

So You Want to Live the SLOW LIFE?

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 1

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The Meeting

I was wearing jeans and a plain, long-sleeved shirt—an admittedly poor choice of attire for the long hike ahead—as I boarded the bus, weighed down with bags. The bus took me most of the way up the mountain and I rode it until the very last stop, where I disembarked and passed through the border gate. After that, it was all on foot.

I walked uphill for quite some time before finally coming across a clearing. This wide area gave the impression it'd been carefully carved out of the dense forest. In this clearing stood a single-story building with a thatched roof and a veranda running along its side. An old-fashioned living room and a prayer alcove, both visible from the outside, fully qualified the house as an authentic, traditional Japanese dwelling.

When I was a child, I'd spent pretty much every summer here, at my great-grandpa's house. After he'd passed away, nobody wanted to live in it, out here in the middle of nowhere...but it had to be passed down through the family. *Somebody* had to take care of it.

As Great-Grandpa had laid dying in the hospital room, the whole family had crowded around him. It'd felt like they were drawing straws, each trying to pass the buck to the other. Their behavior was more than insulting, given the situation. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore. I spoke my mind and stood my ground. Their reactions were harsh, the ensuing discussion heated. But in the end, it was settled—I'd be the one to inherit the house.

"A homeowner at twenty-five...can't say I saw *that* coming," I muttered to myself as I approached the house. I sat down on the veranda and finally dropped the various bags I'd had slung over my shoulders and back. They hit the floorboards, one thud after the other.

Hauling all those bags had been no picnic. I was so out of shape. I'd lost some muscle since my university days, and it seemed my stamina had vanished with it. I wouldn't last very long living on this mountain if a few heavy bags were all it

took to wipe me out.

I peered into the living room. Inside, the luggage that I'd sent ahead lay arranged in large piles. It looked like everything had arrived safely.

But something wasn't quite right.

I'd expected to be greeted by a very different scene—all the storm shutters firmly closed, a thick layer of dust in the corridors, the tatami mats detached from the floor to keep them from going moldy. But this house was totally ready to be lived in.

I wondered if someone had been looking after the place. After all, who exactly *had* been here to receive my luggage? *Somebody must've been.* I pondered this while I caught my breath, then removed my shoes, stepped up onto the veranda, and explored the rest of the house.

The kitchen and bathroom faucets turned easily and the water ran clean. The gas and electricity were both working, and all the fuses were in the upright position. Strange. When Great-Grandpa was being admitted to the hospital, they knew he'd be gone for a long time. *When a house is going to be vacant for a while, isn't it normal to shut off all the valves and breakers?*

All the appliances were still there—the fridge, the microwave, the TV—even a Wi-Fi router, as Great-Grandpa ordered a lot of stuff online. *I don't see a computer anywhere, though...maybe Gramps upgraded to a smartphone?* Or maybe...maybe a relative had thought it was worth something and took it to a pawn shop. It seemed likely. I dashed frantically back to the veranda, slipped on my shoes, and rushed to the warehouse next door.

The warehouse. This cave of wonders had always been packed to the brim with Gramps' various treasures. Now the shelves were empty. Nothing left. The fridge and the freezer units were empty, too...but the circuit breakers in here had all been safely shut off.

It's not like I'd honestly expected anything to be left over. But I was still disappointed. The part of me that remembered that beautiful spectacle was a little heartbroken. I left the warehouse in a funk, shoulders slumped, and headed deeper into the mountains behind the house to check on Great-Grandpa's orchard.

“Thank goodness. It’s just like I remember.”

My ancestors had cleared this plot of land many generations back—they’d literally carved it out of the hillside themselves, if our family stories were to be believed. Gramps had tended it faithfully right up until he’d fallen ill.

The chestnuts and walnuts harvested from this orchard had let my great-grandparents raise six healthy children and put them all through college. The trees stood tall and proud above the neatly tended soil, as they always had, and their verdant green branches swayed in the spring breeze.

It was a sight to behold, and seeing it finally put my heart at ease. I’d given up a very promising career in its early stages in order to come and live here. If something had happened to this orchard, I had no idea how I’d pay the bills and put food on the table.

“*Hmm...* This should all be growing wild now, though. It’s far too neat. Somebody’s clearly looking after it,” I muttered as I strolled into the orchard.

Row after neat row of trees stretched into the distance, so many that they became too indistinct to count. As far as I could see, there wasn’t a single dead leaf in sight nor the slightest sign of debris on the ground. I went right up to a nearby tree.

No insects or pests of any kind. No holes chewed in the leaves. No broken branches. No sign of neglect.

Between the state of the house and now the orchard, it was perfectly clear that this place had some sort of secret caretaker. Secret, as I’d heard nothing about anybody living nearby nor seen any signs of human life since I’d arrived. I looked around once again, now with greater suspicion.

The birds sang and the insects chirped with almost deafening intensity while the swaying trees provided a background chorus...but I was *sure* I was alone. And yet, the state of the orchard suggested otherwise. It was a disturbing feeling. Maybe it was because I’d lived in the city all my life, but the complete lack of other humans made me restless—I suddenly realized I felt extremely on edge.

I reconsidered my situation. I might be living out the rest of my life here in

this quiet, lonely place. Nobody to talk to. Nobody to have tea with. Completely alone. My heart sank. My mind raced. I found myself drowning in a deep, spiraling anxiety.

If I got sick or took a bad fall, or if there was an earthquake or a forest fire, there'd be nobody to turn to for help. That idea—of having nobody near me—seemed to upset me the most. I couldn't shake that unease.

And yet, despite all my nerves, I understood that this, too, was part of my inheritance. It was my duty and there was nothing to be done. *Somebody* had to live here and that was that.

Yes, part of me wanted nothing to do with it. Part of me felt backed into a corner, forced into this situation by my selfish relatives. That was all true. But I'd said my part—and sharply at that—and in the end, I'd made the final decision for myself. There was no point in looking back.

The moment I'd quit my job, I'd resolved to make the most of things. Because *this* was my life now. I tried to recapture that feeling as I vigorously ruffled my shortly trimmed black hair. Then I turned around and headed back toward Great-Grandpa's house.

...*No*.

Toward *my* house.

"So, we've got chestnuts and walnuts... I've researched the basics of chestnut cultivation online, and I packed a bunch of different books...but this orchard is *massive*. I don't think this is a job for one person."

I continued to ponder the problem under my breath on my way back to the house. One of the books I'd brought with me suddenly sprang to mind. But when I headed for my bags to retrieve them, I spotted a strange figure.

A young woman was sitting on the veranda. In her hands, she was holding a book on chestnuts—the very volume I'd been thinking of.

This girl, who'd rifled through my things uninvited and now looked to be casually reading my book, was wearing the strangest clothes. Her long-sleeved, indigo blue overcoat reminded me of some sort of traditional folk dress. She also had on a pair of soft, billowing trousers, which were tucked into her long

boots. Completing her ensemble was something like a mailman's messenger bag, slung over her shoulder. It seemed a bit too big for her delicate frame.

But what drew my attention even more than her outfit were the large, brown ears quietly perched atop her tawny, bobbed hair...and the large, brown, bushy tail behind her that occasionally twitched.

"A squirrel? No...her ears are slightly different. Maybe she's part chipmunk?" I quietly surmised. "They don't call them the Beastly Wilds for nothing."

I continued to stare intently at her while I mumbled to myself.

Her delicate features didn't seem to be adorned with any makeup. Yet, her skin was clear and smooth, and her deep blue eyes had a sparkle to them. She was a really beautiful girl...*although I guess I should say Beastgirl? Beastwoman?* I wasn't sure how these people referred to themselves.

The Beastly Wilds were home to a people known as the "Beastfolk." Not quite human, not quite animal, they were something in between. Access to the mountain was only possible through special border gates, which doubled as quarantine stations for medical examination purposes when crossing the border.

The Beastly Wilds—this whole forest—was their territory. The nation of Japan had no rights to it. None, that is, except for one small human settlement—a single house and an orchard, both, until recently, belonging to my great-grandpa.

In the distant past, my ancestors had somehow earned the right to have this plot of land. And in the name of harmony between humans and beastfolk, or reconciliation between our peoples, or something like that, it'd been strictly passed down through my family for hundreds of years. Every generation, somebody would be forced to take ownership of the house and have no choice but to live in it... This was the true inheritance that the rest of my family had been so desperate to avoid.

Still, I hadn't expected to meet a beastperson on my very first day. As I stared at the girl, trying not to gape, she noticed me.

"You there," she said in a high but resonant voice. "Are you a relative of

Tomiyasu's? Are you his heir? You humans, with your dark hair and your dark eyes—I can never tell you apart. But I think I see something of Tomiyasu in you. Judging by these books, I take it you're here to look after the orchard. Will you also be making a pact with us, as Tomiyasu did before you?"

She said it so seriously—so sincerely—but I had no idea what she meant. Initially, all I could manage was a confused tilt of my head.

"...Yes, you're correct," I finally replied with some apprehension. "I am indeed Tomiyasu Moriya's great-grandson. But...I don't know anything of a pact. You mean some sort of contract? What exactly are you talking about?"

She responded to my bewilderment with a grim scowl and a long sigh, making no effort to mask her annoyance.

"We look after the orchard and, in exchange, Tomiyasu handed over 30 percent of the harvest. That was the deal we had before," she explained, eyeing me with a stern face.

She was watching me closely for any reaction. I guess she was trying to get a read on me—what I thought about such an arrangement and whether I'd agree to it.

For 30 percent, it seems I can have everything taken care of... Everything?

"Just what do you mean by 'look after'?" I asked. "Could you tell me what that means, in detail? You mean to say that, for just 30 percent of the harvest, you take care of *all* the necessary work? Right up till harvest time?"

I voiced my doubts in a shower of questions, but the girl just nodded silently in answer to the final one and continued staring me down.

Thirty percent in exchange for all the work... If you flipped that around, then these folks put in all the effort, only to have 70 percent of the proceeds taken off the top. *Gramps got a hell of a deal out of this arrangement.* It was positively brutal—feudal, even. In fact, it sounded a *lot* like old-fashioned tenant farming.

Great-Grandpa owned the land and orchard and gave the laborers a portion of its harvest as payment. If I remembered right, tenant farmers also got something like 30 percent of the yield at harvest time...at least, that's what I

seemed to remember from school.

Thirty percent. It *was* a very good arrangement. A new idea came to me.

“I understand,” I said. “You receive a payment of 30 percent for your efforts, which entails all the work needed up to and including the harvest. That said...I was wondering if you’d be open to negotiation regarding the exact figures. I was thinking—”

As soon as I mentioned an adjustment, the girl’s gaze became much more intense, and a truly terrifying expression began forming on her face. Her hands balled up into tense fists, suggesting a terrible strength. She looked like she might leap toward me at any moment. I stepped back a bit unconsciously, but I still had the presence of mind not to turn away and not to break eye contact. I quickly kept speaking.

“I was thinking of increasing your share to *40* percent for the same work. However, while you’re at it, I’d also like you to teach me everything there is to know about the orchard and its trees. Would that be possible?

“I don’t know the first thing about tending an orchard. Leaving everything to you is a pretty good deal for me, but I’d rather think a little more long-term here. This orchard belonged to my great-grandfather, and I think it’s important for me to learn everything I can in order to keep it secure and productive for many years to come.”

I said my piece and waited to see how the girl would respond. I doubt she had expected her share to jump a whole 10 percent. The fierce expression that’d been brewing on her face melted away, and her previously sharp eyes and mouth were now round with surprise. Her tense fists relaxed and opened. The tip of her big, bushy tail began to meander in the air behind her.

She was stuck in this state of blank amazement for some time. Then, attempting to rearrange her vacant expression into something more self-possessed, she responded.

“Teaching you the ins and outs of orchard work is no skin off my nose,” she said. “I have to teach the new kids every year, see? It’s hardly worth mentioning. You *sure* you’re okay with giving us a whole extra 10 percent for a little job like that?”

I couldn't believe how honest her answer was. *Perhaps she's just straightforward by nature?* The girl had laid her cards right on the table and they were very much in my favor. She'd given me the perfect reason to withdraw my offer. This was completely backward from how things had been at work—my colleagues had kept their cards so close to their chests, you never knew who was friend and who was foe.

In that moment, the young woman won me over. I could feel a warm smile threatening to stretch across my face. She was frank, honest, and no doubt hardworking, given the orchard's spotless state. She and her comrades were probably responsible for the house too—even though it wasn't covered by this pact of theirs, which, in any case, would've been null and void when Great-Grandpa passed away. Despite all that, everything had been spotless when I'd arrived.

So while the extra payment could be considered a token of gratitude for their keeping the house clean, if this girl's comrades were half as upright and hardworking as she was, I could hardly think of fairly paying them for their services as any kind of loss.

"Yes, I'm quite certain," I told her. "You'll get 40 percent. We'll start with a one-year agreement for the standard work and the extra training, and if I need another year of tuition, we can always arrange an extension. Speaking of which, do we need to write up a contract? I can grab some stationery..."

As I made to enter the house, the young woman stood up from her perch on the veranda.

"There's no need," she said, reaching for my hand and grasping my wrist firmly. "What's your name?"

"...My name is Mikura Moriya," I said.

"I see. I'm Tokatechi Kurikara," she replied.

What an unusual name, I thought to myself. A moment later, every tree in the vicinity began violently rustling. This was no murmur of trees in the wind. Even a large earthquake wouldn't shake the leaves like this. I had no idea what was going on.

“Calm yourself,” Tokatechi said, still gripping my wrist tightly. “It’s only the beastfolk who live in these woods. They can kick up a real storm, don’t you agree? The Beastly Wilds are home to a great many creatures, big and small. *They* will be the ones to witness our pact. But remember this—if you break your word, you’ll be making an enemy of *them*, as well as me.”



I took another look at the forest around me and it stared back. There were eyes everywhere—in the trees, behind the tree trunks, beneath the leaves and clumps of grass on the forest floor. We weren't short of witnesses. This young woman certainly knew how to make a point.

She was making things very easy for me as well—if I'd ever had even the slightest intention of not honoring the pact, that temptation was gone in an instant. Of course, I wasn't one to break my word in the first place. But I made a quick mental note to keep it that way and follow this agreement to the letter. I gave a solemn, confident nod, exaggerating my gesture for our observers' sake.

Once I'd done so, the young woman released my wrist. Her grip was very firm, leaving behind a clear handprint.

"By the way," I said, rubbing my tender wrist with my other hand, "I can't say I've ever heard a name like Tokatechi before. Is it popular around these parts? Or is it a traditional name among beastfolk or something?"

"Oh," she replied. "I was wondering why you made a funny face when I told you my name. Yeah, I don't know if I'd say it's *traditional*, but it's been passed down through my family. If you can't get your mouth around it, Techichi is fine too. That's what Tomiyasu used to call me."

"I see. In that case, if you don't mind, I'll allow myself to take that liberty. I shall call you Miss Techichi from now on," I said, with a customary bow.

"*Listen...*" she said, sounding maybe a little annoyed. "I know we just made a pact and we're now technically coworkers or whatever, but let's cut the polite business talk, yeah?"

I nodded in agreement but using casual speech with a woman I'd just met— a perfect stranger—still didn't sit right with me. What's more, this was my first time meeting a beastperson, and I wanted to show the right level of respect.

But if that's what she wants... I set my discomfort aside and flipped that switch in my head.

"Right. Yeah. Got it," I managed, trying my best to sound casual. "I'll do that then. I look forward to working together, Tetchi."

Dropping polite speech was one thing, but trying a nickname right out of the gate was too much. She glared at me sternly and I immediately regretted it. I quickly corrected myself.

“Sorry, Miss Techī. Just a little joke.”

Now seemingly content with my term of address, she gave a satisfied nod, turned toward the forest, and drew in a deep breath.

“All right, you guys!” she bellowed. “Out you come! The pact is made, so show yourselves!”

And out they came; an army of little chipmunks. Well, I say little, but they were far bigger than any rodent I’d ever seen at around a foot-and-a-half tall. They didn’t look human like Techī. Rather, they looked just like regular chipmunks, except for their extreme size and that they all wore clothing. A whole swarm of these strange creatures was coming out of the forest.

Some wore shirts and trousers, others dresses. There was even one completely hidden beneath a long cloak. The mob of oversized chipmunks chattered excitedly to each other in perfect Japanese as they walked this way and stood in a long row before us.

“S-So *cute!*” I blurted out, unable to stop myself.

Chipmunks are *stupidly* cute in the first place, but the way they were all lined up, staring at me with those adorable, round eyes, was too much for me to bear. Not to mention their delightful little plush toy outfits or the slight toddle in the way they walked like human children. It’s a wonder I managed to restrain myself as much as I did.

“Techī! Techī!” shouted one of the little ones. “Does that mean we can keep looking after Grampa Tommi’s orchard?”

“That’s right,” Techī replied with a firm nod. “The deal’s done. The orchard is our responsibility. So don’t you worry—we can keep looking after it, just like before.”

The little faces of the oversized chipmunks lit up with big smiles. They started running and jumping all over the place, hands joined together and bursting with joy.

“Erm...Miss Techy? What exactly are these young creatures?” I asked. “Are they also some kind of beastfolk?”

I was unable to tear my eyes away from the joyful spectacle before me. I could have happily watched these little chipmunks frolic about all day long.

Techy frowned once again—though briefly this time—but still answered my question with her usual look of annoyance.

“Oh yeah...I forgot, you don’t know the first thing about us, do you? These kids are beastfolk, yes. They’re the children of other members of my clan, about five or six years old. Looking at their perfectly animal-like appearance, you might be surprised to hear that. But that’s how we are.

“Beastfolk are born in animal form, and as we grow, we stay that way. Only when we approach adulthood do we begin shedding our fur, our teeth and claws shorten, and we start to look like humans.

“There are some differences,” she continued. “For example, some beastfolk grow both human ears and animal ears, like me. Others will only have one or the other. Occasionally, a beastperson will grow into a perfect human lookalike, but that’s very, very rare.”

She pulled back her hair, revealing a pair of human ears, hidden away in their usual places on either side of the head, in addition to her chipmunk ears perched up top. I curiously inspected them in turn; first one pair, then the other, then the first pair again.

“Those ears...” I asked. “Do they all...*work*? Do they all hear?”

“Of course,” she replied. “That said, my human ears aren’t as sensitive. And I always cover them with my hair anyway, so you could say I don’t really use them. If a beastperson hears a loud noise with both pairs of ears at once, it can really throw them off balance. It feels kind of like motion sickness. So most folks will cover their human ears with their hair like I do. Some’ll even use earplugs or earmuffs. Beastfolk with only one pair of ears don’t have to deal with any of that. They don’t know how lucky they are...”

I wondered what might cause such a phenomenon. Perhaps it had to do with the ear’s semicircular canals? Maybe the ear canals of both sets of ears were

somehow interconnected, creating an unpleasant echo? Or perhaps each ear had its own eardrum, with all four being overstimulated? In the end, I decided that trying to apply human logic to beastfolk biology might be a futile exercise. But it was a fun thought experiment nonetheless.

But now, there were more important things to attend to.

“I *do* have one major concern that I have to raise,” I said. “In your talk with the children, you seemed to suggest that *they* would be working the orchard. That might be a problem. They’re so little! Isn’t that technically...child labor?”

In response to my question, Techī’s mouth visibly turned down at the corners, fully expressing her incredulity without saying a single word. It was the most irritated face she’d pulled all day.

“Look, that might be how *you* see it,” she huffed. “But that’s *human* logic, based on human laws and human values. Trying to bring that into the forest... I’m not sure whether to question your good sense or just laugh.” She paused and gave me a hard look.

“As you can see, young beastfolk are near-indistinguishable from ordinary animals,” she began to explain, seemingly deciding our pact required it. “And so they possess equal...no, an even *greater* physical agility than the animals themselves. Naturally, we adults are still very strong climbers. But our skills pale in comparison to the little ones. They’re so light, they can zip up a tree like nobody else.

“Moreover, there are some jobs that can *only* be done by children. It’s not just limited to members of *our* clan—it’s common throughout beastfolk society for children to do such unique, skilled work. Of course, nobody’s forced into anything,” she stressed. “They’re all paid very fairly, and there’s always a grownup around to supervise the work. Also, once the youngsters reach a certain age, we start to prioritize their education instead.

“All this is to say that every one of these kids *wanted* to be here today. And when the autumn harvest comes, they’ll get to stuff their little faces with chestnuts and walnuts till they’re sick. Trust me, these kids can work harder than any adult. Isn’t that right?”

Techī turned to look at the kids, who displayed an amazing range of reactions.

Some puffed their little chests out with pride. Some raised their arms in the air in mock superhero poses, as if to say *I can do this!* Some even covered their faces in embarrassment at the compliment. However, there wasn't one gloomy face nor one look of aversion. Observing their enthusiasm, I compared them to the kind of helpful spirits you sometimes see in fairy tales as I tried to adjust my perspective.

"Well, if that's the case, I guess that's fine. I'll leave the orchard in your capable hands," I said, nodding profusely.

If I nod hard enough, perhaps I can convince myself that I'm not violating any child labor laws.

"So..." I continued. "Did you want to start work right away? Or was today meant to be more of a meet and greet situation so we can start fresh tomorrow? What's the plan?"

Techi and her little gang all peered over in the orchard's direction.

"May as well start now," she said.

They set off, the children leading the way, once again in their neat line, with Techy following behind at a relaxed pace but keeping an eye on them. It felt exactly like a preschool class out on a day trip.

I rushed over to my bag and grabbed a notebook and pen—key items for my new education. *It might also be good to take some photos or videos.* I checked my phone battery. *...Better grab a portable charger too, just in case. That should cover all the basics.* I slid everything into my jean pockets

"Left, right, left, right!" the kids shouted up ahead, cheerfully making progress. I ran to catch up with them, their bobbing tails visible even from a distance.

When we arrived at the orchard, the children formed another line in front of Techy, who'd sat down. They filed past one by one, and she gently patted each child on the head, counting them as she went.

"Nineteen...twenty. Okay, there are twenty of you helping out today," she said, standing back up. "Now, listen up—the landlord may have changed, but the work hasn't. Pay attention, don't hurt yourself, and be thorough in your

work. All right?”

“Yes, Tech!” echoed the kids in a cheerful chorus.

Then they all dashed to a small cabin tucked away in one the corner of the orchard—some sort of storage shed—and disappeared inside. They emerged a short time later, each clutching a small wooden pole in one hand and a small garbage bag in the other, raising them overhead so we could see. Then they broke into a run and scattered throughout the orchard, each picking a nearby chestnut tree.

The little chipmunks hopped and swiftly climbed high up into the branches in an incredible show of skill and agility—despite still holding their bags and poles. Once they found a suitable branch to perch on, they each sat still and began carefully scanning the trunk and branches, sniffing the air as they did so.

“Today’s chestnut day. We might check on the walnut trees tomorrow. Although we can do it whenever, really—walnuts don’t need much looking after. Chestnuts are pretty hardy too. But, since we don’t use any chemicals or pesticides, we have to keep a careful lookout for pests and disease,” explained Tech, keeping an eye on the climbing kids while we headed toward another structure not far from the storage shed.

This one resembled a rest area you might find on a hiking trail—a concrete foundation underfoot and a wooden roof overhead, with a set of wooden benches and tables in the middle. There was also a small washing area, much like you’d find at a campground, and a water pipe, complete with a faucet.

Upon closer inspection, I also saw a gas pipe, next to a spot clearly meant for a cooking stove. There was no stove in sight. But it’d be easy to get a hold of one and cook out here, or even just boil fresh water for green tea.

Judging from the comfortable way that she seated herself, I could tell Tech had spent a lot of time here. I pictured her drinking tea together with Great-Grandpa as they’d supervised the children. I sat down on the bench opposite and took another look around the shelter and at the children in the orchard beyond. Then I readied my pen and notebook and launched into my first question.

“What exactly are the children doing?” I asked. “What’s with the bags and the

sticks?”

“It’s like I said. They’re checking for signs of disease and keeping an eye out for bugs and other parasites while they’re at it,” said Tech, glancing over at the children as she spoke. “If they find any pests, they pry them loose with the pole and collect them safely in the bag. Small, swarming insects like aphids need a different approach. But the stick method is fine for most of the bugs we get here.

“If we do find a diseased tree, we *can* mix up our own medicine. But usually, we’ll just call the arborist and get them to look at it for us. Do you know what an arborist is? Sometimes, they’re also called tree surgeons—they specialize in tree medicine. Tomiyasu used to call in his arborist twice a year, even if there was nothing wrong. You know how it is; sometimes you just need to talk to a specialist. I’ll give you their phone number, so be sure to call and introduce yourself later.”

Tech reeled off a series of digits from memory as I hastily scribbled them down.

“What else do we do...” she continued. “Oh! Every year around February, we prune back all the trees. The pruned branches are refrigerated for use as scions when grafting new saplings. You must’ve read about grafting, right? You grow a new sapling from a nut or seed. Then, once it reaches a certain size, you graft one of your pruned branches onto the trunk to create a completely new tree. When you graft rather than growing from scratch, you get far more nuts. They taste better, too!

“But, no matter how careful and attentive you are, eventually, a tree *will* wither and die. So it’s very important to keep numbers up by grafting new saplings every year. You don’t want to wake up one spring and find yourself with a tree cemetery.”

I’d read that it can take several years for a chestnut or walnut tree to reliably bear fruit, unlike, say, vegetables. That means that if a large number of your trees died all at once, your harvest would be hard hit for several years, even if you immediately scrambled to plant a full set of replacement trees. It seemed to be critically important to increase your tree numbers in a gradual and

measured way, every year without fail.

“Also...if any trees start to grow weak, we can use fertilizer to reinvigorate them. That’s pretty rare, though—the soil in this forest is incredibly fertile. In fact, using too much fertilizer can also cause trees to get sick. So you need to be very careful not to overdo it.

“What else... Ah, yes! It’s a long way away yet, but at harvest time, you’ll want to sell the chestnuts and walnuts we gather. I’ll give you the contact details for our buyers—we have two. One’s a discerning and reliable businessman. The other rides the coattails of one of Tomiyasu’s childhood friends. And *that* one’s a good-for-nothing bum who’ll gouge you for less than half the market rate. I strongly recommend you don’t sell anything to that bum. Don’t even call him to say hi!”

Techi gave me two more telephone numbers then proceeded to carefully remind me not to use the second one (in case I’d already forgotten). I added a comment next to the number in my notebook to make sure I wouldn’t. She was clearly very serious about this.

We sat in silence for a moment. My eyes wandered back to the young chipmunks in the trees.

“Hang on,” I said after a little while. “That’s it? That’s all there is to it? Pest control. Fertilize as needed. Graft saplings regularly. Call the tree surgeon in a pinch. That’s...a very short list.”

Techi put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands.

“That’s right. It’s not much when you put it that way,” she replied, peering at me through half-closed eyes. “Chestnut trees are very resilient. They do well in the heat and well in the cold; strong winds and heavy rain are no big deal either. Unlike growing fruit and vegetables, you could not lift a finger all year and still get a half-decent chestnut harvest. Walnuts are even more robust. They’re fine with massive weather changes and are very resistant to disease.

“So tell me, how do you feel about that 40 percent now? Was it worth it? Or do you regret taking the loss?”

It felt like she was testing me—her expression was that of someone trying to

ferret out another's intentions. I took a moment to think it over before I replied.

"I don't think I can judge that until after I've counted the earnings from the harvest...wouldn't you say?" I countered. "Perhaps at that point, I might find that I need to renegotiate our agreement for next year...but Great-Grandpa was an experienced veteran, and no doubt, he'd had good reason to keep the same terms year after year. This is to say...I trust you, Miss Tech, and your helpers."

Tech let out a sharp breath through her nose and cracked a gentle smirk, her elbows still propping up her face. Her eyes wandered toward the orchard and mine followed. To my astonishment, many of the chipmunks were lounging among the roots beneath the trees or ingeniously wedged in between the higher branches, sleeping soundly.

"Kids will be kids," said Tech. "They take regular naps. They also like to play and mess around during the workday. Trust is a big word for little creatures like that. Don't worry—I won't think any less of you if you admitted that you miscalculated."

She grinned, clearly delighted by my look of surprise.

"Yes, well... I say it's a good thing," I replied, trying to regain my cool. "It just goes to show that you and Gramps weren't working these poor kids to the bone! What a relief!"

Tech said nothing in response. She simply continued to stare me down with that smirk on her face.



WOULD the pact with Tech and her clan lead me to profit or loss? I decided to drop that question for the moment, saving such thoughts for after the harvest. Tech and I hadn't said anything to each other for a while, so I watched the kids at work in the orchard instead.

Some were enthusiastically working hard, some sleeping soundly, and others were enjoying a game of tag with their friends or generally running around and playing. As I observed them, I saw that some were serious, some were happy, and some were smiling away. But I didn't see a single look of misery or pain or distress. Gradually, my heart lifted and I was finally convinced—no one was

coercing these children. There was no forced labor here. I let out a deep sigh and kept watching.

After a while, a new thought arose from the quiet.

“Miss Techī,” I said. “Could you write down all their names for me? It doesn’t have to be today.”

Techī acknowledged my question with a contemplative noise and thought about it for a while.

“I mean...sure, I can,” she replied eventually. “But what on earth do you need that for?”

“I was thinking it’d be a good idea to make them nametags. See, if a kid gets hurt or there’s some other sort of trouble, the last thing I want is to not know their name. An injured kid crying their eyes out is going to have a hard time answering my questions. But, if everyone has a nametag, I can immediately see exactly who was where and figure out what happened. That’s my thinking anyway.

“*You* may know everyone’s names, but, I hate to say it, these kids all look alike to me. It’ll take me a while to remember their names and faces. I think it’s important. It may not seem necessary if you’re always here, but you never know what may come up.”

“...That’s fine. Well said. You’ll have your list tomorrow,” she replied. “Tomiyasu was very good with names. If he met someone new, he’d remember their name right away...but I guess you’re still fresh from the outside. You haven’t seen many beastfolk yet. That probably makes things difficult.”

“Gramps could tell all those kids apart?” I asked, very impressed. “Wow. I’d expect nothing less. Speaking of which, I guess Great-Grandpa was able to keep this place running right up until his hospitalization thanks to these kids’ hard work, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Techī. “He had a pact with us, so we looked after the orchard for him. He’d sit out here drinking green tea while he supervised the little ones. Other days, he’d be toiling away at that weird hobby of his. Well, there’s a limit to what you can do out here while also watching the kids, but he

always found some prep work he could do.”

Great-Grandpa’s hobby. The treasures that he’d produced had once filled that warehouse to the brim. That hobby of his had saved my life once, back when I was a little boy.

Whenever I thought of him in his later years, completely obsessed with his favorite pastime, as happy as the day was long, it brought a warm smile to my face. It must have done so now as well, as Techii was giving me a strange look.

“So, what’re you gonna do?” she asked. “Your ‘orchard education’ isn’t exactly going to take very long, and the tasks you’ll need to do yourself are few and far between. If you don’t find *something* to do between now and the autumn harvest, there’s a real risk you’ll go a bit loopy from having too much time on your hands. *You’ll* need a hobby too.”

Too *much* free time? That was an unimaginable problem to most citizens of modern Japan. I’d be the envy of every working adult in the country, many of whom fantasized about exactly such an existence. *How curious*, I thought. I had long since figured out exactly how I’d spend such time, given the chance.

“I’m going to take up Great-Grandpa’s hobby. The very same,” I replied matter-of-factly. “I want to uphold his vision, humble as it was. When I was a kid, looking up and down the shelves in that warehouse, every little space crammed with colorful bottles and jars...I thought it was the most beautiful thing in the world. The mere sight of it inspired me. I’d like to recreate it.”

Techii let out a small sigh and shook her head in disbelief.

“Tomiyasu had some peculiar habits,” she admitted. “So...I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that the same strange blood flows in his great-grandson’s veins. I used to think that only a man like Tomiyasu would consider preserving food to be an engaging pastime. But now I’ve met *two* of you maniacs.”

Gramps loved preserving food. It was his favorite way to spend his free time.

Salting foods. Sugaring them. Pickling in vinegar. Pickling in alcohol. Smoking. Drying. Canning. Bottling. Vacuum packing. Freezing. He could make umeboshi, jam, compote, dried fruit, beef jerky, pickled wasabi, western pickles, frozen jellies, even freeze-dried tofu. He loved it all. He made such a vast range of

foods. And they kept so well, retaining their delicious flavor for years at a time.

Sometimes, he'd send them to relatives. Sometimes, he'd eat them himself. And occasionally, he even organized "preserve parties" just to enjoy them with other people. They brought him joy in so many ways. I was sure that even the sight of all that countless glassware lined up neatly on the shelves must have filled him with a deep sense of satisfaction.

And it was those countless jars and bottles that'd saved my life as a boy when I'd come to visit Gramps one summer.

I'll admit, I'm exaggerating a bit when I say that, but it definitely felt that way at the time. That warehouse full of food let us weather a very scary situation with hardly a care in the world.

"One summer, when I was just a kid," I began to explain, "I was visiting Great-Grandpa like I did every year. This was...fifteen years ago now. Summer break had just started and I'd just arrived at the house...when that huge disaster happened.

"The Great Disaster, they'd called it. This whole area had been hit—the town at the mountain's base had been completely devastated, as had the road connecting the town to the forest. In an instant, Great-Grandpa's house had been cut off from the rest of the world. Although, I suppose that the result would've been the same even if the road had been spared.

"In the news reports, the town looked like a picture of hell itself. Homes, schools, roads; everything was damaged or destroyed. Everything the townspeople would normally take for granted about daily life had been snatched away. Nothing was coming in or out; everyone was stuck here. The camera crews filmed the survivors piling into the evacuation shelters, desperate for food and water. Seeing the aftermath unfold before me on TV, I was terrified of what was to come. I was sure that I'd starve. I thought there was nothing but suffering ahead and I started bawling my eyes out.

"But...Great-Grandpa simply smiled and told me there was nothing to worry about. He said that, until the town reopened and I could return home at the end of the summer, I could eat as much as I wanted of all my favorite foods.

"He led me straight to the warehouse building. Normally, it was strictly off-

limits to us kids, so this was my first time seeing the glorious spectacle hidden inside. It was quite a shock. I remember the long rows of jam jars caught my eye right away—a full rainbow of the most delicious-looking hues. I wondered what fruits had been used in each jam—some of the colors were so exotic, I couldn’t even begin to guess. I was drooling at the thought of all those different flavors.

