceful jingling from their spots, hanging off the roof eaves.

I had an admission to make—I was the kind of boorish guy who didn't feel that the chiming sound cooled me down. In fact, I never understood why people said that the sound was associated with a refreshing cool breeze, but anyway. The association of summer and wind chimes, as well as summer vacation and chiming sounds was imprinted thoroughly on me due to my yearly summer visits to this house.

Whenever the sound of a wind chime happened to enter my ears as I watched movies or TV dramas, it would all suddenly rush to the front of my mind—the layout of this house, Gramps's smile, and the numerous delectable meals he had made.

I was a goner. I could never chase that association away.

If we added the scent of mosquito incense on top of that, it was a lethal combination that spurred on an impulse to throw everything away, board a bullet train, and leap right into this house to play.

Such thoughts swirled in my mind as I crouched down in front of the lit mosquito coil. In that sentimental moment, I had the delusion that at any moment now, Gramps would walk down the corridor next to me, making the floorboards creak with every step.

You know, now that I think about it...holding our wedding in this house might be a blissful thing, especially for me. I didn't truly believe in the afterlife or

ghosts from the bottom of my heart, but celebrating the next major step of our lives in front of Gramps's altar made me feel as if we were sharing our big moment with him.

Though I couldn't assemble everyone, many of my relatives were going to gather in this house, and they'd probably greet Gramps at the altar while they were here. If Gramps was truly watching over this house from the other side, I was a hundred percent sure that he would be over the moon.

I dragged out a long sigh. "If only I came back earlier... He could've been with us, and I could show him that I found my happiness in life..."

Though I was the one who said it out loud, I knew that it was impossible—a what-if that could only be realized in my dreams. But I still couldn't stop the words from spilling forth.

And that was when the phone in my pants pocket made a noise and vibrated, shocking me out of my wistfulness. I almost jumped out of my skin. In reality, however, I'd only jumped to my feet as I hurriedly took it out of my pocket. It was a text from Tech. The subject line was displayed on my phone's screen, and it read, "*I picked one.*"

"Whoa... That's way too fast!" I gasped. "She only *just* took the pamphlet with her to the orchard, didn't she?"

I opened the text and read the full thing, but in the main part of the text was only the overly concise response of "*This one*" and a designation number that had been printed on the pamphlets. Then, attached was a photo of the dress which the number referred to.

The base was a pure white dress, and a translucent blue dress would be worn on top of it as a second layer. The blue and white melted together perfectly into a stunning gradient, and just above the chest area was an elegant rose ornament. On the other hand, the back of the dress was a bit plainer with no special decoration to speak of. *Oh, actually, that makes sense. Her big chipmunk tail would cover it, so it'd be pointless to use the budget there.*

For the back, the focus didn't seem to be on extravagant looks, but on the design of her tail fitting. The fitting would wrap around her tail comfortably and make it look natural. It seemed that the pamphlet featured close-up photos of

the mechanism as well.

After staring long and hard at her text, just in case, I texted her back, *“Are you sure you want this one? You still have time to decide tomorrow.”*

Almost immediately, I received a reply. *“I want this one.”*

Okay, if that’s what she wants. I wasted no time and relayed her choice to Mr. Kaōin via a text message.

His response came quickly as well. *“Are you certain that you want this one? There is still time. You can think over it until tomorrow if you’d like.”*

I chuckled—I’d just sent almost the same message to Techī, after all. I replied, *“Yes, this one, please.”*



AFTER work, Techī arrived home, accompanied by the evening sunset. After she’d washed her hands and gotten changed, she settled down in the living room like always. Then, she proceeded to flip through the wedding dress pamphlet eagerly.

She’d already decided on the dress and had apparently looked through the pamphlet many times during her free time at work, but it seemed that the simple act of perusing the dresses was a source of joy for her. She was even humming a tune—I’d never seen her in such a good mood before.



It's a bit of a rare sight, and my heart's warm and happy just from watching her like this. She might remain in this state until and even after the day of our wedding. Oh, that's such a wonderful thought. With such thoughts in my mind, I prepared dinner.

That was when Techii called out to me. "Have you decided on your one, Mikura?"

"My one?" I paused my preparations and gazed at Techii quizzically. "What are you talking about?"

She raised the pamphlet high up in the air. "I'm asking you what you're going to wear to the wedding." She threw an exasperated look at me.

Oh... It'd completely slipped my mind, but she was right. It was also *my* wedding. Which meant that, of course, I had to wear something formal and proper, and I had to stand next to Techii in such formal and proper attire...

I resumed my preparations for dinner, and during the few spare moments I snuck in, I gave her a reply. "Hmm... Uh... I mean, I can't wear my business suit, right? So I guess I have to rent something too. Something for rent, something for rent... What should I pick? Hmm... Actually, what kind of clothes would be the most suitable?"

"Well, I'm going to wear a dress, so you probably have to pick one that matches well with it." Techii paused. "Wait, does that mean you haven't looked through this pamphlet yet? The last few pages feature male attire too, you know."

"Oh... I only skimmed through it quickly, so I missed that part. Of course, I made sure to look carefully at the dress you picked. But if there're good choices on the pamphlet, I suppose I could select one from there. As long as they adjust the tail opening, I should be able to wear it with no problem."

"If that's what you think's good, go ahead." She paused. "There're only a few pages though, so there isn't much of a choice, to be honest."

"I guess I expected that. In general, brides tend to be the central figures of weddings," I commented as I arranged grilled fish onto plates. Then, I mulled over the words I just said—that the bride was the star of the ceremony. As I

transported the dishes to the living room, I continued, “Hey, how about you pick one for me, Tech? If you select an outfit you want me to wear—an outfit that you think will match you well when I stand by your side, that’s probably the best choice possible.”

Eyes wide, she whipped her head around and looked at me. She opened her mouth, as if she wanted to say something, but those words died in her throat for reasons unknown to me. In the end, she only nodded and said, “I see.” She cast her gaze back down at the pamphlet and began flipping through the pages.

While Tech was busy perusing the pamphlet, I set the table. The last piece of the puzzle was two bowls of miso soup on the low table, and once it was in place, I sat down leisurely.

Tech looked up and gazed at me. She then turned her head downward to stare at the pamphlet before looking back at me again. After repeating the cycle a few times, she closed the pamphlet with a small sigh and picked up her chopsticks.

I was a little intrigued by her actions, but I put my curiosity to one side for now. I took my chopsticks into my hand and voiced thanks for the food before diving right into dinner while it was still steaming hot.

As I worked through my meal, I said, “Well, we have time. Even if we contact him tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, it should be fine. Take all the time you need.”

“Ha.” Hearing that, Tech let out a small chuckle before she replied, “No, I’ve already set my sights on one of them. I *have*, but I just thought that, well... There aren’t that many formal clothes that look good on you. The usual, easygoing shirt and jeans you wear suit you more than anything else. When I imagine you in something fancy and stiff... Nah. It’s awful.”

I was slightly dejected. “Really? You’ll go as far as to say ‘awful’?” I pursed my lips slightly. “I might not look like it, but whenever I showed up in a suit, I always received critical acclaim.”

“Oh, I get that. I saw you wearing a suit when you greeted my parents a while ago, and you pulled off the look perfectly. Strange. When I tried to imagine you in something formal based on your usual appearance, it felt really mismatched,

but you looked really good in that suit... Hm, why is that?"

"I mean... If you want to look for a reason, I guess it's because it was custom-made." I shrugged. "It certainly didn't come cheap. Professionals tailored it to my form so that I'd look good in it, and naturally, that produces stunning results."

She hummed nonchalantly. "Is that how it works? But the basic structure and design of that suit is the same as the normal ones you see in stores, which only cost ¥10,000 or ¥20,000, isn't it? Shouldn't they all feel similar in the end?"

"Never! Even higher-tier suits around ¥50,000 or ¥60,000 can't hold a candle to custom-made articles. Some of my coworkers didn't hold custom-made clothes in high esteem, but the first impression you make when wearing them is like night and day compared to commercial products. Whenever I had to do promotion or sales, it was my irreplaceable partner that I couldn't go without."

"Huh. Didn't know that."

"Well, now you know," I smiled slightly. "Even for a wedding dress, there would be a world of difference between commercial and custom-made. The tailor would design it to hug your form and bring out all your beauty and noble charms. It'll be a design that captivates anyone who sees you, and they'll take care so that it won't look out of place on you at all, you know what I mean?"

Techi, who'd been working on her grilled fish happily until now, suddenly stilled her hand holding her chopsticks. A pensive look took over her face. She glanced at the pamphlet she'd put to one side, then finally met my gaze. "Custom-made clothes are...*expensive*, right? Does that mean this dress is going to cost a fortune, too?" As she spoke, tension stiffened her features to the extreme, and she fixed an intense stare on me.

I tilted my head in question as I gave my response. "Huh? Weeell... Yeah. It's going to be expensive. I'm not that wedding dress savvy, but if I remember correctly, they might cost as much as millions of yen or something like that. It's a bit of a different case for us, though. These dresses may be custom-made, but we are renting them and returning them afterward. They're even offering us a special discount, so it shouldn't be *too* costly."

"Gah... Hmm..." She looked at me nervously. "D-Does that mean...they'll get

mad at us if we get it dirty?”

“I think it depends on how dirty and what kind of treatment it requires. No matter how careful we are, it’s definitely not going to remain completely clean. If we keep it down to a level that a basic wash can fix, I don’t think they’ll hound us about it.”

“Gnnnah...” she groaned. “M-Mom said that she was gonna make her special unagi eels for our wedding, but that could cause a nasty stain...!” She gritted her teeth with chagrin. Her eyebrows were furrowed and she chewed hard on her lip, as if she were a child who’d been robbed of her favorite toy. It was a new look on her.

I couldn’t help but break out in laughter as I replied, “You can just change into something else when we’re eating. First, you’ll show off your dress to everyone, take some photos, do the wedding vows... Then you can get changed during the banquet and eat away happily in casual clothing. Many couples like to change from a Western dress to a Japanese kimono during the banquet after, so it’ll be our own version of that. That way, the dress won’t get dirty, and you can eat to your heart’s content.

Pausing, I continued, “Actually, isn’t unagi eel supposed to be in season during autumn? You already have them available around here? And...it’s so heavenly that you’d react so strongly about it?”

Techi widened her eyes. They remained wide as her cheeks took on a shade of apple red. She then puffed out her apple-red cheeks, and she skillfully kept them puffed out as she used her chopsticks to carry food into her mouth. With terrific vigor, she wolfed down the food I’d prepared for her.

Then, in a fierce voice, she yelled, “Thanks for the food!” Her embarrassment had yet to die down, it seemed, because she gathered her bowl and tableware into her arms before stomping into the kitchen and arranging them in the sink. Then, she made a beeline for the bathroom and escaped from my sight.



AFTER breakfast the next morning, I contacted Mr. Kaōin about my wedding clothes. In the end, both sets of clothing would arrive this coming Monday. Accordingly, my wedding was next week, but my day passed by peacefully and

leisurely like always.

Like I'd mentioned before, preparation for weddings in the Wilds didn't really fall on the shoulders of the bride and groom. Compared to the standard weddings on the other side of the border, it was much more easygoing, which meant I didn't have to use my brain much. I appreciated that. The weddings I was familiar with usually had speeches with details about the relationship as well as other events hosted by the couple, but that wasn't necessary either.

As for preparing food, it wasn't much different from what I usually did. The amount of work was probably similar to the boar hot pot party with the kids or the barbeque day. *Hold on...* Techī's relatives were going to share the burden, so perhaps I could cut down that estimate by half.

Wow. It's a breeze in comparison. It'd be nice if we had such carefree weddings as an option on the other side of the border too, I couldn't help but think. Oh, but I should check in with Techī's parents first so that we don't end up making the same things. If two identical dishes end up on the tables, it'd get awkward. I think we'll need to hold a strategy meeting before we start.

I decided that I would ask Techī about these matters after she returned, then contact her parents to confirm the details. *That reminds me... Techī said something about unagi eel, didn't she? Unagi eel, unagi eel... Hmm...*

When one thinks of unagi eel dishes, the immediate association is Japan's Midsummer Day of the Ox. Eating grilled unagi eels—which are both nutritious and delicious—on the hottest days of summer is the perfect way to replenish energy lost to the sweltering heat. But the best season for unagi eels is actually autumn, and they're said to be at the peak of their taste roughly between October and December.

It is currently early summer—we are still a long way from the best unagi eel season. In fact, I suspect that I might not be able to find any unagi eels readily available in the market even if I tried. Purchasing such fish at a time like this, therefore, means that you have to either buy farmed-raised or frozen stock from the previous year. But that doesn't seem quite right judging from Techī's reaction.

Don't tell me... Can you catch a ton of unagi eels in the Wilds regardless of the

season? No way, right? Then again, there are many mysterious things about this forest. I don't know whether we owe it to the Fusang trees or the natural environment here, but we can harvest valuable mushrooms as if they were weeds growing in our backyard, and animals like masu salmon end up bigger and more delicious than their counterparts on the other side. If that even applies to unagi eels... It sounds like I can gorge on an out-of-season feast of delicacies, but hmm...I wonder about that.

I mean, if they can catch however many unagi eels they want, whenever they want, there should already be an export industry selling them to the other side of the gate, right? Actually, the hon-shimeji and masu salmon are also of a grade that can be exported as luxury food... But there doesn't seem to be anything remotely like that, and Mr. Oinu, who gave me a big pile of hon-shimeji, didn't mention it either. Does the export industry have strict regulations due to quarantines and inspections or something?

But that doesn't make sense, either, because isn't that exactly what my business involves? Selling chestnuts and walnuts produced in the Wilds to the other side of the gate? Which means that exporting local products isn't a problem at all, and there are established networks for such trade. In that case... Maybe someone out there really is exporting local specialties like our hon-shimeji—I'm just not aware.

Now that I knew of the local specialties and the Fusang trees, I discovered that the Wilds had much more economic power and potential influence than I'd imagined. *Perhaps those are some of the bargaining chips that preserves its self-autonomy.*

While I entertained such thoughts, I unhurriedly and leisurely did housework as usual.

Suddenly, my ears picked up the pitter-patter of tiny feet racing toward me. The culprit darted across the garden, yelled "Incomiing!" before diving onto the veranda and making a beeline for the bathroom. After washing his hands, he plopped down in the living room as if it were his own house and turned on the TV. He was clearly preparing to stand by until my chores were done.

I wonder whether I was just like him when I was a child... I wondered as I stole

glances at our usual visitor, Kon, while tackling the chores. With speed and efficiency, I finished the housework and washed my own hands. Finally, armed with tea and snacks, I advanced into the living room.

“Welcome, have some tea and snacks,” I said, placing the tea and snacks on the low table. “And oh, my wedding with Techī is probably happening sometime next week. I hope you’ll come with all the other kids, Kon.”

As Kon reached out for the refreshments, he showed me his signature close-eyed smile. The first word out of his mouth was his blessing. “Congrats!!! Also, is it really okay for us to come too? We’re chipmunk beastfolk like Techī, but we aren’t relatives or anything.”

I munched on the senbei crackers I’d prepared as I replied, “Yeah, of course. I only moved to the Wilds relatively recently, so I don’t really know a lot of people. It’s not like I can invite my friends from the other side of the border over, after all, so it’s just Techī, her parents, Rei, and you little ones. We’ll make a magnificent feast, and I hope that’ll be enough to attract you to come.”

“Yahoo!” Kon cheered. “I see, a wedding, huh! A feast at Mikura and Techī’s wedding! Hmm... It must be unagi eels.” He reached for a senbei cracker and held it steadily with two paws. Crunching sounds echoed out as he nibbled on the cracker with his front teeth, gradually chipping it away.

I blinked. “Are unagi eels a standard menu during a wedding banquet?”

Though Kon continued to gnaw at his cracker, he took breaks to reply, “Umm... Not really. Techī’s mommy is famous for her grilled unagi, so I thought she might make them for the wedding! She always treats us to unagi during festivals and stuff! It’s *amazing*! For other families, I think...whole roast is common for their weddings?”

“Whole roast? By that, you mean...whole roast pig?” I guessed.

“Pigs, cows, sheep, deer, bears...” he listed them off. “Oh, and I guess *fey-zants*? *Fey-zants* are birds! They’re yummy!”

“Huuuh... You’ve got a lot of variety around here. Hm? Wait, pheasants? As in, the green pheasants?”

If I remember right...they’re birds we’re banned from eating, right? Hold on... I

vaguely remember something about it being legal to eat male ones, just not female ones...was it?

I froze as that thought flashed across my mind. Then, I noticed Kon tilting his head worriedly, as if to say, “Are you okay? Did something happen?”

Hurriedly, I sent a smile in his direction to reassure him. *I can’t remember the exact rules on the other side of the gate, and this is an autonomous region, so I shouldn’t think too hard about it,* I decided.

Shaking those thoughts out of my mind, I said, “You mentioned whole roast, but you’re not roasting them as they are, are you? You must, uh, prepare them in some way, right?”

“Huh? Oh, um, y-yeah.” He looked startled at my sudden question. “We build a stove with bricks and put the meat inside. We’ll stuff its belly with rice, veggies, seasoning, and oh, sometimes fruits too! When we’re done, we pile on more bricks to cover the whole thing, light a fire, and slowly cook it!”

“Interesting. Fruits, huh?” I mused. “Fruits cooked with rice and meat... I’ll be honest, but I can’t really imagine what they’d taste like.”

“They’re sweet and full of meat flavors! They taste really good!” Kon chirped. “It’s kind of like...hmm... The sweet rice is a bit like eating *inari* sushi steamed with all kinds of ingredients!”

As he spoke, he flashed me his usual close-eyed smile. I admired it as I thought, *Unagi eels are nice, but I also want to try out a good whole roast.* For a while, I sank into my thoughts. “Huuuh... Unagi eels, whole roast meat... It sounds like it’ll be an extravagant wedding banquet. Extravagant, huh...? That means it’ll need lots of money and effort...” In my mind, I pictured a stereotypical feast with many lavish dishes.

Kon peered into my face worriedly. “You don’t look happy, Mikura! They’re really delicious! Whole roast is YUMMY!”

I plastered a smile on my face as I replied, “W-Well, it’s not that I’m worried about the taste of whole roast or anything. It’s just that I have to prepare some food for my wedding too, and I’m struggling to come up with dishes that won’t look out of place next to the exquisite unagi eel and whole roast.” I sighed.

“Huuuh...” Kon sounded like he didn’t quite get it. “Your food is always yummy, Mikura, so anything you make should be fine!”

I hummed in thought. “But it’s our *wedding*. I can’t just serve up my usual dishes... The problem is that I can’t come up with any good ideas either.” I dived back into my brainstorming.

That was when Kon joined me in my dilemma and hummed in thought as well. Both of us wrung our brain for ideas. After a while, Kon seemed to beat me to the punch, because he flashed a brilliant smile and raised his voice. “When I think of your food, I think of smoked stuff! And sausages! And jam is nice too!” He announced with confidence, as if he had the best idea in the entire world. His smile was as radiant as the sun, and I could feel joy and triumph practically radiating off him.

I wore another smile, a little more genuine this time, and gave him my reply in a soft voice. “I’m elated that you think so highly of me, Kon. But those were all foods I made for my hobby. They taste good, yes, but I wouldn’t exactly call them a feast—”

But Kon didn’t pay any mind to the lack of self-confidence in my tone. He snuffed it out with his own big and energetic voice. “What’s wrong with that? Hobbies are great! It’s just like you too, Mikura! A wedding is where one family and another come together and *shocial-lize*, so it’s important to have good food, but it’s also important to tell people what kind of person you are! I think you can turn your food into your self-introduction! You can say you made it for a hobby, and your food will tell everyone what you’re like!”

“O-Oh, is that how it works?” I blinked, taken aback. “You’re amazing, Kon. You know so many complicated things and are so mature... Sometimes, you blow me away with your words.”

Kon tossed the last fragment of his now reduced senbei cracker into his mouth. He placed a hand on his cheek and fiddled with it until he stuffed the senbei cracker into what must be his cheek pouch. His cheek puffed out like a balloon, and he wore his usual calm expression as he replied, “Yeah. I’ve been studying lots about weddings lately, so I know a buncha stuff! I became a rich guy, so a lot of people want to marry me, and there’re so many people that I

have to go to arranged marriage *inta-views* with or something!”

Huh? What? Excuse me? What did Kon just say? Okay, he said that there are a lot of people who want to marry him, and he has to go to...arranged marriage interviews?!

“A-Arranged marriage interviews?!” I squawked pathetically. He acted aloof, as if he was talking about the weather, but I felt like the world was crashing down on me. “*You’re* going to them? A-At your age? Seriously?! And they want to marry into riches?! Is that really okay?! Are *you* really okay?!”

Kon tilted his head quizzically at me. He replied in a perfectly indifferent tone, “Yeah, I’m okay. Daddy and Mommy will look at them carefully first, and they’re *inta-views* for mature and proper marriage, so... Ah, I got it! Maybe your marriage *inta-views* on the other side are a bit different!”

I let that possibility sink in.

He explained, “Over here, we can’t go to them unless big adults represent us. The beastfolk who’re present and the beastfolk that introduce the brides to us have a LOT of *responsa-ability*. If the marriage fails, those people have to take *responsa-ability* and pay stuff like *kompan-sation* money. That’s why it’s apparently better to marry someone through *inta-views* instead of marrying someone you met randomly. During the *inta-view*, Daddy and Mommy will be with me the whooole time, and I dunno much about marriage, so I thought that’s my best choice.”

Kon practically dropped a bombshell on me while acting completely composed and calm. The contents of his speech were no different from what an adult would say, and he was more levelheaded about his life than I was about mine. I couldn’t help but feel awe and respect welling up, but his mannerisms and expressions belonged to the Kon I knew very well. He was shuffling the senbei cracker in his cheek around, playing with it like the carefree child he looked like.

The contrast was mind-blowing, and I felt a big culture shock for the first time in a long while. It caused my head to spin.

Things like weddings and arranged marriage interviews were private matters. The people involved and their families had the final say. And judging from what

he'd said, the Wilds had an established culture revolving around them, so an outsider like me shouldn't poke my nose into their affairs just because I came from a different cultural background. But I was still worried. I was so worried that I felt the urge to say something, anything, but I didn't know whether I should.

Thoughts swirled around in a chaotic mess in my mind, and I fell deep into thought. In fact, I was probably overthinking things when Kon looked up with a start and raised his voice.

"Actually!" he exclaimed. "My marriage stuff doesn't matter! We're talking about your wedding right now, Mikura! We were talking about food! What are you going to do? There isn't that much time, so my vote's for bringing out your hobby food. Oh, or do you wanna make something like the meal you made back when your Daddy and Mommy came? That super fancy stuff in the morning! That was soooo tasty."

I searched my memories. *Let's see, I think I made...crispy salad, pork shabu-shabu, bacon and egg sandwiches, and fruit yogurt, if I remember right.* They were menus that took a respectable amount of effort, had exquisite taste, and were usually well-received. But the problem was that they were only a decent choice—it was hard to say whether they were suitable for a grand wedding.

In that case, I guess I should take Kon's advice and make something smoked... or should I? Hmm, I should discuss this with Techii and think over it carefully by myself too. I should also look up recipes on the Internet and make thorough preparations before I make a final decision. I nodded to myself.

Though we didn't have a confirmed date for our wedding yet, it was going to be next week, and I was in a race against time. I had to purchase the ingredients necessary, prepare the cooking utensils, do the preparations, then cook the actual meals within the span of time available. *I should make a decision as soon as possible.*

Coming to that conclusion, I said, "I'll think about it. Thanks, Kon. I'll chat about it with Techii tonight and pass on your advice to her. I'll decide then."

Kon flashed me his signature smile and nodded merrily before gulping down the senbei cracker fragment in his cheek. He looked like a mischievous child

when he acted like this, but for some reason, he seemed oddly mature today, and I changed my internal assessment of Kon just a tad.



THAT night, I bombarded Techī with questions about the food for our wedding, and the result was a simple, “Do what you like” from her. Apparently, it wasn’t an overly strict or formal ceremony in the first place, so as long as there was some kind of food to eat, it was enough. If neither of the families could cook, it was even acceptable to order takeout. Of course, we had the option of preparing the food by ourselves too, and it was always better for us to invest some money into the feast, but we didn’t have to force ourselves.

Since high-class dishes like unagi eel and whole roast was going to be on the menu, I’d set my expectations for myself extremely high, but the reality was that Techī’s mom was only making unagi eel because it was her signature dish. The meat for the whole roast would be whatever was available in the Wilds, so they didn’t count as much of a luxury food either.

Therefore, according to Techī, I didn’t have to worry about maintaining a high standard at all. Anything was fine—the preserves I’d made until now, any random dish, or even a selection of sandwiches. The most important thing was that I was getting married to her, after all, not the decoration. That being said, it was out of the question to starve our guests, and she added that it would be best if we had food that met the minimum requirement in taste and volume.

I was considering going over my plans with her family, but Techī said it wasn’t necessary. Even if we ended up making the same thing, the guests could just enjoy different styles of the same dish, and once people started digging in, no one would care about who made which—food was food. As long as I contacted them about my planned schedule ahead of time, that was apparently enough.



WITH all that information in mind, I got to work the next day. I relaxed and let my thoughts wander, and my mind didn’t disappoint me as it arrived at one certain menu that represented me well.

After breakfast, housework, and grocery shopping, I dived right into the preliminary preparations for the food I’d serve at the wedding.

At the supermarket, I'd bought the highest grade of Japanese Berkshire pork boneless rib, and one pack was in my hands now, ready to be transformed into a treat.

For our mystery dish, first, pack the meat into a zipper bag. Pour in the light pickling liquid you would use for Japanese-style lightly pickled vegetables. Don't use the stronger brine you would use for French cuisine. Finely grind a selection of herbs with subdued aromas and sprinkle them inside the bag. Squeeze out the air before zipping tightly. Place in the fridge and leave it to rest.

"It's smoked meat, isn't it?! It's smoked meat, right?!"

The lively voice of Kon cut into my internal commentary. He was perched on his usual chair as I repeated the earlier process over and over again in the kitchen.

"Bingo!" I replied while working on the meat. "This time, I'm using pork instead of boar meat, so it'll taste very different from before. The difference will be particularly obvious because I'm using the boneless rib of expensive Berkshire pig, which were fed with first-class sweet potato. The fat is incredibly sweet, and the meat is soft and tender... If you smoke these, they will produce a delectable taste that is on a whole other level compared to other smoked products."

Kon stared hard at the blocks of rib meat lining up on the chopping board and swallowed audibly. His eyes were fixed on the meat as he slowly opened his mouth and said, "Um... You put them in pickling liquid, which we usually use for lightly pickled veggies, so you need to wait for a while... That means these must be for your wedding next week, right? I see! We'll get to eat smoked meat at the wedding! I'll get that yummy smoked meat again! Yahoo!"

I cackled evilly. "You are too naive, my little friend. Yes, I will turn this into smoked meat, but that isn't the end of the story... I'll take it a step further and make a heavenly dish that requires smoked meat. Eating them directly is a pleasure, yeah, but smoked meat prepared and cooked meticulously will surprise you with an extraordinary taste!"

His eyes widened. "A recipe with smoked meat?! Even though they're already delicious just like that?! Wh-What kinda dish is it? Um, erm... Oh, when you

made that pancetta, you said that you were going to make soup? But...turning smoked meat into soup? Sounds like a bit of a waste.”

“Contestant Kon, it is my regret to inform you that you are incorrect! The answer is...” I paused dramatically. “...*donburi* with a big heap of smoked meat over rice!”

He gasped. “Smoked meat donburi!!!” Then, his face fell slightly. He must’ve imagined what the dish would be like, and he seemed somewhat disappointed. He tilted his head and asked, “Um... You’re only going to put smoked meat over rice?”

I decided to enlighten Kon about the recipe for smoked meat donburi while I did the preparations.

A very important component of any smoked food is the woodchips you use. For this recipe, select something that has a moderate aroma; not too strong. You should also desalinate your meat more thoroughly than usual. The rest is your usual smoking process.

When the smoking is complete, slice the meat thinly. Place the slices of rib meat onto rice. Sprinkle some pepper onto the rice bowl. Place a heap of shredded spring onion on top of the smoked meat. Next, grind green yuzu skin and sprinkle over the entire rice bowl. Squeeze a small amount of green yuzu juice onto the dish. Separate egg yolk from egg white and lay the egg yolk gingerly on the summit.

And you’re done. You may eat it as-is, or you can adjust the taste with a refreshing ponzu sauce-based sauce or a rich and sweet soy sauce-based sauce.

The flavorful smoked rib meat and shredded spring onion is a match made in heaven. If you add steaming rice to the mix, it’s simply irresistible. The aroma of yuzu, the rich, creamy flavor of egg yolk, and your sauce of choice will be your companions to the very end, making every single grain of rice an absolute delight.

I was planning on making smoked meat donburi for all the guests—or well, for everyone who wanted to eat it—which was why I was mass-producing smoked meat at the moment.

“Wow!” The moment I finished my lecture, Kon stood up, kicking down his chair in his excitement. He waved his hands up and down vigorously as he exclaimed in an exhilarated voice, “Smoked meat donburi! It sounds AMAZING! And the meat you bought is top quality, right? Which one tastes better?! Boar or the pork?!”

I hummed in thought. “Good question. I think it depends on your preference. The charm of boar meat is its overwhelming umami and rustic, gamey flavor. Meanwhile, Berkshire pork is a luxury product that requires a lot of time and effort, and the result is an irresistible combination of sweetness, tenderness, and an exquisite flavor no matter which part of the meat you eat.”

I continued, “But if you’re asking for my personal opinion, if we are taking the smoked meat a step further and turning it into a dish like donburi, I think Berkshire pork wins. As for boar meat, eating it by itself and simply grilling it brings out its natural charms better.”

“I see, I see!” Kon exclaimed with shining eyes. “That means the pork donburi must taste yummier than the smoked meat I had last time! Ohhh, I might be able to stomach seconds and thirds and even more of just donburi alone at the wedding!” But then, his eyes opened wide, as if he suddenly realized something. He stilled, and a grave expression settled on his face before he looked up at me nervously. “Mikura... There’re also going to be unagi eel and whole roast at the wedding, right?”

I blinked. “Huh? Yeah, there should be. Techī’s parents are going to prepare those from what I heard.”

“There will be lots of unagi eel, lots of whole roast, and lots of smoked meat...? Whaaat?! Wh-Which one should I eat?! How can I decide?! I mean, of course, I’m going to eat them all! But my tummy will burst! If there’s so much yummy food, my tummy can’t fit them all!”

