

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

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VOLUME
1



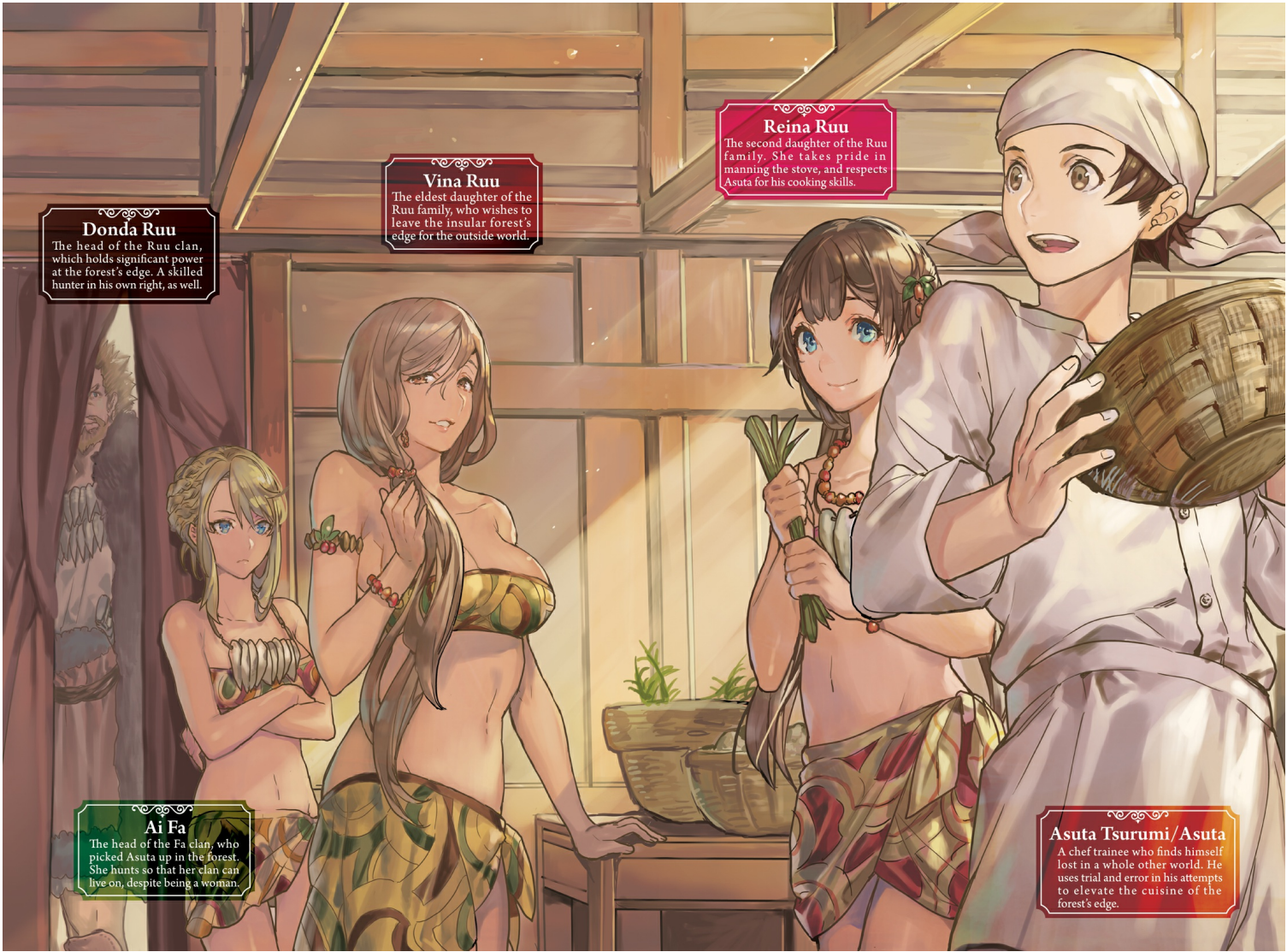


"Now then, just who are you?"

The shining, savage blade remained
pressed up against the tip of my nose.

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Donda Ruu

The head of the Ruu clan, which holds significant power at the forest's edge. A skilled hunter in his own right, as well.

Vina Ruu

The eldest daughter of the Ruu family, who wishes to leave the insular forest's edge for the outside world.

Reina Ruu

The second daughter of the Ruu family. She takes pride in manning the stove, and respects Asuta for his cooking skills.

Ai Fa

The head of the Fa clan, who picked Asuta up in the forest. She hunts so that her clan can live on, despite being a woman.

Asuta Tsurumi/Asuta

A chef trainee who finds himself lost in a whole other world. He uses trial and error in his attempts to elevate the cuisine of the forest's edge.

**"This must be that thing
they call, 'delicious.'"**

Her pink lips seemed to be having
a bit of trouble forming words.



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Prologue

As I came to, I found myself sprawled out on the ground in an unfamiliar forest.

“Huh...?”

