

So You Want to Live the SLOW LIFE?

2

A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds



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So You Want to Live the Slow Life? A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds,
Volume 2

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Burn Those Calories!

WE were still very much under quasi-house arrest and had six days left to go until the end of our quarantine. We'd stuffed our faces with that delicious homemade pancetta just yesterday.

I got dressed, ate my breakfast, and was sitting in the kitchen wondering what to do with the day. Techichi was lazing around in the living room, watching TV. Kon was lounging on the floor beside her.

"I'm bored," she called out from the next room. "Time for some exercise."

As soon as she said this, Kon nodded in agreement, then they stood up in unison and headed out toward the veranda.

Techichi had spent all day yesterday lounging around in the living room, doing nothing but staring at the TV and nibbling on *senbei* crackers. *It's high time for her to get moving before she makes a permanent indent there*, I thought to myself, as I watched them head out.

No sooner had I finished that thought than Techichi spun back around to face me.

"You too," she said matter-of-factly. "Come on."

I didn't have any plans of my own, so I nodded in agreement and followed. Techichi reached under the veranda, pulled out my staff, and handed it to me.

Once we were all fully equipped, the three of us lined up in a row and started with some warm-up exercises. Each of us held a staff firmly in both hands, arms high overhead, and leaned from side to side to give our muscles a good stretch. We looked like we were filming a workout video.

Once we were nicely limbered up and the blood was flowing, we started doing practice swings, a spirited shout accompanying each strike. It was a technique Techichi had taught me only a short time ago, and it seemed to be more of a way to promote body wellness than a kind of combat training.

After the practice swings came sparring—which felt very martial from my perspective, but the beastfolk really did see it mainly as a form of healthy exercise. According to Techī, this exercise was extremely important in their culture. The health benefits spoke for themselves, but it was also undeniable that knowing how to use a staff was very valuable in a crisis. What's more, it seems that those with the most skill garnered the most respect.

The beastfolk varied greatly—both in their body shapes and in their unique abilities. As a result, even though they could all use a staff, every clan had a very different technique and tradition for doing so. Apparently, they would even compete to compare the merits of their different schools.

When I first heard about this, I immediately thought of sports competitions in the outside world. But I was told that the beastfolk also enjoyed sports and sporting contests in much the same way we humans do. This was something quite different, as Techī was quick to point out.

As I reflected on this, we continued to move through the practice swings—overhead strikes, then body strikes, then sweeps. After that, it was time to begin sparring. Since there were three of us, we took turns pairing up—I would spar with Techī first, then Techī would spar with Kon.

I faced Techī and settled into a fighting stance. The way it worked was as follows:

The less experienced fighter—me, in this case—attacks with a slow, but deliberate and powerful strike. I could target anywhere I chose, and I could swing the staff any way I liked. The defender would carefully block the slow strike, and the attacker would draw back and return to a neutral stance to strike again, this time slightly faster.

The aim of the exercise was a kind of visualization. Pay attention to your stance and to your opponent's. As you swing your staff, imagine how your bodies will move and what path each staff will trace through the air. With each successive strike, you had to do this more and more quickly.

Sparring continues in this way, the more experienced defender blocking each successive attack, until the newbie gives up. The round can also end if either fighter loses their staff or if one of the newbie's attacks successfully hits its

target.

That said, in principle, that isn't supposed to happen. The defender is meant to block the strike, after all—they could even stop it with their hands, if need be. Short of them getting lost in thought and spacing out, deliberately letting the attack through, or losing their grip, the defender should never get hit. And even if their hands *were* to slip, the defender is the more experienced fighter—a quick dodge, and they'll still be in the clear.

Incidentally, every time we'd sparred so far, it always ended the same way—with me crying uncle, drenched in sweat and wheezing with exhaustion, unable to lift my staff for another strike.

"You're better than when you first started," said Techī, "but you still don't have the basics down. You should be practicing even when I'm not around, to fully get to grips with your staff. The staff should become an extension of your body—so much so that you know exactly where it's going to hit before you even swing it. You should be able to picture its movement, even with your eyes closed. If you can do that, you'll excel.

"The way you stood up against that gang of thugs was admirable, but if a moment later you actually had to swing that thing, they would've easily dodged it...maybe even grabbing it with their bare hands. Even if you were lucky enough to land a direct hit, it would've been little more than a tickle. You need to be able to do some damage!"

Harsh words to hear while I was putting my strength into every swing...

Part of me was happy that she'd seen me nearly charge into the fray that night...but I couldn't argue with what she was saying. After all, despite all her skill and experience, even she was unable to defeat Satoira's mob—they just kept getting back up.

I was sure we wouldn't be facing another situation like that anytime soon, but if and when we did, I didn't like the idea of leaving Techī to deal with it alone. The thought of not being able to do anything irked me—I gritted my teeth and swung my staff even harder.

Techī flashed a cheeky grin, almost as if she could hear my thoughts. She promptly blocked my strike, parrying it gently, then twirled the end of her staff

around my own. With one sharp flick, it was torn out of my hands and flew high into the air. As it tumbled back toward us, Techī raised one arm overhead and grabbed the falling staff without so much as an upward glance.

It was most impressive.

“You’re done,” she said, handing my staff back to me. “Take a rest over there.”

I nodded, beads of sweat dripping down my face. This was the first time I’d finished without crying uncle. Can’t help but wonder if that was a sign of improvement. I took it as such and staggered over to the veranda to sit down for a bit.

As soon as I stopped moving, my body temperature went through the roof. I continued to sweat profusely, trying my best to wipe myself down and catch my breath. Techī on the other hand, without even a moment’s pause, began sparring with Kon.

Kon’s staff technique was utterly unlike mine or Techī’s. Taking full advantage of his small and light body. Running around his opponent, he used his staff as a vaulting pole, digging it into the ground and springing into the air to strike his opponent with great force. Since he weighed so little, with a good run up he could leap as high as seven feet, maybe even more. As he rocketed back down to earth, his strikes were powerful and difficult to block.

“Yaaah!” cried the little furry cannonball, launching into another, even faster attack. Techī blocked it, as she had the others. But as he flew past her, Kon spun around to hit her with a second leaping strike from behind, hoping to take her by surprise.

Of course, it was a futile attempt. Techī spun around instantly, with astonishing calm and poise, and blocked the attack.



Her deflection was so gentle that Kon simply dropped to the ground, rather than being sent flying by the force of the impact.

Having had his attack so perfectly nullified, I expected Kon to be disappointed. But instead, he was bubbling over with excitement.

“Techi! That was amazing!” he cried out, lightly spinning his staff with a flourish as he circled her, deciding on his next attack. With no loss of enthusiasm, Kon leaped at her again and again, each attack faster than the last, while Techi blocked each one elegantly and effectively.

He was at it for a while, just dozens and dozens of strikes. Eventually, even Kon’s stamina ran out, and he collapsed on the ground.

“...Uncle,” he gasped, completely spent.

“You’re getting better, kiddo,” said Techi, standing over him. “At this rate, you might score a point off me before the year is out.”

Then she gently picked him up in both hands and carried him off toward the bathroom, no doubt to rinse all that sweat out of his fur.



AFTER we were done with our workout and had showered and cooled off, we all changed into fresh clothes. It was already afternoon by then, and about time for us to eat something. I stood in the kitchen pondering the options.

“Hmm, it’s a bit late to start on anything elaborate...” I remarked. “I was thinking sandwiches. What do you two think?”

Kon and Techi both nodded. He was sitting on the kitchen counter, in his usual spot, while Techi was relaxing in the living room. Since we were all in agreement, I opened the fridge and started pulling out ingredients.

I decided on lettuce and cucumbers for the vegetables. As for the main filling...you can’t go wrong with thick cut ham.

A ham filling makes for a great sandwich. However, if ham is the only substantial ingredient, it’s important to spread a generous helping of butter on the bread slices to make sure that the sandwich isn’t too dry. Season with some freshly ground black pepper to round out the flavor.

Also, pickles are a must for any sandwich lover.

...I immediately regretted not buying any pickles when I was at the supermarket. There's no use in crying over spilled pickles, but it's very true—the tartness of the pickles makes for a great finishing touch. It really elevates the whole sandwich. I would have to make do with mixing in mayonnaise with the butter to add a little acidity that way.

The ham sandwiches might not be enough, and it's good to have some variety in any case, so I set about making some egg sandwiches. I put the eggs in a pan to boil and started to wash the vegetables in the sink.

Kon watched me work with his usual curiosity.

“Hey...” he ventured, staring intently at the cucumbers. “Can you make preserved veggies? Hard to imagine you could smoke them...”

I thought about it.

“Hmm... I suppose you could try smoking vegetables...but I think you'd have a hard time getting them to taste good. But there are loads of other ways to preserve veggies. You can dry them, you know, like dried fruits,” I explained. “Or you can make *tsukemono* by pickling them in salt, vinegar, soy sauce, or even miso paste. And then of course, you have Western pickles—they're famous all over the world.”

To my surprise, it wasn't Kon who replied next, but Techii. It seems she was following our conversation.

“I thought Western pickles were just vegetables pickled in vinegar,” she called from the other room. “Why are you singling them out from all the other kinds of *tsukemono*?”

I thought about it for a moment, then resumed my work with my head turned slightly toward the living room so that Techii could hear me more clearly.

“Actually, *tsukemono* and pickles are quite different. In the West, *tsukemono* are usually referred to as *Japanese pickles*. And yes, when we use the English word *pickles*, it does bring to mind pickling in vinegar—that is how the word is most commonly used—but I'm actually referring to a much more specific recipe. It's a method that involves diluted brine for the initial pickling, followed

by a period of fermentation. So even though they don't use vinegar like the pickles you'd buy at the store, they still have a similar acidity, albeit with a noticeably different flavor. They're very delicious, not at all like your everyday pickles, so I suppose it'd be more accurate for me to call them *fermented pickles*."

"I see..." Techii said in a disinterested monotone. Clearly, she didn't see. Or rather, she didn't care a bean—pickled or otherwise. Kon, on the other hand, was spellbound.

"I think the only time I ever ate those kinda Western pickles was in a hamburger!" he said, eyes all aglimmer. "If that's what you're talking about, I wanna try yours, Mikura! Please, make some for us!"

"Oh..." I replied, a little distracted, as I continued preparing the sandwiches. "...Sure, yeah...if you want, I can give it a go. This time they'll work out for sure... I'll make some great pickles just for you!"

I tried to inject some enthusiasm into my half-hearted reply, but Kon could sense my hesitation, that something wasn't quite right. He tilted his head, wanting to know more.

"Well, it's nothing really..." I hesitated. "It's just, the last time I tried to make pickles, I guess I didn't put enough salt in my brine, or maybe I chose a bad spot to store them in... In any case, when the time came to eat them, I discovered they were overgrown with a spectacular amount of mold," I sighed.

"You could say that mold is a natural predator of pickles everywhere, and I was quite shocked to have fallen prey to it," I continued when I saw the confused look in his round eyes. "The saddest thing is that you have to throw away the whole jar... It's not so bad if you're just using vegetables. But say you bought some *really* nice plums, and you were hoping to make them into *umeboshi*... Let's just say that neither my spirit nor my wallet have forgotten the pain..."

My eyes glazed over at the thought.

You can avoid your pickles going moldy by increasing the salinity of the brine you use. However, it's easy to overdo it, which can impact the flavor and isn't so great for your health. It's important to get the balance just right, or else mold

will quickly settle in and spoil the whole batch without mercy. If that happens, everything ends up in the trash. Quite the pickle.

I'd already had a taste of this unfortunate setback once before. Since that time, I hadn't been able to bring myself to try again, worried that I might ruin another set of perfectly good vegetables. I had received a few pointers about umeboshi, and was able to successfully make some using a different, simpler method, but to this day, I have yet to take on the challenge of fermented pickles...

But maybe now was a good time to try again. I had plenty of space in the warehouse for storage—perhaps my luck would be better here.

I set aside thoughts of pickling as I continued working on the sandwiches.

Slice up your bread and spread generously with the mixture of butter and mayonnaise. Cut up the cucumber diagonally into slices, shred the lettuce, and lay them out on the bread slices before adding the thick cut ham. If you're using salted butter, there's no need to add any more salt, especially as the ham will contain some salt as well. Next, add some black pepper—fine is best, freshly ground, sprinkled evenly over the entire surface. Finally, add another layer of lettuce and cucumber and the second slice of buttered bread.

Next, make the egg sandwiches. Once the eggs are boiled, briefly submerge them in cold water to cool them off and remove the shells. Carefully cut open the eggs and use your knife to separate and then thoroughly mince the cooked whites and yolks. Season to taste with pepper, mix with mayonnaise, and sandwich a generous portion of the mixture between two slices of bread.

The ham and lettuce and the egg sandwiches both looked great, but to be perfectly honest, I could've gone for some jam sandwiches too. Sadly, I still hadn't made any jam, so that would have to wait for another time.

Kon continued to watch, careful not to miss a single detail, and flashed me a huge, toothy grin. "Don't worry! You'll do great, Mikura! I think your cooking is even better than Grampa Tommi's. You're so careful, and the food always turns out so yummy. Don't let the pickles get you down! You've got this!"

I was amazed by his blind faith, shining through in his broad smile. There wasn't a hint of doubt in his words. I smiled back, without even a tenth of his

conviction.

...But now I had time in abundance, and plenty of money set aside. I had the tools and the space to experiment. I could research and prepare more thoroughly than ever before. Surely the best way to improve is to learn from your failures? Every time you fail, you're a little closer to success.

Besides, there was also Kon and Techī. Before, I was only making things for myself. But now other people were enjoying the food I was making and were looking forward to trying more. If that's not the best motivation to try to succeed, I don't know what is. *I won't let a little mold beat me!*

I followed Kon's lead and managed to drum up some groundless faith, smiling to myself as I plated up the sandwiches and took them through to the low table in the living room, along with three glasses of milk.

We gave thanks for the meal out loud, grabbed a sandwich each, and took a hearty first bite. The seasoning was spot on, and soon we were all stuffing our faces to our heart's content.



AFTER lunch, I spent the afternoon slowly taking care of various chores. A simple evening meal followed, and then it was time to soak in a bath.

I filled the tub with hot water and had a quick soak, then it was Techī and Kon's turn. It seemed Kon was still too young to bathe alone, or perhaps he still needed help washing—after all, his young body was still completely covered with fur.

I wondered if perhaps it'd be better for me to help him, rather than Techī. Granted, I didn't know the first thing about grooming fur. I was perfectly happy with a dash of shampoo and conditioner for my own mop, but I somehow doubted that would do the trick here. An ignorant human like myself had no right to go anywhere near the fur of a young beastperson.

Kon was still a small child, covered in fur as he was. In Japanese society, it's perfectly normal for young children, even boys, to bathe with a grown woman. Even in a public bathhouse, a young boy can join his mother in the women's section of the baths. I suppose this was a little like that. And besides, Kon

seemed to be genuinely pleased to get to spend more time with Tech.

And indeed, apparently, I was right about the fur maintenance, because they went into the bath carrying an arsenal of toiletries and implements that I'd never seen before. When they came back out some time later, they were far from done. Kon and Tech sat down in the living room and got to work untangling, combing, drying, and brushing. Kon took care of Tech's tail, and Tech took care of Kon's tail and coat. They seemed very comfortable with their tasks, and I realized that social grooming must be an integral part of beastfolk culture.

"This is by the by," said Tech, out of nowhere, "but if you yank really hard on our tails, they'll fall right out. Oh, and it's not just beastfolk—it goes for normal chipmunks and squirrels as well."

Kon continued to gently brush her tail as she spoke.

"You might compare it to how some lizards can lose their tails...but unlike a lizard, once our tail is gone, it won't grow back. Losing a tail is a very real danger, so we have to be very careful about how we use them. Obviously, we need to use our tails day to day, so we learn all kinds of techniques for how to use them safely."

"I had no idea chipmunks could lose their tails," I said, surprised. "But say you were to lose your tail; would it really cause such big problems in your daily life?"

"Of course, it would," she replied. "We spend our whole childhood climbing up and down trees—a child without a tail would have a really hard time keeping their balance. It would have a big impact on their staff technique as well."

"As for adults, being tail-less can make it very difficult to find a mate and get married. Our tails are a very important part of our appearance. Of course, terrible accidents happen, but even if you lost your tail through no fault of your own...you're still very likely to be passed over," she explained, giving her head a small shake. "You can actually get an artificial tail made here in the Wilds—to us, it's almost like a prosthetic limb. But you can tell at a glance that it's not the real thing, so it still makes life very difficult on that front."

"I see," I said, trying to imagine what that must be like.

“As I mentioned before,” she continued, “there are some beastfolk who, through some cruel twist of fate or tainted bloodline, lose their ears and tails entirely as they grow to adulthood... I have no doubt that they suffer deeply as a result. Some of them, seeing how indistinguishable from humans they become, think about crossing the border to live on the outside. But the blood that flows through their veins, their very genes, are pure beastperson. It never works out.”

“So that’s how it is...” I replied, displeased to hear such a thing.

The cultural expectations seemed very harsh. I was surprised to hear they had that kind of...well, discrimination, to put it bluntly. The beastfolk were so varied in shape and appearance—a far more diverse population than that of Japan. I suppose you’ll find prejudice everywhere. But if a pure-blooded beastperson could be treated like that, then I could only imagine how thorny an issue mixed parentage must be. Techī had mentioned previously that beastfolk are vulnerable to a wider range of illnesses than humans and don’t have appropriate medicine, so no doubt that fed into it as well. Life in beastfolk society is no picnic, it seems.

Take Techī and the chipmunk clan, or Také and the other bears. They all possessed enviable physical abilities unmatched by any human. Yet, they were far from free to do what they pleased.

“Surely if you could at least develop some new medical solutions...” I protested, “Wouldn’t that make it easier to visit the outside world? It’d open up so many new possibilities for the beastfolk if you could come and go across the border.”

Techī simply shook her head with a defeated look on her face.

“Beastfolk can catch a wide range of diseases from both humans and animals,” she said. “Do you really think anybody out there is researching this stuff? Sure, they’ve done a few experiments, taken some blood samples. But you can’t imagine how much time and money it takes to make a medical breakthrough. No pharmaceutical company is willing to make that investment.

“Not only is the beastfolk population absurdly diverse, but every clan is relatively small. They’d need to come up with something different for everyone.

There's no way any medicine made for us will ever make money for anyone. You can't cheat the numbers. They're all unprofitable diseases."

Unprofitable diseases? Ah yes, now that I think about it, one of my former colleagues who'd lived abroad had used that term once. I think it was something about how pharmaceutical companies have little incentive to develop medicines for diseases that are only prevalent in Third World countries.

So, based on what Techii was saying, the reasons for the problem were mainly economic, and the beastfolk had no choice but to try to develop new medicines and research their diseases on their own. Apparently, they did have a research facility where they did just that, but a lack of funds, among other factors, was really holding them back.

There were beastfolk living all over the world, but they were all strictly segregated, much like this autonomous region in Japan, so there wasn't much scope for cooperation. What's more, they say that beastfolk in Japan are completely different from those found elsewhere. No doubt that only complicates things further.

"Well, it's a bit of a sore subject, so let's leave it at that," Techii said. "Besides, it's about time for Kon to go to bed."

Kon, his coat smooth and shiny from its thorough brushing, immediately threw himself down on the floor and started flailing around his arms and legs.

"Noooooooo!" he yowled. "I'm not sleepy yet! I wanna stay up with Mikura!"

Techii immediately pounced on him and started tickling his tummy. At first, he giggled and shrieked with joy...then gradually, Techii eased off on the tickling and started gently rubbing his little belly. She had him exactly where she wanted him. Kon's eyelids started fluttering as sleep overcame him...then finally, his eyes closed, and he was dead to the world, snoring quietly.

"He talks big, but he's still a kid," whispered Techii with a little smile. Then she gently picked the sleeping chipmunk up off the floor. She carried him in her arms out of the kitchen and through to the guest room at the east end of the house.

Techii and Kon slept in the guest room, while I slept in the master bedroom on

the opposite end of the house. *We are essentially different species, so I suppose it makes sense to make sure we all have our own space.*

Not that I'm suggesting we should be sharing a room. It's already a great honor to be able to lay eyes on someone so beautiful like Techii every day. It's something I think about frequently. My old office life, living by myself in my little apartment, was pretty lonely. These days, all I had to do was think of Techii, and that old loneliness simply evaporated. Things were pretty peachy for me here in the Wilds.

And so, I headed to bed myself, pondering what I might cook for everyone tomorrow. After all, there were so many great possibilities.

Growing Up

WITH another day in the books, five days remained until the end of our quarantine.

I was making breakfast when a man from the Japan Self Defense Force arrived. He was wearing a full-body protective suit, and he'd brought a number of cardboard boxes filled with supplies. Since we were unable to leave the house, even to go shopping, this was the only way we could get any provisions—be that food to eat or fresh clothes and other daily necessities for Kon and Tech.

This was the second day of these deliveries, so there were fewer boxes than last time. We already had most of what we needed, and besides...even if somebody tells you to order anything you want and that money's not an issue, one can't help but hold back out of common decency. Today's delivery was mostly fresh food to be used over the next few days—very much just the essentials.

The man placed the boxes on the veranda, I signed for the delivery, and then I handed him our order form for tomorrow. Once he was gone, I unpacked all the boxes and took their contents to the kitchen.

I washed my hands (who knows where those boxes had been!) and set about making breakfast.

I cut up the fresh greens, boiled them with bonito flakes and soy sauce, and divided it up into three servings on three small plates. Next, I made some miso soup, complete with dried seaweed and little cubes of tofu in each bowl. Lastly, I grilled three pieces of salmon and placed each one on its own dish.

"Good *maaawning*..." yawned Kon, his voice still heavy with sleep as he shuffled into the kitchen. Somehow, he managed to spring up onto the countertop, skipping deftly from drawer handle to drawer handle while still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He sat down in his little chair as usual. "Oh?"

he said, his eyes wide with surprise. “Today we’re having normal breakfast.”

Normal breakfast? I guess he meant a Japanese-style breakfast.

“Yeah,” I said, carrying on with the breakfast preparations. “I figured that if we just have Western food all the time, we’d quickly get tired of it. Besides, I felt like something a little more traditional today. Is there anything wrong with Japanese food?”

“Nuh-uh, there’s nothing wrong with it...” replied Kon. “It’s just...it’s sooooo *normal*!”

I laughed. “Well, if you really want Western food, I’ll make some for lunch or dinner, so hold on until then, okay? For now, eat your *normal* breakfast.”

“Okay!” Kon shouted.

The next person to shuffle sleepily into the room was, of course, Tech. She tottered unsteadily across the threshold with a very impressive head of bed hair.

“Kon, you little scamp, there you are!” she exclaimed. “What about your morning shower?”

“Whaaat?! Nooooo, I don’t hafta!” he whined in protest, flailing his arms about. “I already had a bath yesterday! Bathing in the morning is yucky!”

But all his wriggling did little to dissuade Tech, who simply picked him up and carried him toward the bathroom.

Tech firmly believed that the secret to beautiful and sleek fur was a shower every morning, a soak in the bath every evening, and an extra shower on exercise days. Of course, it went without saying that after washing it was very important to carefully brush down your fur afterward. Kon wasn’t interested in this level of care, but as they were now sharing a room, he found himself dragged into her personal beauty routine against his will.

Personally, since the clammy summer weather was still a ways off, I didn’t see the need to shower multiple times a day. But I knew diddly-squat about the ins and outs of grooming one’s fur, so I doubted my opinion would be very welcome if I shared it. I set the table for breakfast instead.

I could hear Kon's squeals coming from the bathroom as I arranged all the plates and dishes on the low table in the living room. I filled three bowls with freshly cooked rice and poured three glasses of milk. When everything was ready, I shouted down the corridor.

"Breakfast's ready!"

I could hear the pitter-patter of Kon's feet as he ran back into the room, glistening, and he immediately slipped onto a floor cushion. Techii was right behind him. Kon must've fled mid-brushing, because she was still holding a comb. Techii sat down on the cushion next to Kon's and finished combing his tail.

"Thank you for the food!" we all said in unison, putting our hands together, and set about enjoying our breakfast.

We had plenty of time and no need to hurry, so we were able to savor all the different flavors one by one, chopsticks moving from dish to dish. After the food was eaten, it was time to put the kettle on, hop to the bathroom to brush our teeth, and then return to the living room to enjoy some freshly brewed green tea together.

"Hmm...what shall we do today?" I mused as the three of us sipped our drinks.

No sooner had I said this than the phone rang. It was a bulky, old-fashioned unit with a fax machine built in, and it lived on its own cabinet in the living room. I was somewhat surprised that someone would choose to place a call to this relic instead of my smartphone. I picked up the receiver and pressed it to my ear.

"Hello?" I asked with genuine curiosity.

The voice on the other end was extremely loud, with a thick accent and a harsh tone. I couldn't make heads or tails of what they were trying to say. I quickly moved the receiver away from my head with something of a grimace on my face. Seeing this, Techii immediately stood up and motioned to me to hand over the phone.

Her instincts were right on the money. The voice sounded like it belonged to a

middle-aged man, and I could just about make out the name Tokatechi being repeated over and over amid the torrent of incomprehensible speech. I nodded politely and handed the handset to Tech.

“...Yeah, it’s me,” she said. “Yeah, that’s right... No, it’s none of your business, and I definitely don’t want to hear *that* coming from you... Let me be clear. Stop sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong, and don’t go around callin’ other people’s houses just to talk to me... If that’s all you have to say, then this conversation is over. Thanks for calling.”

The way she talked was somewhere between cold and detached, like she didn’t want to show her true feelings. I might call it businesslike...except that even in the business world, you always had to keep things cordial if you wanted to seal the deal. Tech’s tone, however, was so incredibly distant, it was like she was pushing away with both hands. *I want nothing to do with you. Don’t come any closer.*

She put the phone down.

“...Someone you know, Miss Tech?” I ventured to ask her as we returned to our cushions and picked up our teacups.

“Yeah...” she grunted with a nod. “That was my uncle. He’s an old-fashioned old fart, and his head is packed full of ridiculous, outdated ideas. Like, he believes that when a girl grows up, she should be married off right away, or that women shouldn’t have jobs. But that’s far from the end of it. Take something as normal as reading—I’ve even heard him say that ‘girls shouldn’t bother themselves with books.’

“If he’d made something of himself, I might be able to show him some respect. But ever since he first shed his fur, he’s taken it easy, never found a proper job, never married... He thinks he can tell everyone else how to live their lives. But he has no right to be telling anyone anything.”

It seemed her uncle was far from the only member of beastfolk society to end up in this kind of position. When beastfolk are children, still in their animal forms and with their animal abilities, they work hard and enthusiastically, often trying to outperform the other kids. But when the time comes to go to school, when they start growing up into their human-like form and losing their abilities,

if they can't keep up with their studies, then they're left with nothing. They lack skills and knowledge and are unable to contribute to society. All the good job opportunities pass them by, and eventually, they lose all their drive and ambition.

Of course, there are special programs to get people work. Or they can help out with their family business. On paper, there should be plenty of work to go around. But excuses abound: *That's not a job, that's a handout. That's not a career I can be proud of. That's a woman's job.*

So, in the end, they conclude it's better to do nothing.

"As a little kid, my uncle was a powerhouse. Always helping out, always making himself useful. Later in life, unable to live up to that reputation, his pride got in the way," Techii explained. "There are good options out there. You can study for an occupation or start your own business. But I guess my uncle could never handle any of that."

Techii looked out into the garden. She stared at the sky, stretching into the distance with an inscrutable look on her face.

"Gosh..." I offered weakly. "You lose your animal form...and life gets tough, huh?"

I glanced over at Kon. He had drained his teacup and beamed at me with a proud grin.

"Don't ya worry!" he declared. "Techii makes sure I learn lots! When I grow up, I'm gonna be juuust fine!"

This broke Techii out of her reverie, and she turned back to face Kon with a warm smile. She stroked his head tenderly.

"That's right," Techii agreed. "Kon's well ahead of the game! He solves all the math problems and copies down all the kanji I give him to study. He's real quick about it too, aren't you, Kon?"

She then took his face between both hands and started rubbing his cheeks affectionately. As I watched them playing around, I found myself wondering if perhaps Techii was spurred on by her uncle's inaction. I reckoned that she had decided to become a teacher precisely to make sure as few young beastfolk as

possible ended up like him.

“That old fart... I spend a few nights in a man’s house, and he’s all ‘chastity this’ and ‘virtue that,’” Techī suddenly let her thoughts slip, muttering under her breath. “Get a clue! Besides, Mikura’s human. Humans don’t see beastfolk in that way...”

“*KHOFF!*”

At that very moment, I choked on my tea. It wasn’t a full-on spit-take, but some of the tea did go up my nose, resulting in a horrible burning sensation searing through my head.

Techī turned to me, noticing my discomfort, and peered at me with a beady squint, her eyes half closed. She had essentially said, “Mikura has no romantic interest in beastfolk,” and I had reacted with violent and unmistakable clarity.

The atmosphere was starting to get really weird. Techī continued to look at me with those suspicious eyes, Kon was eagerly waiting for what would happen next, and I was beating my chest, trying not to asphyxiate.

Nobody said anything. Time passed.

Should I be the first to break the silence, or should I wait for Techī to say something? This foolish question circled around in my head, pushing out all other thoughts. I couldn’t string two words together to come up with something to say.

Finally, Techī spoke up, her words mixed with a deep sigh.

“Look, even if you fancied a beastperson and managed to start a relationship, that’s hardly the end of the story. You can forget about marriage and children...*especially* since I’m a woman. *Beast blood* is passed down the female line, so any child I have would be a beastperson too. They’d never be able live in the outside world.”

Techī correctly surmised that I was clueless on the subject, so she started at square one.

This lineage through the female line didn’t just apply to relationships between humans and beastfolk, but to marriages between different beastfolk clans as

well. No matter what the combination of parents was, the child of such a union was always, without exception, born with the blood of the mother's clan.

For example, if a male member of the bear clan were to marry a female member of the chipmunk clan, the child would always be a chipmunk. Every time. The opposite scenario—that the chipmunk mother should give birth to a bear child—had never, *ever* happened.

That was not to say that the child wouldn't inherit any of the father's genes. The child's face, personality, build, and constitution were all passed down from both parents as normal. But this phenomenon of species following the female line didn't fit modern science's genetic model, so this idea of *beast blood* was hypothesized—completely distinct from genetics—in an attempt to try and explain it.

“...In the distant past—and we're talking ancient history here—it was known for humans and beastfolk to marry and have children. But it caused problems—especially when it came to human society,” Techii continued schooling me.

“In those days, the most troubling issues were marriages between male beastfolk and female humans. The children of such a union were always born with a human form, so the first generation was just fine. The problem arose when a female human gave birth to a girl, who then grew up to have children of her own. For some reason, if this daughter married a human male, there was a chance that, despite having two human parents, their child would be born a beastchild. This sort of “generational jump” has never happened in a marriage between beastfolk clans.

“Why would that happen? Because she was only half human? On the surface, she looks like any other human woman. But the child she gives birth to is covered in thick fur. The humans didn't like this one bit. Filled with loathing and disgust, they bickered and fought, with some people going as far as to hunt down and murder these poor children.

“The humans despised us beastfolk for bringing them these cursed offspring, while the beastfolk came to hate the humans even more for killing their innocent children. Our peoples grew distant, even going to war against each other. Today, the border gate at the entry to the Wilds still stands as a

testament to that history,” she concluded.

I had never heard of any of this before, out in the human world. I could barely mutter an acknowledgment of what Techī had said. My eyes were drawn straight to Kon, sitting at my side and watching me. I felt a look of worry on my face, but when I saw him looking at me, I put on a smile instead. I pet his head, ruffling his fur playfully.

“That may be... But as far as I’m concerned, I’d still love to have a cute little kid like Kon,” I said matter-of-factly.

I suppose the island of Japan has always been small and cramped. Maybe that was the reason for all this hate? Why would anyone want to kill such a miraculous, wonderful little creature? Whatever the customs and values might’ve been at the time, that level of discrimination was simply brutal... although I’m sure nobody was thinking about it in those terms back then.

Considering the alternative... What if humans *had* accepted the beastfolk? What if they *had* welcomed these cute little beastchildren into their lives? Society would look very different right now. What wondrous developments might we have made with access to the strength and skills of the beastfolk? I could only feel regret for all the missed opportunities...

As these thoughts ran through my mind, I continued to ruffle Kon’s fur. He was getting very excited, making all sorts of funny sounds, no doubt delighted at having his head scratched. I looked down at him again, and thought to myself once more how stupidly cute he is. But something wasn’t right with Techī.