I was stuck between laughter and fond exasperation. “Well, I mean, you could steadily eat a little bit of each. And knowing you, you can also feast while heading to the toilet to relieve yourself like last time. I’m also planning on preparing palette-cleansing dishes like salads, pickles, and Japanese tsukemono, so you could take breaks by eating those. That way, you can enjoy the food at

your own pace. How does that sound?”

Kon didn't look very convinced—it seemed that he didn't agree. For a while, Kon was plagued by his dilemma. He held his head in his hands, he curled up and threw himself down on the ground, and he even started rolling around like a ball as he wrestled with the question of which cuisine to dine on during the wedding. Roll and roll he did on the kitchen floor, and think and think he did. But an answer didn't come to him, and he started rolling even more. That was when his stomach protested with a grumble.

Hearing that, Kon abruptly froze. He looked up at me innocently as he lay on the floor and said, “Mikura, is Berkshire pork really *good* good? Is it that amazing?”

The little glutton within him was showing its face, and I chuckled as I replied, “Yes, they are very delicious. Of course, it all comes down to preference in the end, but among all pork, it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that sweet potato-fed Berkshire pork reigns supreme.”

“I see... If it's that great, I want to try some, but I have to wait until next week, right? Smoking takes time, right?” There was another growl from his stomach. The hidden message behind his words was clear—this boy wanted Berkshire pork right here, right now.

By now, I'd mostly finished the first stage of preparations for the smoking process. I put away the equipment, tidied up the sink, opened the fridge door... and retrieved a pack of pork loin meat I'd just purchased today.

This pork loin meat was also Berkshire pork. I'd purchased it because I'd predicted that Kon would definitely surrender to temptation. And indeed, it was the right decision, because the moment Kon saw it, he hastily stood up, dashed up to the sink, propped up his chair again, then plopped down. His eyes were practically shining as he entered his usual observation mode.

“Is meat on the menu for lunch today, good sir?!” he exclaimed, using an honorific that sounded downright bizarre when coming out of his mouth.

I laughed even harder than earlier. “Hahahaha! Yeah, that's right. It's meat. But we don't have that much time today, so I can't make anything complicated. I hope you won't mind.”

Next, I fetched the remaining ingredients from the fridge, and now, I was ready to get some cooking done.

The additional ingredients for this recipe are as follows: bell peppers, carrots, celery, onions, and tomatoes. As for seasoning, you'll need lemon, basil—in my case, I'm using bottled basil I keep in the cabinet—salt, and finally pepper.

Wash the vegetables and chop them finely, with the exception of the tomatoes. Cut the lemon into smaller pieces that are easier to handle. Chop the tomatoes last, and try to cut them as small as you can. The juice of the tomato will spill out, but we don't want it to go to waste. Transfer the tomato chunks and as much of the juice as possible onto a plate.

The next step is preparing the Berkshire pork loin. Make incisions between the fat and the lean meat. Sprinkle on a little salt and a generous helping of pepper. Cover the meat in a thin layer of flour. Repeat this process for both sides. Leave to rest until the flavors seep in.

Your hands must be oily from handling the pork, so wash your hands. Fetch a frying pan to make the sauce.

The sauce recipe isn't that difficult. Heat the frying pan. Pour in olive oil. Add chopped vegetables to the pan. After the mixture is somewhat cooked through, add the tomatoes. Turn to low heat or medium heat and sauté the mixture while stirring constantly. Draw out the water inside the vegetables and mix it all together. This will be your sauce base. Add basil, a small amount of salt, and pepper. Adjust to taste.

Some chefs prefer to add some garlic at the very beginning or some sugar for taste, but my personal preference is forgoing both. I aim for a plain sauce that brings out the natural flavors of the vegetables. The carrots and onions provide sweetness, the bell peppers and celery and basil add their potent aroma, and finally, the tomatoes provide their sour tang and juice. When the sauce is close to finished, squeeze lemon juice and drizzle. Transfer the sauce to a bowl. That's one thing off the checklist.

In my opinion, Berkshire pork loin has a rich sweetness and umami, which matches perfectly with a simple sauce like this. If you add sugar, the sweetness becomes overpowering. If you add garlic, the fragrance and flavors become

overpowering. Therefore, a plain and light sauce should be tastier...I think.

Now that the sauce is done, all that's left is to sauté the Berkshire pork loin. Wipe the frying pan clean with paper towels. Drizzle in a small amount of olive oil. Add meat to the pan and slowly cook over medium or low heat. When the fat starts melting, there might be excess oil. Steadily throw the excess oil into a container for waste oil as the meat cooks. When the meat begins to brown, turn up the heat slightly and roast both sides of the meat thoroughly. Once cooked through, the meat is ready.

Finally, arrange the food on plates and set the table.

In the middle of the low table, I placed down the sauce bowl with an audible thud. This way, everyone could adjust the amount of sauce to their liking. And now, we could dig in whenever we wanted to.

Seeing that, Kon, who'd silently watched over my work, jumped down and raced into the living room. He pounced onto his own seat and took a big whiff of the aroma of sautéed pork. "That smells SO *guuud*!" he exclaimed.

Though the sautéed pork wasn't that much of an aromatic dish, it seemed that the faint fragrance was more than enough for his sensitive beastfolk nose to relish in. And while he was busy doing that, Techii came back—it was her lunch break. She did her usual routine of washing her hands and so on before settling in her seat. Now that everyone was here, I prepared rice and miso soup.

Once all three of us were around the low table, we voiced our thanks and dived right into lunch.

Techii hummed in thought. "You know, I've eaten pork steak with relatively strong seasoning, but it's my first time seeing pork with vegetable sauce."

"Me too, me too!" Kon chirped.

And in the same order as they spoke, they scooped up a little of the sauce from the bowl and poured only a tiny bit onto their plates, probably as a sample. They cut their sautéed pork into small chunks, picked one up with their fork, dipped it in sauce, then finally carried it into their mouths. I followed their example and bit down on the meat.

Just one bite was enough to release an indescribable, blissful flavor that

exploded on my tongue. The sweetness and umami of the Berkshire pork blended together perfectly, accented by the vegetables that provided more diverse flavors and textures. Meat and vegetables paired together was practically taste therapy, and wanting more, I chewed harder and faster. I chewed, I munched, and the next thing I knew, I'd swallowed the contents of my mouth. But I was left craving for another piece and another taste of that sauce, and my hands moved with a mind of their own.

I was enjoying my sautéed pork to the fullest, and my two companions seemed to share the same opinion about this combination they'd never had before. In fact, they even piled the finely chopped vegetables onto their plates until the pieces started tumbling down from the small hills. They carried the meat and vegetables into their mouths and chewed silently with radiant smiles.

The pork and sauce were sweet, sour, and extremely aromatic. The flavors of the vegetables were like a vibrant painting splashed with every single color possible, and thanks to their variety, my tongue was thoroughly entertained to the very end. For this dish, it was hard to tell whether the sauce with perfect chemistry was the star, or whether the Berkshire pork was the star—they were both magnificent.

By the time I'd realized, my plate of sautéed pork and the sharing bowl of sauce were both completely empty. And by now, it'd become a standard occurrence for rice to be left over because we were too immersed in the taste of the main dish. To distract myself from my gluttonous desire insisting that I hadn't had enough, I ate rice and drank miso soup, finally quelling the nagging of my inflated stomach and appetite.

In unison, the three of us let out sighs, which were hot from a good steaming meal. For a while, we basked in the satisfaction of eating delicious, sautéed pork in utter silence.

Renovation and the Wonders of Poultry

LUNCH was over, and Techī returned to the orchard. As for me, I put away the dishes and finished up some chores before fetching my staff and heading out to the garden with Kon, who was also armed with his staff.

Recently, it had become a routine to rest a while after a high-calorie lunch and to get moving once our stomachs had settled down. We would sometimes take a walk or do radio calisthenics workouts, but most of the time, this exercise referred to combat training with our staffs.

There was always the risk of thugs, boars, or bears appearing on my property again. It would be out of the question if I couldn't use my staff—if I didn't know self-defense. Therefore, whenever I had free time, I would study as a humble disciple under Kon.

"Huuuurgh!" Kon let out a battle cry as he thrust his staff into the ground and used it as a jump pole to launch himself into the air. In midair, he released his hold on the staff and spread his arms out wide in an offensive stance as he swooped down on me.

In response, I lightly swung my staff—which was wrapped with a thick cloth so that neither of us would get hurt—and gently parried the living projectile that shot my way. The next moment, Kon firmly grabbed my staff and dashed down the shaft as if he were pole climbing. He was fast—terrifyingly so. He extended his arms wide and made a lunge at my face.

Clinging to my head like a koala, he lightly tapped my head repeatedly. Then, he jumped back and away from my face before harrumphing in triumph with a smug expression.

"Yep, my win again!" he declared his victory. "You know, Mikura, there's cloth around the staff to soften the blow, so you can swing it a bit harder!"

I scratched my head as I replied, "Well, I know that in my head, but I still hesitate no matter what I tell myself. Unfortunately, it's a part of my nature,

and it's going to be tough to try and go against it." I sighed.

"I mean... I like that part of your nature, Mikura, but you need to toughen up and beat 'em up when you're up against bad guys! If you get hurt because you're too nice, it's not good." Kon picked up the staff he'd released and assumed a stance. But the next moment, his eyes widened in realization, and he darted toward the veranda.

On the veranda was the backpack Kon always carried everywhere. Inside were his coverall apron and a change of clothes, as well as a few other knickknacks. He rummaged through his backpack and retrieved a set of black clothes and a black headscarf. He promptly changed into the all-black attire, looking exactly like a standard ninja before he held his staff in reverse grip like a ninja sword. Finally, he struck a pose.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "I asked Mommy to make this for me! Ta-da! A ninja costume! How does it look? It's SO cool, right?! Daddy said that a brown one was better, but a ninja definitely has to choose black to blend into the night!"

He was cosplaying—or, well, enjoying his pseudo-ninja experience. He was acting just like the child he was. For a moment, I had the urge to say what was on my mind, but I fought it down in the end. Instead, I said awkwardly, "Y-Yeah! It looks great on you! You look sooo cool, yeah!"

Kon narrowed his eyes, looking unimpressed. "Mikura, you don't sound like you believe what you're saying. You don't think I look cool, do you?" He saw right through me.

I raised both hands in surrender and caved. "No, I really think you look neat, and it suits you. But, well... Like Mr. Sanmaya, I'm also a brown color worshipper, so I didn't know what to say for a moment."

"Reeeeeeally?" He looked at me incredulously. "But brown looks so tacky."

"Weeeell... I think black looks more stylish too, but in reality, black actually stands out like a sore thumb. Apparently, if a black shadow moves inside a human's vision, they will notice it immediately. Even at night, black surprisingly doesn't offer much stealth. On the other hand, even if a patch of brown moves inside a human's vision, it's hard for them to take notice. Because of that, real ninjas were said to have worn boring colors like brown."

Kon gasped. “What?! Black stands out?!”

“Yep,” I replied. “Like a sore thumb. Brown colors are less noticeable than black, and further on the stealth spectrum are the camouflage patterns on military clothing.”

He mulled it over. “Um... I thought that camo colors were kinda flashy. Can you really hide with them?”

“It’ll probably stand out in the streets or in the city, but if you hide inside a forest, people are going to have a hard time finding you. The military uses them for a good reason. Even if someone wearing camouflage moves right in front of you, you might miss it completely sometimes. I’ve seen it in photos before, and it’s shockingly hard to spot.

“If you know the answer from the beginning, you focus on where they are, and they do seem completely out of place. But if you’re only scanning your surroundings quickly and aimlessly, that’s when they are extremely effective. You’ll never guess where they were hiding! If ninjas existed in modern society, I bet they would wear camo.”

“Huuuuh...” Kon stared at me with intrigue. “Daddy also said that brown was good, but he wouldn’t tell me why. He just insisted that brown was better! Maybe he knew all that too. I didn’t find out until recently, but Daddy loves ninjas just like me, and he seemed super happy when I told him that I’ve recently gotten into ninjas. He even told me that there’re old ninja tools passed down in our family, and he promised that he’ll show me when he gets the chance!!!”

“Oh, that’s...interesting...” I faltered once again. “That sounds really exciting, yeah.”

Wait a minute. Old ninja equipment passed down in his family? What in the world is he referring to? I understand if, say, his ancestors loved ninjas too and have passed on a collection of ninja tools from generation to generation. Judging by his attitude, that’s Kon’s interpretation as well.

But there’s also an alternate interpretation—the Sanmaya clan could be descendants of ninjas, and the articles they have inherited might be the real deal. The phrasing Kon is using feels more fitting in that case. In fact, it sounds

more likely.

Ninjas... I pictured chipmunk ninjas, no, beastfolk ninjas in my head. It made an adorable image, but when I thought further about the topic... Based on Kon's traits, these ninjas would come equipped with a petite stature, astounding physical capabilities, as well as ears and noses several times—no, tens of times stronger than humans. Suddenly, they didn't seem all that cute anymore.

They would be terrifying. They could scale any surface in seconds as if they were climbing a tree. They could creep into the tiniest of crevices. They could steal all kinds of information with their ears and noses.

Such a force sounded like trouble, which made them outstanding as allies. Perhaps they could even easily pull off the incredible stunts that were depicted in stories and fiction about ninjas. *Hold on... Give me a moment. Could the historical ninjas actually be beastfolk?*

I think I'm getting somewhere with this theory. They can hide their ears with their headscarf, and they can stuff their tails into their clothes or, at worst, cut them off. Ninjas were said to live in hidden villages when they weren't on missions, and wouldn't the Beastly Wilds fit that description perfectly?



As for the different ninja clans like Iga and Kōga, that could be referring to the different beastfolk races. Each race has different abilities and specialties, leading to different ninja combat styles. And perhaps, the tools they used back then have survived to this day—the tools Mr. Sanmaya mentioned. That sounds like a possibility, doesn't it?

I was pulled away from conspiracy land by Kon's worried voice. "Anyone home, Mikura? Are you tired?"

I shook my head and reassured him that I was fine. At the same time, I cleared those thoughts away from my mind. Thinking about it now wouldn't do me any good. It wasn't like I could arrive at an answer from the little information I had. Even if I found an answer, so what? It wasn't like it was going to change anything. In fact, if the Sanmaya clan was truly the descendants of real ninjas, it was probably better to keep my nose out of it.

Nodding to myself, I put the incident behind me and assumed a proper stance with my staff. Training resumed, and this time, I was up against Kon the Ninja.



MY training with Kon went on. Whenever I was fatigued, I would wipe away my sweat and take a break with tea as my companion. Once I recovered enough to jump onto my feet again, we would dive back into our drills. Time passed by peacefully.

Until an alarmingly loud rustling sound rang out from the forest.

It wasn't a sound that the kids would make, and it didn't sound like wild beasts, either. The rustling sounded rough, almost careless. Something was heading our way while snapping fallen tree branches with every step.

Kon and I paused our battle. We readied our staffs and focused our attention on the direction of the stir.

Suddenly, a large and burly man poked his head out—it was Také, a bearfolk. Také was a man armed with a toned body, a rugged face, as well as shortly trimmed pitch-black hair. He looked to be in his mid-twenties or early thirties. He was brimming with vitality and youthfulness, but in contrast, oddly adorable bear ears perched on top of his head. As for attire, he wore a tracksuit. His

jacket, which had signs of wear and tear all over, was stretching and protesting against his prominent muscles that threatened to rip the fabric apart.

The moment Také spotted us, a big grin spread on his face. “Wassup, buddy? You needed a guy for renovation, and so, he’s here.”

I blinked in surprise, my guarded stance and vigilance melting away. “Huh? Wait, you work in the building industry?”

His grin grew even broader as he raised his voice. “Hey, call me a carpenter, will ya? As you can see, we bears take pride in our brawn! Many of us end up as carpenters or in industries that need strength! So yeah, I heard from Arurei about how you need a hand with renovations, and I came here today to look at your house and have a chat with you about our options. To make things short, I wanna discuss with you how far we should go with fireproofing your house.”

“How far... That’s a good question.” I pondered it for a moment. “Please come over and take a seat at the veranda first. I shall get a change of clothes and prepare some tea.”

“Bah, there’s no need for all that fuss.”

As we talked, I took Kon into my arms and sprinted into the house. We both had a quick shower to wash away our sweat before getting changed. I went off into the kitchen to boil some water. Once that was ready, I brewed some tea, fetched some snacks to go with it, then headed back to the veranda. I sat down and served tea.

Také immediately grabbed three or four senbei crackers from the tea snack plate and plopped them all into his mouth. After he munched and swallowed the crunchy crackers, he drank his hot tea in one go, not caring about the temperature in the least.

He finished his drink and cut to the heart of the matter right away. “All righty, I took a quick look at your house from here during the wait. I’ll be blunt: it’s gonna be pretty tough to fireproof this place. We’ll talk about fireproofing first. There’re two main methods: the first is making your house difficult to burn, the second is to make it hard for fire to reach the flammable material. The first option, well, is pretty much what it sounds like. For this house, you’d tear down the roof and change it completely, then replace the parts of the lumber

throughout the rest of the house. You'd also have to install fireproof materials inside the rooms, between the rooms, and also in places like the attic."

I listened carefully to his explanation and moved my pen across my notepad quickly. Meanwhile, Kon was sitting on his knees formally next to Také, and his eyes were bright with curiosity.

"Let's talk about the second one," Také continued. "There are a few ways you can do this. For example, if you have a tiled roof, you can fill the gaps between tiles with some kind of chemical so that the sparks can't get to the material from those gaps. You can also change your glass windows and sash windows to the fireproof type. That way, even if a fire happens nearby, the window won't crack and let sparks in. That's the gist.

"But well..." He paused and looked around. "After seeing this veranda and other parts of the house, that's gonna be a tough job. You'll have to surround all of this with windows, reinforce the material under the floor, and renovate all the walls of this house. And if you're going to do renovations of that scale, it's gonna be cheaper to tear down the house and build a whole new one."

I could only nod at those words. The house was constructed with good ventilation and easy access for humans from the outside. Therefore, it also allowed ready entry for unwelcome visitors like fire sparks. Protecting this house from fire entering would mean changing its entire structure—it could no longer be a house with a veranda. At that point, indeed, building a new house would be more efficient.

Stroking his chin in thought, Také continued, "So...yeah. If you still want to keep your house this way, I'd suggest you prepare other fire prevention measures rather than fireproofing your house itself. You can start by planting trees around your house. Surround it with trees that are sturdy, thick, and hard to burn, like black pine, sweet viburnum, or Japanese white oak. Those are some common fire protection trees. With them as a barrier, you can resist the fire that spreads from the outside.

"Next would be installing fire cisterns and firefighting facilities. Not many people go that far for a private house, but they save a lotta trouble during the initial stages of extinguishing the fire. In terms of safety, a fire extinguisher can't

even compare, buddy.”

He still had more valuable advice. “Oh yeah, and fire alarms, those devices that practically burst your eardrums even when there’s only a teeny tiny fire. You’d want those too. Nowadays, some types of alarms are linked to other alarms of the houses in your neighborhood. If a house within a certain range burns up, your alarm will ring and warn you about the danger ahead of time. It gives you more time during an emergency, and you can use your firefighting facilities to hose down your fire protection trees before the fire gets here. Heh, nothing can take you or your house down by then.”

I felt my eyes widening. Our conversation had veered off the topic of renovation—in fact, we were getting to a realm that wasn’t the specialty of carpenters. Také was giving me pure and genuine advice about disaster prevention.

My surprise partly stemmed from the fact that he had such a wealth of knowledge in this department, but above all, I was surprised that he was willing to share this knowledge with me. If I felt that the fire protection trees, the fire cistern, and the fire alarms were enough, there was a chance that I would have said that I no longer needed renovations for my home. As a carpenter, it would mean a big lost opportunity for Také, but he had still chosen to tell me without reservation.

Seeing my reaction, Také barked out hearty laughter. Seeing right through me, he added, “You can relax, buddy. Even if you choose to do that, I don’t lose a thing! That’s ’cause the workers that install fire cisterns are us bears, the landscape architects that plant fire protection trees are us bears, and even most of the employees at the fire station which installs fire alarms are us bears! No matter which path you take, my family or my relatives are gonna reel in the cash!”

My eyes grew even wider, and I gaped at him in shock.

Kon, who’d been listening to our conversation while sitting formally, added his opinion merrily. “I heard about that! Bearfolk aren’t scared of fire, fire doesn’t hurt them much, and they’re even strong! That’s why a lot of our firefighters are bearfolk! They’re our heroes! When someone’s left behind in a

house on fire, they charge in, move all the collapsed walls and pillars outta the way in seconds, then carry that person in their arms before dashing right out!”

“Yep! You sure know a lot, kiddo!” Také ruffled Kon’s head with his large hand. “What a smart kid!” His vigor was a little too much for Kon, and the young chipmunk toppled and fell onto the ground. Seeing that, Také hurriedly began apologizing.

I let out a small chuckle at the sight. Také was likely telling the truth. There were no lies, no sales talk to coax me into spending money... I felt that he was putting in genuine thought about what was best for me—or well, best for my household.

My house would be in safe hands if I entrusted it to him and his relatives. I was sure of it. Deciding to place my faith in him, with my notepad in one hand, I began asking him questions about the details of our renovation and fire prevention measures. Just like before, Také answered in earnest.

In the end, this consultation continued all the way until the sun fell below the horizon.



WE had a lengthy conversation until evening fell, and we made some tentative final plans. For renovations, we would change the roof and add fireproof material wherever we could. Furthermore, we would install fire alarms and plant fire protection trees.

I called it “final,” but I still had to discuss it with Tech and ask her opinion first. Then, I had to wait for Také and his team to come up with a quote and make adjustments depending on my budget. We were still only getting started, but the good news was, for now, we decided on a general direction to aim for.

After a day of talking to Také and training with Kon, I was utterly spent. Deciding I would be a bit lazy for dinner tonight, I opened the door of the cabinet filled with canned food and began perusing the selection.

“Are we going to have canned food for dinner tonight?” Kon, who was standing next to my legs, asked. “Are we going to party with a buncha canned food?”

“No, not quite,” I said. “I’m going to turn them into a proper meal.”

I took out the number of cans required for three people—tonight, Kon’s portion was included. The Sanmaya couple were busy today, and they wouldn’t return home until late at night. Due to that, they’d entrusted Kon to us, and naturally, I was cooking for three.

I laid the cans out on the counter.

Perhaps my actions would be frowned upon—I was taking care of another family’s child, so as a host, how could I cut corners when I was cooking? But in my defense, though it was a simple meal, it had all the necessary nutrition and was tasty too. *Please let me off the hook just one time*, I prayed.

What I retrieved were cans of boiled mixed beans, boiled mackerels, as well as tomatoes. Kon chased the cans and dashed up the counter. He skimmed over the labels. “Cans, cans, and more cans... Oh, I never knew there were canned beans, huh!” While he was at it, my trusty assistant also checked all the expiration dates.

“Thanks,” I said before launching into a speech about our dinner tonight. “Canned mixed beans are quite remarkable. You can use them in all kinds of recipes, and they’re even nutritious. As for canned tomatoes and canned mackerel, they are packed with nutrients, yummy, and they even go well together. If you mix all three into a soup, you get a delicious and nutritious meal that barely takes any time. If you take it a step further and add a few spices, as well as chili pepper, it’ll taste like chili con carne, a classic Mexican American cuisine.”

Like I said, the recipe was simple. Mix these three types of canned food together and cook over fire. The end. Though it was a frankly crude recipe, it was surprisingly tasty. The nutrients that had dissolved in the liquid inside the can wouldn’t go to waste either, making it a cost-effective and healthy recipe. During a disaster, if you had such canned food on hand, you wouldn’t ever go wrong with this recipe.

But well, making something this halfhearted for dinner during times of peace was *too* lazy, so I was going to add a few more steps to make it more respectable.

Begin by finely chopping onion and garlic. Heat olive oil in a pot and sauté the chopped onions and garlic. When the onions are cooked through, pour in the three varieties of canned food. Watch how much liquid there is in the pot—you don't want too much. If there is too much water, you have to throw some away, unfortunately.

Add bay leaves and simmer. Finally, season with ketchup, Bull-dog brand sauce—if you don't have that, Worcestershire sauce does the job—and chili pepper.

Since Kon was eating with us tonight, I held back with the chili pepper so that it wouldn't be too spicy.

After simmering for a while, take out the bay leaves. Once the soup is cooked through, serve in bowls and garnish with parsley.

The soup was a decent pair with rice, but since we were having Western tonight, bread would be more fitting. I prepared thin toast and milk. Next, I thoroughly washed cucumbers and tomatoes before cutting them up roughly and arranging them on a separate plate. This would serve as a salad. We could either have it plain or squeeze on some mayonnaise.

I nodded to myself as I arranged the finished products on the low table. “So yeah, as you can see, it's simple and fast. But it's still packed with nutrition and rich flavors. If I have to give it a name, I suppose I could call it chili con carne-style soup with canned food.” I paused to let that name sink in. “You could probably switch out the mackerels for sausages or bacon. Those sound tasty too. Hmm, I wonder whether we can add pancetta... It might be too salty if you don't desalinate it thoroughly. But as long as you do that, it should be a valid option.”

My assistant Kon was laying out spoons and fetching the squeeze bottle of mayonnaise. “I see! The onions and veggies look a bit troublesome, but the rest of the recipe is so easy! I think I can make this, too! Maybe I should make this soup for Daddy and Mommy when I get the chance.”

I smiled. “That sounds like a great idea. I kept the spiciness to a mild level this time, but if you're serving someone who likes spicy, you can adjust it. What else... It also pairs well with cheese, so you could sprinkle cheese on top at the

very end or put cheese on toast. I hear it's pretty good with pasta too."

"Ohhhh! Pasta! If we're mixing it with soup, I prefer macaroni over pasta!"

Actually, macaroni is a type of pasta, but let's not spoil his fun. I replied with a smile instead of words and finished setting up the table. And before we knew it, Techii had come home. Now that dinner was ready, Kon and I settled down in our seats and waited for Techii to get a change of clothes. Once we were all here, we merrily voiced our thanks for the food.

Kon and I picked up our spoons first—tasting the soup was at the top of our list. But while we braced ourselves, Techii went straight for the salad. She opened her mouth wide and ate one whole piece of tomato in one bite. Cucumbers disappeared in a flash, reduced to mere crunching sounds as she chewed. Then, she lifted the soup bowl and drank directly from it, as if she were drinking a bowl of miso soup.

The remaining two of us at the table were slightly taken aback by her gusto. *Is she really hungry? Did something happen today?* And by the time I finished that thought train, Techii had already finished half of her soup.

With a big smile, she said, "Tomato soup with beans is a first for me, but it doesn't taste half bad. Did you add mackerel? It's not the right season for those, but this tastes pretty decent too. Other than that... It might be nice if it were a little spicier."

It seemed to be her candid opinion. She was completely oblivious to the fact that it was a soup made with canned food. Her pause to review the food didn't hinder her pace one bit—she proceeded to dip her bread in the soup and continued her meal.

A most peculiar and triumphant grin wormed onto Kon's face as he unhurriedly drank spoonfuls of the soup. He seemed rather amused that Techii hadn't realized the nature of the ingredients. His grin only grew wider as he stared at Techii while he savored one spoonful at a time.

Naturally, Techii caught onto his unusual behavior. She paused her eating. "What's the grinning for? Did something happen?"

Kon didn't offer any answers. He only single-mindedly enjoyed his soup.

When he was halfway through his portion, his patience finally ran out. Kon assumed an air of mystery as he called out to Techī, “Techī! There’s a certain secret to this soup. Can you guess what it is?”

But by then, Techī’s soup bowl was already empty. She could only tilt her head quizzically.

Seeing that reaction, Kon grinned like the cat that got the cream. He puffed out his chest triumphantly before repeating the exact explanation I’d given him earlier about canned food soup. When he was done, Techī reacted with slightly exaggerated surprise—she was indulging Kon. With a warm smile, she listened patiently to whatever Kon had to say.



AFTER dinner was a discussion with Techī. In the end, we decided to go along with the basic plan Také had proposed. Now, we had to wait for Také to prepare the quote before we could discuss how much we wanted to invest in our renovation. *We should have a concrete plan by then, enough to actually start drafting up a schedule.*

The next topic was our wedding. It would happen on the first day of the consecutive holidays next week—Wednesday. That was also the deadline for our wedding preparations.

That being said, I’d already finished the prerequisites for the smoked meat. As for our clothes, we were waiting for the delivery. We weren’t in a rush to do anything else, so we could only stand by idly until next Wednesday.



SUNRISE announced the arrival of the next day. Techī went to the orchard, and Kon stayed behind to give me a hand. Together with my trusty assistant, we tackled housework and made the house squeaky clean.

Kon made full use of his small build and efficiently cleaned the gaps between furniture. His agility was a great help as well, allowing him to make quick work of the top of our cabinets, the area around the railings, and even the attic. He’d announced that since I was looking after him, he was obliged to return the favor in double, and he was true to his word. With his help, we finished cleaning the

corridors, the living room, the bedrooms...and our last stop was the kitchen, which required meticulous attention.

In my opinion, the kitchen needed to be spotless and required more care than other parts of the house. It was where we stored ingredients and where cooking was done. I'd always stuck to this policy dutifully.

Right now, Kon and I were wiping down the kitchen with a disinfecting alcohol spray. I wasn't sure how much effect that had on the hygiene of surfaces, but it was better than nothing. While I wiped down the floor and the walls, Kon took care of the cabinet doors, cabinet interiors, as well as the countertop.

Our cleaning session went on until we scrubbed every nook and cranny. Once that was complete, I put away our cleaning tools in the closet under the stairs. I breathed out a sigh. "Well, that was tiring."

Kon, who was watching me, tilted his head in question. "By the way, Mikura. You know that big cabinet above the tableware cupboard in the kitchen? There was a really nice smell coming outta there... What's inside? I opened the door and had a peek, but it was kind of filled with messy piles of hot plates and takoyaki pans, and I couldn't see what was at the back. But I'm sure that something in there smells REALLY good."

Oh, hmm. Was there anything aromatic inside that cabinet? I'm struggling to remember... "Weeell... I actually crammed a bunch of random things inside when I moved in. It was pretty hectic, and I didn't have the time to sort it out. I'll be honest, I don't really remember what I shoved inside." I considered it for a moment. "Hey, what did it smell like to you? Does it remind you of any type of specific food?"

He hummed in thought. "Umm... I think it smelled a bit like cheese. But it doesn't seem right. Cheese is supposed to be more...stinky?"

I blinked in confusion. "Cheese? I don't remember putting cheese in...a place like...that..." I trailed off as a memory suddenly floated to the surface of my mind. "Wait! Could it be?!"