I sat up and took in my surroundings, still in a daze.

Yup, that’s a forest. I was right in the middle of some forest I’d never seen before in my life.

Well, I was born and raised in a shopping district, so I guess there was no such thing as a forest I *had* seen, though. Plus, I couldn’t imagine this sort of jungle existing anywhere in Japan, anyway.

I could see a huge, oddly twisted tree. There were large palm leaves and flowers that sure looked poisonous. An utterly alien bird cry rang out from somewhere nearby. And the foliage above my head was so thick that I couldn’t even see the sky.

Just where the heck am I?

Then, I looked down at my body, which was half-buried in the verdant underbrush. I was in my chef’s uniform, complete with white apron and shoes. The black “Tsurumi Restaurant” logo was emblazoned on my chest. Finally, there was a white towel wrapped around my head, completing my usual ensemble.

What was I doing sleeping in a place like this, dressed up in this outfit?

At any rate, I sat there cross-legged and tried to think back on what had happened before I lost consciousness.

Just when I went to move, though, my hand brushed against something. It was the feeling of hard, smooth, processed wood. I pulled it out from beneath the underbrush, and found it was a single all-purpose kitchen knife in a white magnolia sheath. The ebony grip showed plenty of use, and the blade was 20

centimeters long.

I knew exactly what this was without even needing to remove it from its sheath. This was the knife that my old man valued more than life itself, which came from the famed old Sakaki cutlery shop in Kyoto.

The second I saw it, I remembered everything.



My name is Asuta Tsurumi. My family name uses the “tsu” from the Tsugaru Strait, and the kanji for “stop” and “look.” The Asuta, meanwhile, is written like “getting fat tomorrow.” I’m 17 years old, in my second year of public high school. I’m 170 centimeters tall, and weigh 58 kilos, so no, I’m not especially fat. And I wasn’t actually born in Tsugaru, but rather Chiba in the Kanto region.

My family runs the Tsurumi Restaurant, an eatery that does pretty darn well for itself. Or, well, at least it did, until those guys started prowling around a month back.

Apparently, the building next door was getting remodeled into some sort of amusement complex or something, so the new owner came over asking us to sell our land. Officially, he wanted to build a parking lot for his new place. It seemed the real reason, though, was that they were going to have a food court in the park, and having a popular eatery next door might have drawn away their customers.

Naturally there was no reason for us to accept such a one-sided demand, so pops politely refused. It seemed we were up against a worse scoundrel than we thought, though. That building’s new owner was apparently the sort of man to have seized ownership of the place through shady means.

And so, around when the remodeling of that building started, we came under fire from some underhanded harassment. We had someone spray paint “poison” on our shop’s shutters, and people calling us but not saying a word, and we even got a dead cat thrown in front of the place... Really, it was all tried-and-true old-school harassment. The only thing they did that felt up-to-date was spread unfounded rumors online about our shop giving people food poisoning.

Of course, our regulars paid this no heed, coming out every bit as often as ever. That said, though, we saw a dramatic drop in new customers and college kids on their way back from school and the like, which had a definite effect on our sales numbers. It really made me feel the power and reach of the internet to a frustrating degree.

My pops, however, just laughed it off, saying, “I just feel bad for anyone who believes that nonsense and misses out on a chance to eat my cooking!”

It wasn’t much longer before he couldn’t just laugh about it, though.

To me, it felt like just a few hours prior.

Pops left the evening’s preparations to me and went to go stock up on supplies, only to be hit by a small truck along the way and get rushed to the hospital. I hurried to go see him as soon as I got that notice, not even stopping to change out of my uniform.

When I saw pops in the hospital bed, he shot me back a hearty smile.

Even though he had a grin on his face, he had compound fractures in both legs. Bandages were wrapped all around his arms and his head, with red spots here and there all over. He *had* been hit head-on by a truck going at a speed of about 80 kilometers per hour, after all. The attending physician had a look of amazement on his face and said that it was a miracle that he was still alive.

After hitting pops, the truck just kept on going and sped off. There had been a number of witnesses, but the license plates had been removed and the driver was wearing a ski mask and sunglasses to hide his appearance.

It was clearly a deliberate, expertly handled attack. But even so, pops just kept on smiling.

Well, you’d need a dump truck or something to finish off this old man of mine.

“So, how long till I’m discharged?”

The attending physician looked exceedingly troubled, faced with his widely smiling, bedridden, seriously wounded patient.

“No, you see, before we can discuss anything like that, first we’ll need to

examine your brain waves, and then we'll need to perform surgery on your legs..."

"Right. So, how long till I'm out?"

"At this point, I can't really say... After all, you have compound fractures in both legs, and we don't know how many months of rehabilitation you'll need..."

"I see. Well, I'll leave all that up to you, Doc, but I've got a shop to run. I don't care if it needs to be in a wheelchair or whatever, but please discharge me as soon as you can. If I have to leave things to this oaf, my shop'll be ruined."

Naturally, "this oaf" referred to me.