“At some point, I realized I’d stopped crying...and true to Great-Grandpa’s word, I enjoyed an amazing summer without a moment’s hunger or fear. What’s more, as soon as he got word that the road had finally been repaired, Gramps went down the mountain and handed out jars of food to everyone he knew. They were all so grateful—Gramps seemed like a real hero in that moment, you know?”

That, I reflected as I finished, was when I came to understand the charm of preserving food. I’d tried making jam and umeboshi a few times, first at my parents’ house and then in my own apartment. But I could only ever make small batches. There was simply no space to store all those jars for later. I was only a dabbler.

But this place? The house was *huge*. I could make as much as I wanted and more. I could finally sink my teeth into this world that’d fascinated me for so long, filling up the shelves in Great-Grandpa’s warehouse with delicious preserves of my own making. My hands tensed into fists—I could barely contain myself.

Techi’s eyes narrowed.

“...Is that so?” she said. “What a...great story...” She didn’t make the slightest attempt to hide her disinterest. Unconvinced by my impassioned speech, she just stared at me with puzzled indifference.



SHORTLY thereafter, we were interrupted by a rustling sound. A young man—specifically, a brown-haired, brown-eyed beastman of the chipmunk-y variety—stepped out of the forest.

“Hey, Tokatechi! You taking proper care of the little scrubs?” he asked.

Techi was unmoved.

“I should *hope* so, considering that, as a preschool teacher, it’s my job,” she replied. “Shouldn’t *you* be at work too, bro? What’re you doing out here?”

The young beastman was wearing a shirt and jeans beneath a white apron. He bore a strong resemblance to Techī, so they definitely seemed to be siblings. He carried a large shopping bag in his hand, which he lifted over his head with a rustle, as if to answer her question.

“Just a little treat for the kids,” said the young beastman. Then he turned to me. “I see Mr. Moriya’s replacement has arrived, and it seems the pact has been made. So I can also use this visit to congratulate my little sister. Of course, it’s also the perfect opportunity to introduce myself to Mr. Moriya the Younger. The name’s Arurei Kurikara, older brother of Tokatechi over there. You can call me Rei if you like! Pleased to meetcha!

“I’ve got to thank you, buddy—working on Mr. Moriya’s orchard has become an important source of income for our household. So, I’m very relieved, from the bottom of my heart, that we can continue helping each other going forward,” Rei finished, flashing a broad grin.

I politely returned the sentiment and his grin only widened. He placed the shopping bag down on the table and started taking out plastic food containers from inside. He placed one of them before me.

“These are candied chestnuts and glazed walnuts, originally picked right here in Mr. Moriya’s orchard. Some people call chestnuts prepared this way *marron glacé*—did you know that?” asked Rei—rhetorically, of course. “My French isn’t so great, but I believe that *marron* is the French word for a special kind of chestnut that grows on a *marronnier* tree. They aren’t regular chestnuts, though! The French call those *châtaigne* and they grow on a *châtaignier*, if I’m not mistaken.

“The problem with *marrons* is that they need a huge amount of prep work before they’re even edible. As a result, they were often substituted with regular chestnuts in recipes, and eventually, those became the norm. So, by the time these recipes got to Japan, there was plenty of confusion around the word *marron*.

“You know that famous dessert, the *Mont Blanc*? Its original full name is

Mont-Blanc aux marrons. Seems that it used to be made using *marrons* rather than regular chestnuts.”

It seemed that Rei liked distributing facts as well as desserts. He took the lids off two containers and rummaged around in his bag for utensils. He handed Techii and me a fork each and clearly wanted us to dig in right away, judging by the big smile plastered across his face.

I peered into the plastic box and selected a chestnut to start with. I pierced it with my fork and popped it into my mouth. Almost immediately, the refreshing sweetness and aroma filled my whole mouth. There was so much flavor I couldn't even put it into words. All I could do was keep chewing. I was blown away.

“Ha ha ha! Pretty good, right?” laughed Rei. “The nuts that grow in this orchard are the best you can get. Second to none.”

He took a break from watching me eat to call out to the kids in the treetops. “All right, worker bees! Time for a snack! First one to wash their paws and rinse their mouth out gets the first helping!”

This was greeted by a tremendous cheer, and the children were back on the ground in an instant, like little lightning bolts. A moment later, they were lined up at the faucet, scrubbing away thoroughly like they'd been told. Turning on the faucet proved no obstacle, despite their little chipmunk paws.

Once a child's paws were clean, Rei reached into his bag and handed them a small hand towel, then a fork. Then, he removed the lid from a child-sized plastic food container and handed that over too. Once everyone had their share, he started chatting idly with Techii. I listened to their conversation with some interest, while keeping most of my attention on the *glacé* treasures in the box before me.

With each bite, the chestnuts gently released more of their incredible flavor. These were without a doubt the best I'd ever eaten, by a longshot. It was hard to believe a humble chestnut could taste so amazing. Great-Grandpa's ban made a lot more sense now. The chestnuts and walnuts that grew in the orchard had always been off-limits. They were only for the customers, he'd always said. Not once had he let me try one. Now I knew why. Their flavor was

mind-blowing.

The glazed walnuts were almost as good. Again, they made you doubt what you knew about walnuts, bursting with flavor and offering a very satisfying mouth crunch. To be honest, I'm not a big fan of walnuts. Usually, when you buy them, they taste pretty indistinct. You just get this vague nutty flavor—you're not really sure what you're eating. But *these* were completely different. You'd no doubt in your mind that this was the taste of pure, delicious walnuts.

I kept shoveling them into my mouth, one after another, until they were all gone.

That little box of candied nuts had quite possibly been the most delicious thing I had eaten in my entire life. I let out a long, contented sigh. Seeing this, Rei couldn't help himself, and he broke into a wide smile, his face glowing with self-satisfaction.

"So, you liked it, huh? Glad to hear it! There's a lot more where *that* came from, I'll have you know. I run a shop over that way, deeper in the forest. So, when you've got some time on your hands, make sure you come and visit. Of course, don't forget to bring some money with you—I only do freebies the *first* time I meet someone, yeah?"

I finally understood how this absurdly delicious dessert had come about. It seemed that Rei was a professional pastry chef—or *pâtissier*, to stick to his French theme—and he ran his own shop at that. I was very impressed.

"By the way, Mikura," he continued, "Tokatechi told me just now that you're interested in food preservation. Now, I'm not saying you *have* to start with nuts just because you own an orchard. This *is* a free forest, after all! But you've got some great options open to you. Dried walnuts are a very simple way to get started, as are boiled chestnuts which can be refrigerated or frozen for long-term storage. Some people will also boil walnuts with the inner shells still on. And there's a traditional method for making dried chestnuts known as *kachiguri* that's still popular to this day. That last one's a real classic. Definitely give it a go!

"It's a shame that the harvest's so far off. Otherwise, you could use your own produce. But *these* days, you can easily buy stuff regardless of the season, so

make sure you try a bunch of different methods, yeah? If you ever want to learn how to *glacé* stuff, just come by the shop. I'll be happy to walk you through it."



With that, he grinned at me and gave an enthusiastic thumbs-up...but he quickly began packing his things, no doubt because of the cold glare Techī fixed on him.

After he'd retrieved all the forks and towels and food containers, he crammed everything into his big shopping bag. He said goodbye to the kids with a brief, cheerful "See ya!" and vanished back into the forest.

Only once he was gone did I realize that I'd completely forgotten to thank him. *How rude of me!* It gave me a very good reason to visit the shop, though—I made a mental note to do so. I glanced at Techī, who was still coldly staring at the part of the forest that Rei had disappeared into.

"So...Miss Techī," I said, "you're a preschool teacher then? I'm a little surprised. I mean, with the kids working and everything, it's nothing like the kindergarten I went to. Is this the bulk of your job then? To watch over the kids while they work? That's very different from how I imagined the job."

She let out a sigh.

"Well," said Techī, "there are bound to be differences. We don't have training courses or certifications here, so the work is pretty easygoing. Speaking of work...what about you? You won't see any money from the harvest until the autumn. That's a long way off. Will you be able to afford food with no income? It's all very well to obsess over a new hobby, but aren't you forgetting something?"

"Ah, yes," I replied. "I *should* be able to manage for a year with no income... maybe even two. Actually, I've been dreaming of owning my own home for a while now—one with enough room to build a big warehouse alongside it. I wanted to make that happen as soon as possible. So, ever since I started working, most of my paycheck has gone straight into savings. I've led a pretty frugal lifestyle."

Techī sighed once again.

"I guess you've got it all figured out, huh?" she said, with a certain resignation, and returned to her earlier posture—elbows on the table and chin resting on her hands.

The children were back at work, reinvigorated by their afternoon snack, a look of happy satiety still visible on their little faces. And so my eyes too were drawn out to the orchard to watch them.

They really *were* cute as dolls, working away earnestly with their thick and bushy tails twitching and twirling about. I don't think I'd ever seen anything so charming. It really was too much.

"This is my first time seeing any up close," I said absentmindedly, "but... beastfolk really *are* adorable, huh?"

I hadn't really meant to say it—it'd just sort of slipped out while I was looking out at the children. But hearing my comment, Techii immediately stiffened and turned to look at me. She was frowning again.

"You mean to say," she began, "that you've no aversion toward us beastfolk? No feelings of disgust or unease?"

I met her eyes and looked at her a while, carefully taking in her bitter glare. I shook my head from side to side.

"I can't say that I feel anything like that," I answered. "Anti-beastfolk sentiment is a thing of the past. It feels like a remnant of the Shōwa era...and even among older folk, I reckon people who still think that way today are very much in the minority.

"I'm not up to speed on the latest developments, but universities and other institutes are very engaged with cultural and medical research related to beastfolk. Recently, I even saw an anime about beastfolk airing on TV. What was it again...? Oh yeah, it was all about Aterui, that famous beastfolk hero and a great warrior of the Old War. Now that I think about it...Aterui sounds very similar to your brother's name, Arurei. Is there any connection? A namesake?"

"Yeah, that's right," replied Techii. "Our father loved the story of Aterui, so he adapted the name for his son. We do get TV reception up here actually, so a lot of us watched the Aterui anime. TV dramas are very popular here too."

She considered what I said for a moment.

"...So, the war is a thing of the past, you say..."

“I don’t know how *you* might feel about it,” I quickly chimed in, “but the way I see it, we’re only different in culture and appearance. We speak the same language, live in the same country...we’re neighbors now. So no, for my part, I’ve never felt any kind of distaste for beastfolk. As for the war, I guess there are still *some* loose ends. But I strongly believe that if we treat each other right, we can ensure nothing like that ever happens again. I, for one, want to see the peace between our peoples continue.”

I’d said my part, and I watched Techī in silence, carefully observing her face. Now that I thought about it, in all those summers I’d spent at Great-Grandpa’s house, I’d never so much as glimpsed a beastperson. I guess his cooperation with the beastfolk and this whole pact of theirs must’ve started fairly recently. It was entirely possible that Techī wasn’t yet used to associating with humans.

“Well, you know,” I continued, “all those dramas and anime are made by people who’ve never met a real beastperson before; people who don’t know your culture. Sitting here and actually talking to you in the flesh is a completely different experience. This whole situation is still kind of surreal to me, to tell you the truth. If people on the outside knew what you were really like—if they knew how *cute* young beastfolk are—I honestly think there’d be a huge demand for child beastfolk to become professional performers.”

All sorts of thoughts ran through my head as I looked at Techī’s face. I glanced up at her chipmunk ears and peered at the bushy tail behind her. Her features were objectively quite beautiful—I doubt many people would disagree. Furthermore, the ears quietly perched atop her head were utterly adorable, and the way her fluffy tail moved around in reaction to how she was feeling only added to her charm. If she ever appeared on TV, she’d become famous overnight.

“*Hmph*,” she snorted. Her face had become deadly serious. “This whole area is officially part of the Beastfolk-Administered Autonomous Region, a recognized independent territory within the nation of Japan. And yet, to this day, the issue of our citizenship still hasn’t been resolved. Being able to work on the other side of that gate is little more than a fantasy at this point, let alone appearing on TV.

“By the way, you *should* know that there are equally strict restrictions on

people crossing the border into the Wilds. You being allowed to live here is a rare exception, and it's *only* because you're Tomiyasu's successor and a member of the Moriya family. Don't you forget it!"

I nodded in acknowledgment and reached into my pocket to take out a handful of leaflets and papers, given to me by the staff on duty at the checkpoint. They contained various precautions, warnings, and information related to life within the autonomous region, as well as lists of prohibited items and behaviors.

I made a note to carefully read them later...at which point, I suddenly remembered the mountain of other things I had to do, starting with unpacking my luggage. At the very least, I'd have to take a bath, find some bedding, change into some clean clothes, and sort out something for dinner. I checked the time on my phone, noticed with a slight panic that it was almost evening, and rose to my feet.

"I'm very sorry to break off our conversation," I said, "but I just realized how much I still need to get done today. All my belongings are in boxes, I really need a bath, and I still haven't eaten dinner. Can we pick up where we left off tomorrow?"

She gave me a look of understanding and I thought she was about to say goodbye...when she suddenly slapped her hands together, as if realizing something, and she called out to the kids.

"Listen up, everyone! We're finishing early today! Pack up your tools and wash your paws! We're going to help Mikura unpack his things! We've cleaned up Tomiyasu's house plenty of times, so you should have a good idea of what goes where by now. Let's make it quick—I want everyone home before dark!"

The children acknowledged her with raised arms and a shout of cheerful agreement and rushed all their tools back to the storage shed.

"No, no, no," I protested. "I can't *possibly* ask you to—"

Techi looked at me through narrowed eyes.

"That pile of luggage is *huge*," she said. "You'll be at it forever by yourself. Besides, it's an old tradition for people to help their new neighbors move in.

That's definitely still the case among us beastfolk. You're living in our backyard now. So you'd better start getting used to doing things our way.

"...What exactly are you planning to eat, anyway? You know they only let deliveries through the gate on Mondays. Today's Wednesday—you'll be waiting a *very* long time if you order takeout. Your fridge and warehouse are both empty—think you can manage a five-day water fast? Look...if you want to feed yourself properly, that's all the more reason to get to know the beastfolk way of life, yeah? Anyhow, with the kids' help, that big pile of luggage will be gone in an hour, maybe two. Let's go."

Techi stood up from the bench, swept her backside free of dust and turned tail, said tail swaying behind her as she went. She walked toward the children at the water pipe, presumably to make sure they were all scrubbing properly.

"Th-Thank you very much," I called out, fumbling my words. "That'd be a great help."

She didn't turn around. She merely raised one hand and waved it back and forth in answer. Her tail followed roughly the same movements.

Once all the children's paws were spotless, we headed back to the house together. With the help of Tech's little army, we had the place clean and squared away in no time.

As strange as it all was, it seemed the foundations of my new life were starting to fall into place.

Life in the Beastly Wilds

SILENCE.

“It’s so quiet...” I said to myself as I awoke.

An old-fashioned lamp framed with a wooden shade hung from the ceiling, and I found myself bewildered and disoriented by it. What was this place? Was I on vacation? That lamp looked like something you’d see in a traditional Japanese inn.

I looked around the room in search of further clues and saw some sliding shōji screens that might have been doors to another room or perhaps a built-in closet. It was only when I saw the futon cover I was sleeping under—which had a somewhat gaudy yet nostalgic pattern—that I finally remembered where I was. Yesterday, I’d moved into my great-grandpa’s house.

Last night, Techii and the little chipmunks had helped me straighten out the place. After that, I’d enjoyed a simple meal of instant curry with packet rice, bathed, brushed my teeth...and then I guess I had changed into my pajamas and tumbled into bed. Techii and the kids must’ve prepared a futon for me before they left.

I remembered staggering about after my bath, my mind already foggy with sleepiness, fantasizing about crawling into a cozy bed and repeatedly vocalizing my tiredness. I may’ve been exhausted by the move, but I still wondered about the various ways I’d made a fool of myself. I scratched my head frantically...then abruptly got to my feet, folded up the futon, and stuffed it into the closet.

The bathroom was next. I washed my face with the uncomfortably cold water and gently rinsed out my mouth, all the while wondering what to do about breakfast. Since there was a microwave oven, I decided to have another portion of that instant curry and rice and headed for the kitchen.

Once the rice and the curry pouches were fully heated up, I picked out an appropriate plate to eat my curry on and grabbed a spoon and cup. I thought it

was a bit lazy to eat in the kitchen, so I took everything to the living room.

There was an imposing low table positioned right in the center of the room, so I laid everything out on it and sat down on one of the floor cushions. I sat so I faced the window that looked out onto the veranda. Upon closer inspection, it seemed that I'd accidentally left it open overnight.

I put my hands together, voiced thanks for my meal, and grabbed my spoon. And so, I sat and ate my breakfast in the most refined surroundings, savoring the unmistakable taste of instant pouch curry. About half a minute into my meal, I happened to look out onto the veranda in front of me, and I saw a large chipmunk had quietly appeared.

It was staring at me in silence. I stared back and noticed it was wearing clothing. This was no ordinary chipmunk then, but a beastchild—presumably one of the kids who'd worked in the orchard yesterday. No sooner had I thought this than the chipmunk kid scurried over to the table and sat down next to me, still watching me intently.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning!" replied the child cheerfully, continuing to stare at me.

"Um..." I said next, somewhat distracted by those cute, round eyes. "...Can I help you with something?"

"Um," replied the child, tilting their head slightly. "Techi told me to come and get you! She said if you were eating breakfast, I should wait till you're finished and then bring you to the orchard. So...I'm waiting for you to finish your food!"

"I see," I mumbled with a small nod.

I resumed eating my curry so that the day's work could also begin. Once the curry was gone, I took everything back to the kitchen and left it to soak in the sink. At this point, I remembered that I was still in my pajamas, so I went to my bedroom to put on some more suitable clothes—a long-sleeved shirt and some slacks.

I was pretty sure the young chipmunk was a boy, so I quickly changed even though he was still watching me. After that, I brushed my teeth and found myself thinking about all the chores that'd be waiting for me when I returned.

Once I was ready to go, I headed for the front door, put on my shoes, and stepped outside.

No sooner had I done so than I realized I hadn't locked the doors. I didn't even have the house keys on me. But I figured that the place had been left wide open before I'd even arrived and everything was just fine, so I happily gave up the idea. The watchful child was, of course, still watching intently the whole time. We set off toward the orchard together.

"So, what's your name then?" I asked the child along the way. "My name's Mikura, by the way."

The child had been scurrying along the ground quite happily, like a wild chipmunk would. They stopped, turned around, and answered my question.

"That's right! You're Mikura! I'm Kon! Nice to meet'cha! I'm a boy, by the way!"

Kon.

I suspected that this too was a shortened version of some longer, much stranger name. Kon struck me as a name you'd give a fox, not a chipmunk. That in turn made me wonder what other species of beastfolk might live in these woods—*surely, there must be some foxes too?* Indeed, I read a book once that described a range of other beastfolk species. If memory served, there were also boars, bears, foxes, raccoons, badgers, serows, cats, and dogs.

A handful of beastfolk *did* actually live on the human side of the border, serving as goodwill ambassadors to Japan. However, they always made an effort to conceal their animal features, hiding ears and tails beneath hats, hoods, or other clothes. Some even skillfully used elaborate hairstyles for the purpose. At a glance, you'd think you were just dealing with an eccentric human being.

However, the beastfolk in human books, as well as those appearing in our TV dramas and anime, were only based on the faintest impressions of the writers and producers—products of fertile imaginations, exaggerated for dramatic purposes. I think it's safe to say those creators had no idea that there were beastfolk out there who were virtually indistinguishable from wild animals, like little Kon.

Well, even if they were to somehow get a glimpse of the little guy, most people would probably assume they were simply seeing a large chipmunk or a plush toy.

But with his wide, round eyes, his adorable movements, his perfect coat of fur; gleaming and smooth, clearly subject to regular baths...his was an entirely different charm than that of an animal or a plush toy. I wondered why.

Was it because he understood human speech? Yes, perhaps, though that still aligned with his age. But while his speech and his gestures were very much like a preschooler's, there was something animal-like about them as well. Perhaps you could say it was that mix of childlike and wildlife that was the root of his charm.

I mulled this over until the orchard was in sight, the children all lined up in a row with Techī standing over them. At that point, Kon went from a run to a sprint and joined the other kids, quite out of breath. Techī shot the smallest of glances my way, as if to make sure Kon had brought the right person, and she proceeded to pat him on the head and praise him lavishly. Once he'd been sufficiently pampered, she turned her attention to the rest of the group.

"All right, everyone! You know the drill. Pay attention, don't hurt yourself, and be thorough in your work! Right, off you go!"

The kids raised their arms and called back in acknowledgment. Today, they were working a different plot, further inside the orchard, and they all ran off at once. Techī made for the rest area as she had yesterday; I followed. I took a seat opposite Techī once again, and she handed me a sheet of college-ruled paper. It seemed to have been torn out of a notebook. I was about to ask what it was when I remembered our conversation about the list of the kids' names.

"Thank you very much," I said, taking the sheet from her.

Next, she reached into her large messenger bag and took out a chestnut brown pencil box, similar to the one I'd had back at school. She placed it on the table and smoothly opened the lid. The box was packed full of laminated name badges—the kind often used in kindergarten, with a safety pin on the back.

"Since you wanted that list to make nametags for the kids," said Techī, "I thought I might as well get some badges ready for you to hand out. I can lend

you a pen, so help me write these names out.”

The name badges had an acorn design with a white rectangle in the middle where a name could be written. Techii laid them out in rows on the table and handed me a marker pen, which I accepted with a brief nod.

“Acorns. Very appropriate,” I said. “Why don’t you start from the top of the list and I’ll start from the bottom.”

Techii nodded and started writing out names on the badges in big, easy-to-read letters. She casually started a new conversation as she worked.

“...With chestnut trees, the disease you really need to watch out for is chestnut blight. That’s a scary one. America used to be the world’s biggest producer of chestnuts. But about a hundred years ago, the disease spread quickly and destroyed most of their trees. This, in turn, had an impact on the passenger pigeon population, as they nested in chestnut trees, and eventually, they went extinct from overhunting.

“...Some varieties of chestnut trees have a defense mechanism though—their trunks contain high levels of a substance called tannin, which helps keep the disease at bay.”

Not expecting an onslaught of new information, I hurriedly grabbed my notebook and scribbled down the key facts about this dangerous disease. Just as I’d finished and was about to return to the name badges, Techii hit me with another batch of facts.

“Japanese chestnut trees are one of those tannin-high varieties. Chestnut timber has been a firm favorite in Japan since ancient times, and its high tannin levels are a big reason why. Tannins make the timber very rot-and-wear-resistant and, depending on how it’s used, it can easily last for many decades.

“...However, it’s still possible for Japanese chestnut trees to become infected, so we all have to stay vigilant. The last thing we want is a repeat of the American chestnut tragedy. When grafting trees, it’s very important that all cuts and graft points are carefully treated so that there are no entry points for the disease. Insects can also wound the tree and let disease in through the bark. Prevention is the best medicine. That’s why the kids are out there every day.”

The kids were doing very important work by checking for signs of disease and carefully removing every insect—without harming the tree in the process.

Techi went on to explain the downsides of relying on a chemical solution to treat the symptoms rather than the cause. Blight medicine, it turned out, needed to be applied for six months out of the year, and it was eye-wateringly expensive. Specifically, it came to about a third of the total profit from the year's harvest. Prevention really was the way to go.

"I see," I replied with a deep, solemn nod.

It would've been nice to know that yesterday before we made our pact, I thought to myself. I looked directly at Tech, and clearly she read my mind, because she turned her head upward, almost apologetically, to avoid meeting my gaze.

"...My brother scolded me last night," she began, almost whispering. "He said that I was foolish to insist on making the pact before I'd fully explained everything to you. That I'd made you uneasy, leaving you unsure of the terms. That concealing details like that could've ruined everything. That I'd put the whole contract in jeopardy. He gave me a *really* hard time... I thought it'd be fine just to explain things as they come up. Sorry about that."

"I see... Well, we talked it over today, though, right? We have an understanding," I said, trying to reassure her after her unexpected apology. "I've no complaints or problems with the contract. It's all good. So, don't worry about it, okay?" I said, then shifted the conversation to something else. "Changing the subject briefly... Don't walnut trees need this kind of attention too?"

Tech rested her chin in her hands and looked at the walnut trees, deep inside the orchard, beyond the chestnut plot, and began to explain her next point.

"Walnut trees can get blight too, but it's not that serious. I've definitely never heard of it killing a walnut tree—they're resistant to all kinds of diseases. Again, it's probably due to their high tannin content. Chestnut blight is counted among the big three tree diseases in agricultural circles, causing major crop damage every year. So that tells you just how hardy the walnut tree must be.

"Walnut lumber's also highly prized and commonly used in woodwork—it

seems to be especially popular abroad. The Japanese tend to prefer chestnut for the most part, but they've been cultivating chestnut trees since ancient times, so I'm sure it's deeply embedded in the culture by now.

"By the way," she asked me, "do you know how to write 'chipmunk' in kanji?"

"It's written with the characters for 'chestnut' and 'mouse,' isn't it?" I replied.

"*Hmph!* Too easy for you, huh?" she huffed. "I guess there *is* something bookish about you. I'm sure you've read a lot."

With that, she turned her attention back to the name badges and picked up her marker pen. I didn't want to have her write them all out alone, so I only jotted down a few key words to Google later, then returned to the task at hand.

We were at it for a good ten or twenty minutes, when finally, the list was exhausted and Techii called out to the children.

"All right, everyone! We're gonna take a little break and hand out your name badges! Come on down!"

The kids let out all kinds of cheers and whoops of excitement and ran to us, forming a neat line in front of Techii. She got up, grabbed a handful of name badges, and read the names out one by one. As each child responded, she undid the safety pin and neatly attached the badge to their clothing. After she'd done a few, I figured I should do the same. I read out a name and a young chipmunk rushed over to me. I attached the badge and fastened the sharp safety pin with the greatest of care.



We continued until every child had their own acorn badge, clearly displaying their name. They were all beaming from ear to ear, peering around with chests puffed out—partly with pride, partly to better show off their badges as they glinted in the sun.



THE children bounced around the orchard, still overjoyed at their new badges, but gradually resumed their work. There were a few nametags left over for children who had not turned up today due to business at home, so they were put away for later.

Just as I started wondering what I should do for the rest of the day, Rei showed up out of nowhere. Today, he'd brought a large bag in each hand.

It looks like he's brought more snacks.

"Hey! Here I am, folks!" he loudly proclaimed. "You'll be two or three hours, I take it? Someone's gotta watch the little nippers while you're gone, so just leave it to me. Now, off you go."

With that very insufficient explanation, he started laying food containers out on the table. I was confused as to who exactly was going where and what they'd be doing once they got there. Suddenly—almost as suddenly as Rei had arrived—Techi stood up and looked at me, an expectant look on her face. It was a look that said *Aren't you coming? Don't make me stand around all day.*

I stood up, perplexed.

"I'm sorry..." I said, "but am I forgetting something? Were you planning some kind of trip today?"

Techi looked at me as if I'd said something truly stupid while Rei laughed aloud, clapping his hands. She impatiently spelled it out for me.

"A trip, he says... How about a shopping trip, eh? Or are you planning not to eat until Monday? Didn't I tell you just yesterday that you're going to have to start doing things our way? Since you now have a formal connection with our clan, that makes you an upstanding new member of our community. You've earned the privilege of visiting the stores in the heart of the forest. We're going

there now, so you can buy food, clothing, or anything else you might need for daily life.”

She paused briefly.

“...Don’t tell me you didn’t bring any money with you?”

Flustered, I patted down my pockets. Fortunately, my habit of always grabbing my wallet when I left the house was still strong. I took out my wallet and checked its contents.

“*Erm*, I thought I might need money for the move, so I withdrew fifty thousand yen from my bank account. Looks like I still have around forty thousand left... Say, can I use yen in this forest?” I asked Techī.

“Of course you can,” she replied. “This may be an autonomous region, but we’re still located within the fine country of Japan. If you have a bank card, you can even withdraw money at one of our ATMs...although you’ve more than enough cash on you.”

Techī grabbed her bag from a nearby bench, slung it over her shoulder, and headed into the same area of forest that Rei had emerged from. Worried that I’d lose her, I quickly muddled my way through thanking Rei for his help, and then chased after her.

Passing through a gap between the trees, we found ourselves on a quite ordinary, forested mountain trail, which we followed for a time. But gradually, the scenery changed and, as it did so, it simultaneously became much more familiar and yet incredibly bizarre. It’s...difficult to explain.

There was a road. A genuine road, with houses and buildings. Much like any you would find in Japan...except this road was located in the middle of the forest.

Normally, if you wanted to build a road through a forest or houses or what have you, you’d have to clear the land, fell the trees, dig out all the roots and boulders. That’s what I’d thought, anyway. But this forest appeared untouched. The familiar structures began suddenly, deep in the woods, and the road and the buildings were all sort of tucked between the trees. It felt as if I’d stepped into a strange, alternate world.

“These feel just like wooden houses from the Showa era, don’t they?” I offered calmly before my amazement got the better of me. “Wh-What the—?! Those traffic lights are hanging from a tree branch! How bizarre! How do they get electricity?”

“Take a closer look,” said Techī. “There are brackets arranged in a spiral pattern along the branches and down the trunk of that tree. If you look really carefully, you can see the power cables running between them. Speaking of which, we also have our own power station in the mountains. We commissioned the Japanese government to build a dam and a hydroelectric power station, which we own outright and operate ourselves.”

“Wow...who’d have thought?” I pondered aloud. “Is it safe to run electric cables through the forest like this, though? *Hmm*, you do sometimes see cables snagged by tree branches as they run from telephone poles to residential buildings...so I guess it must be safe enough?”

“Well,” replied Techī, “I don’t know anything about the technology, but I’m sure there must be safety measures. What I can say, almost for sure, is that we’ve never had a power outage or a fire here—at least not to my knowledge.”

We continued to follow the weaving road as it poked and wound its way through the forest. The further we went, the more beastman-made structures appeared, all neatly wedged between the trees, while said trees gradually grew thicker and taller and more majestic. Eventually, we reached a spot where the forest opened up to reveal a large—no, that doesn’t begin to describe it. It gave way to a *colossal*, round space.

I say “space,” not “clearing,” because the forest didn’t end there. Rather, the trees had grown to the most absurd, gigantic heights—they were almost certainly comparable to city high-rises in size. These giant trees surrounded the space, serving as a sort of perimeter wall, and the canopy above formed a vast, domed ceiling. Sunlight filtered down through gaps in the canopy, like so many streetlights, fully illuminating the space.

“This is unbelievable. Simply incredible...” I muttered, my jaw slack with awe. “I’ve never seen *anything* like it. It’s like a legendary elven village from a fantasy story or something.”

I'd stopped dead in my tracks, staring up at the impossibly high canopy, unable to grasp the true scale of it. I slowly lowered my gaze, trying to take in the dome in its entirety. When I did, I saw Techí some distance away—she continued walking before eventually spinning around.

"Hurry up!" she shouted.

I quickly obeyed. I made a mental note not to drift off again and to stay by her side. We continued along the sidewalk and crossed the dome's threshold.

As soon as we entered, I felt a strange sensation throughout my body.

"Huh...what's this weird feeling?" I asked. "It's like the air has changed all of a sudden. Has the humidity dropped?"

"It's those trees," explained Techí, sounding almost disinterested as she kept on walking. "They purify the air here. You won't breathe air this clean anywhere else. Our main settlement is in the heart of the forest, and the giant trees that surround it have very unique properties. They say that humans who spend time here can end up living longer. That's how good the air is for you."

"It's just one incredible thing after another today, huh," I remarked.

"All right, enough of all that," said Techí. "From this point on, there'll be a lot more people about, so stay close. Don't get lost."

Indeed, I started to hear the sounds of urban life—the hustle and bustle of people going about their daily business—resounding through the area. As we passed by, I spied all sorts of beastfolk rubbernecking out of the glass windows of the surrounding houses. They were watching us...no, I suppose they were watching *me*— with great interest.

"They all watch TV—they should be completely used to seeing humans every day," said Techí, an exasperated look on her face. "What do they think they're doing, poking their heads out of windows? Have some dignity!"

I guess she wanted to be spared their inquisitive gaze, because she quickened her step. She led me down the road toward a sizeable parking lot, in the middle of which stood a large, single-story building. There was no mistaking it—it was a bona fide supermarket.

“Wow...” I muttered for the umpteenth time, taking in the day’s next miracle. “It’s just like one of ours, with its sprawling, single-floor layout...but the all-wood construction gives it a luxury feel.”

“Funny you should say that,” replied Tech, pointing to the supermarket entrance as she spoke. “For us, it’s steel and plastic that make a building feel classy and luxurious. On the inside though, it’s just like the supermarkets you see on TV. There’re products on display, you grab what you want, and you take your basket to the registers so the cashiers can add up the total cost for you.

“Now remember, we have to carry everything back to the house ourselves, so don’t buy too much. Keep it to what two people can carry. You got that?”

I nodded to show I understood and felt a certain nervousness overcome me. I quickly realized it was actually the excitement and thrill of stepping into a new and unknown world. We walked toward the wooden supermarket.

The sliding doors opened automatically as we approached. I grabbed a shopping basket...and what awaited on the other side was an entirely normal, painfully unremarkable supermarket like any other.

“I...I should’ve expected this,” I said aloud, trying to sweep my unrealistic expectations under the rug. “It’s not like you can make refrigerators out of wood...and it must be easier to install lighting and such when you use steel girders. I see they stock products from outside the forest as well... Of course they do. That makes perfect sense...”

Tech ignored me and walked briskly to the fresh produce section near the entrance to pick out vegetables. I followed.

“The vegetables are so cheap...” I noted as I approached. “They’re all weirdly massive though. I can only imagine how great they must taste—they look very firm and juicy. Do all the vegetables in the forest look like this?”

I reached out my hand to give one of those perfect vegetables a squeeze, but Tech slapped my hand away and shot me a look that seemed to say *That’s no way to choose vegetables!* She proceeded to grab some cabbage, green peas, asparagus, and other greens and gently dropped them into my shopping basket.

“You don’t choose by firmness, you choose by freshness,” said Tech, once

again in lecture mode. “The best way to do that is to eat seasonal vegetables as much as you can. It’s difficult to get your hands on good vegetables in the winter, so all sorts of toxins build up in the body. That’s why it’s important to eat lots of fresh, seasonable vegetables when you can, to flush out all those toxins and other nasties. Now, what else do we need...*ah*, yes. Rapeseed flowers.”