“...What...think...saying...stupid...” she mumbled in a strange, disjointed voice. I couldn’t even make out all the words—they seemed to be getting caught on the way out of her mouth or perhaps slipping out against her will.

I looked up from Kon and turned to look at her. As soon as I did, she went bright red and immediately covered her mouth with her hands.

What on earth was going on? I tilted my head to one side in confusion, and as I did so, Kon wriggled out from under my hand and leaped onto the living room table. He spread his arms wide above his head.

“Congratulations on getting engaged!” Kon shouted at the top of his little

lungs.



He looked back and forth from me to Techī, both arms still in the air, his eyes glistening with expectation as he waited for a reaction. He looked like he might genuinely explode.

...Engaged?

Who's getting engaged?

.....

...Surely, he didn't mean Techī and me?

.....

WHY?

...What...what exactly did I just say?

I only said that it would be nice to have a child like Kon...right?

I tried to maintain my composure as my blood pressure steadily rose.

Take a deep breath, Mikura. Calm down.

I looked over at Techī again. Her face was still completely red, and she turned her head away in a flash to avoid making eye contact.

Surely...expressing a desire to have children...was not how beastfolk proposed to each other?

...Right?

Only a moment ago, Techī had said, plain as day, that marriage was out of the question... And all I said was that I'd be very pleased if I could have a child like Kon...

No way...

Did I really just propose to her?!

My mind was gripped with panic and my world was being flipped upside down. I had no idea what I could possibly say in this situation. I was truly and utterly speechless.

Kon also stood there silently, eyes glittering, waiting to see how the situation would develop and what we'd say next.

Techi didn't say a word. Her brightly flushed face wasn't getting any paler.

...I don't know how long we were all rooted to the spot like that, but time passed *very* slowly.

At long last, Techi broke the silence.

"...I think I see now," she began. "Your situation's different from Tomiyasu's, isn't it? He found a mate in the outside world, before he moved to the Wilds. But you have no choice but to look for a mate here in the forest... I doubt anyone from out there would decide to move to the Wilds just to court you. So, you were prepared for this right from the very beginning..."

Techi's conclusions came hard and fast.

You've got it all wrong! I didn't put any thought into any of that when I was moving here. All I've thought about these past few months was taking over Great-Grandpa's orchard!

If you pressed me on what I thought about Techi, sure—I think she's a lovely person and a beautiful young woman. Her being a beastperson really doesn't bother me, and that's the honest truth. And if I could marry her, I imagine it'd probably make me happy. But I seriously, genuinely hadn't considered it before now.

Obviously, Techi was oblivious to these thoughts rattling around in my head. *Should I say something? Should I put them out there?* Once again, I didn't know what to do. I just sat there like a lemon, utterly baffled.

Techi, meanwhile, appeared to have made up her mind about something. She turned to face me dead on and sat up perfectly straight.

"I accept," said Techi, with a firm, decisive nod.

"Yippee!" Kon immediately leaped off the table and started bouncing around the room like a firecracker.



"CUP noodles and canned goods are both common examples of preserved foods. The same goes for food sold in these retort pouches, like pouch curry. But making these at home presents a number of challenges. Besides, if you buy

them, they tend to be cheaper, safer, and tastier, so there's little reason to make all that effort yourself.

"That said, I've definitely been tempted to make my own canned food. But getting all the necessary gear together is *not* easy. This nut mix on the other hand is a quicky to make yourself. All you need to do is roast some nuts, and you're pretty much done. Almonds are a good choice, or the walnuts that we grow in the orchard—both have been preserved in this way since ancient times. If done properly, they keep really well. They were indispensable on long journeys back then, and were a favorite of traveling merchants."

I was explaining all this as I unpacked the cardboard boxes that had been delivered that morning, taking out the food items one by one. With a pitter-patter of feet, Kon ran up to the box I was working on and lightly jumped inside, forcing himself directly into my line of sight. He stared up at my face with a discerning squint.

"Mikura..." he said, full of suspicion. "Are you trying to avoid the subject?"

I paused my tidying for a moment and stared right back at him.

"...N-Not at all," I objected. "It's just that Tech's been on the phone for a while now, telling her parents the, um, good news. I don't want to get in the way, so I'm clearing away the food delivery. That's all."

"You *suuure* about that?" Kon pressed further. "Y'know...you don't *look* very happy... You're gonna marry *Techi*! You should be *super-duper* excited!"

"Out of the mouths of babes..." I muttered to myself. "Kon, you say some incredible things sometimes, you know that? How old are you again? You're sharp beyond your years. Maybe it's because you started working at such a young age. I wonder if all beastchildren are as smart as you..."

"Don't change the subject!" he countered.

"Okay, okay," I conceded. "To tell you the truth, I was surprised at first. I'm still reeling. I can't figure out exactly how I feel. If I really didn't want to go ahead with it, I think I'd know that, deep down...you know? If that were the case, I would've said so, even though I'd have a hell of a misunderstanding to clear up...so I guess for now I'm just assuming that some part of me is for it."

“As Techii implied, finding a good partner here in the Wilds would’ve been a real challenge. So, getting to be with someone as wonderful...not to mention as beautiful as Techii, moving through life together and giving it our all... You’re right. It very much is something to be happy about,” I nodded.

“What I’m *not* comfortable with is how fast this is all moving. I’m still trying to figure out exactly what is going on and how I feel about it, whereas Techii is already calling her parents to tell them all about our engagement. I really don’t think I should be introducing myself to them just yet... Basically, I thought I might be able to clear my head a bit and sort through my thoughts by sorting out these boxes.”

“Oh boy...” said Kon. “Is it working?”

“I’ll let you know...”

While we were having this discussion, Techii was right next door, sitting on the floor, barely a few feet behind us. Her tail swished back and forth in a big arc as she talked on the phone, twirling the phone cord around her fingers. The joy in her voice was palpable as she passed on the news of her engagement. She was *unbelievably* happy... But listening to her sitting there and spelling out all the details, talking all about me, was simply *excruciating*. It felt like I was lying on a bed of nails. I couldn’t stand it.

But there was nothing I could do, short of fleeing. She’d asked me to stay within earshot so she could pass me the phone when she was done. I guess I had no choice but to sit there patiently as she reeled off an unending string of compliments over the phone.

“I haven’t seen Techii this happy in a long time,” Kon confessed. “So don’t you go doin’ anything that’ll make her sad.”

“Seriously Kon, how *old* are you?” I asked with disbelief. “Of course, I’m also happy to see Techii so happy...and as her fiancé, I’ll do my best to keep her that way.” I paused a moment, before addressing something else he said that caught my attention. “...You say it’s been a long time since you saw her *this* happy. Did something happen to her?”

Kon looked completely shell-shocked at the question, eyes full of concern, mouth slightly ajar. He ran up my back, sat on my shoulder, and grabbed my

head firmly with both hands before he felt he could answer.

“Techi hasn’t been very happy ever since Grampa Tommi died,” he whispered directly into my ear. “Grampa Tommi was nice to everyone—he kinda felt like everyone’s grampa, y’know? But Techi’s been helping out on this orchard for a long time. So, I think she loved Grampa more than anyone. We all loved him too, obviously! But he only died a little while after I met him, so it wasn’t that big of a shock. I think it was a really big deal for Techi and Rei. They were very sad for a long time.”

If Kon was to be believed, Techi was always smiling when she was with Great-Grandpa. She was full of laughter, sometimes laughing so hard that she’d be slapping the table to let it all out. She sounded like a completely different person to the Techi I knew. I suppose that fact alone showed just how much Gramps must’ve meant to her. And if she loved Great-Grandpa as much as that, I imagine she must love this house and orchard almost as much. She hadn’t needed to give the engagement very much thought! I wondered to what extent her love for this place might’ve factored into it.

Ultimately, Techi and I had still only just met, and we hardly knew anything about each other. Who am I to her? The man who was inheriting the house she had known since she was young? That could be part of it. Techi’s kindness toward me, how well we got on, *her saying yes*—perhaps I had Gramps to thank for all of it.

Now that I thought about it, Rei had also shown me great kindness and generosity, despite it being our first meeting...despite me being human. Was that Great-Grandpa’s influence as well?

...And then it hit me.

Kon said Techi had known Great-Grandpa since she was a kid, right? Working the orchard... So...how old was she at the time? How many years ago was that?

As a kid, I would come to this house every summer to visit Gramps. I stayed here all summer long... Who exactly was looking after the orchard then? Was it being worked on by chipmunk beastchildren like it is now?

If that was the case, why didn’t I meet any beastfolk back then?

Great-Grandpa told me not to go up to the orchard, but I'd definitely snuck out a couple of times behind his back.

Now that I think about it...what did the orchard look like back then?

...I couldn't recall.

How many years had it been? Talk about an ancient memory.

...Then again, I remembered plenty about the house, the warehouse...and the Great Disaster, that goes without saying. I remembered it all quite clearly, in fact. Yet, I couldn't remember anything about the orchard in any real, vivid detail.

In fact—and please forgive me for saying this, Gramps—how exactly did I spend my summers out here, in this old house in the middle of nowhere? The summer holidays were over a month long. *What exactly did I do every day?*

Was I really running around all summer long, chasing bugs by myself like a fool?

I concentrated hard. I dug really deep, trying to force some memory to the surface...but nothing came. I started to wonder if my parents might still have my elementary school notebooks in a box somewhere. *We always had to keep picture diaries and the like during the summer holidays—maybe they might help me solve this mystery.*

While I was completely lost in my thoughts, Kon nudged me back to my senses.

"Mikura, I think Tech's almost done with the phone," he told me.

Returning to reality, I wondered how Tech's phone call had gone. I nervously turned my head to look at Tech, my heart threatening to pound right out of my chest. Now that she was done explaining everything, I was ready to take the receiver from her and officially introduce myself to her parents. But, to my surprise, she ended the call instead, replacing the handset with a click.

It seemed I'd worked myself up for nothing—I wasn't sure whether to feel disappointed or relieved as Tech turned to face me.

"My parents are fine with waiting 'til our quarantine's over for you to meet

them,” she said with a tender look, her cheeks still slightly flushed. “Well, it’s hardly the height of politeness to introduce yourself over the phone when you live just ’round the corner. They send their best wishes, by the way.”

I was overcome with a peculiar mix of nervousness and embarrassment and scratched the back of my head as I replied, “Right. So, I guess we wait?”

With that, Tech and I both fell silent. Kon seemed to be enjoying himself, standing in between us, looking from one to the other. He put his paw to his mouth as he giggled under his breath. When we heard this, it only made it all the harder to say anything. We nervously avoided each other’s gaze, both of us clearly restless, and the situation only got more and more awkward.

Thankfully, I was rescued by my phone buzzing in my pocket, shortly followed by a loud ringtone. I wondered who it might be as I took it out. Rei’s name was displayed on the screen. I’d almost forgotten that we’d exchanged numbers.

I answered the call and was immediately met with a loud bellow of laughter from the other end.

“Bwahahahaha! Seriously, good job, buddy! I’ve gotta hand it to you, I’m very impressed that you managed to melt my sister’s cold heart in just these few short weeks. You don’t mess around, do you? Skipping right over dating and straight to the proposal! I wish I had your luck with women! Anyway, I just wanted to call and congratulate you. We’re brothers-in-law now! Or soon to be, anyway! Make sure you treat her well, bro!”

“Of course,” I replied. “I’m honored to be joining your family.”

Rei seemed to like that response—the voice coming from my phone grew even louder.

“Well then, you should go ahead and start calling me brother! The wedding may still be a ways away, but knowing my sister, if you’ve proposed, then you may as well be married already! Call her what you will—serious, formal, old-fashioned, whatever—but sometimes she can be like a runaway train, y’know? She’ll follow an idea through right to the end of the line. It’s too late for you to get off now, so I hope you’re prepared!”

“H-Haha,” I laughed nervously. “I wasn’t planning on getting off this train,

thank you very much. Once we can leave the house again, I'll come by and visit you all in person."

"We look forward to it!" Rei exclaimed. "Let me give you some brotherly advice. Our parents are overjoyed. Even though they're not done with work for the day, they're already deciding what gourmet sushi to order for when you come to visit. They keep saying 'young Mikura, *what a relief*.' I haven't heard a peep of disapproval; they're in very high spirits. When you come by, rest assured, you can come with a smile. No need to be nervous about getting their blessing; you're a shoo-in. So take it easy until then, brother!"

"Th-Thanks for the heads up," I replied. But one detail he'd mentioned caught my attention—there was something odd about it. "Say...why did your parents call me young Mi—?"

Before I finished my question, I noticed that Techii was standing in front of me, completely red in the face and bristling. She gave me a terrifying look...or rather, she fixed her angry gaze on the smartphone pressed to my ear. Which is to say, her anger was directed at her brother on the other end of the line.

She must've heard everything he'd been shouting about with those sensitive chipmunk ears of hers. With one quick swipe of her arm, my phone was ripped from my grasp and now in hers. Without missing a beat, she started hurling abuse at Rei over the phone.

However, her tone was softer than usual, almost childlike. It occurred to me that this must be a side of herself that she only ever showed in front of Rei...in front of her family. I guess that made it her true character; her true self.

She yelled and squabbled, huffed and puffed, and generally gave him a piece of her mind, pulling faces all the while. And on the other side of the call, I could just about make out Rei's laughter, which carried on pretty much throughout the whole tirade. It seemed like Rei was especially amused by Techii's extreme reaction because it was so obvious she was trying to hide her embarrassment. He was clearly very happy for his little sister's good fortune.

Techii couldn't take his ridiculous guffaws anymore, though, and dramatically jammed her finger on the end call button with a frenzied look in her eyes. For one moment, it looked like she was going to hurl my phone out into the garden,

but the next moment she managed to regain her senses and gently placed it back in my hands. Then she stomped off toward the bathroom.

“I’m off to do the laundry!” she shouted without even a glance back. All we could hear after that was the aggressive rustling of clothes as she wrestled them into the washing machine.

It seemed like she wanted to put off the awkward conversation that awaited us as much as I did. Nothing like a few household chores to calm the old nerves. I let out a deep sigh, releasing some of my own pent-up agitation, and turned my attention back to the cardboard boxes on the veranda.

Kon, who had witnessed the entire exchange, tried to hide the grin on his face by puffing up his cheeks in that chipmunky way of his, and he set about helping me clear everything away.

“What is it Kon?” I asked with some awkwardness as I unpacked the first box. “You got something you wanna say?”

Kon let the air out of his cheeks with a puff, shut his eyes, and gave me his signature smile. “Only congratulations!” he said cheerfully, repeating his good wishes.

“Oh...thanks,” I replied.

Kon made off with the packets of sweet treats, swiftly putting them in their rightful place on the sweets shelf, followed by the cup noodles, which he carried off to one of the kitchen cabinets.

Finally, I heard the noise of the washing machine starting up, followed by the stomp of Techī’s feet as she hurried off to her next task. She grabbed a selection of cleaning supplies and started wiping down the windows and sweeping up dust around the house.

Techī had stayed at my house a few times, and then of course we had the quarantine, but before this point, she had only ever done the bare minimum to help out—the odd chore here and there, keeping the guest room clean, washing her own clothes. Not once had she done something like sweep the whole house. Now she was giving it everything she had.

I wonder...does this mean she now feels like this place is her home?

I stood there, dumbfounded, captivated by the spectacle of Techii cleaning. Then Kon gave my pants leg an insistent tug, and I was back on planet Earth, ready to help. Kon and I went to the storage closet to grab the vacuum cleaner. It wouldn't be right to leave all the work to Techii.

Going Steady at the Ready

WHAT started out as a bit of tidying up on a whim somehow turned into a thorough cleaning of the entire house. It wasn't until a little after midday that we finally stopped cleaning and gathered around the living room table to eat a simple meal of chilled soba noodles.

The garnish was nothing fancy—just spring onions and wasabi squeezed from the tube. To be honest, it was a bit miserly as far as lunches go, but we'd been rushing about all morning, so it couldn't be helped. The soba and the dipping sauce were the kind you could buy at any supermarket, so the flavor was perfectly ordinary, but eating it alongside Kon and Techii did improve the taste. Kon was grinning throughout the meal, and Techii appeared content as well. I'd made a little too much, but that didn't seem to matter, it all disappeared in no time.

Once we were done with the food, we took some time to wash everything down with tea, cleared the table, brushed our teeth, and reconvened on the cushions in the living room. After our hectic morning, we switched on the TV and eased into a quieter, slower afternoon.

Once we'd all settled and relaxed a bit, Techii began a conversation.

"You know all that food you've been preserving with Kon?" she ventured. "Next time...from now on, I want to join in. I want to get to know this hobby of yours a bit better, Mikura."

Before I even had a chance to respond, Kon was already grinning from ear to ear, his eyes firmly shut. Clearly, he was looking forward to that.

"Yeah, of course," I replied. "No problem at all. Looks like Kon's very happy about it, and I am too. That said, I don't have any plans to preserve anything right now. I can't leave the house to get ingredients because of the quarantine, and it'd be quite bold of me to ask the JSDF folks to buy us nonessential groceries for my hobby."

“...I don’t think you need to worry about them,” Techī responded, a hint of disappointment on her face. “If you do, we won’t get to make anything for a while...”

“Hmmm...” I pondered, trying to come up with an alternative. “I know. Let’s do something with the ingredients we have on hand... How about we make biscuits?”

Techī and Kon were both incredulous, as if I were trying to change the subject.

“No, I’m serious!” I protested. “Biscuits are a great example of preserved food! They have plenty of calories and keep very well, not to mention being easy to carry around—hard-baked biscuits have been a mainstay of travel for a very long time. As long as they are eaten with water or some other beverage, they make great travel rations. Even when you buy biscuits at the supermarket, the expiration dates are usually months, if not years, away. And even if they get a bit soggy or stale, they don’t tend to become moldy or taste off as such.”

As I explained this, Techī and Kon’s expressions turned from suspicion to curiosity. It looked like they were on board. Once the project was decided, we all got up and relocated to the kitchen to prepare everything. Once hands were thoroughly washed and aprons donned, I laid out some baking sheets for making confectionery that I had previously ordered online.

The ingredients for making biscuits are very straightforward: wheat flour, milk, butter, and sugar. Additionally, you’ll need a rolling pin to roll out the dough, and it’s nice to have a selection of cookie cutters in different shapes.

As I was preparing everything, Kon piped up from his little chair. “Mikura, Mikura, what’s the difference between biscuits and cookies?” he asked.

Perhaps Kon had seen cookies being made before, to ask such a question when he saw all these baking supplies being laid out.

“Hmm, I don’t think there’s much of a difference, actually,” I answered. “Originally, I think they were called biscuits in England and cookies in America, but maybe the recipes changed over time. Based on what’s on sale here in Japan though, I’d say that cookies tend to be made with more fat and sugar? If you’re making them yourself though, I say you should call them whatever you like. As for extras like fruit or nuts or chocolate, they’re all used in both cookies

and biscuits, so that makes no difference.”

Once our workspace was ready, I grabbed a baking tray and placed it into the oven. No need to preheat the oven just yet—there were still a few things to be done before we started baking.

“By the way,” I asked, “Shall we make plain biscuits today? Or would you rather add something like nuts? I also have some dried fruit that I bought. We could try cutting those up into small pieces, that might be good too. If you add too many extras, the biscuits won’t keep as well...but I guess we’re not looking to make something that’ll keep forever. No need to worry about it.”

Kon’s radiant smile was full of wonder, as if he couldn’t decide what he liked the sound of more. After some intense deliberation, he darted across the floor to a kitchen cabinet and started rummaging around for the dried fruit. As might be expected from someone who regularly helped clear away the groceries, he had no trouble finding them—he seemed to know the kitchen like the back of his hand. *Especially* where I kept all his favorite foods, like nuts and dried fruits. Once he found what he wanted, he bravely started to wrestle the bags out of the cabinet.

“Mikura, is it possible to make biscuits with chestnuts?” Techichi asked. “If so, I’d like to make some...”

“I mean, sure, of course it’s *possible*...” I replied, tilting my head. “But it’s the wrong season for chestnuts. I don’t know how we’d get our hands on any. Maybe we could get some boiled ones, but I think we’d have to desiccate them before we could use them...”

“Hold that thought,” she interrupted me.

Techichi grabbed the large rice bin standing on the kitchen floor and slid it to one side. The bin was standing on a piece of embroidered cloth, which she turned up at the corner, revealing what looked like a small trap door. Lifting the door (which turned out to be a lid), she revealed a small storage space. I had no idea we had any under-floor storage in the kitchen.

Techichi reached inside and took out a pair of very fine-quality black lacquer boxes. She placed them both on the kitchen counter, closed the hidden storage space, and slid the rice bin back into place.

“...What do we have here?” I asked, resisting the temptation to simply open them myself. Without a word, Techii lifted the lids of the boxes. Inside each was a handmade packet crafted from Japanese paper, tied up with cord. She undid the knots so I could peer inside. “Ah! Dried *kachiguri* and *hiraguri* chestnuts,” I muttered to myself.

These were two of the kinds of preserved chestnuts that Rei had mentioned before. Simply put, *kachiguri* were whole chestnuts dried out by roasting them over a fire, while *hiraguri* were made the same way, only then broken up into pieces and ground into a powder.

The phrase “dried chestnuts” could also be written using the Japanese character for “victory,” so they were also known as *victory chestnuts*, and frequently used as a good luck talisman. Add to this the fact they keep so well and are so pocketable, you can see why they have maintained popularity as army rations through the ages—they were often sent as gifts to soldiers on the front line or eaten as a ritual before a battle.

“Tomiyasu used to say dried chestnuts were good luck, so he always made some after every harvest and stored them in these lacquer boxes,” Techii explained. “I think it was like a token of his gratitude to the chestnut trees that were his livelihood, and also a sort of protective charm that was meant to keep the house safe. Of course, they weren’t just for show. After a while, they were very much meant to be eaten. And I think this final batch should be eaten sooner rather than later.

“So, I think it would be a good idea to use these, and to put a few biscuits on the house altar as an offering. It’ll be a way for us to send Tomiyasu news of our engagement. We have to thank him for bringing us together.”

Techii looked at me with a warm smile, and I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Yeah. Chestnut biscuits it is,” I said with a reassuring nod.

Unlike smoked or pickled foods, making biscuits is a pretty straightforward process without any real pitfalls. There’s no raw meat, so there’s no need to worry about bacteria and food poisoning, nor is there any chance of mold contamination. There are really only three simple steps:

1. *Mix all the ingredients according to the recipe.*

2. Roll the dough out fairly thinly so that the biscuits bake properly.

3. Pop them in the oven and make sure they don't burn.

Short of utter disregard for the three steps above, it's hard for things to go wrong, and the final product tends to be edible regardless. Even if you do mess up, the biscuits can always be broken up into pieces and added to milk or yogurt to make a simple, impromptu dessert.

Making biscuits and cookies is very hassle-free, and so easy that even a child can do it. In fact, they often do—with a helping hand from their parents, of course.

So why was Kon sitting in his chair, as usual, watching but not baking?

The reason, sad as it sounds...was his fur coat.

Like any other furry animal, Kon's fur was constantly growing, and that meant he was also constantly shedding. It was perfectly normal for us to find chipmunk hair lying around the house, and that meant he had to be kept away from the biscuits while they were being made. He certainly couldn't touch the dough himself, or furry biscuits were guaranteed.

Well, Kon was far from the first beastchild to be told to wait until he was older before he could join in the fun. In beastfolk society, it seemed that cooking and baking were only for grown-ups. It was pure common sense, and never questioned—not even the most selfish child would whine that they didn't get to join in with the baking, and no wonder. If you've ever found a hair in a mouthful of your food, you know exactly why. Even if it turns out to be one of your own, it's rarely any consolation.

Techi and I discussed this at length before we started, but Kon, bless his little heart, simply smiled and said, "I like watching! I don't mind!"

No whining, no selfish complaints, no pranks, or mischief. He just sat down and patiently observed what we were doing. Hard to believe any child could be so well-behaved. I wondered if beastchildren developed faster than humans. When I was his age, I was a real terror. No matter how much I was told to behave or how much I was getting in the way, I could never resist a good prank myself.

I was moved by this young chipmunk's model behavior, and was all the more fired up to make a success of today's baking. Good boys deserve fine biscuits.

Kon had picked out several dried fruits, namely orange, lemon, and apple. I figured we'd be fine mixing them straight into the dough. Apples and oranges have strong flavors, so they should survive the full bake just fine.

When making enriched dough, the approach varies depending on your extra ingredients. Some fruit should only be added as a topping after the bake is done—delicate fruit can lose all their flavor from the high heat in the oven. It's also possible to make a filling, for example, by mixing fruit and cream, and sandwiching a layer of it between a pair of lightly baked biscuits.

As for the dried chestnuts...eh, they'll be fine to mix straight into a batch of dough as well. The *kachiguri* would be best chopped up into small chunks to serve as a bit of an accent, while the *hiraguri*...well, the *hiraguri* is already ground up quite finely, so we could just make a batch of dough with a bit less flour and mix it all in there.

We also had to decide on what biscuit cutters to use for each flavor. In the end, we chose circles for the orange dough, triangles for the lemon, and squares for the apple. That way, we could tell what was in each biscuit by the shape alone. Finally, the *kachiguri* biscuits were chestnut-shaped, while we chose a star shape for the *hiraguri*, since chestnuts are spiky before you peel off their burrs.

Once these important decisions were made, Tech and I got to work on the biscuit dough—mixing, kneading, rolling, kneading again. Part way through, we preheated the oven, and once the dough was ready and cut up, we gently brushed down the parchment paper with butter, laid out the biscuits, and arranged everything on the oven shelf.



Some people like to add a pattern or a texture to their biscuits, or poke holes in the surface with a fork, but since we'd added all sorts of extra ingredients to ours, I preferred not to experiment with anything else on this occasion.

Now that everything was in place, all we had to do was wait...and keep a watchful eye on the oven, of course, to avoid any charcoal surprises.

As we cleaned the countertop, Kon kept trying to peek into the oven. There was a rack in the kitchen that was just the right height for such observations, so I set it up by the oven door and placed Kon's little chair on top of it. I gave the combined structure a firm shake to make sure it was secure enough that our young chipmunk friend wouldn't come tumbling down, and I left him to it.

As I returned to cleaning up, Kon started singing a song to himself. "Are they finished? Are they done? Fruity biscuits in my tum-tum!"

It sounded like he'd pinched the melody from a popular TV commercial, which he sang with a cheerful, upbeat rhythm. His voice was full of joyful expectation, and his tail swung back and forth in rhythm to the music. He also nodded his head from side to side, singing his little song over and over again.

It wasn't half bad for something thought up by a kid—it certainly didn't grate on the ears. As one might expect from a familiar advertising jingle, it had a contagious nature, and I found myself humming along without even realizing it as I continued to clean. Then I suddenly caught myself doing it...and became painfully aware that Techii was standing right next to me...

I'd been careless. I'd forgotten where I was. Up until now, it had only ever been Kon and me cooking together... I'd been bewitched by his absurd cuteness!

Excuses ran through my head as I stood there, frozen, the notes stuck in my throat. Techii was putting the bag of flour back on the shelf. I looked at her nervously.

She turned to look at me too, unable to hold back a smug grin. I immediately had to break eye contact and force all my focus onto the task at hand. I tried to ignore Techii as she burst out laughing behind me—all that mattered right now was the cleaning... Then the oven timer went off, signaling five minutes left until

our biscuits were done.

I peered in through the glass window on the oven door to make sure they were coming along nicely and nothing was burning. Then I prepared the plates while we waited for the last 5 minutes to be up. When they were ready, I opened the oven door and donned my oven mitts. I carefully took out the whole oven rack and placed it on the kitchen table.

Gently I touched one of the biscuits to make sure it hadn't stuck to the parchment paper. *Good. Now we have to wait for them to cool off...except it seems not all of us want to.* As soon as the biscuits were down, Kon skillfully leaped from the rack where he was sitting onto the table, dashing right up to them. He stared wide-eyed at the freshly baked treats as the beautiful, fruity aroma wafted around him. He gulped hungrily.

"We can't eat those just yet, Kon," I explained. "We have to wait for them to cool down, or you'll burn your tongue."

He looked like he was about to cry—I'd never seen him make a face like that before. His voice was full of indignant protest.

"Whaaat?! Noooooo! We hafta eat them while they smell good!" he lamented. "M-Mikura, you touched them just now, and you were fine! If you can touch them, I can eat 'em!"

"Oh, well, the outside of the biscuit cools quite quickly, but the inside can stay very hot. The moment you bite into it, you might burn yourself and spit it right back out again. I know. While we wait for the biscuits to cool, let's prepare a few to put on the altar. They smell so good that even Gramps should be able to smell them, all the way up in heaven."

Kon tilted his head and looked up at me as if he hadn't understood a word I'd just said.

"No, I'm serious," I insisted. "Have you ever heard anyone talk about 'aromatic foods'? When you place an offering on an altar, the aroma of the food wafts all the way up to the heavens. That way, Great-Grandpa can still enjoy the smell and the taste of our biscuits. That's why people usually choose a food with a nice smell when they want to make an offering."

It looked like what I was saying finally got through. Kon sniffed the air, taking in the aroma of the biscuits, then tilted his head back as if following the smell up to heaven with his gaze—although of course, being indoors, he only got as far as the kitchen ceiling.

“I kinda get it,” said Kon with a smile, still looking up at the ceiling. “So, Grampa Tommi up in heaven wants some biscuits too, huh? I guess we hafta save him a few.”

Now that all three of us were in agreement, we put some freshly baked biscuits on a plate and took them to the prayer alcove. We laid the plate on the altar as an offering, put our hands together in prayer, and closed our eyes.

In my head, I let Great-Grandpa know about how I’d taken over the house and orchard, and reassured him that I would take the very best care of it. Next, was the big news with Techī, of course, and I prayed with all my heart that the life we were starting to shape together could go on without end.

When I was a kid, Gramps spent a huge amount of time in front of this very altar, his hands pressed together just like ours. He said it was a great opportunity to calmly contemplate all sorts of things. The peace and quiet made it easy to reflect on what you had done and how life was going. He said such contemplation nourished the soul.

I never understood what he meant by that until I grew up and got a job. As a working member of Japanese society, I didn’t have the time or the headspace to calmly sit and reflect like this, or to pray for a better future.

I wouldn’t say I believe in heaven exactly, and I don’t put much stock in Buddhist beliefs, but I do believe that prayer and reflection are a very good way to spend one’s time—if you can find the time to spare. With this thought, I slowly opened my eyes again, just as Techī happened to be opening hers. Our eyes met, and we both couldn’t help but smile. Those smiles lingered for a while as we retrieved the plates from the altar and headed back to the living room to enjoy a small snack ourselves.

I put the kettle on and brewed some tea. By the time we were all seated around the table again, our freshly baked biscuits had cooled off enough to eat. They were still slightly warm, which meant they still gave off that characteristic

freshly baked aroma. When you bit into them, they had a crisp snap, while still crumbling pleasantly in your mouth and releasing a powerful, sweet taste.

Kon hurriedly chomped through his first biscuit in just a few bites and proceeded to swallow the whole thing in one gulp.

“They’re so good!” he squealed, both eyes shut in ecstasy. He was perfectly focused on the biscuit while he was eating it, and then erupted with joy before quickly reaching for the next one. He started with a plain one, then one with dried fruit in it, before moving on to one with chestnut. His hands barely seemed to stop as one biscuit after another disappeared into little Kon’s big mouth.

If they’d all been plain biscuits, I imagine he wouldn’t have gotten so carried away. But there were a good number of flavors to choose from. The dried fruit ones, with all their different tastes and smells, gave the biscuits a varied texture, and the citrusy ones were particularly tangy. The chestnut biscuits, on the other hand, had a deep aroma and sweetness unmatched by the sharper taste of the fruit. By alternating between them, your tastebuds never get bored.

That said, neither Techī nor I was testing that theory. Kon, on the other hand, seemed to be on a mission to wolf down as many biscuits as he possibly could. Maybe we felt that we shouldn’t get in his way, or we were simply so mesmerized by Kon’s vigorous eating habits, but Techī and I only tried one from each of the available flavors—the plain, the various fruits, and the chestnut—and left it at that.

Watching Kon devour those biscuits was quite a sight to behold. He looked like he was having the time of his life with his broad grin and puffy cheeks. It was so engrossing that neither Techī nor I wanted to interrupt this joyful little spectacle...but eventually, it was too much for Techī’s inner teacher.

“Kon!” she chastised. “You’re practically eating them whole! You’ll get an awful tummy ache! You need to chew your food properly. Take a break, drink some tea, and calm down right now!”

Kon started as if he’d been shaken out of a daze. He switched from his quick chomping to a more leisurely nibbling, nodding his head while he chewed, then started calmly sipping his tea to wash everything down. *He really is a good kid.*

When something is pointed out to him, he listens and does his best to follow the advice.