Well, it's true that my old man would keep on wielding that knife of his until he died, even if he had to use crutches or a wheelchair. I couldn't help but smile, too, thinking about it.

It was then that I got a call from my childhood friend, Reina.

Her panicked screams came through. *"Asuta! Your restaurant is on fire!"*

The smile was wiped from my old man's face for the first time when I conveyed that to him.

"Asuta, my knife! That's the one thing I can't lose!"

I flew out of the hospital, heading back home in even more of a rush than I'd been in on the way there.

My dad valued that Sakaki knife more than life itself. He would always yell about how a true chef could satisfy a customer no matter where they were, regardless of the ingredients and tools on hand. "But this is the one thing I just can't let out of my grasp," he'd add, clutching that precious knife from the famed cutlery shop in Kyoto.

That was the one thing he couldn't stand to lose. No matter how much he was harassed, even after getting hit by a truck and breaking both legs, and even having his shop burned down, my pops would stand firm. But if he lost that knife, that would be the final straw that breaks him.

And so I ran, as fast as I could.

By the time I arrived at the shop, there were already dozens of onlookers staring at the spectacle, and the fire engine had gotten to work. But the restaurant was still cloaked in flames, and black smoke was billowing up into the summer sky. There was probably no preventing it all burning down to the ground at this point, no matter how much water they poured on. It was just burning too fiercely, like something out of a nightmare.

“Asuta-chan...”

Reina had been standing there dumbfounded, but when she noticed I was there she clung to me with tears in her eyes.

I grabbed her slender shoulders, gave a single nod... and then dove into the roaring flames.

Chapter 1: The Worst Dinner Imaginable

1

And so, that brings us back to the present.

I shook free from Reina and the firefighters and dove into the crimson blaze, so what exactly was I doing laying here like an idiot in some forest I'd never even seen before?

I had pushed my way through the roaring sea of flames and managed to make it all the way to the kitchen. Then I hastily grabbed my old man's knife, but in that instant, the building collapsed with a tremendous cacophony of noise. I should've been crushed flat then, scorched by the flames and smoke as I held the knife tightly.

And yet, I couldn't find a single burn or even so much as a scorch mark on my body. And on top of that I was holding my old man's knife, which should've burned up along with me.

"I... guess this really is the afterlife, huh?"

I gave my cheek a pinch to check, and sure enough, it hurt.

Guess that makes sense. Whether this is the afterlife or whatever, it was at least clear that this was no dream or hallucination.

The smell of grass in the air was so strong it felt almost stifling. There was a humid, lukewarm breeze blowing. I could feel the sweat rolling down my cheek.

The knife's white magnolia sheath felt smooth to the touch.

There's no way this was some dream or hallucination...

"So then I really did die...?!" I yelled out to no one in particular, then collapsed back to the ground.

Well, guess it's no surprise that I died. I mean, I went and dove into that sea of flames, so I suppose that's the natural result.

Still, a fact remained that I couldn't just turn a blind eye towards: The whole reason I had gone and done something so idiotic in the first place was because I didn't want to see that hopeless expression on my old man's face. But there was no point if I didn't just lose the knife, but my life on top of it!

10 years ago he lost his wife to illness. Now he lost his shop, and his son, and even his precious Sakaki knife... So just what did he have left to live for?

I clutched the knife in its sheath tight with both hands, squeezed my eyes shut, and ground my teeth. If I didn't do all that, I would have collapsed into an ugly, sobbing heap.

I'm sure Reina must be crying about now, too...

We'd grown up together like we were siblings, but now I'd never see her or the only family I had left, my old man, ever again. Just like my dad, I'd lost anything and everything.

What was even the point of my life...?

Just as that painful question flashed to mind, I heard a rustling from the nearby brush. This was followed by the unmistakable bellow of a beast. I slowly looked in that direction, still laying on my side. On the other side of the brush, in the dim darkness, two burning red glints shone back at me.

What's that...? Is it some sort of demon or devil?

This place looked like a southern paradise, but maybe it was actually hell rather than heaven...

The animosity in those eyes was strong enough that I couldn't help but think so.

Come on, give me a break... I didn't do anything that bad back when I was alive, did I?

I got up nice and slow, so as not to provoke whatever it was that was staring at me.

And then... it finally showed itself.

Whoa...

It was a boar. Or well, something that looked a lot like one. The thing was a four-legged beast that looked just like a boar, and must have been about 200lbs. Its hard, wire-like fur was a brown so dark it almost looked black, and its hair stood up running from its head down its back like a mohawk. Its legs were short, but its thighs were quite thick. It had a squashed snout, with three sets of sharp tusks jutting out. The small eyes staring at me were fixed on the sides of its face. Its large body was short, stout, and round looking.

No matter how I looked at it, it looked just like a boar. And yet, it couldn't be one... That was because there were two splendid white horns growing from its forehead, as if to form a pair with its tusks.

“Whoa...!”