She didn’t stop walking during her lecture, taking a bundle of rapeseed flowers and popping them in my basket too, before heading over to the next aisle to grab some natto and miso soup. I followed Techī around, watching her as she dispensed grandmotherly wisdom, and I realized that she was somebody you could truly rely on. I let her handle most of the shopping decisions from then on.

That said, despite Techī’s firm insistence that we mind how much we buy before we entered the store, her shopping technique clearly had no room for hesitation or restraint. I soon found some much heavier items making their way into my basket, like fresh fish, a two-gallon jug of milk, and a big tub of yogurt.

“...Oh yeah, you have no miso paste, either,” said Techī, completely lost in the flow of groceries. “You’ll need salt and sugar too... Mirin, rice wine, soy sauce... and dashi stock too, of course. Tomiyasu made his own miso from scratch, so I almost forgot about it. Rice! You definitely need rice...well, maybe just a small bag for today.”

Which, hilariously, was probably the only concession she made—otherwise, her shopping style pulled no punches. In the end, we had to use two shopping baskets, and the final bill came to just short of seven thousand yen. We both left the store, heavily laden with shopping bags—several in each hand.

“I think we bought too much,” said Techī, as we stood in the parking lot outside the supermarket. The handles of the heavy plastic bags were biting into her hands, and I could feel mine starting to do the same.

“I guess we’ll have to buy a car,” I joked, then found myself curious about something I’d noticed. “Say, Miss Techī, what kind of cars are popular here in the Wilds? I mean, we walked along that road for quite a while, and now we’re standing in this lot. But I don’t see many cars around.”

“...The most popular would be mini trucks, by far. They’ve been all the rage for decades,” she replied.

“Mini trucks, huh? I can see why. They’re a good fit for the landscape...good for carrying things...”

“Come on, quit complaining and start walking,” admonished Tech. “Standing around like this will only make our hands hurt.”

We followed the road back the way we came and headed home, huffing and puffing under the heavy load. Somehow, we survived the return trip and quickly set about putting away all the groceries in the fridge and kitchen cabinets.

Under Tech’s guidance, I also unpacked food items that spoiled quickly in their original wrapping or kept better if immediately transferred to another container. We were both rather thirsty by the time we were done, so we each enjoyed a glass of milk before heading back to the orchard.

“Miss Tech,” I said on the way. “I’m not sure how many times I’ve said it now, but thank you again. For the shopping, the food storage tips, and for all the cooking advice you offered. You’ve been a huge help.”

Tech, who was ahead of me, looked back at me for the briefest moment then replied, “...It’s no big deal. Until yesterday, I didn’t know if anybody would even show up to take over the orchard. I didn’t know if our clan would get to make another pact. It’ll be quite a headache for me if you die of malnutrition.”

“Ah, so *that’s* how it is...” I said. “Now that you mention it, Gramps lived a very long, healthy life himself. Was that also because of that forest...and maybe because of his lifestyle here in the orchard? What do you think?”

Well,” said Tech, “we don’t actually *know* what effect that pure forest air has on the body. It’s not like we’ve done scientific studies or anything... But I can definitely say that our vegetables are far fresher and more nutritious than those found on the outside. They’re delicious, too—it’s easy to eat a lot of them. I’m sure that plays its part.”

The orchard wasn’t far off when Tech suddenly stopped and looked back at me, this time with a very serious look on her face.

“Say...were you...there at the end?” she asked. “Did you witness Tomiyasu’s

final moments?”

“What?” I asked in return, a little surprised by the question. “...Yes, I was there. He stayed in the best room in the hospital. The entire family had gathered round to watch over him at the end... That was when I decided to take over the house and orchard.”

“Tomiyasu wanted to die here in the forest,” said Techii. “I’m sure of it... But when the humans heard he’d collapsed, they dragged him to that hospital, almost by force... It’s bothered me ever since... Did Tomiyasu pass on with a smile on his face?”

Her deadly serious expression and the powerful gravity in her voice told me that I should reply with an equally genuine and honest answer. No lies, no evasion. I had to tell it as I saw it.

“When I heard that he was at death’s door, I rushed to the hospital. But by the time I arrived, he was already unconscious. He was on life support. But it was clear that nothing could be done, so the respirator was turned off...and the whole family was waiting for his heart to stop beating.

“But those vultures couldn’t even wait that long. They started squabbling about who’d inherit the house and run the orchard, passing the buck from one to another...all while he lay dying, right there in front of us. They just said whatever they wanted. How selfish can you be?

“It would’ve been far more fitting for someone from my grandparents’ generation to take over than me. But they were also stubbornly defending their selfishness. It was as if nobody could even see Gramps lying there.”

I paused at that point to take a deep breath. I looked off into the distance and continued.

“So I said it. Just like that. In the heat of the moment. ‘I’ll do it. I’ll take over. I’ll quit my job, leave my apartment, and look after everything. It’s over. So give it a rest.’ That’s what I told them.

“They pounced on me with heartless words. ‘Your great-grandfather may be dying, but don’t do something so stupid.’ At that moment, Great-Grandpa opened his eyes. His breath was ragged, like his heart was about to stop any

moment...but despite that, he smiled. And he said...

“So...Mikura will take over for me? That’s a relief... If Mikura’s in charge, everything will be fine. Good...I can rest easy then...’

“He died with that smile on his face. It was such a warm, heartfelt smile. We even asked the people at the funeral home to leave it like that for the open casket, so that everyone at the funeral could say goodbye to him with a smile of their own,” I finished.

Gramps had lost a lot of weight by that point. He was all skin and bones. It’d be a stretch to call it his best smile. But despite that, I still think back on it when I need a little solace.

In the end—with that smile and those last words—the matter of the inheritance was settled. Realizing that Great-Grandpa had been awake—that their petty bickering had almost been the last thing he’d ever heard—my relatives accepted the final outcome without further question. Even my parents said nothing to dissuade me.

I thought about how they must’ve felt. I’d graduated from a pretty good university, had gotten a job at a pretty good company, and had worked pretty hard to achieve all that. Suddenly, I was going to give it all up. Deep in their heart of hearts, they must’ve been against it...but they never said a thing.

Thinking about it put me in a quiet mood. But Techii interrupted it with another stern, meaningful look.

“Mikura. Thank you.”

Her words had an intensity to them that she hadn’t shown before. I was embarrassed by her directness. I scratched my head nervously and all I could think to say was “You’re welcome.”

With that, we set off again toward the orchard.



BACK at the orchard, we made our way to the rest area, where Rei was waiting for us with a big smile on his face.

“Hey! Welcome back,” he said, beaming. “Hmm...what’s this? Did something

good happen to the two of you? Techí's face is far less sour than usual."

No sooner had he said this than Techí took a step toward the bench he was sitting on and kicked it so hard that the whole bench moved.

"Is that how you thank your dear older brother who took time off work to help you out today?" asked Rei, rising to his feet. "You hurt me deeply, sis. Your brother is a gentle and delicate soul..."

He started clearing the table of his belongings, storing them away in the bags he'd brought. He left two lunch boxes on the table—presumably a late lunch for Techí and myself—and he patted me teasingly on the shoulder.

"I don't know what happened between you two, but I'm glad to see you and Tokatechi seem to be getting along. You kids play nice now."

With that, he let go of my shoulder and headed back into the forest.

"*Uh...we will?* Thank you for lunch!" I called after him.

I sat down on the bench, and Techí took up her usual spot opposite me in her usual posture, her chin resting in her hands. She fixed her eyes on the children in the trees and my eyes followed. The children hadn't noticed the changing of the guard and continued their orchard work blissful and oblivious, happily giving it their all. I watched them for several minutes before feeling the need to speak.

"Miss Techí..." I ventured. "What else do I need to know about the orchard?"

"What's that?" she asked, turning to face me. "Oh, right... Well, you got most of it this morning before our supermarket trip. That's pretty much it for now. Trimming and grafting are best learned on the job, and as for fertilizer, you add it in specific circumstances, depending on the condition of the soil and the trees. That's also better seen than described. With bugs and disease, it's also probably easiest if I show you when we actually have a problem. And when it comes to prevention...well, as you can see, the children are doing a fine job of it—you can always review your notes from yesterday.

"The only thing remaining is the harvest, and that'll be dealt with at harvest time... It's still early spring, so there's really not anything else I can teach you right now."

Rei was right—her expression had softened and there was less impatience in her voice now. Was it because we'd gone shopping together? Was it because I told her that story about Gramps? Whatever it was, I was glad we'd moved from the stiff rapport of coworkers to something a little friendlier. That was definitely a relief... But I had a new concern to raise.

"So, in other words...we're going to be spending most of our time exactly like this, watching the children work for hours on end?" I asked. "Is that it? We'll just be sitting around doing nothing with our feet up all day?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it like *that*," said Tech. "If the children mess anything up or cause any trouble, we have to deal with it. Sometimes there'll be one-off tasks, like writing out the name badges this morning... Hang on, we already talked about this yesterday. As I said then: you'll need a hobby, because you'll have plenty of time to indulge in it."

"I guess we *did* talk about it..." I conceded. "Of course, I've every intention of taking a deep dive into my new hobby, but having all this free time is still a very sudden shift. I need to get a whole bunch of tools and supplies before I can start preserving any food. Even with online shopping and that supermarket in the forest, it'll take some time to get everything together. So, I guess what I'm trying to say is...what'll I do in the meantime?"

"...If you've nothing else to do, then I guess you'll be sitting around doing nothing, with your feet up all day..." quipped Tech. "Isn't that considered a real luxury in your part of the world? Sometimes they air TV specials about living the 'slow life.' It's definitely a thing."

"The 'slow life?'" I replied. "Hmm... I feel like I've heard something like that before. The Slow Life Movement... Wait, is that what this is? I thought that was about doing your job, but not being under constant, crushing pressure. Living a more relaxed lifestyle. I don't think this counts. I'm definitely starting to feel like I'm lazing around all day as time simply passes me by. That's a very different kind of slow life."

"What are you talking about?" said Tech. "You *are* doing your job. Your job is to manage the orchard. And as the owner, you have entrusted the daily work to my clan and I. Not a bad arrangement. Some people can only dream of that kind

of passive income.”

“Oooh, I see what you’re saying,” I replied, somewhat convinced. “So to enjoy living the slow life, you want a passive income stream to support it. Yes, I suppose people *would* find that desirable...”

Our conversation drifted off. Techii let her eyes drift back to the children. Not having anything to do, I let my eyes go in the same direction. More time passed in silence.

I say silence...well, the two of us were silent. But not much else was. The children were making a spirited racket as they worked, their lively voices echoing through the orchard. The spring breeze tickled the tree leaves, creating a rustling backdrop of sound for a vast chorus of birds and insects that sang above it.

It was anything but quiet. But it was extremely peaceful and calming. My heart certainly felt at peace. I felt embraced by the spring weather. The wind was cool but refreshing. The aromas of the trees and the soil blended with other fragrances I couldn’t yet name, and they all wafted about gently on the forest air.

Those slow life advocates might be onto something.

It was as I was thinking this, my mind absently wandering, that I found myself saying something I’d had no intention of asking.

“So, Miss Techii...are you seeing anyone?”

Apparently nature *does* indeed abhor a vacuum, even in conversation. I did not pose the question with any ulterior motive—that wasn’t my intention. It seems that in letting my mind wander, I’d lowered my guard, leaving an opening for my mouth to blurt out words without first consulting my brain.

At my old company, openly asking a coworker that kind of question could be construed as workplace sexual harassment. I couldn’t believe my carelessness, and I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as I braced myself for Techii’s response. But instead of an angry frown, I was surprised to see a brooding pout.

“No way,” she muttered, a bit sulkily. “Guys don’t go for my type.”

Her type? I took another look at her profile as she said this, and it was simply...adorable. Out in the human world, that face would melt a million hearts. *Are standards of beauty that different here?* I was very puzzled by this. Since I'd opened my big mouth and started this conversation, I took responsibility for continuing it.

"I don't know what type you think that is, but I'm surprised to hear that. I would've thought a cute girl like you would have a boyfriend and be very popular with the guys. Maybe that's just my way of thinking..."

I evasively tried to wriggle out of my original question, but I was only digging a deeper hole. Tech's shoulders twitched at my bumbling words, but she quickly recovered by stretching out her back and sticking both arms up high over her head.

"Beastfolk like their women graceful and refined," she said, her statement half-blended with a yawn. "That kind of grace takes a ton of practice and training. It's a set of skills that have to be learned. Did you know that? There's elocution of course—you know, what to say and how to say it. But you've got to polish and refine all your gestures and movements as well. That's not something you can learn overnight, y'know."

"I think that people who can show the discipline and commitment to learn those skills are amazing. I have so much respect for friends who have mastered them... I've tried to learn too, a couple of times, but the whole thing just doesn't agree with me. I can never stick it through to the end."

"Is that so..." I said. "Well, I'll admit that etiquette and social graces can be very useful skills when navigating society... But for a culture to place that much importance on them is...kind of incredible. Personally, I'd always take a healthy dose of common sense over airs and graces."

Tech put her elbows back on the table and nuzzled her chin back into her palms. Her tail gently swayed and flicked back and forth, but she didn't say a word. As it moved about, it almost seemed like it was trying to hide her face from view. It was constantly drifting into the space between us, over and over again. I took it as a sign that she didn't want to talk about it any further.

I looked out into the orchard once again and got started on the lunchbox that

Rei had left behind. As I ate, I started to ponder all the supplies I would need to get started on my new hobby and what kind of prep work I might be able to do out here once I got my hands on them. I continued thinking and planning as dusk slowly began to settle around us.



WHEN evening arrived, it was time for the work to end and for the little ones to return home. They all marched into the forest in a neat line under Techī's watchful eye, who accompanied them to make sure they all got home safely.

"See you tomorrow!" I shouted, waving goodbye to them as the little squadron trudged off. When they were gone, I set off for home myself.

When I got back, I washed my hands, rinsed out my mouth, and then went to the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator door and surveyed today's pickings, struggling to visualize the broad range of ingredients as a coherent dinner.

"If I remember correctly, the rapeseed blossoms are best served with boiled greens and soy sauce..." I muttered to myself in front of the open refrigerator. "The fish needs to be eaten as soon as possible; I can grill or steam that... Some miso soup would go well with that too... *Ah!* The rice! Got to put the rice on first. Doesn't matter what else you make. It's not a full meal without a bowl of white rice."

It'd been a long day, with all sorts of hustle and bustle, and now I noticed that I was talking to myself. I hoped I wasn't losing my marbles already. I made a mental note to keep my mouth shut and began preparing my meal in silence.

I'd blown my first ever paycheck on a very nice rice cooker, so I was all set on that front. It hadn't been cleaned since the move, so I washed out the inner pot and the lid. Next, I took some rice from the small bag I'd bought and rinsed it thoroughly in the pot. I set the timer, pressed down the cook switch, and left it to do what it did best.

Now it was time to attack the main part of the cooking, knives out. I started gathering utensils when I heard a voice behind me.

"I thought I'd drop in to see how you were doing, but I wasn't expecting *this* mess. Look, you've scattered rice grains all over the floor."

It was Tech, of course. I spun around in surprise, only to find her diligently picking up uncooked rice off the kitchen floor. I hadn't noticed her come in. She went to the sink and collected the rice grains I'd left in there, too. Holding them in her cupped hands, she carefully washed them with a little water. Then she popped open the lid of the rice cooker, which hadn't yet come to a boil, and tossed the orphaned rice inside.

"If you can't take care of the small things, how can you be trusted with the big ones? Food is precious! Don't waste it. You should never throw anything away unless it's going bad," she said.

She pushed me firmly out of the way, banishing me to a corner of the kitchen.

"You watch from there," she ordered, reaching into her bag and pulling out an apron made of acorn-patterned fabric. Then she set to work, swiftly and skillfully.

I suspected that she'd already decided on my evening menu back at the supermarket, as her movements were decisive, with no hesitation. She was well-practiced, even at the most meticulous cooking tasks.



In less than an hour, she'd made miso soup with rapeseed blossoms, green peas, soy-flavored asparagus, and fish simmered in soy sauce. We took everything to the living room and arranged it on the low table. The rice was the last thing to finish cooking, which Techii served up in a large bowl—large enough for two helpings—and gently placed it in the middle of the table without saying a word.

With everything served, she thumped down on a floor cushion, grabbed the TV remote, turned on the TV, and started flicking through the channels. Once she'd found a variety show she liked the look of, she put her hands together, gave thanks for the meal, and began eating as she watched.

I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing, and I stood there for a moment in a bit of a daze. When I snapped out of it, I seated myself at the table and gave thanks for the meal before digging in, eyes fixed on the TV just as Techii's were.

"Mmm, this fish is really good," I said after a few bites. "Also, thank you for going out of your way to check in on me. I doubt this meal would've turned out as well if I'd made it myself."

"This is nothing. Besides, I'm getting a meal out of it as well, aren't I? I feel well-compensated," Techii replied. Her face was relaxed, and she enjoyed the variety show as she shoveled away with her chopsticks.

Between the noise of the television and the loud, nighttime cries of the insects, you could hardly call it a quiet meal. But it was still a good one. Before we knew it, all the food was gone. Techii seemed pleased by this, nodded deeply, and gave thanks for the meal once more. She got to her feet and cleared the table, then proceeded to start washing up.

As I watched her, I suggested that I should walk her home, given that it was now totally dark, but she declined, saying that I'd only slow her down—apparently, the quickest way back to her place was through the treetops. She finished washing up, neatly folded up her apron, and prepared to leave.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said. That was all there was left to say.

"See ya tomorrow," she replied.

She turned her back to me on her way out, casually waved as she walked

away...and disappeared into the dark forest.

After Techii had left, I opened my smartphone's web browser, found a website that sold food supplies, and ordered all the essentials I'd need to start preserving food. When that was done, I took a bath, returned to my bedroom, roughly laid out my futon, and crawled in to enjoy a good night's sleep.



THE next day, young Kon once again came by early to pick me up and waited for me to finish breakfast and get dressed before we went to the orchard together. It'd be a while before all my supplies arrived, so I'd resigned myself to another day of watching the children zip up and down the trees.

Like yesterday, the atmosphere was noisy but peaceful. Since there was nothing to do, time flowed slowly, and I surrendered myself to the slow life experience under the open, spring sky.

It wasn't easy. I thought about all sorts of topics and tried to stay focused, but I felt tired despite this—sleep constantly threatened to overwhelm me. I wondered how Techii was faring. I peered over to see her chin in her hands as usual as she absentmindedly gazed out at the children. She wasn't doing anything, didn't seem to be lost in thought, and she certainly wasn't yawning. She just stared with the absolute patience of a statue.

I didn't know exactly when the pact with Great-Grandpa had first been made, but Techii must've been doing this job for years, every day unchanging. I tried to imagine all that free time with nothing to do...she must've become thoroughly used to the boredom by now.

Then, suddenly, I realized that I'd completely misunderstood.

The whole time I was watching her, Techii hadn't taken her eyes off the kids once. She barely even seemed to blink.

Techii would turn to face my direction when talking to me, but she'd still spend well over half the time glancing back at the children. As I looked closer at her eyes now, I realized there was nothing absentminded about them.

It wasn't the patience of a statue. It was the focus of a *hawk*.

As she watched with that perfect concentration, she reminded me of a coiled snake. If a child looked like they were about to stumble or fall off their branch, her shoulders visibly tensed, and her weight shifted subtly from the bench and onto her waiting feet. When it became clear that the child wouldn't fall—that they were safe—she let out the smallest sigh of relief and relaxed back into her previous state of readiness.

She was ready to pounce at any moment. Ready to sprint. To catch. To help.

No wonder she wasn't falling asleep.

However, I wondered if it wouldn't be better to keep watch from under the trees where the children were working. Another look at my surroundings corrected me; the rest area had been built on top of a very small hillock. It was just high enough that you could watch over the entire orchard without having to move.

Moving closer to the children meant you'd no longer have a complete overview, which explained why Techī set up camp here every day—the orchard was very large and this was the only way that one person could keep their eye on everything at once.

Realizing these things one after another, I couldn't help but mutter some words of approval under my breath.

"Hmm, interesting..."

I was still staring intently at the side of Techī's face when I said it, which earned me a sharp look from her. She didn't say a word, but it was very clear what she was thinking.

What the hell are you on about now?

After that little interlude, we continued to pass the time quietly and uneventfully. Just as I was beginning to think it might be time for lunch, there was a rustling in the trees and Rei appeared.

"Busy again today, huh?" he said, holding up a hand to greet us. I wondered if he'd brought anything with him again today when he lifted the bag he was

carrying, as if on cue.

“Good day,” I said.

“Good day! Good day!” he said, returning my greeting with a smile. “Today’s visit is for business and that makes it a *very* good day for you. Mr. Moriya used my services regularly to buy various daily essentials and I’m here to find out if you’d be interested as well.”

His pitch drew a look of ire and impatience from Techii, but she said nothing. Rei thumped down on the bench next to her and showed me the contents of his bag.

“I’m friends with some local farmers, see,” he explained. “I swung by earlier today to collect this bottle of freshly squeezed milk and these chicken eggs, also freshly laid this morning. Mr. Moriya had a standing order for one small bottle of milk and one fresh egg every morning with the farm’s subscription service. I thought you might like to sign up. The supermarket’s got nothing on this stuff! It’s way more nutritious and tastes amazing!”

Rei placed the bottle of milk—the small, glass kind used by delivery services—and a recycled paper carton containing a single egg on the table in front of me.

“This morning?” I asked. “That’s as fresh as it gets. One bottle of milk and one egg every day, how much would that set me back?”

“That’d be ¥5,000 a month. Some think that’s expensive; some think that’s cheap—everyone’s different. But I’ll tell you one thing. I use these ingredients in my pastries, and I won’t use anything else. That should tell you something.”

Fifty thousand yen...that comes out to a little over ¥150 a day. That wasn’t a bad price. I wondered if the farm even made a profit. It appeared that Rei knew exactly what I was thinking, because he smiled just then.

“It’s worth noting,” he said, “that supplementary orders use a separate price list. You live alone, so one egg and one bottle of milk will be plenty most days. But what if you want to cook something special? What if you decide to bake a cake? If you’re having guests round, one egg definitely won’t cut it.

“In that case, all you have to do is contact the courier to increase the size of your order. And since most customers do that a couple of times a week, that’s

how the farm makes their money. Their real goal is to upsell you once you're on the basic subscription. The farm makes its own butter and cheese—even ice cream—and it's all available via the delivery service. Once you've signed a contract, it's very convenient to order all those extras.

"In any case, why don't you try that milk for starters, and then you can think about it, yeah?"

"I see... A smart business model indeed..." I muttered in response to his explanation and reached out to grab the bottle of milk that'd been offered to me. I peeled off the paper cap and took a big swig.

"Mmm...this is delicious. I've had farm-fresh milk before, on holidays and such, and while it was very good, it doesn't compare to this. This is very thick and has a wonderful sweetness to it... Yes, I think I might be interested in signing that contract... What's the sign-up bonus, by the way?"

I thought of the free laundry detergent that's often bundled with newspaper subscriptions. I never liked the idea of it—using a different detergent from the one you're used to always leaves behind a weird smell on all your clothes.

"Good question," said Rei. "If you sign up today, you'll receive a portable cooler box, complete with reusable ice packs, and an assortment of handmade soaps, made on the farm... Oh yeah...you'll also get a free pole."

"What?" I asked, confused. "A pole? Did I hear that right? Um...do you mean like a laundry pole?"

Rei seemed confused by my confusion.

"How can I explain..." he began, awkwardly scratching the back of his head.

Techi had been sitting next to her brother and listening in silence the whole time. Now, she suddenly stood up and walked to the storage shed in the corner of the orchard—the one where the children kept all their tools. She came back out carrying a long pole and headed back toward the rest area.

The pole was about as long as she was tall and looked to be made of iron. There was a round, metal ball fixed to one end, although I had no idea what it was for. When she'd come to within a few paces of the rest area, Techie twirled the pole around in a beautiful, flowing motion. It was suddenly a powerful

weapon in her skilled hands, and she wielded it as if it were an extension of her body. It was like she'd stepped out of a samurai film—she had a warrior's posture.

"This here's a pole," she said, brandishing the thing. "Technically, you might be able to call it a pole arm or staff. But round here, we just call it a pole. As you can see, it's a fine weapon."

"A weapon?" I replied, even more puzzled than before. "The sign-up bonus for my milk subscription is a *weapon*? What on *earth* am I supposed to do with a weapon?"

"Think about it. When the farm signs up a new customer, it's usually because they're living on their own for the first time or because they're new to the area. Both of those groups need some sort of weapon, so it's a good addition to the welcome package. Very convenient to have it delivered, too.

"As for *why* you'd want one, the answer's simple—self-defense. There're many wild animals in these woods, including boars and bears. If you're unlucky enough to meet one without a pole in hand, you may pay with your life. Of course, you'd be much better off with a spear or sword or gun. But Japan's sword and gun laws are a real pain in the ass. Not much we can do about that, so it's poles all around."

Judging from Tech's explanation, it seemed that beastfolk had a very hard time getting a firearms license. Even human applicants have to fill out a lot of paperwork and undergo strict police checks. Living in a bear-filled forest with no gun access seemed terrifyingly dangerous, so I'm sure the police would deem that a valid reason to own a rifle...for a human, anyway. If I applied for a license, I might well get it. But I imagined beastfolk would have to jump through ten times as many hoops with no guarantees.

After all, there'd once been a war between humans and beastfolk. If the government thought there was any possibility of another, I could see why they'd want to make weapon ownership as difficult as possible. Clearly, it was a political matter.

"Doesn't matter if it's a bear or a boar, as long as you have your pole with you... One good smash on the skull with the business end of this thing will turn

any animal into so much dead meat,” Techī continued. “This place is pretty out of the way—a quiet corner of the forest—so Tomiyasu could simply spray the area with animal repellent from time to time. The last batch should still be working...but you’re still better off owning your own pole. Just in case. If you ask me nicely, I might even show you how to use it.”

Perhaps thinking that it’d help convince me, Techī thrust the round end of the pole in front of my face where I could get a good look at it. The motion was sharp and perfectly measured, as if she’d done it a thousand times. There was no doubt in my mind as to her mastery.

The thought of having to deal with a bear attack weaponless was not very appealing, so I was pretty keen on the idea of owning my own pole and getting some lessons from Techī. However, at that very moment, the iron ball dropped off the end of the pole and landed on the table in front of me with a loud thud.

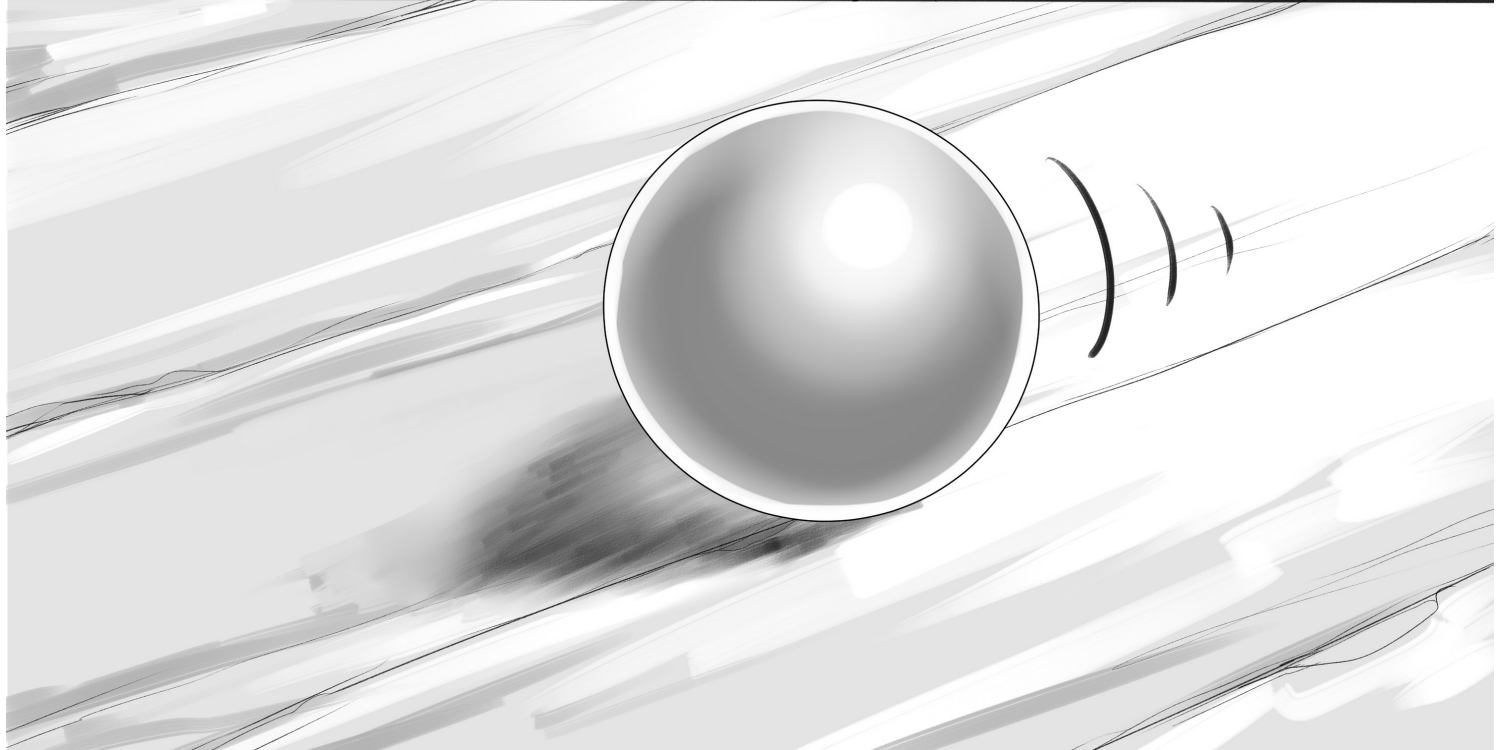
As the metal orb rolled around on the table, I noticed it had what appeared to be a screw thread sticking out of it. A quick glance confirmed that the pole itself had a matching hole in the end. It seems that the two parts hadn’t been properly screwed together, so they’d become loose during Techī’s little martial arts demonstration.

“What do you know?” I said. “I guess this isn’t your everyday, garden-variety pole. I see this end part is designed to be replaceable...but what on earth for? Even if this ball part took a solid beating and got bent out of shape, there’d still be no need to replace it with a new one...”

I considered the possibilities.

“...Oh, I suppose you could always exchange it for something different. Yes, I see. This is a very flexible tool. By switching out the end, it could become a hoe or a rake...or...a...spear...”

As I spoke, I realized that I’d noticed something I shouldn’t have and promptly shut my mouth. From that point, it easily followed that Techī and her clan had a stockpile of screw-mounted blades that would let them transform these simple poles into spears, or naginata, or other such weapons at a moment’s notice. Techī and Rei had broken eye contact with me and were blatantly looking around, feigning disinterest, almost certainly confirming my suspicions.



Then again, in this day and age, I didn't see how a few spears would be much use. That wasn't how wars and revolutions were started anymore. Maybe these poles were indeed only for self-defense.

In fact, I read in a book once...

"Th-That's right! I read in a book once about this traditional Japanese utility knife called a nata; it was common to affix one to the end of a pole to extend its reach. But you could hardly call that a spear. Spears, like the ones common during the Warring States period, have thin blades designed to pierce their target, while nata have a broad, single-sided blade designed for chopping through plants.

"I can definitely see how attaching a nata to one of these poles would be useful out here in the Wilds. I suppose that in a pinch, you could even use it to finish off an animal that's been caught in a trap. A very handy tool, *absolutely...*"

I spun a convenient lie out of what I could remember from the book, and Techii and Rei finally locked eyes with me again. They stared at me rather intensely for a while...and then they both smiled.

It was abundantly clear what those smiles were saying: *Let's leave it at that, shall we?*

I returned their smiles with an equally hollow smile of my own and nodded deeply. I was glad we'd come to an understanding.

The conversation had veered a bit off course, but having fresh ingredients delivered to my doorstep every day was a very tempting offer. I decided to sign up.

Rei immediately handed me a pamphlet with further details and a sample contract. He was very insistent that I read through them both carefully.

"It doesn't matter who the contract's with," he said. "It might be a famous company or a friend or a relative you know well. Whatever. Doesn't matter. Always. Read. The contract."

He banged his hand on the table to drive his point home. I appreciated his

honesty and began scanning the subheadings of the sample contract while I kept listening.

“If you don’t read the contract first and get tricked or scammed, you’re out of luck, no matter how much noise you make afterward. Always *read* the contract. ALWAYS read the contract. And make sure you understand it too. If you can’t make heads or tails of it, then seek out expert adv—”

There was a loud, rustling sound coming from the forest. It was just like the sound Rei made as he approached, pushing his way through the dense trees. Somebody was nearby. I looked where the sound was coming from...and a pair of glaring eyes pierced me to my core.

A violent snort followed. A glimpse of a giant tusk. The gaze was one of murderous frenzy: demonic and intense. Behind that, a huge body covered in thick, jet-black fur.

It was an enormous wild boar.

Gripped by equal parts shock and fear at the sight, I found myself completely unable to move. Techii grabbed the iron orb off the table, screwing it back onto the pole with one rapid twist of her hand. A second later, she was between the boar and us, menacingly brandishing her weapon, her fierce posture suddenly making her appear twice her size. Rei also shot out of his seat, sprinting into the orchard like a bullet, presumably to guard the children.

“Be gone! Leave this place!” roared Techii. “There’s no food for you here!”

But the boar paid her no heed. Its beady eyes and great snout and ears were all fixed directly on me...or rather, on the bottle of milk and the egg carton on the table in front of me. It wasn’t fooled by Techii’s words—*There’s food right there on the table!*—and stamped the ground angrily with its foot as it prepared to charge.

Techii broke her stance for a split second to bash the rest area’s concrete floor with the business end of her pole. The loud clang echoed throughout the orchard—a very clear sign to back off.

“Return to the woods!” Techii roared again. “If you take another step, you’ll get no mercy!”

But despite the warnings, the boar wouldn't back down. It let out an enraged snort, a seething grunt, and started thundering toward us.

Techi met its charge, nimbly and elegantly dodged to one side and, as the boar was passing, swung the pole around with unbelievable speed to deliver a powerful crack to its forehead.

That single hit clearly did some damage, as the boar let out a loud, angry squeal of pain. Its body twisted unnaturally as it charged and tried to get back on target...but the blow had rattled its brain, and it couldn't pick a direction. It tripped over its front legs, tumbling over forward and smashing nose-first into the ground. Somehow, it managed to stagger back to its feet, quivering all the while, and once again set its gaze on me.