“Haaa...” sighed Kon, swallowing his last mouthful and lowering his tea. “Sorry. My head was full of biscuits...”

It looked like he’d surprised even himself, completely lost in a biscuit trance. Apparently, I’d landed a critical hit on Kon’s tastebuds with this particular batch.

“Which ones did you like best? The dry fruit turned out pretty great, don’t you think?” I asked him. Kon stared at the few remaining biscuits, then vigorously shook his head from side to side.

...Oh? When I tried them, I thought the fruit biscuits were the most delicious.

Kon could tell I was doubtful, so he explained, “The tastiest were the chestnut biscuits. I could smell Grampa’s chestnuts in there.”

I fixed my gaze on the chestnut biscuits. The natural sugars in the chestnuts had caused them to bake to a deeper golden-brown color than the regular ones.

“Hmm, I guess that makes sense. After all, you helped grow these chestnuts, and you have a real taste for them. You’re a chipmunk after all, Kon!”

Kon once again beamed at this, then he reached again for the plate we’d laid out all the biscuits on. He gathered the remaining biscuits in the center, divided them up into three equal portions, and then slid each portion to the edge of the plate closest to each of us. Apparently Kon wanted to make sure he didn’t devour everything himself.

“Thank you, Kon,” I said, reaching for a biscuit from my own pile. Tech reached for hers, and Kon eagerly picked up a biscuit from his portion as well. Then, we all bit into them.

Soon, the biscuits were all gone. We brewed the teapot a second time and had another cup of tea. Kon let out a very deep, satisfied sigh.

“Those biscuits were soooooo yummy,” he enthused. “Biscuits have gotta be the tastiest *pruh-zurved* food there is! We should make more! Lots and lots and lots more, so we can enjoy them anytime! All the time!”

“Ah, well, we can make more, not a problem...” I told him. “But if you want them to be well preserved, if you want them to actually keep, then they may not taste as good as these. Adding fruit, for example, can make biscuits go moldy over time, so fruit is out of the question. You also have to bake them a bit longer to make them harder.

“But the main thing that made today’s batch so tasty is the fact that we ate them fresh out of the oven. With biscuits, the more time passes, the less flavor they have. Also, Japan’s a very damp country, so biscuits can easily go soggy—especially during the rainy season.”

Kon was in shock. His face was in pure, utter disbelief, directed straight at me. It was like he was begging me to tell him that it wasn’t true. Unfortunately, it was very true. To ensure preservation, certain sacrifices have to be made. You always lost some of the flavor. They’d still taste good, but of course, there would be no comparison with the ones we’d just had. It was like eating two different foods.

It’s very common for there to be a trade-off between shelf life and flavor when preserving food. Kon was clearly distraught to discover this. I suspected he might be despairing at the thought that such delicious biscuits would have to sacrifice their amazing flavor if they were to last for any time at all.

“Kon, don’t worry,” I tried to reassure him. “This time we weren’t looking to preserve anything. Besides, these days, biscuits aren’t really treated as a long-life food, but more as a snack. They do taste best right after baking, and even though they were originally meant to be used as rations, we can forget all that. There’s nothing wrong with us enjoying them fresh out of the oven.”

Kon still didn’t seem completely convinced.

“Oh, and by the way, apparently not all preserved foods lose flavor with time,” I continued. “They say that some things actually taste better the longer you store them. Like, um...like, maybe canned fish or pickled *umeboshi* plums? With fish, it takes a long time for the fluid to fully season the meat, while with umeboshi, I think the flavor is meant to get more complex. Well...I’m not actually sure about the umeboshi, but you do occasionally hear stories of people finding really old jars of pickled plums at home that they then sell for

some ridiculously high price.”

I was kind of all over the place. I felt compelled to give another perspective, to champion my beloved preserved foods, if only so that Kon would not lose his own budding enthusiasm for them. However, for some reason, Kon and Techiko perked up at what I’d just said and looked at each other. They exchanged no words, but some meaningful glances clearly passed between them. Then they both turned to look at me.

“Are old umeboshi really so valuable?” asked Techiko with an inquisitive gaze.

“It sure seems that way,” I said. “I’m no expert, though.”

Techiko’s expression revealed little. Then, for some reason, she looked up at the living room ceiling.

“...What’s wrong?” I asked. “Is there something on the ceiling?”

Now Kon was looking up, too, also with a peculiar look on his face.

After a short while, Techiko finally snapped out of it.

“It’s...um... You see, Tomiyasu used to have some really old umeboshi in the warehouse. He didn’t want anyone else getting their hands on them, so he asked us to promise that if anything ever happened to him, we’d move them out of there. When Tomiyasu was taken away and hospitalized, the kids and I went ahead and hid his umeboshi in the house instead. Up in the attic.”

“The *attic*?” I exclaimed, joining the pair in staring at the ceiling. “This house *has* an attic?”

The living room ceiling was made of beautiful, solid wood boards. They were highly figured, with varying grain patterns, twisting and turning elegantly along their lengths, each board perfectly flush with the next. There was even an electric light built in.

Like most traditional Japanese houses, this one had a gabled roof with a flat ceiling installed underneath. If you removed the inner ceiling so that you were able to look up and see the joists and beams, you would find a triangular, attic-like space that, at a push, could potentially be used for storage.

“I guess we’d better check on that umeboshi, then,” I said, head still tilted

back.

Techi and Kon got up and dispersed. A moment later they were back, carrying a ladder and a long pole with a metal hook on the end. I had no idea where those had come from.

Upon closer inspection, you could just about make out a square-shaped cutout in the ceiling. Inside that square was a metal fixture with a round hole in it. The hook on the end of the pole was inserted into said hole, and with a twist of the pole, there was a clunk from above, as if a door had been unlocked. The square wooden panel swung down and dangled above us, revealing a square hole, which Techichi proceeded to carefully lean the ladder against. There was another metal fixture on the end of the ladder that somehow locked onto the edge of the opening, such that the ladder didn't wobble or slide about. The whole thing was rock solid.

I started climbing up the ladder while Techichi went to the side of the living room and started fiddling with the light switches on the wall. After a few clicks, a light came on in the opening above me.

...I'd wondered what all those switches were for. The living room wasn't that big—there were definitely more switches than you'd expect for a room of that size. I felt a bit foolish for not noticing the metal fixture on the ceiling earlier. It wasn't exactly well hidden.

I popped my head up into the attic and found it to be brighter and more spacious, not to mention far cleaner, than I had expected. And bang in the middle of it, just casually sitting there, was a single, old-fashioned clay jar.

The jar was dark brown in color, with a lid made out of wax paper. In terms of size, it was just about small enough to carry under one arm. It stood close enough to me that I could reach it without climbing all the way up into the attic, so I stretched out my arm and dragged it toward me. Once close enough, I carefully wrapped my free arm around it and slowly climbed back down the ladder, holding the jar tightly.

Once back down in the living room, Kon had prepared a damp cloth so I could wipe off the dust, and while I was doing so, Techichi cleared away the ladder and closed the attic door. Once the jar was clean, I inspected the lid. The wax paper

was secured around the mouth of the jar with a length of hemp cord. The cord looked fairly new—newer than expected. I undid the knot and slowly removed the lid.

I had no idea how many years these umeboshi had been pickling for. Perhaps they had even been sitting in that jar for decades. Since they were so important to Great-Grandpa, I'm sure they must be something quite special. I was almost giddy at the prospect as I peered into the jar. What I found inside was not at all what I expected.

"Uh...are you sure this is *umeboshi*?" I asked the others. I turned to face Tech and Kon. Tech nodded back.

"Actually," she said, "the lid accidentally came off when we were first moving the jar, so we did take a look inside, but it already looked like that back then. Maybe not quite as far gone, but it certainly doesn't look like umeboshi."

I see. That's why the cord was new. I peered back into the jar.

It was full of salt.

The salt formed a flat surface inside the jar. It was completely dry, with no sign of the liquid you would expect in a jar of umeboshi. With all the moisture gone, the pickling salt was all that remained.

The salt did have a bit of color, and that at least had a hint of plum to it. Well, somewhere in that range, anyway. I wanted to see if it was all salt, so I gave the jar a shake. As I did, a small, dark object emerged on the surface. This...dark brown, shriveled, bone-dry little ball had presumably once been an umeboshi plum.

"Hmm... What do we do with this, then?" I wondered aloud. "Looks like we've got ourselves a big jar of salt for the kitchen. At least there's no mold in here. Dry salt will never grow moldy, no surprise there. I guess this is pickling taken as far as it will go, huh? After so many years, all the moisture evaporates, and all you have left is this salty mass."

I thrust a finger into the jar, took a pinch of salt from the surface, and laid it out on the palm of my other hand. It seemed just like normal salt. It did have a scent, although it wasn't really reminiscent of umeboshi—more like coffee or

over-brewed barley tea. With no mold in sight, and figuring the proof is in the pudding, I licked it off my palm.

...What on earth is this? Umeboshi salt? It tasted like something you might get prescribed by a traditional Chinese herbalist to cure a stubborn illness. It was *most* peculiar.

“*Hmm... What’s this weird flavor? I can’t put my finger on it,*” I said, the taste still lingering on my tongue. “It tastes like some new-age health food or something. I definitely wouldn’t call it *tasty*. I mean, umeboshi *is* a very traditional food that’s considered to bring good luck, and has supposed health benefits, so maybe that explains the high prices for such attic discoveries? I wonder if this is what completely dry umeboshi tastes like...”

Her own curiosity piqued by my rambling, Techii stuck a finger of her own into the salty jar and licked the salt off. And of course, once Techii was interested, Kon was keen to try too.

Now all three of us were sharing puzzled looks. It wasn’t disgusting or off-putting...but it wasn’t good either. Even if we tried to sell this, I seriously doubted we’d have any takers. I felt disappointed at our underwhelming find. Not that I was seriously considering it. For some reason, this jar of umeboshi was precious to Great-Grandpa. There was no way I could sell it...or throw it away, for that matter. I found myself wondering if perhaps the best thing to do would be to seal it away back up in the attic...

I let out a deep sigh as I absentmindedly picked at the salt in the jar. As I did, a larger lump of salt crumbled under the force of my finger, instantly releasing a powerful aroma.

“Wha—?” I uttered, despite myself. This was a surprise—the smell was fresh and very striking, completely different from the scent thus far. I hurriedly peered back into the mouth of the jar. It seemed I’d accidentally poked through some inner wall that had formed out of the salt, revealing a number of actual umeboshi.

These weren’t completely dried out like the ones closer to the surface. For starters, they actually looked like dried plums, although they were a fair bit darker than your average umeboshi. They were covered in large, translucent

salt crystals, completely unlike the powdery stuff on the surface.

Were these the real deal? There was only one way to find out. I briefly went into the kitchen to fetch some cooking chopsticks and a couple of small plates. I used the chopsticks to gently extract three umeboshi from the jar, one for each of us, and placed each one on a plate. I tried scraping off as much salt as I could with the chopsticks, then picked mine up between my fingers.

“Here we go!” I shouted. I nervously brought it up to my mouth and bit off a tiny sliver.

It was incredibly salty and mouth-twistingly sour.

These must’ve been made using very strong brine. They were so salty on the tongue you could almost feel it in your scalp. Despite that, you could still make out a subtle sweetness—perhaps there was also honey in the recipe?

But most importantly, they actually *tasted* like plums.

The texture of the fruit had become more like dried persimmons, and they had a characteristic savory umami taste to them as well. They were absurdly salty and sour, so much so that you couldn’t help but make a funny face. Despite this, I spoke without thinking.

“This is delicious...”

Techi and Kon both seemed to think so, too, as they nodded away in agreement.

Now the idea that such a jar might fetch so much money made a lot more sense. You’d really have to take your time eating them, though. They were far too salty to gobble down in quick succession.

That said, these would be perfect after a bout of heavy exercise to help replenish the body’s electrolytes. They’d be great in rice balls too, and all that flavor would make them really effective for stewing fish or meat. Some great options there.

I put on a third cup of tea, and the three of us slowly enjoyed our umeboshi—their almost overbearing saltiness was a very welcome counterpoint to the sugary biscuits we’d enjoyed a short while earlier.



THERE were still quite a few of Great-Grandpa's umeboshi left when we were done, so I carefully removed them from the jar and sealed them in a more modern, moisture-proof container instead. With the way the moisture was evaporating from the clay jar, I didn't want them to end up as dried-out husks like the other ones. I put the dried out umeboshi in another container, together with the rest of the salt from the jar. Then we hid the good umeboshi away in the storage space under the rice bin, where they'd be safe.

By that point, it was three o'clock in the afternoon, and Techii decided it was time for everyone to grab their staff and do some exercise. She said we'd eaten far too much salt today and needed to sweat it out again. There wasn't all that much time before dinner, so we kept things short, just enough to rebalance our salt levels. Then we made dinner and sat down to eat together once again.

Tonight's menu was pot-au-feu with a side of bread. I'd cut up the vegetables into bite-sized chunks and boiled them together with the remaining pancetta. The seasoning was simple, the flavor coming from the salt in the pancetta, the consommé, and a bit of pepper. The bread was lightly buttered and toasted.

I would've liked to have made something a little fancier, but I was just too limited by not being able to go shopping. Since we had to rely on whatever we still had in the fridge, I kept things simple.

It might sound like I'm making excuses, but it actually turned out well. Kon loves Western food, so he was over the moon, while I think there were enough vegetables in there to satisfy Techii's needs—she seems to be very partial to them. The pancetta imparts a tinge of umami to the whole dish, along with a slight sweetness, and of course a meaty taste. All things considered; dinner was quite the success. If I'd only had regular old pork in the fridge, I doubt it would've come out half as well. *Pancetta truly is a fearsome addition to any pantry. I have to make some more the next time I have the opportunity.*

The rest of the day passed like all the others—we relaxed in the living room, took turns with the bathroom, and then everyone retired for the night.



THE next day arrived, leaving four days left on the quarantine clock. The

morning consisted of the usual hustle and bustle as three people all tried to start their day at the same time.

However, it was also a very smiley morning. Since the engagement, Techii had noticeably softened in her behavior—her happiness didn't seem to wane at all. Whatever she was doing—washing her face, making breakfast, checking the morning programs on the TV—she did it all with an unfading look of joy on her face. It didn't matter how mundane the task was. Even if it was something you would normally do indifferently, in perfect silence, Techii was mysteriously bubbling over with smiles and laughter.

When Kon almost fell over, she laughed. When she picked out a particularly lumpy vegetable for breakfast, she laughed at that too. She laughed at anything on the TV that was even vaguely amusing. All the kind of dumb things you'd never laugh at when sitting at home by yourself.

I was impressed that anybody could be so sensitive to the little joys of life.

We ate our breakfast and then set about our personal preparations for the day. When everyone was nice and spiffy, we returned to the living room to begin another relaxing morning. Once we were all settled in, Kon had a very important question to ask me. It must have been important, considering how excitedly he was leaning toward me when he asked it.

"Heeey, Mikura," he began. "Are you not gonna make any more umeboshi? There aren't many left from the ones Grampa Tommi made, y'know. If we suddenly get real hungry for umeboshi, they won't last very long. Do you think maybe it'd be a good idea to make some more?"

Talk about beating around the bush. You could just ask, little guy. I couldn't help but smile, and I answered his request as if he'd asked directly.

"Of course, I'm going to make more. That's the plan," I told him. "But there's still some time to go until plum season. My hands are tied until fresh plums appear in stores. Also...making umeboshi is a *long* process. First, you need to pickle the plums right up until the summer, then you spend the summer drying them out. *Then*, once they're dry, you need to pickle them one more time. Umeboshi isn't the sort of thing you can eat right away."

Kon gaped at me in open-mouthed surprise, his prominent front teeth in full

view. His expression was hilarious, but I somehow managed to contain my laughter.

“Making umeboshi requires a great deal of patience,” I went on, “but there are other foods we’ll be able to make that we can eat right away, like jam. And plums are good for much more than just umeboshi and jam. There’s always a lot to do during plum season, so many different foods to make—it’s always a busy time. Some people even refer to it as *plum work*.”

“I’ve never made plum syrup myself, but I *have* tried plum brandy, plum vinegar, and plum soy sauce. During plum season, you can make enough for the whole year. If you follow the recipes right, it all keeps for a very long time. Fewer and fewer people make their own plum products these days, but if you do your annual *plum work*, you have a far wider range of options when you’re cooking for the rest of the year. It’s really worth the effort!”

Kon listened carefully with a concentrated look on his face, occasionally nodding in agreement. When I was done talking, he seemed genuinely lost in thought for a while. Once he was done thinking, he spoke up, seeming very pleased with himself.

“I see!” he said loudly. “So, so, with umeboshi and smoked meat, you’ve gotta wait! But with jam, you can eat it as soon as you make it! Mmm, *jamm*... That jam you made last time was sooooo good! I can’t wait to eat it again!”

His large tail started swishing behind him. I wondered exactly what was going on in that little head of his. The jam we made before was strawberry, which is very different from plum jam. I wasn’t sure how he was connecting the dots, but that’s how kids’ minds work, I guess.

“Jam, huh?” said Tech. I wasn’t expecting her to weigh in. “That strawberry jam *was* really good. It was both sweet and sour, and the strawberry chunks gave it so much texture. I could go for some more of that too.”

I scrambled for some way to meet the sudden demand for all this jam.

“You want more jam, do you?” I began, trying to buy myself a little time. “Well, the thing is...as I said before when we made that first batch, it’s better to wait a little while longer until they start selling outdoor-grown strawberries. The thing is, that’s also around plum season. We’d still have to wait.”

They both looked disappointed.

“If you really wanted something now... Hmm, what’s in season?” I scrambled for ideas to appease them. “Maybe something citrusy...how about *amanatsu*? If we can get our hands on some *amanatsu*, we could make *amanatsu* jam...or even marmalade. That could be good. Well, marmalade is bittersweet, so it’ll be quite different from the sweet and sour taste of strawberry jam.”

I find homemade is always better than storebought jam, and this way we can make a whole batch and enjoy as much amanatsu as we like. It has such a unique taste. As I called that taste to mind, I was also reminded of a rather unique application of *amanatsu* preserves that let you enjoy them in a very different way in comparison to other preserves like strawberry jam.

Techi and Kon both suddenly looked very hungry. They were smiling, but they were ravenous smiles of anticipation, rather than smiles of joy or satisfaction. And they were directed right at me.

I was just trying to tell them about plum work. How did the situation get so intense? I guess there’s only one option. I took out my smartphone and dialed the number to place an order with the gate staff. The call didn’t take long.

Tomorrow we could expect a delivery of *amanatsu*, and I could expect to spend the day making *amanatsu* marmalade for everyone.

Since everything was decided, I went to the kitchen to prepare my tools—mainly the fancy-lidded jam jars I had bought a short while back. I’d have to sterilize them in boiling water right before I used them tomorrow, but I still went ahead and gave them a regular clean and dried them off, just so I could line them up neatly in a row. They looked rather handsome, all lined up like that. I stood there for a while, surveying the scene and nodding to myself. Things were good.

Techi sidled up next to me, possibly to watch me watching. She examined the jars herself with a mysterious look on her face.

“I couldn’t imagine a more Mikura-like spectacle if I tried,” she commented, tilting her head to one side. “You look so pleased with yourself.”

Seeing her reaction, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, you’ve got me pegged there. When I buy new tools, I love lining them up and just appreciating them before I use them for the first time. I don’t think there’s any more satisfying moment in any hobby. If tomorrow goes smoothly and we end up with a really well-preserved marmalade though, that’ll be a close second.”

“Hmmm...” Techy replied noncommittally. “Oh yeah, that’s right—I don’t tend to think of jam as a preserved food, but you keep talking about it in that way. Is homemade jam actually good for long-term storage?”

“Sure is. But it does go moldy more easily than other kinds of preserved food, so you do have to be very careful when you’re making it. First, you have to thoroughly boil all the fruit, then add the right amount of sugar, and you have to sterilize all the jars before using them. When the jam goes in the jars, you have to make sure you deaerate them properly, and once the jars have cooled down, they should be kept in the fridge. If you correctly follow all of those steps, the jam should last for a very long time.”

“I see...” Techy hummed. “You mentioned that you need to ‘deaerate’ the jars. What does that mean?”

“Oh, right. To deaerate something means to force the air out. If you pour piping hot jam into a jar and seal it, the air trapped inside expands from the heat. If you were to open that jar ever so slightly, the expanded air would escape with a sharp whooshing sound. Using that principle, you can heat the jars filled with fresh jam to expand the trapped air and force it out of the jar, creating a pressure seal. It’s not a perfect vacuum, but it’s close enough—if you do it right, the air inside should be too thin for any mold or bacteria to grow,” I explained.

“Moreover, all the added sugar inhibits mold growth, and some fruit types are much more resistant to spoiling than others. So, assuming you use enough sugar, I reckon a good plum jam should last at least two, maybe even three years unopened.”

One of the trickiest parts of jam-making is getting the sugar ratio right. If you don’t add enough sugar, the jam won’t last very long, but overdo it, and you can completely ruin the flavor. A true jam master is someone who can nail that

balance every time.

The easiest mistake to make, however (and the easiest to avoid!) is burning your jam. The first rule of jam-making: don't leave the pot unattended!

And so, in light of that golden rule, I took a small camping stove out of the kitchen cabinet.

“...What do you need that for?” asked Techī with a puzzled tilt of her head. “You have a perfectly good kitchen stove right there, don’t you?”

I checked the amount of gas left in the cartridge.

“I do indeed, and I plan to use it. The cooking begins in the kitchen. But once I’m done with the initial boil on the kitchen stove, I’ll be using this to further boil down the jam. It takes a long time to make a batch this large, and you need to regularly stir the pot with a wooden spatula to make sure nothing burns or sticks. Standing in the kitchen all day, unable to do anything else, is rough stuff. Whereas with this little thing, I can keep boiling and stirring while sitting at the low table in the living room and watching TV. A portable stove’s really handy for jam making—I might even call it indispensable.”

One of those options was clearly better than the other.

“That’s a pretty nifty idea,” Techī agreed.

“You can’t cook jam over high heat,” I continued. “It burns easily, and you’ll cook out all the flavor. Instead, you carefully cook it on low heat for a long time, which is the perfect opportunity to catch up on some movies or TV shows. You said before that Gramps used to work on his food preservation while he was watching the kids out in the orchard, right? This is pretty similar to that.”

“Yeah, I follow you,” said Techī. “What other jams have you made, apart from strawberry, plum, and amanatsu?”

My eyes wandered up to the kitchen ceiling as I tried to remember them all.

“Let’s see, apart from those...I’ve made blueberry and raspberry, peach, orange, apricot... Oh, I’ve also made apple and nut jam. Berry jams are pretty consistent, but apples and nuts are quite an interesting challenge—the flavor of the jam varies a lot depending on what variety of apples or nuts you choose to

work with. Some varieties make for great jam, others not so much.”

“Sounds difficult to figure out,” Techι observed.

“It can be, but it’s worth it. Nut jam is especially notable—I don’t know about the science behind this, but nut jam has long been used as a home remedy to soothe a sore throat or lower a fever. And jam in general is very handy when you’re looking after somebody who’s sick. Even if they can barely sit up in bed and lack an appetite, they can still manage to suck on a spoonful of jam to keep their blood sugar up.”

“Hmm... That’s a good point,” said Techι. “It’s very easy to eat, even if you’re ill. I guess it’s worth always having a jar or two in corner of the fridge, just in case—as long as you don’t make too much. Pretty impressive—an actual practical use for this hobby of yours.”

As long as you don’t make too much.

Techι’s comment sent me off into a bit of a daydream.

I used to make jam back when I was living by myself. But even though I didn’t eat much bread, the nature of jam-making meant I had to make several jars at a time. As a result, my little bachelor fridge in my tiny bachelor pad was often filled to the brim with jam jars. At one point, I think I had strawberry, plum, blueberry, apple, and nut, in addition to several jars of citrus marmalades. I was getting flashbacks of that cramped fridge. I don’t know what I thought I was going to do with all of that. In the end, I was unable to eat everything and had to give it away to random coworkers at my office. None of them ever told me what they thought of it...

That was a total bust. Fortunately, that wouldn’t be happening again. Things were different now. I returned to the kitchen from my reverie, Techι eyeing me suspiciously while Kon was rolling around on the living room floor.

There was Techι’s family. There was Kon’s family. There were all the kids working in the orchard, and their families.

I was surrounded by countless people who’d be overjoyed to receive a jar of homemade jam. No sooner did I start drifting away again, as Techι was no doubt wondering why on earth I was so lost in thought.

“I’m really looking forward to tomorrow,” I said with a wide smile.

The Old Gentleman

THE next morning came, leaving us with three days of quarantine remaining.

Breakfast went as usual, followed by laundry and general cleaning while we waited for the day's food delivery. Kon had obviously heard something, as he dashed out onto the veranda, and a few minutes later, I too heard the sound of a distant car rumbling up the mountain road from the border gate.

"Oh good, the *amanatsu* are here," I said to myself, following Kon outside. But when I got there, I was met by a surprising sight. "...Huh?"

Kon echoed my surprise with a louder, much more emphatic "Huh?!" of his own and turned to look up at me.

The car cruising uphill toward us wasn't the usual government vehicle the gate staff made their deliveries with, but the delivery van that usually visited us on Mondays. It was not Monday. Kon tilted his head in confusion as he also wrestled with this contradiction.

The little van stopped outside the house, and the old gentleman from our Monday deliveries peered out through the driver-side window. He greeted us with a gentle doff of his cap.

He climbed out of the car with a cardboard box labeled with the word *amanatsu*, and carried it over to the veranda, placing it on the floorboards with a thump.

"A very good morning to you," he greeted. "It seems some people at the gate are off sick today, so I got called in as a substitute to make your delivery. There aren't many people with clearance to cross the border without inspection, you see, so I get a call like that from time to time."

He had anticipated my first question with a full explanation and fetched some more boxes from the car.

"That's, um...thank you for going to so much trouble," I said. "I see these are

the amanatsu, and I take it those other boxes are the rest of the groceries we ordered?”

The old gentleman smiled as he carried said boxes over. He was also carrying a freshly printed newspaper, which he held out to me.

“That’s today’s,” he said. “That gang of...young men has been officially arrested on charges of perverse behavior, it seems. Unfortunately, such things don’t tend to get much attention in the news, but their mugshots made it into the paper. Everyone around these parts will know about them, at least.”

I took the newspaper from him as he talked. He was still smiling, but I could sense a quiet anger bubbling under the surface. I wondered exactly what he was angry about. I wasn’t sure of his relationship to the whole matter, so I answered noncommittally.

“Yeah...that was quite something...”

That incident was the whole reason we were in quarantine right now, the reason we were unable to even do our own grocery shopping. It might seem absurd to claim that I’d forgotten about that band of hoodlums, but truth be told, I had genuinely not given them any thought until he mentioned them just now. I wasn’t surprised though. I’d been enjoying spending my days with Kon and with my...future wife. I was having far too much fun to spare a thought for those clowns.

Observing my terse reaction, the old man continued to smile, but now I could definitely sense an air of agitation about him. Perhaps he thought I harbored some intense grudge against the perpetrator or that I was tensely awaiting the result of the trial. But in reality, at this point, I really couldn’t care less about them.

I wanted to clear the air, but I also felt like getting one up on our mysterious friend here, so I found myself offering up more than I expected.

“Well, the truth is, I’ve just become engaged to marry one of the locals...a Miss Tokatechi Kurikara. I need to meet her parents soon, and to be honest, I’ve been thinking about very little else.”

The old gentleman’s smile finally faded, replaced with a genuine look of

disbelief. This gave way to a much more tender, genuine expression. This was no customer service smile—it was the real deal.

“Is that so? You’re engaged? Well then, congratulations are in order. We don’t know each other very well yet, but I’m very happy for you. More than you know.”

I wondered if he really meant that. His voice did seem to betray some deep emotion that he was attempting to keep in check. I thanked him with a smile.

At the risk of being a bit late to the party with this comment...I really don’t think this guy is actually a delivery worker.

I didn’t have much to go on, but I suspected he must have some connection to the government. And it was almost certain he’d been tasked with keeping an eye on my move to the Wilds. I guess my engagement was the best proof that it was going smoothly. I suppose it’s in the government’s interest that my move goes well, for the sake of good relations between humans and beastfolk, but I doubted this old fellow expected it to be going quite this well.

The delivery itself was done, but we still took a little time to chat. Ostensibly, the old gentleman had no reason to stay, but he continued to offer his most heartfelt congratulations with that warm smile of his.

Watching the old man, Kon also got into the spirit of things, beaming up at us from the floor with his own toothy grin. Perhaps he wanted to add his own good wishes, or the good mood was simply that contagious. Apparently it was, because the old man and I found ourselves smiling right back at him.

“What’s going on out there?” asked Techī unexpectedly, her voice echoing down the corridor from the bathroom. “You’re very talkative today.”

Techī had been doing some chores at the other end of the house, expecting the grocery delivery to go quickly as usual. But hearing us lost in conversation out here no doubt piqued her curiosity, and she came out to see what we were up to.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said upon seeing the old gentleman.

“Techī, do you know him?” I asked. She nodded as if it were obvious.

“Yeah, he was ’round here pretty much every week when Tomiyasu was alive. The kids and I have met him plenty of times. They were old associates, maybe even friends. Well, I guess when you see someone every week, they become a kind of friend.”

I gasped in sudden realization. How long had this old man been working this job? By the sound of it, he’d been delivering packages for Great-Grandpa well before I’d even shown up. They were of a similar age—they would’ve shared and talked about all sorts of things.

They *were* old friends.

He seemed to know about Techii...so it didn’t seem unreasonable that he might know about me too. After all, as a kid I spent a whole month here during the summer every year.

My government conspiracy theory suddenly seemed a little far-fetched. *Of course* he would be happy for me. It’s very possible I was completely off. This man had just found out that his friend’s grandson was engaged to marry a young woman he’d known since she was a girl. It’s more than likely that he just wanted to offer his genuine blessing. No ulterior motive. I suddenly felt quite embarrassed about trying so hard to create one and generally overthinking things.

With that realization, I immediately reevaluated my opinion of the man, promptly reintroduced myself to him, and formally introduced my fiancée as well. Then the three of us talked together for a little while.



MR. Kaōin is the old gentleman’s name. He still had work to do, so he had to cut our conversation short, but we still enjoyed our brief chat. It was mostly small talk—there was no time for a deep dive about my Great-Grandpa or other such topics, but I figured we’d have another chance to talk next Monday.

But now was not the time for such thoughts. After all, I had a crucial appointment with a batch of amanatsu marmalade, as evidenced by the impatient young chipmunk urgently tugging at my pants leg. I mustn’t keep him waiting.

I picked up the box of amanatsu, brought it into the kitchen, and asked for Techii and Kon to help with everything else. First, we opened up and cleared away all the other groceries, and when that was done, I took the amanatsu box and placed it on the kitchen table. I hadn't even opened it yet, and already their fresh smell was starting to permeate the kitchen. I threw open the box lid.

"They do smell good, don't they?" I commented. "They'll make for great marmalade. Still, it is *a lot*, isn't it? I only asked for a few. I didn't expect them to send us a whole box."

The box itself was...very neat. It was brimming with fruit, but they were neatly arranged and separated by paper dividers, not roughly packed in. I started to wonder if this was some luxury fruit box. Were luxury amanatsu even a thing?

Luxury or not, these definitely had more shine, more color, and more aroma than your run-of-the-mill supermarket amanatsu. They looked so appetizing. I reached into the box and handed one to Techii, one to Kon, and took out one for myself.

"We should try them before we get to work," I said, grabbing a kitchen knife for peeling the fruit and moving to the living room. Both Techii and Kon were enchanted by the citrusy smell, clearly keen to get started, judging by their nods and smiles.

For each amanatsu, I cut a notch with the knife, peeled off the skin, and then flattened out the peel to make a makeshift plate. I took my first bite.

"Wow, this is incredible..." I said in awe. "Both the sweetness and the acidity are just right, and it's so juicy. It's an amanatsu all right, but it also manages to feel like something more..."

Techii and Kon had their own comments to share too.

"You're right," Techii agreed. "It's like drinking fresh juice. I've never tasted anything like it."

"It's sweet and sour at the same time!" said Kon. "And it's sooo good!"

After that, there was no more talking. Everyone was fully focused on their fruit. The amanatsu were large and really quite filling, but you didn't want to stop at just one or two segments—or rather, I found that my hands wouldn't

stop moving until I'd devoured the whole thing.

Once we were done, we exchanged another series of comments about how delicious these fruits were. After a short breather, during which I was mostly speculating about how this marmalade was going to turn out, the peels were thrown away and we all got up and relocated to the kitchen. Hands were washed, aprons donned, and we got to work.