There *was* something I'd left there temporarily, but it'd completely slipped my mind. I frantically rushed into the kitchen, used a stool as footing, then opened the door of the cabinet situated close to the ceiling. I took out its contents one

after another, and finally, I found the culprit. I dragged out a vacuum pack from the very back.

Placing it on the counter for now, I proceeded to put back all the clutter I'd taken out. Now, I could finally look at my prize. I picked it up and brought it right before my eyes to inspect it. Just in case, I even turned on the florescent lights to get a better look.

"Mikura!" Kon chirped. "What's that? Is it cheese?"

"Ah, yeah," I said distractedly. "It's a rather high-grade cheese I received from my superior when I resigned. I completely forgot to take proper care of it. Kon, do you smell anything nasty?"

I approached Kon, who was standing on the counter and staring at me curiously. He sniffed it as hard as he could, trying to detect all the scents with his nose. After checking it tenaciously, he gave me his usual close-eyed smile and made a circle with his thumb and index finger—the classic okay gesture. His verdict was, "It's perfectly fine!"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad to hear that. My superior gave it to me so begrudgingly that I almost felt as if I were snatching a family heirloom. If I neglected the Parmigiano-Reggiano to the point of it growing mold, I could never look at my superior in the eye again."

Kon's eyes lit up with intrigue. "What's that? *Par-me-gan*? Is it really cool? Is it a special cheese?"

"The official name is Parmigiano-Reggiano," I explained. "It's a type of cheese made the traditional way in Italy. It's also crowned as the King of Cheese. To qualify as this special cheese, it has to be aged at least one whole year. Its umami flavors are rich, and even the texture is smooth and exceptional. They say that the mere presence of this cheese on pasta or salad would bump the dish up one grade."

Hearing that, Kon sniffed the scent of the Parmigiano-Reggiano once again and basked in it. I watched him and continued my explanation. "Just now, you called it *Parmigan* by mistake, and there's a cheese with a similar name. Do you remember parmesan cheese? When I made carbonara pasta with pancetta last time, that's the one I used. To put it simply, that's the low-effort version of

Parmigiano-Reggiano. They are imitations of the Parmigiano-Reggiano and aged for a shorter period. There are also very strict requirements for what ingredients go into a proper Parmigiano-Reggiano, but that's not the case for parmesan."

Kon listened with great interest.

"So, well, I guess you can imagine Parmigiano-Reggiano as parmesan cheese with richer umami, a more complex aroma, and a much more delightful taste. You also use them in pretty much the same way—you grate it and sprinkle over food."

"Huuuuuh! The king of parmesan!" Kon started stealing glances at me with feigned indifference. "I never knew there was such a yummy cheese!"

I saw right through his act. After giving him a slight nod, I pinched the incision in the vacuum pack and tore it open in one go.

There were various ways of storing Parmigiano-Reggiano, but it seemed that in general, wrapping it in baking paper, storing it in the fridge, and airing it from time to time was the best method. It might soak up the aromas of other ingredients, so if you wanted to prevent that, you would have to put your packaged cheese into an airtight food container. Care and attention were absolutely necessary if you wanted to keep it in its best condition.

I had to let it breathe first. As a result of that, the irresistible smell of perfectly aged cheese filled the kitchen immediately.

Kon's head perked up. "Wooooow! It smells sooo good! It smells so tasty!" He sniffed the air. "Yeah, I don't smell nasty mold or anything bad even after you opened it!"

I gave him another nod before moving the Parmigiano-Reggiano onto the counter. I cut off a chunk with a knife. As for the rest, I wrapped it with baking paper, sealed it in an airtight container, and crammed it into the fridge while taking care to put as much distance between it and other ingredients as possible.

Now, as for the chunk I'd cut off... From the cabinet below the sink, I fetched a grater and a deep dish. "Well then, I suppose our lunch will be pasta featuring

Parmigiano-Reggiano,” I announced and got to work.

In the category of cheese, Parmigiano-Reggiano was quite hard. I grated the chunk and allowed the powder to fall into the dish. Kon was watching me from his usual seat, but the next moment, he hopped forward until he was right next to the dish. He must have taken a liking to the aroma. It took me a while before I finished grating the chunk, but the whole time, he observed with a merry face and a swaying tail. He looked spellbound whenever he inhaled.

He stared at me, and I observed him back. In the back of my mind, I began putting together a menu for lunch.

For the pasta...I think carbonara would be good. If you want to enjoy the pure taste of cheese, there is no recipe more fitting. Though I've made it before, if I sprinkle plenty of Parmigiano-Reggiano as the finishing touch, it should end up as quite a different experience. I think he would enjoy that. We're out of pancetta, so let's go for bacon from the supermarket instead. The rest of the recipe will be the same as last time.

The sauce will be a mixture of fresh cream, egg yolk, pepper, and Parmigiano-Reggiano. The garnish will also be Parmigiano-Reggiano. Simple but delicious.

Grating the hard cheese was the hardest part. The rest of the recipe, however, was swift and smooth. Once the pasta was done, all that was left to do was pick out a few vegetables, wash them, cut them, then mix them all up into a salad. I set the lunch table, and with perfect timing, Techii came home. Together, the three of us began our attack on our meal.

Techii beat us all to the punch. She grabbed the first bite and voiced her opinion. “Hm, it has a different style compared to what we had last time. The flavor of the meat has gone down many levels, but the cheese is much better.” She should have been oblivious to the fact that we were using a rather luxurious cheese, but her sense of smell and taste had clued her in.

The second judge was Kon. His eyes were practically shining like stars as he moved his jaw up and down. There was an audible swallow, and then, a slightly displeased expression took over his face. “The cheese tastes great! The cheese is amazing, but the bacon's soooooo dull! If only we had this cheese and pancetta! Nothing could beat that!”

It seemed that Kon had become quite a connoisseur after dining with us for so long. I chuckled at his comment and followed suit, taking a bite of the pasta.

The umami of the Parmigiano-Reggiano almost knocked me out. The title “King of Cheese” was well-earned—pure perfection melted on my tongue. Even if the umami of the bacon was lackluster, the sharp, nutty flavor of the cheese was like an explosion that bumped the flavor of the carbonara several levels higher. Just like Kon, I couldn’t help but imagine what it would taste like with pancetta.

When I swallowed my first bite, I gave my comment on the meal as well. “Now that was fantastic. No wonder they crowned it the King of Cheese in Italy. Pancetta and carbonara are both Italian cuisines as well... It feels like an unparalleled combination crafted by a long history and lasting tradition. It feels like the Italians have already found the perfect formula that’s hard to deviate from. I should make a proper pancetta next time and try this recipe again.”

Techi latched on to one phrase. With her head tilted in question, she asked, “The King of Cheese? What are you talking about?”

I quickly gave her a summary of the events earlier and described what Parmigiano-Reggiano was. Uncharacteristically, her face lit up like the sun. Her bright eyes were almost mesmerizing as she replied, “I see, so this is authentic Italian cheese. Beastfolk like us can’t travel overseas, but we can still eat authentic food from places renowned for being the best in their industry, huh?”

“Yeah. That’s one of the perks of cheese,” I said. “Milk spoils immediately, but in the form of cheese, it’s processed so that it can last as long as possible. People invest effort to make it easy to transport, and of course, effort into making it taste heavenly. It doesn’t preserve that well, but it still counts as a kind of preserve. If you’re willing to take the time and pains necessary, you can enjoy your cheese for a long time at your desired pace.”

Techi hummed in thought. “You have my attention. In that case, I certainly hope you’ll surprise me one day with authentic Italian pasta made with this cheese and pancetta. Italy’s famous for their cheese, and I can’t wait...” She suddenly trailed off. “Hold on. Italy? Is Italy really the best place for cheese? I had a vague impression that was France.”

“France is another country famous for their cheese,” I said. “They actually have their own French King of Cheese, a cheese called Brie de Meaux. When it comes to food, both France and Italy don’t make concessions. They’re willing to invest effort, money, and at the same time, they also treasure their traditions...” Realizing that I was going on a tangent, I cleared my throat. “Anyway, if you two love it so much, I’ll work hard so that I can serve more Italian and French food on your plates.”

Techi responded with a soft smile, and Kon flashed me his usual close-eyed grin. The joy spread to me, and the three of us continued our meal while smiling from ear to ear. When the food was finished, I prepared tea. We sipped on it slowly and allowed our stomachs to rest. Time trickled by peacefully.

Suddenly, Kon gasped as an idea dawned on him. In a merry voice, he exclaimed, “Oh, right! If Italian food and French food are that good, Mikura, you can make Italian and French preserves! You can make lots and preserve lots so that we always have some ready to eat. That means we can eat yummy food whenever we want!”

He looked at me with triumph in his eyes, as if to say, “See, I’m a genius!” Kon was a boy who obeyed his appetite dutifully—when it was about food, he would never hold back.

A wry smile pulled at the corners of my lips. Unfortunately, I wasn’t too knowledgeable about Italian and French preserves. Furthermore, with international delicacies, making them locally with local ingredients and equipment would always taste better than trying to replicate them somewhere else. *That’s a rather tall order*, but I took out my phone and began my investigation. A certain recipe stumbled into my search results, and I opened up the website.

As I read, I said the name out loud without thinking. “Confit... Ah, I never knew that confits were a type of preserve. Hmm, if I bottle it properly, it can last several months, huh? Yet, it will remain juicy, and its taste won’t be diminished at all... Interesting.”

Confit is a type of French food—to be more specific, French preserve. Hearing my mumbling, Techy and Kon both fixed their inquisitive gazes on me.

I indulged them with an explanation. “Well, meat confit refers to meat simmered in oil. It can be the meat of wild ducks, domestic ducks, geese, and so on. Other than that, it seems that fruit boiled down and infused with sugar are also called confits. From what I can see here, it’s a general term for preserves simmered and cooked in a liquid that preserves it.”

There was also the compote, which was a similar French recipe, but compote was meant to be eaten immediately. It didn’t preserve well. On the other hand, confit placed a higher importance on lengthy storage. At least, that was what I could gather from my brief research.

Techi blinked in surprise. “Simmering in oil? Not deep frying?”

I nodded. “Yep, simmering. You know how we often see the Spanish al Ajillo dishes featured on TV lately? For those, you basically cook your protein in oil and garlic. It’s kind of similar to that. You slowly simmer your meat in oil at a low temperature, and once it’s cooked through and tender, you bottle it up with the oil and preserve it like that. The meat is submerged in oil, which stops it from going bad and locks in the moisture. When you want to eat it, you take out the meat from the oil and roast it in the oven. After roasting it, sprinkling on some herbs and lemon juice will turn it into a grand feast.”

Food preserved in oil seemed to exist in every corner of the world, and there were countless varieties. The French didn’t disappoint when it came to food—confits didn’t just preserve the ingredient; I could tell that research also went into making the preserve taste good. I would even go as far as to call it a respectable cuisine.

Other than poultry, it seemed that mutton and sausages were candidates for meat confit as well. In Italy, in fact, there even seems to be a fish and octopus confit.

I’d eaten confits a few times at French restaurants. Back then, I hadn’t known they were preserves and had treated them as yet another delicious dish on the menu. Now, armed with that knowledge, I felt that this was a recipe worth investing time into. *If it’s going to be that tasty, I should try! Let’s see... I’ll make a ton, bottle up a ton, and line up those bottles in the warehouse. That’d be a sight to behold.*

The intense staring of the other two was what tore me from my thoughts. Gluttonous desire was burning in their eyes like never before. In fact, Kon was making audible gulps as he swallowed the saliva building up in his mouth.

I raised the white flag of surrender immediately. “Okay, I got the message. It will be on the menu for a future meal, I promise.”

The pair nodded with satisfaction. And so, I returned to tapping away on my phone, searching up all kinds of confit recipes.



THE word “confit” was derived from *confire* in French, which means “to preserve.” As a preserve-making hobbyist, I was almost appalled at the fact that I hadn’t known of this item. Well, to be precise, I’d been aware that confits were a type of French food, but I’d never imagined that they were a type of preserve. I’d assumed a confit was just simple roast poultry with a generous amount of oil. In my defense, when you’re eating out, you don’t get to see how the food is made, so there was no way I could have known.

Based on my research on the Internet, the basic recipe is as follows: season the meat, simmer in oil, then roast in the oven. There seems to be a lot of freedom. For example, you could use oil with special seasoning or added scents. You can also add additional seasoning when you roast it in the oven.

As for things you have to be strict with, the simmering process requires a lot of attention. Specifically, you should cook it slowly at a regular temperature. If you messed this step up, the meat would either become too hard or completely fall apart. This process is what makes this recipe considerably difficult.

The tried-and-true method with the most consistent results is to chuck your entire pot of oil and meat into the oven, which can maintain a regular temperature. A second method is using a rice cooker.

Heating for many hours at a regular temperature is what a rice cooker does best. It would save me a lot of trouble, and even Goldilocks would be satisfied at how a rice cooker can cook it “just right.” It would require a little bit of extra preparation, however, and the taste might be slightly inferior compared to cooking it in the oven. But nothing beats reliable and easy cooking.

Other than that, one thing to note is the ridiculous number of calories these preserves pack. Confit requires a combination of meat and oil, after all, but I suppose it's perfect for beastfolk like Tech and Kon, who have a high calorie requirement. *As for me, uh... I guess I have to resign myself to exercising a lot and burning those calories away.*

After a night of research and sleep, the next day came around. Sometime after lunch, I paid a visit to the supermarket and bought a few pieces of chicken for my first confit-making trial. Kon ended up staying over for another day, and together, we began preparing dinner. That was when Tech came back after a day of work.

"Welcome home," I called out.

"Welcome baaack!" Kon chirped.

Tech responded with a short "I'm home" as she headed to the bathroom. After doing her daily post-work rituals, she came into the kitchen. For some reason, she looked somewhat apologetic as she called out to me. "Uh, hey, Mikura? I kinda told my family about your plans to make confits, and erm... They all seem very interested in what confits taste like."

"Oh, I see." I nodded. "Let's organize an event where everyone can enjoy some. You know, like the barbecue party last time."

She looked even more guilty, and she began furrowing her eyebrows. "The thing is... I don't know how they ended up at this conclusion, but everyone's convinced that you'll serve confits at the wedding. It might be my fault for telling them that we have a confirmed date for our wedding just before I brought up this topic, but somehow the conversation ended up going in that direction. So, uh, just wondering, is there enough time left for you to add that to the menu?"

"Ahhh." I finally caught on. "Give me a moment, let me think... I think it's doable in theory, yeah. Unlike smoked food, I don't have to marinate them or do a lot of prior preparation, but the problem is that I can't guarantee the confits will taste good."

At the end of the day, I was still only a novice confit maker. Meanwhile, the opponent I was tackling was a distinguished French cuisine with both history

and tradition on its shoulders. An amateur going in with insufficient preparation and experience sounded like a recipe for either mediocrity or disaster. I couldn't make any promises.

Techi hesitated. "It's fine even if it doesn't taste good. I have faith that you'll make something that's decent at worst, Mikura. So, well... I'm counting on you during the wedding next week, thank you."

"Got it." I nodded. "I'll do what I can. There's just one thing though... The smoked pork donburi is high in calories, and if you add confits and unagi eels to the list, that's a *lot*. It might be too much, even for beastfolk. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. Don't have to worry about calories or our stomachs. Even if we binged on too much food for a day or two, all we need to do is to work and exercise hard the next day." She shrugged.

Half-amazed, half-shocked, the only words I could muster was, "Wow. Guess I shouldn't have expected anything less from beastfolk. You guys are simply incredible."

And that was when the old model rice cooker that had belonged to Gramps—I usually used a different one—announced its presence with a beep. It was a signal that said its "Hold Temperature" function, which I'd set up to turn off at a certain time, was due to switch off.

Kon was sitting on his knees in front of the rice cooker on the counter, and both his ears and tail perked up. "Mikura! It's ready!" he exclaimed animatedly.

Smiling at the anticipation in his voice, I opened the lid of the rice cooker.

When making confit in a rice cooker, pouring in oil until it's full is too wasteful. For this recipe, prepare zipper bags you can purchase at the supermarket. Put the bone-in leg of poultry into the bag. Fill with olive oil. Add herbs, such as thyme and rosemary. Next, add seasoning, such as garlic. If it's to your taste, you can add Italian parsley and bay leaves as well.

You also have the option of cooking the sides together with your meat in the same bag, such as potatoes and carrots. But today, our main objective is practicing the pure confit recipe, so sides are off the table for now.

Tangents aside, now that everything is in the bag, remove as much air as

possible before zipping it properly. Pour hot water at a temperature between 158°F and 176°F into the ricecooker's inner pan. Submerge the filled bags inside the water. Press the "Keep Warm" button and leave for three to five hours. This time, I've used the timer function to cook the confit for four hours.

There are a few advantages of cooking your confit in a rice cooker. You use less oil compared to cooking it in a pot. The cooking process is easy. If you use a zipper bag, the rice cooker is easy to clean, and you won't get any strange smells steeping into your pan. This method is sublime if you want to make a low-effort confit.

As for disadvantages...well, we'll have to find out what the final product tastes like before we can make a verdict.

I pinched the corner of the zipper bag and fished it out of the rice cooker. Immediately, I moved it to the sink. With a pair of tongs, I pulled out the bone-in legs and laid them out on a frying pan. I'd preheated the frying pan, and the moment the meat touched its surface, a pleasant sizzling sound entered my ears. Once the skin was nice and crispy, the confit was ready to go onto our plates.

Roasting confit in the oven would yield better results, and I would recommend doing that if you had the time and resources. But today was just a quick practice session, so I chose the frying pan instead. Steadily, I seared three bone-in legs until they were golden.

A mouthwatering scent tickled my nose—the herbs were performing their duty perfectly. The meat seemed juicy and tender. It wasn't too hard, nor was it falling apart too much.

Right next to me were my two spectators, Kon and Techii, and their stomachs did the speaking for them by growling. Hearing that, I had to suppress a wry smile. "Sounds like you two are hungry. I've already prepared bread, salad, and even soup in advance. Could you two set up the table while I'm cooking? Once the confits are ready, I'll take it over, so bear with me just a little longer."

The pair went into action with godlike speed. It was as if someone had pressed the "fast-forward" button on a remote—I'd never seen them set up the table this briskly before.

While they were busy, I was busy too. The confits had been cooked slowly inside olive oil, then seared until crispy in a frying pan. For the finishing touch, I garnished them with lemon slices and ground parsley. My curiosity made me hold my breath—what would the bone-in legs taste like after all the above?

Since we were having French food, we should eat like the French. Tonight, knives and forks graced our tables, but we retained our Japanese custom of voicing our thanks for the food. Then, simultaneously, the three of us began working at our pieces of meat with our cutlery.

I cut out a bite-sized chunk and gingerly carried it to my mouth. I chewed, and my first impression of the texture was tender and soft. The meat had a wonderful umami flavor, and the seasoning matched it flawlessly. Despite the lengthy cooking process, the oil that had seeped in had locked in the moisture, making it shockingly juicy.

The meat melted on my tongue with just one tentative movement of my jaw. Though the taste itself was that of chicken, the tender texture reminded me of high-grade beef. It was hard to believe that this was chicken.

After swallowing, I made my comment. “Huh, it ended up tastier than I expected. I’ve felt a little anxious at first about how it would turn out because I was using plain chicken instead of something fancier like duck, but it’s not bad at all.”

Techi was second. “It’s splendid. I love the taste and texture that the oil adds.”

Last but not least, Kon exclaimed, “It’s so GOOD! The sour lemon is really yummy with the meat!”

Now that got my curiosity going. I squeezed my slice of lemon over the meat before taking another bite. *Mmm... Delicious. They have good chemistry.* Chicken confit had a similar charm as *karaage* chicken and Western fried chicken—a charm likely unique to a protein that had low fat content. Unlike the examples I gave just now, however, it wasn’t wrapped in some kind of crispy coating, so I could enjoy the oily, juicy chicken directly. *If I used high-class chicken, the taste of this dish might improve dramatically. It seems that the quality of the meat really matters for this one, huh?*

I sighed in awe. “To think that this counts as a preserve... I’m speechless. I haven’t allowed it to age, so I don’t know what time would do to its flavors, but I remember reading somewhere that it only gets better after aging. I shouldn’t have expected anything less from the French.”

This time, Techii and Kon didn’t offer any opinion. They were wholeheartedly enjoying their confits. Both surprise and elation swirled in my heart, and I could feel a smile softening my features. I decided to work at my confit with my cutlery again, and as I dined, I mulled over how many portions of confits I could prepare for the wedding.

Due to the size limitations of the rice cooker, I couldn’t make these in bulk. It was also a time-consuming recipe. However, if I repeated a cycle of making them and bottling them, I should have a significant number by next week. Considering the cooking time, making them twice or thrice a day was my limit. But if I cut down the time in the rice cooker, I could speed things up a bit. After a rough calculation, I decided that though I was cutting it close, I should make the deadline.

Now that I knew it was likely doable, I had to decide on my protein. Should I use chicken from the supermarket, just like what we were having today? Or should I go for something a little more lavish?

Perhaps something like fancy chicken or duck? Oh, but if I use duck, I probably have to change up the seasoning and herbs a bit. And can I really find that much duck meat available on the market within a short timeframe? It’s not something supermarkets store in bulk, at least not in Japan. Even if I ordered some, delivery takes time...and that’s what I don’t have right now. Yeah, let’s go with chicken. It’s the safe option. I’ll compromise by choosing fancy chicken.

Techii’s intense staring pulled me out of my thoughts. She’d finished her confit in no time, and she noticed that I’d stopped eating because I was brooding too much. “Something on your mind?” she asked.

“Ah, kind of.” I nodded. “I’m thinking about what meat I should use for the confits at the wedding. I just decided that I’ll pick the fanciest chicken available at the supermarket. Duck probably tastes wonderful too, but I doubt I can get my hands on the amount necessary before next week.”

Techi let out a small sigh. “When it comes to matters like that, don’t worry about it all by yourself. I’m here with you, so you can discuss it with me first. If you’re fine with using a hybrid between mallards and ducks, that’s available. There’s a farm nearby. They should also have a bunch of other birds there too. What was it again...helmeted guinea fowl? I think they have those too.”

My eyes widened. “Huh? Wait, really? *Nearby*? A farm, huh... So they’ve been domesticated. That reminds me, I think I’ve heard that in Japanese restaurants, they don’t serve wild ducks, but domesticated hybrids instead. You can only procure wild duck meat during hunting season, after all.” I nodded to her. “In that case, let’s order some duck from that farm. It might burn a hole in our wallet, but we shouldn’t be stingy at celebrations. We’ll need bone-in duck legs for all the guests... Do you have their contact number?”

She propped up her chin with her hand. “The dealer there’s an acquaintance of mine, so I’ll communicate with them. Is domesticated duck good enough? I’m pretty sure they also sell chicken and helmeted guinea fowl.”

“Guinea fowl...” I trailed off. “To be honest, those are delicious even if you don’t turn them into confits. I’ve eaten them before, but they offer a completely different experience from other poultry like chicken or duck. The meat practically bombards you with umami, and in my opinion, it’s one of the most luxurious meats out there. Other recipes bring out its charms better, so I think we’ll have to save that for another occasion.”

The moment those words left my mouth, I immediately cursed my foolishness, because the two carnivores at the table were looking at me with a ravenous glint in their eyes.

“Is it *that* delicious?” Techy muttered.

“They look so scary, but they’re tasty...?” Kon sounded shellshocked.

Though such birds were available at a nearby farm, it seemed that they hadn’t eaten any before. I could hear audible gulps from them both.

I shook my head fiercely. “D-Don’t look at me like that! No matter what you say, I’m putting my foot down on this one! I’m one lone person, and there’s a limit to how much I can handle! I already have my hands full with smoked meat donburi and confits, mind you! I can’t add one more to the list!”

I tried to reason with them. “For one, I’ve never handled guinea fowl before, I don’t even know how to cook it, and though I said I’ve eaten them before, it was only a couple of times. And it’s obviously more difficult than all the other dishes I have to make for our wedding! That means more effort and experience are required, okay?!”

By the end, I was practically squawking in horror. The pair nodded, as if to say, “We know.”

What in the world do they mean by that? I’ve got the feeling that they’re cooking up an evil scheme... But my panic didn’t seem to affect them at all. They stood up, carried the tableware to the kitchen, then washed the dishes. They then headed to the bathroom, but instead of brushing their teeth, they began whispering to each other.

It seemed that their stomachs had made a decision for them. Once their mind was set on something, stopping them was futile. Letting out a sigh of resignation, I dug into the remainder of my confit in defeated silence.



THE next morning arrived. On the previous evening, Techii had promptly ordered hybrid duck meat from the farm, and I was waiting for our order to arrive while I tackled chores alone.

Kon had gone home last night. He should be enjoying pleasant family time right about now, after all their time apart. As for Techii, like always, she was at the orchard. For the first time in a long while, the morning passed by quietly. My only companions were the chirping of insects and the whispering of wind.

After my daily quota of chores was complete, I prepared the glass jars I’d purchased in mass for my preserve hobby. I boiled water, and of course, I set up the rice cooker.

Just as I thought, *Should be lunchtime soon*, the familiar pitter-patter of tiny feet entered my ears. It was followed by the announcement, “Incoming!” Of course, I recognized the voice as well.

I gazed at the veranda. “Welcome, welcome.” I paused. “Hold on, why aren’t you with your family, Kon? It’s an off day for your parents, isn’t it?”

“Yeeep,” he replied. “Because it’s a day off, they’re both taking a nap, and I have nothing to do. And compared to before, I wasn’t separated from Daddy and Mommy for that long, so I’m not bothered anymore!”

“Wow, you’ve matured a lot,” I praised.

Kon was taking off his shoes and climbing onto the veranda when he heard that. He flashed me his signature smile before dashing right into the bathroom. After washing his hands, with a spring in his step—correction, he was practically bouncing up and down like a rabbit as he came into the kitchen.

“Hey, Mikura, has the meat arrived?” he asked as he approached me. “Or are you still waiting?” He then ran up the parkour route created by the cabinet handles before settling on his seat next to the sink.

Just as I was about to give my answer, the roaring of a car engine echoed out from deeper inside the forest. Judging by the sound, a vehicle had emerged from the midst of the trees, and it drove until it was right in front of our garden. There was the sound of doors opening and slamming closed, then someone half-jogging.

Finally, the voice of a young man rang out from the veranda. “Is anyone hooome?”

“Yes! Coming!” I yelled back and turned to face the veranda.

When I approached the source of the voice, I saw a youth wearing an apron that seemed to be made with blue denim. His hair was trimmed to a short length, and peeking out from his black hair were ears covered with black fur.

Are they...dog ears? Or fox ears? Either way, he’s probably a canine beastman.

The young man seemed to read my thoughts, because he beamed at me and said in an energetic voice, “I’m a wolf! I mostly spend my time rearing animals like birds, and when hunting season comes around, I hunt! Since I have a good nose, I don’t need a hunting dog with me, so if I get any orders, I can catch them all in no time!”

“Wow, that is amazing,” I said politely and gave him my benign businessman smile. “When hunting season comes around, I might place a few orders for wild game. And...I assume you’re here to deliver hybrid duck meat today, is that

correct?”

The young man blinked at me a couple of times in confusion before regaining his smile and making an amendment to my words. “Yes, thank you very much for your bulk order of hybrid duck and helmeted guinea fowl! I have safely received your bank transfer this morning. Oh, but I’m afraid that preparing your entire order within one day is slightly challenging, so we will deliver your order in two parts: one part today, and one part tomorrow. We are currently butchering your meat at the factory at top speed, so we should be ready to deliver the rest of your order by tomorrow!”

I knew it. So those two really did order guinea fowl. And in bulk, at that. I couldn’t even imagine how many they’d ordered—a farm was working at full speed, but they still hadn’t made it in time. Techie had done all the ordering and paying with her own phone, so unfortunately, I was completely in the dark about the details.



My expression had stiffened for a moment, but I quickly snapped out of it. “I see. Could you please take the meat to the warehouse? I shall lead you there.” I put on sandals on the veranda, led him inside the warehouse, then showed him the fridge.

The young man looked at the giant fridge and freezer units inside the warehouse and grinned from ear to ear. “Ah, of course. You have an incredible lineup of commercial fridge and freezer units, I must say! I see, you ordered in bulk because you have these.” He paused. “We have prepared your meat thoroughly, cleaned it, then packed each bird in vacuum packs, so I believe they should last a good while. But as with all food, please eat them as soon as possible.”

With that, he was ready to get to work. He’d taken off his cap earlier out of politeness, and now, he put it back on. He retrieved his gloves from his waist pocket and slipped them on. Next, he returned to his delivery van. From inside, he took out a large plastic cargo box and carried it over with both arms.

“You can return the boxes at a later date. If you’d like, you can choose to keep it until your next order,” he explained. “Ah, you can freeze your meat, but please be warned that it will affect its tenderness and taste to a certain extent. If you want to eat them lightly seared like *tataki* though, I would recommend freezing it once, even if it means sacrificing some of the taste and texture.” He opened the commercial fridge and placed the box down with a thud. It certainly sounded heavy, but his next words were heavier, crashing down on me like a ton of bricks. “I shall carry the remaining two boxes over. Please bear with me for a little longer.”

Kon had run over at some point in our conversation. Together with the young child next to my legs, I nervously peered into the box that exuded an imposing aura. Inside were whole birds that had been plucked, beheaded, and disemboweled. They were packaged in vacuum packs, and on these packs were labels with details about the meat. It told me what type of meat it was, when and who butchered it, as well as recommended storage instructions.

“Wow. That’s...a lotta ducks,” without thinking, I muttered those words numbly.

The amount in front of me right now was already enough. No, it was *way more* than necessary. This wasn't even counting the two boxes that were still on their way.

And hang on, it's barely been butchered! They've only done the minimum processing! We'll have to cut it up into chunks that are easier to eat! I had a silent mental breakdown. *It's not impossible, yeah, but it sure is going to take a lot of time, for crying out loud!* I had the urge to use a few colorful words.

Kon was completely oblivious to the chaos that was going on in my mind. His eyes were lit up with anticipation. He placed his paws on the edge of the box, peered in, then turned back and looked at me with hopeful eyes that were brighter than the sun. The next moment, he peered into the box again before gulping audibly.

One by one, the boxes were transported into the warehouse. Our commercial fridge was supposed to be rather spacious, but now, it was filled with three giant boxes. Two boxes were hybrid ducks, while the remaining one was helmeted guinea fowl. The racks of the fridge had been crammed to one side to make room for the boxes, and melancholy weighed heavy on my heart when I looked at them.

Wanting to seal this scene away permanently, I called out to Kon. "I'm going to close the door now." After he'd moved to a safe place, I closed the fridge door firmly. Then, I signed the delivery slip.