Its eyes were out for blood.

"Spring is here!" boomed Tech, somehow managing to raise her voice higher still. "There's plenty of food to be found in these woods! Why do you persist? Stubborn fool!"

She wasn't angry yet. But she was definitely running out of patience. The boar didn't seem to care. Once again, it set its sights on me and charged.

But compared to its earlier thundering assault, this one had no bite, no vigor. It was so tame that Tech didn't even try to dodge. She firmly planted both feet in a wide stance, tightened her grip on the pole, and put all her strength into a single, powerful swing, aiming it straight down toward the beast's skull.

The boar's listless rush made it an easy target and it took the blow at full force. It staggered a few steps further and slowly swayed on its feet before its great body pitched over sideways and hit the ground with a tremendous thud. There was one twitch...then another...and then, it was still.

Is it unconscious? Or is it dead?

It was time to make sure. Tech took on a cautious stance, pole at the ready, and edged toward the boar for a closer look. She gave it a good prod with the end of her pole. When it didn't react, she inched even closer and gently put her hand on the creature's belly.

"It's all right now," she said. "He's dead. Though, if he hadn't been so

stubborn, he could have left alive...”

She mumbled this second part with a certain sadness and gently put her hands together to offer a short prayer. When she was done, she turned to me.

“Mikura, we need to butcher the carcass. Can you run to the house and grab some kitchen knives?”

Then she turned to Rei.

“As for YOU, my dear brother, courageously running off at the first sign of trouble!” she yelled. “Get over here and help me string up this boar! On the double!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” we answered in unison, suddenly spurred into motion. Rei ran toward the dead boar and I headed home. As I went, I could hear the children shouting excitedly amongst themselves.

“Did you see that?”

“That was *amazing!*”

“Techi’s so *cool!*”

While I was running back to the house, my mind had the chance to process what had just happened. I broke into a cold sweat. One or more of us could’ve easily ended up with a boar tusk through the gut... I realized that I owed Techi my life.

I went straight to the kitchen and grabbed three knives, but it didn’t seem very safe to carry them unsheathed. I wrapped them tightly in a newspaper that’d been left over after unpacking. Carrying them carefully with both hands, I headed back to the orchard.

Upon my return, the scene was quite different. The boar was now trussed up with rope from the storage shed and suspended from one of the forest trees next to the rest area. Its huge size was even more evident now that it was hanging upside down, its head dangling just above the ground.

Rei was sitting sprawled out on the ground next to it, completely exhausted. Techi stood next to the suspended boar, her head held high—they seemed to be sharing a moment of mutual understanding. I approached her to hand over

the carefully wrapped knives.

“Hang on a moment,” she said, “I’m just waiting for the water to boil.”

“Boil? How?” I asked, confused. I looked over at the rest area and gave a small cry of surprise. A small camping stove had been connected to the gas pipe and a pan of water was sitting on top of it. They must’ve been in the storage shed, as they were nowhere to be seen this morning.

I still didn’t know what the boiling water was for, though, and it must’ve shown on my face. Techi glowered at me, much like the boar had earlier, and proceeded to explain.

“You have to disinfect the knives first. Then you can slice open the belly, being careful not to accidentally cut into the intestines. Once there’s a big, clean opening, you carefully cut loose all the internal organs from the surrounding flesh. If you do it just right, everything should tumble out together in one go. Once the organs are out, we can move it to the warehouse, skin it, and cut up all the meat... This thing’s *huge*, though—it might be a struggle to eat it all...”

Techi had clearly butchered a few animals in her time, given the thoroughness of her explanation. I nodded with understanding, then found myself once again speaking without thinking.

“If there’s too much, we can always freeze it... Or, even better, we could preserve it. Boar meat keeps really well—we could salt it or smoke it...there are plenty of options.”

Techi turned to me with a look of blank surprise. Some unknown thought seemed to pass through her head and her face softened into a warm, genuine smile.

“Yeah,” she said. “That might be good too.”



“YOU’RE a big wimp, huh?”

I was barely able to move, my face flat on the table. My accuser was young Kon, who was sitting on the table beside me, gently prodding at my head.

“Not...usually...” I struggled to reply. “But I think it’s understandable. Anyone

would get weak in the knees seeing that for the first time. That...slopping s-sound... All those organs..."

Before the boar could be dismembered, it first had to be disemboweled—a spectacle that, it turns out, I hadn't been prepared for. At the sight of the boar's various innards spilling out onto the ground, I was overcome with such an intense wave of nausea that I was unable to stay upright. Even now, I couldn't lift my head off the table while Kon kept talking to me.

"Well, it's gone now," he said. "Techi and Rei put the boar in a wheelbarrow and took it to the warehouse. That's where they're gonna cut 'im up into little pieces!"

I guess he was trying to cheer me up. He supplemented his efforts by gently patting me on the head with his little paws. I laughed feebly.

"...Say, how long does it take to cut up an animal like that?"

"It takes a long time, I think," replied Kon. "After all, when you're done, you've gotta clean everything up and you've gotta take a bath, too!"

"A bath? Why's that?" I asked.

"Why? 'Cuz we're beastfolk, that's why! Wild animals and birds can have all kinds of scary illnesses. The animals are like our cousins, so we can get sick too! That's why, if we touch an animal or get blood on us, it's really important to have a proper bath and change into some clean clothes, so we don't catch anything. Human doctors don't research those kinda illnesses. So, if you catch one, you're in big trouble! 'Cuz there's no medicine!"

"I see...that *does* sound scary," I agreed. "I guess we have medicine for pets and farm animals, but who knows how effective they are on beastfolk? I guess the old saying is true: prevention is better than a cure. If you get injured, the risk is even greater... I can see why the beastfolk would be keen to get their hands on guns."

The more we talked, the better I started to feel, until I could finally pick my heavy head up off the table and look around.

It was like I was in a toy store, surrounded by plushies. There were young chipmunks crowding around me from all sides.

“Oh...hello,” I said. “Everyone’s here... Shouldn’t you be working? Won’t you get in trouble?”

The children narrowed their eyes and stared at me silently—no doubt something they’d learned from Techī. Kon gave me the same look, let out a sigh, and set about educating me—clearly I was missing something.

“We’re just kids! So we can only work with adult *super-vision*! Since you’re flopped down on the table and can’t watch us, we had to take a break. Techī left us this bag of smelly stuff to keep the boars away, but we already finished spreading it around the orchard.”

He picked up a plastic bag that was lying on the table and started prodding it with his little paw. “Animal Repellent” was written on the label.

“Come on, Mikura! *Super-vize* us!”

I took another look at the children and I noticed that some of them were firmly holding the wooden sticks they used to knock insects off the trees in the orchard. It almost looked like they were trying to protect me, poles at the ready, scanning the forest for signs of danger.

I hadn’t realized I was quite such a pitiful sight. I slapped my cheeks with both hands a few times to rouse myself, then straightened up.

“I’m sorry, you guys,” I said. “That was my first time seeing something like that, so I felt a bit sick. But I’m feeling better now, so I’ll keep a close eye on you until Techī and Rei get back. You can go back to work whenever you like. Does that sound good?”

I gave a small, apologetic bow and the children smiled and offered me their own encouragement before running back out into the orchard and climbing up into the treetops.

But one of them stayed. For some reason, Kon was still sitting on the table. I gave him a puzzled look.

“Are you taking a break, Kon?” I asked.

“Nuh-uh! I have a special job today. Techī told me I hafta look after you, so I need to stay right here at your side! If something happens, it’s my *response-*

ability! So, until Techī comes back, I'm not lettin' you outta my sight!"

Kon closed his eyes tightly and smiled as his tail flicked back and forth behind him. I scratched the back of my head at this further proof of my feeble behavior, but I didn't want to burst the little guy's bubble.

"I see. Thank you, Kon," I said. "Everyone's been very helpful today. I'll have to do something special to show my gratitude."

"Something *special*?!" Kon shouted excitedly. "I know just the thing! Give us some of that boar meat! They say boar is super delish! That one's male—they say females are the tastiest, but I won't complain!"

"You eat meat?" I asked, surprised. "But you're part chipmunk."

"Mikura, what're you saying?" he replied, ready to lecture me again. "Of course, I eat meat. Chipmunks eat meat. And besides, we're beastfolk—we *love* meat! Chestnuts and acorns and walnuts are amazing! They're our favorites! But we also eat meat and fish. We drink milk too. I think we eat most stuff that humans eat."

"R-Really? Chipmunks are omnivores?" I asked. "I had no idea! I guess they eat whatever they can find just like other rodents... Okay, if that's the case then, let's make it happen. We can all enjoy eating it together... Wait, no, we can't. Techī was the one who killed the boar. Doesn't that mean the meat belongs to her?"

"Ooh, ooh! I know this one!" said Kon, jumping up and down with his hand raised like a kid in class. "If an animal's killed in somebody's field or house, then the hunter gets half the meat and the owner gets the other half. So, half the meat belongs to you, Mikura."

"Oh, is that so?" I said. "It was a big animal and you're all quite small, so even half should be enough to treat everyone... Okay, if that's the case, then you can look forward to having some of that boar."

"Yesss!" shouted the young chipmunk. "Boar's basically like pork, right? There're so many yummy ways to cook pork—fried pork with ginger, tonkatsu pork cutlets...chashu pork is good too!"

"*Hmm*, ginger sounds like a great idea," I mused. "It'll help get rid of the boar

taint—male boar meat can have a very strong odor. It could turn out to be quite delicious. If we're all going to be eating together, maybe we should do a *botan* stew?"

"*Button* stew?" asked Kon, confused. "Mikura...it doesn't matter how long you stew them; you can't *eat* buttons. They're hard and they don't taste very good. I got yelled at once for chewing on my shirt buttons—they're very dangerous if you swallow them. I know this!"

"Not button stew; *botan* stew," I gently corrected him. "Botan is just a word that's used for wild boar meat. If we add ginger and miso, then simmer it all together with vegetables, it'll make for a really delicious hot pot... Hmm, you're still quite young, though... Children your age don't tend to like stew very much, do they?"

"No way! I love stew!" Kon protested. "Japanese hot pot is amazing! *Oooh*, I can't wait!"

Kon closed his eyes tightly and waved his arms about while he hopped around the table. He was over the moon and it showed. His eyes always seemed to screw up like that whenever he laughed or smiled. I laughed too as I watched him bounce around, then stopped jumping and started dancing and spinning instead. His light, nimble steps were captivating.

And so, young Kon and I kept each other company, enjoying a long conversation while we waited for Tech and Rei to return. All the while, I made sure to keep glancing at the orchard to keep an eye on everybody else as I'd promised.



"**HEY!** I'm back."

I was still talking to Kon when Rei reappeared, one hand raised in his usual greeting. He was wearing a completely different outfit than what he had on earlier. Gone was his white apron—he was now wearing a patterned button-up shirt and a fresh pair of jeans.

"I see you've changed," I said, slightly puzzled. "Where did you get fresh clothes from?"

He'd taken a bath at *my* house. But I didn't have anything that would fit him. He waved his hand casually, as if to suggest there was an easy explanation.

"We called my family and asked them to bring some stuff over," Rei explained. "We had some time while we were waiting for the bathwater to heat up. In any case, the beast has been butchered and all the cuts of meat separated out. Everything is in the big warehouse refrigerator. We went ahead and turned the breakers back on; hope you don't mind."

"No, not at all," I said. "Where's Techī?"

"She'll be along any minute," Rei replied. "I think it just took her a little longer to change, that's all. By the way...half that meat belongs to you. You know that, right? What are you gonna do with it? Eat it by yourself? Preserve it?"

"Ah... I was actually thinking of treating all the kiddos to boar hot pot. Would that be okay?" I asked.

"Sure, I don't see why not," said Rei. "That's a great idea. But even feeding twenty-plus kids, I think you'll still have a lot of meat left over."

"Well, in that case, I can always try my hand at preserving some of it," I said, quite excited about the prospect.

As we were talking, we spied Techī approaching from the direction of the house. I was stunned, completely unable to tear my eyes away while Rei snorted loudly as he tried not to laugh. Kon gave a loud cry of approval.

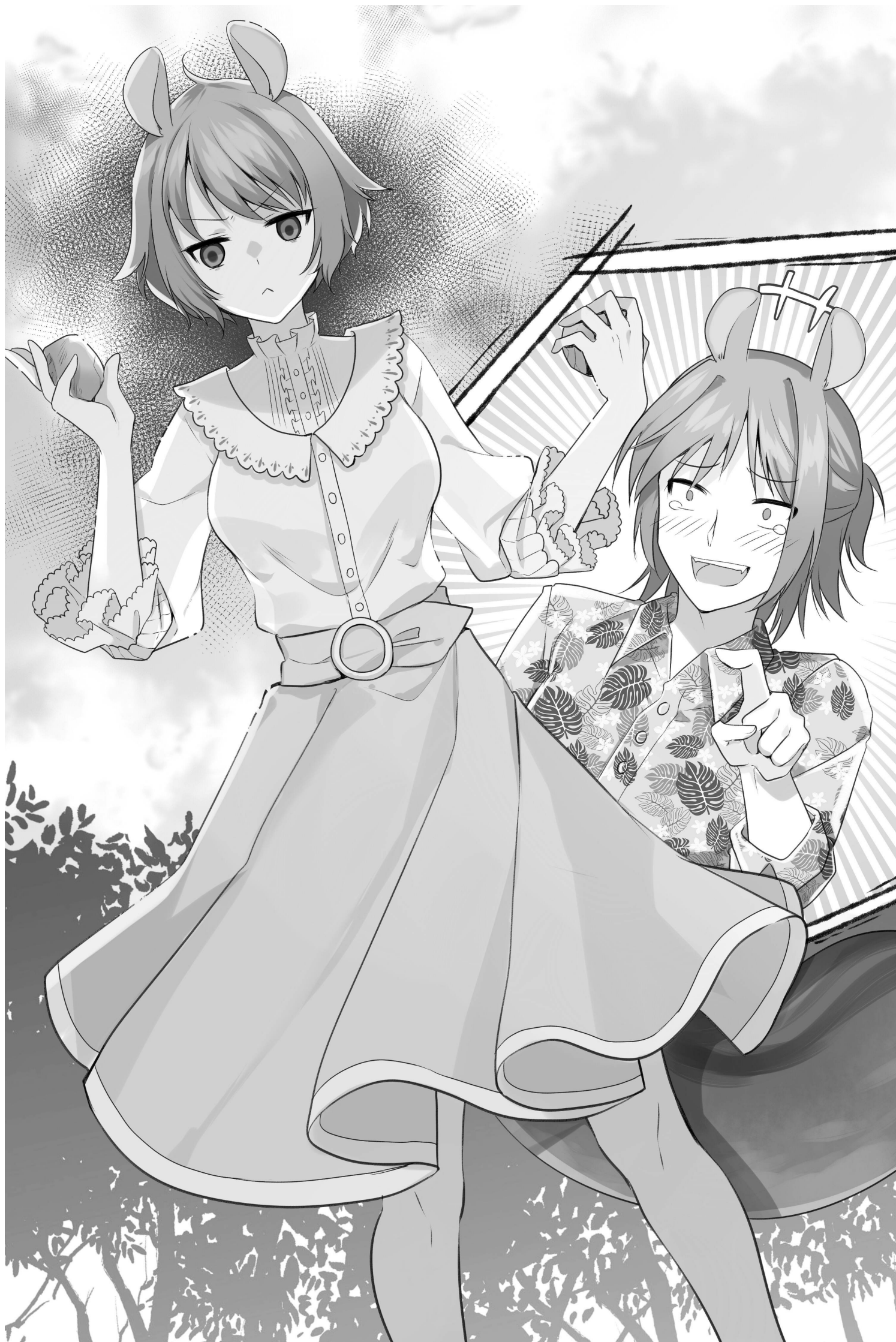
Techī was wearing a light pink flare skirt, coupled with a balloon-sleeved blouse that was covered in frills. I'm no specialist on women's fashion, but I could confidently say that this was outside of Techī's usual selection. In fact, you might say it was the polar opposite—she seemed to strongly prefer comfortable, casual clothes that were easy to move around in. Her tail hung down meekly, poking out from the bottom of the skirt.

I didn't know if she let her tail hang down like that to accommodate the skirt or if the state of her tail was mirroring her feelings about wearing it. Either way, it was clearly said droopy tail that Rei was looking at as he desperately tried to hold back his laughter.

"Looks like Mom did the washing today!" he snickered. "If she'd searched the

house, I'm sure she could've found something else. But Techii asked her on the phone not to bring anything *weird*. So, of course, Mom went and brought the most *normal* clothes she could find—by *her* standards, anyway! Mom loves that outfit; she bought it for Techii herself. She never wears it, but you've gotta admit, it's *perfect* for a tomboy like her, eh?!"

Rei couldn't hold it in any longer and erupted into a roaring belly laugh, his face twisted up with delight. Techii's eyebrows formed a sharp V—she looked about ready to strangle him. She slapped the ground with her drooping tail and used it to flick a small stone into the air. Catching it in her hand, she gripped it tightly, drew her arm back, and hurled it at him.



Rei barely managed to dodge the whizzing projectile. He stopped laughing at once—all the blood drained from his face and large drops of sweat started to form on his forehead. He wasted no time on his escape and had soon disappeared into the forest. Techī flung another stone after him as he ran. When he was out of sight, she let out an angry huff and sat down violently on the bench in the rest area. She looked very disgruntled as she rested her chin in her hands.

“...So, what’re you doing with the boar meat?” she asked. She was clearly trying to change the subject. I repeated what I’d told Rei earlier and she nodded.

“If you want to have a hot pot party, Sunday would be best,” she suggested. “It’s best to let freshly butchered meat age a few days—it improves the flavor. With the big refrigerator in Tomiyasu’s warehouse, there’s no risk of it going bad. It should be good to go by Sunday.”

When Kon heard this, he started nodding profusely, as if to make it clear he could find some time in his busy schedule. We’d have to find out if the other children were available, but we could start planning everything with Sunday in mind.

“In that case, shall we buy all the vegetables on Saturday and do all the preparation on Sunday?” I asked as I pulled out my smartphone and noted the days in my calendar. But Techī shook her head.

“Nah, that won’t do,” she said. “For a start, we’ll need more cooking pots—one hot pot won’t feed that many people. We’ll also have to buy enough rice for everyone and cook it beforehand. It’s all good handing out invitations, but a party this big takes a lot of preparation. Get ready to cancel any plans you have for Saturday... Or is a hot pot party too much trouble after all? You can always back out.”

I didn’t pause to consider her words or see Kon’s reaction. I answered without hesitation.

“It doesn’t matter how much trouble it might be. We should do it,” I said resolutely. “Everyone’s been working so hard and there’s plenty more work ahead. The effort of putting together a little celebration’s nothing compared to

that. I think it'd be a great way to get to know everyone better, too. ...The one thing I'm worried about is whether there'll be enough meat. What do you think, Miss Techy?"

"*Hmm*, classic boar hot pot is always full of vegetables," Techy said, thinking it over. "Worst case, we can always pad it out with more veggies. But even with a glutton like Kon here, I doubt the kids can get through a boar that size."

"*Hmm*, I dunno!" said Kon. "If I'm *real* hungry, there might not be enough for anyone else!"

He rested his hands on his hips and stuck his chest out. Seeing the cocky look on his face, Techy couldn't help but let out a chuckle. She began to lightly brush the fur on his little head and he let out a squeal of delight, closing both eyes tightly and waving his little arms around like before.

After he felt sufficiently pampered, he looked at me, then at Techy, then he turned to look at his classmates up in the treetops. Realizing that his work here was done, he hopped onto the ground and dashed back into the orchard.

I wondered how best to describe the little scamp. "Hard-working" didn't quite capture it, and neither did "diligent," but as I watched him scamper off, I thought that there was definitely something special about him. I glanced over at Techy, who also watched him go, and she seemed to be thinking the same thing. Her expression was so warm and full of gratitude. I realized that "dependable" was the word I'd been looking for. She really trusted the little fellow.

It was rare to see Techy wearing her heart on her sleeve like that. Taken in by her heartfelt expression, I also found myself dropping my guard.

"Those clothes look good on you," I said, quite accidentally.

It was the combination of the gentle look on her face and that delicate, frilly outfit that drew it out of me. I was a little nervous that she might snap at me. But instead, she turned away from me, and I could no longer see her face. She sat in silence, staring into the distance.

I wasn't sure how to resume the conversation after that. So I fell silent, too, and the two of us watched the kids working away until evening came at last.

The Hot Pot Party

PEOPLE have different opinions on how to make a great boar hot pot, but I think Chinese cabbage and spring onions are a must, with chrysanthemum greens and enoki mushrooms making fine additions. Tofu goes without saying.

For the stock, the main flavor comes from the miso and ginger. When everything's been thoroughly simmered together, the meat should almost melt in the mouth, while the vegetables and tofu will be bursting with all the flavors they've absorbed from the stock. Add a mouthful of white rice to balance it all and you won't know what hit you. It's *that* good.

But before we could even think about that, we had some shopping to do. Techii and I had barely survived our last trip to the supermarket, so attempting to carry back ingredients for twenty-odd people without a car would've almost certainly killed us. We needed a lot of rice and some extra cooking pots, so Techii promised to arrange some transport.

She was going to pick me up from my house on Saturday morning, and we'd go to the supermarket and hardware store together from there. Once we had everything, we'd bring it back to my house and prepare the ingredients for Sunday.

The rest of the week was very peaceful, and little of note happened in the run-up to the weekend.



IT was Saturday morning, around nine o'clock. Nobody worked in the orchard on weekends, so I'd taken the opportunity to catch up on assorted life admin. When that was done, I settled in for a little relaxation on the veranda, simply letting the time pass me by, until I heard the sound of tires on the dirt path outside.

The path started down at the border gate and ran straight past the house—it was separate from the smaller path that led toward the orchard. I'd yet to explore it any further. But presumably, at some point, it joined onto the main

forest road I'd seen the other day, as that was the direction the noise was coming from.

Soon, a white van came into view—not quite what I was expecting. It was a delivery van, no doubt about that, and there was something written on the side in big, neat letters:

Kurikara Cakes

Premium Pâtisserie

That was Techī's surname, and there she was in the driver's seat... Was her whole family in the bakery business? The surprise must've been evident on my face, because Techī rolled down the driver's side window and immediately corrected me.

"It's not what you think," she said dryly.

"...Um, *what's* not what I think?" I asked as I got up from the veranda.

She gestured for me to get in.

"This isn't the family car. It's my brother's. He uses it for deliveries for his cake business."

I opened the passenger side door, got in, and buckled my seatbelt. Techī yanked the steering wheel hard to turn us back onto the path toward the settlement and resumed her explanation.

"Out there, in the human world, the profession's called a *pâtissier*, or pastry chef, right? Well, my brother fancies himself a *pâtissier* and he uses the term with great pride. But the truth is that the title's self-appointed. He's completely self-taught."

"He's self-taught?!" I cried. "Are you serious? That's incredible! I would have never guessed..."

"Well, we don't exactly have any student exchange programs going on with the outside world, so he had no choice but to teach himself..." Techī said dryly. "We do have western desserts here—beastfolk have tried making their own—but it's all amateur baked goods that aren't much different from the mass-produced stuff you can get at a convenience store.

"But when we were younger, there was this TV show. Every week, the presenters would visit these beautiful, luxury cake shops and try all these different desserts. And all us kids made such a fuss about it; we whined and whined, we wanted to try these incredible-looking cakes so much. We had no idea that we were asking the impossible. But for some reason, my brother was

inspired by the whole thing, and he set his sights on becoming a pastry chef. He wanted other young beastfolk to be able to enjoy those fine desserts that we couldn't, growing up."

Techi explained how he'd started by studying from books and websites. He'd completely destroyed his childhood savings, pouring money into his education year after year—constantly spending on baking supplies, cookbooks, and such, as his disciplined training continued. By the end of it, he was on another level—his desserts were truly first-class. The mass-produced convenience store cakes didn't hold a candle to him. Now, he ran his own business.

Techi snuck a quick glance at me as she drove along to see my reaction. I was deeply, deeply impressed and I'm sure it showed. A short, sharp breath escaped her nose, no doubt a whiff of pride at her brother's achievements.

"Remember the *marron glacé* he brought round the other day? First, he claimed he'd brought them as snacks for the kids. Then he said it was to celebrate our new pact. But those were just cover stories. He actually wanted you to try them. He wanted to see how they tasted to someone who'd eaten plenty of desserts in the outside world. So, to see you enjoying them so much, completely lost in the flavor...to him, it was proof that he'd finally made it. I'm sure it's given him a big confidence boost."

Interesting.

"Hmm, so that means..." I muttered, trailing off into my own thoughts. After that first serving of *marron glacé*, Rei had come by the orchard almost every day to bring us sweets of one kind or another, all of which I'd thoroughly enjoyed. I'd grown a little suspicious of his regular appearances, though—didn't he have a shop to run? Now it all made sense.

"Rei's very dedicated to his craft, isn't he?" I said after a while. "His shortcake, his *Mont Blanc*, whatever that other unpronounceable dessert was—they were all impeccable. To think he'd go so far for the sake of a childhood whim so that other children could enjoy what he didn't have... It really is something else."

Techi had been gently smiling. But now, she pursed her lips.

"Well, it wasn't all roses and dandelions," she said, with a note of irritation in her voice. "As part of his self-inflicted training, he'd make the same desserts

over and over. Guess who had to eat them all. That got old *fast*. Also, because he always had his nose in some book or other, he became this really annoying walking encyclopedia of dumb food facts. You heard him the other day when he was going on about the fruit of the *marronnier* tree.”

“I remember,” I said, “He was telling us all the French words for chestnut... So, he learned all *that* from studying?”

“Yeah. Now imagine living with him,” Techii said wryly. “If he ever gets married, his partner had better like fun facts.”

“Some people love fun facts,” I said. “Besides, being married to a top-class *pâtissier* would have its advantages. With his level of skill and no local competition, he must make good money. I’m sure his family would be quite comfortable financially.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” said Techii. “Yeah, he brings in plenty of cash, but he always has his eye on some new tool or oven upgrade. Everything he makes, he dumps straight back into his business. So, while the books look great, his personal finances are a different story.

“He’s always ordering ingredients that have to be shipped from hundreds of miles away or importing weird foreign cooking utensils, and everything always has to be the very highest quality. He can *never* compromise.

“Take Tomiyasu’s chestnuts and walnuts. They’re a luxury food that fetches an incredible price. They’re best sold at the market. But Rei’s always using them in his desserts. It’s irresponsible.”

The topic had gotten her quite riled up—Techii seemed to have plenty to grumble about when it came to her older brother. I gently steered the conversation in a new direction, picking up where she left off.

“While we’re on the subject, how much do those chestnuts and walnuts sell for?” I asked. I’d been curious about it anyway.

“Hm? How much was it again...” she pondered. “Walnuts don’t sell for all that much, but chestnuts...last year, I think the big ones went for ¥3,000 each.”

“Three thousand...” I began. “That sounds pretty goo—”

I paused.

“*EACH?! ¥3,000 for ONE chestnut?!*”

I was in hysterics. Techii did not appreciate my loud cries and her mouth twisted into an expression of annoyed disapproval. She gave me a withering look to remind me that she needed to focus on driving. I obliged her and shut my mouth.

How could those chestnuts be so valuable? I was desperate to ask more questions...but I thought it best to let Techii cool off first. Instead, I sat there quietly with my own restless thoughts.

For the rest of the journey, I was reeling from the news that a single chestnut from my orchard could be worth ¥3,000. It simply boggled the mind. I wanted to find out more. But by then, we'd arrived at the supermarket. It was time to focus on the shopping, so I decided to shelve the topic for later.

First, we bought all the vegetables, seasonings, and rice we'd need for the party. Since we had the car, we also picked up some bits and pieces I still needed around the house. After the supermarket, we headed for the nearby hardware store for the rest of the shopping...including plenty of impulse purchases. At least, they all *seemed* useful.

There was plenty of space in the delivery van, but we still managed to almost completely fill it with shopping bags. Most of the cash I'd brought with me to the Wilds was now gone, so we got in the van and set off.

When we were driving back to the house, I finally felt that I could pick up the conversation where we'd left off. I brought up the topic of the chestnut prices again. Techii was visibly taken aback.

“I thought you seemed lost in thought,” she said. “You’ve hardly said a word since we got to the supermarket. But I didn’t think you were still thinking about that! Three thousand is nothing to write home about.”

“N-no!” I protested. “That’s *definitely* something to write home about! I could write a whole essay about it! From where I’m standing, ¥3,000 seems like an absurd price for one chestnut.”

“Now, you listen here,” she said, trying to bring me back down to earth. “Do you really think that every chestnut we pick sells for that much? A chestnut has to be *perfect* to fetch that kind of price—no scars, blemishes, worms, or other bugs. It has to be large, shapely, and top-quality. Only then can you think about asking ¥3,000 for it. But chestnuts are very uneven in shape and size, and bugs absolutely love them, so you’ve got to hunt quite hard for the really good ones.”

“Well, when you put it like that...” I began. “...No, I’m *still* surprised. Three thousand yen is simply amazing.”

“I forget where exactly,” said Techī, “but I *did* hear about an orchard outside the forest that manages to get ¥2,000 for their best chestnuts. The quality and taste must’ve been very good, although they still don’t compare to *ours*, of course. After all, Tomiyasu’s orchard is tended by *us*, the chipmunk beastfolk. Don’t forget that the word chipmunk contains the Japanese character for chestnut! You couldn’t ask for a more fitting workforce, eh? That goes without saying! Our chestnuts are far better than anything they grow *out there*.”

That may be true, but Techī was laying it on pretty thick.

“*Hm*, well...it can be fun to pat yourself on the back,” she continued, calmer now, “but the real reason the orchard produces such great chestnuts is the fact that it’s inside this forest. Our quality and prices are entirely down to geography.”

Techī said nothing for a while, then started talking to herself as she wrestled with her memory of the human-grown premium chestnuts.

“...Where were they from again? Was it Kyoto? Or maybe Hyogo? Hmmm, I’m pretty sure it was one of those two...”

But it seemed her sense of geography was not all that strong, as she soon shook her head and gave up her attempt to remember with a quiet sigh.

“Going back to what we were talking about...” she began. “Mikura, you said it yourself when we were in the heart of the forest—the air’s cleaner here. It’s a blessing that benefits everything in the forest, not just humans and beastfolk. The bugs, the animals, and, of course, all the plants are affected by this pure air. There are more insects and they’re all hardier. The animals are larger and

stronger, and the plants are overflowing with nutrients and flavor. They make incredible crops.”

So... I thought to myself as she continued, *everything is thanks to the mysterious power of this forest—it’s the forest that has allowed beastfolk society to flourish; has allowed this whole hidden world to exist.*

The insects, plants, and animals here were so different, they could almost be considered a different set of species—stronger, healthier, more resilient. That let those who lived here—the beastfolk who fed on these plants and creatures—lead healthy, wholesome lives.

But it didn’t just affect their health. No doubt, it must’ve contributed to their unique physiology, too—to their physical prowess and great dexterity. And that in turn had let them protect their forest and culture all these centuries.

Then things changed. On the outside, we humans had been developing our own power, in the form of science and technology. That soon exceeded the ability of the beastfolk to protect their forest with muscle alone. The balance of power had shifted, and the beastfolk’s territory was absorbed into the nation of Japan, becoming the self-governing autonomous region that we knew today.

But humans had become very reliant on technology. The crops produced by modern agriculture were no match for those of the beastfolk, which quickly gained a reputation for being highly nutritious and extremely good for your health. The beastfolk were able to start exporting them for huge profits, which allowed them to invest in technology of their own. Now they had their own dam, their own hydroelectric power station, and a full-blown power grid.

All in all, they seemed to be doing pretty well for themselves.

“...Mikura,” said Techī, taking a brief pause from her drive-by history of the Beastly Wilds. “This forest is very special, very unique. Have you ever wondered why the humans don’t just march in here and take it away from us by force? You must’ve thought about that, right?”

I hadn’t. I tilted my head to one side.

“I can’t say I’ve ever thought about it, no... Although the way you just asked that sounds like a leading question. So, you mean to say there *is* a reason?”

“Wha—? Really, you’ve never thought about it?” exclaimed a puzzled Techī, looking directly at me even though she was still driving. She looked like a chipmunk in the headlights—she must’ve been expecting a very different answer. “Yes, you’re right. There *is* a reason, a specific reason...but I can’t tell you it just yet. It’s kind of top-secret. But since you live here now, I’m sure you’ll find out sooner or later. Tomiyasu knew all about it.”

She was still looking at me.

“Eyes on the road,” I urged her, before returning to our earlier topic. “Well, thanks for the history lesson. I think I get the gist of it. Something about this place makes the air extremely pure, that clean air makes for extra-healthy, extra-nutritious, extra-tasty chestnuts, and that leads to these astronomical prices. Of course, the chipmunks’ hard work plays a major role as well—that goes without saying. So, does that mean our walnuts fetch a high price too?”

“Yeah, they do,” replied Techī, “although they don’t go for as much as the chestnuts. They’re way above the norm for walnuts, though. As a matter of fact, as far as the numbers go, they say that walnuts are actually way more nutritious and way healthier for you than chestnuts. But chestnuts take the crown when it comes to flavor, and that’s always reflected in the price, as you can imagine.”

“Yeah, I can understand that,” I said. “Chestnuts are pretty delicious. I can only imagine what a freshly picked, ¥3,000 chestnut tastes like. Great-Grandpa *never* let us taste the merchandise, and I can understand why. You don’t let your great-grandchildren snack on ¥3,000 chestnuts, no matter how much you like to spoil them. You’d probably ruin all other chestnuts for them for the rest of their lives. That *would* be tragic.”

The thought of normally priced chestnuts never tasting good again was a horrifying one.

“...Say, Miss Techī, can I ask you about our chestnut buyers?” I asked. “You mentioned one of the two—this bum, as you called him—never offered more than half the market rate. Does that mean he’d pay ¥1,500 for one of those ¥3,000 yen chestnuts and then go on to sell it for an even higher price?”

Techī’s eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, that’s right,” she mumbled through tightly gritted teeth.

I wondered what exactly the relationship was between this greedy buyer and my great-grandpa and why he'd let it continue for so long. It was a terrible decision from a business standpoint, but the buyer's demands were also completely out of line. I'd never met the guy, but seeing how Techichi reacted at the mere mention of him, my opinion was about as low as it gets.