When making amanatsu marmalade, the key is how you use the peel.

You can choose not to use the peel at all. You might decide to use the peel, but without any of the white pith. Or you might only want to use a little bit. You can soak the peel in water before it goes in the main jam pot, parboil it, or even give it a thorough heating in a pressure cooker. There are a great many options to choose from.

There are also mixed opinions about whether to include the thin skin that separates the fruit segments or to throw it away.

There are no right answers here. Every choice has its own positives and negatives, and ultimately, its own effect on the final flavor.

This time I decided not to include the pith or the segment skins, and to lightly parboil the peel before use. That's what my gut was telling me after trying one of them fresh.

Start by thoroughly washing the fruit in cold water. Once clean, make a cut with a knife and remove the peel. Carefully remove all the white pith from the peel and then cut it up into thin strips. Put your sliced peel into a pan of water to soak for now. Take the body of the fruit and carefully separate it into segments so you can remove all the inner skins.

Parboil the soaked peel, and once done, transfer to an enamel pot suitable for making jam or marmalade. Now you can begin the long process of boiling everything down.

Start with the peel. Boil until it goes soft, then add some sugar. Mix together thoroughly. When fully mixed, add your fruit together with a splash of lemon juice and any more sugar as needed.

Now boil, boil, and boil some more until it's done!

We had a lot of amanatsu to get through, so I went for the largest pot I could find. I'd be doing the final slow boil in the living room, so I could take a bit of a break between batches. Once it was boiled down enough, I moved the pot back to the kitchen and started boiling up the empty jam jars.

The sterilized jars are then filled with jam, the lids replaced, and the closed jar is immersed in boiling water again so that the air inside expands and is forced out, creating a tight pressure seal.

After that, it was rinse and repeat. I set aside a portion of fruit for us to enjoy fresh and went about turning everything else into marmalade. Cook a batch, bottle it, cook a batch, bottle it... Apart from a lunch break, I was at it nonstop and didn't finish until three o'clock in the afternoon.

When we were done, I was exhausted, but it was a very comforting feeling. I stood there and surveyed the row of jars once again, now full of marmalade. With the amount we made today, the three of us could probably enjoy marmalade on toast every day for a whole year. But it'd be nice to share it around, so I started to think about who we might give some to.

For starters, there was Techī's family, Kon's family, our new friend Mr. Kaōin...

If the list grew too big, we wouldn't have any left for ourselves, but I kept thinking of other names all the same. As I did, Kon stared at me with intense anticipation from his little chair on the kitchen counter. It was impossible not to notice him.

"Of course, Kon, you're quite right," I said. "We're finally finished, so it's about time we tried some, eh? It hasn't cooled down yet, so it'll still be a little warm, but that's kind of perfect on a slice of toast. Well, we only had lunch a short while ago, so maybe just half a slice..."

I prepared some toast, brought everything to the living room, and the three of us sat down to liberally smear the toast with freshly made marmalade.

I took a deep bite of my piece of toast.

"*Mmm*, that came out very well," I commented.

"Yeah, it really makes you want another slice," Techī replied.

“I loved the strawberry, but this is tasty too!” Kon said excitedly.

With our first impressions shared, we were free to dig into the rest of our toast. The marmalade was sweet with just a hint of bitterness and a powerful aroma. The peel gave it a bit of a kick too. I took another bite of my toast, and another. The toast halves were gone in no time, leaving only a pleasant feeling of fullness.

Tiredness soon hit me again, but with such tasty marmalade to show for it, it was so worth the effort. Considering that half a day’s work got us a whole year’s worth of the stuff, it hardly seemed like a fair exchange.

Of course, some of it would be gifted to others, so it wasn’t all for us, but somehow it was just as exciting to be able to share this flavor with our nearest and dearest. As we relaxed in the living room after our snack, I found myself thinking about who else might like to receive a jar of our marmalade. I pictured various acquaintances of mine as I compiled my mental list, until a particular pair of faces flashed suddenly into my head. I let out a cry of surprise.

“What is it?” asked Tech, somewhat alarmed. “Is something wrong?”

I turned to look at her.

“Er, kind of?” I replied. “...I just remembered that I still haven’t told my parents about the engagement.”

Tech didn’t say anything at first.

“...You...you what?” she finally managed.

How on earth did we both manage to forget something like that?

The two of us sat in stunned silence, staring at each other in complete disbelief.

Family

MY family.

My parents.

Great-Grandpa was from my father's side of the family. So as his grandson, my father would no doubt have spent time in this house.

As for my mother...I really didn't know. She must have met Gramps at some point, but it likely was outside of the Wilds.

I always got along with my parents, but recent events had left me a little less certain about the relationship. When we were all in Great-Grandpa's hospital room during his final moments, my parents were arguing over who would inherit this house, just like all our other relatives. When I readily gave up a secure job at a good company to take over this place...to be honest, I expected a fight, but somehow one never came. I do wonder if one might be slowly brewing.

I suspect the reason they didn't argue with me was that they felt guilty about making such a scene in front of Great-Grandpa on his deathbed. After all, I was going to quit a good career to take over a house and an orchard up in the mountains, completely cut off from the rest of the world. As loving parents, I'm sure they wanted to speak up and stop me.

But Great-Grampa had heard what I'd said. Everyone saw the smile it brought to his face, the relief that it gave him to know his legacy was in good hands. They heard his final words of gratitude to me. How could they taint his final moments on this earth by going against them? Objecting after that point would've been the ultimate form of disrespect. They'd be trampling over Great-Grandpa's wishes.

Given all of that, I had no idea how they'd react when I told them that I was going to marry one of the beastfolk. That I was going to marry Tech.

I was very uneasy about it, no doubt about that. I really wanted to avoid a

fight.

But I picked up the phone and made the call.

“Hi, Dad? I’m calling because I’ve just gotten engaged. To a young woman who works on Great-Grandpa’s orchard. Yes, that’s right. Yes, one of the beastfolk... A chipmunk. Her name is Tokatechi Kurikara... Yeah, please let Mom know as well.”

I tried to keep it short and sweet.

Well, it wasn’t as if I could get engaged and then just keep it to myself. And putting off the call would only make it more and more awkward as time went on. Besides, I was hoping my parents were still carrying around some of that guilt from the hospital. There’s no time like the present. Just get it over and done with.

The line was silent for a while as my father processed the news.

“How old is this woman?” he asked.

“Um...wait, how old is she again?” I muttered to myself. “Don’t think I’ve ever asked her.”

Overhearing me, Techichi held up two fingers on her right hand and four on her left.

She could have said it out loud, but presumably she didn’t want to disrupt my phone call. I nodded back silently to thank her and turned my attention back to my father on the other end of the line.

“She says she’s twenty-four. Yeah. No, we haven’t made any decisions about the ceremony or anything else. I still have to meet her parents. What? When can you meet her? No, I don’t think it’s possible for her to leave... Well, if you *did* come, it would take some time to sort out all the documents and medical stuff, I don’t think we can make it happen right away.

“...No, listen, there was an incident, don’t you read the news?” I asked, incredulous. “A group of perverts from the local town managed to slip through the border gate. It was in this morning’s paper. That’s the one, yeah. Now we’re all quarantined, self-isolating at the house, it’s caused all kinds of problems...

Yeah, that's right, it complicates things, doesn't it?

"...What? You already have all the vaccines? What do you mean you already have clearance and can come over right away? No, no, what about Mom? ... Don't change the subject! It's been ages since you saw the beastfolk? You want to come as soon as possible, and you want to meet Miss Tech. ...Dad, gimme a break. I'll send you a picture."

My father was way too excited about all this. I was starting to get a headache from his enthusiasm. I rubbed my throbbing temple with my fingers.

It turned out my father also spent time here during his childhood...but it seemed he could remember it all clearly, unlike myself—he mentioned how much fun it was to play with the beastchildren back in the day.

"*Oh, it takes me back,*" he kept saying, digging up old memories of his summer holidays—though they were hardly the kind of events you'd forget. Isn't he supposed to be at the office at this hour? You wouldn't think so, given how excited he was getting. He was almost shouting over the phone.

"Beastfolk in the family? Who'd have thought? Yeah, I guess if you wanna be together, marriage is the way to do it!" he exclaimed. "Whenever I'm in a bookshop and I spot a book about the beastfolk, I get all misty-eyed reliving my youth. Some of those memories are pretty bittersweet! But you went straight for marriage, huh?

"Oh yes, you mentioned your future wife is part chipmunk? That means I'll have cute little chipmunk grandkids, right? Buddy, lemme tell you, I've never been so glad that you were born a boy as I am right now!"

Hang on... What was that, before he started talking about grandkids? He was indirect, but did he really imply what I think he just implied? Unbelievable! I was at a loss for words, unable to reply. I wondered what Mom would think about such a thing. *It's best she doesn't find out. I don't know if their marriage would survive such...pleasant recollections.*

I'd planned to have Dad report back to Mom about the engagement, but given his excitable state, maybe it was better I did it myself. *Who knows what might happen otherwise...*

“Listen, Dad...let’s leave it at that for today,” I blurted out, finally regaining the power of speech. “I’ll send you a photo when I’m done, and then I’ll call Mom myself. You just enjoy your trip down memory lane, all right? I know! We’ll take the picture in front of the house. Lots of great memories of that, eh?”

I was rambling at that point, so I brought the conversation to an abrupt close. I turned to look at Tech and Kon. She looked nervous, while he looked enthralled. He may as well be at the movies or a carnival.

“Could I get a photo?” I asked them.

We went straight out onto the veranda and into the garden. I found a suitable cardboard box to prop my phone up on, set a self-timer on the camera, and took a picture of the three of us standing together.



I wondered if it was okay to send a picture with Kon in it, but we didn't want him to feel left out. We decided that it would be fine if we just explained that he was one of the neighborhood kids.

I checked the photo. I had on my usual expression, Techii was clearly nervous, and Kon was grinning from ear to ear. We took a couple more and sent the best one to my father. On my way back to the living room, I scrolled through my address book to find my mother's number and hit the call button. I figured that she would be relaxing in front of the TV about now, and sure enough, she picked up right away.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Hey, Mom. I've gotten engaged," I said, without any hesitation. Short and to the point. *Just stick to your script, Mikura.* "I've gotten engaged to someone in the Wilds. I sent Dad a photograph, so you can ask him if you want to see what she looks like."

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?!"

I reflexively jerked my phone away from my ear. And I thought my *father* had been loud...



I'D tried to do things my way, but after that outburst, the pace of the conversation was entirely dictated by my mother. She demanded to hear the whole story, all the details of how this came about. She wanted to know who this woman was and what she was like. Finally, she demanded that I send her a photograph as well, and pestered me to let her speak to Techii directly. Reluctantly, with a deep sigh, I handed over the phone.

Techii took my phone nervously and held it to her ear—one of the ones on the side of her head, not the chipmunk ones on top. She answered in a high-pitched, meek tone that was far from her usual way of speaking... But after that initial hiccup, their conversation went far better than I'd expected. Techii's nervous expression soon relaxed, and my mother's voice on the other end of the line sounded positively bouncy.

I sat there restlessly, Kon was riveted to the spot with curious excitement, and

we both just watched...but the call just went on and on. Given they were talking about an important topic like marriage, I expected it to take a while, but this was positively endless.

They talked for five minutes...ten minutes...still no sign of stopping.

Twenty minutes must have passed before Techii finally handed the phone back to me. She had a relieved smile on her face, as if she'd laid down a heavy burden or overcome some fiery trial. I raised an eyebrow as I put the phone back to my ear. What on earth was she saying to this poor girl?

"Well, she seems nice," said my mother. "I feel better about all this now. But there'll be many challenges and obstacles in a marriage with a beastperson. Don't you forget it. If something happens, you'll need to be prepared to take the lead and stand up for this girl. You'd better keep that in mind, starting right now. Your father and I will send off all the paperwork to apply for a visitation permit. In the meantime, you behave yourself. You're a big boy now. Make sure you act like it, you hear?"

My mother was back to her usual self, it seemed. Full-on bulldozer. I wondered where all that guilt and soul-searching from the hospital had disappeared to. I tried hard to check all the right conversational boxes by nodding along on the phone and not objecting to anything.

"Yes... Yes, Mom... Yes, I understand... I'll take care of it... Yep... Yeah."

There's no point in defying her. If I just suppress my entire personality and all my own opinions and quietly let her lecture wash over me, it'll all be over soon.

"Hey! You think you can just politely nod your way through this, kiddo?"

How did she know?!

"If you're going to be such a wet blanket, you'll only cause trouble for Miss Tokatechi! If you won't take this seriously, then call off the engagement! You've got some serious thinking to do, buster! By the time we get there, I expect you to be absolutely committed to this. Fix your attitude, young man!"

I quickly fixed my attitude.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll do my very best. I'll be ready. I'm serious about this."

I wasn't sure if it was right to completely roll over like that, but a few minutes later, the call finally and mercifully came to a close. I hung up the phone with a desperate sigh. My phone's battery had gotten very low, so I plugged it into a charger in the corner of the living room.

I let out one final drained gasp and collapsed onto the tatami on my hands and knees, my head hanging down between my shoulders. I was completely empty.

Then my phone made a jolly little noise to let me know I had a new text message.

What is it now? I picked up the plugged-in smartphone. The sender was my mother...it seemed Dad had sent her the photograph. Perhaps it'd been completely different from her expectations, because she immediately messaged me with more questions. I glanced over the text, sighed deeply for the nth time, and simply wrote back that Dad knew more and she should ask him for all the details.

It was about time to start making dinner—I couldn't spend all day dilly-dallying about with my mother.

Another sigh. Enough. I slowly got to my feet.

"What shall we have for dinner today?" I asked the others. You could hear the tiredness in my voice.

"Up to you," replied Tech.

Kon was as bubbly as ever and replied with a cheerful "Anything's fine!"

I doubted I had it in me to pull off anything more than a simple meal...but having just finished announcing my conviction on the phone with my mother, it didn't sit right with me to just whip out some instant food from the cabinet. We did have the food that was delivered today, so I could just follow the menu I'd planned, but when I opened the fridge, my mother's face flashed into my mind, and I was reminded of an old recipe that she used to make for me. I had all the ingredients, so I took them out of the fridge and put them on the counter.

Onions, carrots, bell peppers, and chicken thighs...

Thinly chop the vegetables. One of the quickest and easiest ways to do this is with a cup slicer or similar kitchen gadget that gives a fine, consistent cut.

Cut the chicken into generous bite-sized chunks, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and place in a bowl with cooking sake to marinate.

Sauté the onion, carrot, and bell pepper slices in a large frying pan. Once partly cooked through, add the meat, and continue to fry together. Then heap in a big serving of cooked white rice.

Stir-fry the lot, mixing thoroughly with a wooden spatula while being careful not to damage the rice grains. Once everything is well mixed, clear an empty space in the middle of the rice to make a donut shape, and pour a suitable quantity of ketchup onto the exposed surface of the pan.

Reduce the heat slightly and simmer the ketchup until it starts to bubble, then quickly stir it into the rice. Gradually add salt and pepper to taste.

Choose a bowl that's slightly smaller than your serving plate. Fill it carefully with the rice mixture and place it upside down on the serving plate to create a handsome hemisphere of chicken rice.

“Where’s the flag? What about the flag?!” Kon asked from his little chair on the counter, his ears pricked up sharply and his bushy tail flailing around behind him.

He seriously wanted the little flag like you’d get in a restaurant? I was surprised...but who was I to tell him no? I cut a small piece of paper from a memo pad and wrapped it around a toothpick to make a small Japanese flag and gently planted it on the summit of the ricey mound.

I had never seen such a grin on Kon’s face, and that’s saying something. He grabbed a dust cloth and eagerly rinsed it, wrung it out, and ran to the living room with it to wipe down the table. He was desperate to get his hands on that chicken rice as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, Kon’s little body was not a great fit for a big job like cleaning the table—he simply didn’t have the reach—but Techii was able to give him a hand, and the table was spotless in no time.

In the meantime, I finished serving the rice and brought the plates to the living room, along with a spoon and a glass of milk for everyone, since we were

out of juice. We were also out of salad, but hopefully everyone could make do without it until tomorrow morning.

Once everything was in place, we gave thanks for the food and tucked in. There was no thin-cooked omelet to cover the rice, and the rice itself was a little soggy. It was a poor attempt, if I'm honest, but Kon didn't care at all. He just kept saying how delicious it was, over and over, smiling broadly with his cheeks full of food.

And so, with that enjoyable, tasty evening meal, another strange and eventful day was brought to a close.



THE next day. Only two days remained of our quarantine.

Today was the day I had promised to deliver the smoked meat to Také and his bearfolk kin. I'd been up since the early morning desalinating cut after cut of boar meat to prepare them all for smoking. It was going to be a *very* busy day.

Smoking one or two pieces of meat is no big deal, but making enough for all those bearfolk *and* for the three of us was an industrial-scale job.

To speed up desalination, which I usually did in the sink, I placed a number of bowls on the countertop so I could rinse out multiple cuts at once. After rinsing, the cuts were wiped down and taken to the warehouse refrigerator to dry off. Once the first batch was dry, it went straight into the stovetop smoker, and the smoking could finally begin.

Time was of the essence, so I didn't take any chances. I needed to be on the ball. But it wasn't like I could only focus on the smoking at the expense of everything else. There's always something else to do, so I had to take little breaks whenever I could to handle other chores or cook our own meals throughout the day.

Since the smoker was ceramic, I couldn't do batch after batch without letting it cool down in between—that might crack the clay. I went as fast as I could, but I was still at it as the sun started to set in the sky. The smell of the cherry woodchips filled the whole house and was drifting out into the garden, which is presumably what finally drew Také and the other bearfolk to the yard.

They were all busy milling around outside, an assortment of camping furniture on their shoulders, sniffing the air loudly as they prepared the garden to fully enjoy the smoked food. They set up camping tables and chairs, and where they didn't have enough, they used beer crates instead.

I'd been planning to take everything to them at their campsite near the gate when the meat was done, but it seemed they had no regard for my plans. When I had a moment to spare, I poked my head out into the garden.

"There are kids around, so no all-nighters today, thank you!" I called out. Také and the other bears laughed.

"We know, we know!" Také called back. "Besides, tonight, all we have to soak up the booze is your smoked meat. We'll just enjoy a few drinks, yeah? Nothing too crazy. Besides, now that you've thrown your lot in with Miss Kurikara, you truly are a friend of the forest. We don't wanna be a nuisance!" He gave me a toothy grin. "...I gotta say though, that sure smells good! How's the meat coming along? What flavor did you go for in the end?"

"Oh, it's all going smoothly," I replied. "The meat you gave me was really fresh, so it's coming out as well as could be expected. I think it might even be better than the last batch I made.

"Speaking of the smoked meat, how would you like to eat it? I can just cut it up and serve it as it is, but there are a few other options too. I could fry the meat for you—it's really good with a fried egg, I can recommend that. You can also grill it with a little soy sauce and tofu, or just sprinkle it with salt and pepper—simple but effective. Some people also like to serve it with onion soup. Or if you want something a little fancier, you can sandwich it between slices of onion and serve it with a salty egg yolk dipping sauce. If you do like eating it with onions, it'll benefit from a squeeze of lemon and lime juice to give it that extra something," I said, finishing off my suggestion list.

Plain meat straight out of the smoker is great and all, but with a little extra effort, you can do so much more with it. Of course, what you choose to do should be informed by the underlying seasoning of your smoked meat, but you can really go all out. You could even slather it with a thick layer of barbecue sauce, fry it up, and bung it in a burger with a stack of sliced vegetables—that's

not a bad choice either.

Faced with so many options, Také and his crew froze up, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, drooling in silence, lost for words. After a short while, perhaps finally realizing how ridiculous they looked, they snapped back to the present. Starting with Také, beer cups were swiftly drained, and the bears turned to each other to earnestly discuss the problem.

“What should we do? Which should we choose? What do you think will go best with this beer?”

The debate was intense, and far from short. Eventually, Také came up to me, wearing the most serious expression I have ever seen in my life. He looked like he was about to tell me I’d failed an exam, or that one of my relatives had died.

“Any chance of...a bit of everything?” he asked, his voice low.

“I mean...I would if I could,” I replied. “But any way you cut it, there’s simply not enough meat. I doubt we’ll really enjoy ourselves if we only get a tiny nibble of each dish, wouldn’t you agree?”

This pained him greatly.

“Nnnnnnnngg... Arrrrgh... Yeah, I can’t argue with that. If that’s how it is, then please fry the meat for us. You know, the fried meat with the fried egg. As for the seasoning...let’s have half with soy sauce and half with salt and pepper. And if you could make some of that stuff with the onion slices, that’d be really great. If you’ve got any other vegetables you think would be a good fit, throw those in too. I’ll pay you back after... I’ll pay you back double. Just work your magic, please, yeah?”

I nodded to show that I understood and headed back to the kitchen to start working on their order.

For the vegetables, besides the sliced onion, I decided to go with lettuce and wasabi leaves. Wasabi leaves are a great fit for smoked foods and meats, so I made sure I’d ordered some in advance. I gave them a thorough wash and served them up like a salad. Then I thinly sliced the meat I’d smoked to gently fry it up—not so much as to cook anything, just to add some extra flavor. Frying smoked meat strengthens and fixes the taste and aroma imparted by the

smoking process. It's simple but remarkably effective.

I prepared a portion for Také's group and another for our little party of three, and then carried them to the garden and the living room table, respectively. At long last, the food was finally served.

"Sure is lively today, huh! It's nice having guests 'round! Uncle Také and his friends really brighten things up!" Kon exclaimed, taking a seat at the low table.

I had no idea where they got it from, but at some point, the bears had set up an oil drum outside, filled it generously with firewood, and started a fire, brightening up the garden quite literally. The glow came right into the living room, completely changing the usual dinnertime atmosphere.

Techi had finished folding the laundry and joined us in the living room, and we all sat down. Everyone paused and put their hands together.

"Thanks for the grub!" roared the bear clan.

The three of us were enjoying our dinner, the low table set with rice and miso soup, while the bears outside were having a booze-up, with almost all the table space taken up by beers. It was quite a contrast.

Finally, chopsticks were set in motion. Kon and Techie were the first to pipe up.

"Smoked meat's really amazing!" shouted Kon. "These spicy leaves are kinda weird...but the meat is real tasty!"

I guess Kon was still a little young to appreciate wasabi leaves. Maybe a side of fried vegetables would've been a better choice than a salad...

"Hmm," Techie hummed. "Onion and wasabi leaves are a good fit here, aren't they? They're not my favorite, but I guess you needed something sharply flavored to cut through all the beer being drunk by our *guests*."

At least Techie was somewhat positive about my choice of greens. She glanced outside to see how the bears were doing.

The garden was eerily quiet. Nobody said a word, they just grinned, big toothy grins, and continued to eat and drink in silence...until suddenly, the dam finally broke, and the garden erupted into loud chatter.

"This is too good! Can you believe this stuff? It smells incredible!"

“When he says cherry, does he mean the same tree that produces the cherry blossom? Who knew you could use cherry to make such great-tasting meat!”

“Aw, man! Can you imagine if we’d had this at our cherry blossom party? Shame the season’s over.”

“Why does this taste so good? I guess we bears have a good sense of smell—nothing beats food with a great aroma.”

“I dunno about all these vegies... I like me some meat! Next time we hunt down a boar, let’s just smoke the whole thing and forget about the green stuff.”

The discussion was intense and the beer flowed freely. The bears were serious drinkers. But, true to their word, they kept the party short. Soon the food was gone, the beer was drunk, and they cheerfully packed away their fold-up chairs, shouldered their beer crates, and departed for their camp by the border gate.



WE slept very well after eating our fill of smoked boar. The next day was the final day of our private lockdown.

None of us seemed to have any symptoms of any kind of disease, and I received a morning phone call to let me know that the lab results had us in the clear. Starting tomorrow, we could move about as we pleased.

There was a real feeling of restless bustle in the house this morning. Kon would finally be able to return home tomorrow—he was clearly itching to see his family. That said, when we were taking a little break in the living room after breakfast, his face was by turns excited and melancholy, somehow even managing to blend the two. He knew that our extended slumber party was coming to an end, and part of him didn’t want it to.

Techi, on the other hand, had every intention of moving in right away, it seemed, but she still needed to go home first to see her parents. Speaking of which, I would also need to go and meet her parents before we could start living together. That was at the forefront of my mind, looming far greater than the end of the quarantine or the prospect of cohabitation.

I was aimlessly milling about—standing up, sitting down, standing up again,

walking around in circles, sitting down again. Techī kept asking me if everything was all right, if there was something wrong. She insisted there was no need to stress and implored me to relax.

I mean, it was a bit pathetic for me to be getting cold feet at this stage. After all, we'd already been living together for the better part of a week, and I'd resolved to make this work. I simply smiled and told her everything was fine.

She didn't buy it, suddenly looking very concerned. She sat down on her floor cushion.

"Mikura, you're hiding something behind that smile again," she pointed out. "I feel I can't just take you at your word. There's no need to worry or overthink things. Whatever happens, happens."

My head hung down dejectedly. She saw right through me, and that took the wind out of my sails. I reminded myself never to use my salaryman smile on Techī, and just about managed to lift my head again to look at her.

"No really, it's okay. Please don't worry," I said, trying to reassure her. "If there's anything we need to worry about right now, it's what kind of gift I can get for your parents in time for tomorrow. I also caused some trouble for Kon's parents, so I need a gift for them as well when I visit them to apologize. Any ideas?"

"A gift, huh?" pondered Techī. "Well, you could still order something through the gate staff, but surely you could just make something yourself? It doesn't have to be preserved food, either. Just pick a dish that always makes you smile. I'm sure that'll be just fine."

A dish that makes me smile? I racked my brain for something that might fit the bill. *What can I make with the ingredients I have on hand that would be suitable for a gift?* The first thing that came to mind was the amanatsu marmalade we made the other day. After all, I had planned to give some to Techī's family and some to Kon's, and I did have a few jars set aside for that purpose...but it seemed a little lacking.

Could I make something to go with it? What goes well with marmalade?

I could bake some bread or crackers...or I could go straight for the big set

piece. The problem with that, delicious as it might be, is that it might be seen as a bit of a weird gift... And even if it wasn't, I didn't have the ingredients to make it anyway.

"What is it?" asked Techī. "You've thought of something, haven't you?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I was thinking about the marmalade... I know a couple of great meat dishes that use it. You mix the marmalade with soy sauce or miso paste and then smear it on the meat before grilling it, or you can even just use the marmalade straight out of the jar. It really softens up the meat and can mask any odors it might happen to have. You'd be surprised at how tasty the result can be. Oh man, if I had some meat on the bone, I could even make marmalade spareribs..."

"Wow," Techī said. "I had no idea you could use marmalade like that." Once again, there was a hungry gleam in her eyes.

Kon had to add his two cents as well. "Another Mikura meat dish? Yes, please!"

He looked hungry too. I felt myself cracking under their gaze.

"No, look, I know it might sound really appetizing—you two look about ready to bite my fingers off. But I'd have to prepare everything today, marinade it overnight, and then get up early tomorrow morning to grill it all if it's to be ready in time to give to your families. We don't have any meat, either. The race is over at the first hurdle. If I had some pork or some boar, that would be another story."

The pair of them were up like a shot. They both had a murderous glare in their eyes, as if they were about to leave the table right now to go out and hunt down a wild animal. Then they headed out to the veranda, where we kept the weapons...

"Now hang on just one minute!" I cried out after them. "What on earth will I do with a whole boar, eh? I only need one set of ribs for each of your families! We can ask the gate staff to buy some for us, or maybe Také still has some boar left over that he could give us... No, wait, they killed that boar almost a week ago," I realized. "Even if it were still fresh, chances are they've already eaten it by now. If only we could go out and buy some... I guess we'll have to rely on the

border staff...”

Both of them still had their backs to me—I wasn’t sure if they’d heard me or not. They were reaching under the veranda to grab their staffs regardless.

What should I do? What can I do? I ran through a few options in my head, but in the end, only one seemed sensible.

“A-Aren’t you forgetting something? We’re under quarantine! It’s all well and good for us to move back and forth between here and the gate, like Také and the bears, but make sure you don’t end up anywhere you might come into contact with other people!

“Also, hunting alone with just the two of you is too dangerous, and there’s no way you will be able to disembowel one of those things by yourselves. At least get the bears to go with you! Ask for their help with the hunting and the dressing, and offer them the rest of the animal in exchange. We only need the ribs anyway. Please don’t take any unnecessary risks!”

With a nonchalance that seemed to imply that that’s what they were planning all along, the pair of them shouldered their staffs, nodded silently, and set off at a brisk pace toward the gate. A moment later, they were gone.

Their fearless resolution comes less from their hearts and more from their stomachs, I thought with some concern. I sighed a heavy sigh and sat down to go over the sparerib recipe once more in my mind. Not that it was particularly complicated.

Start by gently parboiling the ribs, then fry them in a frying pan. Once browned, transfer to a pot of water and bring to a boil. Simmer for a while, remove the scum from the surface, and add some cooking sake. Cover with a wooden drop-lid and continue to simmer, carefully removing any further scum and fat from the broth as you go.

Next, add the marmalade with either miso or soy sauce, followed by salt and/or pepper to taste, replace the drop lid and thoroughly simmer everything together until done.

As far as meat recipes go, this one wasn’t much work. Even if I went with the fancier version, it was still relatively straightforward: cut up the meat, let it cure

for a while, then marinate it in your marmalade mixture before cooking. But even the fancier recipe didn't call for several days of pickling, like when making smoked meats, for example. *Yeah, if we can actually get our hands on some ribs today, this will be a piece of cake.*

I still had my doubts about how suitable it was as a gift, but as soon as those two found out about it and charged out of the house to go on the hunt, it was too late for second thoughts. I breathed a sigh of resignation and set about doing some chores, free from any further self-doubt, awaiting their triumphant return with a huge slab of raw ribs.



TECHI and Kon had indeed gone to Také for help.

I suspected that even if they *did* manage to track down a boar alone, the two of them would've had a very hard time chasing it down and cornering it if it decided to run away. I preferred not to think about what might happen if it turned on them and attacked instead.

The bears, on the other hand, had caught their boar the other day without much effort at all. I mean, they were *a big* hunting party. I honestly thought the only sensible thing for Techii and Kon to do was ask the bears for help, and I was glad they did exactly that. When they returned, they were carrying only the ribs; the rest of the animal presumably remained with Také and his friends.

It must have been a hell of a beast, though. The ribs they handed me were even bigger than the ones from our first boar, which I didn't think was possible. *Did these even come from a boar?* In any case, it was plenty—more than enough to make spareribs for both Techii's and Kon's families.

I got straight to work, cutting up the meat, seasoning it, and leaving it to cure overnight.



THE next day, our quarantine was finally over. We could go wherever we wanted and see whoever we wanted...but I was up early that morning to get started on the amanatsu marmalade spareribs.

I followed all the steps I'd gone over the day before. Somehow, even though

the meat was only in the marmalade mixture overnight, the marinating process had been super effective. The meat had become so delicate, I was worried I might have overdone the stovetop cooking and it'd all fall apart.

Of course, the marmalade mixture does a lot for the flavor too, imparting a sweet and sour twist, as well as a notable saltiness from the soy sauce. I tried a little of the sauce while I was cooking, and I was surprised at how perfectly balanced the flavor was—no need for any extra seasoning from this point on.

The smell was divine as well. The delicious aroma completely filled the kitchen, despite switching on the extractor fan. Kon was sitting in his little chair, and Techii was standing right behind me, intensely watching every movement of their former prey, and I could hear both of them sniffing the kitchen air. There was such excitement in their breath, I was genuinely worried they might snap at the ribs if they got too close.

“Hey, you can’t eat these, you got that?” I reminded them. “These ribs are a gift for your families, and I expect them to reach their recipients. I’m keeping an especially close eye on *you*, Techii.”

Alas, it seemed my warning fell on deaf ears—they were still very much entranced. *What is going on with these two?*

At that moment, I heard a voice I’d never heard before.

“Excuse me!” called the voice from the direction of the veranda. It was the voice of a young man. But before Techii or I could turn around to check, Kon’s ears suddenly stood bolt upright, and he was bounding out of the kitchen and toward the voice.

“Hiya!” said the voice, warmly greeting Kon. “Did you behave yourself, little guy?”

Kon didn’t say a word—he just kept running at top speed and leaped a full four feet off the ground, straight up into the man’s arms.



“What’s all this, you little softie! You don’t see me for a couple of days, and now you’re desperate for a hug!” said the man, returning the little chipmunk’s hug in kind. “I hope you haven’t been crying your little eyes out and bothering your hosts!”