When I saw it kicking off the ground with its hind legs out of the corner of my eye, I took off running as fast as I could. The boars I knew could apparently go upwards of 40 kilometers per hour, but what about this guy? And the boars I knew were omnivorous but didn't tend to go after live prey, but would that hold true here?

While pondering such questions in the back of my mind, I ran desperately as fast as I could. I ran a whole lot back when I was alive, and now I've got to do it in the afterlife, too?

Maybe I didn't have anything to fear now that I was already dead, but I'm sure getting stabbed by those horns and tusks would hurt a whole lot more than pinching my cheeks did.

"I'll be tackling a brand new dish today, Ai Fa!" I declared near sunset, only to get a muttered, "Do as you please," back from the sour-faced young woman. Perhaps my blunder from earlier in the afternoon was still having a lingering effect. Still, it was the kind of incident where I'd be sure to lose in court if she accused me of sexual harassment, so I suppose there was no helping her doubting my character a bit as a result.

"I mean, the giba soup has turned out pretty well, but if you eat the same thing every day, you'll end up getting bored of it. Look forward to a serious surprise this time around, Ai Fa."

"Do as you please."

"...By the way, I decided to go ahead and try on your father's clothes right away, but what do you think? Does it suit me?"

"It doesn't. You just look ridiculous. In fact, I wish I never loaned it to you."

Hmm... Yeah, she was being pretty deeply contrary right now.

Well, I'm sure that once I feed her something tasty, her mood will improve.

By the way, I felt uneasy in the fluttery vest with only my waist down covered, so I had on my t-shirt underneath. It may not be the proper way to wear it at all, but hopefully that can be pardoned out of consideration for my fear of getting burnt while cooking. Plus, hopefully it was acceptable that I still had a white towel wrapped around my head as per usual.

"Anyway, there's no point in hiding it any more: the poitan is already done cooking. Also, I used up a lot of firewood, but I'll try to make up for it when I'm out gathering tomorrow, so hopefully you can forgive me."

Ai Fa remained silent, her face expressionless. Eventually I realized I wasn't getting a response.

After hitting me she headed off for the forest like always, so she shouldn't have seen any of me cooking the poitan. Was she really not curious in spite of that?

“Well, whatever. It’s a little early, but should I go ahead and start cooking? If you’re not hungry yet, then go ahead and use the time to build up an appetite.”

I may have been the opposite of Ai Fa right now, being that I was in something of a manic state. I couldn’t help it, though, since I was looking forward to taking on a new dish.

Originally, the plan was to tackle yakiniku for the first time today. I also had all kinds of ideas like steam-grilling or teriyaki, too. But after I figured out what the poitan was, I put those off for later and decided to take on a special dish tonight.

Now, I have no intention of putting on airs: Tonight’s dish was going to be giba hamburgers. Or shortened, giburgers.

I headed off into the pantry while humming a tune, and then carried the necessary ingredients to the stove.

I had about 500 grams each of giba thigh and rib meat.

Six of those pseudo-onions, the aria.

Two pinches of pico leaves.

Fruit wine.

Rock salt.

And then that magical extract I got from the poitan.

There wasn’t all that much of it, so I was just storing it in a little container I had made out of one of those pseudo-rubber tree leaves.

Now then, time to get cooking!

First, I needed to cut off a bit of the roughly one centimeter thick fat clinging to the blocks of thigh meat. It was kind of a shame, but I needed it to serve in place of lard. All of the fat that came off the pelt this time had been processed to be used in the candles, so I’d have to be sure to secure at least a bit for cooking next time around.

It had already been five days since I’d prepared this meat, but it wasn’t showing any signs of going bad. It seemed that pico leaves really were a first-

rate preservative.

But apparently, despite that impressive preserving power, meat would still end up going bad by the time that 15 to 20 days had passed. If that happened, I'd have no choice but to smoke it in order to preserve it. I still had time left since it had only been five days, but there was still a mountain left to use, so I spent each day thinking about how I could best use it.

But anyway, I was cooking now.

I fired up the stove, and as the pot was heating up, I diced two ari.

Once that was done with, I moved onto the meat. I minced up both the thigh and rib meat into little bits, and then finally pounded away at them with my knife. For the first part I used the memento from Ai Fa's father, and for the back part I used the knife that was my old man's heart and soul.

It was roughly a kilo of meat, but it wasn't really all that hard to handle. Hamburgers were a popular dish at the Tsurumi Restaurant, so I was already an old hand at this kind of work.

In less than 10 minutes, I had minced giba lying before me.

I turned around to look at Ai Fa, only to find her sitting in a Buddha-like pose and staring back at me with a displeased look.

Normally she would just sit there silently, like she was showing some degree of respect for me as a cook. But she was looking rather cranky today... Didn't she have any interest at all in why I had turned the precious giba meat into this strange, pink little mound?

While holding back the unnerved feeling I had inside, I went ahead and checked the flame. When I put in a drop of water it evaporated in no time at all, so it seemed to be about right.