"What was Great-Grandpa thinking?" I muttered to myself. "What reason could he have? I can't see any upside. The second buyer always pays a fair price... I'm surprised he'd stand for such unequal treatment. There's no way you'd get that kind of situation at my old job—people would be up in arms..."

When she heard me mention my old job, Techichi perked up.

"What exactly *was* your old job, Mikura?" she asked. "You never did say..."

"*Hm?* Oh, I was a regular office worker. I had a regular job at a regular trading company. When I put it like that, it doesn't sound like I did much of anything at all. But if I had to pin it down, I'd say I worked in sales."

Techichi made some noncommittal noise that showed she was listening but not especially engaged. I don't know if she was disinterested or if she simply didn't know much about human companies, but we'd arrived at the house, and the conversation naturally ended.

We unloaded some of the food-filled shopping bags from the van and carried them to the warehouse. There were a total of twenty-five children under Techichi's care—*that's twenty-five portions of food, plus extra for the adults*. There was no way that was all going to fit in my home fridge. Fortunately, I had another one.

The warehouse refrigerator was an imposing silver tomb that took up a whole corner of the main room. Taller and wider than a standard kitchen fridge, Great-Grandpa had ordered this custom-made industrial unit for food preservation. It could've easily accommodated the meat of three or four boars like the one Techichi had killed. There was a separate freezer unit of about the same size as well.

The warehouse was roughly divided into three sections. One area filled with row upon row of shelving, a separate area for cold storage, and a third area that housed the cellar entrance. It was truly impressive in size and scope.

The warehouse building itself was equipped with a high-end ventilation system, and everything was carefully insulated despite the building's intricate construction—clearly a custom job. I couldn't begin to guess how much money had been sunk into this place.

The refrigerator door had a display on it that showed the current temperature inside. Pulling on the large handle opened the door, revealing a large space divided up into four levels by wire shelves.

"Wow, this thing is massive," I said, gaping into the giant refrigerator. "This has to have at least several times as much space as a normal fridge. If you bought one of those bulk boxes of frozen food, you wouldn't even have to unpack it. The electricity bill for this thing must be astronomical."

As I held the door open, Techii slid past and started swiftly emptying the shopping bag contents onto the shelves.

"It *does* use a lot of electricity when cooling things down. But, once the temperature is stable, it's actually not much of a hog at all," she explained. "But if you hold the door wide open like you are right now, the cold air escapes rapidly. It'll end up costing you a lot more than staring at the contents of your fridge at home, so make sure you don't accidentally leave the door open, yeah? Now, let's load this stuff up quickly—every second we're chitchatting, this thing is getting warmer."

I quickly snapped to it for the sake of my utility bill. It took us several trips between the van and the refrigerator to get all the food put away. I made sure that the refrigerator door was firmly shut between each trip.

The boar meat from the other day was also stored on stainless steel trays on the bottom shelf. Everything was neatly separated into different cuts and bound up with stainless steel mesh. I couldn't help but stare at the glistening cuts of meat. It was a heavenly sight for an empty stomach like mine.

Tomorrow, that beautiful meat would become a steaming boar hot pot. Any cuts that were unsuitable for hot pot purposes would be left over for me to enjoy at my leisure...or to preserve in some delicious way. As I indulged in this little food fantasy, my mouth started to water. I gulped the saliva down unconsciously.

“*That’s* a scary look in your eyes,” said Techī. “And to think that while we were butchering that thing, you were paler than a freshly laundered sheet. It’s a good thing that experience didn’t put you off boar for good. That would’ve been a real shame.”

I scratched the back of my head nervously.

“Once it’s all cut up, I’m fine...” I said. “Sorry about all that. Hopefully, I’ll be able to help you out next time. Oh, speaking of which, I heard that half that meat belongs to you. Will you be taking half of what’s in the fridge there, or have you taken your share already?”

“The meat in the fridge is all yours,” Techī replied. “When Mother came by with our change of clothes after we butchered the boar, she also took our half of the meat home with her. Mother’s not the kind of fussy cook who’ll age meat for days on end, so we’ve already barbecued and eaten a bunch of it as yakiniku. I think she’s using the rest to make chashu boar and a big batch of boar stew.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Does boar make for good yakiniku?”

“Hmm... This boar was male, so it wasn’t the finest yakiniku I’ve had,” she said. “Male boar meat tends to have a strong odor, so female meat is always better. But it wasn’t *bad* by any means. It was *fine*.”

“So *that’s* why you bought so much ginger today,” I noted. “Once the meat’s been simmered in the miso stock with all that ginger, it should mask the smell completely.”

“Exactly. Speaking of which,” Techī began, “ginger doesn’t go in the fridge. Make sure you store it at room temperature in the future.”

She held up a shopping bag that she’d been holding for a while—it was full of the ginger I had placed inside the refrigerator earlier. I hadn’t noticed her take it back out again. The plastic rustled as she pushed the bag into my hands.

“Ginger needs to be stored at room temperature?” I asked. “But it’s always in the refrigerated section at the supermarket.”

“The supermarket workers don’t know what they’re doing either,” Techī replied. “Ginger is a tropical plant, so it keeps best at room temperature with

some level of humidity. Some people will even wrap it in damp newspaper. But, since the skin isn't bone dry on these, they'll be fine as is. Since we're using them tomorrow, it won't make a big difference.

"Right! Next up, we need to wash the new hot pots and dishes we bought. Once they're nice and clean, we can start thinking about the tables. The food's the least of our worries—the vegetables only need a gentle rinse and cutting up into rough chunks. But setting up seating for two dozen people is always a puzzle. Come on."

With that, Techī was already on her way out of the warehouse, and we started moving the cooking pots and other utensils from the van to the house. There was so much to be done that it was a bit overwhelming for me. But fortunately, I could just follow Techī's instructions and do as I was told.

As a kindergarten teacher of sorts, Techī had many years of experience with children. She was a pro among pros—it seemed like she'd organized plenty of these kinds of parties before. It'd explain how she knew everything that we'd need and everything that needed to be done. She also had very specific ideas about how best to set up dining tables for children, which I was happy to follow to the letter. I did the best I could not to get in her way and to carry out my tasks without question.



SUNDAY had arrived.

I'm not sure it quite deserved to be called a garden, but my house did have an open area without any trees or shrubs just past the veranda, large enough that it could fit a row of several parked cars. We laid out a picnic sheet on the grass, on top of which we'd placed a wooden shipping crate to use as a table. On top of the crate was a camping stove and atop that was a cooking pot, where today's magic would be happening. With that, the first table was in place.

Only five more to go.

Once the tables were out, we prepared all the dishes, tableware, drinks, and floor cushions for everyone to sit on. The ingredients that'd be cooked in the hot pots were divided up into portions for each table and placed on bamboo strainers, then wrapped in cling wrap so they could sit out on the veranda until

they were needed. All that remained was to wait for the kids to arrive.

“The rice is cooked. The ingredients are divvied up. The drinks are ready... looks like everything’s good to go,” said Tech, restlessly making her last-minute checks.

She’d been at my house since first thing this morning, helping me out with everything as if it were a matter of course. It appeared there were two reasons for that. First, it was her job to look after the children. And second, I suspected she wanted to help me get used to life in the Wilds as quickly as possible.

Today, I’d get a chance to break bread with the youngsters. This hot pot party would be a neighborhood housewarming as much as anything else. No doubt, the children would be on their best behavior, cautioned by well-meaning parents to be sensible, but hopefully, we’d all still have a good time.

It wasn’t like we’d all suddenly become bosom buddies. But, with any luck, everyone would be a little closer after this. So I could see why Tech would decide to give up her whole weekend to help make it happen.

As I was sitting on the veranda, I decided that I’d have to do something to show her my appreciation after the party. I was snapped out of my reverie by the sound of loud, cheerful voices and saw the first group of children approaching, with Kon leading the pack.

“Hey!” I greeted them. “Welcome, welcome!”

Hearing my voice, the whole group ran up to me excitedly. Kon and the others were all wearing backpacks, which they removed and rummaged around inside. Out came an assortment of paper bags, which the children then politely held out for me to take.

“Thank you very much for inviting us to your party today. It’s not much...but these are for you...” said Kon, with the awkward intonation of a kid trying to remember their lines in the school play. No doubt his parents had written the script.

“That’s very kind of you. Thank you so much,” I said, matching his level of politeness. I reached down and accepted the children’s gifts.

Inside the various paper bags were all sorts of boxes, big and small, all neatly

wrapped. The names of a range of famous brands of tea, sweets, and luxury soaps were printed on the different sheets of wrapping paper.

“Right, you guys,” said Techichi once the children had handed everything over, “there’s the spigot. Wash your paws and rinse your mouth out. When you’ve freshened up, grab some tableware, chopsticks, a cup, and one of the small floor cushions. I’ll only light the fire under the hot pot once all of you are seated, y’hear?”

The young chipmunks gave out a loud, sudden cheer and dashed over to the spigot next to the front door to make themselves presentable. Soon, everyone was clean as a whistle, and they grabbed their bowls and other bits and sat down politely on their knees as they’d been asked.

Their eyes bounced restlessly between the hot pot, the waiting Techichi, and the eating utensils they held at the ready. It was quite a sight, all those bushy tails nervously twitching at once.

Seeing them all so eager, Techichi couldn’t help but flash a warm smile. She grabbed one of the bamboo strainers from the veranda and started loading ingredients into the pot on the table.

Today we’ll be cooking fresh boar meat, cut from the leg, with miso paste and ginger providing the basic flavor for the hot pot broth. We’ll also be adding Chinese cabbage, spring onion, and chrysanthemum greens, as well as enoki mushrooms and grilled tofu.

Start cooking on high heat, reducing to a simmer once the broth has boiled. Now simply continue to cook until all the ingredients have soaked up the flavor...

...is how I’d have narrated it, but Techichi was the one handling the cooking. In the meantime, I was helping out in the background, preparing the condiments and serving up the rice. A row of rice cookers stood patiently in the living room, keeping the freshly cooked rice warm, which I spooned into a small bowl for each child. When everything was ready, the children gave thanks for the meal in far, far louder voices than needed.

“THANK YOU FOR THE FOOD!”

With all the polite stuff out of the way, they proceeded to attack the hot pot.

It was go time. Green lights on the hot pot highway. A fierce race to see who could get their chopsticks into the pot first and snap up a juicy piece of boar meat.

One chunk after another, the meat was fished out. Once firmly grasped, it was swiftly ferried to a waiting mouth and tossed in without delay. The children's little cheeks bulged with food and they chewed eagerly, their sparkling eyes leaving no doubt as to the flavor. They continued to chew with flushed faces, keen to dig into their next piece.

"Hey! Make sure you eat your vegetables too!" Techī admonished them. "There'll be no seconds until all the vegetables are gone from that pot! Oy, Mikura! The next group of kids is here! What're you standing around for? We've still got plenty to do!"

I went to greet the new arrivals, relieve them of their gifts, and set up the next hot pot. Eventually, all twenty-five young guests had arrived as planned and been seated, leaving us free to set up a hot pot for Techī and myself...and for Rei, who'd conveniently decided to arrive at that very moment. We set about the preparations.

"You know," Techī said to her brother, looking at him through narrowed eyes, "the kids all brought *gifts* for the host..."

She smiled insincerely and gestured for Rei to take a cushion, which he did in a great hurry.

"I-I brought dessert!" he stammered, a slight squeak creeping into his voice. Clearly, he was flustered by her comment. "It won't arrive until after the main course!"

The children's ears pricked up at the sound of the word "dessert," but they'd more important things to attend to right now, with all that juicy meat still waiting to be devoured. Both mouths and chopsticks continued to work without pause. They were grinning from ear to ear and clearly enjoying the food, yet they were unusually quiet.

Far too busy to talk, clearly.

There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. A fresh breeze blew through the

garden, and the last hot pot portion was finally ready. Our pot was a fair bit larger than the others—a more fitting size for the grown-up table. Each of us held a large bowl piled high with rice in one hand and a pair of chopsticks in the other. We sat down around the table on our floor cushions.

“Thank you for the meal!”

Nothing further was said—there was food to be eaten. Despite Techí’s earlier admonition of the children, I *had* to try the meat first. I reached out with my chopsticks and grabbed a piece of boar, admiring its color as it came out of the ginger and miso broth.

I caught the dripping liquid with my rice bowl and guided the morsel to my lips. As soon as it was in there, the seasoning did its work, and the taste and aroma spread instantly throughout my mouth. I took a single bite into the tender slice of meat and all the delicious juices that’d been bound up inside came spilling out in a further explosion of flavor.

Exquisite.

Simply exquisite.

Not a hint of boar odor. Just a beautiful, savory umami taste and a soft texture.

Techi had said that male boar meat didn’t taste that good, which had lowered my expectations. But this was simply brilliant. I was deeply surprised and couldn’t begin to imagine how this hot pot might’ve tasted if we’d had a female boar. I shoveled a helping of white rice into my mouth, just as engrossed in my food as the children were.

The cabbage was also delicious, adding a refreshing note, while the characteristic taste of the chrysanthemum greens served as an extra highlight. The fried tofu soaked up the warm broth, filling with flavor, while the enoki mushrooms’ texture felt so good in the mouth.

Just as I thought I might like a few more of those enoki mushrooms and reached out my chopsticks to help myself, Techí and Rei also reached for the pot, determined not to fall behind.

It was a party of few words. There was no space for talk between mouthfuls,

no thought of anything except the delicious food before us. But we all enjoyed ourselves very much.



THE boar gave me a new perspective on what meat should taste like. Some of the children cheerfully clamored for more as they peered into the empty pots, while others sat comfortably on the picnic sheet, allowing their packed tummies a little time to rest and digest.

In the middle of this lull, a familiar car appeared—Rei’s white delivery van, the one that we’d borrowed yesterday. I don’t know who was driving—Rei’s coworkers perhaps, or Tech’s mother—but they didn’t stick around for long. Rei hopped to his feet as soon as it arrived and quickly grabbed several large objects out of the back of the van. When he was done, the mystery motorist promptly drove back into the forest.

Rei laid out his delivery on the veranda. It appeared to be a number of steel trays. I was extremely curious as to what had arrived and I stood up from my seat to get a better look.

The trays, carefully covered in cling wrap, were full to the brim with jello, wobbling with every touch. But that wasn’t all. Encased in the jello itself were all manner of fruits—from what I could see: strawberries, tangerines, grapes, pineapple, and white peaches—all carefully peeled and separated into segments, but very much recognizable by shape.

Rei fetched some glass bowls from the cupboard inside the house, then proceeded to use a kitchen knife and a spoon to carefully cut the jello into cubes and deftly roll those cubes out of the trays and into the bowls. It looked very appetizing and was the perfect choice of dessert for the rich boar hot pot, finishing on a light, fresh note.

As soon as they realized what was happening, the children started chirruping with anticipation and crowding around the veranda.

“Hold on, hold on,” laughed Rei, “I still have to add the finishing touch!”

He picked out a bottle of lemonade from the drinks that’d been prepared for the children to enjoy and unscrewed the cap.

“N-No way!”

The youngsters were stunned. Rei took a bowl containing a portion of fruit jello and topped it up with the lemonade, right to the brim. The addition of a spoon completed the presentation. He flashed a grin at the children.

The little ones all scrambled for the first portion, arms outstretched. Before long, everyone had a bowl, and they alternated between drinking the lemonade and biting into the jello, cheeks puffed out by the large chunks of fruit. Everyone was thrilled. Smiles all around.

“It’s all quite simple,” Rei told us, very proud of himself. “You just need the right proportion of gelatin, sugar, and citric acid. Then add the fruit—as much as you can fit in the tray. Keep everything in the fridge until it sets and you’re good to go.

“But the real trick is in how you prepare the fruit. Some people will cut the fruit up into small pieces that are easy to eat, which is fine, but I prefer to leave the chunks as big as possible. The more it feels like you’re eating actual fruit, the better. It’s much more satisfying that way and it looks much better. It’s definitely best eaten the same day, though—I wouldn’t recommend making it the day before.”

I *did* listen carefully to what Rei was saying. But I was already reaching for my spoon. I scooped up a bit of jello and had a little taste. The balance of sweetness, acidity, fruit, and fizz was just right. A real treat. There were hardly any gaps between the fruit chunks too, which made it feel very luxurious. The children seemed to be enjoying it even more than the boar hot pot.

“This is really quite good,” I said, sitting down on the veranda as I kept eating. “It must be a hit in the summer.”

Rei suddenly fixed me with a serious look. I wasn’t sure if it was something I’d said. He sat down next to me and quietly slipped me a business card—a very familiar object from my time in the corporate world.

Perhaps sensing the shift in Rei’s body language, Techii came over to us too. She loomed over imposingly, as if standing guard, and Rei paused for a moment before he began.

“These are the contact details of a trade association president, of which my own shop is a member,” he said casually. “He also happens to be Kon’s father. Thanks to Tokatechi’s dogged, persistent grumbling, Mr. Moriya’s old business arrangements with a certain price-gouging bum are very well known in this forest. There’s some concern that he may try and harass you. The president asked me to give you that business card, in case you ever need any advice.

“It looks like Kon’s been putting in a good word for you at home, eh? So whatever happens, you should know that the members of the forest trade association have got your back, at least.”

I took the business card and considered what Rei had said. *Clearly, this is an act of goodwill, and I should make sure I accept it graciously.* I thanked him.

I thought we were done. But Techii gave Rei another stern look, urging him on.

“...Mikura,” Rei continued. “You’re not planning to *sell* anything to that scoundrel, are you?”

“...No, I’m not,” I replied. “Letting someone take you for a ride like that is a surefire way to go out of business.”

“I’m glad that’s your answer,” said Rei, “but there’s no way he’ll take it lying down. That man’s a sore loser with a nasty personality. With the way he beat down the orchard’s chestnut prices, he should’ve made an insane profit when he went to sell them. He won’t let that money go easily.”

“I suppose that’s to be expected,” I said.

“...Then you’d better make sure you’re prepared. Watch out for yourself, y’hear?” warned Rei.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine,” I laughed. “Even if he wanted to do something, he’s out there and I’m in here. I think his options are rather limited. What’s more, I’m pretty used to this kind of predicament from my old job. You wouldn’t believe how livid a supplier could get if they lost a big contract—we’re talking much larger sums of money than this bum of yours could ever dream of. Fortunately, I still have some contacts that are very useful in that kind of situation. Even if something were to happen, I think I’ll be able to handle it.”

“Oh...” said Rei. “That’s good to hear. But Tokatechi told me you were just a

regular office worker...”

“Well, she’s not wrong...” I began, then thought it might be quicker to show than tell. “Hang on. I should still have some business cards left over...”

At my old company, you couldn’t go anywhere without these things. I took out my wallet and opened an inner compartment to reveal a small cache of my own business cards. I handed one to Rei, which he diligently read. His eyes widened and he looked to Techī for an explanation.

“Now hold on a second!” he exclaimed, both shocked and impressed at the same time. “This trading company deals with our businesses here in the Wilds all the time! Mikura, were you a big fish at the head office or something?”

“No, I was very much a small fish,” I reassured him.

“But I bet you were on the fast track to management!” he cried, an intense look in his eyes, making things up as he went along, apparently. “You left a job like *this* to come and live out in the sticks with us?! You’re crazy!”

Rei was exaggerating, of course. I’d only been working there a few years, and that meant nothing. He was right in that it was a well-known corporation with some very big clients. But I’d been just one tiny cog in that huge machine. The company’s reputation may’ve been impressive, but I never felt that was something you should take personal pride in—it had nothing to do with me or my achievements, after all.

Besides, I had already given up my job at that company, and you know what they say about spilled milk. It’s not like you can go back to a job like that and expect to resume where you left off. But I still had contacts—my superiors, coworkers, former clients, trade partners, and of course, our on-call lawyer. They’d all been very insistent that I should call them if I needed help, seeing me off with a smile.

If I ever were in trouble, I honestly think they’d come through for me. Thinking of those fine people filled me with confidence in the face of the unknown challenges ahead.

Last night, I’d carefully looked over Great-Grandpa’s business ledgers, contracts, and other documents. He kept them in the prayer alcove, hidden

inside the Buddhist altar. I already knew what I needed to do and didn't foresee any problems. I smiled and nodded to myself. There was far more important business to attend to right now. And with that, I helped myself to another mouthful of delicious fruit jello.

Food Preservation 101

THE next day was Monday.

I wouldn't be going to the orchard. Instead, I was waiting at home for a delivery. It'd be arriving at some point today, after everything had been inspected at the border gate.

I'd ordered goods from several different websites, but everything was combined into one batch for today's delivery, as deliveries to the Wilds were only made once a week. Someone had to be around to sign for it, and if I missed the delivery window, it'd have to wait another week. I didn't want to inconvenience the courier and gate staff, so I felt justified in taking the day off.

However, sitting around twiddling my thumbs felt like a waste, so I set up shop in the kitchen with some of the boar meat that we hadn't used for yesterday's party. I'd fetched a cut of boneless rib from the warehouse refrigerator and set about my first attempt at meat preservation since moving here.

Well...this recipe didn't *fully* preserve the meat, but I'd be dipping my toe in the waters today.

"A rib is a kind of bone, right? So how can you have boneless rib?"

The person asking this insightful question was none other than Kon, sitting on a small wooden chair above the dishwasher. When we were all making merry after finishing yesterday's dessert, Kon had gotten so excited and frolicked so hard that he eventually keeled over and fell asleep right then and there. He'd literally partied until he dropped.

It was deemed necessary for him to rest and recover his strength, so he too had been given the day off. I suppose it made sense given the nature of his work—if you're asking a child to climb a tree and hop from branch to branch all day, you definitely want them in top shape to avoid any nasty accidents.

Now, I thought that meant he'd spend the day at home. But it turned out that

both of his parents work late into the evenings. He'd be home alone, with far too much time on his hands to cause mischief. Therefore, he was entrusted to my care, so he'd have someone to cause mischief with.

"Yes, Kon, you're right. A rib *is* a type of bone. But the word's also used to describe the meat that surrounds the ribs. So, if you take those ribs out, you're left with boneless rib," I explained. "Rib is very fatty, so some people don't like it. But today, I wanted to try doing something that will improve the flavor of this fatty cut of meat."

I placed the massive cut of rib on a large cutting board I happened to have. The slab of meat was so big that I needed two hands to carry it.

"And so you're gonna *reserve* it?" Kon asked. "I heard you like *reserving* food, Mikura!"

"Well, I could *preserve* it, yes. But in this case, preserving it would make it lose a lot of its flavor. Sometimes, the more long-lasting you make a food, the less flavor it will have. With the method I'll be using, you still have to keep the food in the fridge. But it will keep for a while. Maybe you could call it half-preserved."

"Really?" said Kon. "Well, we want *more* flavor, not less. So definitely do that..."

He made a loud gulping sound as he eyed the slab of meat, no doubt inspired by memories of yesterday's hot pot.

"With this method, all the great flavor comes from the fat, so we want a fatty cut of meat," I continued to explain. "Rib is perfect. Red meat's best enjoyed fresh, so some people will even go as far as separating all the fatty meat to enjoy it on its own."

As I spoke, I got started on preparing my herb mix. I opened my fresh packets of thyme, oregano, bay leaf, and basil.

First, tear up the bay leaves into small pieces and crush them finely, mixing them together with all the other herbs. Set the herb mixture aside in a small bowl.

Next, prepare some salt and a largish fork. Gripping the fork tightly in your

hand, raise it over your head and bring it down sharply into the rib meat. Do this at least a dozen times.

I had a thing for narrating the recipe in my head as I worked.

“Mikura! What are you doing?! What’s wrong?” asked Kon in a panic. I continued forcefully stabbing the meat, over and over.

“By doing this! You open up! Holes! In the surface! It helps! The herb aromas! And the salt! Get deep! Into the meat!”

Turn the meat over and repeat.

“Once you’re done! With one side! Flip it over! And do the same! On the other side! No need to! Do the edges!”

“But Mikura, the holes are just closing right up again,” observed Kon. “I didn’t know meat could do that!”

“That’s! Totally fine! You can’t see them! But the holes! Are still there! The salt! Dissolves! And can still get in!”

Once I was happy with how much I’d brutalized the meat, I grabbed my bag of salt...

Using the finest-grained variety you can find, thoroughly sprinkle the meat’s surface with salt. Once covered, rub everything down with two hands to help the dissolving salt soak into the meat.

“It doesn’t really matter if you use too much,” I said, “as I’ll be desalinating the meat later on. That basically means I’ll be rinsing out the extra salt. If you do use too much though, a lot of it will just stay on the chopping board, which is a bit of a waste. So, you may as well use the right amount in the first place.

“You can use a coarse salt—it will dissolve eventually and get into the meat—but I just prefer using fine salt. I feel that it gets absorbed better. Once you’ve got plenty of salt on there, it’s time for the herbs. You can’t rub those in like you do with the salt. You have to kinda pat them down with your hands.”

After the salt has been mostly absorbed, add the herb mixture. Use a patting motion to make sure the herbs stick to the surface of the meat. Wrap the herb-covered meat in kitchen paper and place it in a lidded container to be stored in

the refrigerator.

“You know, in the past, they used to make this with much more salt,” I told Kon, “and they didn’t wash any of it out at the end either. That way, the meat would dry out and could be preserved for a long time. But since we have fridges now, we can use much less. We don’t have to rely on the salt alone to keep the meat from going bad.

“Now we leave it like that for about three days. Then we’ll wash the meat with water to remove the layer of herbs and finally leave it in running water for about ten minutes to remove some of the salt. After that, we use kitchen paper to remove the excess moisture and then wrap the meat again in fresh kitchen paper—but this time, we put it on a tray rather than in a container. That way, it can begin to dry out more easily. After that...you probably want another week in the fridge, and then you’re done.

“There *is* one thing to watch out for. Depending on the temperature and humidity in your refrigerator, the kitchen paper might stick to the meat’s surface, so it’s best to check for that every day. If it’s starting to stick, change it out for fresh paper, or you can just leave it unwrapped for the rest of the drying process.”

When handling raw meat, it’s important to wash your hands thoroughly before touching other surfaces. If you can, use your elbow to turn the faucet on. An electronic soap dispenser can also help with kitchen hygiene.

I washed my hands, dried them, and put the plastic container in the fridge. Now all that was left to do was wait. I set about washing the chopping board and other utensils while Kon sat restlessly in his chair, repeatedly looking over at the refrigerator.

“And? What happens at the end of all that?” he asked.

“We get pancetta, or salted pork,” I replied. “Well, salted boar in this case. In addition to helping it keep longer, the salt strengthens and concentrates all the flavor of the meat. The fat becomes almost sweet; very delicious. The whole thing has a pleasant salty taste as well, of course. You can even cook pancetta in a pot of vegetables to make a simple and flavorful soup.

“What else is it good for... You can use it to season dishes, it’s a quick and

easy base for a meat dish and, of course, you can add it to consommé—it's very good for that. Oh, it's brilliant in pasta dishes, too. The aroma of all the herbs we used today will come out in whatever dish you cook with the pancetta. So, choose whatever herbs you like best when making it."

Kon let out another loud gulp. Now he wasn't even taking his eyes off the fridge. It'd be ten days before the pancetta was ready, but he continued to stare across the kitchen, impatiently fidgeting in his seat, as his bushy tail waved back and forth.



THE washing up was done and everything had been put away. I let out a satisfied sigh. Then I turned to Kon, who was still sitting in his little chair.

"Kon," I asked, "where'd you get that chair? The size is just right for you, and you seem very at home sitting up there on the countertop."

Kon screwed up his eyes in that happy way of his and flashed me a big smile.

"That's 'cuz Grampa Tommi made it for me!" he said, tapping the sides of the chair. "He was always doing all kindsa strange things in the kitchen. When I told him I wanted to watch, he made me this chair just like that! When Grampa Tommi died, I put it away 'cuz I thought I wouldn't get to use it anymore. I'm glad I was wrong!"

Kon got up, stood on the seat of the chair, then climbed up onto the chair's back, where he balanced with perfect ease... Then he suddenly jumped into the air, flipped over, and landed back in the seat with a little thump.

It was an impressive trick—clearly, he'd done it many times before. He followed it up with a showman-like gesture and a well-practiced "Ta-dah!" before shutting his eyes again for another smile. His tail was swishing with excitement.

We spent our time making silly conversation about nothing in particular until finally, the front doorbell rang. As soon as Kon heard it, he became very serious. He hopped off his chair and swiftly clambered down from the countertop. Rushing over to a corner of the kitchen, he grabbed the small wooden pole that he'd left there and dashed off to the front door.

I hurried after him and found him standing in the entranceway, drawn up to his full height, pole pointed menacingly at the closed door. It seemed he was trying to protect me. I smiled at him appreciatively and asked if I could pass so I could open the front door.

Outside was a man wearing the uniform of a well-known local delivery service. He was an older gentleman with neatly trimmed white hair and a mustache—also neatly trimmed. The man smiled meekly, holding his cap in his hands as he calmly stood there.

To tell the truth, I was expecting someone younger or at least more solidly built. He must have seen my look of surprise, as his face creased up into a more genuine smile.

“Good day,” said the old man. “I have a delivery for you. Should I bring it through here? Or would you prefer me to put it on the veranda?”

“Ah...on the veranda, please,” I replied.

The man bowed and handed me a bundle of papers with the various delivery documents, which I took. He replaced his cap, turned around on the spot, and headed back to his van. I stamped the first of the numerous delivery confirmations with my personal seal, watching him out of the corner of my eye as he unloaded my packages from the car and carried them around to the side of the house.

Kon looked at the old man, then up at me, then at the old man again. A moment later, he was gone, dashing through the house toward the veranda. *I guess he wants to keep an eye on the old man's movements*, I thought to myself, as I stamped all the documents. As I was stamping the last one, the old man suddenly reappeared by the front door.

“I’ve left everything on the veranda as you asked,” he informed me.

“Thank you very much,” I responded, returning the stack of papers. “Here are all your documents.”

Kon returned from the veranda and was soon noticed by the older gentleman, whose face creased up into another smile.

“I heard that you moved here only a short while ago, yet you’re already

getting along so well with them. How wonderful; that really is something. It's great to see you've got a good relationship—it really helps us out. I pray your friendship grows from strength to strength.”

I wondered what he meant. Taken at face value, I suppose that if I stayed here and got on well with the beastfolk, he and his company would have more regular delivery work here.

Maybe he gets a commission bonus or something, or maybe he only works part-time...

But I felt like there might be something between the lines in what he was saying. Something didn't add up here. It was almost as if he had some secret motive. I smiled back at him, my heart filled with doubt.

What kind of delivery service hires an old man to carry heavy packages? He must've been sixty years old, maybe even seventy. Surely, you'd be better off having him do office work?

What's behind that smile? He was definitely hiding something. Who was this mysterious man? I started considering possibilities, pondering what questions I might ask...but the old man could sense my suspicion and decided to call it a day.

“Have a good afternoon,” he said and headed back to his van.

I wondered if I should call after him and ask him to explain himself. No, if that was all it took to get the full story, surely he would've explained himself right at the beginning. He was very careful to express himself subtly and say nothing directly. There must've been a reason for that. I decided to hold off for now and be sure to remember this old gentleman. I looked down at Kon, still brandishing his pole at my feet.

“Thanks, Kon,” I said. “Listen, I'm going to unpack my things now. If you help me clean up, I'll give you a piece of the candy I ordered. Only a little, but I'm happy to share.”

Kon was thrilled to hear that. He squinted tight and opened his mouth in a wide grin that showed off his little white teeth.

“Yesss!” he cried, sprinting straight for the veranda.

Along the way, he grabbed a utility knife from a drawer in the living room and proceeded to cut through the packing tape and open up all the cardboard delivery boxes with practiced ease.

When Kon and the other children helped me unpack when I first moved in, they'd stowed away my belongings with impressive efficiency. They knew where things should go. All the cooking utensils ended up in the kitchen, food items I'd brought with me were neatly arranged on the living room table, and if they weren't sure what to do with something, it was placed on the tatami mats in the living room for me to sort out at the end.

Items that were too large or too heavy for them to carry were left exactly where they were—no irresponsible heroics. The tidying had proceeded swiftly, just as it was doing now with Kon's help. But after a while, Kon was at a loss.

"This is nothing like what we were unpacking last week," he said, peering into the open cardboard boxes. "It's all *weird* stuff—I've never seen any of this before."

"That's because I mainly ordered things you can't get around here," I continued the unpacking process as I explained it to him. "Food preservation needs all kinds of unusual tools. That can make it quite an expensive hobby. Even if you're only preserving something in sugar or pickling it in salt, all that cost adds up.

"Herbs aren't exactly cheap either. I guess you could call it a rather extravagant pastime. But then, it only takes one little mistake for your whole batch of food to start going moldy or turning sour, and then all you can do is throw it away and start again. It's also very unforgiving."

"Why do people do it then?" Kon asked. "Why do *you* do it?"

"Hmm..." I wondered. "I guess once you've finally made something that you know will keep for a long time, it brings you peace? Also, you can use less aggressive, short-term preservation techniques, like with the pancetta, to enhance the regular flavor of certain foods. But if you truly want to understand the unique charm of preserved foods, it's best to let your tastebuds be your guide. I'm very happy to let you try the various things I'm going to be making."

Kon smiled at me again and his large, bushy tail was once again wagging

furiously.

“I can’t wait!” he exclaimed.

We unpacked all the boxes and put everything in its proper place. I had ordered a large quantity of yōkan, a kind of red bean paste gelatin dessert, for preservation purposes, and I gave a small block of it to Kon as promised. He was happily chewing his way through it with a satisfied smile on his face. I was flattening the last of the cardboard boxes when he spoke up.

“Boy, it’ll sure be a while before we can eat that meat in the fridge, though. *Pruh-zurving* food takes a long time!”

“It sure does,” I agreed. “Any time you need to soak or pickle something, you always have to wait a while. That said, ten days is not very long at all in the preserve world. Some preservation techniques can take several months, you know.”

“WHAT?!” shouted Kon. “Months? You’ll *definitely* forget about it by then!”

I suspect that children and adults experience time very differently. An hour or a day to a child is many times longer—maybe even ten or twenty times longer—than it is for an adult. So, what seemed like a few short months to me must’ve sounded like years to this little guy.

Kon rolled around on the living room tatami mats and kept talking.

“Hey,” he said, “is there any quick way to *pruh-zurv* food? Like, ‘BAM!’ and it’s done? Somethin’ you can eat right away...”

“Sure, there are. Those glazed nuts that Rei makes are like that. So is the yōkan I gave you. As long as you have the tools and ingredients, you can make that stuff the very same day.”