Kon shook his head left and right, his face buried deep in the man’s chest.

It wasn’t that Kon was sad, or that he’d had a bad time with us. But as mature as he was, he was still just a little kid who missed home.

I followed him out onto the veranda to get a closer look at the man. He looked like he might be a farmer, though I wasn’t sure—he was wearing a white t-shirt with denim overalls. I couldn’t tell if he was in his early or late twenties. He had medium-length dark-brown hair that completely covered his human ears, while atop his head he had a pair of chipmunk ears that were the same shape and color as Kon’s. A large tail wagged merrily behind him, and that too followed the exact same movements I had seen so often from Kon in recent weeks.

“Hello,” I said to the man. “I’m Mikura Moriya. I appreciate your trust in me, letting me look after your son like this, but I must apologize most sincerely that he got mixed up in my private business, and for all the trouble I’ve caused you.”

Kon’s father flashed me a cool smile in response. “Please don’t worry about it, Mr. Moriya!” he said, holding his son tenderly. He looked down at Kon as he went on. “I’m kind of glad things turned out this way, actually. The little guy’s always telling me about the things you two get up to. He’s been pretty down since Tomiyasu passed away, so I think it did him some good to ‘move in with you’ for a little while. He’s been so much happier ever since you came to the forest—even more so than when Tomiyasu was alive. I’m very grateful for how you’ve treated him.

“As for the incident, I understand the matter was no fault of your own. Neither my wife nor I feel that you did anything wrong, so there’s no need to apologize. Every business hits a few bumps along the road, especially when you’re just starting out. Everyone made it out in one piece, so I’m happy to put it behind us. I hope you’ll keep being a good friend to my boy here.”

I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Those kind words meant far more than

he could possibly know—I was grateful for them from the bottom of my heart. I bowed deeply, keeping my head low, to try and express those feelings.

“Please raise your head,” said Kon’s father. I did as he asked.

“It’s very pleasant talking out here like this, but perhaps you would like to come in?” I offered, motioning invitingly to the living room.

No sooner had Kon’s father sat down, did Kon himself suddenly come to life. His eyes were still damp from the tears, but he opened them with fierce determination.

“Oh yeah!” he shouted. “We have meat! Me and Techii and the bears went out hunting, and Mikura cooked the meat we got, and it looked so good! Daddy, you gotta eat some!”

“Oh, you went hunting, did you?” asked Kon’s father. “And what exactly did you hunt?”

“*BOAR!*” roared Kon, finally tearing himself free of his father’s breast to tear around the middle of the living room and reenact the entire saga. He started with how they found the boar, then went through the hunt itself, and finished with a full account of my heroic deeds in the kitchen, wildly gesticulating the whole time. His father listened patiently and attentively, nodding along and occasionally chiming in with an encouraging comment or an expression of shock as his son told his story.

In the meantime, I divided up the freshly cooked spareribs into two portions, and found two large, lidded pots to put them in. I closed the lids firmly and took one of the pots to the living room.

“This is the aforementioned dish,” I said to Kon’s father. “Since we’ve agreed we’re not doing apologies, this is not an apology, but I made this hoping that you and your family could enjoy it together. Please accept this humble gift.”

I placed the pot of ribs on the low table in front of him. Kon’s father reacted with a warm and genuine smile—even his eyes creased up at the corners.

“Well, well! You really shouldn’t have. Thank you so much!” he replied. Then he went on. “Could I bother you for some chopsticks?”

Apparently, Kon's father...or should I say, Mr. Sanmaya, intended to try the ribs right now. I went to the kitchen to fetch two pairs of chopsticks and some plates for him and his son.

When I brought them over, young Kon Sanmaya burst into a grin of his own.

"Mikura, Tech, you should have some too! Eat with us!"

I was a little taken aback. We couldn't eat the gift we'd just given to Mr. Sanmaya. I glanced over at Tech, who gave me a little nod. We helped ourselves to a few ribs from the Kurikara pot in the kitchen instead and brought them to the living room on two more plates. We gave thanks for the food, loaded up our chopsticks, and bit into the marmalade spareribs.

They were still pleasantly warm. The meat was soft and delicate, almost falling off the bone, yet it still had a strong meaty taste, probably because it was game. The marinade hit all the right notes—sweet and sour from the marmalade, and salty from the soy sauce. The flavor went right through the meat, and you could even taste it on the bone.

They were very moreish. As the taste of each bite faded, you just wanted to take another so you could keep enjoying that amazing flavor, even if that meant chewing on the bones. Such was the power of these ribs.

I wondered if Kon and Mr. Sanmaya felt a similar siren's call...and clearly, they did, as they finished their ribs and hungrily reached into the pot for more!

"H-Hang on!" I cried, raising my voice in surprise. The pair of them were already busy eating their next ribs. "Shouldn't you leave some for your wife?"

Kon and his father froze, their broad smiles completely fading, and they looked at me as if the thought had not even occurred to them. It pained them greatly, but they didn't help themselves to any more after that. However, despite their apparent resistance, they were still desperate to keep eating. Both Kon and Mr. Sanmaya shared the same, identical, deadly serious expression. Then, as if on cue, they both reached for the pile of bones in front of them and started nibbling away, hunting for any spare morsel of meat they might still find.

Even though Kon had the face of a chipmunk, while his father had the face of

a human, I was astonished at their family resemblance. Their facial expressions and mannerisms were almost identical. I left the room and headed for the bedroom, as father and son continued to gnaw on the leftover bones from their spareribs. It was about time for me to change into my suit.

Techi insisted there was no need for me to wear one, but I was about to meet my fiancée's parents. How could I not?

The suit itself was custom-tailored—one of my senior coworkers had recommended I have one made shortly after I joined my company. It was extremely well cut—a perfect fit in every dimension. I needed only to put it on, and I would instantly know whether I had gained or lost any weight since I moved to the Wilds.

Once I was changed, I looked myself over in the full-length mirror on the bedroom wall to make sure there weren't any problems. I really wasn't sure what to do with my hair. I would've gone to the hairdresser's if I had one nearby, but I guess I somehow had to tame it myself. I continued my preparations and attempted to style my hair in front of the mirror, when I heard a familiar voice echoing down the corridor from the direction of the veranda.

"Hello, boys and girls! Don't mind me!"

...It was Rei's voice.

What was he doing here? We were planning to go to their house, so he would have seen us there.

...

No...

Don't tell me...

I rushed to finish my personal grooming and headed for the living room.

When I got there, Kon and his father were still casually nibbling away on the leftover bones. Standing outside, watching them eat with a smile on his face, was Tech's brother, Rei. And behind *him*, stood a man and a woman, both somewhere in their forties or fifties. They were exchanging pleasantries with Tech, who was positively beaming.

The man had a slender face with long, grey-streaked hair, tied up at the back of his head. He wore a grey suit with a well-matched pair of glasses. He gave the impression of a true gentleman.

The woman had short, jet-black hair that swung around with every turn of her head. She was also wearing a very fetching suit. She displayed a very elegant smile as she spoke with Techī.

Of course, it should come as no surprise that they both had chipmunk ears atop their heads and large, bushy tails behind them. I hurried into the living room.

“Welcome to my humble abode, you really needn’t have troubled yourselves to come all the way here,” I began, summoning all the politeness I could muster. “My name is Mikura Moriya, and I wanted to meet you today to ask for your daughter’s hand in—”

I was interrupted mid-sentence by none other than Rei.

“Ah, here’s the man of the hour! Mikura, meet Mom and Dad. I told them not to bother with the fancy clothes, but they insisted, so we were a bit late today. No need for you to cling to tradition either, brother—our parents already approve of the marriage. They figure Tokatechi isn’t the kinda girl to get swept off her feet by some weirdo—her choice is good enough for them.”

I was completely speechless.

How anticlimactic.

Introducing your partner to your parents is supposed to be a big occasion, both for the parents and for the future bride herself! How could Rei completely jump the gun and deflate the situation like that?

What’s more, ever since the engagement, I’ve been worrying about every little thing. I’d slept very poorly last night, mentally going through dozens of different ways I might introduce myself and make a good impression...but all for naught. He’d completely killed my vibe.

Not that anyone else seemed concerned in the slightest, least of all Techī. She motioned to her parents and cheerfully invited them into the house. They bowed to me silently as they stepped inside, and their daughter ushered them

into the living room.

Techi grabbed a couple of extra floor cushions from the pile in the corner and laid them out for our guests. Her parents sat down first, followed by Rei and Tech. Kon and his father were sitting opposite them on the other side of the table. Apparently, they already knew each other, as they simply said hello and started chatting, just like that.

I surveyed my living room, inexplicably full of people...this was a far cry from what I'd planned for today...

Gifts. Start with gifts.

I took the other pot of ribs from the kitchen and placed it on the living room table, followed by plates and chopsticks for the visiting Kurikaras. I didn't know if they'd need them, but I brought some knives and forks as well, just in case.

Once the tableware was set out, I put the kettle on and prepared teacups for everyone... The whole situation was quite unexpected and overwhelming, but here I was, my house full of guests, and I immediately defaulted to full hosting mode. When the kettle had boiled, I made tea and brought it to the living room to serve.

By that time, Tech's father had finished his rib, placing the empty bone back on the plate and addressing me.

"Mikura, my word, that was delicious," he said. "Was this a gift for our first meeting? A very thoughtful choice. I've heard a lot about you from Tokatechi, of course, and from Rei. But now that I've finally met you myself... Well, I hope we'll be seeing more of each other."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mikura," added Tech's mother.

I immediately sat down in a polite kneeling position and respectfully bowed my head before I replied. "The pleasure is all mine."

I stood back up once more and returned to the kitchen to fetch two jars of marmalade from the refrigerator, brought them to the living room, and knelt back down on my cushion. I placed the jars on the table and presented them to our guests.

“These are also gifts for our first meeting. The spareribs you had just now were made with this amanatsu marmalade. You can enjoy it on a slice of toast by itself, or you could use it to cook a meat dish like this one if you prefer. One of these jars is for you, Mr. Sanmaya. Please take it home and enjoy it with your wife, along with the rest of the ribs.”

The first person to respond to this was not my future father-in-law, nor my future mother-in-law, but Rei, my esteemed brother-to-be.

“Marmalade! You’re not a bad gift giver, Mikura. But it’s brave of you to offer that to a family with a *pâtissier* among their number. If it isn’t better than anything I could make, the marriage is off!”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just laughed awkwardly. Kon’s father was the next to pile on.

“My, my, look at all this fancy city food,” said Mr. Sanmaya. “We never have anything like this at home. What did you call them, spareribs? I can’t believe you can make something this amazing in your own kitchen. I think we’ll have to stick with marmalade on toast. Although I guess that means we’ll have to buy some bread. And a whatchamacallit...a toaster,” he laughed. “Kon! I can’t believe you had it this good! Is all the food here this amazing? It’s like going to a restaurant for free every day. I’m pretty jealous, buddy.”

“Hehe, yep!” Kon grinned. “All Mikura’s food is this good! Today’s ribs were yummy, but so was the smoked meat, and the pancetta, and the strawberry jam! It’s all amazing! Oh, oh, and Mikura said that soon it will be strawberry season, and then he can make lots more jam for us! I can’t wait!”

Hearing that, Mr. Sanmaya’s eyes lit up with an excited, hungry spark that I’d seen many times before. It was the same look that Kon got, sitting in that little chair of his, his eyes filled with pure delight. I was amazed. They couldn’t be more alike.

Speaking of family resemblance, my in-laws were showing a subtle change as well.

When Kon was overjoyed about something, it came right out on his face. He was like an open book.

Techi, on the other hand, did not wear her heart on her sleeve like that a lot of the time. Certainly not on her face. You might be able to read her moods if you knew her well enough, but I'm sure she's caused plenty of confusion and weird misunderstandings among strangers and casual acquaintances alike. You really need to know what to look out for with Techi.

Now, as I watched her parents, I had to stifle my laughter. They were showing the same kind of small, subtle signs that Techi did when she was happy or excited about something. I wasn't the only one to notice.

"Mom! Dad!" Rei said reproachfully. "What's all this? You never get this excited when I'm making desserts at home! ...Is it the meat? It's the meat, isn't it? You've fallen foul of this man's savory gifts!"

It was too much for me, and a small burst of laughter escaped from me at Rei's indignation. That very much broke the ice. The atmosphere in the living room finally relaxed, and we all started to enjoy a lively conversation. Kon and Techi's families mainly wanted to know about how we spent our days during our quarantine, and it proved to be a fun topic with plenty to laugh about.

When we'd finished telling the whole story, Rei summed up our experience.

"So basically, you did nothing but eat for a week straight?"

Everyone laughed at that. That was pretty much our week, yeah.

When we'd all calmed down again, there was a natural lull in the conversation, and Techi's father, Hikagachi Kurikara, locked eyes with me and casually moved on to a new topic.

"So, Mikura, when's the wedding?"

I briefly froze at the question, and I could feel my salaryman smile starting to spread across my face. But I chased it off and tried to express myself as genuinely as I could. *Don't hide anything, Mikura.*

"Well... To be honest, I haven't really gotten as far as thinking about an exact date. We're officially engaged, so it will happen sooner or later. But I figure there's still a lot to get used to with my new life here, and with work on the orchard. It'll also be a while before I start earning any money. If I had to be more specific, I was thinking maybe some time after the autumn harvest..."

I did my best to keep my expression genuine, and made sure everything I said was truthful. All three of the visiting Kurikaras—Hikagachi, Torirai, and Rei—looked shocked, then disappointed...as did Techī.

“That’s...quite some time away,” said Hikagachi, apparently speaking for the whole family. “We heard that your parents would be visiting you soon, and assumed you’d want to take the opportunity to have the ceremony then.”

This time it was my turn to become flustered. My parents would be coming before the end of the month, next month at the very latest. Any way you looked at it, that would be *way* too soon. Besides, the time between me meeting Techī and the two of us getting engaged had been incredibly short. Was it really so wise to rush into the wedding as well? The last thing you want is to tie the knot too quickly with someone you barely know, only to fatally butt heads and get a quick divorce. That would be messy.

And there was another problem.

“I really appreciate how enthusiastic you are about our swift engagement and how much you’re looking forward to the wedding,” I insisted, “but I’m currently living exclusively off savings from my old office job. Using those to pay for the engagement gifts and the wedding ceremony would put us in a very tight spot...”

I had lived quite a humble lifestyle during my salaryman days, so I had enough set aside for about one year of living expenses. Well, one year with me living alone anyway, and frugally at that. Indulging myself and buying luxuries would see that money burned through in no time, to say nothing of paying for engagement gifts or the wedding ceremony itself. Wedding expenses are on another level.

The way I saw it: come autumn we’d harvest the chestnuts, sell them, and count the proceeds. Then we could figure out a budget for how much we could save, set the money aside, and plan the ceremony for some time next year.

There was also one other factor that made next year preferable. Due to the peculiarities of living in the Wilds, I didn’t technically have a Japanese address. There was no local authority for me to register with, so while I still had to pay my prefectural taxes for this year, from next year on I’d no longer be bound by

that requirement.

In fact, the staff at the gate were quite insistent that I not pay anything, even voluntarily. Apparently, it would cause them all sorts of bureaucratic headaches if a Japanese citizen kept paying their taxes from the other side of the border. It seems this loophole had saved Great-Grandpa quite a bit of money over the years. I'd still be paying for insurance and paying into my pension, but my other outgoings would see a big drop next year.

Well, that was my line of thinking anyway. It was a very reasonable plan. Techichi and I would discuss it, gradually refine it, but the skeleton was there.

Unfortunately, Hikagachi proceeded to completely obliterate all of my objections with his next remark.

"Oh yes, engagement gifts! We saw those on a TV show about Japanese weddings once. It's all amazingly expensive, isn't it? You do like your lavish ceremonies!

"Things are different here, though. A traditional beastfolk ceremony is a far less formal gathering. All the couple's relatives come together, everyone brings food and gifts for the bride and groom, and we throw a big party to celebrate the union. The happy couple doesn't have to worry about paying for anything. In fact, you'll probably come away with more money than you had going in. Guests often give cash, which is sure to help ease your living expenses for the first couple of months.

"Oh, and don't forget about the compensation money Tokatechi got from the Japanese government. It was quite a large sum. Also, Techichi's always been one to save rather than spend, so I'm sure she has some money of her own tucked away as well. Of course, when you decide to start a family, you'll start to look at money very differently, but for now, I think you'll manage just fine."

When her father was done, Techichi took over.

"Mikura, I didn't know you were worrying about money," she said. "If things get tight, we'll both simply pick up side jobs to make some extra cash, it's no big deal. Besides, now that we don't have to worry about that weasel Satoira constantly ripping us off, our chestnut profits will be much higher this year. We'll be able to set plenty of money aside, so there's no need to worry.

“As for my savings...well, this is neither the time nor place. But it’s probably fine to talk about the compensation money, since Kon got the same amount. Hmmm, let’s see...yeah, it’s probably about the same as what you’ve got in savings from your office job.”

“Whoa!” cried Kon in surprise. “I’m loaded! I’m as rich as Mikura!”

“Hmm... Yeah, it probably came to around that much,” said Kon’s father. “But remember, Kon, you can’t just go and spend it all. A new toy or two is okay, but you need to take good care of the rest. One day you’ll want to buy your own house, or your own car, and you’ll be glad you kept all those savings.”

This new fact left me completely flabbergasted. I felt all the strength leave my body. My head slumped forward, and my forehead hit the low table in front of me with a thud.

I mean, I’d heard that they’d been given a lot. I’d heard it was a sizeable sum. But I never imagined it would be *that* much. What sort of provider was I in this relationship, if my fiancée had more money than me?

Rei burst out laughing as I lay there with my head on the table.

“What, did you think that you’d waltz into Tokatechi’s life and support her like a good salaryman? Mikura, that’s a very outdated view of the world! We live in the modern era! Gender equality! Equal rights! Both partners supporting each other! All those good things.

“...At least that’s how we see things here. We beastfolk don’t save up our money to get married. We save to build a bright future together *after* the marriage—so that we can have children and grow the clan.

“In beastfolk society, both children and grown-ups can work, regardless of age. Do you really think we decide work based on gender in a society like that? For us, getting people married and raising more children is far more important. More families mean more beastfolk, and more beastfolk means we can better protect our future families. It’s all about community.

“It’s not that human society is the enemy. But humans aren’t part of the herd, see? There *are* those out there who would harm our flock, like that man from the other day. That is the threat we face, and that is why it’s so important for us

to fill these lands with more of our kind!”

Rei concluded his speech with a loud belly laugh. His father was very impressed.

“Well said! I really liked that last bit, especially. Did you read that somewhere?” he asked.

“Eh, some video game,” replied Rei.

I lifted my head off the table to steal a glance at the two men as they freely joked and laughed. I, too, was going to become a member of this family. That meant that I couldn’t keep thinking of myself as a member of the outside world. I had to be ready to become a man of the forest. One of the herd.

Daily with Techī

REI'S explanation of beastfolk marriage values was very enlightening, and I now understood why they were so keen to have the ceremony sooner rather than later. I nodded to signal my comprehension, but then realized that this was probably a situation where I should express my agreement clearly and unambiguously. This was clearly important to them.

"I understand," I said. "In that case, I agree that we should arrange the wedding as soon as possible. However, there is still the matter of my family. There are quite a number of distant relatives I'll have to contact to at least inform them of the marriage, and then there will be closer family members that will need to be invited as well—although I don't know whether they'll actually come. I would kindly appreciate it if you would allow me the time to do so. I don't have much choice in the matter—that's just how my family is. If we skip ahead, it could damage Techī's future relationship with my parents, and I wouldn't want that," I explained.

The Tokatechi family all nodded to show their understanding and their approval. As for the date of the wedding, it was firmly scheduled for "As soon as all the arrangements could realistically be made."

When my parents came to visit, I'd tell them everything that had been said today, and try to convey to them how important a swift marriage was in beastfolk culture. They would probably be able to find time for a second visit a month from now, maybe two...early summer at the latest.

There was another matter that had to be decided about the marriage.

"One more thing..." I began. "What shall we do about surnames? Am I going to take your name, or are you going to take mine?"

The Tokatechi family once again took on complex facial expressions that I couldn't make heads or tails of. They looked at each other in wordless conversation for several seconds, before coming to an understanding. Techī was

the one to announce their conclusion.

“Either is fine?” she said. “We do have a family registry here in the Wilds, of course, and we do have surnames, as you’ve seen, but it’s really not such a big deal here. It’s kind of like...leaving your surname behind is a normal part of leaving the family nest, something like that. You get married couples with different surnames, or children and parents who don’t share the same name. You just pick the name you want, file it with the town hall, and you’re good to go.

“Apparently Kurikara is an old name with a long history, but my brother will still have it, so I’m not too bothered. Tokatechi Moriya, Tokatechi Kurikara—either works fine for me.”

“I see...” I replied. “Things are really that flexible here, huh? In that case, I think I’ll leave the Moriya name behind. Since I’m leaving my own nest, you know? I don’t think it’ll be hard to sell my parents on it, either. Mikura Kurikara... It has a good ring to it. A little hard to say, though.”

If the Kurikara family appreciated the gesture, they certainly didn’t show it. They just nodded, politely but indifferently, to acknowledge my decision. They were simply pleased that everything was progressing smoothly.

With that, the bare minimum of details had been confirmed. Things like dates were still a bit up in the air, so there was only so much planning that could be done, but the wedding was going ahead. In the end, it was only a short discussion, so I suspect it may not have alleviated all their doubts, but Techī’s parents relaxed *considerably*. There were definite sighs of relief and hushed words of gratitude.

My best guess was as follows. The headline news here for Techī’s parents was not that Techī was marrying a human, *but that she was getting married at all*. That was far more important to them than who she was marrying. It was a momentous occasion, and they were worried they may have never seen it otherwise. I’m pretty sure I overheard her parents whisper that it was a huge weight off their shoulders.

I struggled to understand it.

From my perspective, Techī was a beautiful young woman with her head

screwed on straight. We got on incredibly well, and I could really see myself sharing and looking after a home with her. But her parents didn't seem to think she was suitable for marriage in the slightest; that she couldn't hope to find a good husband. In fact, for all I knew, they might not think much of the one she'd found, either.

I think it was just a matter of her parents being deeply caught up in the beastfolks' way of seeing things...but it seemed rude to Techii to dig into that right now. Probably a good idea to drop the subject and wait until the two of us were alone. Then I could ask her about their cultural values until the cows came home. It was probably a good idea for me to get clued up on that front anyway.

Kon, who'd been quietly listening to and watching our discussion, sensed that topic was coming to an end and a shift in the tone of the conversation. He took the chance to add his own perspective.

"Mikura Kurikaraaaa!" he yelled. "I think it sounds cool. Kinda like a finishing move in a video game!"

"I'm sure it'd make a great finishing move," I replied with a laugh. "But I hope you don't plan to shout my name like that every time you want to use it."

Kon's father looked at us apologetically, but the Kurikara family took no offense and laughed sincerely, amused by the young boy's antics.

Laughter was followed by more chatter, and I suspected that the serious talk was over for today. I went to the kitchen to brew more tea for everyone. We'd all been talking a lot, and I was sure people were getting thirsty. It seemed like the perfect moment for a refill.

I didn't have any fancy biscuits or cakes to go with the tea, but I did have *senbei* and *mochi* crackers lying around somewhere. I began searching for them when Techii joined me in the kitchen to help out. I left the hunt for snacks to her, while I focused on the tea.

I put the kettle on, brought the old teacups back from the living room, replaced them with fresh ones, and cleared up the plates with the finished rib bones while I was at it. Since I was boiling a whole kettle full of water, I quickly took care of washing the dishes as well, while Techii served the crackers. Kon's excitement could clearly be heard all the way from the living room.

Now that I think about it, even though Kon and his father had no connection to the marriage, they were still forced to sit through all the discussions. *I'll have to apologize for that later*, I thought to myself.

Techi came back into the kitchen, stood next to me, and peered up at my face as I watched the kettle on the stove, lost in thought.

"Don't worry about it," she assured me with an eerie level of insight. "Most discussions are very free and casual here. We could've just as easily been talking about our divorce in that dining room with the very same guests. It's not uncommon to talk about contracts or money matters by the side of the road, either.

"I only know what I've seen on TV shows, but on the human side of the border, there seems to be a time and place for more serious discussions. For the most part, things are much more relaxed here. As for Kon and his dad, they're chipmunks. We're from the same clan. So, even if we're not related, we're still very much one big family. We could move into the same house tomorrow and we'd get on just fine.

"The only reason Kon's dad sat quietly through the marriage discussion is because you didn't ask his opinion. If you had, he'd have joined in the conversation right alongside my parents, sharing his views."

I couldn't believe how well she'd intuited my thoughts.

"You might not know much about my world, but I know plenty about yours," she informed me. "Given how the discussion went, I had a good idea of what you might be thinking. And as for the engagement gifts... I have nothing against that kind of thing, but for me, it's the thought that counts. So don't worry so much about it, yeah?"

If it's the thought that counts, then that thought right there counted for so much. I suddenly felt a lot better. I nodded firmly and offered her a warm, grateful smile.

"Thank you," I said. I meant it from the bottom of my heart.



OUR quarantine was over, our first parental visit was behind us, and the most

crucial details for the coming months had been confirmed. The next day, we returned to our daily duty of watching the kids at work. It was also the first day of my new life with Techī—that is to say, it was moving day, with all the work that entailed. The day after that, we went shopping, set up a few new pieces of furniture and other bits and bobs, and we decided on the ground rules for our home life.

It was a busy couple of days. But Techī's good mood never waned, her smile never faded, and it had more of a honeymoon feeling than a simple moving-in together. She seemed to be having so much fun as we were browsing the stores and choosing furniture—no matter how tiring things got, I didn't feel any fatigue when I saw that bright smile of hers.

When Monday came around, our delivery guy, Mr. Kaōin, arrived with a very different smile on his face than usual. In addition to the parcels we ordered, he also handed me some documents from the gate staff—my parents' visitation permits. It seemed that all of their medical exams, vaccinations, and so on had gone smoothly, leaving only the signing of the final documents.

Previously, I could've just confirmed everything over the phone, but things had changed since the recent incident. I guess they introduced new documentation to show they were doing something about the issue and to cover their backs in case something like that ever happened again.

I scribbled down my signature to confirm the visit and handed the papers back to Mr. Kaōin, who was still grinning like the day is long. Techī had joined me when he arrived, and he addressed his next words to her and me.

"I'd like to share something with you. I've had this dream ever since I was a boy. I wished with all my heart that we could dismantle that crude border gate. That humans and beastfolk could see past their differences and live together in harmony, walking arm in arm into a brighter future. Well, it's quite a childish ideal, as you might expect of a little kid.

"But I studied hard to try and bring it into reality. I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; I rose through the ranks...but ultimately, I was unable to make a real difference. Now I'm just a common deliveryman, my old dream abandoned. But when I see the two of you so happy together, it feels like that dream is no

longer just a dream. A very childish thought for an old man to have, don't you think? Please forgive my saying this out of nowhere, but I pray that you will have a great many joyful years together."



Mr. Kaōin bowed to us, deeply and sincerely.

“See you next week.”

And with that, he left.

“I always thought he was a bit odd,” Techī remarked, watching him go. “Working that job once a week for all these years. Now it makes sense. I guess you get those kinds of dreamers on that side of the border too.”

She started to open the packages that had just arrived when I was hit with a sudden, perplexing realization.

I had assumed that Mr. Kaōin’s fondness toward us was due to his friendship with Great-Grandpa, but it seems that I was jumping to conclusions—his childhood dream had a lot to do with it as well.

It was certainly a beautiful dream. A rare one, too—I couldn’t imagine many people devoting their lives to trying to achieve it.

Sure, I’d heard plenty of people say they’d like to meet a beastperson for a laugh, that they wouldn’t mind befriending one—people like that were a dime a dozen. But in my experience at least, I’d never met nor heard about anyone who truly meant it.

Yet this man had gone as far as to join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs...

Now that I thought about it, was the Foreign Ministry responsible for dealing with the Wilds? *I guess it must be.* Mr. Kaōin had brought me a number of documents to sign in recent weeks, but I hadn’t paid much attention to which ministry they’d come from.

He said he’d risen through the ranks...what exactly did that mean? The ranks of government? Had he moved to a different department? No, I imagine he meant moving up in Foreign Affairs. *What’s the hierarchy like there, anyway?*

Being clueless on the subject myself, I turned to the Internet. I took my smartphone out of my pants pocket and ran a search for “Kaōin Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”

There were plenty of results. The top one was the official ministry webpage listing past ministers. I had a good idea of what I’d find if I followed that link, so

I closed the search page and locked my phone again.

He'd risen through the ranks, huh? He really meant it!

What on earth was a guy like that doing working a job like this? He'd given up on his dream? I didn't buy it for a second! I'm sure the two were connected somehow. The whole thing smelled fishy.

Well, he'd been on very good terms with Gramps, and he was genuinely positive about me living here and about my future marriage with Tech. Maybe I shouldn't think so hard about it.

I don't know if he was a friend, but I'm pretty sure he wasn't an enemy.

When I first moved here, and after the incident with the thugs, I'd let my imagination run wild, imagining this old deliveryman pulling various strings behind the scenes for the government. But there was no proof whatsoever—it felt like sheer paranoia.

In any case, for now, whenever Mr. Kaōin was scheduled to make a delivery, I decided we should welcome him with a cup of tea and some sweets, as we would any friend. As Great-Grandpa would have done. Calling him a friend might be premature, but we could still treat him as a good acquaintance.

This might all seem terribly calculating and manipulative, carefully crafting a new friendship like this, but by the sound of things, Mr. Kaōin was something of a pro in that field. Somehow, I didn't think he'd hold it against me. In fact, he'd probably be disappointed in me if I didn't.

With my plan now hatched, it was about time that I helped Tech clear away today's delivery. When I joined her, however, I saw that she had fished a bag out of one of the boxes and was holding it in front of her, staring at it.

It was a packet of beef jerky.

"Are you a fan of beef jerky?" I asked.

"Yeah," she mumbled, still entranced.

"You know, jerky is a type of preserved food as well. I suppose Gramps must have made his own too. Homemade jerky's delicious; I can understand why you'd fall in love with it."

“No...Tomiyasu never made jerky,” Techichi corrected me. “Homemade jerky, huh? Sounds nice...” Her voice had a drooling hunger to it, and she trailed off at the thought.

“Well...would you like me to make some for you?” I offered. “You have to remember, though, with homemade jerky, shelf-life is a priority. You always lose some flavor. Beef jerky tends to be made from steak, but don’t expect the same kind of taste as a fresh, juicy ribeye! I hope it’ll meet your standards...”

If Techichi wanted to try homemade jerky, I was more than happy to put in a little effort to make that happen. It wasn’t a lot of work. But Techichi’s reaction was completely out of proportion. Her face lit up as she looked at me, her eyes radiating supreme bliss.

“Thanks, Mikura! I love ya!”

...And there you have it. My fiancée’s first ever use of the L-word...elicited by the promise of homemade jerky. *I’d expect nothing else from Techichi*, I thought to myself, as I offered her an awkward smile of my own.



JERKY is a form of dried meat.

Sounds simple. Take plain meat. Dry. Done.

But that’s before you consider how you want to dry it and how you might want to flavor it.

You can dry the meat by smoking it to make smoked jerky, or you can bake it dry in the oven, to give two examples.

Dried squid, a Japanese classic, is known abroad as squid jerky. The term “jerky” is very flexible, as it turns out.

Indeed, there is endless potential for experimenting with flavoring and preparation methods. There’s no right answer when it comes to making jerky, and you might be surprised by some of the combinations people have come up with.

Jerky can be eaten by itself as a snack, but it’s also very popular when drinking alcohol or to take on the go—it is a preserved food, after all, with plenty of

calories and nutritional value. So, you should take its final use into account when deciding how to prepare it.

In the house of jerky, beef definitely rules the roost. It's by far the most popular kind out there, taking well to a wide range of flavors. Common varieties include sweet, spicy, salty, black pepper with herbs, all sorts of fruit flavors, and even soy sauce and miso. It's a real cornucopia.

Soy sauce and miso flavors were initially created by Japanese producers for the domestic market, but when the rest of the world found out, word quickly spread.

It just goes to show: when making jerky, the only limit is your imagination.

Faced with so many options, I was struggling to pick one I thought would live up to Techī's expectations. It was all very easy to say I'd make her some, but now I was hopelessly overwhelmed by choice.

I had successfully made some jerky a few years back and was pleased with how it came out. It tasted good, I enjoyed it... But now I'd be trying to please my fiancée, trying to make something that would be worthy of that unbelievable look of excitement.

It was not an easy decision. I went over the options in my head again and again and again, but by evening I was still no closer to an answer.