"Thank you for your patronage!" the young man said energetically. "If you order in bulk again, we will give you extra meat free of charge, just like this time! We look forward to doing business with you again!" He got into his van and returned to the forest.

After seeing him off, I hung my head slightly, letting out a long sigh. *Now then, how'm I supposed to cook all that?*

Kon looked up at me and said in a merry voice, "He's coming again tomorrow, right?! I can't wait!"

He dealt the finishing blow. This time, my head was drooping despondently. *Oh. Right. He's coming again tomorrow because they haven't finished processing the order,* I thought numbly. *Looks like I'll have to cook some today*

and move some to the freezer. Yay...

I pressed a hand against my forehead. *Then again, I suppose there's a silver lining.* The amount of hybrid duck and guinea fowl that had arrived was much greater than I expected, which gave me a headache. At the same time, gaining a lot of guinea fowl meat and being able to experiment with it was cause for celebration.

Compared to chicken, helmeted guinea fowl has less odors and isn't as acrid. Even if you roasted it plain without any seasoning, its rich umami would still surprise you with its potent impact. The meat is fatty, juicy, and tender. In conclusion, it's a delectable meat that didn't seem to have any flaws. In fact, some even gave it the title of Queen of Poultry. When I had some in a restaurant in the past, I'd been moved by its exquisite taste.

As for the best ways to enjoy helmeted guinea fowl, simply skewering the meat and grilling it produces the most ideal results. Lightly seared slices, tataki, would be delicious as well, but since it's better to freeze the meat first, it requires more time. Therefore, grilling meat skewers like *yakitori* is the way to go. *Oh, I can already imagine salting it slightly before slowly grilling the meat over charcoal. Yuuum.*

But just salt sounded a bit dull. A hint of spice with *yuzu kosho*, a mixture of yuzu and chili pepper, would be a nice addition. Since it's a fatty bird, offsetting it with refreshing ponzu mixed with grated daikon radish or simply grated daikon with no additives sounded like a good plan as well. *Or I could go for a curveball and pair it with daikon in lemon juice. I'm on a roll today.*

Ah, I could make soup with guinea fowl if I want to savor its delightful umami, and stew on a cold day could never go wrong. Donburi with chicken eggs and guinea fowl sounds like a genius idea that should make it onto the Guinness Record. Guinea fowl is already delicious without seasoning, so using it as a donburi topping—which is usually seasoned relatively strongly—would be an explosion of flavors in my mouth. It might sound like a waste, because you don't get to enjoy the pure flavors of such lavish meat, but its natural umami should be strong and prominent enough to shine through a strong sauce. Guinea fowl would definitely go well with eggs and rice, and once you get started on guinea fowl and egg donburi, you can't stop.

...As you can tell, my mind was a bit distracted as I butchered one whole helmeted guinea fowl in the kitchen. I was referring to the video playing on my phone, which I'd propped up against the wall behind the sink.

Though the minimum processing had already been done, I didn't have any hands-on experience with cutting up an entire bird. But of course, videos on the Internet always came in handy on occasions like this. Next to my phone, Kon was standing by with an uncharacteristically grave look on his face. He was on phone duty, and he would adjust the progress bar whenever I missed something or wanted to look at a section again.

"Can you drag it back a little more?" I asked. "Yep, right there. Thanks." Referring to the video, I manipulated my knife. "All right, I think that should be good."

Kon was a dutiful and helpful assistant. He was putting in every effort so that my cooking would somehow make it in time for lunch.

The menu for today is helmeted guinea fowl skewers. First, cut up your whole bird into parts, just like the sections you would usually find in a store. Cut the appropriate cuts into bite-size chunks. Skewer the chunks with yakitori metal skewers. When the skewers are ready, transfer to a plate.

Wash your hands. Use tongs to move unnecessary cuts into zipper bags and store them in the fridge. Just in case, I would recommend using two layers of zipper bags for raw poultry. Raw chicken is the perfect breeding ground for bacteria, so it never hurts to be extra careful.

I wasn't too sure whether that was the case for guinea fowl, but it was always better to be safe than sorry.

Once that's done, wash your hands and your tools meticulously. Now for the next step, preparing the skewers. Sprinkle some salt onto the skewered meat, but not too much. If you'd like, you can sprinkle some pepper as well, which is what I'm doing today. Arrange the skewers neatly on the built-in grill of your cooktop. Grill skewers.

If I had the time and resources, I would've loved to grill my skewers over charcoal, but I supposed I had to save that for another day. Considering the amount of meat in my fridge, I should have plenty of opportunities to test out

variations.

There was a lull in the cooking session as I waited for the meat to grill. Kon, who'd been meek and quiet as he assisted me through the process, raised his voice. "I think this might be my first time eating yakitori skewers! Whenever Mommy grills birds, she always turns it into teriyaki with a frying pan!"

"Ah, teriyaki, I see. That sounds nice too. Teriyaki guinea fowl..." I considered that possibility. "Yeah, I think it's worth a try."

With a smile and merry voice, Kon chirped, "Teriyaki is nice, but you can't go without rice! Pile on some *nori* and spring onion, and my tummy will go growlin'!"

"Oh! HUUUUH... Kon, you're a genius. Nori and spring onion... You have good taste."

"Mommy loves nori seaweed!" he explained. "Even if we can't go to the beach, we can still smell the sea when eating nori, and they're her favorite! Oh, she also tells me to eat lots because they're good for my health! She said that the toasted ones are better for our stomachs than the dried ones!"

"The smell of the sea, huh?" I hummed thoughtfully. "I know it's not possible right now, but I hope that you guys get to see the ocean in person one day. If privacy is necessary, it'd be great fun if we could all swim at an isolated island or private beach somewhere."

"Hmm... I already have lots of fun swimming in the lake, so it's okay! When it gets a bit hotter, we're allowed to swim in the big lake. Only adults can swim in rivers, so kids like us go to the lake."

I raised an eyebrow as I did one of my frequent checks on the skewers inside the grill. "Why's the river limited to adults?"

Kon followed my example and peered into the glass window of the grill compartment. Like a ninja, he was nimbly clinging to the edges of the glass panel. "The river has flowing water, so it's dangerous for kids. There's even a huuuge waterfall. Adults won't get swept away, so they're allowed to swim. The lake isn't that deep unless you go right into the middle, so we kids swim and fish and do all kinds of cool things there!"

“Swimming in the lake sounds fun. Hey, how about we all head over when it gets hotter?”

“Yay!” he cheered. Though he was still clinging to the glass panel, he turned around and gave me his close-eyed smile.

I peered inside the grill compartment from the unobscured part of the window just below his arm. *Looks like it should be ready soon.* I fetched a new plate for serving the skewers.

Seeing that, Kon immediately peeled off from the cooktop. I dragged out the wire rack and scrutinized the guinea fowl skewers. The meat was cooked through, and the grease that seeped out was sizzling alluringly. When I opened the compartment, the potent aroma assaulted my nose, and I could feel my mouth salivating. *Yep. Should be good.*

I switched off the grill and arranged the skewers on the plate. Then, I gently left the plate in the waiting hands of Kon, who was standing attentively on the kitchen floor with both arms held high. Dutifully, he carried the plate to the low table. I watched him from the corner of my eye as I reheated the leftovers from breakfast—rice, boiled vegetables in bonito-flavored soy sauce, and miso soup. Once the meal for three was ready, I set the table.

Techi had returned home sometime into our preparations, and she was already waiting at the low table. I sat down in my usual seat, and the three of us voiced our thanks for the meal.

I actually had a lot of things I wanted to ask Tech. *More like grumble to her, actually.* But steaming food fresh from the grill was laid out before us, and I wasn’t going to be a spoilsport. Enjoying food took precedence—we could talk later.

As if we’d rehearsed the motion, the three of us simultaneously reached for the guinea fowl skewers. I picked up a skewer and stared hard at the meat that was coated with a beautiful sheen of grease. After gulping audibly, I bit down on the meat and pulled one chunk of the skewer with my teeth.

The rich flavors of grease and the aroma of meat itself hit my mouth instantly. I chewed, and a powerful umami stimulated my tongue. The luxurious flavors of the meat burst out, and I couldn’t stop my mouth from chewing—I was in

rapture.

Craving more, I moved the skewer and my mouth almost instinctively. The rice, miso soup, and vegetables were beneath my attention; I was single-mindedly indulging in the flavors of the helmeted guinea fowl. Delicious was the only word my addled mind could come up with. The meat was clearly more flavorful and higher in quality than normal helmeted guinea fowl, possibly because the birds had been raised in the Wilds. I'd only chucked on some salt and pepper, but the dominant flavors of the meat were making me question my memory—had I sprinkled on additional seasoning but forgot about it?

It was truly an overwhelming experience. The three of us were completely hooked, and our minds went on autopilot, commanding us to chew and reach for the pile of skewers on the plate.

The Big Wedding

AFTER a very delightful meal of guinea fowl skewers, I came to a certain conclusion: just like I'd thought, guinea fowl probably wasn't suitable for confit. It already came with plenty of fat and umami, so why should I deliberately add more? It was simply delicious, and thus it was best when cooked simply. Sprinkle on some salt and grill. Done. It didn't even need that much salt, either. Just a pinch had been enough. The title Queen of Poultry certainly didn't ring hollow.

Techi and Kon were convinced by my argument. And therefore, one new item was added to our wedding feast: helmeted guinea fowl skewers.

That certainly *skewed* my lineup, for the lack of a better word. A triple combo of meat, and I wasn't even counting the food Techi's family would make. It seemed that an invitation to our wedding also served as an invitation to a fierce war against calories and fat. I felt apologetic to my parents and relatives. *Well, there's no regulation dictating that our guests must eat everything on the menu, so I guess it's best if they keep an eye on how much they eat and adjust accordingly.*

Now, we finally had an official menu for the cuisine I'd prepare for the wedding. Which meant that as one of the chefs, all my days leading up to the wedding would be spent on making confits and preparing guinea fowls.

After our meal, I got to work. While the confit was cooking sous vide in the rice cooker, I butchered guinea fowls, stuffed the meat chunks into zipper bags, then transferred them to the fridge. I repeated this cycle and spent all my time stuffing food into jars and bags.

On the second day, more poultry was delivered, and to make room in the fridge, I moved some into the freezer. Then, I dived back into my cycle of mindless food preparation.

It was exhausting. This was a kind of fatigue that I would never have

experienced if this were a wedding on the other side of the border. I'd thought that standard human weddings were more taxing, but at this rate, I might have to reassess that judgment.



DAYS passed in a blur.

...Until a certain night when I had a familiar dream after crawling into my futon.

I knew it was a dream the moment I gained awareness. I'd had this dream many, many times. At this point, it might as well be an old friend.

The dream began with me traveling in a car from my parents' home to the foot of the mountain here—to the mountain where Gramps lived. The drive felt like it lasted forever, especially as a child with less patience.

I was staring at the scenery outside the window the entire time. As I watched, my mind memorized the distinctive parts of the scenery which I saw every year. A road that drew a big arc. A battered stone bridge that looked like it might collapse sooner than later. A path that climbed up the mountain covered with giant trees, then a steep incline that descended as much as we'd risen.

After I'd grown up and stopped my regular visits to Gramps's house, I always had this routine dream. It repeated on and on like a broken record. After I became a working adult, most of the scenery had become blurry, but that wasn't the case tonight. Perhaps because I'd traveled along the same route recently, parts of the scenery were so vivid that it didn't feel like a dream.

What always followed the drive, without fail, was a scene inside Gramps's house. The distinct smell of mosquito coil. The gentle melody of the wind chime. The performance by the band of cicadas that grated on your ears until you got used to them, but once they became a part of your world, they weren't as bothersome. The confectionery box left on the low table, and the tall pile of senbei crackers inside. Then, my great-grandfather, wearing his haramaki belly band.

Gramps in my dream was completely different from Gramps on that hospital bed. His back was straight like a ruler, and protruding blood veins traced his

muscular arms. The smell left by moxibustion therapy, which he'd practically done every day, lingered around him.

Until a little while ago, even this scene had been blurry and unfocused, but living in this house had completely cleared the fog. I noticed all the details that I'd thought I'd forgotten. I counted wooden kokeshi dolls that used to line up on one cabinet. I admired the wood carving of a bear. There used to be big shogi pieces too, as well as countless stacked snack tins that had been repurposed into treasure chests of knickknacks.

Even the toilet and bath had been completely different—they were made in the traditional Japanese style. The household appliances had all been timeworn and battered, and there would always be horizontal static on the TV, perhaps due to bad reception.

My eyes grew hot, and I felt tears sliding down my cheeks. I was mystified. *Nothing sad ever happened here, so why am I crying?*

The next thing I knew, I returned to the perspective of a primary school student. I sat down in my usual chair and admired my nostalgic home. Then, the familiar pitter-patter of quickened footsteps echoed out.

"I'm here!"

It was a lively voice. It reminded me slightly of Kon, but it was shriller, and I could tell that it was definitely someone else.

And then I saw a girl in overalls, which was identical to what Kon and the kids working at the orchard wore. The moment I saw her, I stood up as if it was the natural thing to do and called out to Gramps, "I'm heading out." Then, I sprinted over to the girl and went outside with her.

We entered the forest and caught bugs. The girl helped me pick fruits and we ate together. We fished at a river, grilled fish, and shared them between us. And somehow, we ended up trying to swim around and play in the water, but the adults scolded us. Left with no choice, we moved to the lake instead.

My entire summer holidays were spent having a good time with her as my companion. We enjoyed our fun and games, but I hadn't forgotten to write my journal, which was my summer vacation homework. Naturally, that meant my

journal was filled with accounts about horsing around. That was kind of dull, so I wanted to add something exciting. And...that was why I'd ended up proposing that we sneak into somewhere we shouldn't go.

Before I knew it, my perspective shifted to that of an adult. I was watching over the two kids who were acting just like their age—impulsive and foolish. I pondered whether I should stop the pair.

If someone had nipped this adventure in the bud, I wouldn't have forgotten about the girl. We would have remained good friends for a long time.

But if I stop them... Would Techii and I still end up in the same relationship as we have now? Would we have remained friends forever, and nothing more? There's a chance that we might have a big and fatal fight one day. Or we might grow distant as we mature.

Such questions appeared in my mind, turning me into the rope in a tug-of-war game. I didn't know the right answer. And during my hesitation, the children stepped into that fateful area—the Godwood. Their eyes lit up at the view inside, and they looked proud, as if they'd accomplished something great. Their hands were joined as they headed deeper and deeper inside...



And then...someone, no *something* there got mad at us. Something happened, and we were chased out of the Godwood... After that, there was only complete and utter darkness.

The next thing I knew, I was in my company in Tokyo. I was working at my desk. On my desk was a giant stack of papers, and stuck to my computer screen were countless sticky notes.

Break time came around, and there was a call from my father. He told me that Gramps was in critical condition. I left my workplace early and rushed to the hospital.

That was when I opened my eyes.

I stared absentmindedly at the dim sunlight that spilled in from the window. It was morning. I dragged out a long sigh. *What a dream*, I thought feebly.

For some reason, I was sweaty all over. I realized that the temperature was unusually sweltering. I kicked away the futon duvet that was covering me, liberating my perspiring body.

It was so hot that it felt like noon during the peak of summer. *It's still early morning. Why is it this warm?* I finally stood up and headed to the bathroom to have a shower.

Tomorrow was the big day. I had to finish all the food and clothing prep before the end of today.

As I thought that, I turned the diverter lever from Bath to Shower. The water that came out was much colder than I'd expected, and I shivered from the cold and surprise. That was when my mind finally pushed away the last remnants of drowsiness. I realized that I hadn't turned on the on-demand water heater.



ON the previous day, I'd borrowed tables and chairs from the president of the community association, and I was setting them up in the garden right now. I'd also borrowed a few ice chest coolers from Rei, and I took those out. I had already stored ice gel packs and drinks like beer in our fridge—those would go into the coolers when necessary.

The ceremony wasn't complicated; I didn't have to memorize a program or even an opening speech. The only things on our itinerary were preparing the venue for the banquet and our change of clothes, such as my formal attire and Techī's dress. Rei, Techī's parents, and the kids helped out with the former. Thanks to them, venue preparations ended swiftly and smoothly.

One part of these preparations involved building a giant temporary stove out of bricks in one corner of the garden. To be more specific, it was right in front of the warehouse. Once that was ready, I almost questioned my eyes when an entire cow was carried inside. Among all the choices for a whole roast, cows were probably one of the largest options. Techī's parents mentioned that the cow needed to be cooked slowly starting the day before the ceremony, and they busied themselves with that task. I stayed out of it. It was in their capable hands.

As for the three types of food I would prepare, my plan was to start cooking early tomorrow morning. Rei and his staff member who'd just become his girlfriend, Miss Yasaka, were going to give me a hand. I had a lot of work on my hands, but with their help, we should manage it somehow.

During our discussion, Kon had overheard and interrupted while hopping up and down animatedly. *"Me too! I'll help too! I watched Mikura cook them, and I memorized a lot of the steps!"* he had declared. Thus, I had a grand total of three assistants. Even though Kon was supposed to be a guest, he would bring his coverall apron and stay at my house tonight. He was truly dedicated to helping me, and I was eternally grateful.

As for my parents and relatives, they would arrive at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. The regulations hadn't changed, and they couldn't stay the night in the Wilds, so they would head back at three in the afternoon. Our official wedding ceremony would be during that timeframe.

My guests were my parents, my uncles, my aunts, and a handful of others. My cousins had worked toward trying to attend too, but processes like applying for permission and the medical examination took too much time and effort. In the end, they couldn't attend. Some of our other relatives would be absent as well, including those from my grandparents' generation. Now that I thought about it, many of my relatives had reported that they wouldn't be present. Perhaps they

held a grudge against me for what I'd done during the big fight leading up to Gramps's final moments.

Welp, I can't do anything about that now. A lot of my relatives are practically strangers to me anyway, so I expected this outcome. I shrugged.

Among the small number of guests from my side, one certain person stood out especially: Mr. Kaōin. He was the only person who wasn't my relative, and he even had the status of a formal minister. He had offered to act as a guide for my parents and relatives, and when they'd heard the news, my family had been stunned.

Apparently, a handful of my relatives had known that Mr. Kaōin was at least an acquaintance of my great-grandfather—the two had often sent each other seasonal greetings such as New Year's cards. But they'd never expected that the two men were such close friends, and there had apparently been a bit of a commotion back at my family home.

Anyway, Mr. Kaōin was taking care of affairs to do with the other side of the border, and it was a piece of cake for him. I entrusted it all to him, and thanks to him, I could focus solely on wedding preparations.

And of course, the most important and time-consuming part was preparing food. The menu for our wedding banquet was as follows: the Holy Trinity of Meat I would make, unagi eel courtesy of Techī's mother, and whole roast beef prepared by Techī's father. But that was a very skewed menu of only proteins, and that wasn't appropriate. That being said, we didn't have the time or manpower available to make more, so we'd hurriedly ordered appetizers and salads from the supermarket.

Basically, our wedding was a banquet with all the dishes listed above.

I'd heard that a few of Techī's friends would attend. They were coming to give their blessings, yes, but they also had another goal: they wanted to see Techī's wedding dress. If the dress was gorgeous and high-quality, they would consider renting dresses as well. It seemed that they had also set their sights on the remaining two pamphlets and the special discounts they came with. *In spirit, I suppose it's something like how young women look forward to the bouquet toss on the other side of the border.*

Details aside, the next morning arrived in the blink of an eye. Long before sunrise, the alarm I'd set up on my phone began banging on my eardrums. For some reason, I hadn't managed to get any sleep after my shower last night, and my body was sluggish as I crawled out of my futon. That was the cue signaling the beginning of my wedding—*our* wedding.

The lazy fog of night was still hanging over the scenery like a veil, and being active from this hour of the day was unique to special occasions, such as going on a trip or indulging in your hobby. Such experiences had instilled an instinctive restlessness within me—or perhaps I was simply nervous about my wedding. From the moment I opened my eyes today, my heart had been thumping erratically in my chest, jumping around like an excited rabbit.

Feeling my pulse race, I washed my face and did my morning rituals. But even then, my tension hadn't eased, so I tried drinking some coffee to give me a boost. Unfortunately, that didn't work.

That was when Tech and Kon—who'd slept in the same room as her—woke up. They did their morning rituals as well. Once we were all ready, the three of us snacked on a quick breakfast of bananas and fruit yogurt, which I'd prepared yesterday.

It was going to be a busy day, so one could argue that we should eat a hearty breakfast so that we wouldn't run out of steam, but you mustn't forget that the menu for our banquet today was a mighty lineup of meat, meat, meat, meat, *and* unagi eel. Therefore, I'd decided to eat something light in the morning.

If we got hungry during the day, we could always snack on a banana or two to recharge our batteries slightly. Other than that, well...we could always take a few bites of the meat that would soon be laid out on the tables in the garden.

After breakfast, we brushed our teeth, and I was ready to dive into preparations. Armed with my apron, I stood in the kitchen and checked the time. We would change into our formal wedding clothes when all the preparations were done. Somewhere around nine o'clock was probably fitting, since our parents would arrive at ten. Right now, it was five in the morning. For the next four hours, I had to persevere in my kitchen armor—my apron.

I began preheating the oven and preparing the smoker. The roaring of car

engines entered my ears as I worked, and soon, Techí's parents, Rei, and Miss Yasaka rushed into the house.

"Hullo and gud morning!" Techí's dad said merrily. "Congratulations, kiddos!"

Techí's mom smiled. "Congratulations. I've made my signature dish today, so please eat your fill."

Rei lifted a hand in greeting. "Bonjour! Quite the unorthodox guy, aren't you? It's not every day you see the groom standing in the kitchen before his wedding."

Miss Yasaka bowed politely. "Congratulations. I shall be in your care today."

I returned with a greeting of my own and began chatting with them. During our conversation, even Kon's parents arrived as assistants. The house became lively in an instant, filled with greetings, idle talk, as well as discussion about our plans today. As if encouraged by our cheery atmosphere, the sun peeked out from the horizon, shedding light on our environment.

Thus began what was likely the longest and most important day in our lives. Starting today, Techí and I would walk hand-in-hand as family—as husband and wife.



A blanket of meat was spread out on the smoker, which I placed over the stove. In the oven, I roasted confits. With Rei as their leader, the others had set up charcoal grills in the garden, and now, Rei was grilling the helmeted guinea fowl skewers. Kon was our odd job boy, but he mostly assisted me in the kitchen. Meanwhile, Techí was in charge of setting the table.

Finished food was immediately transferred to the many tables in the garden. Techí's guests had gradually arrived one after another—they came with their chipmunk ears and chipmunk tails, and they helped themselves to the drinks. On one side of the tables were coolers filled with beer and beverages, but the supplies were diminishing quickly, accompanied by the familiar popping sounds of pulled bottle caps. Techí's guests entertained themselves with food, beer, and juice.

Their conversations trickled into the kitchen.

“I have to say, I’m very happy for her.”

“I agree. I was actually getting worried about young Techī, but I’m glad it all turned out well.”

“Her husband’s a human, but he seems like a good man. That’s a relief.”

“All the food here is incredible. She chose a good husband.”

According to Techī, idle talk and communication between relatives was at the core of beastfolk weddings. The relatives of the bride and groom would gather, greet each other, and converse. They would celebrate the fact that the two families were united and join hands as they gave each other their best regards.

Like this, one clan would form a bond with another; one family would be united with another. When there is joy, they share it. When there is hardship, they extend each other a helping hand. They are one big family, after all. That’s apparently the most important part of beastfolk weddings—connecting one family to another. It isn’t just about the married couple.

Food and drinks were facilitators that helped break the ice, and other than that, the only thing required was an earnest wish to celebrate this happy occasion. The atmosphere here was rather different from the weddings on the other side of the border—an easygoing mood filled the entire venue.

That was when Techī’s mom—no, my mother-in-law caught my eye. She was standing in front of a barbecue grill that had a cover. She began grilling the unagi eel, and a mouthwatering aroma wafted in my direction. Delectable aromas were seeping out from the smoker in the kitchen and the oven as well, but the aroma of unagi eels was just as overpowering. The wind direction worked in its favor, relentlessly delivering the scent to the kitchen. My mother-in-law, meanwhile, was laying down one eel after another and quickly brushing marinade on the fish. She was a skillful and efficient cook.

The dominating aroma was reigning supreme in my surroundings as I sliced smoked pork fresh from the smoker. “Kon, if you’re hungry, you can go ahead into the garden whenever you want. I think they prepared tall seats for kids, so you can wait there.”

With a pair of tongs, Kon picked up the sliced smoked pork and piled them on

bowls of steaming rice. His voice was muffled by his mask, but I heard his reply clearly. “I can wait! I’ll head over after I finish all my work! I was the one who offered to help, so I’ll work hard until the very end!”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You’re such a good boy, Kon. When I was your age, I never helped out. I spent all my time goofing around.”

“Huuuh, really? You’re amazing now, Mikura, but you were a bad boy when you were a child!” Kon puffed out his chest with pride, but he didn’t slack at all.

All beastfolk took up jobs during their childhood. Compared to these responsible kids, I was quite a good-for-nothing as a child. *Can’t argue with his verdict*, I thought wryly.

We had quite a lot of tiny guests today. There were Techī’s relatives, of course, and a handful of them were kids who didn’t work at our orchard. Everyone had big smiles on their faces as they stuffed their cheeks with the feast on the tables.

I found my mind wandering. *If Techī and I have children... They will be just as cute as the kids here, and I’m sure they’ll be energetic and full of spirit like Kon.* As I admired the scene, a tender warmth filled my heart. Of course, I knew that raising children also came with its hardships—cuteness wasn’t all there was to it. But for some reason, my mind was still drawn to the positive side. *If we had adorable kids, I’m willing to bet that they’ll always brighten up our day. They’ll be our sunshine.*

I exhaled slowly. *I mean, it’s our wedding today. It’s an appropriate day to start thinking about our plans as a family. I’m sure no one would blame me if I fill my mind with such daydreams for one single day.*

Realization suddenly dawned on me. *On that topic... Um, Techī and I have never done anything along those lines yet, have we? In fact, I don’t think we’ve even held hands that many times...*

The roaring of car engines rang out, snapping me out of my thoughts. It was too early to be my relatives, so I assumed the vehicle brought along more of Techī’s guests. Soon, I was proven wrong when a delivery van pulled into the premises of our property. The name and logo of the local supermarket was visible on the van.

The appetizers and salads we'd ordered were transferred one after another onto the tables. There were even boxes of liquor bottles and other beverages. Judging by the conversation that filtered into my ears, someone had placed an additional order by calling the supermarket.

I mean, it's a celebration, so I think people should drink as much as they want. But everyone, please be sober enough to hold conversations when my relatives arrive. I hope the beastfolk guests aren't wasted by then.

Unfortunately, my prayers didn't reach the guests present. The venue only grew livelier and livelier. They had good food, good company, and good alcohol. Holding back was a waste.

My personal opinion was that they should have a bit more restraint for now because we were still waiting for other guests, but it wasn't like I had the means or heart to stop them. Resignation settled in my heart, and I focused all my attention on the food at hand. If I worked with utmost effort, I could get to eat my mother-in-law's famous unagi eel a little earlier.

Time ticked by. When the hour hand of the clock moved slightly past ten, the sound of car engines echoed out faintly from the border.

The voices of drunkard middle-aged chipmunk beastmen entered my ears.

"Ah, they're finally here."

"It's the humans."

"Exciting. Can't wait to see them!"

A shuttle minibus soon emerged from the forest. It reminded me of the courtesy vans you'd often see in Japanese hot spring areas. The minibus pulled to a stop slightly in front of the house. The door opened, and a series of nostalgic faces entered my vision as my relatives alighted the vehicle.

My parents walked with their heads held high, as if this was their own backyard. They'd visited the Wilds recently, and they'd already met Tech, so it wasn't anything new to them. As for my relatives who seemed to have visited the Wilds while Gramps was still around, they looked at the surroundings with wistful nostalgia dancing in their eyes. Finally, there was the faction who'd never come here before—my relatives who were seeing beastfolk for the first

time. They walked out from the minibus gingerly, and tension stiffened their shoulders.

As for the beastfolk, they raised their cups brimming over with alcohol. Some were even swinging their guinea fowl skewers around in excitement. It was as if they were welcoming latecomer friends to a party.

“Over here! We have lots of meat and booze!”

“Join us!” One of them ushered my relatives over. “Dig in, the food’s great.”

“What a wonderful day! I never thought that a human family would become one of us!”

“You can save the greetings for later. As latecomers, you’re obliged to drink three cups first!”

It certainly didn’t seem like the mood for a formal occasion like a wedding, and some of my relatives were taken aback. But lovers of meat and alcohol among them stared at the lively scene with exhilaration in their eyes.

Their arrival signaled the official beginning of my wedding with Techī.

Mom was the first to make a move. She marched over to me with a furious expression, as if someone had stepped on her landmine.

I continued cooking as I called out to her. “Mom, it’s a celebration today. Don’t be so ma—”

She squared her shoulders and cut me off in a loud voice. “Oh, for crying out loud, what the hell are you wearing?! You prepared a special attire for today, didn’t you?! Even Miss Tokatechi is in her everyday clothes... What happened to her dress?!”

I’d completely forgotten to get changed. My mind froze. How could I have forgotten?

My mother was just as appalled at me. She called out to her fellow ladies, my aunts, and she took on the role of the leader. “Save the chat for later. We’ll take over from here, so hurry up and get changed already! I’ll help Miss Tokatechi get dressed, so sisters, please take care of the food.” She turned to face Techī. “Miss Tokatechi! Don’t worry about setting the table. Where’s the dress? Oh,

it's in your bedroom? Okay, let's go together!"

All the women filtered into the house frantically. Seeing that, Kon, in his coverall apron, raised both hands high in the air. "Um! Excuse me! I know what to do with the food! I helped Mikura the whole time! You can follow my instructions!"

From the perspective of a human from the other side, Kon was just like an adorable plush toy who could move and talk. My aunts squealed in excitement and swarmed around Kon. They talked to him, shook his hands, and even gently stroked his head. *Well, more like stroked his headgear.* Then, they composed themselves and did exactly as Kon said.

Meanwhile, Techī and my mother rushed into Techī's bedroom. I was a man on a mission as well, and I headed to my bedroom.

Unlike wedding dresses, formal attire for men was easy to put on and take off. A mere span of minutes was enough for me to get changed. When I walked out of my bedroom, I was in for a surprise—all the sliding *shōji* screens were shut. I found Dad waiting for me in front of my bedroom door.