I added in a glob of fat, then spread it out with a wooden spatula (self-made), then threw in the minced ari. It was a bit troublesome that you couldn't move a metal pot around the way you could with a frying pan, but I didn't let that get me down and just kept on stirring with the spatula.

Once I saw them gain a certain degree of color, I added in the fruit wine.

Then, I carefully stirred it around until the alcohol evaporated. Once the green aria reached a golden brown, I scooped them out into a separate bowl using the spatula.

Back home, we kept a ratio of one fourth of an onion for every 200 grams of minced meat, so two whole aria for one kilo was a bit on the high side. But the giba meat had a fairly quirky flavor, so there was no issue with going heavy on the aria.

I couldn't move on to the next step until the cooked aria cooled down, so for now I went ahead and chopped up the rest of them. Rather than mincing these, though, I cut them into thin slices parallel to the fiber. When you want to heat them up and get them nice and soft, it was best to cut perpendicular to the fiber, but that texture was going to be important today so I changed up how I cut them.

I piled up the four aria worth of slices atop a pseudo-rubber tree leaf... If you'll allow me to speak a little selfishly, I really do wish I had a few more containers to work with.

At any rate, the aria seemed to have cooled down in the meantime. I went ahead and dumped them on top of a pseudo-rubber leaf along with the minced giba meat. Then I covered it with powdered salt and pico leaf, and finally... It was time for my magical extract to make its appearance. I went ahead and drizzled the sticky, cream-colored paste over the mountain of meat. And then I just started intently mixing it.

After a couple of minutes of kneading it, it stuck together just like I had expected.

I'd shaved the fat off of the thigh meat, but I made sure to add plenty to the rib meat, making for something that was just perfect in terms of feel and color.

I could feel the excitement tingling in my spine in anticipation of my victory.

I scraped off the meat paste that had stuck to my hands, then rubbed the leftover giba fat on them to act as a lubricant and prevent that from happening again. Then, I set about molding the meat.

Regulating the heat would be difficult if I made them too big, so I scooped out

one sixth or so of the bundle of meat, then formed it into an oval. I threw it back and forth between my hands with a *pat, pat, pat*, not forgetting to make sure I got all of the air out of it.

In the end, I had six miniburgers, around 160 grams each. They sure were cute... And they were a really beautiful pink color that just made me want to bite into them right then and there. That would have to wait, though. Now, how was the heat looking...?

Hmm. That may be just a bit high. I pulled out the firewood just a bit, which tested my nerves a tad at the same time.

Having to measure out the heat by eye while cooking was the big obstacle this time around.

First the fire would be too high, and then too low... Having to regulate all that was honestly pretty tricky. But nothing comes from nothing, so I just had to tackle this to the best of my ability. It would be a test of my flexibility and creativity. And lastly, my decisiveness.

I dropped some fat into the pot, then waited for it to get crispy and the grease to boil out, at which point I finally added the giba patties. An absolutely intoxicating smell filled the room alongside the satisfying sizzling sound.

The bottom of the pot was rounded, so I had to take care that the patties didn't all stick together as I hurriedly added them and then waited a few seconds.

If I messed up here, it would all be ruined. While paying attention to even minute changes in smell, I used the wooden spatula to check the sides that were cooking.

Did I need to weaken the flame? I'd already been regulating it for six minutes now.

Well, it was better to do that than to burn them, right? Even if a bit of the flavor dissolved, I still believed that wouldn't be enough to exhaust the giba meat's deliciousness.

After a few more seconds of waiting, they looked to be the right color, so I flipped them.

And so, I hurried on to prepare the next step and... I stepped backwards, only to run into something. At some point, Ai Fa had started peeking into the pot from behind my back.

“Gah, you scared me! You were back there, Ai Fa?!”

“Why should I have to leave my own house?”

“No, that’s not what I meant... Ah, sorry, I’ve just got something I need to prepare.”

Dodging around Ai Fa, I picked up the teapot full of fruit wine and the pseudo-rubber tree leaf bowl full of sliced aria. When I got back to the pot I put down the teapot and checked the color of the patties. They looked about 80% of the way there, so I figured it was about time.

“Ai Fa, something hot may come flying, so watch out, alright?”

I didn’t get a response back, but there was no time left for hesitating. After pouring in the fruit wine, I hurriedly put the lid on the pot.

There was a grand sizzling, crackling sound, though it was a bit muffled.

This cooking method was my own original idea that I came up with for the giburgers.

Normally, with a hamburger you’d first quickly fry both sides using a high flame so that the flavor wouldn’t escape, then slowly heat it on a low flame so that it’s cooked all the way through, or perhaps move it into an oven instead.

Those options weren’t available to me, though, so I chose to bake it in a covered pot. This way, I could heat it all the way through without burning the surface.

I’d made the patties small and thin for exactly this purpose.

I wasn’t able to do any fine adjustments on the heat, but it was absolutely necessary that I cooked both sides on high flame... In that case, I had no choice but to leave it all up to a strong flame. In other words, I had to make the patties small and bet it all on a sudden death battle.