THE next day, we were back at work, watching the children from our usual spot in the rest area at the side of the orchard. Techī had left her seat for a while to walk around the trees, leaving me in charge of supervising the kids as they did their thing. I checked on them with regular glances while casually browsing the Internet for recipes on my smartphone.

"Hmm, perhaps the Internet isn't the answer..." I muttered to myself as I scrolled. "It's endless; there's simply too much choice. I guess online, it's always quantity over quality. Maybe I should buy a well-reviewed recipe book? That might do the trick..."

I heard the pitter-patter of little footsteps as Kon cheerfully bounded over in my direction, then hopped up onto the table directly in front of me. He sat

down casually, meeting me eye-to-eye.

“You’re making funny faces today, Mikura. Is everything okay?” asked the little chipmunk. “You keep mumbling and grumbling. It’s kinda weird!”

“Yeah, it is kinda weird,” I agreed. “It’s just... I agreed to make Techy some beef jerky, and I want to make her something really delicious, so I’ve been trying to pick the right flavor. I’m already struggling to decide whether to use the smoker or the oven, but when it comes to flavoring, there’s so much to choose from that I’m kind of lost.”

“Oh, is that it?” said Kon. “I’ve seen jerky before, but I’ve never had any. Daddy said it’s all salty and spicy, and it’s not for kids, so he’s never let me try it.”

“Yeah, that’s often the case for jerky that’s served with alcohol. Strong flavor, plenty of black pepper or chili flakes...and usually really chewy, too. It’s an acquired taste, but once you get used to it, it’s really quite good.”

“I like meat more when it’s soft!” Kon announced. “Like the spareribs you made! Soft and delicious like that!”

He looked over in the direction of my house and gulped loudly.

That made me laugh, so I decided to take a break from thinking about jerky and took up the subject Kon had introduced.

“Was it really that good?” I asked. “In that case, you should ask your mom to make some. There’s still plenty of the marmalade I made, and as long as you have that, it isn’t much work to make the spareribs.”

“Well... I did ask Mommy, but I don’t think she’s gonna do it...” Kon trailed off sadly. “Ah! But she did eat the spareribs that you made! She thought they were delicious. She asked me to say thank you, but I forgot. So, thank you very much, Mikura!”

“You’re very welcome,” I told him. “I’m glad you all enjoyed them. Still...if she liked them so much, I’m surprised she wouldn’t want to try making more by herself.”

“She says, um...she says she can’t *vizhoo-uh-lize* it,” explained Kon. “My mom

learned all her cooking by herself. She, like, figured it out somehow? She makes up the recipe as she goes. And she says that if she can't *vizhoo-uh-lize* something, then she can't make it taste good."

Sounds like Kon's mother had a good instinct for food. When she's cooking Japanese dishes, I bet they all taste really good. The problem, I'm guessing, is that she only has that kind of familiarity with Japanese food and Japanese ingredients. So, when it comes to Western dishes, she can't imagine the flavors, she can't envisage herself doing a good job. That then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and she ends up with something that simply doesn't taste right.

Kon told me about her curry. I'm very familiar with curry, of course—it's a very forgiving and reliable staple of bachelor cooking everywhere. Apparently, even this simple Western dish was a real struggle for her. But since Kon loves it so much, she persevered, tried making it over and over, and eventually managed to make something that tasted reasonably good.

"Her instinct is failing her, huh?" I wondered, comparing it to my own problem. "Hmm, I'm feeling kind of similar right now... Maybe I shouldn't butt in, but sometimes an outside perspective can reveal answers that we couldn't see before."

"What do you mean?" asked Kon with a tilt of his head.

"Oh—I was just thinking that sometimes, even if you think something won't work, you should still try it anyway," I explained. "Sometimes the right answer only becomes obvious in the doing. That's something your mother should think about. And I realized that with all my recent doubt and hesitation, I should too."

"Umm...what?"

Kon wasn't following at all. His head was tilted so far over now, I was worried it might unscrew itself and fall off. I laughed and tried to simplify things.

"I was overthinking things. Before, I was trying to find the best recipe before I even started. Now I've realized that I need to jump in and just start making lots and lots of jerky instead, trying out all the different recipes, and finding the best one that way."

"Ummm... I still don't really understand," said Kon. "But if you need to make

lots and lots of jerky, you'll need somebody to eat it! I can be your food taster!"

He grinned broadly, both eyes scrunched up tight.

I considered what flavors of jerky Kon might like—something with a sweet, fruity taste, or maybe a walnut flavor. I'd add those to the list. After all, there was no right answer, was there? Now that I could see a way out of my crisis, I needed to make some time to go to the supermarket and buy all the ingredients for *The Great Jerky Experiment*.

I spent the rest of my time with Kon enjoying some trivial talk about what was on TV last night, until Techī returned from her rounds.

"Welcome back," I said.

She joined us at the table, and I told her about how I'd decided to try a range of different jerky recipes. When I mentioned needing to buy ingredients at some point, she interrupted me with a smile.

"Why don't you go now?" she suggested. "I can handle things here for the time being."

"You know what, I'll take you up on that," I replied, getting up from the bench. "Thanks, Techī."

I tapped on my trouser pockets to make sure I had my wallet and set off toward the supermarket. Before I'd even gone a few steps, Kon had hopped down from the table and was running after me.

"I'm going too!" he shouted.

I immediately looked at Techī to make sure. She responded with a slightly strained smile. "Sure, whatever..."

I turned to Kon. "All right, let's go," I said, and we slowly headed down the road that led to the supermarket.

The last time I'd walked this path from the orchard to the settlement, all these strange and wonderful sights had been completely new to me, almost too much to process. I'd simply gazed around in awe as the scenery flowed past me, the likes of which were not to be found beyond the border gate.

This time we went at my pace, and I could admire the forest as much as I

pleased. So much so that Kon kept trying to run ahead.

“Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up!” he shouted, running left and right across the path while he waited for me to catch up. When I did, he’d blitz ahead once again.

“Just make sure you stop once we get to the road!” I called. “You never know when a car might come!”

“Okay!” said Kon.

Finally, we made it to the supermarket, grabbed a basket, and went inside.

The first order of business was to find some beef round and a wide range of ingredients to season it with.

Recently, they’d started selling herbal salts and premixed herb blends that could be used as-is to give a specific taste to your dishes. I thought they’d be perfect for our jerky experiment, but as I was about to head for the herb section, Kon turned into the seafood aisle instead. He ran down the aisle, grabbed a plastic stepladder labeled “For Our Younger Customers,” and placed it in front of one of the display fridges. He climbed up the steps and stood there, peering at the fresh fish.

“Today we want the meat aisle, little guy,” I said when I caught up to him. “Not the seafood aisle. Or are you suddenly in the mood for some fish?”

He was standing directly in front of the sliced squid.

“Hmmm...dried squid is basically squid jerky, right? Does that mean you can make fish jerky too?”

“People make all kinds of dried fish in Japan—like dried mackerel—but nobody calls them *fish* jerky,” I explained.

“Are they different?” asked Kon, blinking up at me.

“When you make jerky out of meat, it’s often smoked or baked after a period of drying. But I don’t think you tend to use heat with dried fish—most of the time you just let them dry naturally. I’m no expert on bacteria, but since you can safely eat fish raw, like in sushi or sashimi, I get the feeling that’s why you can dry them out safely without extra heat.

“Maybe in ancient times, people might have dried out meat without access to fire, but I don’t hear much about people doing that now. We know a lot more about food safety these days.”

“Dried fish, huh?” Kon mused. “We eat lots of dried fish at home. I like all the different kinds of mackerel!”

“Yeah, you eat a lot of Japanese food at home, don’t you?” I replied. “I think dried fish build up more umami flavor because they’re exposed to the sun... something like that. Even if I’m wrong about that, when the moisture evaporates, it concentrates all the flavors in the fish, so it does improve the taste. I like dried mackerel too, actually, especially with grated daikon radish and grated ginger on top. If I’m eating dried fish that has low sodium content, I might even drizzle the grated daikon with ponzu sauce for an extra citrus kick!”

“Aha!” exclaimed Kon. “So, it’s the sunshine that makes it so tasty! Can you do the same thing with meat, then?”

“Hmm...maybe? But when I’m drying meat, I don’t air dry it—I dry it in the fridge instead. Japan is a very humid country, so meat goes bad very easily, not to mention all the bugs flying around. If you use a refrigerator, the meat is way less likely to spoil, bugs can’t get anywhere near it, and the meat will still dry the same whether it’s the rainy season or the height of summer. Even if air drying increased the umami and improved the flavor in general, if you get sick afterward, then it’s all for nothing, isn’t it? I’m fine without taking that risk.”

“I see,” said Kon. “So, the fridge is much safer, huh? Maybe Mommy should dry her yams and her persimmons in the fridge then, too?”

Kon peered back into the seafood fridge one more time. When he was satisfied, he climbed back down the stepladder, picked it up, and tottered off toward the meat aisle. I followed.

“Your mom makes dried yams and persimmons?” I probed, curious about what he’d just said.

“Hm? Yeah, she does. She makes them every year,” he replied. “...Then the rainy season comes, and they start to go bad. They get all lumpy and sad-looking. Mommy and Daddy and me all love dried persimmons, so she always makes lots!”

I pictured a traditional Japanese house with a thatched roof and row upon row of drying persimmons hung up under the eaves.

“Somehow dried persimmons feel like a perfect fit for your family,” I said. “But if that’s the case, then your mom’s a member of the food preservation club, too. Dried persimmons and dried yams are both types of preserved food, you see? Well, dried persimmons are more about increasing the sweetness than long-term storage, but even sour persimmons can become quite tasty when they’re dried.”

Kon’s ears twitched when I said that. He stopped walking and spun around to look at me. It was probably because of my comment about his mother’s exclusive new affiliation. He was very happy about it, shutting his eyes and grinning as he often does.

This put Kon in a great mood—he was wagging his tail as he led the way to the meat aisle with a spring in his step. We picked out a large piece of quality beef round that would make plenty of jerky, then loaded up our shopping basket with various fruits and other ingredients for seasoning.

When we had everything, we went to the cash register and paid up. Kon was skipping all the way back to the house.

Back at home, the meat went in the fridge, the herbs and spices went in the cabinet, and Kon still showed no signs of coming down from cloud nine as he helped me put everything away.

“Jerky’s chewy, jerky’s yummy; get that jerky in my tummy!”

Another song from the young maestro. I didn’t realize he was quite this excited. Between him and Tech, I’d really have to pull out all the stops. I was starting to get fired up!

I’ve got the ingredients, I’ve got the determination, and I’ve got the motivation. Now all that’s left is to get in the kitchen and make some jerky!

My food preservation hobby was important, of course, but so was looking after the orchard. It was my bread and butter, after all. I called Kon over, and we both headed back to the orchard, where Tech was waiting for us to return.



THE following day, Techii let me skip orchard duty to work on the beef jerky instead. I was in the kitchen first thing in the morning.

This whole jerky thing was only an attempt, an experiment. There was no guarantee I'd make anything that tasted remotely good. But despite that, Techii still wanted me to give it a go. As long as she'd be getting beef jerky, she was happy. *I mustn't let her down.* I rolled up my shirt sleeves defiantly.

"Let's go, Team Jerky!"

That was Kon, of course, shouting from his little chair on the countertop. For some reason, he had shown up in my kitchen instead of at the orchard this morning, wanting to help out with the jerky. I preferred to ask a few questions before I agreed to him being my little assistant.

"Kon, is it all right for you to be here? You went shopping with me yesterday, and you took a whole week off work during the quarantine. What about the orchard? I have to ask."

Kon was by no means a lazy boy, so I was a little curious. He didn't seem to mind me probing, and he smiled back.

"It's fine! Daddy said it was okay!" Kon replied. "Daddy said I should take lots of time off work!"

"What? Really? And why would he say something like that?" I asked, my eyebrow cocked.

"Well, we get paid for how many days we appear on Techii's morning register," explained Kon. "Daddy says it's called a *pro-paw-shun*. After those men attacked us and I got all that money for *Kon-pen-say-shun*, he said I shouldn't work so much anymore. I can take days off as long as it doesn't create too much work for the other kids.

"If I keep working every day, then the *pro-paw-shun* for everybody else will be less, and Daddy said that's no good. That's why until I'm old enough to start my studies, I don't have to go to work. Buuut Mommy doesn't want me sitting around at home all day, so I'll still work once in a while. When I'm not working though, they said I should come here and help you out in the kitchen and learn how to cook!"

Kon grinned, eyes closed and teeth glistening.

I briefly reeled from his over-earnestness. Bless his pure little heart and his blinding, toothy smile.

“Oh...okay,” I replied and resumed the jerky preparations. “Carry on, then.”

Well, it’s never too early to start learning how to cook. If he ends up a bachelor, he’ll be glad he can cook for himself, and if he starts a family, he’ll be able to help out around the house.

I might not be the best role model as my repertoire skewed heavily toward preserved foods, but there was still plenty he could learn by watching me cook—knife handling, baking, boiling, broiling, simmering, roasting, grilling, pan-frying, deep-frying, stir-frying... Maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

“You know what...” I said while I sterilized the kitchen knife in boiling water. “In that case, how about next time, instead of just watching, we give you something to do, huh? You like the sound of that?”

Kon grinned as he always did, but his tail was thrashing about so much that it might tear itself off and start flying around the room at any moment. He might be a chipmunk, but he was as excitable as any puppy.

I took the big chunk of beef round out of the fridge, and it made a slapping sound as I laid it on the chopping board.

“When you’re making jerky, you have to slice the meat thinly so that it’ll dry well,” I explained. “If the meat is too soft, you can always freeze it to make it easier to cut—you can get really thin slices when it’s half-defrosted. Well, freezing food can affect its flavor, so there are people who wouldn’t dream of doing something like that. Personally, though, I can’t taste the difference when I’m making jerky, so I freeze the meat if it needs it.”

“I see,” said Kon. Then he noticed the knife I was holding. “Mikura! What happened to your knife? It’s got a weird pattern on it today!”

I held it up to the light so that he could see it better. It was much heftier than what I usually used.

“Yeah, this is one of my more expensive ones; it’s called a Damascus knife.

They use some special method to forge the steel that gives it this wavy pattern along the blade. I don't actually know anything about Damascus steel, or what gives it this pattern, but I like it a lot because the blade is really sharp. I always turn to this when I need to cut up some premium meat—it gives me the perfect cut.”

I prepared a large plate on which to place the meat slices and set them to one side. I then lined up my knife on the big block of meat. I wanted a slice that was as thin as possible without petering out halfway or tearing through the meat. I slowly made the cut.

One slice. Two slices. Three slices. Four.

Great. They were really thin. The block of meat didn't feel like it was shrinking at all. It would take a long time to cut up the whole thing. I was aware that meat oxidized quickly when exposed to air, but I continued at the same, unhurried pace.

“What're you gonna do with the meat when it's cut?” asked Kon. “Are you gonna dry it right away?”

“No, not right away,” I replied, without taking my eye off the blade. “First, we need to flavor it—I was thinking salt and pepper, soy sauce, miso, and maybe a *dashi* stock mix. We need to make a sauce with each flavor, put it in a press seal bag with the meat, and leave it to marinate in the fridge for two or three hours. Once the flavor has soaked into the meat, we'll lay the strips out neatly on a wire tray, then dry them out in the fridge.

“How long they need to stay in there depends on the fridge model and how full it is of other stuff, so it's difficult to say...but you can tell when they're dry enough by looking at them.”

“Aha! So, what happens after that?” asked Kon.

“You either smoke them or put them in the oven to fully drive out all the moisture. *Then* you're done,” I explained. “I was going to use the oven for today's batch. Smoked jerky tastes great too, but since there'll be aromatic flavors like fruit and walnuts, I'd rather not cover those up. When you're using herbs, smoking works great—the aromas of the herbs cut through just fine. But with more subtle flavors, using the smoker can overpower them, and the jerky

can end up kind of tasteless.”

“Okay! Oven it is!” Kon cheered. “So...when will it be ready? Soon?”

He tilted his little head sideways inquiringly. Half of him was genuinely curious, but the other half simply wanted to get his paws on the beef jerky as soon as possible—preferably right now, if not sooner. I tried to let him down gently.

“It depends on how long they need to stay in the fridge...” I said, “...but probably not until tomorrow. If the meat’s done marinating by noon, it might be dry by evening, but I’d prefer to leave it overnight to make sure.”

Kon’s mouth dropped open in horror. The next moment, he’d slid off his seat and was crouching on the counter, clutching his head in despair.

“But I thought I’d get to eat some today!” he cried.

Seeing him like that, I couldn’t decide if it was cute or heartbreaking. He was having a full-on existential crisis.

I thought hard to see if there was something I could do. I um-ed and ah-ed aloud as I pondered, until I came up with a compromise.

“Okay, listen,” I said. “There is one thing we could do. We *could* use the oven to quickly dry out the meat in one go. We can’t do that for all the jerky, just one little batch—honestly, it’ll only be a few strips, but it’s better than nothing. Do you want to give that a try?”

Kon was on his feet like a shot and looking straight up at me. He looked like I’d just saved his life. His face was so full of hope and joy and gratitude.

“Yeah!” he cried, full of life once again.

I’d take care of the promised batch of “instant” jerky later, but first things first, we had to get the rest of the jerky prepped and into the fridge so it could dry overnight.

Salt and pepper-flavored jerky is very straightforward. Sprinkle the meat strips liberally with salt and pepper and pat down the surface until well covered. Place in a seal press bag—without any sauce—and leave in the fridge for two to three hours.

If you plan to serve it with alcohol, you can use much more salt, but for regular jerky to be enjoyed by itself, keep things under control—it should feel like there's more pepper than salt.

Next, prepare your soy sauce flavoring.

Pour soy sauce, mirin, and cooking sake into a pot and gently simmer. Taste and adjust the flavor as you go. Since the sauce will end up coating the meat, some people will add in glucose syrup or sugar to make it thicker and give it more of a sheen.

Personally, I think just using mirin gives perfectly good results.

Once again, for those of you making jerky to go with alcohol, make sure there's more soy sauce in the mix.

When the sauce is done, cool it to room temperature, add it to the bag with the meat, and return it to the fridge.

Make two more portions of the same sauce, this time mixing grated ginger into one and grated garlic into the other, and place them in two separate press seal bags. Into the fridge they go.

For the miso flavor, there's no need for anything fancy. You can just rub the miso paste all over the meat. You can also dissolve the miso in a dashi and soy sauce blend, or make up a sauce of miso, cooking sake, and mirin, so pick whatever you like the sound of the most.

On this occasion, I combined a small amount of miso with a little water, cooking sake, and mirin, and very briefly simmered it on the stove. This keeps the miso taste subtle—you can still taste it, but it isn't overly prominent.

If you're making a miso sauce, cool it to room temperature and place it into a press seal bag. If you like ginger or garlic, feel free to add those, and some people even like to add a little butter, as it complements the flavor of the miso.

For fruit sauces, there are several overall approaches that people tend to prefer. Some people will keep things sweet and simmer the fruit as if they were making marmalade or jam. Others will bring it to a boil mixed with miso or soy sauce, similar to how you'd make a yakiniku barbecue sauce.

Of course, using premade yakiniku sauce is also an option—it is designed to enhance the taste of grilled beef, so it naturally lends itself to making jerky. Simply marinade in the yakiniku sauce as in any of the other examples.

I decided to go for the jam style, finely chopping up the fruit, adding sugar, and gently simmering it before cooling it off and popping it in the fridge in a press seal bag.

Next, we had today's headline challenge. The big experiment.

Walnut sauce.

I'd long thought walnut would make a great flavor for beef jerky, but I never found the opportunity to try it. It felt quite out there as far as recipes go, and I never quite plucked up the courage.

Well, that changed now. Today was a day of culinary adventure. The walnut sauce would fit right in.

I started by breaking up the walnuts into small pieces. I then thoroughly ground the pieces up in a mortar, quietly praying that the walnut flavor would actually make it into the meat.

Next, I had to dial in the flavor. I needed to add something sweet and something salty. I wondered which ingredients to use. Sugar is the obvious choice for sweetness, although mirin and honey also work. Honey might be good too. An inexpensive honey with a minimal aroma might just do the trick.

Honey it is.

As for salt, I could go for soy sauce, table salt, or miso. I wanted to really draw out the flavor of the walnut, and salt is great for that...but I didn't just want a strong flavor. I wanted a great flavor. Soy sauce would give it that extra something.

I combined my ingredients, mixing and tweaking and tasting as I went, trying to make a smooth walnut paste. If it got too thick, I diluted it with a little water, continuing to mix until I had the right consistency and flavor.

From here, I had two options: either smear the paste directly onto the meat, or simmer the paste on the stove with a little cooking sake. I decided to try

both. After all, the big benefit of making things yourself is being able to try different variations. You don't want to go too crazy, though—after all, you're the one who has to eat it at the end. It's a fine line between playful experimentation and mad science. The last thing you want to do is waste quality meat.

With the sauce ready, I rubbed it carefully into the meat. Then bag, fridge, and marinate.

Last but not least, we had herb and salt jerky. This was another experimental one that I decided to try, just to see how it would turn out.

Herb and salt jerky is pretty foolproof. All you need is a premixed salt and herb mix, often sold in supermarkets with names like "herbal salt" or "magic salt." The technique is almost identical to the salt and pepper recipe. Simply sprinkle on your salt and rub thoroughly into the meat.

So easy a chipmunk could do it.

Now that all the overnight jerky was marinating happily in the fridge, I could turn my attention to the "instant" jerky for Kon. I started with two easy flavors. The dependable classic: salt and pepper. And the idiot-proof option: herbal salt. As long as you didn't mess up the quantity, these were pretty much guaranteed to taste good.

Recently, they've started selling more kinds of herbal salts and herbal mixes. They're really handy in the kitchen, so I always keep an eye out for new blends.

As for the third and final flavor, I went for walnut paste and sake. I'd accidentally made too much walnut paste (and I mean *way* too much), so I was glad to use up the rest—I was able to thickly cake all the meat strips with walnut. I bagged them and put them in the fridge to marinate with the overnight ones for two to three hours.

When I was finally done with all that, enough time had passed that I could finally start preparing the first of the overnight jerky for drying.

After a few hours, once you think the flavor has fully permeated the meat strips, remove your press seal bags from the fridge and dispose of the marinade. For fluid sauces, wipe the excess moisture from the meat with a paper towel. For

more paste-like marinades, leave a little stuck to the surface of the meat. For chunky marinades like black pepper or walnut, leave plenty of bits stuck to the meat for a more interesting texture.

Next, lay your meat strips out on a wire tray. In order for the meat to dry properly, it's very important not to overcrowd them. Arrange everything neatly, making sure there are no overlaps. This can potentially take up a large amount of space, so you may want to plan ahead!

I had not planned ahead, not in the slightest. But fortunately, I'd somehow had the foresight to buy a frankly absurd number of wire trays. What didn't fit in the kitchen fridge could go in the warehouse fridge instead. *Phew!*

"Mikura..." Kon said as we walked back from the warehouse. "I think Techii will get mad if the fridge is full of meat with no space for anything else. You should be more careful about how much you make!"

"Yeah, I might've overdone it..." I admitted.

Back in the kitchen, we cleaned up all the utensils and surfaces. By the time we were done, it was finally time to get back to work on the instant jerky.

The steps for making same-day jerky are the same as before—wipe off the moisture with a paper towel, remove the majority of any paste-like marinade, and leave some of the larger chunks, such as walnuts.

Preheat the oven to 250°F and lay out your beef strips on a baking tray, once again making sure that there's no overlap. Bake at 250°F for 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, you should find droplets of moisture starting to escape from the surface of the meat. Wipe these carefully away without damaging the jerky strips, then turn them all over one by one and bake at 250°F for a further 30 minutes.

You can opt for a longer baking time if you prefer—instead of two rounds of 30 minutes each, you could go for two rounds of up to 60 minutes, depending on how thoroughly baked you want the final jerky to be. Whichever you go for, the key is to keep the heat low, while still hot enough to drive out the moisture from the beef. For comparison, when baking jerky that has first been dried out in the fridge, a single bake of 30-40 minutes at 250°F is perfectly sufficient.

My personal preference is to keep things on the shorter side rather than over-bake it, as I prefer that slightly chewier texture.

We were nearing the end of the second bake, and Kon was just about ready to explode.

“Is it ready yet? Is it ready yet? It must be ready by now!” he cried, fidgeting restlessly as he peered in through the oven door, craning his head left and right, until he couldn’t take it anymore and started running back and forth across the kitchen.

“Yes, it’s almost ready, but it’ll be piping hot straight out of the oven,” I told him. “We’ll still need to wait a little while for it to cool down. If we don’t, you’ll burn your little tongue!”

Kon was stunned, his mouth once again falling open like something out of an old cartoon. I burst out laughing, unable to stop myself. Putting on my oven mitts, I opened the oven door, fully unleashing the wonderful smells inside. I took out the baking tray covered in perfectly dried jerky strips and placed it on a trivet on the kitchen table to cool down.

The final jerky result was slightly thicker than commercially sold jerky, and had a dark, almost blackish color, rather than the usual beautiful brownish-red. I guess that’s the difference between the work of an amateur and that of a pro.

Kon scrambled up onto the table and stood directly next to the tray. He stuck his nose right by the jerky—he looked ready to snap it up at any moment—and we waited for it to cool down together. After a few minutes, I gave the all-clear, and Kon and I both reached for a piece of the walnut-flavored jerky. It was still slightly warm in the hand, and it wasn’t baked stiff—it was soft and pliant. The smell of baked walnuts wafting off it was extremely appetizing, and only grew stronger as I moved it to my mouth.

Once in, I was treated to a strong nutty aroma as the taste of the beef started to spread throughout my mouth. I took my first bite, and it had a little bit of that satisfying firmness, but after a few bites, it gently came apart in the mouth. The mouthfeel was fascinating, changing as you chewed.

This was completely different from a jerky you’d serve with a glass of whisky. The flavor of the meat itself was more subtle, although you could still discern

that umami taste that made you want to take another bite. I found myself chewing and moving the beef around in my mouth, just to further enjoy that umami flavor. Before I knew it, the piece of jerky had completely disintegrated.

“Delicious,” I said.

“Delish!” echoed Kon.

We both looked at each other, our simple comments evoking smiles. We took a big gulp from the glasses of milk I’d served for us, serving as a short break from the jerky, and we were soon reaching for our next piece.

We both went for the jerky rubbed down with herbal salt.

The first bite immediately released the faint aroma of the herbs, while the umami of the beef was much more prominent. The saltiness was also front and center. Those flavors enhanced and complemented each other in a very balanced way, and the more you chewed apart the soft piece of jerky, the more umami was released, hitting taste buds all over your mouth. I could feel myself drooling as I ate...

“Mmmm! I like this one more!” said Kon. “You can really taste the meat!”

“Kon! You’re quite the connoisseur! So, you prefer to enjoy the taste of the beef itself, do you?” I asked as I reached for a second piece of herb and salt jerky. Kon followed suit, extending his thumb and index finger in a pincer-like motion and snapping up another piece, looking pleased with himself. He then continued his painstaking analysis.

“The walnut was nice too! Walnut is always good,” he said. “But maybe the taste was a bit too strong? Like, the meat couldn’t compete? It still tasted great! But this one lets me enjoy meat more, y’know?”

With comments like that, this kid wasn’t just a connoisseur. He was well on his way to becoming a full-blown gourmet.

“I see what you’re saying,” I said, impressed and nodding along. I popped my second piece of herb and salt jerky into my mouth.

Yep. Still great.

It managed to avoid tasting too salty—perhaps that’s what was keeping the

herb flavors in check? Herbs could be overpowering, but these had a subtle aroma that was just right.

We had one more flavor to try.

The jerky king, the heavyweight champion: salt and pepper. The perfect complement to the taste of beef.

This was impossible to mess up. If you could get the ingredients onto the meat and the meat into the oven, you were golden.

I took a piece, put it in my mouth, and chewed diligently for a while.

“Pretty good, huh?” I found myself saying after I finally swallowed. “It’s good, isn’t it? Salt and pepper is a real classic.”

“Hmm...” Kon hummed, not convinced. “It does taste good...but it’s way too spicy for me.”

It seems I had my first negative review from Kon. He reached for his small cup filled to the brim with milk and started hastily washing down the peppery taste. He was right, I had overdone it—there was too much black pepper in there for a child’s tastebuds. I felt bad, so I took the remaining salt and pepper jerky for myself, and surrendered the other two kinds—the herb and salt, and the walnut—to Kon in exchange. Of course, I first set aside two slices of each for Techy to try when she got home, which were set aside on their own plate and covered in plastic wrap.

As I was taking care of that, Kon was hopelessly struggling to decide which piece of jerky to eat next. In the end, he decided to temporarily delay his attack on the herb and salt in favor of the walnut. He grabbed a piece from that pile, grabbed it firmly in both paws, and started nibbling it like a chipmunk gnawing on a walnut. That posture was already very cute, but every time he bit into the piece of beef he would blink, and when he chewed, he would look around the room as those big round eyes of his glistened in the light, and no words could possibly express how utterly charming this little creature really was. Suffice it to say, I was very pleased that I’d get to enjoy the same sight again tomorrow when the second batch of jerky was done.

Jerky dried out in the refrigerator turns out slightly tougher, but it gives the

flavors a chance to settle, while also significantly increasing the umami taste of the meat. This time we were using cuts of lean meat, dried in the oven, but when using fattier meat, the fat is sweetened by the heat. This also increases its umami, which makes the oven a great tool.

Fatty cuts of meat also do very well in the smoker. The fat lends it a sweetness to balance the smoky aroma, and even a light smoking creates the perfect companion snack for an evening of drinking beer. Just don't expect your guests to leave before all the jerky and beer is gone.

For that reason alone, it's worth experimenting with less premium cuts of meat. You can even use really expensive cuts like sirloin to make jerky with an extravagant taste, but to me, that always felt like a step too far. Sirloin makes for such an incredible steak that I would much rather have it pan-fried and served up on a plate with a little salt and pepper.

...The thought really put me in the mood for steak, despite just snacking on this jerky.

Kon had now finished his piece and was staring intently at the rest on the plate in front of him. There was still a lot of the walnut and the herbal salt jerky left after I'd traded him for the spicier salt and pepper. After all, you can only eat so much of this stuff before the body starts to politely decline, and Kon was only a little guy with a little body.

"No need to force yourself," I told him. "You can eat it later. It is preserved, after all; it'll keep just fine. You could take it home to enjoy with your mom and dad. Here, let me get you a bag for those."

I prepared a press seal bag for him, while he continued to stare at the jerky, not taking his eyes off it for a second. I heard him mutter a few words under his breath.

"I wonder how the miso and soy sauce jerky tastes... The fruit jerky sounds great too... What about boar? I bet boar would make great jerky..."

Huh...

I thought he'd eaten his fill and lost interest, but on the contrary—the little guy couldn't wait to eat more. I think I may have created a monster.

“You’ll have to wait until tomorrow for those,” I said with a nervous smile.

He looked at me with a peculiar expression that seemed to be a mix of excitement for the day ahead, and unease at having to wait that long. I handed him the bag, and he carefully placed the remaining jerky pieces inside, one by one.

I wondered if he would share them with his parents or keep them to himself. I guess he might also be planning to share them with his friends. I left him to it and started cleaning the oven and other baking equipment.

I was a little worried about whether Techī would enjoy these...but if Kon liked them, then she probably would too. They were both part chipmunk, after all.

Now that I think about it, her reaction when she found that packet of beef jerky was pretty extreme. She was practically hypnotized, staring at the bag she held in her hands. She must *really* like the stuff. Unusually so.

When I asked her if she had a favorite flavor of jerky, she dismissed the question, saying that anything was fine and leaving the selection of flavors up to me. Was that her way of saying that she simply loved beef jerky in general...and especially the flavor of the beef itself?

Maybe I should have probed a little deeper before I got started—I slightly regretted not paying more attention. Ah well, the jerky was made. We could talk about her tastes more when she came home. And with that, I got back to cleaning up the mess in the kitchen.



AS evening came, Kon finally headed home. He gripped the press seal bag tightly in both arms as if it were a precious treasure, and skipped away with a huge grin plastered on his face. Techī returned from the orchard just as Kon was leaving, so they briefly crossed paths.

Techī came in, washed her hands, and changed into a jersey and sweatpants before joining me in the living room. I brewed some fresh tea and relaxed for a bit while we told each other about how our respective days had been. She told me how today’s work at the orchard had gone smoothly, with nothing unusual to report, while I told her all about our jerky adventures.

As I told the story, she got up, went to the fridge, and opened the door to check our handiwork. She grabbed a can of beer and a chilled glass from the fridge, as well as the plate of jerky I'd left for her on the kitchen table, and smiled cheerfully as she came back into the living room.