"I'm a messenger for the ladies," he explained. "They've instructed you to wait obediently in the living room until Miss Tokatechi finishes changing. Once she's ready, the two of you will stand side-by-side as we open the veranda sliding screens at once, allowing all the guests to see the couple. Photos are a must, according to them."

He shrugged and gave me a small smile. "When your mom sets her mind on something, all resistance is futile. If you want to survive, you better listen to everything she says until she's satisfied, buddy. I'll head into the garden and greet all the other guests there. I repeat, listen to your mom obediently. If you make her mad..." He shuddered. "Yeah, bad idea."

I nodded meekly and headed to the living room. I opened the screen and walked in before sliding it shut again. The option of sitting down crossed my mind, but I didn't want any wrinkles in my attire, so I ended up standing as I waited obediently.

The joyous voices of my female relatives and Kon echoed out from the kitchen. The boisterous and lively chatter filtered in from the garden—it felt

more like a barbecue party than a banquet. Delicious aromas swirled and mixed in the air. My attention was pulled in all kinds of directions—the fragments of conversations I overheard was intriguing, the tantalizing aroma of cooking food made me hungry, and whenever I heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor, I'd whip my head around thinking that it might be Techī. Unfortunately, so far, I'd only found disappointment. My heart was in my throat during the entire wait.

Time ticked by excruciatingly, and the wait was much longer than I'd expected. It wasn't just ten or twenty minutes—I'd already waited for nearly an hour by now. *My feet are getting a bit sore from standing for so long...*

The moment that thought crossed my mind, the sliding shōji screen that led to Techī's bedroom opened like the curtains of a stage, and there, I saw Techī.

She hadn't just changed into her wedding dress. Makeup highlighted her charming face, and ornaments decorated her short hair. Her gaze was cast slightly downward. It was the first time I'd seen this serene expression on her face, but it was strikingly beautiful, I felt it weave into a permanent part of my memory. Surrounded by an entourage of my mother and aunts, Techī walked forward.

The moment Mom entered the living room, she began talking my ears off. "At a normal wedding, you usually arrange for hair and makeup when you're renting a dress, okay? Things like these are always better in the hands of a pro. But I guess there's no point nagging a guy about that."

She sighed. "I'm thanking my lucky stars that my sisters and I came prepared, even if we only brought the minimum equipment. Seriously... You should be grateful that Miss Tokatechi is young, has beautiful skin, and is a stunner even if she doesn't wear makeup. If this happened to anyone else, the bride might file for divorce on the spot, and none of us would blame her for it! Am I clear, kiddo?!" She wagged her finger at me.

"I guess I *can* praise you for preparing a lovely dress for her, but that's it!" she continued. "There are more important things than cooking, especially on a day like this. I guess the apple really doesn't fall far from the tree... You're tactless, just like your dad and grandfather. Be very careful so that this never happens

again, you hear me? Marriage is a vow to share your lifetime with someone else. You're going to live with her for many decades, and it never hurts to be considerate! There is no such thing as being overly caring. Drill that into your head, buster!"

And that was when she finally paused to take a good look at me. She gasped, as if she was looking at some kind of eldritch horror. "What in the world is with that hair of yours, young man?! Are you a caveman who's never heard of hairdressing products?!"

Techi maintained her serene expression, but I could see mirth twinkling in her eyes as she suppressed laughter. Meanwhile, my mom and my aunts made a fierce attack on my head. They meticulously wiped away the perspiration and oils from my face and proceeded to smear some kind of obscure liquid all over it. Then came another layer of cosmetics—"foundation," as they called it. Even my eyebrows weren't spared. They trimmed and cut until it was the desired shape.

Unfortunately for me, they weren't done. They even worked at my eyelashes and smeared something onto my lips. Hair styling gel was used to slick my hair back, and I was left wondering whether they were all perfectionists as they arranged my hairstyle until every last strand was in place.

Nearly an hour of standing upright had left me fatigued. And now, faced with this onslaught, I staggered and nearly fell over. Seeing that, Mom smacked me in the back. "Stand up straight, kiddo! If you act like an unseemly hunchback in front of everyone, I'll make you regret it!"

Her commanding voice was so loud that everyone probably heard her, including our guests in the garden. Now, everyone knew the predicament I was in. After a short pause, boisterous laughter echoed out.

Uh. Um. At this point, I feel like this wedding is turning into a standard wedding humans usually hold on the other side of the gate. My gut is telling me that it's going to be a lot more tiring and ceremonious than I expected... A weary look weighed down my features, and of course, that didn't go unnoticed by my mom. Almost immediately, she snapped at me.

The living room only grew livelier as time went on. And that was when the

screen facing the kitchen slid open. From inside, Kon popped out. He'd taken off his coverall apron and was wearing a pristine shirt paired with black trousers, a slightly more decorous attire than usual.

Mom walked forward until she was standing next to Kon, and she began fixing his shirt and fur. "Little Kon, you'll be the page boy who carries Miss Tokatechi's dress train as she walks." She paused. "Weeell, you're only walking onto the veranda from the living room, so it's only a few steps forward, but you still have to look prim and proper."

She then addressed me and Tech. "I'll go over our plans. When we open the sliding shōji screens, you two cuddle and take a step forward. Extend your greetings to all the guests. As for the vow... Yeah, I bet you haven't prepared anything like that considering what I've seen so far, but seal your marriage with a kiss, at least. *Please*. Dad will be filming everything, so keep that in mind. Kiddo, that means if you slack off, it'll be captured on the camera. Miss Tech, if it's not too much to ask, please go along with us."

By now, I was completely exhausted, but I still straightened my spine and managed to muster a "Yes, ma'am..." That one simple sentence took all the energy I had.

Once the two of us were groomed to their standards, the ladies team led by my mother left the living room. Apparently, they had preparations to attend to in the garden. Kon left with them—my mom wanted to brief him in advance. Thus, only Tech and I were left behind, clad in our formal attires.

I stared at Tech for a while. Then, I nodded firmly before addressing her. "It really suits you, Tech. You look wonderful. The same can be said for your makeup and your hairstyle. We'll need to thank Mom and my aunts later."

"Mmhmm." Tech's response was short. Her gaze met mine.

I continued, "From what I've heard, you don't do wedding vows in the Wilds, so allow me to say this while we are both here." I took a deep breath. "I love you, Tech. I promise that I will always be there with you. Let's do this together."

"Mmhmm."

“If anything ever comes up, let’s discuss it first and foremost. When we need to compromise, let’s do that when possible. But if it’s something we both can’t budge on, let’s respect each other. I want to grow old with you, and for us to be together for as long as possible, communication is key. Let’s do everything we can.”

“Mmhmm.”

“And, um...” I hesitated. “I would be overjoyed if we had an energetic child like Kon.”

“Mmhmm.”

“...Please take care of me from now on.”

“Mmhmm.” She paused. “Same here.”

At some point in our exchange—it felt more like a monologue, actually—Techi began casting her gaze downward, possibly out of shyness. Her expression remained serene. We both relished this special alone time that my mother and aunts had likely arranged for us.

A while later, Kon opened a sliding screen by just a margin and slipped in. He gently picked up the dress train, which wasn’t actually long enough to require a page boy. This was a signal from my mother that everything was ready.

Techi and I stood next to each other and faced the direction of the garden. Though we hadn’t discussed it beforehand, our arms naturally linked with each other, a posture that was more fitting for a married couple. Then, we stared straight at the sliding screens before us.

Almost immediately, the screens slid open vigorously. The intense flashing of cameras bombarded us, and inside this shower of light, the two of us stepped forward onto the veranda.

In the front row of the guests were my dad and my relatives armed with cameras. Behind them were Techi’s parents and a handful of other beastfolk around our age, who were likely Techi’s friends. As for the remainder of Techi’s relatives, they were single-mindedly gorging on their food while sparing curious glances in our direction. They probably had never seen this type of wedding before.

The next moment, my aunts began throwing cut-up pieces of paper leaflets at us. They likely meant it as a rice shower of sorts. It was soon followed by another round of camera flashes.

The entire time, Mom was gesturing at me repeatedly without a word. I could practically hear her instructing me to “Get on with it already.” My expression was stiff from nervousness and a complex mix of other emotions, but I indeed got on with it. Gently, the two of us leaned in and kissed.



Deafening cheering filled the venue. The excitement had reached a climax, and all the guests went wild. There were teasing shouts and whistling. There was the sound of people toasting in celebration. All of it mixed into a great commotion as our guests enjoyed the food, enjoyed the drinks, then sang and danced to their hearts' content.

Techi's friends rushed over and crowded around the bride. They voiced their blessings as they admired her dress, touched it, and took photos with their phones. Their zeal only ballooned with time, and the venue got even livelier and noisier.

I furtively picked up Kon and hugged him to my chest before evacuating from the site. I sat down on a chair that my dad had prepared, and finally, I had a moment to catch my breath.

"Now that I think about it, I've been standing without rest since I woke up this morning..." I muttered to myself. "Wait, I think I took a few breaks here and there...? Gah, I was so busy that all my memories are blurring together."

During my monologue, Kon moved from my lap to a table. He grabbed one of the guinea fowl skewers available and began enjoying it blissfully. "Congratulations, Mikura! You were real handsome!"

"Ah, I'm honored to hear that. Thanks for helping us today, Kon. Your job is finished, so you can eat and drink as much as you want. We prepared plenty of juice. Pick the types you like."

"I will! There's so much good food around, so I'll binge away for the rest of the day!" He paused. "Aren't you going to eat, Mikura?"

"Well, I don't want to get my clothes dirty." I gestured at my formal attire. "I'll wait a little longer before changing back into my normal clothes and digging in. The enticing aroma of the unagi eels has been making my mouth water, and I've actually been looking forward to it for a long time. Once I get changed, I need to eat until my tummy's full."

"Good idea! Tech's mommy makes great unagi! I need to help myself to some of those once I finish working on my skewers!"

That was when Dad came over with a radiant smile on his face. In his hands

were a cup and a beer bottle, respectively. He offered the cup to me, twisted open the bottle cap with an opener, then poured the fizzy liquid into my cup while saying, “There you go, buddy. Drink up.”

I’d planned on refraining from drinking today, but I could only raise the white flag of surrender under his insistence. I tilted the cup and poured all the contents down my throat at once. The men among my relatives took that as a cue—my uncles and my grandfather gathered around me like a swarm.

Their gazes and expressions conveyed one message: “A lot of things happened, but we’re glad it all turned out well in the end. Congratulations. We hope you’ll still treat us as family from now.” One after another, they poured beer into my cup, which symbolized our reconciliation.

And well, how could I refuse? They’d come all the way into the Wilds and showed such sincerity. Resigned to my fate, I doused my throat with one cup of beer after another until the number of drinks I had was equal to the number of relatives crowding me.

The moment I finished drinking my last cup, I let out a burp. “Okay, I think that’s my limit... I’ll head off to the bathroom and get changed while I’m there...” I staggered to my feet and trudged unsteadily toward my bedroom while clutching my spinning head. On my way there, all the surrounding scenes leapt into my vision.

In one corner, my mom and aunts were chatting with Techī’s lady relatives with big smiles on their faces. Some of my female relatives were fussing over the kids but were also restraining themselves from going overboard. In another corner, Techī and her friends were flipping through the wedding dress pamphlets while talking animatedly to each other. A group of guests had started a drinking competition, possibly inspired by my binge drinking. I saw a heartwarming scene of Rei and Miss Yasaka making food merrily and carrying them to the tables.

I didn’t know how to describe it, but such sights made me feel that this type of wedding wasn’t bad at all. My heart swelled, and once I returned to my bedroom, I promptly got changed before paying a visit to the lavatory. I finished my duties there and headed to the bathroom sink. I washed my hands and my

face, then used my hands to sweep my slicked-back hair to its usual state. With a towel, I wiped my hair impatiently.

All right, I'm all fresh and better now. Time to dig into the unagi eels! With anticipation burning in my heart, I wasted no time and returned to my seat. There, I found Kon perched quietly on the tabletop. With his signature close-eyed smile, he was stuffing his mouth full of enticing grilled unagi. Right next to him were two large plates, and on them were significant piles of grilled unagi. I almost did a double take at the volume of the small mountains. Kon must have carried them here. One plate was his, and the other was likely for me. He was such a thoughtful boy.

I admired the pile. The unagi eel fillets were magnificent—they were nice and big and fatty, and their aroma made my mouth water. I took a seat at the table with the lavish feast on display, and Kon pushed one of the large plates until it was in front of me. I accepted it with a smile and thanked him.

With his eyes still closed, his smile grew even wider as he chirped, “You’re very welcome!”

I picked up the pair of chopsticks that Kon had grabbed for me and reached for the unagi eels that I’d been itching to have. The unagi eels my mother-in-law had made were the two classic types: *kabayaki*, where the eel is dipped in a sweet soy sauce-based marinade, and *shirayaki*, where the eel is grilled directly without any seasoning. In looks, they weren’t anything out of the ordinary. They seemed identical to the unagi eels I’d eaten on the other side of the border.

But well, even if there isn’t much of a difference, unagi eels are already delicious without any treatment. If she makes them with care and attention, it’s only natural that she’s made a name for herself. The *kabayaki* unagi Kon had fetched had a gorgeous luster, and I transferred one onto my plate. With my chopsticks, I cut them into bite-sized chunks and carried one into my mouth.

In terms of sweetness and saltiness, the marinade was rather mild. I didn’t know what seasoning she’d used, but the umami was especially prominent. *Did she add something that has umami flavors to the marinade? Or does she have some kind of secret technique to highlight the natural umami of unagi eels?* I wondered. A powerful, rich, and irresistible aroma left a lasting impression on

my nose. At the same time, the tender flesh of eel entertained my tongue.

“Wow, this is even more delicious than I expected!” I exclaimed as I reached for a second bite, then a third.

I was tired after a day of nonstop work and nearly nothing to eat. Both of these factors probably emphasized the delectable taste of the unagi eels, but even if I took them out of the equation, the food I was savoring was on a whole other level. In fact, I could declare that these were the best unagi I’d ever had in my entire life. My pile of kabayaki unagi gradually diminished and disappeared into my mouth.

That was when my mother-in-law came over with two bowls in her hands. One was filled with shiny white rice, and the other was filled with rice cooked with various ingredients. From what I could see, it had green *shiso* leaves, sesame seeds, and thin slices of ginger, though there might be more I hadn’t identified. My mother-in-law showed both to me and asked, “Which one?”

I mulled over the meaning of that question. *Is she asking me which one is better for unagi donburi? The classic unagi donburi, of course, has to be white rice...but she’s the unagi master. Why would she deliberately bring over seasoned rice with other ingredients while knowing that?*

Ginger, green shiso, and sesame seeds... They sound like a wonderful combination with sashimi or chirashi sushi, which is topped with plenty of seafood. Are they a good match for unagi too?

There was a chance that they didn’t mix well. My mother-in-law might enjoy it, but perhaps it wasn’t to my taste. But once my curiosity got going, stopping it was nigh impossible. I rose to the challenge and chose the seasoned rice.

Kon followed my example. Soon, two bowls were served before us, and I placed a kabayaki unagi fillet onto the rice without hesitation. Armed with my chopsticks, I began my attack on the unagi donburi with seasoned rice. I divided the fillet and picked up one eel chunk with rice. I gingerly carried it into my mouth.

The first thing that hit me was the taste of eel, the elegant and mild seasoning of the rice, as well as the aromatic green *shiso* and sesame seeds. The rice wasn’t dominant—it didn’t fight for a place under the spotlight, and even the

ginger obeyed that theme dutifully. But from time to time, the spice of ginger and the vibrant flavor of green shiso would fill my mouth.

I hummed in thought. If I had to make a verdict, it was delicious. The seasoning suited seafood well, and my impression was that this rice would indeed pair well with sashimi or chirashi sushi. At the same time, it also matched my mother-in-law's unagi nicely. I didn't know what did the trick—was it the mild marinade that was slightly different from normal kabayaki? Or was it the rich and potent umami? Either way, I could never get tired of eating it, and my appetite only grew with every bite. I could chew on forever. I could eat this unagi forever.

At the same time, I felt that white rice would also fulfill the same role. The simple, homely taste of rice was more compatible with the impactful kabayaki unagi in my opinion. *That being said, this combination is good too. It never gets dull, I keep craving more. Though my stomach is getting fuller, I feel like my appetite is growing bigger instead. It feels like she mixed in pallet cleansers like tsukemono into the rice, which prevents the rich taste of the unagi from becoming overwhelming. Maybe it's just right for an occasion like this, where it's both lively and restless.*

While I enjoyed my slightly unorthodox unagi donburi, Kon, who was sitting on the table adorably, was practically inhaling his unagi and rice. He munched, he chewed, and he took big bites. "Mm! Omph! Yuummy! Mm!" He was completely captivated by the dish.

As he wolfed down his food, his nose twitched, and his ears and tail moved vigorously. The movement of his nose was especially intense, and I had the belated realization that this seasoned rice was more attractive to beastfolk. Green shiso, sesame seeds, and ginger were all aromatic condiments. They must be powerful stimuli for Kon's appetite. The effect was more subdued for someone with a mediocre nose like me, but it seemed to be a different case for beastfolk.

As I observed Kon, I let out a whisper while eating my unagi donburi. "I see, I see..." If I memorized this rich combination of flavors and aromas, I might make food better tailored to Techii and Kon's tastes.

My eating session was interrupted by a sudden explosion of joyous shouting on the other side of the garden—approximately from the front of the warehouse. I shifted my gaze, and what entered my vision was a staggering cloud of rising steam and heat. The source was the stove made with stacked bricks, where whole roast beef was being cooked. It seemed that the whole roast was finally complete, and the seal on the stove was broken, spurring on a wave of excited cheers.

A complex and inviting aroma permeated the venue. Many beastfolk, who'd been sitting while eating and drinking, immediately stood up. With plates and chopsticks in their hands, they flooded the vicinity of the stove. They must have been waiting for this momentous event.

Taking that as a cue, Rei stepped forward with a giant knife and a large spoon that reminded me of a rice scoop. He proceeded to butcher the cow. He systematically cut up the skin of the cow and the meat, and with his spoon, he scooped up the rice that stuffed the cow's stomach. One spoonful was just the right amount for one person, and he started transferring the food onto the many plates that were thrust out at him. Both the server and the beastfolk being served acted as if they'd done this a thousand times before. Everything proceeded smoothly.

As for the relatives on my side, they stared, astounded by the sight. A handful of the men worked up the courage and approached the stove with plates in their hands. They'd already eaten more than they usually did, and they'd filled up their stomachs with plenty of alcohol too. Yet, they still couldn't resist the temptation of the alluring and impactful whole roast cow that boasted a striking aroma. Thus, my uncles dived into a reckless challenge that they might end up regretting.

...And I was just as reckless. As one of the central figures of the event, it would be rude of me if I didn't at least have a taste. Furthermore, if I missed this chance, it might never come by again. Living in the Wilds meant that I might attend more weddings in the future, but from what I'd heard, they usually roasted pigs, not fancy cows like today.

One after another, I lined up excuses in my mind as I polished off the last of my unagi donburi. I took my plate and chopsticks into my hand before standing

up while knowing I was walking into madness. I marched over.

Meanwhile, Kon was staring at me intently with his stomach full and bloated. He let out a small “Heh.” He stood up with the same gear and was quick to follow. His cool attitude practically said, “Guess I’ll go along with you, pal.”

I chuckled at Kon’s unexpected manly display as I made my way to the whole roast. The moment I arrived, Rei called out to me. “*Bonjour!* Congrats, brother! Eat to your heart’s content today! The real charm of a wedding is when everyone eats together and feel happy as one big family!” As he spoke, he arranged rice and a cut of the whole roast beef on my plate.

The skin was roasted until it was crispy and crunchy, and the meat was soft and flaky. Next to it was a serving of rice—*baked rice*? It looked more like fried rice or pilau with all the ingredients mixed in. At a glance, I could tell that there were at least raisins, dried apricots, carrots, and onions. There also seemed to be some spices, but judging from the scent, was quite mild on the spicy spectrum. Upon a closer look, there were even crushed walnuts.

The moment I noticed that, Rei commented, “Those are walnuts farmed by Tomiyasu, by the way.”

Ah. They probably did this especially for me... I whispered, “Oh. So they’re Gramps’s walnuts...”

My uncles, who’d been standing nearby, widened their eyes. They all walked back to the rest of my relatives and started dragging them over, saying that, “You *need* to eat this. Just one bite’s enough.”

I nodded to myself. *Looks like Gramps still has a place in their hearts. I’m glad.* The next thing I knew, Rei had finished piling food on my plate. With steady hands, I carried my miniature mountain of meat and rice back to my seat earlier. Kon had been served after me, and he was hot on my heels. The two of us voiced our thanks for the food rather belatedly.

I decided to start on the rice first. With chopsticks, I carried some into my mouth. The first bite told me that it was much more flavorful than I expected. The tingle of the spices and the umami of the beef that saturated the grains were balanced out by the somewhat sweet vegetables and fruits. It was rich, but it wasn’t too heavy. Furthermore, the walnuts added to the texture, and it

reminded me of *gomoku* sushi, which was like *chirashi* sushi except the topping was mixed with the rice. Every bite was pleasant and entertaining.

As for the beef... It was simple in comparison. On the skin was some kind of sauce that was likely soy sauce-based, and it had steeped into the skin thoroughly. The roasted skin was crispy and aromatic, and though it was just a tad tough, it only added to its charm. The flesh itself was left nearly untouched. It only had the natural and delectable flavors of the meat itself. Whenever I was left wanting for a bit of spice and seasoning, I would eat the meat with skin or rice. Based on what I could see, some people were even adding a bit of salt and pepper.

“Mmmm! Whole roast beef is supreme!” Kon exclaimed. “Nothing can compare! It’s amaaazing!” He was the type who preferred enjoying the meat as-is—he didn’t add any additional seasoning.

I followed his example and chewed slowly on the plain meat, enjoying its rustic beauty.

My leisurely eating session was interrupted by Kon. He’d polished off his plate in the span of seconds, and he stood up vigorously with a grave expression. Then, he raced to the toilet of my house. After roughly ten minutes, he returned with a flat stomach. He retrieved orange juice from a cooler nearby and made his way to my table. He plopped down and began chugging on the juice.

I gaped at him. *Wow, his speedy metabolism is incredible like always.* I shook my head with fond exasperation as I continued chewing on my food. Finally, I carried the last piece of beef into my mouth.

As if he’d been waiting for me to finish, Kon chose this moment to speak up. “By the way, Mikura, are you sure you don’t have to be with Techī?”

I swallowed the last mouthful and replied, “Techī’s friends are attending the wedding today. I can talk with her as long as I want after the ceremony, so I think she should prioritize her friends for now. I’m sure they want to talk about her dress and catch up on everything they’ve missed.”

“Huuuh. Is that how it works?”

“Yep. Due to the complicated and strict process for people to cross the border, I couldn’t call any of my friends over, but I’m sure I’d be chatting to them right now if they were present. Accompanying your special someone is important, yes, but so is talking to your friends. As adults—no, no matter what age you are, your friends are irreplaceable treasures.”

“I see, I see!” He nodded to himself sagely. “When I get married, I need to make time to chat with my friends and make sure that my bride can hang out with her friends!”

“O-Oh right, yeah, I’d recommend that,” I stammered. I still wasn’t used to the culture in the Wilds where the boundary between an adult and a child was blurry and unclear. “You’re heading to marriage interviews soon, how can I forget? It’s probably better if you start thinking about stuff like this early on.”

The next moment, the children—Kon’s coworkers at the orchard—who’d been scattered around the venue and enjoying the food, ran up to me all at once. They spoke up in unison, giving me their blessings and thanks.

“Congratulations!”

“Congrats on your wedding.”

“Thank you very much for inviting me today!”

“The food was awesome!”

“I hope you have a happy marriage with Tech!”

“I love the fancy food!”

“The smoked meat donburi was really tasty!”

A brilliant smile lit up my face. I stood up from my chair, squatted down to meet their eyes, then voiced my thanks to each and every one of them. In response, they all replied with their unique smiles that were distinctly different from each other. Soon, they scattered once again. Some headed to the toilet, some returned to the feast, some even began savoring the different types of drinks available. A group even rushed up to Rei and hounded him, asking him whether there was dessert.

They were just like the young and carefree kids they were supposed to be at

their age. It was a heartwarming sight. They gave me a different impression from Kon, who would sometimes sound like a grown-up and say things that were even more mature than a working adult like me. Was Kon special? Or was I just oblivious about the mature sides of these beastchildren?

Well, I mean, they already kind of count as adults because they're working and earning their daily bread. I wouldn't be surprised if they nurtured a sense of responsibility through such experiences, and that's one of the requirements for maturity. But if all of them are shrewd like Kon, does that mean the children Techī and I eventually have would also be mature at such a young age?

According to Techī and the others, if we had children, they would be chipmunk beastfolk and look just like Kon and the other kids. Did that correlation also apply to their personalities as well? *When I have the opportunity, I should ask Techī about such matters. Actually, tonight sounds like a good plan.* After coming to that conclusion, I rubbed my full belly as I stood up. To relieve my grumbling stomach, I dashed to the toilet.

I did what all people would do in a toilet before heading to the bathroom sink and washing my hands and face. With this refresher, I focused my mind again before returning to the garden.

In stark contrast to before, everyone was quiet. Drowsiness from food and alcohol must have settled in. I went around the slightly calmer venue and extended my greetings to the guests. I thanked my relatives for coming all this way and greeted Techī's relatives formally. From now on, we were one family.

While I was at it, I also exchanged idle chatter with them, such as asking them about their thoughts on the food I'd prepared—the smoked pork donburi, the confits, and the helmeted guinea fowl skewers. I asked them which one they liked best, I asked about what other dishes they'd like to try, and sometimes they were the ones asking me for my recipes. It was truly trifling small talk.

After making one round, I headed toward Rei. There was still half of the whole roast left, and even now, he was dishing the beef out. When I approached, I said, "Allow me to thank you again for all your help today. The whole roast was simply amazing."

He waved his knife flippantly, as if saying that there was no need for such

formalities. “You don’t owe me any thanks. This is our duty when our family gets married. Just letting you know, but when I get married, you’re going to take my place. So don’t worry, you’ll return the favor one day.” He grinned at me.

I blinked. “I see. When that day draws nearer, please tell me the detailed recipe. I want to reproduce this marvelous taste as best as I can.”

“Sure thing, I’ll do that when I have time. It’s actually not that complicated. What’s more important than the taste is making sure you prepare the right amount of meat, actually.” With slight apprehension in his eyes, Rei looked down at the whole roast cow left behind in the stove. It was kept warm by the remnant heat in the bricks.

There was still around half of the whole roast left. However, most of the guests had already eaten their fill. They were rubbing their full stomachs as they indulged in leisurely conversation, allowing the food to digest. It seemed that Rei and my parents-in-law had prepared too much.

Seeing the frown on Rei’s face, I made a proposal. “Hey, if there’s too much left over, I can go grab some zipper bags. We can divide the food up into smaller portions and either distribute them or store them in the fridge.”

He gave me a bewildered look, as if to say, “What in the world are you talking about?” Then, realization dawned on his face, and this time, he communicated with his words. “Mikura, you got the wrong idea. I’m not in a fix because we’ve got too much meat here. I’m worried that we might not have enough. It’s barely past noon, and your wedding’s only just getting started. But it’s so popular that they’ve already gotten through half of the roast... They liked it so much that the Kurikara family restaurant’s going to run outta food way faster than we expected.” He sighed. “Guess I shouldn’t have expected anything less from beef, the king of meat.”

“Huh? Wait, what are you saying?” I gaped at him in shock. “Th-The guests aren’t done with the food yet?! I knew that beastfolk are big eaters, but seriously?! Everyone ate my food too, right?! Even the supermarket appetizers and salads are nearly gone!” By the end, I completely lost my composure.

Rei shook his head and looked at me with eyes of pity. “We’re far from

finished. It's clear that this is only the start of our battle. But yeah, I gotta admit that the speed they ate even took me by surprise. Normally, the amount of food we have should last until evening, but..."

Suddenly, his eyes widened. "Ah, I see now. The whole roast cow and your food were good, *too* good. They catered to our palates perfectly, and everyone's got a way bigger appetite than usual! Ahhh, it all makes sense. Sometimes, being an expert chef isn't always a good thing, eh? Hmm... At this rate, this wedding's gonna cost us twice or thrice more than a standard one."

"R-Really...?" I whimpered. "So you're saying that...they like the food so much that they crave even more food than usual and ended up eating more than usual. But they still aren't satisfied and want to eat this buffet until our operating hours are over, am I right? That's... Even if they have the time and the appetite, we don't have more meat left in our inventory. The only thing I can think of is my stock of canned food. But considering how many beastfolk are present, it's far from enough..."

"Ah, don't worry, that's not the case for everyone," he reassured me. "The uncles and aunties binged on alcohol, and they probably don't have much room left in their stomachs. Our opponents are the children and the young ones—I bet they aren't even halfway to satisfaction. Oh, and also the beastfolk who do manual labor and need a lot of energy." He shrugged helplessly and scanned our surroundings. "There's no other way. The only thing we can do is to whip up some extra food on the spot."

Like Rei had said, the adults wore expressions of satisfaction on their faces. However, there was a hungry look in the eyes of the younger generation. I could practically see gluttonous desire burning in their eyes. Among them was Kon, who looked at me expectantly. He wanted to eat more. He wanted to enjoy this day to the fullest. His gaze flitted between the whole roast and me. The message was clear: he wanted me to make more food.

Rei sighed. "As you can see, Mikura, we've got a long battle ahead of us today. Unfortunately, the kids are pestering me about dessert, so I'm going to do a tactical retreat and fetch the chilled desserts from my *pâtisserie*. During my absence, please weather the storm somehow with Mom, Dad, and Tokatechi! I know you need a lot of ingredients, so I suggest ordering stuff from

the supermarket over the phone. They should deliver it quickly. Annnyway, I'm leaving the battlefield in your capable hands, chef! I'm sure you can come up with a wonderful recipe and whip up something nice with the ingredients available at the supermarket! I'll be back!"

He handed over the knife and spoon to me before sprinting to his delivery van parked near the garden. On his way, he called out to Miss Yasaka, who'd been engaging in chatter with Techii and her group of friends. Together, they climbed into the van and drove off into the distance.

I watched the van disappear into the trees in a daze. Then, I looked down at the knife and the spoon in my hands and racked my brain for ideas. Whipping up something on the spot wasn't as easy as Rei made it sound. I didn't even have time to prepare anything, which meant that our only choice was to begin a simple barbecue party where we grilled the raw ingredients that arrived.

Okay, we'll buy ready-made barbecue sauce, meat, and vegetables. We'll grill the food and dip them in whatever sauce we like. Done. No effort or skill necessary. Yeah, I think that's my only feasible option.