“*Reeeally?* Can you make somethin’ like that, then? I wanna try some of your *pruh-zurved* food today!” said Kon.

I thought about the options, checked the clock to see if we had enough time, and decided on something that could be prepared quickly and easily. I nodded and headed for the kitchen. Kon dashed after me, his little feet rapidly tapping on the floor and took up his previous spot on the countertop, sitting

comfortably in his chair.

“So, with pancetta, it’s the salt that keeps it from going bad,” I told him. “But we can also do something similar with sugar. Both glazed chestnuts and yōkan are made that way—using a large amount of sugar prevents the food from going bad.”

I put on my apron and washed my hands as I explained. Kon’s eyes went round with wonder and curiosity.

“So, a very salty food and a very sweet food will work the same way?” he asked. “But when Mommy makes cake, she says that it’ll go bad quickly...”

“That’s because cake is made with fresh cream and eggs,” I said. “Those kinds of ingredients go bad very easily. However, it is possible to preserve foods with milk and eggs in them. If you can remove enough moisture and use plenty of sugar, they can keep quite well. Well, we don’t have time for anything that elaborate today. But we have something that’s just as good.”

I opened the refrigerator and removed a pack of strawberries. Kon’s eyes glinted as they followed me across the kitchen. He looked like he might devour them as soon as my back was turned, so I gave him a stern warning that these weren’t for eating as I carried them to the sink.

Wash the strawberries and carefully hull each one. Once hulled, give them another rinse to remove any debris from the hulling process. Place them in a pan and add plenty of sugar.

I reached for a ceramic container on the countertop that had “Sugar” written on it in large, English letters. I opened the lid and dumped the entire contents into the pot with the strawberries.



“Whoa!” Kon cried in surprise. “Mikura, that’s way too much! You can’t use that much sugar!”

“Ha ha ha, it *is* a lot, isn’t it?” I laughed. “Actually, cakes and other sweets also contain a lot of sugar. You wouldn’t believe how much sugar there is in soft drinks. With this recipe, only a small amount of the sugar is needed for taste. The rest is essential for the preservation process.”

Place the pot over a medium heat and gently simmer. Be careful not to burn the mixture, stirring regularly with a wooden spatula. When it begins to boil, add some lemon juice. The citric acid in the lemon juice preserves the color of the strawberries, but be careful not to use too much, or the final product may taste sour.

I’ve heard that some people will even use vitamin C powder that you can buy at the pharmacy, but I find it easiest to just use lemon juice.

Vitamin C is also frequently added to bottled green tea. Presumably, that means it has anti-oxidizing properties as well.

Reduce the heat slightly and continue to slowly stir the pot with the wooden spatula.

“Mikura, this smells amazing!” shouted Kon. “It’s sweet and warm and slightly sour!”

I looked up to see that he’d moved his chair right to the edge of the stove without me noticing.

“It’s a good smell, isn’t it? Can you guess what I’m making?” I asked him. “You’re right to be excited—it’s something that smells as good as it tastes.”

“Smells as good as it tastes... I know!” said Kon. “You’re making strawberry pie! Rei let me have some strawberry pie once!”

“Not quite,” I laughed. “Pie doesn’t keep for very long at all! Well, we’re almost done, so I may as well tell you. It’s jam! I’m making strawberry jam.”

“Jam,” said Kon with surprise. “Strawberry jam? We buy strawberry jam at the supermarket sometimes... It’s not BAD, but it doesn’t really taste like strawberries.”

“Ah, the supermarket stuff,” I replied as we watched the strawberries simmering away. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say they’re all imitations, but a lot of them definitely use more flavorings than fruit. This is the real deal though, made with real strawberries. It’ll taste great, I’m telling you.”

As I was only using a small number of strawberries this time, I was able to boil them up quite quickly. But if I’d wanted to make a whole jar of jam and seal it, it would take several packs of strawberries and would’ve easily taken two or three hours.

As a rule, you want to boil the fruit for a long time, as that ensures a long shelf life, but they also lose some of their flavor during the process. Since this was going to be eaten today, it was fine to do things quickly. I turned off the heat before the strawberries completely lost their shape.

If I were bottling the jam, there’d be one final step in the process.

Sterilize your jars with boiling water, dry them in the oven, fill each with hot jam, and close the lid tightly. Prepare a large pot with water, place the sealed jars inside on a dishcloth, so the glass doesn’t heat up and explode, and bring the water to a boil to pasteurize the jam. When the jars are cooling back down to room temperature, the jam and the air inside will contract, producing a vacuum seal. Once fully cooled, the jars are ready for storage.

However, as I’d only made a little, I didn’t need to cool the jam down. I simply poured it into a dish and took it to the low table in the living room. Then I prepared some toast for Kon and myself and poured us each a glass of milk—by far the best drink to enjoy with jam on toast.

“This doesn’t smell like jam at all! It smells so good!” enthused Kon, eagerly gripping the side of the low table, his tail waving about in a frenzy. I passed him a piece of toast.

“You can put on as much as you like,” I told him.

He took me at my word, completely slathering his toast with jam and vigorously chomping down on it. I spread some jam on my own slice and took a bite.

Good. It was just the right amount of sweet. I nodded to myself in

satisfaction. Unlike regular store-bought jam, which simply tastes sugary, the taste of real strawberry jam should fill the whole mouth. What's more, since these soft strawberries still retained some of their original shape, they added a little more texture to the jam with their squishy mouth feel. Personally, I never grew tired of it.

"When I was living in my own apartment, I made many different jams like this," I told Kon. "But strawberry was always my favorite. I really think it's king of the jams."

Kon had finished the last bite of his jam on toast. He grabbed his glass of milk and greedily gulped the whole thing down until it too was empty.

"That was *soooooo* good!" he shouted. "It's sweet...but a bit tangy...but still sweet! It actually tastes like strawberries! This is nothing like supermarket jam. Mikura! Mikura, Mikura, Mikura! I love this! I wanna eat this again!"

I tried to let him down gently.

"I completely understand, but strawberries are actually quite expensive this time of year," I explained. "Outdoor-grown strawberries won't be available until May or June, so we'll have to put any jam plans on hold until then. When summer comes around, you can buy great-tasting strawberries in bulk for cheap. If we make a big batch of jam then, you'll be able to keep it in the fridge and enjoy strawberry jam all year long. Even if it isn't strawberry season and they're not selling any strawberries.

"Impressive, huh? That's only possible thanks to the power of preserves."

Kon closed his eyes, grinned, and gave a huge nod of agreement.

"*Pruh-zurvs* are amazing!"



THE jam, the toast, and the milk were all gone. Since we'd been eating sugar, we were in the bathroom brushing our teeth. As the young chipmunks worked in the orchard all day long, they were expected to bring a small bag with various essentials to work every day. Fortunately, that included a toothbrush, so I was able to lift Kon up to the mirror's level, and he was able to brush his teeth with no problem.

After that, I washed all the jam-making equipment and started putting it away. While I was storing things around the kitchen, I turned around to see Kon sitting in a corner with a packet of instant cup noodles from my personal stash, holding it firmly in both hands and staring at it intently.

“What’s up, little guy?” I asked. “Are you still hungry after all that jam?”

“Nah,” he responded, shaking his head. “I was just lookin’ at the use by date. Talking ‘bout *pruh-zurving* food all day made me curious.”

“Oh, I see,” I said. “Now that you mention it, cup noodles keep for a very long time. I guess you could say they’re a kind of preserved food as well.”

“Right?” said Kon. “This is good to eat for another four years! Do cup noodles also last forever because they’re really salty like pancetta?”

“No, cup noodles are a bit different,” I explained. “They’ve been heated and then dehydrated—that means they’ve had all their moisture taken out. Food goes bad because of microbes...that is, bacteria...germs, basically. But water is very important for microbes to survive.

“So, if we remove all the water, they’ve no way to grow. And by thoroughly heating food, we can kill the microbes already in it. After killing all the microbes through heating, the food is carefully sealed so that no air or new microbes can get in. For example, we can seal it in an airtight can or jar. That’s one of the basics of making food that can be stored for long periods of time.”

“Huh...” hummed Kon. “So salt, sugar, and heat all beat bacteria. You have a lotta options, huh?”

“That’s right,” I replied. “And that’s not all. We can also use vinegar or alcohol or a number of other methods to kill bacteria or keep them out or slow down their growth. But all food goes bad eventually, even if it takes a really long time. That’s why food has expiration dates, and that’s why it’s important to pay attention to them. That way, you can enjoy a healthy life, working and playing without any surprise tummy aches.”

Kon put the cup noodles back where he’d found them in one of the floor-level kitchen cabinets...but he kept the door open, carefully examining the various foodstuffs that were stored away in there, from the food cans to the last of my

instant curry. His eyes were almost sparkling as he read the labels—he seemed genuinely interested. I think it was the jam on toast that finally won him over. I was thrilled at the thought, and I crouched down next to him as he kept exploring.

“You know that those cup noodles were made by a big company, right?” I went on. “Those companies have to regularly test the food they’re making to make sure they’re killing all the bacteria and to make sure new ones aren’t growing when the food is being stored. That lets us eat their products without a second thought about whether they’re safe or not.

“Making things at home is a bit different. Most people who’re preserving their own food don’t have the equipment to perform those kinds of tests. So, there are a few important things to remember. You can’t see bacteria with your eyes, so it’s very difficult to tell if there are any in the food you’ve preserved. That’s why it’s so important to follow the recipe for whatever you’re making *exactly*, for your own safety. In the end, only *you* are responsible for the food you preserve. If you get a nasty tummy ache or get sick, you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.

“So remember. Be careful. Safety first. Always follow the recipe and always follow best practices. The more you can learn about preservation techniques, the better. And if you ever decide you want to try preserving food on your own, make sure you talk it over with your mom or dad or even me, first. Okay?” I stressed that point, making sure I got a firm nod from him before continuing.

“This is really important. When you make some delicious food, you want to share it with your friends and family, right? Make sure they can enjoy it without getting sick. Remember—always follow the recipe. Of course, if you’re making something that’s going to be eaten the same day like the jam we made today, you don’t have to be as careful. But it’s still good to get in the habit.”

When I first moved into my own apartment and Great-Grandpa heard that I’d been making jam, he’d called me up right away to explain all this. I tried to summarize that conversation as simply as I could for young Kon, to make sure he understood the dangers and how to avoid them. He nodded intently to show he understood, eyes still sparkling with wonder. Rather than be put off or frightened by my warning, it seemed to only deepen his curiosity. This was

getting better and better, so I introduced a new topic.

“Before you decide that bacteria are all bad though, you should know they can have different effects on different foods. When bacteria makes food go bad, we call that spoilage—as in, the food becomes spoiled. But in some situations, bacteria can improve the taste of the food. We call that fermentation.

“The thing about fermentation is that it can also preserve foods and help them keep for a long time. I mentioned vinegar and alcohol earlier—both of those are made by bacteria through the power of fermentation. What I’m trying to say is that using bacteria in the right way can also be a great help when you’re preserving food.”

“*Hmmm...*” Kon made a thoughtful humming noise. “I’m not sure I get it. But it sounds like bacteria are pretty amazing. I don’t drink vinegar or alcohol, though. What other foods can you make with *fur-mint-ation*?”

“Hmm...” I tried to pick some good examples. “I’m sure you eat soy sauce and miso and natto, right? All three of those are actually made by fermenting soybeans. If you’ve ever eaten Japanese or Western pickles, those are fermented too... Yogurt and cheese are also fermented foods.”

“Oooh!” said Kon. “I like natto! I like yogurt! I didn’t know I ate so much *fur-minted* food!”

And so Kon and I continued to discuss the finer points of preservation for some time...until I felt somebody’s gaze. Well, maybe not gaze, but I was sure I could feel a presence—outside the kitchen, past the living room, out in the garden. Somebody had arrived at the house.

Who could it be? I wondered, peering through the house in that direction only to see Techī standing out there, looking very imposing. Behind her, I was surprised to see that the sky was not blue as I’d expected but had turned a deep crimson.

Time flies when you’re having fun.

Apparently, the workday was over, and Techī had come by to check on us. She was glaring at me with a look of disbelief that deeply questioned what I was

choosing to talk about with the child that'd been placed in my care.

What the hell are you telling this kid?

It's understandable. Techī certainly wasn't a diehard fan of this hobby. She was perfectly happy to buy such goods ready-made at the supermarket. And who can blame her? Those store-bought foods are safe and economical. Making these things by hand takes time, incredible effort, and you frequently end up burning through a whole lot of money along the way. I could see why she might not approve of me corrupting Kon's young mind with these strange ideas, leading him down a dark path... I had to convince her otherwise.

I opened the refrigerator and removed a small jar. I'd ordered these in bulk for ¥100 apiece and they had arrived today. They were perfect for food preservation. The main container and lid were made of thick glass and were connected together with a metal hinge and a metal clasp. A rubber ring was attached to the lid, allowing the jar to create an airtight seal when closed. I took it and walked over to Techī.

Inside the jar was a small amount of jam—the remains of the jam I'd made earlier. This jam had opened Kon's eyes to the joys of this hobby of mine—I hoped that it might be enough to help Techī understand its charms as well. To nudge her opinion in a slightly more positive direction.

"Kon and I made this jam today... We were hoping you might like some as well," I said, holding the jar out to her.

She glanced down at Kon, who was standing at my feet, eyes shimmering brightly. She narrowed her eyes at me, suspicious, but she took the jar, albeit with some hesitation.

It wasn't exactly a lie! Kon may only have been watching, but he was by my side the entire time, listening carefully to everything I said. I was *almost* telling the truth.

"It's made entirely from fresh fruit, so it's very tasty," I said. And I gave her my classic salaryman smile, a well-worn companion from my old job—almost threadbare by this point—that'd accompanied me in countless business meetings over the years.



THE following day, I was back at the orchard. I headed over in the morning after my breakfast and went to the rest area. Techii was already there when I arrived. As I was about to sit down, she passed me a familiar jar, which was now empty, and said just two words.

“...Not bad.”

She said it reluctantly, the words flat, trying hard not to make it sound like a compliment. But from the soft expression on her face, I could tell that she’d enjoyed the jam. It seemed that my little bribe may have worked.

“There will be more when strawberry season comes around,” I told her as I sat down. “They start selling outdoor-cultivated strawberries around May or June, so I plan to make a big batch then. I’d love to share some with you.”

Techii made no reply except for a small nod of her head, and we settled into another relaxed shift of watching the world go by. The children were working as energetically as ever, and Techii kept a constant, roving eye on them, her elbows on the table and her chin perched on her hands as usual. Everyone had something to do except for me. I felt a bit useless.

There must be something I can do...

So I decided to do as Techii had suggested last week and find a way to use the time for my hobby. Specifically, I needed to think through what I was going to do with the remaining boar meat that was still lying in my warehouse refrigerator. Techii and Co had taken half of it away to start. Then, we’d had the hot pot party, and yesterday, I’d made pancetta. But there was still meat left over.

What can I make?

I didn’t necessarily *have* to preserve it. I didn’t even have to cook anything fancy. I could always just fry it and eat it—keep things simple. Or boil it with some bean sprouts and garlic chives, top it with a soy sauce and mustard mix—that could be good too.

But maybe I should take the opportunity to try a new preservation technique. Maybe even smoke the meat...

While I was considering the options, I took out my smartphone and started browsing some cooking websites for inspiration. Then Techii finally spoke.

“Mikura,” she said in a low voice, “did you find the ledgers Tomiyasu left behind?”

“Yes, I did,” I replied. “They were hidden inside the Buddhist altar. Knowing Great-Grandpa, I knew that’d be the first place to look. When I moved the altar though, I wasn’t expecting to find a full-blown hidden compartment inside it. Gramps went all out.”

“Huh... And...did you find anything apart from accounting figures?” she asked. She turned to look at me, chin still in her hands. “Information about business dealings, perhaps? Or anything about us?”

“Yeah, there was something actually,” I replied. “It seems that Gramps knew he was running out of time. Sometime around last summer, he wrote out a long note. It doesn’t really amount to a will, but he left some instructions for how he’d like things to be organized after his death. He wanted you and your clan to continue looking after the orchard. He left the contact details for the tree surgeon that you told me about...and the contact details for his chestnut buyers.

“What’s more, he wrote down, in some detail, the reasons *why* he continued to sell to that trader you dislike so much—the good-for-nothing bum, as you call him.”

It was a common story. The original founder of that trade business was a childhood friend of Great-Grandpa. They suffered through poverty and worse during and after the Second World War. But they overcame those adversities together, as loyal friends.

This friend’s grandchildren and ultimately, his great-grandchildren, started working for the business and eventually took over. Before he died, the old man had asked Great-Grandpa to look out for his family...and he had been ever since, giving them special treatment. That sort of thing happened a lot with people of that generation.

“When he wrote the note, my great-grandpa still didn’t know who’d be inheriting the orchard. But he did write that there was no need to continue the

special treatment. It seems his friend had died many years ago, and Gramps made it very clear that his obligation would be over the moment that he himself passed away.

“If Great-Grandpa was aware enough of the succession problems to write out and hide all these instructions, I’m a little surprised he never called to ask me to take the reins. I was his first choice, after all. Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised, though—I did have a career lined up at a big company... That’s probably why he kept it to himself. That’s just like Gramps.”

I stared into the distance, not focusing on anything in particular as I told Techī all of this.

“*Hmph*,” she huffed sharply and continued in a low voice again. “That’s just like him—the whole story. That means he was fully aware of what he was doing and just how much he was being exploited...but he kept it up for all those years out of loyalty to his friend... Oh, Tomiyasu. He never *could* say no to anyone...”

Her tone was calmer and softer than usual, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She looked genuinely relieved—a warm smile had spread across her face.

“Well,” I told her, “I’ve no intention of being exploited, so I *will* be saying no. Clearly and unambiguously, with Great-Grandpa’s blessing. Or rather, I *would*. But I’ve heard nothing at all *from* the bum since I arrived, and harvest is still months away, so...I haven’t even had the opportunity or the need *to* say no, you know?”

Techī’s eyebrows twitched. Her smile faded and she stared at me intensely.

“He hasn’t tried to contact you?” she asked. “That *is* surprising. I would’ve expected him to swoop in straight away to try and snatch up a monopoly... Hmm... By the way, did you contact the tree surgeon?”

“Ah yes, I did,” I replied, “and I asked them to come for routine visits. It’s not cheap but, being the complete amateur that I am, I’d rather have that safety net. As for the other buyer, the honest one, I got a call from them on... Thursday, I think it was? They introduced themselves politely and asked if I wanted to keep doing business with them. Then they explained how they based their rates on the market price around harvest time. So, unless anything

unusual happens, I plan to sell the whole harvest.”

“Good. That sounds great. As for the other guy, I wouldn’t even sell him the worm-eaten chestnuts,” said Techī, clicking her tongue with disdain. Her earlier gentle smile was now a tightly knit frown. It was amazing how quickly her attitude changed whenever the bum was mentioned. I’d been wondering about that for a while.

“You know, I understand being upset about Tomiyasu being ripped off. But you’re more than upset. More than angry, even. There’s some kind of *deep* rage there, and I can’t figure out why. It seems to me like there’s more to this than chestnut prices... So, what did he *do*?”

Techī looked at me, still frowning, still glaring, and reluctantly began to explain.

“...Everything on this side of the border is beastfolk territory. Tomiyasu owning a house here is a *huge* exception. Normally, that’d be unthinkable. In order for Tomiyasu to be able to live his life and run his orchard, his trade partners and contractors had special permission to come and visit him—another big exception to the rules.

“Now, we may technically be an autonomous region inside Japan, but if one of those outsiders were to cause trouble, it’d effectively become an international incident. Most businesses wouldn’t want to be involved in that kind of scandal and would make sure to send sensible workers who wouldn’t cause any problems.

“But that stupid buffoon’s a wretched fool, through and through. As a trade partner of the orchard, he had special permission to enter the Wilds. But he was always trying to abuse it in his hunt to make a few extra yen. He secretly tried to take photographs of the children. He was caught at the border trying to smuggle in a small cage one time. Another time, it was a stun gun.

“Fortunately, I spotted his camera, so he didn’t get away with any photos. Every time he tried to sneak something in, it was confiscated. He received stern warnings and was chewed out by the border guards. He was questioned and detained. Tomiyasu tried to get him to change too, but he never learned his lesson. He kept coming and kept pushing his luck.

“It got so bad that both administrations wrote to Tomiyasu, warning him that the situation could threaten his ongoing ability to do business. I’m amazed he kept honoring his commitment to that friend of his through all of that.”

In other words, Great-Grandpa had been stuck between several rocks and a very hard place. His childhood friend’s useless progeny was causing trouble for Techii and her clan, the border guards, government officials on *both* sides, and who knows who else. I couldn’t imagine how painful it must have been for Gramps, lying on his deathbed, knowing that the situation was still unresolved. The thought saddened me. I sighed.

One thought immediately came to mind. *What a horrible situation! Why didn’t he tell us? We could have helped...* But I only had to think about it for a few moments to understand the answer. We would’ve told him to cut the guy off, just like everyone else, and that would’ve only added to his worries.

Or, even worse, we might’ve forced his hand, making him break his word to his dear friend. That would’ve been so painful for him. That was one regret he would’ve carried all the way to his grave.

...Now I better understood why Techii had asked about Great-Grandpa’s final moments. Why she’d asked whether he’d died with a smile on his face.

I thought about that smile. I thought about Great-Grandpa in his dying moments, drifting in and out of consciousness and hearing through the haze that I would take over the house. Why was he smiling? Yes, I’d take care of the orchard. But maybe there was more to it. Maybe he was smiling because he thought I’d also be able to finally fix this messy situation that he never could.

At the very last moment, he was freed from the viselike jaws of that dilemma. He could leave this world behind in the knowledge that his great-grandson—the most “successful” and “competent” member of the family (as I was often referred to by other family members)—would take care of it.

If Mikura’s in charge, everything will be fine.

Good.

I can rest easy then.

I had to make sure he *could* rest easy, wherever he was now. My hands

formed tight fists under the table. I had a responsibility to the orchard, of course. But now, I also had a responsibility to stand up to this nasty bully, whenever he decided to show up. To make sure he left and never came back.

The Raid

IN that moment of reflection, I'd strengthened my resolve to protect the orchard. I looked at Techī, then looked at the children. I'd keep that selfish, greedy troublemaker far away from them.

I was ready to get on with my day. But just as I was about to pick up my phone and resume my search for boar meat recipes, it rang.

I picked up.

"Hello, Mikura Moriya speaking... Yes... Yes... Um, excuse me? ...I see... No, I assure you that I've no appointments today. I'm not at home right now... No, I'm out on business; I can't see anyone... Yes, that's right. Yes... Yes, please go ahead and do that... I'm sorry for the trouble. Thank you for letting me know."

I hung up. Techī looked at me inquiringly, wanting to know what the phone call was about.

"Well, speak of the devil. It seems our *favorite* chestnut buyer is down at the border gate, asking to be let through," I told her. "The gate staff called to ask me what they should do."

Techī lifted her chin out of her hands, her ears pricked up, her tail stiffened, and she stood up furiously. Her eyes were intense—almost crazy. She looked ready to sprint all the way to the border gate to deal with him on her own terms.

"Calm down, Miss Techī!" I said. "I told them not to let him through because he hadn't contacted me in advance. They won't open the gate, so he can't get through. He'll give up and go home."

That's what I was counting on. The border was a high-security operation; the gate itself was quite high-tech and made of durable materials. There was always at least one armed member of the Japan Self-Defense Forces on duty. It wasn't the kind of facility you could just sneak through.

In order to cross the border, you needed special permission and the right paperwork, and you had to inform them in advance. Moreover, you needed to undergo certain medical examinations during the crossing, without which it was impossible to enter or leave the Wilds.

If he tried to barge his way through regardless, he could be charged with any number of crimes—interfering with the duties of a public servant, trespassing, even assault. Anyone with a lick of sense would turn back.

“I don’t get it, though,” I said, puzzled. “Surely he *knew* that he wouldn’t be able to see me without advance notice.”

Techi let out a ragged sigh as the adrenaline left her system and she thumped back down on the bench.

“You got advance notice,” she muttered, sounding thoroughly fed up. “You got a call from the gate staff just now, didn’t you? He’d pull this nonsense all the time, showing up out of the blue. Tomiyasu never complained; he just told the gate officials to let him through. I guess he thought he could keep doing the same thing with you, Mikura.”

“Wow...” I said. “That’s so entitled... So, he feels equally entitled to keep buying our chestnuts? And without so much as a phone call to introduce himself? I wonder what he hoped to achieve, showing up out of the blue like this...”

But as soon as I said it, I was pretty sure I knew the answer. He almost certainly wanted to sign a contract.

What would normally happen if a buyer heard that someone had inherited the orchard? They’d pay them a polite visit to ask if they could keep trading on the same terms as before. After what Techι had said though, I strongly doubted that was this man’s intention.

What if this guy discovered that a successor had appeared...because he heard through the grapevine that I was already in discussions with another buyer, as was indeed the case? He’d probably show up out of nowhere and attempt to play on my inexperience to trick or threaten me into giving him a monopoly on the chestnuts. This seemed a far more likely story.

He'd show up in person because it'd let him keep the hogwash flowing long enough to try and fool me. He'd talk in a loud, authoritative voice, citing nonexistent contracts and made-up laws. There are plenty of people in this world who'll say *anything* to get what they want. He was clearly one of them.

With that line of thinking settled, I unlocked my phone and found an article on how to smoke meat.

Smoking meat may sound straightforward, but there are many different flavors, aromas, tools, and methods to choose from. I started wrestling with the abundance of choice, but Techy glowered at me through half-closed eyes, as she often did. She couldn't believe I was doing nothing about the man at the gate. I took a break from my research.

"Look, Miss Techy," I said, "there's nothing to be done right now. There's no point in going to see him—the guy isn't worth the effort. What's more, I don't have any kind of contractual obligations toward him. He's a perfect stranger as far as I'm concerned. If I refuse to acknowledge him, he can't set up a meeting and, without a meeting, he can't get me to sign a contract. Let him make the first move."

I had no intention of doing anything, nor was there any need to. I'd carefully read over his contract with Great-Grandpa, and that much was clear. But I was going to have a professional look it over too—if push came to shove, I could ask one of my old work contacts. I'd made my preparations and, rather than let him get inside my head, I preferred to think about something fun. I would be far better off concerning myself with my new hobby.

I resumed my Internet research...but Techy kept staring at me pointedly, with a hint of concern in her eyes. She still doubted my conclusion. I looked her right in the eye.

"It'll be okay," I said, my face deadly serious. "I'm not going to let anything happen to this orchard. And I *will* face that brute head-on when the time comes. I'm fully committed. I've already made what preparations I can. Now the best thing for us to do is to wait and see how he reacts. ...Of course, there's always the remote possibility that he won't be willing to try anything stupid, and the problem will fade away on its own. That'd be no skin off my nose.

“...By the way, Miss Tech, have *you* made any preparations for dealing with this guy?” I asked.

Tech scoffed, balled her hand up into a fist and showed it to me.

“*This* is all the preparation I need,” she said. “The only way to deal with a man like that is to beat the snot out of him. Crush his spirit. I may *look* slight, but I train a lot. Give me a pole or leave me my bare fists, it’s all the same to me.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Her expression was far more serious than mine had been a moment ago. I broke into a cold sweat and tried to talk her down.

“No, no, no, that won’t do!” I said. “No violence. That’s no good at all. You said it yourself. This is an international issue—you’ll cause a diplomatic incident. We can’t strike first. If this blows up, I could lose the right to live here... So, please...let’s do things my way.”

I tried to change the subject.

“R-Right, enough of that! What do you know about smoked meat? The idea with smoking is to imbue the meat with a fragrant wood smell while also intensifying the flavor of the meat itself. Smoking also melts a lot of the extra fat off, so the end result can be extremely delicious. Depending on the exact technique you use, it can even have preserving effects. You spent time with Great-Grandpa; you’ve probably eaten plenty of smoked meat,” I listed off the facts as fast as I could.

Tech lowered her fist and sighed deeply yet again.

“Sure, I’ve had it several times before,” she said. “But as long as the meat’s edible, I don’t really care how it’s prepared.”

It was quite possibly the bluntest thing I’d ever heard her say.

This would be a challenge, but I was determined to make her something special that’d open her eyes to the beautiful flavors of smoked food. I eagerly dove back into the Internet to sort through the relevant information and began to hatch a plan for smoking the rest of the boar meat.



SMOKING meat is actually very straightforward.

First, season the meat. Then smoke it.

Like I said, simple.

When it comes to choosing your flavors though, things get more complicated—the combination of the seasoning and the type of smoke you use has a huge influence on the final result.

For seasoning, the most common method is to soak the meat in a pickling liquid. Dissolve the required amount of salt in water to attain the right level of saltiness for your recipe. Add sugar, herbs, and other ingredients to craft your desired flavor and boil the whole mixture. Leave your meat to pickle in the liquid for several days. When done, desalinate, remove any excess moisture, and the smoking process can begin.

In Japan, we refer to a salt and sugar solution as Saumur fluid, but once you've added herbs and spices, I'd really call it a pickling liquid. However, introductory books on smoking food often use the term Saumur fluid, no matter what it may contain, so at some point, it seems to have become a standard term.

Every decision can affect the final flavor: how you make your pickling liquid, what herbs you choose to add, the pickling duration, how long you desalinate your meat at the end... The possibilities are endless. You'll need to use your own judgment.

Consider what flavors go well with the meat you'll be smoking and consider your personal tastes. Will you be eating the smoked meat as is? Or will you be cooking it in other dishes? Different approaches will give you different results.

On this occasion, I wasn't thinking of my own tastes. My main objective was to make something Techii could enjoy; something that might win her over, even a little bit, to the joys of preserved food. So I'd try to play to her preferences.

In that case, the most important thing would be the choice of herbs.

Herbs are an important part of the process. They can mask any odors (for example, in boar meat), help preserve the food better, and help tenderize tougher cuts of meat. Herbs are also very good for your health. As you can see,

there are many advantages to using herbs to add flavor to your food.

However, with great potency comes great flavor. Some herbs have a very strong flavor, fragrance, or both. If these aren't prepared properly or used in the right quantities, it's very easy to overpower the flavor of everything else. Every bite you take will have a strong whiff of the offending herb and little else. You can't enjoy the food's varied flavors if everything tastes the same. This kind of blunder is to be avoided at all costs.

Additionally, people's tastes vary. What may be the perfect combination of aromas for you may be unbearably stinky to your dinner guests. That's also something to watch out for.

That last one was particularly relevant to my current situation.

When making smoked meats, you can always sidestep the problem of overly strong herbs by using highly fragrant wood in the smoking process, such as cherry or apple. The smoke from these woods has a wonderful smell and can potentially mask other odors in the meat. Some people will even skip the herbs entirely and use this technique instead.

I decided to go halfway. I'd only use a few herbs and rely on my wood chips for a strong fragrance rather than taking a risk by overloading the meat with herbs. To figure out which herbs I should use, I asked Techii what herbs she liked most, but her response wasn't very helpful.

"...I dunno."

My next strategy was to bring her a few different herbs to sniff. I tried bay leaves, rosemary, and a few other common picks, but not a single one got a positive reaction from her. This girl was just *not* into herbs.

"My brother serves herbal teas at his shop," she'd said. "They're not bad; I'll drink one from time to time. The lemon grass one is actually quite good."

I briefly considered buying a range of herbal teas, including lemon grass, and making pickling liquid with them. But given that I was trying to make a good impression, perhaps it wasn't a good time for such wild experiments. I decided to skip the herbs entirely.



“SMOKED meat? Sounds great! Have you ever made it before?”

Two days had passed. I’d decided to get up early before today’s shift at the orchard so I could start all the prep work for smoking the boar meat. Through some unknown sixth sense, Kon had guessed that I’d be doing something interesting today. He arrived with the usual scurrying sound of his little feet, I turned around to look and the next moment, there he was, sitting in his little chair next to the sink.

“Yes, a few times,” I replied. “I never did anything elaborate, though—I used a simple technique you can do at home on a regular stove.”

Step one was pickling, so I lined up my various seasonings on the countertop.

“M-Mikura? What’s all this?” asked Kon. “I thought you were smoking meat today. What’s with all the pickling stuff?”

I flashed him a reassuring smile. *Oh Kon. You still have much to learn.*

I took the remaining boar meat out of the fridge and placed it in a plastic ziplock bag I’d prepared—the kind that’s often used for marinating food. Finally, I opened a bottle of pickling liquid I’d bought at the supermarket. This particular brand was often advertised on TV for making Japanese-style pickled vegetables.

“*Heh heh heh,*” I chuckled knowingly. “You’re quite right, Kon. This product is intended for pickling vegetables. But it also happens to be perfect for pre-curing meat that you intend to smoke. It has just the right level of saltiness and it has a pleasant mix of other ingredients, including a very tasty dashi stock. This time, I opted for their kombu dashi variety. This handy bottle is a great shortcut if you want to skip the fiddly process of making your own pickling liquid.”

There’s no need to calculate or measure anything when using a store-bought liquid. Since the level of salinity is perfect out of the bottle, you don’t have to worry about using too much or too little salt. If you want to add any herbs, simply add them straight to the liquid. Otherwise, use as-is.

This stuff was a lifesaver. It was perfectly good for its intended purpose of pickling vegetables, but it may as well have been specially designed for smoking meat. If you don’t want to risk any mistakes, if you don’t have time to make everything from scratch, if you’re overwhelmed by all the options in the recipe

books, it's a great shortcut that produces great results.

Pour a generous amount of pickling liquid into a plastic ziplock bag, enough to cover the meat while minimizing the amount of air left in the bag when sealed. Place the bag in the refrigerator and leave it to pickle for five days. Desalinate in running water for five to eight hours and remove any excess moisture. Once dry, the meat is ready to be smoked.

"Wow, that's simpler than I thought," said Kon, head tilted to one side, waving his tail around as he watched me work. "But after that, you've gotta make a whole buncha smoke to smoke everything! That sounds like a lotta work."

I placed a second piece of meat inside the ziplock bag with the pickling liquid.

"That depends on what equipment you're using," I replied. "Some people make their own smokers out of cardboard boxes, or you can get a cheap DIY kit at the hardware store. If you're willing to pay extra for the convenience, they even sell electric smokers. Some food smokers are very hands-on, while others, you just need to flick a switch. The smoker I have is pretty easy to use."

I pointed to the floor, where I'd placed my smoker. It looked like a regular earthenware pot at first glance. But inside, it had a removable rack for your food and a space at the bottom to put wood chips.