"Why do I love beef jerky so much?" she said, alluding to a question I had asked earlier as she sat back down on her floor cushion. "I had to think about it, but I don't think there's any specific reason. I've just liked it ever since I was a kid. I had really weird tastes for my age—I loved stuff like squid with *shiokara* fish paste, dried fish roe, and, of course, jerky.

"If I had to point to a specific reason...then maybe it was my mom's influence. She loves all that stuff too, so it was always lying around at home, either because she'd bought it or made it herself. That makes a lot of sense, actually..."

Techi wasted no time when she sat down, immediately cracking open her beer and pouring it into a glass. Then, with a gleeful smile, she took her first swig of beer and tossed a chunky piece of jerky into her mouth.

"Hmm, you're right—the taste is a little on the weaker side, as you say..." she commented. "But it's still jerky, no doubt about it. I'm more interested in how you got it so soft. I like my jerky so tough you can't even bite through it. Mom used to buy a few different kinds, and one of them was this really tough one—I liked that one more than any of the others. I used to sit in front of the TV and just chew on it endlessly."

I watched her profile as she spoke, happily drinking her beer and grazing on the jerky as she spoke.

"The toughness of the jerky depends on how hot you set the oven, so that's very much something you can change," I replied. "I'm curious...you said your mother always had *shiokara* and jerky and such around the house. Those are some pretty intense flavors for children's snacks... Does your mother drink a lot by any chance?"

"Yeah, that's right. She likes a drink," said Tech. "She won't touch alcohol before 5 p.m.—it's a rule of hers—but she'll typically crack open her first drink after that. We've had plenty of funny-tasting dinners at home as a result. There

used to be a bar in the neighborhood that had an all-you-can-drink option—you paid in advance and could choose any of their cheap drinks. When Mom discovered it, she became a regular. Very soon after that, the bar called it quits on the all-you-can-drink deal.”

“That’s...impressive,” I admitted. “Okay, she drinks a fair bit, then. That explains why you always had jerky and other drinking snacks on hand.”

Since we were on the subject of her parents, maybe now was a good time to raise that question I’d been holding onto since their visit. I carefully observed Techī’s reaction as I broached the topic.

“By the way, Techī, about your parents...” I began. “How should I put this... It did feel like they were trying to rush you into the wedding. Any particular reason?”

She didn’t seem at all bothered by the question, and her answer was very nonchalant. “Oh, that. I guess it’s because I’m unsold stock, huh?”

I did not expect anyone to be able to drop that sort of bombshell with quite so much detachment. I struggled to come up with a reasonable reply. Techī noticed my unease and roared with laughter.

“Hahaha, don’t look so surprised,” she said, “it’s pretty common here in the Wilds. Most people ’round here meet their future spouse when they’re young, working together at their childhood jobs like Kon and the others. They spend so much of their time together when they’re growing up that a lot of them end up getting married.

“Obviously, kids have no such plans for the future, but their parents will often arrange for the children of their friends to play together; they’ll invite them to go on trips with them—you know, generally plot and scheme. It’s a long game.

“As for me, well, here I am—hardheaded, with a strong head for alcohol, and miles ahead of the pack when it comes to fighting with a staff. I’ve always just been unashamedly me, and no boy was ever interested in that. Besides, there were also people who disapproved of me working for Tomiyasu, the only human living in the Wilds. I always figured I’d find someone who was right for me sooner or later, so I never worried about it. But my parents, of course, were a very different story.”

With that, she knocked back her glass in one go.

It seems that Techii was not a heavy drinker herself, but a sensible one—she liked to enjoy a drink or two in the evening, or with a meal. Even on special occasions like a birthday or a cherry blossom party, where people typically cut loose and drink themselves blind, Techii preferred only to drink enough for her cheeks to go rosy.

However, if her mother was such a prodigious drinker that she almost single-handedly put a bar out of business, word of that would no doubt spread. Even if Techii herself didn't drink all that much, her mother's reputation preceded her own.

"So, you have yourself a little reputation," I said. "I don't see a problem. As long as you're not damaging your health, there's nothing wrong with enjoying a few drinks."

Techii grinned at that. She looked out toward the veranda and into the garden.

"Don't worry, I may have a high tolerance, but I don't drink that much. When it comes to eating beer snacks, though, that's another story. I'm very happy when those are within easy reach. When I was little, where other kids said their favorite foods were hamburgers or curry, I proudly said I loved squid shiokara. I don't know if the other kids were weirded out or impressed... But it just tastes so good.

"Take some shiokara, toss it in a bowl of piping hot rice and enjoy the firm texture of the squid and the heavenly taste of the fish paste offset against the sweetness of the rice. It's such an amazing mix. Ooh, or steam a couple of potatoes, cut a hole in the tops with a knife, and load them up with shiokara. That's a killer combination too."

"Mmm, I know what you mean; that does sound really good," I agreed. "It feels like a very extravagant topping for freshly cooked rice or steamed potatoes, doesn't it? I've actually made squid shiokara a couple of times before, so the next time we can get our hands on some quality squid, let's try making our own. As for steamed potatoes...when are Hokkaido's new potatoes in season? I think it was around August..."

I was watching Techii as I spoke, while she gazed out into the garden. She

continued to look outside wordlessly as she slid her floor cushion over toward mine, until she was sitting right next to me. Only then did she finally return my gaze, before being overcome with what I assume was embarrassment and staring fixedly down at the table.

“Yeah,” she said sheepishly, with a small nod, her cheeks taking on a rosy tint.



MOST of the next day was spent finishing the overnight jerky from the day before. I'd made a lot of different flavors, using plenty of beef for each, and there was only so much jerky that would fit in the oven at any one time. Add on top of that the regular daily chores like cleaning, sweeping, and, of course, making food for myself and Kon, and it turned out to be a very busy day indeed.

Eventually, I finished, though, and by evening, all the different flavors of jerky were packed into their own separate bags for storage.

“Mmmm! This fruit jerky is yummy!” Kon exclaimed. “It’s very sweet. I’m surprised at how well that fits! You just wanna eat more and more. But the meat taste is still there all the time, and it’s nice and soft too.”

I looked at Kon sitting on the kitchen table and crunching his way through his jerky. I pulled up a chair to join him on a little break, treating myself to some jerky as well. After a little while, Kon finished his first piece and pulled a second one out of one of the bags with both hands.

“Mikura, now that I look around...” Kon began. “I think you made too much.”

“Too much jerky?” I replied, still enjoying my first piece. “There’s a lot, yeah, but it won’t be going bad any time soon. Besides, there’s all sorts of things you can do with jerky. Nothing to worry about.”

Kon looked confused.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “What else is jerky good for other than eating?”

“No, I...of course I mean eating,” I explained. “But you can make things with it, use it in other dishes. You can cut it up into little pieces to sprinkle on salads, use it as a replacement for ham or bacon when cooking, or even add it to soups

to add to the flavor.

“That last one is especially tasty—making jerky concentrates all the *umami* in the meat, brings out its saltiness, and highlights the flavors in the fat. You only need to put it in some boiling water to get a pretty good soup stock, a bit like making dashi. This time around, I kept the flavors on the weaker side, but they’d still make for a good soup. They’d still give it a strong umami base.”

“Wow, you can use jerky to make dashi? So, they’re kind of like bonito flakes!” Kon said with excitement in his voice.

For those of you who may not be familiar with them, bonito flakes—also known as katsuobushi—are thinly-sliced shavings of dried bonito fish (known in Japan as katsuo) that are used to make dashi stock, the basis for a great many soups in Japanese cuisine.

I laughed at his comparison.

“Hahaha, you’re right,” I agreed. “I guess you could think of *katsuobushi* as a kind of *bonito jerky*, although the process of making it is much more complicated, very hard work. But you can use them in similar ways—bonito flakes are good sprinkled on salads too.”

“Oooh, I didn’t know you could put katsuobushi on salad! At home, we eat a lot of tofu with bonito soy sauce.”

“Sure. Mustard greens and daikon salad is good with katsuobushi,” I said. “Or any salad with small fish in it. The same goes for crispy salads where you’re using fried wonton strips. They’re all improved by sprinkling them with some larger bonito shavings.”

“I’ve never even heard of those salads!” Kon cried. “Mikura, make some next time!”

“Sure, why not. They’re all pretty easy. I could even make some on Sunday—that way you won’t have to skip work to join me.”

This delighted Kon, who grinned back at me, then proceeded to start munching on his second piece of jerky as his tail flicked around happily behind him.

He paused again, apparently remembering something.

“Mikura, can you make your own katsuobushi?” he asked. “It’s a kind of *pruh-zurved* fish, right?”

At first, I hesitated.

“Um—” Then I decided it was probably best, to be honest. “No way!” I answered resolutely. “Katsuobushi? Not happening!”

Kon was a little shocked and looked at me in blank surprise. I laughed.

“I did say it was very complicated and a lot of work, didn’t I? I think the entire process takes a hundred days from start to finish, maybe longer... Besides, when they make it in a factory, they have all kinds of special tools. Without any of the equipment, it’d probably take even more time and effort. The katsuobushi you can buy in a shop is top class—perfectly tasty and reasonably priced. I promise you, it’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Oh, okay,” said Kon. “I just thought that since katsuobushi has been made in Japan for a long time, you could make it at home too, like miso.”

“No, it’s very difficult...” I replied. “Making miso is not exactly simple either, but compared to katsuobushi it’s a walk in the park. I guess miso is about as much work as the jam I made or the smoked meat. ...Now, as for canning your own food, that’s another story. There’s something I’d love to try at least once. Maybe we should try doing that next?”

Kon was dumbfounded, his face blank and his mouth agape. He looked over at the kitchen shelves—first up at the bag of bonito flakes on the top shelf, then at the tins of mackerel lower down. He looked up and down, up and down, over and over again in a nodding motion, before finally turning around to face me and shouting in disbelief.

“*No way!* There’s no way you can do that! How is making metal easier than drying fish?!”

I could understand his reaction. At first glance, making your own canned food might seem much harder. But there was, of course, a shortcut.

“It’s not as hard as it sounds,” I told Kon. “You can buy canning kits online.

You get the metal cans, the lids, and a tool that seals the two together. All you have to do is make your own food to go in the cans, fill 'em up, seal them with the special tool, and then boil the sealed cans to sterilize what's inside. As for the sealing tool... Well, you put the lid on the can, then you mount this thing on top of that and turn a handle 'round and 'round. It folds the two pieces of metal into each other to create a tight seal. The kit wasn't that expensive...about twenty thousand yen, I think. It even comes with a range of cans in different sizes.

“Just think of all the canned food we could make with that. Miso stewed mackerel, seasoned beef mince... Hmm, I wonder if you can do canned fruit? I don't see why not—as long as the fruit can take the heat to be properly sterilized, it should be fine...”

I gesticulated enthusiastically throughout my explanation, which only got Kon more and more excited. His eyes shone and his tail flicked about. Since he started spending time with me, he'd fallen head over heels for preserved food, and now he was hearing the tempting song of the beautiful art of canning. I understood perfectly—making your own canned food is a thrilling idea. The first time I heard it was even possible, I felt that same excitement myself.

There was definitely no space to keep a canning kit in my small bachelor pad, so I sensibly resisted the siren's call. But my life is very different now. My house is huge, and I didn't have to worry about space.

“Well...it is quite a big purchase,” I admitted. “Not exactly pocket change. I'll have to ask Techii first. If she gives me the okay, I'll order one. It'll probably arrive a week or two after that.”

Kon was thrilled, his eyes shimmering intensely and his wide smile exploding into a full grin. He thrust both arms overhead in triumph, then brought them back down and started counting on his fingers.

“Okay, umm, we'll need mandarins, and peaches, and pineapple...” he muttered, counting them off. “What other fruit is good in a can... Maybe persimmons? I've never had canned persimmons, though... Oh, oh! We should make coconut gel!”

Coconut gel? I don't know if that qualifies as canned fruit, little guy... Is a

coconut even a fruit? It has “nut” right there in the name. Who knows. Either way, coconut gel definitely seemed beyond the reasonable limits of home cooking, but if I ended up buying the kit, I’d definitely be sure to make a can of pineapple chunks for Kon. He was so excited by the whole notion that it simply went without saying.

A Second Visit

THE next few days passed quietly and without incident. I went to the orchard every day, not having any particular preserved foods to work on—unless you counted eating the mountain of beef jerky we had at home, which we were now gradually working our way through. Beyond that, there's nothing worth mentioning.

I was perfectly happy to spend my days in this slow and leisurely way, but unfortunately, that was not to be. Over the course of those few quiet days, my parents finally finished undergoing their medical exams, vaccinations, and doing the final bits of paperwork.

Their visit was ready to go ahead, and they would be arriving tomorrow.

To be perfectly honest, I found the whole idea of them visiting unbearable. But unfortunately, we were already on a direct collision course. The meeting was unavoidable, inevitable, slowly rumbling toward us like a freight train. That said, I think Techii was feeling the pressure even more than I was, nervously steeling herself for what was to come.

Which brings us to today, the day before the visit. I had been making preparations for my parents' arrival since the early morning. That makes it sound like I was putting in a lot of effort, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. I cleaned the house and picked out some nice clothes, then prepared the ingredients for a meal we could enjoy later on, which was only slightly fancier than the sort of thing I usually cooked. I wasn't especially going out of my way.

"Mikura's mom and dad, huh?" Kon pondered aloud from his seat on the kitchen counter. "I wonder what they're like..."

Okay. We did make one special arrangement, and that was to make sure Kon was here today. Kon was a beastchild, and any child Techii and I might have in the future would be like him. Techii wanted my parents to see him before they gave their final approval for the marriage, so I asked his parents if he could join

us. Neither Kon nor his parents were fazed in the slightest, and he himself agreed with an upbeat smile. He'd be staying the night at our place, since my parents were supposed to arrive early the next morning.

Considering that I was asking them to get involved in tedious family matters that did not concern them, I expected Kon and his parents to need some more convincing. I certainly didn't expect such a positive reaction. I suspect that Kon would cheerfully agree to anything for the promise of a good meal, while his parents seemed happy to get a little time to themselves... But on the other hand, maybe I'm being too cynical. The people who live in this forest do seem to be very generous folks.

"My parents?" I said, taking up his subject. "They're just normal people; nothing interesting about them. I'm afraid you might be in for a boring time today, but it should all be over in a few hours. Thanks in advance, little guy."

Kon looked at me with a more nuanced smile than usual, letting his feet swing freely from the edge of the chair as he carefully watched me continue with my work.

"It's all good," he said. "You promised me a delicious *katsuobushi* salad for tomorrow. I'm really looking forward to it!"

"It's not a katsuobushi salad, buddy," I corrected him. "The katsuobushi is just a garnish that goes on it at the end. The main ingredients are completely different... If my parents were arriving a little later, we could've had food delivered, but that's kind of out of the question that early in the morning. We'll have to try and fool them with my home cooking instead."

"I like your cooking better, though!" Kon declared. "You can always get take-out."

"I think you've got things a bit backwards," I said. "Most people see take-out as an occasional treat. But I'll do my best to live up to your standards."

"What's the menu for tomorrow, anyway?" he asked.

"In the end, I think we decided on crispy salad, pork *shabu-shabu*, bacon and egg sandwiches, and fruit yogurt. To be honest, I thought we'd be fine with just salad and sandwiches, but Techii wanted to go all out—she felt it wouldn't be

enough for a satisfying meal. Now I think we've gone too far the other way. In any case, it'll be quite the spread."

"Pork *shabu-shabu*? Fruit yogurt?! Wow!" Kon shouted, his eyes already twinkling with anticipation at the expanded menu. His feet, previously swinging at their own leisurely pace, suddenly started moving with much greater urgency. Seeing that, I couldn't help but laugh out loud a little. I looked behind me and onto the veranda to check if Techī had returned from her morning shopping trip, but there was still no sign of her.

If she was only going to the supermarket, she should've been back already. While she was out, I'd made the wasabi soy sauce for the pork shabu-shabu, the herb mayonnaise that would go in the egg sandwiches, and finished up a batch of fresh strawberry jam. I placed these all in storage containers and put them in the fridge, then turned my attention to cleaning up all the cooking utensils.

By the time I was done with the cleaning, there was still no sign of Techī.

"Techī's been gone a really long time... Did something happen?" I wondered aloud. "Maybe I should give her a call..."

Kon, who was now sitting on the kitchen table, was smearing some of the freshly made strawberry jam onto a piece of toast and about to take a bite.

"Has it really been that long?" considered Kon. "Mikura, even if she hurried, Techī wouldn't be home this soon."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "She only went to the supermarket."

"Techī took her shopping purse with her, but she also took her staff. I think she's gone hunting. To get meat for tomorrow," he said.

"She went...hunting? *She went hunting?! Are you serious?*" I cried, shocked and baffled at Kon's revelation. "So, when she said that she'd hunt down some meat, she meant that *literally?!?*"

Kon shook his head from side to side slowly, surprised by my surprise. "Well, I think she went with Uncle Také and the other bears, so they shouldn't be much longer."

Now that he'd explained the situation, he turned his attention back to his

piece of toast, fully engrossing himself in the taste of the strawberry jam, and leaving me in a state of stunned disbelief. My head was a tangle, and I had very mixed feelings about what I'd just heard... The one thing I knew for certain was that I'd have to make some changes to the shabu-shabu. I moved over to a cabinet in the corner of the kitchen.

When I make pork shabu-shabu, I collect all the vegetable scraps from the day's cooking and boil them in a pot of water. I can then rinse the pork in this vegetable water to remove the meat odor. But if Techii was planning to bring back boar, like Kon said, I was worried that the vegetable trick wouldn't be enough. I'd need something stronger to fully cover up the odor of the boar meat.

Ginger. Ginger might help. I took some ginger off the shelf, minced it finely, and placed it in the pot with the other vegetables. Once rinsed, the meat would be ready to use for shabu-shabu.

To arrange a shabu-shabu platter, prepare some roughly sliced celery, similarly chopped seaweed, some round sliced tomatoes, and lay everything out nicely on a plate with some smallish Japanese mustard greens. Add wasabi soy sauce to the meat—a simple mix of wasabi and soy sauce, with a little added sugar and ponzu—and the shabu-shabu is ready for cooking at the table.

You can also make a perfectly good sauce from ground sesame seeds, mayonnaise, and ponzu sauce, but I thought wasabi was a much better fit for all the other items on tomorrow's menu.

When eating shabu-shabu, wrap a little celery and seaweed in a wafer-thin piece of meat smeared with wasabi soy sauce, and you're good to go. The contrast of the firm crunch from the celery and the slipperiness of the seaweed is wonderful, while the combination of flavors of the celery and tomatoes will keep your guests reaching for more. Occasionally mix in a few mustard greens for variety, and there's plenty of variation to prevent diners' tastebuds from getting bored.

But all that advice was intended for pork shabu-shabu. I was really worried about whether or not it would also work for boar. But Techii was trying her absolute best to make sure this visit went well. If she decided serving boar was

the best way to do that, I needed to keep my doubts to myself and make it happen. With that thought, I returned to the food preparations.



IT was a tough day in the kitchen after that. A real crusade. But I made it through somehow.

The following morning, I received a very early phone call from the gate staff, and we were now all waiting by the front door. A white van appeared on the path leading up to the house, presumably with a border worker behind the wheel. It appeared the new policy was to chauffeur visitors to and from the gate directly.

The van drove right up to my front door, stopped, and my parents stepped out.

My father had a bulging middle and thinning, combed-back hair. His navy-blue suit and the small bag that he gripped under his arm loudly announced that he was firmly in the throes of middle age. My mother's long, tied-back black hair was starting to lose its youthful sheen, but still contrasted strongly against the beige suit she was wearing.

My mother...Mom, looked first at me standing in the doorway, but was soon transfixed by the spectacle of Tech and Kon. I had already sent her a photo of them, but it's always a different experience in the flesh—that's your real first impression...and my mom's seemed to be one of considerable surprise. My dad, on the other hand, was grinning as if he had just set eyes on his first grandchild for the very first time.

"Isn't this something? Beastfolk! Takes me right back to my childhood," said my father as he walked over to us. "Well, I have seen some of your kind since then—I'd usually spot a few of you when I came to visit my grandfather as an adult—but you'll forever be a part of my childhood summer memories. Gosh, how nostalgic!

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Mishiné, Mikura's father," he continued, greeting Tech with a handshake. He then promptly turned his attention to Kon, crouching down to his level. "There's a good boy," he cooed, playfully tousling the fur on his head.

“So, these two people are...beastfolk, are they?” asked my mom. “I’ve never set foot in this forest before, so this is my first time meeting any of your kind. I see how it is now... Oh, and you look like this when you’re young, do you?”

She was a little distracted.

“...Oh, I’m sorry, I should introduce myself. My name is Tsukino.”

She offered Techii a shy handshake, then looked down at Kon, who was grinning from ear to ear as my father scratched behind the chipmunk’s ears.



Mom's eyes opened wide; her surprise now completely unmistakable...but she did not look away. If Mom was ever disturbed by something, she would always avert her gaze. So, this was good. The way she was looking at Kon, it seemed she wasn't feeling any aversion...or, knowing my mother, it was probably that Kon's adorable charm had won out over everything else. She continued to stare, wordlessly.

"Well, shall we talk in the living room?" I suggested.

Hands on hips, my father heaved his way up onto the high threshold with a grunt, while my mother followed behind Kon, watching him closely as he toddled through the house toward the living room.

We'd stowed away the usual low tea table and set up a larger one for hosting guests in its place. It was covered with all the food we'd prepared yesterday—the crispy salad, the shabu-shabu, the bacon and egg sandwiches, and the fruit yogurt—all served on our more elegant tableware and laid out neatly.

Mom glanced at the spread, but instead of sitting down at the table (we'd also laid out our fancier-patterned guest cushions for the occasion), she floated right into the kitchen and immediately opened my fridge to inspect its contents.

Well, at least I was ready for that.

She'd done exactly the same the very first time she'd visited my city apartment, and she continued to do so with every subsequent visit. I knew it was a guaranteed outcome. So, I paid her no heed, and took my own seat at the living room table instead.

Techi and I sat on the side of the table closer to the kitchen, with Kon in between us, while we seated my parents on the veranda side. Dad actually sat down, unlike somebody else.

"This place is full of memories, too," he said, looking around energetically.

"Mikura! What's all this?!" came the inevitable call from the kitchen behind me. "Why is your fridge filled to the brim with meat? That is far too much meat for one fridge by any stretch of the imagination." Having finished her inspection, she announced her final judgment. I turned around with a certain resignation to explain.

“Techi went out of her way to hunt down a boar in the forest, just for today. Thanks to her, we’ll be able to enjoy something a little more unique than regular pork shabu-shabu. What you see in the fridge is all the leftover meat. Although I do plan to find a way to eat that too, of course.”

Mom was speechless. Fortunately, Dad was ready to step in.

“Wild game, huh? Grandpa used to cook a lot of game for us. Deer and bear and the like. The deer was especially good, I liked deer a lot.”

Then, without a moment’s hesitation, he picked up his chopsticks from the table, reached for a piece of boar shabu-shabu, and started eating.

“Hey!” cried my mother. “We’re still talking, haven’t even sat down at the table, and you’re reaching straight for the food? What kind of impression do you think you’re making on Miss Tokatechi?”

She rushed around to his side of the table and jabbed him in the ribs, but Dad didn’t seem to mind.

“It’s really good,” he said, and continued to eat.

Emboldened by this, Kon cried out, “Thank you for the food!” and picked up his own chopsticks, going straight for the crispy salad he had been looking forward to so much.

The salad consisted of thinly cut *daikon* radish with finely chopped mustard greens, sprinkled with fried wonton strips and, of course, katsuobushi, all gently splashed with a little French dressing. Kon stuffed his mouth completely full of the stuff, making a range of delighted young chipmunk noises that were just about audible over the crunching sound of the salad. He swallowed greedily and aimed his usual, beaming smile directly at me.

“Mikura! This salad is outta this world!” he cried. Then, determined not to fall behind my Dad, he reached for a piece of boar shabu-shabu.

Meanwhile, Techi was quietly nibbling on an egg sandwich. She was taking bites so small that it was hard to tell if she was even swallowing anything. *She must be really nervous*—I could certainly sympathize. I took it as a cue to make a formal introduction.

“Mom, Dad, this is the woman I intend to marry...” I began. “Or should I say, the woman I’ve proposed to, Miss Tokatechi Kurikara. She’s moved in with me, and we’re currently living together...oh, but I did meet her parents before that, who both gave us their blessing, as did her older brother as well. In beastfolk custom, it’s normal to have the wedding ceremony as soon as possible after the engagement, so we’d like to get things moving quite quickly. We were hoping to make it happen before summer...”

Dad turned to look at me with a glad smile, thoroughly chewing all the while, before finally he swallowed and responded.

“Good, good,” he said. “If it means I’ll get to meet my grandchildren sooner, then go for it. Get the wedding over and done with, bish bash bosh! Oh, but you will need to invite your aunts and uncles from Yokohama, and you’ll need to get in touch with Machi’s lot over in Shizuoka as well. As soon as you know the date, make sure you let them know, okay? For now, just tell them that there’ll be a wedding and they’re invited. I’ll help them sort out all the paperwork to come here. The ceremony will be taking place here, of course. We can’t exactly get Techii out to the other side.”

Suddenly, my mother cut in. She seemed to have some reservations. “Hold on! Not so fast!”

But Dad interrupted her in turn, completely unfazed.

“*Give it a rest,*” he said firmly. “The time for any objections from us is long gone. Everything’s already been decided. *It’s done.*”

Normally, it was Mom who had the final say at home. For the most part, Dad went along with whatever she decided—he was that kind of person. But very occasionally, he would come out with that unassailable line: *Give it a rest*. When those words crossed his lips, the discussion was over. It meant that something was so important to him that he wouldn’t budge so much as an inch.

Dad was very much on the straight and narrow. He occasionally had a few sips of sake, and he didn’t smoke. His hobby was walking. He didn’t gamble on horses or play pachinko, and there had been no infidelities or other crazy drama in his marriage. Every day after work, he was back at a regular time. On the weekends, he was always there to spend time with his family. *Always.*

When a man like that put his foot down, it was very difficult not to let him have his way. Mom's policy in these situations was unconditional surrender. Dad always put family first, ahead of himself. I suppose that extended to his stubborn outbursts too. That's probably why Mom could never say no.

As always, she simply let out a small sigh and dropped the subject, looking the other way. Seeing that she'd backed down, Dad smiled again and reached for the fruit yogurt. The yogurt was a simple dessert—I'd simply added a bunch of canned fruit like mandarins, pineapple, and peaches. Dad ferried a spoonful into his mouth with another grin.

"Mm-hmm," he mumbled, reaching for this and that with his spoon and his chopsticks. "So! Congratulations all around. Happy occasions make me hungry, so I hope you don't mind if I eat my fill today!"

He glanced over at Techī, who was not making much headway with her food, and addressed her with a big, warm smile on his face.

"Miss Tokatechi," he began, "we and our boy may be a bit odd, but I hope we can all get on well. Please take good care of him for us. As for right now, we should get on with this breakfast spread. On a special day like this, you've gotta eat your fill. Those are the finest moments in life!

"For many generations, my family has prayed to the goddess *Ukanomitama*. Did you know? Being a goddess of food, sometimes she's also called by the name of *Mikuranokami*, or 'goddess of the warehouse.' You may notice a similarity between her name and my son's. Mikura was named after an ancient goddess, you see."

This was news to me! Apparently, Mom was also hearing this for the first time, and we looked at each other in amazement. Techī, on the other hand, finally relaxed, her nervousness dissipating and a smile taking its place.

"Thank you for the food," she said, for a second time, and took a hearty bite out of her egg and herb sandwich.

When I was little, I asked about where my name came from a number of times, but I don't remember ever getting a serious answer. I never expected to be named after a goddess, though. Isn't that tempting fate a little? On the other hand, I'd survived on this Earth for twenty-five years without any major

disasters, so I guess it didn't work out too badly for me.

After my father's comment, the atmosphere loosened up and Techii became more talkative. We ate while enjoying a pleasant chat, and what had initially seemed like an excessive amount of food was soon dwindling. I was sipping my freshly brewed tea when Dad turned to me, behaving with unexpected seriousness.

"By the way, Mikura, how're you doing with savings?" he asked. "Have you got enough to cover the ceremony?"

I placed my half-full teacup on the table and put on a straight face to match his.

"We'll be just fine," I replied. "I took a page out of your book, Dad, and saved up everything I could. I never spent money frivolously. Techii also works as a kindergarten teacher, and we have the house and the orchard that Great-Grandpa left us. The wedding won't cause us any financial trouble."

"I see..." he said. "Well, you were working at a pretty fine company, and your sales numbers were always good, so I'm sure you had plenty to set aside... In that case, you can use this to pay for the renovation of the house."

My father picked up the small bag that was lying next to him. He reached inside, took out an envelope with a bank logo printed on the front, and placed the bulging envelope on the table. Even with a cursory glance, it was clear we weren't talking about dozens of banknotes here. There were at least a hundred...maybe even two hundred banknotes inside. I immediately looked over at Mom to see if she knew anything about this, but she didn't say a word—didn't even bat an eyelid. She simply continued to quietly sip her tea.

"...I really appreciate the thought, Dad," I said, "...but this is far too much."

My father immediately knitted his brow and fixed me with a strict stare, the likes of which I'd never seen from him before.

"Now listen here, bucko," he said firmly but quietly. "You're about to start a family. I don't wanna hear that kinda talk from you. If someone gives, you take. Understand? You do whatever it takes to look after your family. I hope you're prepared for that. Things won't work out otherwise."

“When we were in the hospital with Grandpa, why do you think I didn’t volunteer to take over this place? It had nothing to do with my feelings, or the strange location of this house. It was because I have a duty to look after my own home—the home where you grew up, and where your mother still lives. That’s not a duty you can just abandon. I couldn’t say anything, even if I wanted to. But you were young and single—you were in a position to say yes.

“Now your situation’s changed. You have a duty to Miss Tokatechi, and to any children you might have. Protecting them and providing for them comes before everything else. You’re not in a position to say things like that anymore. ...Okay, I admit my thinking is a bit old-fashioned. I should probably be lecturing both of you about working together and looking after each other, right? That would be more in line with the times. But what I’m saying still holds.”

Dad looked me sharply in the eye and held my gaze for quite some time. Then he turned that discerning eye on the living room, or rather, on the house itself.

“Grandpa made some changes here and there, but this house is so old... Too old,” he finally said. “A thatched roof in this day and age? You don’t see that much anymore, do you? ...That said, some people still like them, but these days they’ll almost always install a custom sprinkler system. You know, even with a tiled roof, it only takes a single spark to make it through a gap in the tiles and you’re in a world of trouble. I don’t think I need to tell you what a single spark will do to a thatched roof.

“With modern, fireproof building materials on the other hand, a fire could be raging just a few feet away from your front door while your own house remains perfectly safe. Only a short while ago, a whole neighborhood block burned down in a big fire. Even with a blaze like that spreading from house to house, the modern, fireproof homes were spared the tragedy. Have you ever looked into that?

“You see what I’m saying, don’t you? I understand wanting to keep things as they are, wanting to preserve Grandpa’s legacy. I agree, memories are important...but life is more important. Your family is more important.”

He hadn’t raised his voice, or his hands. He’d calmly walked through his argument, logically moving from point to point. It had been a long time since I’d

been on the receiving end of one of Dad's lectures. Part of me felt a certain nostalgia. But I surprised even myself when I found myself unable to answer back.

There I was, a grown man with a fiancée, being perfectly scolded by his father. These days, when I visit the family home for occasions like New Year's, my dad and I can have a perfectly normal discussion, like two adults. But in this moment, I simply couldn't find the words to respond, like a child.

I wasn't even able to put on my calm business face. My years of training in the corporate world had failed me—my composure was all gone. The look of defeat on my face was clear as day, and there was nothing I could do but let him drive his point home.

"You can gradually rebuild the house bit by bit..." my father continued. "If you both work hard and save up your money, you can reimagine the place as you see fit. But don't forget—safety first! More and more people are thinking about fire risk, and rightly so. Remember, it only takes a single spark. You can lose everything—your house *and* your family. You'll want to get some disaster hoods for the kids too, of course—the kind that protects their heads from falling objects during an earthquake. But make sure you get the newer ones—they're more fireproof..."

"I'll leave it at that—I'm sure I don't need to spell it out for you. You know what to do."

Only when he reached this point did I finally regain the ability to speak.

"Thank you for your generosity," I said, respectfully taking the envelope. "We'll be sure to make good use of it."

Techi joined in, bowing her head and giving her sincere thanks as well.

"Atta boy," said my dad, followed by an entreaty from my mom to "Spend it well."