Oh, but I suppose I could make my own sauce. I could mix minced onions and grated apples as the base for the sauce. I'll add some kind of dashi stock, then a main seasoning like soy sauce or miso paste. Or maybe both. If I simmer it all in a big pot, I can make it in bulk. Combine that with grilled meat and vegetables, and we should be golden.

What we need now, then, are multiple barbecue grills. Looks like I'll need to borrow them from Rei again.

I had an idea, and I was willing to use it. I fished out my phone and sent a text to Rei with a summary of my plans. He was likely still driving. Then, I called the supermarket and ordered every single ingredient that came to mind. Once that was complete, I focused on serving the whole roast cow and persisted until Rei made his valiant return. Then, I passed on the torch—the knife and spoon—before making a beeline for the kitchen. With Kon as my assistant, I launched into sauce making.

The sauce was soon finished. When the ingredients arrived, I made preparations for the barbecue party. I'd thoughtlessly made a sauce with a

strong aroma, it turned out to be a catalyst that helped the beastfolk regain their appetite in the double. They were even more eager than before. *Oh no...*

And so, my grand wedding day, which also marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life, was transformed into a day of cooking around the clock.

After the Wedding

JUST as scheduled, my relatives returned at three in the afternoon. The banquet, however, continued on until roughly five. The moment the clock struck five, everyone leapt into action and began the big cleanup. By the time six o'clock arrived, they were all ready to go their separate ways.

During the middle of the banquet, some of the guests had taken a break by resting on their chairs, and it seemed that they'd reserved their stamina for the cleanup at the very end. Apparently, it was a rule in the Wilds that the relatives did the cleaning and washing so that they didn't have to force any unnecessary workload on the newlyweds. They would finish cleaning up by six and leave immediately after.

And...well, I had a good guess about one of the reasons for the early dismissal. *They probably don't want to, you know, get in the way of the wedding night.*

I'd been swamped with work during the ceremony, and I hadn't had much time with Tech. By the time the most formal part of the ceremony had ended, Tech had long changed into her normal clothes. Judging by her expression, she had enjoyed the food until she was satisfied. She'd talked to and received blessings from her friends and family on top of that, and her expression was gentler than usual. Her skin was practically glowing, and she was filled with a vitality I'd never seen before.

She proceeded to neatly arrange the giant trash bags, which had been filled with an unthinkable amount of trash, inside the garden. And with that, she dusted off her hands, announcing that the tidying up for today was complete. Then, her gaze shifted to look at me, and our eyes met.

I was tongue-tied. I didn't know what to say, but Tech didn't seem bothered at all on the surface. "I'll clean the bathroom and bathtub, so could you take care of the tableware?"

"Okay," I said slowly. "Got it, I will."

I did as she'd instructed. I washed the remaining dishes and arranged them inside the dryer. As for the batch that had already dried, I put them away inside the tableware cabinet. Somewhere down the line, Techii entered the kitchen, having finished her part of the cleanup. She fiddled with the water heater before returning to the living room.

What followed this interaction was a usual leisurely night like any other. She sat on a floor cushion and propped up her elbow on the low table as she stared absentmindedly at the TV. After I finished putting away the tableware, I joined her.

Time passed by leisurely as we lounged in the living room. Then, the subpanel of the water heater announced that the hot water was ready. Techii swiftly returned to her room and came back with a change of clothes in hand. She advanced into the bathroom.

Um... How should I interpret this series of events? I thought nervously. *We sleep in separate bedrooms to begin with, so...which one should we sleep in tonight? It seems a bit awkward for us to move our futon mattresses into one room after all this time... Now that I think about it, our minds were so occupied with the ceremony itself that we haven't discussed matters like these at all.*

The question of sleeping arrangements after a wedding seems pretty significant. Judging by her reaction... Are we going to stay in separate bedrooms and only convene in one of them when it's necessary? Is that what she's implying?

My mind was working overtime, going on all kinds of tangents. I grew restless. On impulse, I stood up and walked into the prayer alcove. The sliding screen leading inside was wide open, and the shutter of the Buddhist altar was left ajar as well. I'd arranged it this way so that one could see the garden—the venue of the wedding—from the prayer alcove. Incense sticks were lit, and other offerings were dedicated as well: flowers, fruits, Rei's homemade sweets, and even some of the food I'd made today.

Did Gramps watch over our wedding? Did he have a good time? I wondered as I sat down in front of the altar. I pressed my palms together and prayed silently.

I wasn't exactly a devout Buddhist, but in my opinion, time spent on praying

to those who had left a step ahead of us was something I appreciated. Taking a small amount of time whenever we felt like it out of our busy everyday life to pray wasn't bad at all. It also helped me to collect my thoughts and reflect on my feelings. While I was at it, I could also offer prayers for the happiness of those around me and the people I cared about, amassing what people called "good karma." It was always better to have more of that, right?

If possible, I wanted to show the ceremony to Gramps while he was still alive. I wanted to tell him that the orchard, the house, and even Tech and the kids were all in good hands, so he could rest easy. I would take good care of everything.

Alas, one couldn't change the past. I was praying now because I couldn't do that, and I didn't know whether that was good or bad. All kinds of thoughts swirled in my mind.

That was when something unusual happened. There wasn't anything strange about the Buddhist altar itself. Diagonally upward from the altar was the compartment built into the wall of the prayer alcove, and further on top of it was what should be called *nageshi*, a beam running between the posts of a wall. Along it hung large portraits of our deceased ancestors, and for some reason, two of these portraits fell down simultaneously—the portraits of my great-great-grandfather and my great-grandfather.

"S-Seriously...?" I whimpered.

Hey, couldn't you have chosen a better time to fall? It's meant to be a happy day, but this ominous omen kind of ruins it... I picked up the framed portraits from the ground and checked whether the glass had any cracks in them. Something caught my eye—there was a brown envelope stuck to the back of my great-great-grandfather's portrait.

"What in the world is this...? Did Gramps hide this too? I mean, he always liked playing these games, I guess," I muttered to myself as I peeled the envelope off the portrait. "First, he hid the ledgers in the Buddhist altar, and now, I find a hidden envelope behind a portrait..."

Before I examined the envelope, I returned the portraits onto the beam. I secured them so that they wouldn't fall down again. Then, I finally opened the

envelope and peered inside.

Two necklaces slipped out. At a glance, they seemed like toys you'd give to a child, but upon further scrutiny, they seemed to be carefully crafted. *Are these high-end accessories? And...from the looks of it, these are probably custom-made. After all, in the place where any other necklace would have a precious stone or intricate device, these ones have an ornament modeled after a chestnut, of all things. It's not the burr, but the pointy fruits covered with the tough skin. What in the world are these ornaments made of? It looks like some kind of metal... Is it platinum?*

I took both chestnut fruit ornaments into my hand and inspected them closely. On the back were engravings of Japanese hiragana characters. It seemed to be "Mi" and "To" respectively on each necklace.

I had an epiphany. *Wait, are these the first characters of "Mikura" and "Tokatechi"? Did Gramps arrange these for us? Did he go out of his way to order these custom-made accessories? These necklaces...feel kind of nostalgic to me... These chestnut necklaces...*

Hmm, when I sort through my memories, I've got the feeling that I wanted something like these when I was a child. The memory's vague, but... Gramps received some kind of similar accessory from...someone he knew, and...I nagged him saying that I wanted one? Did I?

Wait. Did Techie possibly make that request with me? I...can't remember a thing, but that would make the most sense. Gramps ordered these or made these especially for us before hiding them inside the prayer alcove, thinking that we'd find them one day. I think that's what happened.

Oh, I should have noticed when I hung Gramps's portrait up on the beam. What have I been doing until now? I berated myself. Maybe the portraits fell because Gramps wanted to tell us about these necklaces... No, he must have, I decided.

It should be safe to consider these as a wedding present from Gramps. The design of these chestnuts was also very fitting for me and Techie.

I gently put the two necklaces back into the envelope. I turned to face the Buddhist altar once again and pressed my palms together. This time, I dedicated

a prayer filled with gratitude.

Then, I returned to the living room and placed the envelope on the low table for now. Having finished her bath, Techii returned in her pajamas. She ushered me with the words, “Get on with it, Mikura. Take your bath.”

...I wasn’t quite sure how I should interpret those words once again. My heart skipped a beat for no reason at all as I entered the bath as I was told. For no reason at all, I cleaned my body thoroughly tonight before heading out. I changed into my pajamas and headed back into the living room.

There, Techii was staring at the TV like always. Since the night had begun, she had maintained her usual behavior. Once again, that was a mystery I couldn’t make heads or tails of. *Should I take that as a sign that...to her, everything is the same even after our wedding?*

My thoughts were going rampant again after seeing such a scene. I headed to the kitchen, opened the fridge, and took out chilled barley tea to rehydrate myself after my bath. The first mouthful made it down my throat when Techii called out to me.

“...I prepared a futon mattress in a vacant room, just letting you know.”

Not in my room, not in her room, but in a vacant room. Her message was clear by this point.

My scrambled mind commanded me to say something, but it was overheating. I only managed a lame response. “Ah. Okay. Um, thanks.”

I put the barley tea back into the fridge. I returned to the living room and picked up the envelope. I obediently headed into the vacant room.

The vacant room turned out to be pristine. A certain someone had cleaned it meticulously. On the low table next to the window were flowers in a vase. A certain someone had prepared it while I’d been completely oblivious.

Hot on my heels, Techii entered the room after me. I switched on the light inside the room and sat down on the futon mattress. On autopilot, I took out the contents of the envelope.

She looked like she hadn’t noticed the envelope at all. Perhaps it was because

she was too nervous. She tilted her head in question and fixed her gaze on me, but that didn't stop her from sitting down next to me. Quietly, patiently, she waited for me to speak.

With both hands, I held up the necklace with the "To" engraving and showed it to Techī. "This seems to be something Gramps prepared for us. Look behind this ornament—there's a 'To' engraving, and I think it's the 'To' in Tokatechi. The one over there has 'Mi,' and it should stand for Mikura. I have no clue when he arranged these presents, but they were hidden behind my great-great-grandfather's portrait for a long time." I paused. "Techī, did you know about these?"

"No, it's my first time seeing them." She shook her head. "But...I have the vague feeling that I wanted something like this in the far past." She began staring at the necklace intently.

"Yeah... I have a memory of something similar. The two of us nagged Gramps about it when we were kids, and he remembered that. He arranged these necklaces and hid them behind a portrait. When I was praying at the Buddhist altar earlier, the portrait fell together with the envelope, and I feel that... Gramps did that."

A beat of silence passed before I said, "We somehow ended up being so busy that I haven't had the time to prepare wedding rings, so for now...shall we exchange these in their stead?"

Hearing that, Techī closed her eyes meekly and drooped her head. Gently, ever so gently, I put the necklace around her neck while taking care not to tangle it in any of her hair.



She quietly lifted her face, took the chestnut fruit ornament into her hand, and stared hard at it. She let out a soft chuckle. “So Tomiyasu prepared this, huh...?” Elation bloomed on her face.

And then, it was her turn. She gingerly picked up the necklace with the “Mi” engraving. Seeing that, I followed her example. I closed my eyes and drooped my head. Just like I did, Techii placed the necklace gently around my neck.

But that was when Techii’s movements started being different. She placed the necklace around my neck and wound her arms around me to fasten it...and she kept them there even after she was done. I opened my eyes, wondering whether there was something wrong, and the first thing I saw was a pair of orbs as stunning as jewels staring back at me. They were right in front of me, and we were so intimate that there was barely any distance separating us.

I was startled. It was sudden, and I didn’t know what was happening. ...*No. It isn’t sudden.* Finally understanding the situation, belatedly, I felt my heart thump erratically in my chest. Our lips met for the second time today as she leaned forward. And then, Techii pinned me down passionately, almost forcefully. In the back of my mind, I quietly commented that it should be the other way around, but soon, I didn’t have the luxury of thinking about anything else.



...**THE** next morning arrived. To be more precise, it was noon. I’d been utterly spent after my episode of Kitchen from Hell yesterday, as well as...a few other things, so by the time I finally crawled out of bed, it was a little past noon.

Today was a day off, and Techii was taking a break from her work as well. She told me that I didn’t need to make breakfast, but I hadn’t expected myself to sleep like a log until the afternoon. I sighed in exasperation at myself.

The first thing I did when I opened my eyes was to look around me. Techii wasn’t there—it seemed that she’d woken up before me. Judging by the sounds coming from the garden, she was likely up to something there.

I had the option of heading to the garden straight away, but I decided I should groom myself first. I headed to the bathroom, took a shower, shaved, brushed

my teeth, then got changed into fresh clothes. Feeling nice and clean and ready to face the world again, I proceeded to tidy the vacant bedroom, do the laundry, and do some cleaning. Through doing the chores, I gradually restored my usual state of mind. It was time to return to my mundane everyday life.

Using flat mops with disposable cleaning pads, I wiped down the corridor and steadily made my way to the veranda. Techī entered my vision—she was smiling broadly as she brandished her staff, waving it about as she trained. Her vigorous movements sent her glimmering sweat into the air. She seemed to be in high spirits. In fact, she was training enthusiastically with such a brilliant expression that I almost felt like she was a second sun. She seemed to have plenty of—no, excess stamina and energy.

The sweltering heat of summer had begun setting in, and her clothes were soaked through with sweat. I wasn't exaggerating—she looked absolutely drenched, and I felt worry growing in my heart. *How long has she been training today?*

As I wiped the floor nearby, I called out to her. "Techī, when did you start training? You seem like you've perspired a lot. Have you rehydrated yourself properly?"

She shifted her gaze to look at me, and her glowing expression grew even brighter. "I don't remember the exact hour of the day, but was probably around eight or nine. Don't worry, I've been drinking from the tap over there." With her staff, she indicated the tap on the outer wall next to the entrance of the house.

Umm... That tap's meant for watering plants and hosing things down, though... "Plain water isn't enough. You need salt in your system too." And that was when her words finally sank in. "Wait. If you've been working out since eight in the morning, you also need to replenish your energy with food." I frowned disapprovingly. "I'll whip something up immediately after I'm done with chores. How about you take a break for now, get a shower, and change into fresh clothes?"

She pursed her lips slightly. "I understand where you're coming from, but I'm on a roll right now. It's been a long time since I've moved around vigorously like this."

I shook my head profusely. “I will not accept any objections. Exercising for so long without rest and replenishment is out of the question. Your body burns through calories more quickly than humans, and you’ll collapse. If you insist on keeping up with this... You’ll only have umeboshi onigiri for lunch and dinner today,” I threatened.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” she protested. “I mean, I like umeboshi onigiri, but after that feast yesterday, how’m I supposed to go back to such simple and rustic meals so quickly?”

“If you don’t want that to happen, take a shower and get changed, please,” I said in a firmer tone than usual. “Once you do that, I will make something delicious for you, Tokatechi.” For emphasis, I even used her full name.

Techi’s tail drooped despondently, but she replied with a meek “Okay...” before putting away her staff and trudging to the bathroom.

Seeing that, I resumed my housework. Once the corridor was squeaky clean, I headed into the prayer alcove. I opened the Buddhist altar shutters and offered up incense. In my heart, I greeted Gramps before heading into the innermost corner of the prayer alcove. I’d left the Fusang sapling next to the circular window with a bamboo frame, and I approached it.

During the day, I would carry it outside. On rainy days and at night, I would display it in the recessed space—which was reserved for decor like pots and jars—in front of the round window. The official name for it was a *tokonoma*.

We had many children over yesterday, so I’d left it in this area. I couldn’t afford to let the plant pot fall over and break by accident. It was already noon, but having as many hours of sunshine as possible was likely better for the plant. Thinking that, I reached out...and froze.

Something wasn’t right.

The plant pot looked exactly the same as yesterday. The sapling itself didn’t seem any different, either; it hadn’t grown bigger, it hadn’t grown more leaves. But my gut was telling me that something was different. I leaned in and inspected the plant carefully. Finally, I realized there was a small bud on the tip of one branch.

It was still fully green—no sign of vibrant petals. In size, it could pass for a branch bud. If you didn't look at it carefully, you'd completely miss it, but it was definitely a flower bud. I was slightly surprised. *When in the world did this thing grow?*

I stared at it and muttered under my breath, "I wonder what kind of flower will bloom." I held up the pot carefully before heading to its dedicated area next to the veranda.

There, I placed it on the shelf and fetched the small watering can near the tap before watering it just a tiny bit. *Okay, that should be good.* I nodded to myself before heading to the kitchen. It was time to make lunch for Techii, who'd been active since the morning.

The problem is, well... Though I'd like to make something fancy, the fridge is nearly empty. We depleted most of our ingredients during our wedding yesterday. Oh well. Guess I'll have to make full use of leftovers to make this lunch.

I got to cooking right away.

A true chef knows how to effectively use the leftover ingredients available. Today, we'll be cooking with eggplants and bell peppers. Cut these vegetables into bite-size chunks. I found some green shiso, so we'll be using that too. Finely chop the green shiso. Take out sesame seeds.

Place a pot over low heat. Pour in mirin and simmer until the alcohol evaporates. Add a heap of sugar. Pour in soy sauce that's roughly twice the amount of the mirin. Boil it down over low heat. This will be your kaeshi sauce, a classic Japanese noodle soup base. Once the sauce is ready, add eggplants, bell peppers, green shiso, and sesame seeds.

I fetched the one untouched kabayaki unagi fillet left over from yesterday.

Cut your fillet into bite-size chunks and toss into the pot.

The unlucky fillet was a small one with an awkward size. It wasn't big enough to be the topping of unagi donburi, and it definitely wasn't enough for two. But it would serve as a good addition to the kaeshi sauce, adding its wonderful fishy flavor and delectable flesh to the mix.

After all the ingredients have been added to the pot, allow the mixture to simmer. Once the flavor seeps into the bell peppers and eggplants, the sauce is ready.

Next, cook somen noodles. This will go with the sauce.

I could have chosen to use a commercial noodle soup base, but I also liked making sauce with plenty of flavors and ingredients. Smooth somen noodles paired with ingredients that added all kinds of textures was an addicting combination.

Other than the ingredients I'd listed above, there were many more options. Pork, chicken, mushrooms, Japanese ginger, *aburaage*—deep fried tofu pouches—were also delicious. Since it was summer, you could also go for a curveball with seasonal vegetables like tomatoes. It created a rather interesting and delicious taste.

In terms of calories, it was on the low end, which wasn't ideal after all her exercise, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Our fridge simply wasn't equipped for a hearty lunch. We still had some food pills left over from my last batch, and I hoped that was enough as an addition. I would make up for the lackluster lunch by cooking a splendid dinner after we stocked up on groceries. *Please bear with it for now, Techii.*

Just as such thoughts crossed my mind, Techii walked into the living room. She'd had a shower and gotten a change of clothes. Seeing that, I took out tableware and utensils before setting the table. The sauce and the noodles were fresh off the stove.

The charm of a sauce with additional ingredients was a more varied experience when eating. It wouldn't get dull as quickly compared to a plain noodle sauce. You can achieve similar results with condiments, but I liked adding something with substance. They offered more prominent changes in texture and flavor, and experimenting with different combinations was fun. Furthermore, you would get your proper dose of vegetables and fiber.

If you made your own kaeshi sauce, you could even dictate the proportions of salt and sugar. When you want to cut down on your sugar and salt, you can add in more stock like bonito dashi or *kombu* dashi, or you can add in more

ingredients to make up for the milder taste. That applies to herbs as well.

You could even enjoy the sauce on a cold winter night by heating it, and you could add more variation by experimenting with seasonal vegetables. No matter what time of year it was, you could enjoy this delicious but effortless recipe to the fullest. I was very grateful to its inventor.

To me, this was a standard item on my menu. It was such a signature dish that, in fact, whenever I obtained somen noodles one way or another, this would be my go-to comfort recipe.

As for Techī's reaction...

"Mm. Yum. This is very good," she said as she slurped up somen noodles rapidly. Her reception was better than I'd expected. The noodles, sauce, and additional ingredients disappeared into her stomach in the blink of an eye.

While I watched such a dramatic scene, I ate my noodles as well. *Mmm... The aromatic green shiso, as well as the classic combination of eggplants and bell peppers are incredible together. Not to mention the unagi, which provides a nice accent with its rich flavors, tangy taste, and texture. I could eat this all day long.*

Usually, I don't use so many luxurious ingredients, but if it tastes this good, I could consider making it a regular item on my menu. Pork and chicken have really good chemistry with somen noodles too, but unagi eel is on a whole other level. It's so out of this world that I could enjoy the sauce alone without noodles.

I slurped up noodles, chewed, and swallowed. After savoring the aftertaste, something suddenly came to me. "Oh, right. If this isn't enough calories for you, I've fetched some food pills just in case."

Techī was practically inhaling her noodles at sonic speed. Her cheeks puffed up with the food she stuffed inside, and as she chewed with difficulty, she gave me a nod.

With how much food she's vacuuming up, even if noodles don't have that many calories, it'll add up. But well... She's been exercising hard since morning, so it should be fine for her to eat some additional food pills...right? Uh, I also added a little more salt today since she sweated a lot. It's just one meal, though. Surely it won't be a big problem. ...I hope.

The two of us enjoyed our meal at our own pace. Suddenly, I sensed an intense gaze stabbing into my back. My instincts told me that someone was out there, staring at me. I turned around while slurping my noodles and faced the veranda. Behind one of the towering pillars was a familiar silhouette that was trying to hide but failing.

The culprit was Kon.

I blinked in surprise. “Uh... Kon? What are you doing there?”

Nervously, Kon replied, “I, um, I didn’t have anything better to do, so I came over without thinking, but I just remembered that Mommy said I should stay away for a while because I might get in the way of the newlyweds...”

“Ah, I see.” I smiled at him and beckoned him over with my hand. “Don’t worry about that. You’ve already stayed here many times. You’ve bathed with us and even slept in the same room. To us, you’re already a part of our family.”

“Really?!” With a brilliant smile, he dashed over to us.

The next moment, however, Techii raised her hand in a “Stop” gesture. Kon’s expression withered immediately like a wilting flower. With great effort, Techii chewed and swallowed the noodles filling her mouth to the brim. She freed her mouth and said, “You can come over whenever you want, but you need to wash your hands when you come into the house. You’re going to eat noodles with us, aren’t you? Off to the bathroom you go. Hygiene is important.”

Realization dawned on him. Kon realized his careless mistake, and a complex smile appeared on his face—sheepishness and elation battled for a spot on his features. He nodded furiously at us before darting into the bathroom. The noisy sound of gushing water echoed out as he washed his hands with utmost effort.

While he was occupied, I took this chance to fetch his chopsticks and tableware. After that, I grabbed a pot to cook extra somen noodles, as well as another pot for kaeshi sauce. I washed all the remaining vegetables—by now, our fridge was nearly empty—and cut them all up. *I might as well use up everything we have now.*

Kon raced into the living room before yelling, “Thanks for the food!” He happily slurped on the noodles.

I stole glances at him while I tended to the extra noodles and sauce. Once I was done, I transferred them onto the low table, which was quickly growing empty. The two gluttons in this household reached for the new pile of food at once. The pile of noodles and the bowl of sauce diminished at a rate the eye could see.

Kon happily ate his noodles. "I never knew somen noodles could be this good! Wow! I think Mommy's somen is nice, but I've eaten too much of it. When it's the summer holidays, she makes them *every single day*. Today's lunch is somen, tomorrow's lunch is somen, every day's lunch is somen! Even if it's good, I'd get sick of it. Every single day is too much..." At the end, he was rambling deliriously.

I felt like he was unearthing some kind of buried trauma, and I frantically changed the topic. "H-How about this? I'll write down the recipe and give it to you next time, and you can show it to your mom. Making sauce with additional ingredients is simple, and she can change up the taste by using different combinations so that it doesn't get dull. Other than the soy sauce-base I used today, there're a lot of other delicious soup bases. I'll make some when I have the chance, and if you take a liking to them, I'll write down all their recipes."

Kon, whose head had been drooping like a wilted flower, immediately looked up. He gave me a bright smile and regained his usual energy. Then, he turned his focus back to the noodles and wolfed down as much as he could.

Though I'd prepared a significant amount of noodles and sauce, both were gone in a flash. I helped myself to the somen noodles left at the end and ate it at my own leisurely pace.

My mind started wandering. *After I finish eating and do the dishes, I think I'll need to stock up on groceries in bulk. You know, I should start considering buying a car for my grocery trips...*

I felt conflicted about another big expense on top of the wedding and the renovations. However, this was a necessary investment, and if I had a car, I could head farther into the forest and get to tour around more places. *It doesn't have to be anything fancy. I'll just grab a cheap secondhand one. Okay, let's go with this plan.*

Mind made up, I swallowed the last mouthful of noodles and voiced my thanks for the food once again. I soon began washing the tableware and pots I'd used.



AFTER washing the dishes, the three of us decided to head to the supermarket together. The lack of a car meant that we required manpower to carry the baggage, and having more people sharing the load was always better when manual labor was involved.

And well...it's also our first day as a wedded couple. Going our separate ways this quickly doesn't seem right.

The three of us walked down the forest path unhurriedly and engaged in idle chatter.

Like usual, I was giving a lecture about food. "When it comes to somen noodles, sesame sauce also tastes wonderful. You mix plenty of finely ground sesame with either mentsuyu noodle soup base or kaeshi sauce and knead the mixture. It'll look like sesame salad dressing when you're done. Then, add condiments such as spring onion and Japanese ginger. Finally, toss the noodles inside the sesame sauce.

"The slippery noodles will be coated with a layer of rich, dense sesame sauce, and it's heavenly. At the same time, it isn't too heavy, because the refreshing spicy and aromatic spring onion and ginger are hidden within. The creamy taste of sesame will bring out the charms of the condiments and the texture of the noodles, creating a different kind of experience from standard soy sauce-based noodle soup base."

"Oh?" Techii looked at me with intrigue. "I've never tried sesame sauce before. Is it that praiseworthy?"

"Mmhmm." I nodded. "In summer, you can add ice and eat it cold. It's good either way. Personally, I prefer it over a standard noodle soup base. The slippery somen noodles and the viscous sauce have a wonderful compatibility."

Kon perked up and joined the conversation. "I wanna have some! I want to eat sesame sauce noodles too!"

Techi and I shared an amused and hearty laughter before moving on to another topic. Once again, Kon's comment fished out laughter from us as we advanced down the path.

As we walked, someone caught my eye: the president of the community association, Mr. Karashina. Like last time, he was sitting on a chair in the parking lot just before his house's entrance, staring long and hard at the people who went by.

The three of us extended our greetings.

"Hello there," I said.

"Good afternoon, Grampa Karashina!" Kon chirped.

Techi bowed. "Hello. I'm glad to see you in good health, sir."

Mr. Karashina kept up his sullen expression as he harrumphed at us. "I hear you got married and are a part of the chipmunk clan now. That means you're a full-fledged member of this community. There are a lot of compulsory events that are coming up, like public park cleanups and gutter cleanups. Make sure you turn up." He paused. "That aside, how's the Fusang seed I gave you a while ago? Has it already gone rotten in your possession?"

Hearing that, I halted my footsteps and approached him. "No, it has grown into a sapling, so I have transferred it into a bonsai pot. Its roots are growing healthily, and so is the plant itself. When I checked it this afternoon, there was even a small flower bud."

Mr. Karashina's eyes widened abruptly. He froze on the spot. A while later, several indescribable expressions flashed across his face before he finally spoke in a faltering manner. "I...see. It grew a flower bud, hm? ...Well, I suppose living in harmony and sharing happiness counts as a good deed at the end of the day. If that's the case...that's not bad news at all."

He looked into my eyes. "Hey, you... Moriya, was it? If the flower blooms and bears seeds, bring it over and show me. Make sure you don't give it to anyone else, you hear me? The day you give it to me in person, well...I suppose I'll treat you to alcohol. The good stuff, of course."

I nodded. "Understood. I shall do that if it bears seeds."

He quirked an eyebrow. “I have to say, you’re an obedient one. You’re not going to ask me the reason first?”

“It was something I received from you to begin with, and it seems to be the correct course of action. I shall follow your instructions.” I said carefully. “That being said, it has only just budded. Even if it bears seeds, that will likely be in the far future.”

Mr. Karashina’s eyes grew wide once again. His ears, which were peeking out from his gray hair, twitched. Then, he fell into complete silence and waved his hand to shoo me away.

Receiving that message, I bowed slightly.

“See you again,” Techī greeted.

“See ya, Grampa!” Kon waved his hand cheerfully.

The three of us resumed our journey to the supermarket. After we put enough distance between ourselves and Mr. Karashina for him to fade into the distance, I muttered under my breath, “So Mr. Karashina also thinks that Fusang trees are nurtured by good deeds...”

I’d heard that rumor from Techī a while ago, and she’d thought it was only a superstition. *Actually, it would make sense for the older generation to believe in it wholeheartedly because it’s an old superstition.*

Personally, I hadn’t taken it at face value. The definition of a good deed differed from person to person—how could such an ambiguous concept nurture a plant, of all things? But I couldn’t help but be bothered by Mr. Karashina’s reaction. It made me wonder whether there was more to it.

Not to mention that the Fusang trees before my eyes never made much logical sense to begin with. They were extraordinarily large and were also the embodiment of legend and fantasy. A fantastical superstition actually seemed more convincing since it aligned with the trees’ theme. The more ridiculous it sounded, the more plausible it was beginning to feel. Or at least, that was the rabbit hole my mind was diving down.

I began thinking out loud. “At the moment, the theory is that living in harmony with everyone counts as good karma or a good deed, which nourishes

the tree. I suppose I could say that I've made a lot of friends since I moved to the Wilds. There's Techī, there's Kon, there're the kids working at the orchard, there're Také and the other beastfolk... I've never quarreled with Techī, either. Hmm, if a big fight counts as a bad deed, would it wilt?"

With how much rambling I was doing, it was no longer much of a monologue, because Techī and Kon had heard me loud and clear. The pair, who'd run ahead of me, turned around with impish grins.

"Do you want to try fighting, then?" Techī asked. "If we do that in front of a Fusang tree, we can test how accurate that superstition is."

"Let me join! I want a turn too!" Kon exclaimed. "I'll wrestle with you or something! If we make a lot of noise and exchange blows, the trees might react!"

I felt a wry smile growing on my face. *The fact that you made the statements is already evidence enough that it won't be anything close to a real fight*, I thought, amused. Being able to plan a "fight" beforehand was evidence of a close bond. Only good friends and close family could pull off something like that, and at the end of the day, that counted as harmony. I shook my head with fond exasperation and let out a small chuckle.