But even at this size, if I waited for the flame to heat them all the way through to the center, they would end up completely charred. In that case, using a quick

bake was my only choice.

It was an incredibly simple, logical conclusion.

“Alright, it should be good now.”

As I opened the lid, a powerful explosion of scent burst forth, this time with the fragrance of the fruit wine added in.

Using the wooden spatula, I split one of the patties in two. The meat inside was a beautiful ivory-white, without any red left to it whatsoever.

“Ai Fa, could you grab me a bowl?” I yelled out as I fiddled with the other patties using the spatula to prevent them from burning. In no time at all, a wooden bowl was passed my way without a word. I hurriedly moved three of the patties into it, then I took a second bowl and placed the remaining three inside of that one.

“Alright, now I just need to deal with the aria.”

In the bottom of the pot, I simmered the sauce made from fat, meat juices, and fruit wine. And then, I threw in just a pinch of salt and pico leaf, as well as the thinly sliced aria. Once the aria were nice and soft, it was complete.

“Could I have one of the bowls again, Ai Fa?”

Just as I’d asked, I was handed one of the bowls with the patties. Hmm? I wasn’t certain because I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off of the pot, but had she been holding the bowl and waiting all this time?

She certainly was thoughtful. It was proof of just how good and honest this blunt girl was, to even pick up on something like that.

But I should set that matter aside and return back to the task at hand.

I placed an equal amount of aria in each bowl, then poured the sauce overtop, finishing off the giburgers.

“Oh, could you just have a seat and wait a moment?”

I ran off to the pantry, and brought back the poitan that I had left in waiting. It probably wouldn’t be possible to recognize them as poitan at this point, though.

When she saw what was resting atop the pseudo-rubber tree leaf, Ai Fa tilted

her head.

They were rounded, evenly shaped, slightly burnt-looking cream-colored little things. If anyone from back home saw them, they may be tempted to call them Indian naan, or perhaps just really plain okonomiyaki.

This is what the poitan really were.

“Now then, let’s dig in before it gets cold! I’ll explain it all later.”

3

I’ll start from the conclusion I had reached: The poitan was a grain, in all likelihood.

Naturally, this was all just me guessing, as I didn’t have any way to research it properly. But at any rate, thanks to that hypothesis, I was finally able to find a way to cook it.

The big hint had been “nutritional value.”

It actually wasn’t anything all that complex in the end. Heck, even an elementary schooler may be able to figure it out.

The protein and fat came from the giba meat. The vitamins and dietary fiber came from the aria, which was a green vegetable. So then where were the carbohydrates coming from? When that question came to mind, I finally had my revelation.

I didn’t know how exactly the bodies of this world’s people were laid out. But we looked so similar that applying a bit of my world’s common sense shouldn’t be a problem.

At the very least, I could see that Ai Fa was incredibly healthy. Her skin was simply stunning, and her finely toned body was probably stronger than mine, frankly.

For her to be in that sort of shape, she had to be eating a properly balanced diet.

So, I knew that Ai Fa ate meat, as well as vegetables. In that case, it would be

weird if she wasn't eating her carbohydrates. I mean, to start with, those are our source of energy. I couldn't imagine that Ai Fa, who had more strength and energy than most wild animals, wasn't eating any carbohydrates whatsoever.

"The poitan is a grain, which makes it a carbohydrate."

The other big hint that helped me reach this conclusion was the poitan's texture.

The first time I ate it, I thought, *It's almost like someone went and dissolved flour in water.*

Flour. In other words, milled wheat, which was a type of grain.

There was no need to roast it or parch it or bite into it raw. I mean, the answer had been right before my eyes from the very start.

I should have paid more attention to the eating habits of the people of the forest's edge. Boiling it was the one perfect answer, after all. When it was heated to a high temperature, the poitan's astringency was released, and it dissolved into the water. That allowed it to meet the base qualifications of being edible.

It was just muddy water without any taste like that, though. It was ultimately still roughly the same as flour dissolved in water. But if you dissolve flour in water, then all you need to do is turn it back into flour.

Thanks to that thought process, I realized how to overcome the poitan.

I heated the poitan in a small amount of water to make a sort of mushy poitan broth, then heated it further right up to the limit. By heating it just up until when it was about to burn, I was able to make it into a sort of slime-like batter. Then I exposed it to sunlight for an hour, finally hardening it into a solid shape.

I broke that apart and gave it a taste, and... it was just a powder, without any real flavor to it.

It really did resemble flour... And in that case, it meant I could treat it like it *was* flour.

My hunch really had hit the mark.

I dissolved the powdered poitan in water, then heated it, but I didn't boil it

the way I had with the original poitan, so instead it sputtered and started to burn a bit. It really did look just like okonomiyaki with nothing added to it.

I only had a little bit of my sample batch left, so I went ahead and cooked up the slime that hadn't been exposed to sunlight, but that was no good. All that happened was the moisture evaporated, leaving just a burnt powder behind.