Once again, I didn't know what to say—I was gripped by a very strange mix of feelings. Fortunately, Kon, who had been listening quietly the whole time, came to my rescue. He stared at my dad, his big, round eyes sparkling away, until he couldn't contain himself any longer.

“Wow!” shouted the little chipmunk. “Uncle Mishiné, that was so cool!”

He continued to gaze in admiration at my dad, who got rather embarrassed. Dad’s cheeks turned red, and he started to repeatedly brush his hand through his stiffly combed back hair in agitation. Seeing my middle-aged father blushing like a schoolgirl was not something I ever expected to see.

“Don’t look at me like that, little fella,” he laughed. “You’re making me lose my cool! Listen up, Kon. When you grow up and you meet someone you like very much, make sure you think long and hard about how you’ll take care of them. You’re a beastchild, so I’m sure you already have a job. Make sure you save up plenty of money for when you meet that person, all right?”

Now that he was in full swing, there was no shutting him up. Dad moved from topic to topic—first he talked about his own wedding, then about how I was born, and quickly moved on to various tales from my childhood. Normally I would have stopped him from telling stories like that in front of Techī, but I was well past the point of protest. Considering the huge pile of cash we’d just been given, I had little choice but to let him have his fun.

“I’m telling you, Mikura was a silly one! An unbelievably reckless kid,” he said. “The first time I ever left him here with Grandpa for the summer holidays, he wandered right into the heart of the Beastly Wilds. What was that place called again... *The Godwood*, I think. This guy just waltzed right in there. When I heard the story, I seriously thought my heart was going to give out.”

Dad was really starting to get into it. Mom nodded in agreement.

“That’s right, we were so worried,” she said.

Yet despite their matter-of-fact comments, I had no memory of anything like that. It didn’t even ring the tiniest of bells. This was absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, the first time I heard this story. I was astonished.

I looked over at Kon and Techī and saw that they were equally astounded, which confirmed my suspicions that this Godwood place was as serious as it sounded.

Noticing that his entire audience was in complete shock, Dad paused his story.

“What’s with that look?” Dad asked me.

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember!” cried Mom in disbelief. “After all that rigmarole we went through?”

Now, all five of us were sitting around in openmouthed surprise.



BOTH Mom and Dad had only heard the story second-hand from Great-Grandpa, so they didn’t have all the details. All they could say for sure was that while I was staying with Gramps, I’d wandered into a forbidden area deep in the forest called The Godwood. They didn’t know what happened while I was in there, but when I came back, it was like I was walking around with my head in the clouds—I was staring into space and daydreaming *a lot*.

They took me to a major hospital for a full checkup and a whole battery of tests to try and discover the cause. It seemed that was what Mom meant by “all that rigmarole.”

The test results all came back negative. I was in perfect health. Even before all the testing was finished, my focus had completely returned to normal. The final medical diagnosis was parental paranoia.

The following year, Mom and Dad didn’t want to leave me with Great-Grandpa. But I made such an uproar about wanting to go, screaming and bawling my eyes out. I might have been mischievous, but I was not a selfish, willful kid. I never kicked up that kind of fuss about anything. In the end, they reluctantly let me go...and there was never any repeat of that previous rigmarole.

With all that behind them, the incident was confined to memory—a single scene in the endless day-to-day drama of raising a child. Over the years, it gathered a thick layer of mental dust, with no particular reason to dredge it up and dust it off until now.

According to Rei, Techī’s parents had referred to me as “young Mikura,” which really made it sound like they already knew who I was. It probably had to do with my trip to the Godwood—they’d most likely heard my name in relation to that.

I'd spoken to them on the phone since our first meeting. I tried a couple of times to indirectly ask if they knew me from before, but I could never get a straight answer—they always found a way to dodge the question.

I could understand why. I don't know what kind of place this Godwood was, but with a name like that, entering it uninvited was probably a serious transgression. If they mentioned it directly, it might give the impression that I already had a reputation here in the Wilds. They didn't want to embarrass me as a new member of their community. It seemed Techī's parents were simply being discreet. I'd have to thank them for that later.

But...that still didn't quite explain it. What exactly had Rei said on the phone that time?

That's right...it was, "Young Mikura...what a relief." No matter how you slice it, that's not how you talk about some human brat that went trampling through your people's forbidden forest. I tilted my head as I wrestled with this puzzle.

My parents had finished their story, and Kon, who had been patiently listening to the whole thing, turned to look at me.

"M-Mikura...you've been inside the G-Godwood?" Kon stuttered. There was a note of fear in his face, but he tried his best to put on a brave front. "I'm really surprised. I didn't think any human had ever gone in there..."

"Kon, do you know about the Godwood? What kind of place is it?" I asked. "...If you're allowed to talk about it, that is."

"Yeah, I know it. And nobody's ever said not to talk about it! The Godwood is the place where the forest gods live. It's not somewhere you should ever go... Oh! And there are these weird mushrooms there. They let out these, um... spores. The mushrooms go *fwoooooom*, and the air gets misty with the spores, and if you breathe it in, then you get all forgetful!

"Daddy says that the gods don't actually live in the Godwood; people just made that up a long time ago, because if you go inside, you forget everything! You forget who you are. You forget where you live. You get lost, and then you even forget that you're lost! In the end, you can't get out, and you die. So now it's called the Godwood, and everybody knows you shouldn't go in there."

“That sounds like a very dangerous place,” I agreed. “Spores that trigger amnesia, huh? That’s one hell of a mushroom...”

Suddenly, my father clapped his hands together as if something had just occurred to him.

“Now I remember,” he said. “The year after his little escapade, when Mikura was throwing his tantrum about going back to Grandpa’s place, he insisted he had to meet a friend. He didn’t remember their face, or their name; he just knew that they’d played together, and that they’d be waiting for him... I was puzzled—how could you be so desperate to see someone if you couldn’t remember their face or their name? But with those mushroom spores, it makes perfect sense. ...Did you figure out who it was in the end?” he asked. “Did you see your friend again?”

I didn’t answer. I just sat there in silence again. The revelations kept piling up.

I couldn’t remember a thing. Everything about this was news to me.

I’d thrown a tantrum I didn’t remember to be allowed to visit Great-Grandpa, to see a friend I’d completely forgotten. I wondered if I’d actually gone looking for them. Whether I’d managed to find them.

Hang on... What friend?

What friend could I possibly have had here at Great-Grandpa’s house? Nobody lived here but beastfolk. The only friend I could possibly have made would have been a beastchild...

Which...did remind me of something.

As a child, I used to have this dream. Actually, it was more of a nightmare. It was always the same. In it, I was looking for my beloved plush toy. It wasn’t just any plush toy—this plush toy was a very close friend. But no matter how hard I looked, how much I cried, how much I ran around the forest searching, I could never, ever find it.

...I think the plush toy was a chipmunk.

Was it really a plush toy I was looking for?

When I’d first met the chipmunks, I’d arbitrarily assumed that Great-Grandpa

had only started employing them fairly recently. But what if Tech and the others had already been working for him *when I was a little kid*?

If that had been the case, I absolutely would have come into contact with them...with friendship sure to follow. What if I became particularly good friends with one of them, and we set out on an adventure to the Godwood together? What a fine mess that would have been. "Rigmarole" didn't cut the mustard.

So, presumably, the reason I never met any beastfolk...was never *allowed* to meet any beastfolk in the summers after that, was to avoid a similar situation happening again.

Would Great-Grandpa have arranged something like that? To keep me away from my friend? I had a hard time imagining it—he was such a kind and loving person. If Gramps were still alive, we could have asked him for the full story. But instead, here we were, trying to assemble the pieces.

There was one person who was very close to Gramps right up until the end, though. Maybe Tech knew something. I turned to look at her, sitting at my side...but when I did, she was already looking at me. Her cheeks were bright red and she looked right into my eyes, her own eyes welling up.

She stared and stared, and eventually the tears gently started to flow. When they did, they were joined by a bittersweet smile.

"When I was little, I also snuck into the Godwood," she said. "It seems that it wasn't such a big problem for you, but when I went in it became a huge deal. My parents wouldn't let it go. I don't have any detailed memories of my own, but because they were endlessly bringing it up, I know the gist of the story. A particularly vocal group of beastfolk pinned the blame for my escapade on Tomiyasu's influence. From that point on, there was a period every year when none of us were allowed to do any work for him—they said it was for our own safety.

"...And there was one other thing. Apparently, when I snuck into the Godwood, there was another child with me. A close friend, someone I played with all the time. I was sure my parents knew who it was, but they refused to answer any of my questions. They never let me see them again..."

I answered without even thinking.

“I see... So, *you* were the chipmunk plush toy in my dream. The one I could never find, no matter how hard I searched... Why didn’t I remember that sooner?”

Techi didn’t say a word. She simply continued to look into my eyes, while I looked back into hers. We were completely lost in each other’s gazes with no feeling of time passing, until a loud cough from my father brought us back to the present.



TWO hours later, my parents headed back to the border gate.

Overnight stays required a bunch of extra paperwork and other checks that we didn’t really want to deal with, and since they had to catch the bullet train back home the same day, we had to keep things short. However, as far as the visit itself, I’d say things went pretty well.

We’d just finished a long discussion with my parents, but there was still a lot more for Techi and myself to discuss, including the wedding ceremony, the house renovations, and a host of other things. But this seemed to be a good stopping point, and we laid those subjects aside for now. Both Techi and I felt like a weight had been lifted from our shoulders, and we wanted to take some time to talk about that instead. In fact, we ended up talking about it any spare moment we could.

Our exposure to the Godwood mushrooms meant that we couldn’t remember anything about our old friendship, no matter how hard we tried. But we could talk about the things we did remember from that time. How our lives had unfolded up until this point, what our childhoods had been like. What our favorite manga and anime shows were growing up, the games we liked to play with our friends, and which subjects we liked at school. What experiences we’ve had in life. We frankly discussed all of these things and deepened our understanding of each other in the process.

It’s funny how backwards this was. We only got to know each other like this *after* we were engaged, but I was glad it was before the wedding itself. I felt like I was genuinely falling in love with the person I was going to marry. Things were going to work out in the end.

As for the Godwood—I'd caused quite a commotion here in the Wilds, and no doubt I'd eventually hear from those who'd tried to pin it all on Great-Grandpa, but at least now Techī and I would be able to face that dragon together.

Finally, all my father's talk about the house renovation and the importance of family had somehow lit a fire under me. I was resolved to make things work as well as I could, and I felt a noticeable shift in my attitude toward the marriage. It seemed to have had a positive impact on Techī's feelings too, and we talked at length about the future.



WITHIN a few days, spring was coming to an end and the temperatures started to rise. The humid season was on its way. When the rainy season arrives, the season's first plums will be harvested and start appearing on supermarket shelves. It would still be a little while before we got the fully ripe ones—*the good stuff*—but I'd still be able to make a start on this year's *plum work*.

Before long, we'd also see a wide range of other fruits appearing, including apricots, peaches, and, of course, Kon's promised outdoor-grown strawberries. When that time came, I'd have plenty to work with on the jam and preserve front. There'd be more than just the wedding keeping me busy.

When things got this busy back at my corporate job, it always brought with it a sense of gloom, but the thought of having my hands so full in my private life gave me a feeling of great satisfaction. How could I put it? It was like I was making the best possible use of everything the slow life had to offer. I felt complete, empowered. I was busy, but my spirit felt light and free. No doubt having Techī at my side helped too, but I felt deeply, deeply happy. I wanted to hold onto this happiness, to build a great life for Techī and myself going forward.

I sat down comfortably on the floor cushions in the living room to delve a little further into these thoughts. But the living room clock showed 8:30 a.m.—it was time to get to work. At that very moment, we heard the familiar pitter-patter of little feet outside, and Kon appeared in the garden.

“Mikura! Techī! Time to go to work! Everyone's waiting!”

Techi came in from the bathroom where she'd been brushing her hair, and I stood up again and headed toward the veranda.

From what Techy had told me about the orchard, the real work was only just beginning. Even though chestnuts didn't need as much hands-on work as other fruit trees, as summer drew nearer there'd be a lot more insects to deal with, and you needed to keep a careful eye on the trees to apply fertilizer as necessary. I'd have to schedule regular appointments with the arborist to examine our trees as well. There was still plenty to do between now and the autumn harvest.

"Good morning, Kon! Another day, another battle, eh?" I said to him.

"Hello, Kon," said Techy. "Everything fine out there in the orchard?"

We greeted him as we did every morning.

"Good morning! Yep, everything's A-okay!"

Once out on the veranda, we put on our shoes, stepped down into the garden, and headed toward the orchard. Kon ran excited circles around us as we walked. We both laughed and warned him that if he used up all his energy running around now, he'd be napping soundly in the middle of the workday again.

The orchard came into view, with row upon row of chestnut trees in full bloom. Their green, bushy crowns were decorated with flowery tendrils that reminded me a little of the drooping cherry blossom, though the flowers were smaller. The other kids were waiting for us, and when they spotted our approach, they ran over with excited smiles. Kon merged into the group, and they instantly arranged themselves into a neat line for us, standing to attention.

Techy took the daily roll call and delivered her usual little speech about hard work and safety. When she was done, the kids shot back earnest grins that showed they were ready to do as she asked, and they gave a spirited cheer before running off toward the trees to get to work.

We took up our own spot in the rest area and sat down to keep one eye on the kids and another on the clouds—the upcoming rainy season meant frequent, sudden downpours. Of course, we talked about all sorts of things

while we kept watch—about the orchard, about the kids, about each other, the past, the future. With so much catching up to do, we were not short of things to discuss. But there was also plenty of time to quietly watch the antics of the children, each more surprising than the last, and we exchanged frequent glances and smirks as they dashed about.

It was lunchtime before we knew it. It appeared Rei had too much time on his hands, because he showed up too, and the next thing we knew, it was already early evening. Time was just evaporating.

“All right, boys and girls, see you tomorrow! Make sure you head straight home!” shouted Techī as the kids ran off into the forest at the end of the workday.

“You did a great job today, thank you!” I called out as well. “And remember, summer is coming! I don’t want anyone getting heatstroke from playing too much in the sun, you hear?”

As it started to get warmer, bugs and animals alike were crawling out of hiding, while trees and wild plants were starting to flower and bear fruit. It wasn’t just the orchard that needed extra care and attention. For the kids, summer meant play and adventure. The days were already getting longer, and there was still plenty of daylight left when the kids headed back after the day’s work. Our final instructions were already forgotten, and the young chipmunks were clearly not headed in the direction of home.

Fortunately, it seems we grown-ups—or more specifically, the children’s parents—had a trick of their own up their sleeves. The children hadn’t even made it out of the orchard when a whole group of adult chipmunks suddenly appeared from between the trees. The little ones tried to scatter, but they were swiftly and efficiently chased down and scooped up.

It was an amazing thing to watch, and Techī and I laughed heartily at the spectacle. Once all the kids were captured and escorted away, we set about putting away all the remaining tools. As we did so, we found ourselves talking about how someday, we too, might have reason to take part in such a rascal hunt.

Childhood Memories

FOR some reason, after we'd eaten dinner and I'd had my bath, I felt some whim to sort through my things. There were still some boxes I hadn't opened after the move, so I grabbed one, removed the packing tape, and opened up the top. Inside was a bunch of hobby-related stuff and other miscellaneous knickknacks—including one particularly sentimental item from my childhood that I could never bring myself to get rid of.

"Huh! Fancy seeing you again," I found myself saying. "I forgot you were in there."

Techi, who must have been nearby, opened the door and stuck her head inside to see what all the fuss was about.

"What are you up to, Mikura?" she asked. Then she saw the item I'd taken out of the box. "...Oh, wow...that's not what I was expecting."

I lifted it up with a wry smile so she could get a better look.

"Yep. It's a chipmunk plushie," I said, examining it as I held it in my hands. "My parents must've bought it to replace the one I was convinced I'd lost, although it never filled that void, of course. I've tried to throw it away before, but somehow, I still have it all these years later. I guess it represents some important memories...well, lost memories anyway, thanks to those forest mushrooms."

Techi came into the room and started to gently stroke the plush toy's head.

"It is quite cartoonish, isn't it?" she said. "Is this some manga character? The proportions aren't very realistic. It wouldn't make a good replacement for me—I was a lot slimmer as a kid."

"It certainly didn't," I replied. "Not that it's a bad plushie. I mean, I've held onto it for all this time. Even though those memories are gone, somewhere deep down I knew that I'd had a chipmunk friend that I didn't want to lose."

“Even so...couldn’t you have found something that looked a little more like me?” Techichi complained, slightly indignant. “This thing is soooo chubby! I don’t know how to feel about that...”

“Oh come on,” I laughed. “I’d lost my memories, how could I know? Now I only know your adult form... Oh, hang on! Don’t you have any pictures? You know, photos of you when you were a child, in your chipmunk form.”

Techichi suddenly stiffened, as if turned to stone. She didn’t move a muscle—didn’t even breathe—for a good twenty or thirty seconds. Eventually she came to, speaking in a quivering voice.

“S-So, Mikura,” she said, “the other day we were talking about how humans fall in love. Tell me more about that...”

“Hey! Don’t try and change the subject!” I admonished. “You’re not getting off that easily! Are beastfolk all so squeamish about showing off their childhood photos?”

She was sweating nervously and wouldn’t look me in the eyes. But she replied, her voice still trembling.

“Well, we, um...” Techichi babbled. “I mean, showing your fiancé photos of you as a kid like that...it’s so embarrassing! M-Mikura, surely you feel the same way? You wouldn’t want to show me your childhood p-pictures, r-right?”

“Well... I mean, I guess it does feel kind of embarrassing,” I admitted, “but I can’t say I’d be that bothered by it. Actually, my photo albums should be in one of these boxes. What if you show me your photos, and I show you mine?”

Even this more reasonable request caused Techichi to freeze like a deer in headlights, although she still avoided eye contact. She didn’t reply this time. It was harder to refuse a fair exchange like that, and she was definitely curious to see me as a little tyke. She was conflicted. Seeing her like that, I decided to have a little fun at her expense.

“Ah! I could always talk to Rei or your parents!” I exclaimed with glee in my voice. “I’m sure Rei would be more than happy to help me ou—”

“H-Hey!” she shouted, interrupting me midsentence. “Not fair! Don’t you dare even try!”

She'd gone completely red in the face—she was losing her mind over this. She grabbed hold of my shoulders and started shaking me back and forth, maybe hoping to shake the very idea out of my head. She pushed and pulled, pleaded and protested, but it wasn't long before all the fight drained out of her. She knew that eventually I would see the photos, whether she wanted me to or not. Her arms went limp and she hung her head.

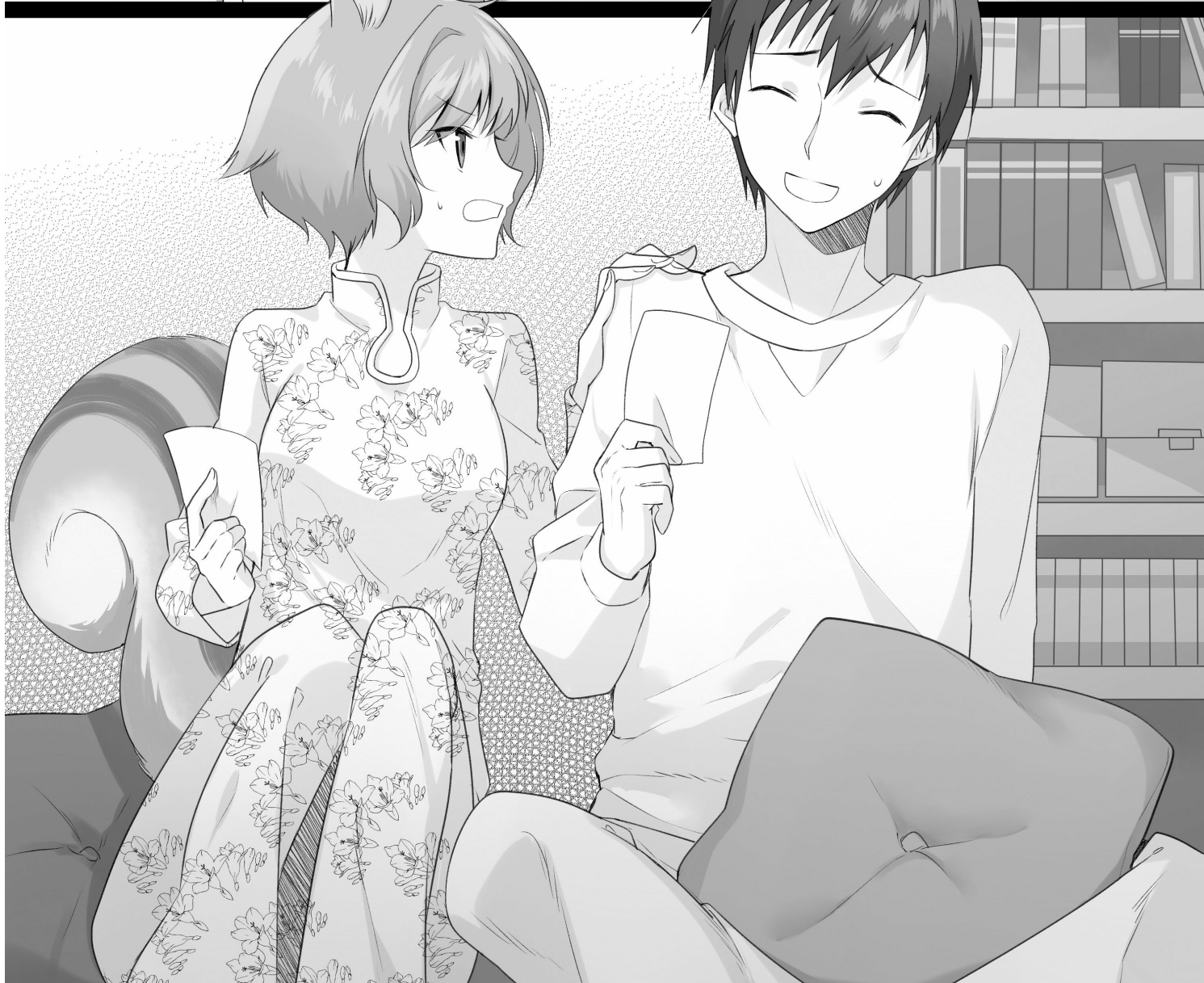
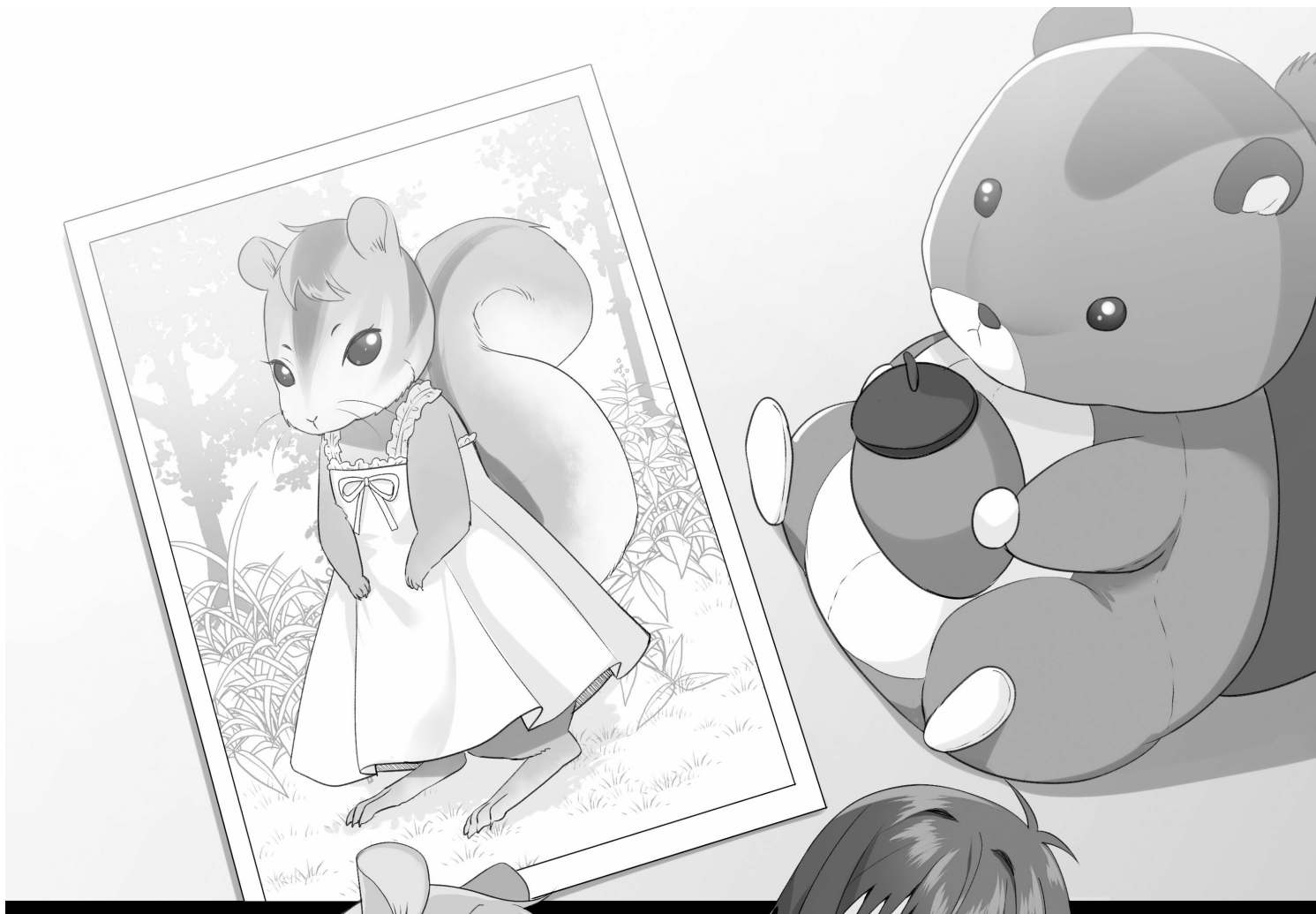
"We'll do a swap..." she conceded, sounding utterly defeated. "Your pictures for mine."

We both dug out our childhood photos and went through them together. It felt like quite a momentous occasion.

She was *adorable*.

Young Techii was slimmer than Kon, her eyes had more of an upward tilt, and she wore a variety of skirts and dresses that made a very charming impression. Even though she looked completely different now, her gestures and her facial expressions were still unmistakable. Even if I'd seen these pictures without being told they were of Techii, I'd recognize her at a glance.

While Techii was busy looking at my photos, I secretly snapped a few pictures of her album with my phone's camera, then saved them all in a password-protected folder. It was very important that these precious treasures were preserved for future generations.



Kon the Student

THE education of beastchildren in the Beastly Wilds is quite unusual. Kids would work a job during the day while undergoing basic schooling at home—how to read and write, arithmetic, that sort of thing. Then, only when they reached a certain age, did they go to an actual school.

I'd been told that their *beast blood*, their instinct—whatever it was that made them what they were—was so strong during childhood that it made studying a slow and inefficient process. Since they developed so differently from humans, they needed to be educated differently as well.

That wasn't to say that beastchildren were stupid—far from it. Young Kon was sharp as a tack—he picked up things I taught him with incredible speed. If he were to study a human curriculum targeted at kids his age, he'd breeze through it. So, to that end, whenever there was a rainy day that stopped him from playing outside, I tried to teach him to the best of my ability.

He'd already mastered many of the basics—he could read and write simple kanji and even solve math problems that used multiplication and division—so I taught him some more advanced topics from around the elementary school level. I introduced him to ideas about society, science, and, of course, he got plenty of schooling in home economics while I taught him the basics of how to cook.

On top of that, he was always helping out around the house with cleaning and tidying things up, not to mention his work in the orchard—that was all stuff he picked up over time. He really is an outstanding kid.

As for cooking, he was learning a ton just by watching me all the time, and his understanding was clearly growing. I didn't see any reason why he couldn't have started a regular education by now.

I was pondering that very idea one morning after breakfast while Techii and I were relaxing a little in the living room, and I decided to ask her directly. She is a

teacher, after all.

“Oh, it’s fine up until around the third or fourth year of human schooling,” she explained, “but once you move on to harder material—end of elementary, start of middle school—it isn’t smooth sailing anymore.

“Beastchildren develop real fast—they can run around and play soon after they’re born, and next thing you know, they’re already learning their first words. By the age of five or six, they already have the brains of a human kid in third or fourth grade. But then their development comes to a crawl, and they stay at that level for quite some time. Only when they’ve gone through puberty and changed into their human forms, do they gain the intelligence to deal with ideas and problems at the middle school level. Schooling before that point doesn’t really work—at least not the human approach to school.”

“I see,” I said, processing all this new information.

“If you think of our mental development, in terms of Japanese education, then I guess instead of moving through elementary, middle, and high school like you do, it’s more like we get to elementary school level when we’re really young, don’t really develop beyond that for a long time, and then suddenly skip straight to high school. See what I’m saying?” she asked.

“Yeah... I think I understand,” I replied. “So basically, beastchildren don’t really develop until they reach puberty and start to transform into their human forms. Is that right?”

“They do grow larger and stronger in that time, but mentally, yeah, they’re pretty much on pause,” she said. “Of course, some are less bound by that than others—you definitely do get kids that seem to grow smarter and smarter with each passing year, just like a human. Families with a kid like that will often change their home studies to focus more on book learning.

“It’s still too early to tell with Kon, but the basics are still important, and he could turn out to be an early bloomer. Don’t force it, but you should keep teaching him a wide range of stuff that challenges him.”

“Of course, I think that’s very sensible,” I replied. “Besides, he’s not the only one who’s enjoying our little lessons.”

At that point, we heard the excited pitter-patter of tiny footsteps, out of sight, but drawing closer and closer, until they were right by the veranda.

“Never fear! Kon is here!”

Kon’s lively announcement echoed through the house.

“Hi, little guy!” I called to him. “Go wash your hands and we’ll have something to eat. They forecast rain for today, so...let’s work on some arithmetic.”

Kon scrambled up onto the veranda with a grin.

“Okay!” he replied, full of cheer, before running off to the bathroom.

It was anyone’s guess what the future held for Kon. But he had nothing against studying, he never whined or complained, and he really enjoyed working hard. I had no doubt that he’d grow up to be a very accomplished young man.

The thought brought a smile to my face, and I saw that Techii was smiling as well. As I sorted through the day’s teaching materials, Techii and I tried to imagine what Kon might be like as an adult; what his life might look like. It’d be a long time before we could see it for ourselves, but we enjoyed making a few predictions nonetheless.

Afterword

HELLO everyone, it's been a while! Greetings from the author, Fuurou.

We made it to the second book! I'm delighted by and deeply grateful for everyone's support.

There's a lot going on in volume two. We're starting to get more of a glimpse into Mikura's past, not to mention his new relationship with Tech! Marriage is often the end goal for stories like this, but Mikura and Tech's story is only just beginning.

There's plenty for us to find out still—the secrets of the Beastfolk, the mystery of the Beastly Wilds, and more—but don't worry! Whatever they might discover, I'm sure Mikura and his friends will still have plenty of time to enjoy living the slow life. There's lots of work to be done on the orchard, and countless delicious foods they could try their hands at preserving.

One of the foods I would like them to make plenty of use of going forward is pickled *umeboshi* plums. I love umeboshi myself, and all of the various foods that can be made with them.

My digestive system has been quite delicate ever since I was little, so whenever I got a stomachache, I used to drink an infusion made with *umeboshi* and boiling water. This old remedy is supposed to be good for an upset stomach. I also loved *onigiri* filled with umeboshi, onigiri in my rice at dinner... I would even eat umeboshi by themselves, right out of the jar. That's just the kind of child I was. My father was pretty worried about me because umeboshi have a very high sodium content.

However, as someone very wise once said: "What's bad for the body is good for the soul." To me, umeboshi is like the elixir of life. I still make my own every year without fail, and then proceed to eat them all at a pace that would probably make my doctor quite angry.

When I was little, I used to eat umeboshi made by my grandmother. Seeing

how happy they made me, she always put a lot of work into preparing them. Since then, I have come up with a few ways to update the recipe using some of our more modern conveniences, and I have covered some of those methods in this volume. I sincerely hope that I can convey some of the taste and charm of these umeboshi even to those of you who are not so enamored with this wonderful food. So do expect more mentions of umeboshi and how to use them in future volumes.

I hope you will join me as I continue to tell Mikura's story alongside the fascinating story of what kinds of preserved foods can be made with umeboshi...

...Well, at the very least, I hope *umeboshi* will get another brief mention in volume three's Afterword.

That's all from me for now. Until next time!

Fuurou—New Year's Day, 2022



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