My laughter seemed to get on their nerves, and they both pouted at me in displeasure. Though we weren't in front of Fusang trees, the pair rushed up to me. Techī ruffled my hair until it was a mess, and Kon used my back as a climbing post. They began their very physical protest against me, who still wore a wry smile on my face.





AFTER shopping at the supermarket, the three of us carried hefty shopping bags laboriously back home. After we arrived, we washed our hands before we started sorting through our haul and putting things away into the fridge and cabinets.

In the middle of the sorting session, I noticed Kon glancing at me repeatedly. He seemed restless and fidgety. In his hands was a bloated shopping bag. I'd been efficient with my work and was pretty much finished, so I accepted the bag while shaking my head with fond exasperation. I knew he couldn't wait for his dessert, so I rolled up my sleeves and began my next mission.

Today, there was a sale on large Japanese fruit jelly cups, and so I purchased a selection of many flavors. Take out the blocks of jelly from the cups. Cut into bite-size cubes. Transfer into a bowl.

The specific flavors I chose were satsuma mandarin, peach, grape, and apple. With a varied selection like this, you'll have vibrant colors and many flavors. When the bowl is filled with jelly cubes, pour in a generous amount of soda.

This was our dessert for the day. It was also our reward for Kon, who'd helped out with shopping despite the sweltering and humid heat. This quick dessert was something light, refreshing, and easy on the stomach.

If I had the time, I actually wanted to buy agar-agar powder and make the agar jelly from scratch, but the clock never paused to wait for anyone. To cut down on the preparation time, I was using store-bought jelly instead. Cheap jelly cups are honestly mediocre—they don't leave much of an impression. But if you mix an assortment of flavors and pour on a liquid such as soda or a certain famous fermented milk drink that you have to dilute, the jelly is transformed into a tantalizing dessert. If you scoop it up with a ladle and arrange it in a glass vessel paired with a somewhat stylish spoon, it will even look like art on top of tasting like art.

That was exactly what I did. I retrieved a glass cup and a fancy dessert spoon before serving the final product to Kon. He accepted the cup with both hands, his eyes lit up in anticipation. His gaze was practically glued to the contents as he walked into the living room with big strides. He quickened his pace, wanting

to dig in as soon as possible, but he still carried his prize carefully so that he wouldn't spill the soda.

I smiled to myself while watching him until a hand moved in my vision. Techī was thrusting her hand before me—a silent demand.

Oh. Of course, I'm going to prepare one for her too. Honestly, she doesn't have to act like a child, I thought with slight exasperation, but of course, I could never say that out loud. Without another word, I prepared Techī's fruit jelly cup. Just like I'd done with Kon, I stuck a dessert spoon into the jelly assortment before handing it over.

Though Techī's expression remained impassive, her eyes widened slightly and were shining with excitement. She strutted briskly into the living room.

After our marriage, Techī had begun acting oddly childlike. Or, to be more precise, she started being more direct and open with her feelings. From time to time, her childish side would slip out, and perhaps it was her way of acting cute and asking for me to fuss over her.

I felt like her more innocent, pure side was actually her true self at heart. In front of the kids, she had to act like a responsible adult. In front of her parents, whom she'd apparently caused a lot of grief, she had to act mature. She had to put on masks and take on a persona which was required of her. Maybe. *I might be overthinking things.*

Either way, our married life had only just begun. I shouldn't be jumping to conclusions this early. I had plenty of time to gradually learn more and more about the woman known as Tokatechī during my long life with her.

Such thoughts swirled in my mind as I watched Techī leave. I didn't prepare another serving for myself—I headed straight to the living room with the bowl of jelly and soda, a glass cup, and a spoon. This kind of jelly was perishable, so having leftovers wasn't the best idea. I placed the bowl on the low table, served myself, then announced this to the pair, "Feel free to have as many seconds as you want."

The two were speedily carrying jelly into their mouths, but I could tell that their eyes were shining with joy. The jelly and soda quickly vanished from their cups. They took turns to get a second helping before eating again. The cycle

repeated, and the contents of the sharing bowl were gone in no time.

One portion had been enough for me. I hadn't had plans to grab a second, but I was still stunned at their incredible speed. They'd polished off the entire bowl before I could even finish one small cup!

If I used homemade agar jelly, which allows you to enjoy the flavors and textures of the original fruits better, this dessert would've disappeared even faster. I can't even imagine that. I was actually thinking about making the homemade edition sometime and bought some of the necessary ingredients today, but I don't think I purchased nearly enough. I should head to the supermarket sometime and buy more, I decided.

I also had another item on my shopping list: plums. It was around the time of year when those would start lining the supermarket shelves. There were so many things I couldn't wait to make. The long-awaited umeboshi, of course, but also plum jam, plum syrup, plum jelly, and even *umeshu*, plum liqueur. If I didn't get to work around now, I might carelessly forget about the season and let this opportunity slip from my clutches. That was the last thing I wanted.

A thought occurred to me. *I haven't really explored much of the Wilds... Is there a chance they might have plum trees or plum orchards around here? If they do, I could get my hands on plump, high-quality plums, so I should do some research, huh?*

As I entertained the thought, I finished the last of the jelly left in my cup. And that was when I finally realized the two sharp gazes drilling into me. I wasn't being dramatic when I called them sharp—these gazes were intense and filled with predatory desire. The silent message was that they were starving, and they wanted me to make much more food because this dessert barely made a dent in their appetite.

I frowned slightly and looked at them both, sending them a silent message with my eyes, *"Hold on. You two have eaten loads already!"*

This time, Techii conveyed her message with a projected voice. "That was a light and refreshing dessert, yes. I was bingeing before I knew it. The problem is that I feel as if I haven't eaten at all, because it's not filling. If possible, I want something that's light, but also has substance."

I blinked dumbly at her words. Calling it the paragon of willfulness wouldn't be far off—it was self-contradictory, and it was such a tall order that I wanted to ask, “What in the world do you want me to do?” I was completely stuck, but I got moving. I collected the sharing bowl and the empty cups before standing up slowly.

I hummed in thought and frowned. “In that case... I guess I'll use fruits to make...something. I'll figure it out.” As I spoke, I rifled through the archive of memories inside my head, especially the older ones. Did I know any good recipes? Was there any good contenders among the snacks I'd eaten as a child? Could I find anything that could satisfy the two gluttons with bottomless stomachs?

Like how I would squeeze a lemon, I squeezed my brain dry for any drop of wisdom as I turned to head to the kitchen.

And that was when a certain scene leapt into my eyes. The bonsai pot had been left on a shelf which could be seen from the living room, and the flower bud of the Fusang tree let out an audible and soft pop before coming into full bloom before my eyes. Delicate petals of a gorgeous pink spread out, bursting with life.

I couldn't tear my gaze off the enchanting flower. It was so beautiful that if it had been any other time, I would be letting out a sigh of wonder and staring at it in a daze. I fixed my gaze on it and muttered, “Seriously? Did it...really have to bloom now, of all times? Does this tree *really* have a correlation with good deeds?”

Neither Techii nor Kon offered an answer to my question. Only the chirping of insects occupied the house for a long while. I was dazed for just as long.

When I came to my senses, I sighed and shook my head. *I should stop thinking so hard about that tree. I'm getting nowhere.* Instead, I focused on the task at hand. I advanced into the kitchen to make another dessert for my two hungry customers.

Plum Work: The First Stage

UNRIPE, green plums are poisonous. But the amount of toxins present is tiny, and apparently, as long as you don't ingest a crazy number of plums, the poison isn't a big deal. It's just like apple cores and apple seeds in that sense.

I'm not an expert on the topic, but due to this reason, I've never eaten untreated and unripe plums before. Instead, I dig into processed plum products every year without fail. As a result, plums ended up as one of my favorite foods.

They are extremely versatile. You can eat salty and sour umeboshi plain, or you can use it as a topping on steaming rice. You can turn umeboshi into pulp and use that in your recipes, such as simmered sardines with umeboshi. Many simmered dishes, in fact, have good compatibility with these pickled plums, a little like how Western dishes often use cranberry in savory dishes.

I repeat, I'm not an expert, so I can't tell you whether this information is scientifically proven. However, umeboshi have always been prized for their amazing antibacterial properties since ancient times, and just the addition of one or two will prevent your lunchbox from going off as quickly. I'd made it a point to always put these marvelous plums into my packed lunch, and whenever I have an upset stomach, I eat umeboshi for the same reason.

They say that an apple a day keeps the doctor away, but to me, umeboshi are the miracle remedy for most digestive system problems, whether it be diarrhea or gastroenteritis. Whenever I'm down and suffering, I would crush umeboshi and dissolve it in hot water before slowly sipping the water with a hint of sourness and saltiness. I feel this remedy would speed up my recovery and give me a boost of energy. I don't know whether it's a placebo effect or the umeboshi actually helping me, but I always get better eventually.

In fact, I even rely on this drink every time I catch a horrible cold that feels like torture. If I got sick of the taste of umeboshi in hot water, I'd start sipping on watered-down *ume* kombucha.

Even when I'm fit and healthy, I can't go without plums. Eating umeboshi with rice first thing in the morning helps me wake up with its tangy sourness. The intense sweet-and-sour umeboshi jam spread on toast has the same effect. Diluting plum syrup with sparkling water transforms it into a refreshing beverage that I can drink all day.

Let's move on to the seasonings you can make with plums. I can soak a small amount of kombu and umeboshi in soy sauce to make ume soy sauce. I can mix chopped umeboshi with miso paste to make ume miso. Oh, and how can I forget about ume liqueur? A light layer of salted plum juice on top of seasoned nori from the supermarket is criminally delicious when paired with rice.

In conclusion, if I persevered during this season and got my plum work right, I can enjoy the taste of plums throughout the entire year.

Compared to other countries, the traditional food preservation culture of Japan isn't as developed. Like I mentioned before, we Japanese seem to place a higher priority on taste, rather than long shelf lives. But plums are so prized that we even coined the term "plum work," and we've been experimenting with them for millennia. Perhaps there are still many more ways of processing plums out there waiting for me to discover.

Okay, so as you can see, I love plums. And so, I'm sure you can imagine my excitement when I went on my routine grocery shopping trip a few days after our wedding and saw the magnificent piles of plums on display in the supermarket. They weren't just any plum—they were Nanko plums, which are famous for being one of the highest quality variety of plums available on the market.

I immediately whipped out my phone and called Rei.

He picked up immediately. *"Hello, hello! How can I help you? Do you want to order some pastries?"*

My eyes were glued to the Nanko plums, inspecting their quality with my eyes as I replied, "I'm afraid not. I was just wondering whether your delivery van is in use. Can I borrow it for a bit?"

"Ohhh? Doing some shopping?"

“Yes. I found Nanko plums in the supermarket. I’m actually checking their luster and condition right now, but they seem to be decent, so I’m thinking about buying them in bulk. I have plans to purchase our own car, but I think that’ll take a while. If it’s not too much trouble, I would like to borrow yours.”

“Ah, plums! As a preserve hobbyist, you can’t miss out on those! Hmm... I don’t use much of them in Western confectionery, but I do use a little bit. From a business standpoint, trying new things would be beneficial too. Ooookay! Wait for me, I’ll head over right now. I should take around ten or fifteen minutes.”

My eyes lit up. “Thank you so much!”

Rei ended the conversation with, “*You’re very welcome*” and hung up.

During the wait, I purchased all the other groceries on my shopping list. I carried my shopping bags and was on standby next to the section with stacked-up towers of Nanko plum boxes.

Just like he’d announced, at the ten-minute mark, Rei walked in. Just like me, he thoroughly checked the condition of Nanko plum with his eyes and hands.

He nodded to himself. “For something stocked by the supermarket, it’s pretty good quality. I guess they can’t slack because the elderly around here all have a hobby of making umeboshi. Ones with bruises don’t turn out well when you pickle them, and I can tell they selected these plums carefully.” He sniffed it. “Yeah, it smells good too. It’s just one step short of being fully ripe, but well, that should be fine as long as we store them properly according to our needs. The real question is...are the plums that aren’t on display the same quality? Let’s see...”

Rei gently lifted the top box of plums so that he wouldn’t damage the fruits. Then, one after another, he checked the boxes stacked below. After selecting a few boxes, he sent a sharp gaze in my direction and asked, “How many do you want?”

I mulled over it for a moment. “I would like five boxes if possible. Umeboshi, plum jam, plum syrup... There’re so many things I want to make.”

Hearing that, Rei counted a total of seven boxes from the pile that had passed his inspection—five for me, and two for him. He combined the seven into one

stack and carried it effortlessly to the cashier.

They weren't all that heavy, and I could probably lift the stack as well. But Rei did it so effortlessly that I stared at him in surprise.

He grinned at me. "Being a *pâtissier* isn't an easy job, you know. I gotta carry things like sugar, flour, and fruits back and forth. If I don't have muscles, it's a matter of life and death! Both my arms and my back will crumble under the literal weight. So this is nothing." He barked out a hearty laugh.

At the first cashier, he put down my five boxes before he headed to the second cashier with his two. We both finished our payments and headed toward the car park where Rei's delivery van was parked. Of course, I couldn't let him do the heavy lifting again, so I carried my boxes together with my shopping bags. It was a challenge, but I managed it somehow while grunting with effort.

We loaded the boxes gently and secured them with a tie-down strap. Then, I arranged the shopping bags so that they wouldn't get in the way before settling down in the passenger seat.

As Rei climbed into the driver's seat, he said, "I don't know for sure, but from what I heard, you can make plums sugary sweet through selective breeding. But no one does that, 'cause the sourness of plums is their identity." He shrugged. "I mean, there are plenty of naturally sweet fruits out there, so I guess there's no demand for purely sweet plums."

"Huuuh. That's interesting." I nodded.

Rei began giving me one of his usual trivia sessions as he turned on the engine. He didn't even pause to take any breaks, and this lecture lasted all the way until I arrived home.



REI drove me home, and I began unloading my baggage from the van. Kon was sitting adorably on the veranda while swinging his dangling legs back and forth. He was admiring the Fusang flower when he noticed me. "Welcome home!"

I smiled. "I'm home. And welcome, my little guest."

A smile came into full bloom on his face as he charged toward me and peered into the cargo area of the van. He rifled through the shopping bags, picking up things that he could carry before moving back into the house with the items in his arms. He seemed to have judged that the bloated, hefty shopping bags and the plum boxes were too heavy for his small frame.

While I lined up the plum boxes on the veranda, Kon made several trips between the van and the house, slowly but surely transferring the groceries in my stead. He was trying to lessen my workload, and my heart melted.

Once all five boxes were arranged neatly, I lifted the shopping bags that were significantly lighter thanks to my small assistant. I voiced my heartfelt thanks to Rei, who lifted his hand in response before driving away. I then looked down at Kon, who was standing by next to my legs, and thanked him warmly.

Another big smile—his signature smile—lit up his face. He leaped up onto the veranda and stared at the many plums on display. He sniffed. “It’s so SOUR!” He gasped. “It already smells so sour! I never knew plums were sour even before you pickle them!”

I proceeded to transfer the boxes into the kitchen. Though I was busy, I still had the leisure of responding to him. “Yeeeeeep. They’re sour and they make your lips pucker. We use plenty of salt when we make umeboshi. I’m sure you’re familiar with those. When we make plum jam, we use plenty of sugar. Even if we use lots and lots of sugar though, the jam is still really sour and intense.”

“Whoaaa! It’s *that* sour?” He sniffed again. “They smell nice and yummy, but if they’re super sour, I dunno whether I wanna eat them anymore...”

“Ah, about that. Unripe plums are apparently toxic. It’s fine if you pickle them or turn them into jam after they fully ripen, but you mustn’t eat them untreated and unripe,” I warned him in a firm tone. “Maybe your beastfolk nose sensed the toxins and your instincts are telling you that you mustn’t eat them.”

His eyes widened like saucers. “Whaaat?! Toxins?! Plums are scary!”

“I heard it doesn’t cause any problems as long as you eat them in moderation though. And... There we go, the last box,” I said as I stacked the box on the kitchen counter.

Once that was done, I moved to the bathroom sink and washed my hands. I returned to the kitchen and took out a big bowl. It was time to wash the plums.

Kon, who'd also washed his hands in the bathroom, settled down on his usual chair next to the sink. "Are you going to make something right away? Are you going to make umeboshi?"

"Sure am." I nodded as I got to work.

There wasn't any heavy lifting today, though.

Use a toothpick to hull the plums. Wash the fruits carefully inside a bowl of water—don't bruise them. Remove the fuzz from the skin. Done. Soak in water for roughly six hours. You may then begin the pickling process.

When making umeboshi, you can use unripe plums or ripe plums. Either is fine, but unripe plums produce salted plum juice more readily during the pickling process...that's my opinion, at least. Plus, you will retain more of the fruit's natural texture, so I personally prefer umeboshi made with unripe plums.

I repeated the process and cleaned the plums thoroughly and gently. Kon seemed to notice the amount of care I was investing, and he asked, "What happens if you bruise the plums?"

I continued washing the plums as I replied to him. "Bruising them or damaging them is a bad idea. The damaged parts will start to spoil and grow mold, and it'll ruin your entire batch of umeboshi. That's why you have to be very careful. You must check the condition painstakingly when you buy them, you must be gentle when you process them... Patience and care are virtues when it comes to making umeboshi. Oh, but it's fine if the plums burst or get damaged after they become all wrinkly in the pickling liquid. The tough part is cleaning them, soaking them for six hours, then pickling them in salt. You can't let your guard down until you reach the last step."

He blinked at me with intrigue. "I see... What do you do with damaged plums, then?"

"Well, I'll separate them from the rest of the batch. Usually, I wait until they ripen and turn them into plum jam. Damage doesn't matter much for jam, because you cut the fruit open and take out the pit anyway. You're going to

cook it over fire and add plenty of sugar, so you don't have to worry about mold, either. That's why I don't use the expensive, unblemished plums when I'm making plum jam. I go for the cheap, flawed ones."

"Ohhh! It's the same as the time when you bought *out-jaw* strawberries! You buy lots of cheap ones make lots and lots of jam!" He nodded furiously to himself. "Hey, just wondering. Hulling and washing make sense to me, but why do you soak them in water?"

"The soaking removes the harsh, acrid taste...or so I heard." I shrugged. "I only do it because it's the proper way to make umeboshi. I've never really looked into the details about how each step would affect the final product, but it'll probably taste bad if you skip this step. The thing is, plums are kinda expensive. If possible, I want to follow the tried-and-true recipe so that I won't mess up.

"If you soak the plums, bubbles start forming on the plums skin. I think we call it...scum? For fully ripe plums, a couple of hours will suffice, but if you're using unripe, green plums, you'll want roughly six to eight hours. This is where you have to be careful once again. Soaking the plums too long will cause discoloring or rotting. The maximum soaking time is probably one night."

"Huuuh... Plums are so difficult! You can't damage them, and you can't soak them for too long."

"Weeell... There're also simple types of plum work, so that isn't necessarily true. But in the case of umeboshi, yeah. It's a very tough road. One small mistake could ruin your whole batch with mold." I sighed. "I think I mentioned this before, but that happened to me once. I had to throw away a significant batch with a heavy heart. That was so tragic..."

"When I opened the lid of the earthenware pot and peered in, the entire thing was filled with fuzzy mold! I literally fell onto my knees in shock. I think it left lasting trauma on me... Even now, thinking about the amount of money that went to waste, the amount of effort that went to waste, and the amount of time I would go without homemade umeboshi until the plum season arrived again..." I shuddered. "I mean, it was kind of my fault for thinking I could handle making umeboshi in an earthenware pot as an amateur. Ever since then, I've

stuck to a method that has the least chance of growing mold and is simple at the same time.”

Kon tilted his head in intrigue. “What method is that?”

I flashed him a smile before using my thumb to point at the fridge right next to us.



THE basic pickling process for umeboshi is as follows:

1. *Hull the plums and soak in water.*
2. *Transfer clean plums and salt into a sterilized container and leave it to rest. Salted plum juice will seep out of the fruits. Once there's plenty of juice, thoroughly wash fresh red shiso and add the leaves to the mixture. The pickling process officially begins.*
3. *On a fine, sunny day sometime during July or August, carefully take the plums and red shiso out of the salted plum juice and leave them to dry under the sun. You must check the weather forecast before this process. Ideally, you want to dry them for three days. Depending on the situation, you can put them back into the salted plum juice temporarily before drying them again.*
4. *Transfer the dried plums and red shiso into a convenient container for eating, then pour in the salted plum juice. Now, your umeboshi is ready to eat.*

As for when your plums are the most susceptible to the assault of mold, it's step 2. This is also where I'm up to.

The traditional method is to rest your plums with salt in a container to make salted plum juice. Make sure to calculate the salt content necessary. After adding the salt, put down some kind of weight to encourage the plum juice to seep out.

Mistakes made during this step are fatal. Not having enough salt, not having enough plum juice, and not sterilizing your equipment properly will invite mold to feast on your plums. One lapse of attention is enough for mold to take over your entire container.

At that point, you're done for. There might be a few plums that haven't been contaminated, but an amateur has no way of telling them apart. You don't know how to remove the toxins either, so sadly, into the bin they go.

Having a higher salt content will decrease the probability of a mold outbreak, but your umeboshi will be too salty to eat, and it's bad for your health. But you've already heard the horrors of having too little salt. It's an extremely challenging juggling act.

So, you ask, is there any way to make umeboshi simply while avoiding disaster? How do you make umeboshi that's slightly sweetened by honey and sugar, which makes it easier to grow mold? How do you protect your beloved little red umeboshi from the big bad mold?

The answer, my friend, is...

"...our first defense line against spoilage, the fridge!" I explained animatedly to Kon. "Back in the day without fridges, people had to store them in earthenware pots and in a cool, dark place, but the wonders of modern technology simplify the process for us! I used to throw out batch after batch of bad plums, but after I started making them in the fridge, never again have I suffered defeat at the hands of nasty mold," I said theatrically.

"You can decrease the salt content without feeling anxiety, and you can check on the state of your umeboshi easily every day when you fetch ingredients. I would recommend using transparent or translucent containers to make the latter easier. Of course, plastic bags would work too."

Six hours had already passed since I began soaking the plums. We were riding on the coattails of the afternoon and heading into early evening.

I gave my lengthy lecture to Kon as I retrieved zipper bags, which had also played an active role during my other cooking sessions, such as the smoked meat for the wedding. Kon looked overwhelmed by my enthusiasm, and he stared at me with wonder before scrutinizing the alcohol disinfectant spray that I'd fetched. It was the type that could be used in the kitchen.

"You said that there won't be any mold in the fridge," he began. "Do you still have to clean it with alcohol?"

I nodded as I took the spray into my hand. “Maybe pickling it in the fridge means I don’t have to sterilize the container, but I want to decrease the chances as much as possible. Plus, there’s no downside to taking more sanitary measures. I’m going to disinfect my hands, my arms, the tongs I’ll use to pick up the plums, and depending on the type of container, I’ll sterilize it too. Some containers don’t react well to alcohol, so I always check the manuals as I go.”

He nodded fervently. “I seeeee! I’ll make sure to disinfect everything properly when I make umeboshi too!”

The two of us shared a smile before I did exactly as I’d announced. Seeing me spraying the alcohol on my hands and arms, Kon reached his tiny hands out gingerly. He probably wanted to follow my example. Giving him a small nod, I lightly sprayed some alcohol onto his hands. Then, I proceeded to sterilize the equipment.

Next, I opened the zipper bag wide and transferred the floating plums carefully from the bowl of water with a pair of tongs. I didn’t wipe the plums on any surface—I only waved my tongs to shake off the surface water. As quickly as I could, I moved one plum into the zipper bag after another.

Though I’d disinfected Kon’s hands today, I’d asked him to sit out and watch just this once. He could help me when we got to the stage of sun drying, but I was still recovering from my mold trauma. The current stage was the most vulnerable and dangerous part, and I wanted to finish it as quickly as I could. I felt apologetic, but it had to be done.

Actually, Kon might grow a bit bigger by this time next year. He’ll also be a more experienced chef, so maybe he can help me out then.

I soon finished stuffing the umeboshi into the zipper pack. Without hesitation, I dumped in the salt I’d measured beforehand. Taking care to squeeze out the air, I sealed the zipper. I’d finished everything there was to do for now.

Allowing myself to breathe a sigh of relief, I finally had the luxury of talking to him. “If you’re worried that the juice might leak out, you can put on a second layer of zipper bag. Oh, and after you add the shiso, you have to knead the shiso inside the salted plum juice to transfer the red color. If you use a zipper bag like I am, you don’t have to take out the juice—you can do it all inside the bag.”

I paused and gave him a wry smile. “Well, some people think it’s heresy and avoid it like the plague, but it’s easy and produces consistent results. I think it’s totally valid. Okay, future plans aside, let’s put this into the fridge. Usually, they say that sun drying it during midsummer is the best idea, so you can look forward to that.”

Kon approached the bag of plums and salt. He inspected it closely and prodded it carefully with his finger before looking up at me. “Mikura, you said that you messed up a lot of times, so I thought making umeboshi is a nightmare. But...it doesn’t seem that tough?”

I hummed in thought. “The fridge method is easy if you’re only aiming for moderate to good results. It doesn’t grow mold easily, so you don’t have to measure the salt content like a perfectionist, and monitoring it is low effort too. As long as you get to the sun drying step, even if you don’t use that much salt, the sun will kill the spores and mold. Basically, the fridge is a barrier protecting your umeboshi during its most vulnerable stages.

“However, making *delicious* umeboshi is another matter. You have to experiment and find the best salt weight percentages. You have to add all kinds of seasoning. You might have to add sweet things like sugar and honey... All these additional steps are what bump up the difficulty by many, many levels. Actually, I think that’s the case for most recipes with a long tradition. Making a basic one is easy. Making a *good* one is tough.”

Kon nodded exaggeratedly. “Ohhhh! I understand!” Once again, he looked at the bag and poked it before directing his voice at it, “Salt and plums, become salt and yum, or else I’ll be bummed!”

I chuckled at his adorable antics as I carefully picked up the bag and moved it into a section in the back of the fridge—I’d reserved this space specifically for my umeboshi. The first bag was finished.

I proceeded to prepare more and more bags of plums and salt. Once I’d finished putting them all away, I began washing the dishes. And that was when I noticed Kon engaged in a staring contest with the unripe plums left in the bowl of water.

He tilted his head in question. “Mikura, what about these?”

“Ah, I’m going to use them for other recipes. I’ve got a long list of things I want to make other than just umeboshi. But not jam, because I want to make that with ripe plums. I’ll save jam for later, when plums are cheap at the supermarket. So...with these, I guess I’ll make plum liqueur or plum syrup.”

Kon’s head remained at an angle. He puffed his cheeks with what was clear displeasure and skillfully talked while maintaining his ballooned cheeks. “That’s *alco-hall*, right? I can’t drink *alco-hall*. I wanna eat jam! Jam is my jam!”

“Umm... Syrup is charming too. If you dilute it with water or sparkling water, it’ll taste like sweet plum juice. Are you a hundred percent sure you still want jam? Green plum jam is...real sour.” I grimaced. “Ripe plum jam is quite sour too, but green plum jam’s a level above that. Your mouth will pucker!”

However, Kon nodded firmly, insisting that the demerits were acceptable. *Well, in that case, I guess I’ll indulge him.* And so, I began preparations for plum jam cooking.

As you know, the recipe for jam is incredibly simple. We already have clean, soaked plums ready, which saves a lot of time. Cut the plums into halves. Remove the pits. Then, like other jams, add sugar and simmer.

Unlike strawberry jam, removing the pits is a bit annoying. Once you get the hang of it though, you can do it in no time, so it’s not too bad.

I simmered the mixture slowly in an enamel pot over the cooktop.

No matter what kind of plums you use, plum jam is always, without fail, sour. That’s common knowledge. You can add in heaps of sugar to balance it out, but adding too much makes the taste overbearing. In the end, adding roughly the same amount of sugar as strawberry jam creates the best ratio in my opinion. Plus, too much sugar isn’t good for your health.

Being sour is the identity of plum jam. Enjoying it in its most natural state is for the best. At least, that’s my policy with my homemade plum jam.

Anyway, like I’d warned Kon, green plum jam is potent. Could his taste buds really withstand it? *I guess we’ll find out.*

As the mixture simmered, the aromatic and sour scent of plums permeated the kitchen—no, it filled the entire house. Kon, who’d moved his seat near the

stove and was watching the pot, swallowed audibly. The smell must have made him recall his past experience with plums and delicious umeboshi that would make anyone salivate.

It was an unavoidable phenomenon whenever one was reminded of the sweet and sour plums, and I wasn't an exception. Several audible gulps could be heard in the kitchen as the plum mixture continued to bombard our senses.

During the simmering process, Techii came back after a day of work. She washed her hands before making her way into the kitchen and sat down on a chair next to the counter. She took a deep inhale, then let out a long exhale. "Ahhh... This is my first time realizing that plums smell so divine." She shook her head slowly. "Your plums are a great help... I feel alive again."

Her comments seemed to come out of nowhere, and I struggled to interpret them. Kon seemed to recall something, because his ears and tail went limp and despondent.

Puzzled, I cocked my head and asked, "Did something happen in the orchard?"

Techii lifted her face and looked at me with wide eyes. The next moment, realization dawned on her features. "Oh, right. You wouldn't know. It's blooming season for chestnut trees. The peak of chestnut blooms might arrive somewhat earlier in other regions, but we just reached that in the Wilds. The orchard is filled with chestnut flowers everywhere, and it's awful."

I blinked. "Awful? I've seen pictures of chestnut flowers before, but they were pretty, like weeping cherry flowers... Wait. Oh, I got it, it's the smell you're talking about. Chestnut flowers are stinky, right?"

Both Techii and Kon hung their heads with disgruntled faces. Chestnut flowers are already stinky to humans, who have duller senses than beastfolk. I couldn't imagine what kind of experience would be like for the pair. Though they'd put up with it since it was their work, they both despised it to the point of reacting like this at the very mention of it.

My curiosity was piqued. "What does it smell like, by the way?"

The two whipped up their heads in sync and said in unison, "It smells like the

nightmare edition of the broth left by parboiled bamboo shoots.”

I think they mean the liquid left behind after you skim the scum off. I’ve prepared bamboo shoots a few times when they’re in season, and I have to agree that the stench is almost unbearable. But Techii and Kon have to endure the hellish version of it... They have my respect.

They even said the same thing without giving each other any signals. This description must be common knowledge or a go-to phrase. These two must have suffered so much... Hmm, should I make something like perfume or aroma sachets? Then again, the entire orchard is filled with these flowers. It’ll only be a drop in the ocean.

In that case, I should at least help them soothe their noses inside this house. Okay, during this period, let’s make fruit jam and savory food with aromatic herbs or spices, I decided.