You place the whole contraption on a normal stove top, and the wood chips heat up and begin to produce smoke. Then it's just a matter of putting on the lid and adjusting the heat to control the amount of smoke to your liking. It was a very convenient item.

"In any case, today, I'll just be cleaning out this thing to get it ready for next time," I told Kon. "The meat needs a few days to pickle first before I can smoke it... But even when I've smoked this batch, I'll *still* have a lot of boar meat left over. I wonder what I should do with the rest...the remaining meat is quite tough. If you don't mind meat that's a little harder to chew, I could try grilling it with salt? That should help make it easier to eat."

Kon made a gulping sound at the mere mention of salt-grilled meat. I'm sure he was carefully imagining the taste.

All the tastiest parts of the boar were pretty much gone, and a lot of what was left would be hard, sinewy, or have a strong odor. But if Kon wanted to try it, I wasn't going to stop him—it was much better than him growing up a picky eater.

When I'd finished most of the prep work, I washed my hands and was clearing everything away when my phone started ringing on the countertop.

Once again, it was the phone number for the border gate. I grabbed my phone and went into the living room before answering, as I thought it was better for Kon not to hear.

"Hello, Mikura Moriya speaking... Again? Yes... Yes, I'm home right now, but I'm about to leave for work... No, he did *not* contact me. He does not have an appointment... Yes, please let him know that I cannot see him... You can tell him that I require all visitors to schedule their arrival, no exceptions. I cannot conduct business without being notified in advance... Yes, thank you, please do."

He was back. That good-for-nothing bum was kicking up a fuss at the gate, insisting that surely, I *must* be home at this hour of the day. I asked the border staff to tell him that I needed all visitors to contact me in advance if they wanted to be let through. The worker on the phone confirmed that he'd pass on the message, and I hung up.

Kon toddled into the living room carrying his little chair in both arms, a sympathetic look in his eyes.

"Mikura, it sounds like you're having a hard time," he said quietly. "That man's causin' a lotta trouble for the workers at the gate, huh..."

I placed my phone on the living room table.

"What?" I said in disbelief. "Don't tell me you could *hear* all that?"

"Sure can!" boasted Kon. "Us beastfolk have *really* good hearing when we're little. You were only in the next room, so I could hear the voice on the other side of the phone pretty well. When we're workin' in the orchard, I hear some of what you and Techii talk 'bout too."

"I-Is that so..."

Another incredible new detail. I made a nervous mental note to be more careful with what I said when the children were around, then I set about preparing to leave. Not that there was much to do—I washed my face, checked myself over in the bathroom mirror, and changed from my home clothes into a slightly nicer shirt and trousers. Ten minutes later, I was ready. I grabbed my phone, stuffed it deep in my trouser pocket, and headed for the veranda to put on my shoes.

I knew I should really use the front door, but leaving by the veranda was so convenient that it was starting to become a habit. Kon followed me out the same way, but he stopped on the grass, his ears twitching. He could hear something. He turned his head in the direction of the border gate.

He listened for a while, ears still twitching away...then he turned to me with a look of some confusion.

“I think he’s trying to force his way past the guards,” he said, shocked. “He’s screaming to be let through, and the border staff are tellin’ him to get back, or they’ll arrest him. Everybody’s yelling.”

“Are you serious? I can’t believe he’s so persistent...” I said. “Well, it’s up to the border staff to keep him out, so we should let them do their jobs. We shouldn’t get involved.”

Kon agreed, nodding deeply, then started toward the orchard, bobbing a little as he walked.

Being able to hear voices on the phone was one thing, but hearing the commotion at the border from all the way out here... The gate was over two miles away, even though it was a straight road with few obstacles that would block the sound. If there was a really, really loud noise, I might be able to hear it, but forget about human voices—let alone being able to pick out *individual words*. I wasn’t even sure if a high-end super-directional microphone could do that.

Yet another amazing demonstration of beastfolk abilities. I looked at Kon with a renewed sense of respect and set off after him. Glancing back at me, I think he must’ve noticed the look of awe on my face. He grinned and started walking with large, confident strides, swinging his arms high with each step. He was very

pleased with himself, strutting along like that.

When we were almost there, Kon seemed to suddenly remember something. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his name badge, which he attached to his chest. *Now* he was ready to face the workday.

Everyone else was already at the orchard when we arrived, so Kon rushed over to join the others in line. Techī counted them and gave them their daily warnings about safety and thoroughness as usual, and then the work began.

The sky was slightly cloudy today and a light, chill breeze was blowing. Perhaps due to their fur coats, the children didn't seem to mind, and they quickly climbed their trees and set about their work. I sat on my usual bench, watching the children busy themselves. I decided I should tell Techī everything that'd happened that morning, from the smoking preparations to the phone call and the struggle at the gate.

"...I see," she said, propping her chin up with her hands. "You can skip the meat pickling story next time, but thanks for keeping me updated about the other two."

"N-Now hang on a second," I sputtered, "the meat pickling is just as important, maybe more so! I'm smoking this boar for *your* benefit, Miss Techī. So please come round to my place and enjoy some when it's done, five days from now. If you like alcohol, beer goes well with smoked food... Say...do you even drink? Can beastfolk drink alcohol? I guess there was plenty of alcohol at the supermarket. What's the drinking age here? Is it the same as in Japan?"

"Sure, we drink. Beastfolk can drink," Techī replied. "But only adults. Young beastfolk are only allowed to start drinking when their bodies have fully grown out of their animal form. Letting young people get drunk while they still have an animal body would be a disaster. Combining that kind of strength or agility with booze is a really bad idea."

"I see. So that's how it is," I said. "I thought it might be health-related, but that's also a very good reason... Well, in that case, you definitely have to come! I'll pick up some delicious beer for us, maybe some Ebisu-sama!"

Techī's ears suddenly twitched at my outburst, standing on end. I think it was actually a sign of embarrassment—it was followed by her cheeks turning red.

She sharply turned her face away a moment later.

“...I don’t know why you’re getting so excited over a couple of beers,” she huffed. “Why are you going to all this effort anyway? If you wanted to make smoked meat, you could just eat it on your own.”

“I could...” I replied, “but I wanted to find a way to spark your enthusiasm for preserved foods. Besides, think of it this way. It’s not just preserved food; take something like cookies or dinner or whatever. When you make something delicious, don’t you want to share it with other people? Doesn’t everyone feel that way?

“There’s nothing wrong with cooking for yourself; that’s very enjoyable too. But when you share your food—when you share that joy—don’t you think the food tastes better? I enjoy it ten times more! So, I thought, Miss Tech, since we’re coworkers, we should share some of that food and some of that joy, especially as we’re out here together every day.

“Great-Grandpa preserved more food than he could ever eat in one lifetime. You can bet he did it because he wanted to share it with other people.”

At the time of the flood, I’m sure Gramps wasn’t thinking about making himself feel better. He just wanted to help a little in whatever way he could. But when things calmed down a bit, and people started telling him how delicious his preserves had been, how they made the situation feel a little brighter...when word got back to him about how much it’d helped, he must’ve been over the moon.

Well, that’s my guess anyway—I wasn’t there to see it. By that point, the summer break was over, and I’d already gone back home. But I have no doubt that’s how people reacted, and it must have made Gramps very happy. I too wanted to experience that feeling, even if it was just a shadow of what he got to enjoy.

Making the preparations for smoking the meat, buying the beer—this minimal effort was a small price to pay for the thrill of sharing a meal with somebody else. I was really hoping I could introduce Tech to a new, delicious food and generally show her a good time. That’d make me very happy indeed.

When I was done with my sentimental tirade, Tech still wouldn’t look at me.

“If you insist, then I’ll join you,” she said in a quiet voice...with the smallest hint of excitement.



THE next five days passed quite uneventfully. No phone calls, no disturbances, and no unexpected visits from that man. Eventually, Monday rolled around again.

I was awakened by my alarm clock, and I headed for the kitchen to finish preparations for the boar meat I planned to smoke. I took the meat out of the refrigerator and placed it in a bowl that I’d left in the kitchen sink. When I turned the faucet, the gentle stream of water flowed directly over the meat. This would gradually desalinate it.

The purpose of desalination is to reduce the saltiness of previously cured meat. If I were to use this cut of boar as it was, it’d taste unpleasantly salty. Opinions on how long you should desalinate vary a lot. Some people say one hour’s plenty, others prefer five, and others still will not settle for anything less than eight. Some people also think it’s fine to use still water. Personally, I’m in the eight-hour camp, and I always use running water.

That said, I don’t like to use too much—you *do* have to pay for it after all—so I use a very gentle stream—barely a trickle. When you use so little water but leave it running for a long time, you can still get good results.

After that was set up, I ate my breakfast, got ready for the day...and once again, Kon showed up.

“Mornin’, Mikura!” said Kon, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

“Morning, Kon!” I replied, showing him to a floor cushion I’d prepared in the living room. I turned on the TV and entrusted him with the remote control. “I’ll be spending most of the day cleaning and tidying, which isn’t much fun to watch, so just make yourself at home. I’ll make us some lunch around noon.”

Kon grinned and nodded. I gradually cleaned the house and got it into a state to receive guests. I’d already purchased the beer. You can’t really serve smoked meat on its own, so I also picked up some snacks and other ingredients to round out the meal, so cleaning was the only big chore left to do.

I opened all the windows, vacuumed the whole house, and quickly wiped down all the surfaces. I also cleaned the toilet and bath, and while I was in there, I gave the washstand a quick clean as well.

I'd been at it for a while when the doorbell rang, and I went to the entryway to see who it was. It was the old gentleman from last week: the one who worked for the delivery company.

"Good day," said the old man, smiling just as before. "I've got a delivery for you. Should I bring it through here, or would you prefer I put it on the veranda?"

I think he said exactly the same thing last week, word for word... I also repeated my response from last week and asked him to leave it on the veranda. He swiftly piled up the cardboard boxes with the movements of a man half his age. When all the documents had been signed, he took them from me, smiling. He looked at me, his smile fading ever so slightly, his voice taking on a little gravity.

"I heard recently that some man's been hassling the staff at the gate. Well, no doubt they contacted you about it, too..." he said. "Apparently, that man's become very quiet all of a sudden, not making any more trouble. Only a few days ago, he had the guards on edge, reaching for their weapons whenever he approached. Now he seems like a completely different person. It's very strange.

"Don't think that the man's lost interest in this side of the border, though. He shows up at the gate almost every day and just loiters there aimlessly. Nobody knows what he's thinking. The gate staff have no idea what to make of it.

"It's such a strange situation that there's even been talk among the border guards of getting a court order against him before he has the chance to do anything brash... Well, I somehow doubt he'd be able to make it onto this side, but it may be best for everyone to stay on their guard...just in case."

I gave the old man a polite smile. "I see. Thank you for going out of your way to let me know."

There were plenty of other things I would've liked to ask. *Why do you know all this? Why are you making a point to tell me about it?* There were still so many unanswered questions. But I couldn't be sure that this man wasn't a wolf in

sheep's clothing. I didn't want to give too much away, so I played dumb and pretended I didn't understand, rather than risk playing into his hands.

He didn't seem dangerous at a glance, though. He didn't seem to be hiding any malicious intent, and his actions also seemed to show genuine concern for my well-being.

I peered down at Kon, who was standing at my feet with a relaxed expression on his face. As a beastchild, Kon's ears, eyes, and sense of smell were all extremely acute and he had excellent instincts in general. If he was relaxed in this situation, I doubted we were in any immediate danger. I decided to trust Kon's gut.

Seeing that I didn't completely distrust him, the old man gave me a fresh smile and bid me farewell with a simple "See you next week." Then he got into his delivery van and drove back toward the gate.

Kon and I unpacked the packages and put away their contents, just as we had last week. We were breaking down the cardboard boxes when I realized that it was already noon.

"Kon, it's time for lunch. Is there anything in particular you'd like to eat?"

Kon continued to bounce up and down on a folded cardboard box as we spoke.

"What do *you* want to eat, Mikura? What can you make?"

"I can cook most things," I told him. "Nothing too involved, though—we want something that's quick to prepare. What's good for lunch... Egg fried rice, yakisoba, omelette and rice, Napolitan spaghetti, pizza toast...any of that sound good to you?"

Kon stopped jumping. His eyes went completely round.

"Omelette with rice? Napolitan spaghetti? Pizza?! Mikura, that's amazing! You're like a restaurant!"

He whirled his arms and tail around with excitement.

There was nothing difficult on that list—they were all simple recipes where you could roughly eyeball the seasoning and they'd still taste great. Yet judging

by Kon's reaction, he seemed to think of them as fine dining that you could only enjoy at a restaurant. They were all kid favorites—that's why I'd listed them—but I didn't expect this kind of reaction. Perhaps his parents didn't cook much at home? Or maybe they preferred Japanese food?

Kon was still flailing around, apparently unable to stay still while thinking through his choices. Finally, he stopped waving his arms and opened his eyes. He balled up his paws into little fists. He'd made up his mind.

"Pizza toast!" he shouted.

He went straight for the simplest recipe. I would've asked for something fancier in his shoes.

I've never seen anyone get so excited about pizza toast before. What a kid.

"Pizza toast, coming right up," I said and headed into the kitchen. I washed my hands thoroughly and put on my apron.

The basic ingredients for pizza toast are onion, bell pepper, bacon, cheese, and, of course, bread for the base. Ketchup is a popular option for seasoning. When cutting up the ingredients, you want them thin enough so that they'll easily cook all the way through but large enough so that they're still satisfying to bite into.

Spread the ketchup onto the bread slices, add your toppings, and sprinkle everything with cheese. Place the bread in the toaster oven on a layer of aluminum foil.

Kon suddenly appeared beside me, clutching a bread plate. He must've taken it down from one of the shelves when I wasn't looking. He seated himself comfortably in front of the toaster oven, peering in through the glass door to keep a watchful eye on the toast as it cooked.

"I don't know if this is true or not, but I've heard that the red light from the heating elements in a toaster oven is bad for your eyes," I warned him, "so don't stare too long, okay?"

"Okaaay," said Kon.

He sat there a full five minutes until the cheese had all melted and was

sizzling, the bread was crispy, and the delicious pizza aroma was wafting through the kitchen. As soon as I approached the toaster oven, he thrust his plate out with both hands. I opened the door, dragged out the aluminum foil by one corner, and transferred the pizza toast to Kon's plate. He raised the plate high above his head, drooling slightly as he rushed it to the living room table.



“THAT pizza toast was soooooooo tasty... The way the cheese and ketchup melted was amazing,” said Kon absentmindedly.

It'd been hours since lunchtime—in fact, it was almost evening—but Kon was still thinking about his pizza toast. It must've made quite the impression.

Kon was lazing around on the living room floor. He'd grabbed one of the thinner floor cushions and wrapped it around his body, turning himself into an oversized sushi roll. Now he was rolling this way and that, his face blissfully relaxed. I couldn't help but grin as I watched him.

It was about time to get started on the final preparations, so I got up and returned to the kitchen. The sushi roll followed me, rolling all the way to the kitchen doorway before speaking.

“What are you doing?” asked Kon. “Are you makin' dinner?”

“No...have you forgotten?” I responded. “We're eating smoked boar tonight. It's time to smoke the meat. I've been desalinating it all day; most of the salt should be washed out by now.”

I removed the meat from the bowl in the sink and dried it thoroughly with a wad of kitchen paper. Then I tore off some fresh sheets to carefully wrap up the meat. In the meantime, Kon shed his protective cushion and came into the kitchen to join me. He lightly kicked off of several drawer handles to make it up onto the countertop and sat on his little chair in his usual spot.

“Oh yeah, I 'member now...” he said. “I've never had smoked meat before. Is it yummy?”

“Of course it is,” I replied. “I love it, personally. To get the very best results, it's better to take time to dry the meat thoroughly, but I'm sure you want to get down to eating as much as I do right now. So, we'll just give it a quick smoke

and be done with it.”

I’d been rubbing the meat through the kitchen paper to dry it as much as I could. I removed and discarded the damp kitchen paper, took a moment to wash my hands, and started setting up the earthenware stovetop smoker.

Place the smoker on the stovetop, removing the lid and the food rack. Insert the cherry woodchips into the bottom compartment, then replace the wire rack. Carefully arrange the meat on the rack and turn on the burner, leaving the lid off the smoker for now. Keep on high heat until the wood starts to give off smoke.

“Oooh, it’s making a weird smell!” said Kon excitedly. “It’s like a burning tree...but not in a bad way. It smells kinda nice.”

Kon came right up to the edge of the stove, poking his nose out and sniffing away. I still couldn’t smell a thing, but it seemed that young Kon’s powerful sense of smell was already picking up the gentlest aroma of woodchips. After a while, the woodchips started giving off white smoke.

“Now that there’s smoke,” I said, “it’s time to replace the lid and turn down the heat. That said, these cuts of boar are larger than store-bought meat, so I’m going to keep the heat slightly higher than usual. After heating it for around ten, twenty minutes, take the smoker off the heat and wrap it in aluminum foil or a thick dishcloth so that it doesn’t cool down—the smoking process will continue as long as everything remains warm. After that, we’re done!

“Exactly how long you should heat the smoker and how long you should keep it wrapped up depends on what you’re smoking. In this case, I’m going to have to rely on my own limited experience and the timings I’ve seen on recipe websites.”

As I was explaining all this and loading up the smoker, I could hear Kon sniffing the air the whole time. He seemed to be quite taken with the aroma of the cherry woodchips. I suppose that, as Kon and all the other chipmunks are very much tree people, living deep in this dense forest and working closely with the trees every day, it made sense that they’d enjoy this woody aroma.

My one concern was that they might not appreciate a smell that might make them think of a forest fire. But it was different enough from a regular burning

tree smell—much more aromatic and appetizing—that it seems my concerns were unwarranted. Kon certainly wasn't bothered by it.

In any case, once enough time had passed, I returned the foil-wrapped smoker back to the stovetop and slowly opened the lid, revealing the meat. It was beautifully browned, with a brightly glistening surface. It looked deliciously enticing, and Kon's earlier sniffing sounds were replaced by an almost catlike purr of anticipation.

"Looks good, doesn't it?" I said to him. "Some people let the meat sit a while so that the aromas can settle deep into the meat, but I prefer to eat it fresh out of the smoker. If you leave the meat, it gradually loses moisture, which makes it shrink and harden somewhat. But I find that makes it lose some of its... meatiness. Well, sometimes I'll still do that—let it sit to fix the aromas, that is. Then you can fry the meat to release all those amazing smells again. It's pretty great."

I wasn't sure if Kon was listening to what I was saying, but his mouth was watering so much that he had to swallow several times during my explanation. I began to worry that he might leap straight onto the slab of smoked meat, and I thought it might be best to slice it up right away. At that moment, the guest of honor arrived.

"...You can smell that from a mile away," said Techī. "I guess you're done smoking then. Huh...this is my first time seeing meat fresh from the smoker, but it looks a lot like chashu pork, doesn't it? Very appetizing."

Concluding that we'd be starting right away, Techī headed straight for the bathroom without waiting for me to reply. In the time it took me to transfer the meat to a chopping board with a pair of tongs, Techī had already washed her hands, returned to the kitchen, and grabbed the beer and some chilled glasses from the refrigerator. She carried everything to the living room and arranged it on the low table.

"Kon, are you okay with milk?" she asked. "I don't know how well it goes with smoked meat...but you're just a kid, so you don't have much choice."

Techī poured a glass of milk for Kon, who was still sitting on the countertop, looking like he might burst from anticipation at any moment. She then picked

him up in her arms and carried him and his milk to the living room. She plonked him down on a floor cushion at the table, presumably so he'd be out of the way while we set the table.

I proceeded to cut the smoked boar meat into bite-sized pieces, carefully checking to see if they were cooked all the way through. When I was satisfied, I arranged them on a large serving plate.

If your smoked meat fails to cook all the way through—if you're worried it might be a little too pink for safety—you can always finish it in a frying pan. Frying it will not diminish the taste at all, and some people even claim it strengthens the flavors and aroma. You can improvise with this step, too—add some light seasoning to the pan or fry an egg alongside the meat until everything is slightly crispy.

As I'd smoked the meat on a somewhat higher heat than usual, there was no need for any kind of touch-ups. However, if the meat had been a little too pink, I would've preferred to play it safe to make sure none of us came to regret it later.

Finally, once everything had been plated up, there was one final important step. I filled the earthenware smoking pot with water before leaving it in the sink. As the smoking process causes excess fat to melt off the meat, it all pools at the bottom and mixes with the smoldering woodchips. If you leave that to cool down and solidify, it becomes an absolute nightmare to clean. So remember: if you fail to prepare, prepare to scrub.

The rest of the cleanup could wait until later. Now the fun could begin.

I took the plate with the smoked meat to the living room, where Tech and Kon were impatiently brandishing their chopsticks as I approached. No sooner had the plate touched the table than their chopsticks were already moving toward it.

They both popped a piece of that lean, aromatic meat into their mouths at the same time...and both of their expressions started to change simultaneously.

Now, that was to be expected. It was freshly cooked meat and that brings a great deal of joy to a great number of people. But it seems that the additional cherry aroma took this to a whole new level for this pair of tree-loving

beastfolk. I'd yet to see a look like that on either of their faces. It was a look of deep satisfaction and pleasure, but somehow more than a smile.

Clearly, they were enjoying something truly exquisite: something that perfectly aligned with their tastes and their palate. They both sat there and chewed away in silence, swallowed the meat, reached out for their drinks—beer for Tech, milk for Kon—and completely drained their glasses in one go.

I was still standing at this point, so I sat down and joined them. I picked up my own chopsticks, selected a piece of smoked boar, and popped it into my mouth. The cherry aroma and the fragrance of the meat lit up my senses. The remaining fat was deliciously sweet, while the meat itself was perfectly done. You could even taste a hint of the underlying umami of the dashi stock and the other flavors from the pickling liquid as they played on the tongue.



It was too good to wash down with beer, too good to cover up with rice. I simply let the taste fill my mouth, chewing thoroughly as I enjoyed the flavor. Finally, I gulped it down greedily and let out a satisfied gasp.

“...That turned out even better than I’d hoped,” I found myself saying, without intending to. “I’m so glad.”



THE plate with the smoked meat had been picked clean and we’d drunk a fair amount of beer (and milk). It’d been a decadent meal of many delights. Now, the three of us were sitting around, shouting and laughing as we watched TV. I suddenly became aware that it was completely dark outside.

“Wow, it’s getting late,” I said. “Shouldn’t we start thinking about getting Kon back home?”

Hearing this, Techι looked at the clock on the dresser. “Yeah, it’s about that time...” she murmured.

Kon wasn’t happy to hear that and he wanted us to know it. He puffed up his cheeks in that way only chipmunks can. But his parents would be worried about him by now, and that wouldn’t do.

Since it was already totally dark, Techι and I decided to walk him home together. As we were getting up to go, Kon’s ears suddenly twitched. He dashed out onto the veranda, his little feet scurrying across the floor, and stood there, ears on end.

“...What? Why? H-How?!” he chattered, nervous and confused. Something was happening and he didn’t have any idea what to make of it.

Techι, on the other hand, clocked on immediately. She was on her feet right away, ran out to the veranda, and hopped down onto the ground. She crouched down, reached underneath the veranda...and pulled out a pole. I had no idea when she’d hidden it there.

She reached in again and grabbed a shorter one for Kon...and finally one for me. She placed them on the wooden floorboards and Kon picked his up without a word, gripping it tightly. I followed them both to the veranda and picked up

my own weapon.

As it was deemed a good idea all around for me get some exercise and learn a little self-defense, Techii and Kon had both given me a few lessons in how to fight with a staff. I had plenty of free time and quiet gaps in my day, after all. I nervously gripped the pole as I'd been taught. I looked to Kon.

Kon was staring into the darkness, in the direction of the gate, ears bolt upright. "Any minute now," he whispered.

What, exactly, is going to happen any minute now?

I considered the possibilities. An animal attack didn't seem likely—surely any wild beast would come from the forest, like the boar, and not from the gate. If it wasn't an animal...then it had to be human. But who on earth would show up at this hour, without any kind of advance notice?

Kon and I stood guard on the veranda while Techii firmly tied up her boots. Then she went out to stand guard ahead of us, in the garden. We waited for a short eternity, without saying a word to each other...

A middle-aged man wearing a jacket and carrying a flashlight came into view, immediately followed by a group of around ten other rough-looking men. It seems that he was in charge. I addressed the middle-aged man before he had a chance to speak.

"Mr. Seika Satoira, I presume."

I didn't expect to remember his name, but it floated up when I needed it.

This man was one of the two chestnut traders my great-grandpa had sold to. He was cheap to the point of dishonesty, had tried several plans to kidnap beastfolk children, and could safely be described as an all-around, good-for-nothing scumbag.

The man was pleasantly surprised and grinned at me.

"Yeah, the one and only," he said, his voice gravelly from heavy drinking. "I'm flattered you recognize me. That'll speed things up."

Why the hell would you think I recognize you? I replied in my own head. *Who else would show up on my doorstep like this in the middle of the night?*

It was a mystery to me how he'd managed to cross the border, although I shouldn't be too surprised that this man would find a way.

"You know, it doesn't matter how tight security is. It's always possible to reach some sort of...*arrangement*," he sneered.

I hadn't asked, but he'd smugly volunteered the information anyway. Apparently, he'd bribed the border guards. I was a little ticked off that our well-salaried public servants could be bought off like that. But I tried not to show it and did my best to maintain my business face. I brought out my salaryman smile for backup as I considered what to say next.

But Satoira didn't wait for me to speak. He'd been eagerly awaiting this opportunity, so, seeing victory within his grasp, he pushed on, almost fervent in his speech.

"Well, since we all know each other, we can get right down to business. Would you mind signing this contract for me?" said Satoira, feigning professional politeness.

He reached into the satchel he was carrying, took out a thick stack of papers, and took a few steps toward me. Seeing this, Techii, who was already pointing her staff at him, made an intensified show of force. Her menacing presence was overwhelming. She was out for blood.

Of course, Satoira noticed this. He flinched but didn't stop moving and continued walking toward me, closer and closer. I watched him approach and examined his fake smile. There was something impatient, even anxious about it. I wondered why.

So he greased someone's palm to sneak through the gate...but with such a massive group, that might still attract attention. If other staff started asking the corrupt officials questions, their cover could be blown very quickly. When that happened, you could bet that the Japan Self-Defense Forces would be on them like a ton of bricks.

Besides, this was beastfolk territory. These guys had no way of knowing if and when they might run into local beastfolk, and if they did, they could be damn sure that no bribe would be large enough. No wonder Satoira was in a hurry to wrap everything up.

“I’m sorry,” I replied, “but I must decline. Your company clearly has a poor idea of protocol and compliance. I cannot possibly do business under such circumstances.”

I lowered my pole, putting one end on the ground and leaning the other against my shoulder. I waved him away dismissively with one hand, hoping to rile him up. In the meantime, I discreetly snuck the other hand into my pocket to unlock my phone. Then, with a series of motions that were second nature by now, I opened up the recent call list, chose the most recent number, and tapped the dial button.

At least, I hoped that’s what I tapped—you can never be sure where you’ll end up when you’re not looking at the touch screen. Still, in this situation, trying seemed better than doing nothing. I just needed to alert the gate staff to the situation up here. I prayed that whoever picked up the phone wouldn’t be the same person who had taken the bribe...

I took a deep breath. Whatever I said, it had to be loud to make sure it could be heard at the other end of the line.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” I shouted. “You show up in the middle of the night, with no appointment! You bring a band of thugs with you, and you demand I sign a contract? Where did you learn how to do business?”

“Even if you could get me to sign that phonebook of yours, I could lodge a complaint with any courthouse in the country and get this dismissed for being signed under coercion. That thing’s null and void before I even put pen to paper! What do you hope to achieve here? You’re playing a losing game! You must realize that!”

You must remember that this outlandish speech was for the benefit of the border official who I sincerely hoped was listening on the other side of the phone. I was very much making this plan up as I went along. I was almost at my wits’ end...but somehow, I was able to string a logical-sounding argument together. It soon set things in motion.

The first to react was Tech. She grinned at me, baring her teeth in a way that unmistakably said *Way to tell off the bastard!* To be perfectly honest, the look in her eyes scared me a little. Tech then fixed her murderous gaze back on

Satoira and continued to stare him down with even greater intensity.

Next was Kon, who seemed to look up at me with some new level of respect, his eyes twinkling as brightly as I'd ever seen them.

Satoira was last...and what a reaction it was.

He fell for my provocation hook, line, and sinker. His face went completely red, and he was grinding his teeth with a visible fury.

Unbelievable! I wasn't expecting him to fly off the handle so easily.

I'd barely stated a few facts. This man had been in business for years. Surely, he must've heard far worse before? Any businessman worth his salt has to endure a constant stream of rejection and a great many blunt, abusive words. You have to keep your cool in the negotiating room. How could any professional have this little resilience?

As I thought these things, I maintained that façade of outer calm that'd been drilled into me at work—my loyal, tired, ever-present companion, the classic salaryman smile. I smiled that inoffensive, noncommittal smile as I racked my brains for what to say next.

Satoira was not happy.

“Wipe that grin off your face, you smug bastard! You tryin’ to pick a fight with me?!”

His face was no longer red. Even in the dim light coming from the living room behind us, it was perfectly clear that he'd gone a deep shade of purple. What was going on in his head? I couldn't understand why he was getting so riled up.

Even during my first year at the company as a naïve graduate, I somehow had more patience and perseverance than this man. I'd been dressed down countless times; shouted at by superiors, put through the wringer by clients. Sometimes their choice of words was very colorful indeed, but I was always able to let them wash over me and get on with my job. So why was this man so quick to anger?

I had experience with a wide range of business troubles, but this was a first. Back in the corporate world, I'd never seen this kind of ham-fisted approach—

the lack of negotiation, the implied threat of violence, the complete lack of respect. It was, quite frankly, barbaric.

I couldn't begin to understand it and I had no idea what to do. I had no strategy—I was purely in reactive mode...and as I tried to come up with something, anything, that I could do, Satoira started barking out instructions to his lackeys. Some of them started running toward us.

Oh no... It looked like the violence was no longer just a threat. Was he really going to do this? Did he really think he'd leave here with a signed contract? Did he really expect to casually pick up his chestnuts at harvest time after this display? Satoira had completely lost sight of what he came here to do, and I was in shock at how the situation had escalated.

Then there was a flurry of motion.

Techi leaped forward with an incredible speed and fury toward one of the oncoming thugs, smashing her pole hard against his arm. A disturbing cracking sound echoed through the clearing, followed by a loud scream.

“AaaaAAAAHHH!”

Despite the danger of the situation, I found myself wondering if that could legally be considered self-defense...they were caught in the act of trespassing and were on the hook for some even more serious offenses, so...maybe it'd be okay in court?

...What the hell am I thinking about at a time like this?

As I looked on in a total daze, Techि swung her pole again, with the kind of fluid and powerful movements you'd expect to see in a kung fu movie. She spun the staff around, slammed it against another of Satoira's men, then swept it in a low arc to trip a third man off his feet. Blow after blow, she dealt with the thugs one by one.

I didn't know if it was because of her beastfolk abilities or if this was just Techि being Techि, but her onslaught was ferocious, while her movements remained beautiful and elegant. All I could do was watch in dumb amazement while Kon stood at my side, his short staff raised, ready to defend me if it came down to it.

I snapped out of my dazed state and berated myself for gaping at the scene in

front of me like a slack-jawed fool, but there wasn't much I could do. I was just an office worker, after all. I was a fish out of water, flopping around a dry riverbed. I was used to doing battle with words and documents, which left me ill-equipped for this conflict.

What happened to the pen being mightier than the sword?

Yes, Mikura. Very clever.

My stupid internal monologue continued unabated as Techii continued to strike the men again and again...but there were so many opponents. Her breathing was becoming more ragged. Techii could put a lot of power behind that pole of hers, but she was trying not to kill anyone. A blow to the head with that thing was too risky, so she was unable to knock anyone out...and so her opponents kept getting back up.

She was in trouble. *She could actually lose...*

I readied my pole, gripping it tightly, and took one shaky step forward. I'd no idea what I could do in this situation, but I had to do something. I took another step. Kon moved forward too, as if to encourage me. We stood there, ready to make our charge. We were about to leap off the veranda and join the fray, when suddenly...

"Hey! Kurikara! Sorry we're late!" boomed a deep voice.

The voice hadn't come from the garden, nor from the road leading back to the gate...but from the pitch-black forest behind it.

Who...?

Everyone but Kon and Techii was suddenly very uneasy. A large, looming figure appeared at the edge of the dark forest. It was a man. He was almost seven feet tall, very muscular, and he wore a black tracksuit with a single white line running down each side. From the pair of strangely adorable bear ears on top of his head, it seemed safe to assume he was a beastman. He stepped out of the trees, grinning from ear to ear, followed by a whole band of other bear-like beastfolk.

They carried no weapons, but they didn't exactly need them. These folks were absolutely stacked with muscle. Moreover, they had what must've been

teenagers in their group, because some of them still had bear paws instead of human hands—complete with very sharp-looking claws.



All of Satoira's men recoiled at once. None of them were very interested in fighting Techī anymore. This was no doubt their first time seeing beastfolk of this kind, and not only were they dwarfed in terms of body size, the gang now found itself outnumbered as well.

They'd no fight left in them. They looked, unsurprisingly, as if they'd just met an angry bear in the woods and reacted as best they could. Some of them played dead, some made a mad dash for the gate, while others collapsed on the ground, losing all the strength in their legs.

The bearfolk responded in kind. The fleeing thugs were effortlessly pursued by bears who sprinted with the speed and elegance of Olympic athletes. Those who were playing dead were grabbed by the head and lifted up into the air. And those whose legs had failed them were in for a very nasty shock too—as they sat on the ground, the bears pounded the ground between their legs so hard that it crumbled.

Satoira, the mastermind of this nasty mess, couldn't take the heat. Amid this terrifying display, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed on the ground, unconscious.



WITH Satoira's thugs rounded up and safely subdued, it would've been nice if that had been the end of the story. Unfortunately, the whole incident caused us quite a lot of trouble after that.

I contacted the border staff again after the incident, who descended into a complete panic when I told them about the bribe and the raid. Their panic only increased when they were told the perpetrators had been apprehended by the beastfolk. Terrified that the whole matter could become a diplomatic incident, the border officials decided that they didn't have the necessary authority and would need to contact their superiors—which, given the time, proved to be very difficult.

Before long, a group from the JSDF turned up to collect our unwelcome visitors. Some of them were wearing hazmat equipment, presumably so they could be rushed over the border without a medical examination. However, when they tried to take away Satoira and his gang, they were stopped by the

bearfolk, who refused to hand them over.