Apparently completely drying it out once was the real clincher.

I had no idea what sort of change was going on in the poitan's molecular structure or whatever, but I didn't really feel the need to know that, either.

At any rate, I'd figured it out. At least for my purposes, this was the right answer.

And also... When I finally accepted that I had won out over the poitan, I was overcome by a great, uplifting sense of joy. If I had a "flour" to act as a bonding agent, then I could take on the challenge of making hamburgers right away, even though I had put it off for later.

A "bonding agent" referred to a food that helps to connect together the minced meat. Normally, you would just use egg yolks or breadcrumbs or something.

Naturally, it was still possible to make hamburgers even without any bonding agent. Heck, I'd heard adding it in was something that was unique to Japan in the first place. I'd also heard people say all sorts of stuff, like "As long as you add salt, you'll be fine," or even, "You don't need to add anything at all. Just mix it all up."

But at any rate, the Tsurumi Restaurant used a bonding agent in theirs, and I had no experience making them without any, so I just couldn't come to grips with the idea of making them that way.

If I *had* a bonding agent, though, well that was a different story.

I could take on steam-grilling or teriyaki anytime I wanted, and I honestly didn't think it would be that much harder than making a stew. So in that case, I wanted to at least give it a try.

Hamburgers were what was referred to as a processed food. It was a type of

cooking that didn't keep the meat in its original form. To me it was pretty much the most standard dish imaginable, but to the people of this alternate world, it was sure to come across as some sort of profound mystery.

Just how much would I surprise Ai Fa if I could pull this off...?

As that thought ran through my head, I could feel my heart throbbing in my chest like a lovesick maiden.



After many twists and turns, it was finally time for dinner on my fifth night in this new world.

"The shape has changed quite a bit, but this is a poitan. It still doesn't have much flavor in and of itself, but if you chew into it alongside meat, it should be plenty passable."

I had placed the sliced onions atop the three little giburgers, and slathered on plenty of the sauce that I made with a fruit wine base. And then there were those round little okonomiyaki-looking baked poitan. They were about 30 centimeters in diameter and roughly one centimeter thick.

"Well then, let's dig in!"

Ai Fa once again ran a finger on her left hand alongside her lips, then muttered something inside her mouth. Then she grabbed her bowl and spoon, and unsurprisingly looked scrutinizingly at the giburgers.

While sneaking a glance at her, I went ahead and scooped up some of a patty with my own wooden spoon.

Yeah, there didn't seem to be any issues in terms of firmness. And I was seeing from the cross-section that it was insanely juicy, so this was looking like it may have turned out really well.

Still, the issue remained of whether or not the ingredients would prove to be compatible. I mean, I couldn't imagine there were that many people out there who would make a burger with boar meat. My guess was that meant boar meat wasn't all that suited to being cooked up as a hamburger.

Boar meat was softer than pork, but that probably only held true when you

were boiling it. I mean, I'm pretty sure the fat content was the reason, but at any rate, boar meat just got softer and softer the more that you boiled it. But if you ate it after using some other cooking process, you'd probably categorize it as a pretty tough meat.

Naturally, if you followed the proper steps when preparing it, it wouldn't end up all that tough. But still, it would probably never be softer than beef or pork.

And besides, beef was considered the easy choice when making a hamburger. The next choice after that was to use a mix of beef and pork, which was quite popular in its own right. I haven't really heard of a pure pork hamburger before, though. And seeing how boars were the ancestors of pigs, their meat was unsurprisingly similar.

So boar meat absolutely wasn't suited to being made into hamburgers, and giba meat had the exact same taste. Just how would a burger made with giba meat turn out, then? Even if I did manage to surprise Ai Fa, would I end up being satisfied with how it turned out? At any rate, that fight was already on.

Using the wooden spoon, I tossed the chunk of giburger I had scooped up into my mouth. The meaty juices were still so hot that it felt like they may end up burning me as they spread through my mouth.

My initial impression was... *That's sweet.*

What the heck? It was seriously sweet. Was boar, no wait, giba meat's fat this sweet?

Alongside that mild sweetness, there was also the slightly quirky taste of the meat, and the fragrance of the fruit wine sauce... Yeah, it was tasty.

Sure enough, the meat had a pretty chewy texture for a hamburger. It was still like this even after I minced it up so carefully...? Still, it wasn't an unpleasant texture. Rather than the sort of thing I'd say was overly tough, it was something that you could really bite into. And when you did bite into it, even more juice came spilling out and filled your mouth with deliciousness.

Ah, but that won't do...

I really did have a much stronger fondness for meat with a quirky taste than most folks. Whether it was boar meat, or lamb, or duck, I loved those sorts of

powerful flavors. And so I earnestly did think this was delicious... but I couldn't really offer an objective opinion.

Seriously though, it was crazy good!

I added in some sliced aria and a heaping helping of sauce, and brought it all into my mouth.