I checked the plum jam again, and it was roughly the right consistency. I used the wooden spatula—which had been stirring the pot—to scoop a tiny bit of jam onto a small plate I fetched. I poured the steaming and viscous paste into my mouth.

It was sour. Really, *really* sour.

It was supposed to be sour, but I still had to comment on it. My entire mouth puckered. The sour soreness even spread to my cheeks, and all my muscles contracted painfully.

Seeing the pained grimace on my mouth didn’t deter the other two. Their curiosity won out, and they both held out small plates to me. Without a word, I scooped jam onto their plates.

Against their better judgment, the pair immediately poured all the jam down their throat without hesitation. A moment later, two shrieks of pain echoed out.

“It’s so soooour!” Kon cried.

“How can food be this sour?!” Techii exclaimed.

Laughter slipped out of my mouth at their comical reactions. *I made some good jam indeed.* I nodded to myself and began preparing the jars I’d store

them in.



THE plum jam was done. It retained plenty of the plum's original texture since I'd used unripe plums. Techii challenged it again, and she responded with half shock, half grimace at the sour taste. "I can taste a hint of sweetness and an explosive, tangy sourness. If I have to make a verdict, it's delicious, yeah. But how in the world are we supposed to eat something like this?"

I was pouring jam into sterilized jars, boiling the jars, and deaerating them. "Well, it's jam. We eat it like jam." I grinned. "You can spread it on toast or crackers and eat it while frowning at how sour it is. You can dilute it in chilled sparkling water and turn it into fizzy plum soda that'll keep the summer heat fatigue at bay. Plum jam salad dressing is a good idea too. Annnnd of course, how can we forget about meat when jam is involved?"

Kon and Techii, who were both still frowning somewhat from the tart aftertaste, looked at me with burning eyes when they heard the magic word. Seeing that, I wore a wry smile as I launched into an explanation. "Plums have good chemistry with both green and red shiso. You can make a sauce by mixing plum jam, grated ginger, ground sesame, cooking sake, and soy sauce. It's a light sauce that's usually paired with pork steak. The meat and the sauce bring out the charms in each other and elevate the flavors to a whole other level.

"The refreshing and light taste also pairs well with vegetables wrapped in meat," I continued. "You wrap pork around summer vegetables such as eggplants, sauté the bundles in a frying pan, then drizzle on the sauce. Yum. Other than that, you can go for a spicy edition by adding coarse ground pepper. You can even simmer pork in plum jam sauce. Oh, karaage chicken marinated in plum jam sauce is also a match made in heaven. These are all pleasing meat recipes that whet your appetite during the heat of summer. The secret to its success is, of course, its potent sourness."

Here, I paused to catch my breath. Two pairs of ravenous eyes were fixed on me. I heard audible swallows. I could feel the silent pressure and almost hear their silent demand; they wanted to taste all the meat dishes I'd just mentioned.

Smiling slightly exasperatedly, I continued my explanation. “Ripe plum jam is a bit sweeter and better for eating directly. It’s like a dessert. Unripe plum jam, meanwhile, feels more like a sour ingredient to me. I would use it as a seasoning. And yes, I know, you two are craving plum jam dishes, but it’s nearly dinnertime. Kon has to head home too, so let’s think about it tomorr—”

Techi suddenly leaned forward and raised one hand, facing her palm at me and cutting my sentence off. She took out an empty plastic food container from the cabinet above the sink and held it out to me. “What’s stopping you from making some right now? Kon can take some home and enjoy it with his family. The two of us can enjoy our portion by ourselves too. Did you really think you would *get away* with putting it off after giving us such a vivid explanation? I will *not* allow such cruelty in this household.”

Hearing that, Kon gave me his signature smile and nodded furiously, displaying his support.

I’d already worn several wry smiles today, but I felt the most exasperated one taking over my features. I accepted the food container and started brainstorming about what to make.

Karaage...I don’t have time for marinating or deep frying. Meat wrapped around vegetables...I don’t think I have enough of the latter in our fridge. Pork steak...hang on, I think we have pork! I nodded to myself and decided to start with the sauce.

The recipe for the sauce is exactly what I described earlier. Plum jam and ginger match well, so grated ginger is a must. Even if you don’t have any raw ginger, you can use the ready-made type. Prepare ground sesame. Likewise, use ready-made types if necessary. Finely chop green shiso. Add cooking sake and soy sauce. On top of that, add a few drops of aromatic sesame oil. Mix the ingredients.

Garlic was a nice addition as well, but after experiencing a day of stinky stimuli, Techi probably didn’t want any of that, so I refrained.

Prepare the pork. Beat with a meat tenderizer so that the pork won’t shrink into a clump when cooking. Add incisions between the lean meat and the fatty meat, as well as around the sinew.

Sauté one side until brown in a frying pan. Flip over and turn to low heat. Cover the pan with a lid and cook the meat slowly. When the meat is cooked through, lift the lid. Use paper towels to wipe off excess water. Pour in the sauce you made earlier. Simmer over low heat until the sauce is reduced.

You can add chili pepper or coarse ground pepper during this stage if you want to spice it up. Plum jam is also good with spicy flavors, but let's skip the chili this time.

Soon, the pork was ready. All I had to do now was to transfer them onto our plates together with some suitable vegetables. But well, Kon was taking some home today, so I made the Sanmaya family's portions first. I filled the food container with sautéed pork steaks and excess sauce before putting it inside a plastic shopping bag so that it was easier for him to carry.

"Make sure to reheat the steak and sauce in a frying pan first," I instructed as I handed it over.

Kon beamed at me with a radiant smile. "Thanks, Mikura! I'll deliver it to Mommy right away, so I'm heading back now! See you!" And off he went, accompanied by the pitter-patter of tiny feet.

A smile curled my lips as I watched him sprint into the distance. Naturally, I noticed Techī glaring at me like a wrathful demon. The message was clear—she was telling me to hurry up and satisfy her protesting stomach. For her sake, I promptly cooked for two. Perhaps that wasn't too accurate—I cooked for one human and one beastwoman. Her portion was thrice that of mine.

Once the pork steaks were ready, I asked Techī to arrange them on plates while I prepared rice and miso soup. I carried the dishes into the living room and laid our dinner on the low table.

Techī had been ready a step ahead of me. She'd finished serving the food earlier and was sitting in her usual seat. During my preparation time, her glare was glued to the pork steaks on the low table. I felt as if she could eat enough for two with how hungry she looked.

So that she could eat as soon as possible, I quickly finished my preparations and walked briskly to my usual seat. The moment I sat down, Techī clapped her hands together and voiced her thanks for the food rapidly—she hadn't even

stopped to wait for me, a testament to her impatience.

Pork steak with plum jam, of course, was sour. The sauce was sour, aromatic, slightly sweet, and filled with concentrated umami. As for the flesh, it was tender and substantial.

It wasn't a recipe with guaranteed success. If you weren't careful, it would taste like meat plus jam, not meat *with* jam, and the prior wasn't very appetizing. But if you simmer the meat in the sauce properly and allow them to blend in harmony, it becomes a delicious meal that releases its rich flavors with every bite.

Fortunately, I found harmony and success this time. I couldn't give it a perfect score, but it definitely deserved a passing mark at the very least. Techii didn't have any complaints—she didn't moan about the sour sauce at all. With brutal speed, she polished off all the pork steaks I'd prepared for her.

The many additional seasonings I'd added to the jam helped soften the blow of the sour plums. The cooking process also brought out more of the sweetness, further cushioning the tart taste. On top of that, the pork was high quality and contributed its rich and complex umami.

In conclusion, dinner today was a great success.



THE next morning, after our usual breakfast, I saw Techii off before diving into housework. That is, until Kon's signature footsteps echoed out from the garden. I glanced at the veranda, and Kon's petite head popped into my vision.

"I'm here!" he announced.

He then headed to the bathroom and washed his hands before assisting me with housework. With the Swiffer mop, he wiped the floor with utmost effort. As he worked, he called out to me. "Mikura, Mikura! Your pork steaks yesterday were SO good! Mommy and Daddy both loved your cooking, especially Mommy! Mommy seems to like sour things, and she said she'll try to make plum jam too! Oh, and they told me to tell you, 'Thank you very much for your wonderful food!'"

I was wiping the glass windows along the corridor while I replied with a smile,

“I’m glad they liked it so much. Plums are a traditional ingredient in both traditional Japanese confectionery and savory Japanese food. I guess it really appealed to your mom’s palate in that sense too.”

Kon raced down the corridor, moving the mop left and right as he went. “We don’t often use umeboshi when we’re cooking, but Mommy said that she’ll start trying! Like...what was it again? Umeboshi pulp! She said she’ll try to use that!”

“Ahhh. Yep, umeboshi pulp. You remove the umeboshi pit and chop the fruit finely. You can use it as a topping or mix it with rice, salad, pasta, deep-fried food, and even tempura. By the way, it might sound strange, but as long as you choose the right combination of ingredients, cheese and umeboshi pulp can be criminally addicting.”

I paused, slightly pensive. “For example... You can use umeboshi pulp and green shiso as topping on chicken tenders. Sprinkle on plenty of cheese before slowly baking in a covered frying pan. The mild flavors of chicken tenders have a simple elegance, but it transforms into the taste of high calories and sinful delight through this recipe. This one’s addicting too.”

His eyes lit up. “Umeboshi pulp and cheese! Whoever came up with that is a mad genius!”

I was on a roll, and I gave him a few other examples. “You can cut into a piece of meat in the middle and stuff it with umeboshi pulp, cheese, and green shiso before deep-frying it. There’s a specific tempura dish where you sprinkle a topping of green shiso and umeboshi pulp on *sillago* fish fillet before coating it in tempura batter. You can add cheese to the mix, or you can sprinkle on cheese after it’s fried. Fine Parmigiano-Reggiano powder would be a luxurious garnish—the top tier of sophisticated food.”

Kon gasped. “*Frying* umeboshi pulp and cheese?! That’s nice food, plus nice food, plus nice recipe! That’s so unfair!”

The end of the conversation also signaled the end of our cleaning session. I went to retrieve the laundry from the washing machine, which I’d switched on before I’d started cleaning. I hung the laundry on the clothesline in the garden.

The first thing I did when I returned to the living room was to look at the

clock, checking whether it was lunchtime. Then, my gaze shifted to Kon. “Well then, time to decide on a menu for lunch. Kon, do you have any requests?”

Kon puffed out his cheeks like tiny balloons and narrowed his eyes at me, as if to say, “Do I have to spell it out for you?”

Feeling his intense stare on me, I cracked a smile and replied, “Okay, okay. Gotcha. I guess I’ll make one of the dishes I just listed. Oh, or maybe...” I paused. “Umeboshi pulp and cheese pizza sounds like a valid option too. For toppings, we can use asparagus, tomatoes, okra, corn, and whatever else we prefer. Umeboshi pulp, green shiso, and cheese will provide the flavors. It’ll be a pizza that’s healthy and light on the stomach with plenty of fiber. What kind of meat would go well with this combination? Hmm... I mean, I could be a bit adventurous and use fish, but if I remember correctly, we don’t have any of that. In that case... Hmm... What about leftovers? Do we have anything that—”

“OH!” Kon cut me off with a gasp. He seemed to have recalled something. He darted to his backpack—which he’d had left at his usual seat in the living room—opened the zipper and began rummaging through the contents. From inside, he fished out a thin, folded item made of cloth. “I completely forgot! Mommy told me to give you this as thanks for always taking care of me!”

He proceeded to unfold the mystery item—it turned out to be a shopping bag made with sturdy cloth. He held it out to me and continued, “Here you go! It’s a reusable shopping bag! She says that we’ll start the...eco-point? System? In the Wilds too, just like the other side of the border! We need to use reusable bags to earn points! That’s why Mommy made this! Let’s go buy fish, carry it with this bag, then make fish pizza!”

I accepted it with a smile and voiced my thanks, but on the inside, I was completely baffled. *I mean, having reusable shopping bags is always better, but did he just say the eco-point system? If I remember right, the eco-point system was a nostalgic incentive program by the government over a decade ago. Purchasing specific energy-efficient electric appliances will earn you points or something like that. Why would they implement such an outdated system here in the Wilds? I also don’t understand the correlation between reusable shopping bags and eco-points.*

My mind was churning away, trying to make sense of the information. The Beastly Wilds is a place of thriving nature, as its name suggests. This forest has developed a unique harmony between nature and civilization—for example, power cables run between branches, and the center of the settlement is surrounded by Fusang trees.

The citizens living here, as a matter of course, cherish mother nature, for she is a major part of their lives. Japan is infamous for having one of the strictest and most complex waste sorting systems in the world, but it doesn't hold a candle to the Wilds. The regulations concerning plastic waste are especially strict—if you litter, you will be fined on the spot.

The standard lifestyle here is already quite sustainable and friendly to the environment. I couldn't imagine what an eco-point system in such a place would involve, and I tilted my head in confusion. But I quickly snapped out of my analysis, because our stomachs wouldn't wait for us. I hung the cloth bag on my arm, fetched my wallet, then headed to the supermarket with Kon.



SOMETHING immediately caught my eye when we arrived at the supermarket. In the car park were *nobori* banners scattered around various places. It was a rare sight.

I scanned the text on some of the banners.

“New eco-point system!”

“Ten times eco-points for a limited time only!”

“Eco-friendly measures starting this year! Ask staff for details!”

Judging from what I could read, the eco-point system here was completely different from what I was familiar with. I had a decent idea of what it involved after reading the banner texts, and I walked into the supermarket alongside other customers, who were also equipped with reusable shopping bags.

After entering the supermarket, I saw a staff member standing slightly ahead of us. This was new. The staff repeated the same explanation over and over to the customers with reusable shopping bags.

“Please keep your reusable bags folded until you reach the cashier! You only have to show the bag during payment! Please put your items into your basket or cart like usual! I will be handing out point cards over here, so if you would like any, please come over!”

At this point, it was clear—this supermarket had implemented a new point card or loyalty point system, and they’d coincidentally named it “eco-points.” With a wry quirk on the corners of my lips, I walked up to the staff member and received a point card. Then, like always, I headed to the vegetable section first.

As we walked, Kon, who was roaming around aimlessly near my legs, looked at me triumphantly. “See? There really *is* an eco-point system! I dunno the details, but I hear that there was a similar system on the other side of the border, and some beastfolk thought that we should follow the trend! I’ll be honest, but I have no clue what the ‘eco’ part means, but Mommy was happy because we get more value! And I thought you might be happy too, Mikura!”

A smile wormed onto my lips. “Yeah, thanks for telling me. You were a *big* help. From what I can see on the card, it’s definitely worth the effort. Looks like this reusable shopping bag will be my good partner from now on.”

He nodded profusely. “Awesome! Go ahead and use it! I mean, Mommy made it, but I’m still glad you like it!” He paused and looked at me curiously. “By the way, have you ever received eco-points on the other side before?”

“Weeell... Hmm... No, the eco-point system on our side was something from over ten years ago. I was just a child back then, so I’ve never been involved in it.”

“Huuuh! That’s so interesting! I wonder whether humans on the other side did what we’re doing now!”

We walked as we chatted. I observed our surroundings and quietly thought, *It all makes sense now*. The TV in the Wilds broadcasted news and TV dramas from the other side of the border, acting as a window to the outside world. However, to the citizens of the Wilds, such information and news came from a different world—it was useless and meaningless information from a world they would never interact with. The best they could do was to gain a haphazard understanding of it and to put it to practice equally haphazardly just like this

point system in the supermarket.

They likely didn't remember any of the details of an event from over a decade ago. They couldn't remember when exactly it happened, what exactly had happened, but they didn't have the motivation to investigate it properly, either. Only a vague imprint was left in their minds.

But there was still a handful of exceptions—beastfolk who were interested in this foreign world. They still remembered the concept of eco-points or had researched it on the Internet. But they hadn't spread that information or contacted the supermarket about the misconception. They only gazed at this commotion impassively from the sidelines, as if it wasn't their concern.

The Wilds already had a sustainable trash disposal and recycling system. Encouraging a more eco-friendly lifestyle wasn't high on the priority list, so there wasn't much point, for the lack of a better word, in using the term "eco-points." But someone had heard this word in the past and knew that reusable shopping bags were trending on the other side of the border. They'd made that connection and implemented the system for such a fleeting reason. That was my guess, at least.

As a human who'd lived on the other side of the border, I could have chosen to clear up the misunderstanding. But there weren't any merits in doing that, and I didn't want to be a party pooper. Plus, earning points whenever I went shopping was a welcome addition. *Yeah. I'll stay silent about this one*, I decided. There was an unsurmountable rift between these two worlds separated by a border, and I was reminded of this fact once again.

Shaking these thoughts out of my mind, I headed to the fresh seafood section and admired the display, mulling over which fish I should pick for my pizza. *The pizza I'm making is the light type, so should I go for a matching fish with a light taste, or should I deliberately go for something with rich flavors?*

Umeboshi pulp goes well with sardines. I can think of it as a cousin of anchovy pizza. Those are nice. Oh, there's still fresh trout available at this time of year, huh? The trout here is amazing, so that's another good option.

And hello there, unagi. I recalled the delicious grilled unagi my mother-in-law had made. There was a respectable selection of top-quality unagi that would

probably cost at least a few thousand yen if I bought them on the other side of the border. Some were whole, some were butterflied, and some had already been grilled as kabayaki.

Unagi...pizza? A sudden extravagant and blasphemous idea popped into my mind as I admired the eels.

Then, Kon's cheerful voice caught my attention. "Ah! I spy with my little eye something beginning with f! There's *fugu*! Fugu tastes nice too, right?!" He grabbed his usual stepladder and peered into the fridge inside the fresh seafood section, leaning forward eagerly.

Fugu? Wait... Is fugu in season right now? I quickly shot down that thought. *No, it must be frozen fugu since we're living in a forest on the mountain, so I guess there's no season to speak of.* Thinking that, I glanced at the fish that had attracted Kon's attention, and when I read the text on the price tag, I did a double take. It read, *Product of Beastly Wilds*.

I gaped at it. "Huuuuh?! *Local* fugu?!"

I didn't know whether it had always been there or whether it had only appeared recently. It had completely slipped by unnoticed, and of course, I'd never checked its price or place of origin. It was like a bolt from the blue.

Kon blinked at me, tilting his head quizzically. "Yeah. It's local. We farm them near the dam in...some kinda pool? It's easy to cook, so when it starts appearing in shops, which is around now, Mommy often simmers it in ginger and soy sauce."

"What?" I stared at him in shock. "Hang on... Wait, your mom has a fugu cooking license?"

"Huh? You need a license? For cooking *fish*?"

"I mean—" I gestured with my flailing hands. "—fugu is poisonous!"

"What? How can fugu have poison? I like fugu quite a lot and I eat them often, but I've never gotten a tummy ache before."

This was when my brain finally started working. I recalled my knowledge of fugu toxins.

Fugu ingests their toxins from their staple food source, shellfish, and the toxins within the fugu are just a concentrated version of that. Therefore, if they are reared on farms and are only given feed that doesn't contain these toxins, the fugu wouldn't be toxic...or something like that. Nonpoisonous fugu is readily available in the market, but if the misconception that "all fugu are safe to eat" spreads, people might get poisoning from eating wild fugu. For this reason, even now, all fugu chefs require licenses no matter what type of fugu they handle. On top of that, there're apparently regulations against advertising nonpoisonous fugu.

But don't take my word for that. I'm just a layman who's heard bits and pieces from various sources. That aside... As long as there are strict requirements for importing wild fugu from the ocean, it's almost impossible for the citizens of the Wilds to get their hands on any. If there are only farmed fugu available here, it's fine for the citizens to think that fugu was a safe ingredient. Furthermore, this is a self-autonomous region where Japanese law doesn't fully apply. There isn't the concept of fugu licenses here.

I looked at the price tag again. The farmed fugu in the Wilds were incredibly cheap—it was almost surreal when I thought back to the prices of fugu on the other side of the border. My hands gained a mind of their own as they reached out and transferred some into my basket.

I snapped out of my trance, and my rational mind asked, *Fugu pizza? Would that really taste good?* Just in case, I grabbed some sardines that definitely wouldn't go wrong. While I was at it, I also took one portion of *shirayaki* unagi eel that got my curiosity going.

If anyone else looked into my shopping cart, they probably couldn't ever predict that I was going to make pizza, not even in their wildest dreams. *I hope they'll be tasty*, I thought as I headed to the cashier. After paying for my items, I showed them my reusable bag and earned eco-points without incident.

On our way back home, Kon wore a big smile. When we arrived, we washed our hands and headed to the kitchen to make pizza. To be more accurate, we were doing a taste test before we started working on the actual pizza.

It was too risky to chuck the ingredients thoughtlessly onto the pizza dough

without knowing whether they'd produce good results. We would cut off tiny, bite-size chunks and get an idea of what they taste like. If they didn't go well with pizza, I could always change to tried-and-true ingredients like bacon.

The first on our tasting menu was unagi. I wanted to see whether it matched cheese and umeboshi pulp well. Since my homemade umeboshi were still far from ready, I was using umeboshi from the supermarket. I topped the small chunk of shirayaki unagi with umeboshi pulp and cream cheese, which I chose because I wasn't bothered to melt the cheese during the tasting session.

Kon was sitting on his usual chair, and he was salivating and swallowing the entire time. I held the sample next to his mouth and said, "Here, try it." He opened his mouth wide, ate it, then began chewing. His eyes widened, and he looked at me with starry eyes while nodding repeatedly.

Oh? That's a better reaction than I thought. I quirked an eyebrow. I made my own sample and tossed it into my mouth. An elegant, delicate flavor melted on my tongue. Part of it was probably due to the high quality of the unagi, but to my surprise, I could tell that it matched the umeboshi pulp and cheese extremely well. A hint of salt blended with a distinct sourness and the creamy taste of cheese. It was a stunning combination—in fact, I felt like it could rival kabayaki unagi in sophistication.

This will definitely go well with rice, but I think something else is even better—alcohol. Not Japanese sake, but maybe a highball cocktail.

I chewed thoroughly, savoring its taste before swallowing. I hummed in thought. "I only bought the unagi on a whim, but I made a really good choice, huh? I think it's a good pizza topping, but it's also good just as-is. If I used better umeboshi, not the stuff in the supermarket, I have a feeling it has a lot of room for improvement."

A radiant smile lit up Kon's face, and he immediately followed with his comment. "It was YUMMY! I like this too! I love it! I dunno how to describe it, but I feel like it's similar to the side dishes Mommy always makes. It reminds me of the shiokara and dried mullet roe! That type!"

Like always, his preference was rather unique for a child. The dishes he mentioned tended to be the favorites of someone who indulges in alcohol. For

someone like him—who came from a family that worshipped a particular category of traditional Japanese food—to give such high praise meant that this was perfect as a snack with alcohol, just like I thought. I nodded to myself, feeling satisfaction take over my heart before I began making sample number two.

And no, it wasn't sardines. Anchovy pizza was already a thing. It was finally time for fugu to enter the spotlight.

When one thinks of fugu, the first dish that would spring into mind is fugu sashimi. But when you use something as a pizza topping, you have to cook it, so I sautéed it lightly in the frying pan before adding umeboshi pulp and cheese. I delivered the samples into Kon's mouth, then mine.

"Hmm," I muttered, "it's not bad. It's not *bad*, but it's not as impactful as the unagi."

"Yeah, I think so too. The unagi was way too yummy."

It was too early to give up though. I experimented with it, trying to find some other combination that might work. Instead of using chunks this time, I cut off slices that were as thin as possible so that I could test more varieties.

After a round of trial and error, I came to the conclusion that fugu didn't go well with cheese. It was delicious with umeboshi pulp and chopped spring onion shoots, umeboshi pulp and radish sprouts, and finally, umeboshi pulp and asparagus. At one point, I even lost sight of my original goal and discovered that wrapping umeboshi pulp and spring onion shoots inside a slice of fugu sashimi tasted heavenly. The umami and texture were incredible.

Tangents aside, since I learned that fugu, cooked or raw, went well with umeboshi pulp and vegetables, I decided that I'd avoid getting cheese on them when I made the pizza. After our lengthy round of tasting and experimenting, we finally returned to our original objective: making pizza.

I donned my apron and Kon got into his coverall apron.

Pizza dough takes time to make, so today, we'll be using ready-made pizza bases from the supermarket. Spread olive oil and pizza sauce on the pizza base. Sprinkle chopped green shiso. Start by adding the vegetable toppings—roughly

chopped asparagus, tomato slices, okra slices, and corn kernels.

Next, add the fish. Respectively, shirayaki unagi with umeboshi pulp, sardines with umeboshi pulp, and fugu with shredded umeboshi. Sprinkle on a generous amount of cheese—make sure to avoid the fugu chunks. Sprinkle additional chopped green shiso. Cut bottled green olives into halves and scatter around the pizza.

Transfer pizza into a preheated oven and bake. When cooked through, remove from oven and transfer onto a plate. Cut into slices with a pizza cutter.

The first pizza was fresh out of the oven, and I carried it into the living room. There, to my surprise, I found Techii waiting in her usual seat. *When did she get back?* I told Techii and Kon to start ahead of me before heading back into the kitchen and making another pizza with the same toppings. Considering the calorie intake of beastfolk, one normal pizza definitely wasn't enough. I needed three at least. *The first two are reserved for them. I think I'll start eating when the third one is ready.*

Eating the same pizza three times might get a bit dull, but I hoped the rich variety of ingredients was enough to make up for that problem.

Soon, I carried the second pizza into the living room, then the third. Finally, I took off my apron and settled in my usual seat. When I cut the third pizza with a pizza cutter, I noticed the other two waiting for me with their small plates ready. The first and second pizzas were already gone. *Looks like they can still eat more of the same pizza. That's good.*

The moment I finished cutting the pizza, two hands reached out with alarming speed. I took that as a challenge, and I reached for a pizza slice as well. Holding my plate under it, I slowly savored the slice bit by bit.



My experiments earlier had been worth it. The fugu, sardines, and unagi were all incredibly tasty. Unagi stood out the most, and though I had the urge to only gorge on the unagi pieces, the fugu and sardines weren't half bad. They added a nice touch to the pizza, making it more flavorful and addicting. The three types of fish also had completely different textures, and that turned out to be a genius combination. And I mustn't forget the fresh summer vegetables that added even more variation and a small break between the richer ingredients. The pizza was so good that it made me smile without realizing it.

I wolfed down my food as if I hadn't eaten for a century, and the other two followed my example, as if this was a contest. Somehow, I managed to snatch three slices from the last pizza despite the fierce competition.

Techi seemed to have eaten her fill. "I have to say, this pizza is gorgeous. I never knew pizza could be this good."

Kon was next. "I thought the fish was nice even if you don't make pizza with them, but it's even better as pizza toppings!"

The fish and umeboshi pulp pizza was a huge success. It had a unique flavor that was also a bit different from Japanese-style pizza, such as teriyaki chicken pizza. *It's plum style—no, maybe fusion Japanese-style?*

Kon's excited eyes suddenly caught my eye. They were even more brilliant than usual, twinkling like stars. "I never knew plums and umeboshi could be this yummy! I already liked them, but I love them now! Mikura, you're still going to make lots of different food with plums, right?"

I stared back into his eyes and nodded firmly. "Of course. We are only at the first stage of plum work. It's going to last all the way until plum season ends. There are a lot of preserves and cuisine you can make with plums, so look forward to it."

Pure elation took over his face, and Kon gave me his usual close-eyed smile. This time, however, his eyes were squeezed even harder than usual. Then, with both hands, he stuffed the rest of his pizza into his mouth, chewed fiercely, and savored his food in utter bliss.

Afterword

AND that's the end of volume four! Hello, I'm the author, Fuurou. It's been a while since we've last met.

Before all else, I would like to voice my thanks. Volume four wouldn't have been possible without the support of all my readers and everyone in the editing team. Thank you so very, very much! I shall work hard so that I can continue to deliver a good story to everyone.

Finally, we've made it to Mikura and Tokatechi's wedding. Usually, in a story where romance is the main theme, this might be our goal and our last volume. But this series has a bigger focus on the slow life, so we'll keep going for just a tad. Marriage isn't the goal, but the starting line. We will continue taking a peek into the lives of this couple who feel as if they haven't changed much, but have definitely gotten closer and closer as time goes by.

Onto the topic of preserves. Finally, plums have made an appearance, even if it was brief. Plums and plum products are said to be health tonics and, apparently, also keep your food from spoiling as quickly, so they have been adored by many since ancient times. There are many varieties of plums, and they have a long history, resulting in an astounding number of ways to process and season them. It's incredible.

Plums are so popular, in fact, that in Japan, we have a term called "plum work." Whenever plum season comes around, plum lovers would run about to purchase the best ones and process them immediately. They will work to make an entire year's worth of plum products and preserves.

Japan's extreme humidity and heat during summer are the natural enemies of food. Everything goes bad in the blink of an eye. Plums must have seemed like a savior to many, because as long as you treat them properly, they last a very long time.

Not to mention that plums are incredibly versatile. As *umeboshi*, they're good with rice. As plum jam, they're great with bread. I hope I delivered some of the charms of plums and Japanese plum culture to my readers through this story.

And of course, we're only getting started with plum work. Mikura and his hungry assistants will diligently make all kinds of products with plums. You can definitely look forward to that.

That's all from me. I hope to see you again in volume five!

Fuurou

Early Summer, 2023

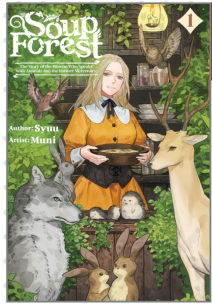


Let's Get to Villainessin': Stratagems of a Former Commoner

By Hiironoame

Illust Misumi

Would you become the villainess to save your beloved baby sister? Mio agrees to do just that! Survive three years at an elite academy where the progeny of tycoons and moguls roam, and in return, the real villainess will cure Mio's terminally ill sister. What lengths will Mio go for her sister?



Soup Forest: The Story of the Woman Who Speaks with Animals and the Former Mercenary

By Syuu

Illust Muni

Olivia has a secret she can't tell anyone: she can hear not only people's thoughts, but also animals'. She's lived surrounded by animals at her soup restaurant on the edge of the forest, until a former mercenary appears on her doorstep. How will they change each other's lives?



The Former Assassin Who Got Reincarnated as a Noble Girl

By Satsuki Otonashi

Illust MiRea

High Society Is Rough For Assassins!

A cold-blooded former assassin has to figure out a new use for their killer skillset in high society after they reincarnate into a noble young lady!



STORY BY
Kiri Komori

ART BY
Yamigo



URL <https://crossinfworld.com/>

Twitter @CrossInfWorld



Cross Infinite World