They demanded an official apology through the proper channels before they'd release the culprits. The leader of the JSDF detachment told them that he couldn't just call up his superior and ask the government to issue an apology, but the bearfolk wouldn't budge.

Eventually, they managed to get a politician on the phone—a big household name that you'd often see in the newspapers. I was stunned—official apologies never went this far up the political food chain. *Maybe they just managed to find someone else with the same first and last name? This incident must have really set off some alarm bells.* In any case, once the apology had been made and accepted, the conversation turned to another matter.

Satoria and his men hadn't undergone the necessary medical examinations before crossing the border. For the safety of all parties, anyone who'd been in contact with them would have to undergo a period of quarantine. As the offending group had quite literally had the snot beaten out of them, along with no shortage of blood, sweat, and tears, there was a small but very real risk of disease transmission from the outside world.

As a result, Tech, Kon, the bearfolk, and I could not be allowed to leave just yet. This was understandable for us adults, but the bears were furious about the fact that young Kon would be prevented from returning home to his parents. The politician on the other end of the line offered further profuse apologies and, eventually, they somehow managed to talk the bears down. I imagine it'd be a lot like trying to talk a grizzly bear down when it's keen on charging you down...



WHEN they finally let us go, the sun was coming up.

We'd been prodded and probed and examined by medical staff all night, and we were now required to spend one week self-isolating at home while we waited for all the test results to come back. The Japanese government had instructed us not to leave the house, and it'd been recommended that we let somebody else handle business for us during this time—in our case, we were able to leave everything to Rei and the rest of the children.

However, as we were outside Japanese jurisdiction, none of that could be enforced, so the officials had politely asked—almost begged us, in fact—to exercise restraint and not meet with anyone outside our original group. They made the same request of the bearfolk, who were going to spend the next week living in tents pitched near the border gate. In this way, the authorities hoped to resolve things in a safe and controlled manner.

As the situation would significantly inconvenience Techī and her family, Kon and his family, and all the bearfolk and their families, the Japanese government was providing them all with special compensation to make amends for the fact that they'd be separated for a week. It was the one silver lining to this whole incident.

It may be worth mentioning that I was also being paid standard business closure compensation for my week off work, although it was a very paltry sum compared to what the beastfolk were getting. *I suppose I should be grateful that I'm getting anything at all.*

Sorting out everything had taken pretty much all night so, when we got home in the morning, I quickly prepared a room and bedding for Techī and Kon. We spent much of that day sleeping and relaxing, trying to recover from the all-nighter. For the next week, we'd be living under one roof as a trio—it almost felt like an extension of our shared dinner.



“MIKURA, breakfast with you is the best! There's so much food to choose from! At my house, it's always rice and miso soup!”

It was already two days after the incident by the time we were all fully rested and ready to resume normal life. Kon was thrilled about our eating arrangements this morning—it looked like I was right about his parents only eating Japanese food. We had egg sandwiches, vegetable soup, mixed nut salad, and fruit yogurt, among other things. A whole range of exotic foods covered the living room table.

“Yes, well, the government kind of went all out with the food supplies,” I told Kon. “We've got plenty of time to cook, so I guess we'll be eating like kings right to the end of our quarantine. Oh, we can also call the gate staff if we have any

special requests, so if there's anything in particular you want to eat, just let me know."

Kon closed both eyes and grinned at this good news. He clapped his hands together in an exaggerated motion.

"Thank you for the food!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Techi and I followed suit, giving thanks for the meal, and proceeded to enjoy our breakfast while casually watching some program or other on the television. When everyone was done, the three of us gave thanks for the meal in one coordinated chorus.

After breakfast, we cleaned up all the food and tableware, brushed our teeth, and got ourselves ready for the day. Once all those regular routine tasks were out of the way, we made some tea and coffee and settled down in the living room for a little post-meal relaxation.

After we'd had our feet up for a while, Techi raised a completely new subject.

"...What's going to happen with that Satoira guy?" she asked. "He's going to be punished, right?"

"Yes," I said, recalling a phone call I'd received yesterday. "Based on your testimony about his previous attempts to target young beastfolk, they're going to charge him as a..." I chose my next words carefully, aware that Kon was listening. "...degenerate."

"...What? Are you serious?"

"I spoke to that politician's secretary, and she said that's the story they'll be drip-feeding to the press. It seems that the whole bribery aspect is a very thorny issue that they'd prefer not to make public. Instead, they're claiming that a long-running group of perverts and other degenerates managed to destroy a section of the border wall next to the gate by crashing a car into it and were thus able to enter the Wilds. Something absurd like that—they're being vague about the details.

"As for the border official who took the bribe, they are being dealt with very severely, I've been told. As for Satoira's gang, they'll all be serving time in prison. And it doesn't matter what they say or what excuses they make,

everyone will think they're predatory deviants—both inside the prison and after they're released... Their lives are sure to become much harder with a label like that on their record. The person I spoke to on the phone was very adamant about that."

Techi gazed through the veranda and out at the garden for a while. Then she let out a little sigh.

"I missed my chance to give them a really good beating," she muttered, "but maybe we can leave it at that."

From her expression, it looked as if some small weight had been lifted from her shoulders, and seeing Techi like that, I also let out a sigh of relief. Kon, who was drinking his barley tea, simply closed his eyes and smiled. He didn't understand what we were talking about. But he could tell by our faces and body language that some kind of tension was finally gone, and he was happy for it.

After that, we returned to the deep pleasure of letting time slowly pass us by.

Shortly before lunch, Kon's little ears pricked up, and his expression was suddenly very alert...but a moment later, it softened.

"Ah, it's a bear person," he said. Apparently, we had visitors.

"Heeey! Human! You got a minute?" boomed a voice from outside.

A middle-aged man wearing a tracksuit appeared in the garden outside the veranda. He was the largest and seemingly the oldest of the other day's group of bearfolk. A hint of stubble adorned his chin. Neither Techi nor Kon were alarmed by his presence. But apparently, he'd no business with them, only with me. I couldn't imagine why, and I stared at him blankly for a moment. Then I got up and headed out to join him on the veranda.

"Um...sure," I said. "Can I help you with something?"

The bear ears atop the man's head twitched, and he started sniffing the air loudly as he continued.

"The other night, you guys were eating some kinda delicious meat, weren't you?" said the bear man. "It had the most amazing smell. Not that we could tell while everything was going down, but when things calmed down, and we were

all standing around waiting for the humans to arrive, we noticed a *beautiful* smell lingering in the air. And to tell you the truth, we can't stop thinking about it!

"The humans from the border had the good sense to bring us quality meats and wild salmon and honey, which all went down very well of course. But we're still real curious about the smell from that evening. D'ya think we could try some of that stuff? Whatever it was."

"Oh...you must mean the smoked meat," I replied. "If you want to try some, I could make some more for you... The only problem is, it takes five days to prepare. No, make that six...it'd take another whole day to get the ingredients delivered. Our week of self-isolation will be over by then, won't it? Well, I'm happy to get started on that for you, but you could always request some smoked meat from the gate staff. That might be a good alternative—it won't be homemade, but some of the store-bought stuff is really good too."

The beastman's eyes went completely round with disbelief.

"*THAT* was smoked meat?" he boomed.

He went on to explain that in the old days, before they could easily get their hands on human refrigerators and such, it was very common for bearfolk to smoke fresh meat in order to preserve it. But by the sound of it, they used a very different smoking method, and since the main goal was long-term storage, little attention was paid to fragrance and flavor.

Once refrigeration was introduced, it was easy to store fresh meat that could then easily be fried or roasted, so they stopped smoking meat altogether. To the bearfolk, it'd simply become an irrelevant piece of culinary history.

Whenever smoked meat was shown or mentioned on a TV show, the elder bears who remembered eating it in their youth would scoff and complain about its hard texture and unpleasant taste. The younger generations knew better than to question their elders, so the idea that the captivating smell might have been smoked meat hadn't even crossed their minds.

Well, even out in Japan, the only people who ate smoked meat were, for the most part, those who actually smoked meat as a hobby. If you weren't familiar with its taste and smell, I guess it'd be difficult to guess what it was.

“In that case, we’ll put in an order for some smoked meat with the folks at the gate!” said the bear man. “Thanks for the tip! Either way though, we still wanna try your handiwork as well, so get your stuff ready too! That good with you?”

With his business concluded, the man trudged off back in the direction of the tents with long, whomping steps. As I watched him go, I turned to look at my two housemates.

Kon was waving his arms overhead, thrilled that he’d get to eat smoked meat again. Techī, on the other hand, put on an air of nonchalance. It seemed to say, with surprising specificity, *I suppose I can lend you a hand, if there’s more smoked meat in it for me*. The three of us sat down to discuss what kind of smoked meat we’d like to make this time around.



THIS batch of smoked meat was mainly for the bearfolk, so we decided to use the same vegetable pickling liquid as before for the base flavor, with no herbs. The bears had been captivated by the smell of the previous batch, and that’s what they were expecting, so it wouldn’t do to change things up by adding any strange herbs or other new ingredients.

There was no good boar meat left by this point, but if we called the border staff, we could get them to send us some regular pork belly, which would do nicely. The same went for the vegetable pickling liquid we needed.

“...That’s what I was thinking anyway,” I said.

I was explaining the plan to our new bear friend, who I had since found out was called Také. When Techī, Kon and I were sitting around relaxing after our lunch (Napolitan spaghetti, to be exact), he once again appeared in the garden. When I told him about the pork belly, he just smiled. His stubble seemed to have grown thicker in the few hours since we’d last seen him. He held up a large, black plastic bag and tried to hand it to me. It looked suspiciously like a garbage bag. When he opened it, it was full of meat.

“Nah, that’s no good! You’re new to the neighborhood—it’d be a disgrace if we saddled you with the bill for all that meat. Instead, we went out and found a boar of our own to save you the trouble. It’s just been butchered, so the meat’s fresh as can be. Oh, and we made sure to give you the belly—the human I spoke

to said that's the best part of the boar for smoking!

"...What's with the funny look. Is it the bag? Well, that was the only thing we could find that was big enough. Don't worry, buddy, we made sure to use a clean one!"

A sparkly-eyed Kon stood at my feet while Techī made a show of disinterest, sitting at the living room table and sipping her tea. I carefully took the heavy, meat-filled bag from Také.

"Well, thank you for putting it in a bag, at least..." I said. "This boar must've been as big as the one Miss Techī took down. Yes, this should be enough to feed everyone."

"Hm? No, no, that's the meat from two boars, not one," replied Také. "We hunted down one at first. But after we butchered it, we decided one wouldn't be enough, so we went out again and found another. The humans gave us plenty of advice while we were butchering them too, so it should all be very safe. Y'know, hygiene and all that. That's some quality meat, so we leave the rest to you. I look forward to seeing what you make of it in five days."

I was more than a little shocked that anyone could find, hunt down, and butcher two boars in the space of a few hours. I excused myself briefly to put the boar meat in the warehouse refrigerator.

If it was butchered quickly and it was going to be smoked, it was unlikely anyone would get food poisoning, but he was right to pay extra attention to hygiene, especially as people would be eating it. That meant it was important to get it into the refrigerator as quickly as possible. I stashed everything away, just as Techī and I had done last time, disposed of the garbage bag, and washed my hands thoroughly before returning to Také and the others.

"Thank you for waiting," I told him. "Now, as I said, the preparations will take five days...but I've nowhere near enough seasoning or ziplock bags to deal with that much meat."

I'd plenty of woodchips left and, as long as we did everything in small batches, washing out and drying the meat smoker between each batch, it shouldn't be a problem to smoke all that meat—although it'd take some time. But I had only purchased a small amount of vegetable pickling liquid, and that'd definitely not

be enough.

“I’ll have to place an order with the gate staff before I can begin,” I went on, “so it’ll probably be six days before—”

“Yeah, you did say that earlier,” said Také, raising his hand and stopping me mid-sentence. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his smartphone, and pushed it into my hand. “So before I came back here, I had a talk with the humans. If we call them right away, they said they can get us anything sold in a regular supermarket within one to two hours. So, with that lil’ head start, y’think you can turn it around in five days?”

“I gotta be honest with you, me and my buddies are looking forward to this so much. Some of ’em are already sitting around, beer cans in hand, drinking and making merry. We’ll manage five days—we can keep things jolly for that long—but I don’t think they can wait a day longer. I’m sure it’ll be a lot of work, but do you think you can do it?”

I took his phone and selected the most recently called number, as instructed. Most likely, it belonged to some JSDF officer who was permanently stationed at the border gate. I tapped the call button and my call was answered almost immediately.

“Good afternoon. What do you wish to order?” said the person on the other end. They spoke briskly, with a lot of authority.

Shaking my head in disbelief at the whole situation, I rattled off our order. I asked for more pickling liquid and ziplock bags than I thought we’d need to make sure we didn’t run out, as well as some Ebisu-sama beers and some other bits and pieces. I thought we might as well make the most of the opportunity—while we were smoking the boar meat for Také and his group, we could sneak our own batch of meat in and enjoy a second smoked meat party of our own.

The person on the other end didn’t skip a beat, despite the size of the order. “Understood. We’ll have that with you shortly,” they said tersely and hung up the phone.

“That’s a big order!” exclaimed Také.

“Yes,” I said, giving him my good ol’ salaryman smile. “Since you and your

companions are making merry, I thought that the three of us could enjoy our own little celebration here as well. Do you mind if we use part of the boar to make a little smoked meat for ourselves as well?”

“Sure thing, buddy, that’s no problem at all,” said Také. “Just make sure you leave some for the rest of us, yeah?”

“Oh, one last thing,” I remembered. “Last time I used cherry woodchips, but there are many other options. What do you think? The aroma of the meat will change, although it’ll still be delicate—unlike when using a herb mixture. The fundamental experience stays very much the same, though—it’ll be just as delicious. As I said, what you smelled before was cherry wood. I also have apple, which smells just as you’d expect, and walnut, which gives a nutty aroma. Walnut is an especially good pairing for beer. Well? Would you like me to prepare a range of flavors for you?”

“Hmmm...” thought Také. “That all sounds mighty appetizing...but let’s stick to the plan for now. We’re all itching for that aroma from the other day, so let’s keep it to what my buddies asked for—their bellies are ready and waiting for that one thing, so I don’t wanna disappoint them. We’ll find another chance to try your full range of flavors, I’m sure.”

“Of course, that makes sense,” I said. “In that case, I’ll only use the cherry wood. I’ll get right to work on the preparations as soon as all the supplies arrive. If you come back in five days’ time at around six o’clock in the evening, I’ll have that all ready for you.”

“Great stuff! Thanks a lot, buddy,” boomed Také, grinning from ear to ear. Then he headed back toward the gate with long, heavy strides.

I let out a small sigh as I watched him go. Kon was once again bouncing around with excitement at the prospect of more smoked boar while Techii was poking around on her phone, apparently to find out what side dishes went well with smoked meat, judging by the page she was scrolling through.

It’d be a busy couple of days, I thought, and I found myself reflexively trying to hold back a big smile. First things first, I needed to cut up all that meat into smokable pieces. I went outside and headed back to the warehouse.



“MY goodness,” I said, half to myself, half to Kon. “I’m so glad they were able to get us more of this pre-mixed pickling liquid. Trying to make this much from scratch would have been a Herculean task...”

I’d finished the preparations, and all the meat was separated out into individual ziplock bags full of pickling liquid, which I had left in the warehouse refrigerator. I’d returned to the kitchen and was taking a little breather, while Kon sat in his usual spot on the countertop.

“Are you okay?” he asked, sounding genuinely concerned. “You look tired. Maybe I can help somehow? Shall I make dinner for everyone? I can make dinner...as long as it’s instant noodles.”

I smiled at him and opened the refrigerator.

“Thanks, little guy,” I said, “but you don’t have to worry. We still have this...” I reached into the fridge and took out the tray of boar pancetta we had made together. “We’ll cook up a simple pasta dish with our pancetta and serve it with the leftover salad from this morning’s breakfast.”

The pancetta had dried out and hardened slightly over the last week. As the water content gradually evaporates and the meat shrinks, the flavors get more concentrated—especially the umami taste. I placed the tray on the countertop with a *thunk*. Kon looked up at me, down at the pancetta, then up at me again.

“I forgot all *about* this stuff!” he shouted, shutting his eyes tightly and grinning.

“It’s matured nicely, so it’s about time we started using it,” I said. “Today, I’m going to use it to make a carbonara. It’s very easy to cook—you’ll watch me make it once and you’ll never forget the recipe.”

I quickly prepared the ingredients and started cooking.

Boil the pasta. While the pasta is cooking, prepare the sauce by mixing fresh cream with grated parmesan cheese. Cut up the pancetta into largish pieces—you want them to have a little bite to them. No need to go overboard with quantity either—if you have a lot of pancetta, store the rest in the fridge for another day.

Heat up a frying pan over low heat and add the pancetta. Slowly fry until the

excess fat has melted and soak it up with a piece of kitchen paper. Pour the cream sauce into the frying pan with the pancetta and simmer for a short while. Then add the drained pasta and stir thoroughly. Once the pasta and the sauce are well mixed, add your egg yolks and stir everything again. Plate up the pasta and top with black pepper and some freshly grated parmesan.

“So much cheeeese!” cried Kon as he ran out of the kitchen and into the living room.

Techi must’ve realized we were almost done, because she’d cleared the low table and wiped it down neatly. While I was serving the pasta, she took the salad and milk out of the refrigerator, prepared a salad dressing, and fetched cups for everybody.

When everything was ready, we all sat down at the living room table, put our hands together to give thanks for the meal, and proceeded to start winding spaghetti onto our forks.

I moved a neatly wound mouthful to my lips... *Good*. I was pleased with the flavor that spread through my tastebuds.

The cream, cheese, and egg yolks were well balanced—the whole sauce was rich, full of flavor, and coated the pasta well. After my first mouthful of pasta, I picked up a piece of pancetta and bit into it. The strong, herby aroma and the concentrated umami came through right away—the seasoning had been well chosen and the remaining salt tingled pleasantly on the tongue.

Thanks to the desalination process and the generous coating of fresh cream, the salt level felt just right. Once the initial salty hit had passed, the sweetness of the fat came through, and that was simply heavenly. It made me want to grab another piece right away.

“This is so good!” said Kon, barely able to tear himself away from the food. “Both the pasta *and* the meat!”

He immediately went back to his next forkful. As for Tech...it might’ve been a little rude of me to think this, but I was surprised to see how elegantly she ate her spaghetti. She had the perfect technique and would’ve been quite at home in an Italian restaurant. Tech gave a small nod and her expression softened ever so slightly.

“...I’ve never thought much of pasta,” she said, “but this is actually good... These strong herbs are not at all out of place... They’d work well with the smoked meat too, wouldn’t they?”

“Yes, they would...” I agreed, nodding. “I guess it’s a matter of taste, but if you’re using herbs, you do want to carefully balance them with the aroma of the woodchips. The reason I used so many herbs for the pancetta was to cover up any potential boar smell...but the final result turned out rather good. When you’re using high-quality pork with no boar smell, you can get away with using just salt and no herbs. But I find that using all these herbs gives it a kind of rustic feel—I thought it might be a good combination with a Western dish like pasta.”

“I see,” said Tech. “If you’re keeping things Western, are you going to use the rest of the pancetta to make more pasta?”

“Not at all,” I replied. “If we eat nothing but pasta, we’ll get bored of it very quickly. I was thinking pot-au-feu or a bean soup... Lemon sautéed vegetables would go well with it too. And we can always drop the Western theme—I’m sure it’d be really good in egg fried rice.”

“*Hmm*, I see you’ve thought this through,” said Tech. “...Well, with a slab that size, I guess you’ve plenty to experiment with. You won’t run out for a while. How long does pancetta like that last, though?”

“I did desalinate it, and it’s not going to dry out much more than this, so I don’t think it’ll keep for very long,” I replied. “If I really cared about preserving it, I’d have to make it incredibly salty and dry it out until it was stiff. Basically, you have to sacrifice flavor. You have to remember that I’m still an amateur, so while I am looking to start making things with a long shelf life, this was meant to be eaten rather quickly. That’s why I wouldn’t say this was something I preserved, as such. Rather, that I simply used a few techniques to enhance the taste.

“The same thing goes for smoked meats, really... But these are just the first steps. Going forward, I’ll be making long-lasting foods as well. There’ll be plenty of time, so there’s no need to rush things.”

So far in my endeavors, fruit jam was just about the only thing I’d made with any significant shelf life. Of course, that involved using airtight jars, carefully

boiling and sterilizing everything, and a ton of sugar to keep bacteria from growing.

When I pictured the handful of jam jars in my little apartment refrigerator and compared that to Great-Grandpa's warehouse, where the shelves were lined with row after row of different foods, it reminded me that I was still just starting out. These were only my very first steps into this exciting new world.

As the seasons moved from spring, through the rainy season, and on to the summer, a wealth of different produce would come onto the market—or perhaps I should say, into the supermarket. I planned to use a wide range of ingredients as I tried out various techniques for long-term preservation and continued to learn the craft. In a way, this year would be my apprenticeship. Everything up until now had just been a taster course.

I would fill up that warehouse again.

While I was lost in these daydreams, Kon had slurped up the last of his carbonara, finished his salad, and gulped down his milk.

“That tasted amazing!” he said loudly, beaming from ear to ear with both eyes screwed up tightly. I wondered if he really meant it, but he showed the most genuine smiles.

There was more to all this than just filling the warehouse. I wanted to introduce Kon to a whole range of new foods and keep him smiling in that joyful way of his. I realized that his simple but earnest compliments meant just as much to me as anything else. I wanted to give him plenty of good opportunities to share them.

While I was watching Kon, Techī was carefully observing me. This time, instead of her customary sigh, she simply said “Hm,” and allowed a tiny smirk to float across her lips.

“He's right,” said Techī, her tiny smirk turning into a warm smile. “It *was* delicious. I'm curious to see what you cook up next.”

An Evening for Two

LATER that night, I crawled into my futon filled with a deep feeling of satisfaction—the carbonara had come out great and I was very pleased with myself. But for some reason, I couldn't fall asleep. I shut my eyes and tried some deep breathing exercises, but no matter what, I just couldn't drift off. I lay there under the covers in quiet agony.

I wanted to be well-rested for tomorrow, but the harder I tried to fall asleep, the more awake I felt. I wasn't resting—I was merely lying down. In the end, I gave up on trying to get to sleep, sighed, and crawled back out of my futon. If I got up and did something, perhaps I'd grow tired enough to fall asleep.

It might also help to distract me from that particular feeling of helplessness that'll be very familiar to anyone who's ever suffered a sleepless night. I tried to make as little noise as possible as I got to my feet, opened the door to my bedroom, and snuck through the house toward the kitchen.

I made it without bumping into too many things in the dark, and once I was there, I finally turned on the light—it was far enough away from the guest room that Tech and Kon were sleeping in that any noise I made shouldn't wake anyone up. I gave the refrigerator door a good, hard tug.

The classic cure for a sleepless night such as this is a glass of warm milk, with an optional dribble of honey. It slowly warms the body and helps you relax. After that, I'd brush my teeth and do a few gentle stretches to tire myself out. I'd be asleep in no time...I hoped.

I got to work. I grabbed the milk out of the fridge, poured a single serving into a mug, and sweetened it with a little honey. Then I put the mug into the microwave and pressed the on button. I didn't want to just stand around while it was heating up, so I started doing some stretches to pass the time. Placing my feet closely together, I raised both arms over my head to stretch out my spine. As I did, I saw Tech standing in the doorway to the kitchen in her pajamas.

“What on earth are you doing?” she asked coldly.

“I...I’m stretching,” I said, flustered, my arms still overhead. “I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d make myself some hot milk. I’m waiting for it to heat...up...”

Techi shook her head and casually took a seat at the table in the middle of the kitchen. I slowly lowered my arms and took a deep breath to try and shake off my feeling of embarrassment.

“What’re you doing up so late, Miss Techy?” I asked her.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she replied simply.

I nodded in acknowledgment of our shared plight, just as the microwave timer went off. I opened the microwave door, took out the steaming mug of milk, and placed it on the table in front of Techy. Then I set about preparing a second one for myself.

She picked up the mug without a word and began sipping the hot drink. Once the microwave had heated up the second mug, I brought it over to the table and sat down facing her. She stared at me for a while through narrowed eyes before speaking. Her voice was uncharacteristically low.

“So...you still haven’t tried to make a move on me, huh?” she said. “I thought men were supposed to be uncontrolled horndogs who thought about little else. *Especially* when they’re living under the same roof as a young woman.”

I was about to take a sip of my drink and almost spilled it all over the table. *What an absurdly sudden change of topic!* By some miracle, I managed to keep all the milk inside the mug, steadying it with both hands as the ripples lapped against the rim.

What was this woman trying to say? Did she have something in mind? I tried once again to take a sip of my milk, this time bracing myself against any unexpected shocks.

“No,” I replied. “Men are *not* all uncontrollable horndogs. If you’re not dating someone, you don’t just go and pounce on them... We’re in quite an unusual situation because of the raid and quarantine. I’ve not been thinking about... whatever it is you *think* I’ve been thinking about...”

“How could I continue living in Great-Grandpa’s house, or look Kon in the eye, if I abused a situation like this? They’re planning to charge that guy Satoira as a sexual predator; I don’t want to end up as his cellmate.

“Even if I *thought* a woman wanted me to make a move, I’d talk to her about my feelings and about becoming a couple first... That’s how it’s usually done, and that’s how I’d do it.”

I waited to see how Techii would react, but she simply murmured “Hmm...” before taking another sip of her hot milk. Her gaze wandered through to the living room before she continued.

“That’s how you’d do it, eh? And just how many times *have* you done that? How many people have you gone out with? How did those relationships work out? Did you go on a lot of dates, out there in the human world?”

“Wh-What? I...what?!” I was completely taken by surprise yet again. “What’s *with* you today? What exactly are you getting at? Those are some very personal questions!”

Techii continued to peer into the living room, her gaze drawn to the blank TV screen... But her voice had the tiniest hint of excitement—it was lively, curious, eager. She never talked like this normally.

“No, I mean...” she said, trying to plot out her train of thought. “The kind of relationships between men and women that you see on TV—you know, going out and all that... We don’t really *have* that here. Since you’re a human from beyond the border, I thought you’d have been in a range of relationships like that. Haven’t you?”

She was still looking at the television set, rather than talking directly to me... and I finally understood what on Earth she was talking about.

Techii watched a lot of TV. She was probably *really* into romantic dramas.

To us humans living in the outside world, those were everyday, unremarkable caricatures of romance. They were nothing to get all that excited about. But to Techii and the other beastfolk, they were a window into an entirely different world, telling stories that revolved around an entirely different system of values.

They could *only* peer at that world through their television screens. Visiting in person so they could experience it for themselves was beyond their wildest dreams. As someone who came from that world, Techii seemed to think that I'd lived through the kind of weird and wonderful love stories that were so popular in romantic dramas.

Did she really believe in those fantasies? Now that she had a flesh and blood resident of that strange world sitting in front of her, she could ask her own questions, as if taking her own first steps into that world. What bizarre and surprising stories from my life—what twisted and exciting tales, devoid of common sense—might I have to tell? She certainly seemed caught up in the idea—she was almost giddy with anticipation at what I might say.

It was clear now. She wasn't making advances or flirting with me. She wanted a small taste of the outside world, that fantastical world of romantic adventure from the stories she liked so much.

Now that I'd finally realized all this, I wasn't sure how to proceed. Should I frankly answer all her questions...or would it be better to refuse? Needless to say, love in the outside world was nothing like TV.

Those all-consuming, life-changing, teenage romances were the most outlandish of fantasies. Most real love stories were ordinary and unexciting when viewed from the outside; nothing that could be put on TV. That televised world didn't really exist on either side of the border.

But Techii had her own dreamy image of the outside world, some yearning for that fantasy. Was it right to shatter that with boring truths about my life?

I wrestled with the question but struggled to make up my mind... In the end, I let out a small sigh and settled on simply telling the truth. I proceeded to tell her various things about my younger days—my time at high school and my college years. That included honest stories of my failures too—failures borne out of my own youthful misapprehensions about love and relationships...

I told her about the girl I'd gone out with just to say I was dating someone. To this day, I *still* don't know whether I really liked her or not. Talk about a pathetic story of young love... In the end, this "girlfriend" and I were unable to close the distance between us—the most we ever did was hold hands. It wasn't long

before we broke up.

That put me off relationships for a while. I stopped actively pursuing them, choosing to focus my energies on my studies and job hunting instead. Once I started working, I started socializing more. I went to mixers and such, and I met all sorts of people, but I didn't stay in touch with them—I never met anyone I really clicked with. And not long after that, I wound up in this forest.

I told the full story, hopeless as it was, without any lies, exaggerations, or omissions. But what felt pitiful to me seemed captivating to Techii. She enjoyed its mundane twists and turns, and her eyes glimmered with a gentle excitement as she commented and asked questions.

"I see!" Techii said enthusiastically. "So *that's* what a mixer is like? I've seen them before in manga and such, but they're shown so differently than what you described! Tell me about dates at the amusement park! That's a classic date spot, right? What're they really like? Is going up on a Ferris wheel as exciting as it sounds?"

It was the first time I'd seen her like this, full of excitement and emotion. It felt like something I wouldn't get to see any other time or in any other place—a rare and precious moment, a show of hidden charm. I basked in the look of thrilled curiosity that lit up her face. Not wanting it to disappear too soon, I continued to answer any and all questions she asked, frankly and honestly.



Side Story: Kon the Gamer

IT was a quiet afternoon with very little going on. I'd already finished all the morning housework and made lunch. Kon and I were sitting in the living room with the TV on in the background, only half paying attention.

A commercial came on and suddenly, Kon was transfixed. He watched it with intense focus, his gaze both excited and filled with longing. I thought he was going to get sucked right into the screen. The commercial was for a popular video game system, and Kon seemed almost beside himself with the desire to get his hands on one. When the commercial was over, he let out a small gasp of a sigh.

"Do you like video games, Kon?" I asked, tilting my head.

Kon's ears perked up and his tail stood at attention.

"Yeah, I do!" he shouted back.

"Really? I've never seen you playing any, though," I noted. "Not even once."

With that observation, the young chipmunk's perky ears and tail wilted into a dejected droop.

"I like them, but I don't get to play much..." he said, rather crestfallen. "Mommy hates video games... I'm not allowed to have any at home, and Mommy's always grouchy when I go and play them at a friend's house. ...And since our paws are really small, we can't hold controllers very well. Even if I could buy my own game system, I won't be able to until I'm all grown up. It's the same for a lot of my friends.

"Parents are always sayin' games are bad for your health 'n' make you lazy and stupid...but Ken has a system, and he's really smart and full of energy..."

Kon flopped down on the tatami mat floor, bemoaning the clear contradiction illustrated by his friend. I watched him roll back and forth as he tried to vent his frustration. After a little thought, I slowly got up, went to my bedroom, and dug

out my old work bag.

This satchel had been my daily companion back at my old job and was filled with a variety of equipment I used for work. Not only that, but hidden among all the office supplies, there were also a few items that helped me pass the time during long journeys on public transport and the bullet train. Among these was a portable video game system with a large built-in touch screen display—the very same one that’d just been shown on TV.

I powered it on to check the remaining battery life. There was definitely enough juice left to play some games. I took the system back to the living room with me and casually sat back down on my cushion, holding the device as if I were about to start playing so that Kon would definitely notice.

When he did, he totally lost his mind. He was up on his feet in a flash, his arms quivering as he waved them around.

“What? WHAAAT?” he yelled. “Mikura, you have *that* console?! And it’s the newest one! Not even *Ken* has that one! H-How many games have you got? Do you buy cartridges or downloads? Did you get all the big games? I... I... Can I...”

Kon was in a complete verbal spiral.

“Can I play too?!” he finally managed to blurt out. “Please, Mikura! Please, please, please!”

Kon rushed over to me and climbed up onto my knees, where he could see the screen of the device I was holding. Then he started alternately looking up into my face and back down at the screen. The little guy was just about ready to explode.

Seeing him so excited, I laughed despite myself and selected a game that could be played with just the touchscreen—that way, his small paws wouldn’t pose a problem. Once the game had loaded up, I surrendered the console to Kon.

“Now listen,” I said. “I don’t want any trouble from your mom, so we can’t have you playing games all day long. You have to keep up your good work at the orchard. Make sure you keep helping out at home. You definitely mustn’t neglect your studies... And *please*, make sure you spend some of your time

playing outside as well...

“In short, if you can prove to me that the grown-ups are wrong, that video games *aren't* going to make you lazy and stupid, then I can lend you my game system from time to time. How does that sound? Do we have a deal?”

Kon looked me right in the eye, dead serious, and nodded vigorously. Then he scrunched up his eyes and beamed at me before shouting again at the top of his little lungs.

“Thank you, Mikura!”

Afterword

HELLO everyone! This is the author, Fuurou. I mainly write web novels and post them on the Internet.

So You Want to Live the Slow Life? A Guide to Life in the Beastly Wilds began as one such web novel, but I was given the wonderful opportunity to publish it as a light novel. This edition contains edited chapters from the original online version, as well as some brand new content.

I wrote this story because I wanted to explore what my ideal “slow life” might look like. I actually preserve food myself as a hobby (I absolutely love it), so I wanted to include that too. All the recipes I describe in the book are things I’ve actually made at least once in real life. I prepare my smoked meats the same way that Mikura does. Even the stovetop smoker that appears in the story is the same one I use at home.

The house where the story is set is also based on a house at which I spent my summers as a child, but that house belonged to my great-grandma. To tell you the truth, it wasn’t as deep in the forest as Mikura’s; in fact, it wasn’t very far from the sea. My great-grandma ran a vegetable shop, so the layout of the house was also different to accommodate that. But I kept her home firmly in mind when I was writing and did my best to try and capture the same atmosphere.

After my great-grandma passed away, the house went too. Now it exists only in my memories. But those are very clear and distinct. In writing this book, I wanted to offer my readers some small taste of my time there.

The main character Mikura, on the other hand, bears no resemblance to me whatsoever. He’s a very upstanding young man and a good guy all around. I’m sure he’ll get into all sorts of interesting situations as things move forward. If you enjoyed his story even a little, I honestly couldn’t be happier. I’ll be working hard on future chapters so that you can all continue enjoying the story as it progresses.

I sincerely hope we meet again, and with any luck, I'll get the chance to share a few more of my thoughts with you in the afterword of a future volume.

That's all from me for now.

Fuurou — Spring 2021



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