It was delicious. Just so, so tasty...

I'd probably end up thinking exactly the same thing about a boar meat hamburger, I'd imagine.

It was a bit embarrassing giving such high praise to something I made, but it really was good.

If I were to give one critique, it would be that I really would like to try it with thicker patties. As is, the thoroughly cooked outsides just had a lot more relative importance to the dish when compared to the juicy inside. That was the one thing I could think of that was bugging me.

I bit off a chunk of poitan, and sure enough, that was good too.

The ideal would be to have some white rice, but it really was essential to have meat, vegetables, and carbs. Well, that may not be the case in other countries, but it was at least true of the one I was raised in. And it was the case for the house I grew up in, too. You needed meat, carbs, and vegetables. If any of those were lacking, it couldn't be called an ideal meal.

And it had been a while since I had experienced this familiar dull, grainy taste.

I apparently had been craving carbohydrates a lot more than I had thought.

Poitan wasn't as puffy as white bread or naan, and in the end it was like an okonomiyaki without anything in it, not even eggs. But even so, I couldn't help but find it delicious.

I only had one single poitan for my three burgers. The giburgers were pretty rich in flavor, so I got the feeling that I could easily eat two more of the poitan alongside them.

I broke out in an awkward chuckle, thinking on how much I had tried to avoid the poitan. And then I got a cold, "Just what are you laughing about?" back.

That was my first time hearing Ai Fa talk in a little while.

That's no good. I got so absorbed in eating that I stopped paying attention to her.

I reflected a bit on how stubbornly fixated I could be on eating.

"Ah, Ai Fa, what do you think of the taste?"

Looking over her way, I could see that Ai Fa had chewed off more than half of her poitan, and was already finished with her second giburger. Man, she was fast. I only just finished my first one.

After she finished swallowing what was in her mouth, Ai Fa simply responded with, "Tasty."

"I'm glad to hear that! But it would also be nice if you could offer a bit more detailed impression..."

All I got back to my earnest request was a, "Don't want to."

"You don't want to...?"

"I don't feel like telling you my thoughts."

"Huuuuuh? Why? Are you still angry about what happened around noontime?"

"Noontime?" she questioned, tilting her head. "Ah. You mean when you lost control of yourself and acted insolently. I had already completely forgotten about that."

"You forgot... Then why won't you tell me your thoughts?"

"Stop asking! If I don't want to tell you, then that's all there is to it!"

And then, an inexplicable phenomenon occurred: Ai Fa hung her head down and seemed to try to cover her beet red face with her bowl.

"Just drop it! Don't look at me!"

I just plain didn't get it.

Well, whatever. Her emotions seemed to be all over the place today, so I'd just have to ask her what she thought some other time. At the very least she seemed to be dodging my questions, but she *did* say it was tasty... That alone

was enough to make me super happy.

While such thoughts were running through my head, an unexpected voice from an unexpected direction said, “Hey, what is that that you’re eating?”

Ai Fa and I both looked in that direction, dumbfounded. It had come from the window beside the stove. It had grown pretty dark out, but I could see a small face staring at us from beyond the bars.

“Hey, hey! It smells really good! Is that giba? What’s that white thing there?”

“Rimee Ruu... I thought I told you not to come near my house.”

When I saw the surprise vanish from Ai Fa’s face as she nonchalantly said that, I calmed down a bit. If she was an acquaintance, then it shouldn’t be a problem. And it’s not like we would do anything shady, anyway.

Still, just what was the deal with this kid? She was short enough that all I could see through the window was her reddish-brown hair and round eyes, so I couldn’t even tell what her face looked like.

“No way! This is my first time seeing you in a while, so why are you being so mean? Hey...! What are you eating? What does it taste like? Who made it? Is that guy your husband, Ai Fa?”

“Don’t be stupid! Why would I go and marry this pale fool?!”

Those words inflicted quite a bit of damage on me.

But... As she was ranting and raving, Ai Fa’s face was redder than I’d ever seen it before. Hmm...

Let’s just go ahead and say those two things cancelled each other out.

“Hey, who exactly is that kid?” I asked Ai Fa, but the girl herself was the one to respond.

“I’m Rimee Ruu! The youngest daughter of the Ruu household! And also, Ai Fa’s friend!”

“Stop messing around. I don’t recall ever becoming friends with you, Rimee Ruu,” Ai Fa said in an even chillier voice than usual as she scooped up the last patty with her spoon. “I’m not fond of noisy brats like you. Now hurry on

home.”

So then... The girl who called herself Rimee Ruu stared blankly for a second, and then an instant later, exploded with a, “Bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” and started sobbing uncontrollably.

“H-Hey, Ai Fa, you shouldn’t act so immature towards—” I started to chide, but the wailing drowned out my voice.

She seriously could cry. I mean, I could even feel my eardrums pounding.

“But I looooooove you Ai Faaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” I somehow managed to make out from within her sobs.

At any rate, that was how my meeting with the youngest daughter of the Ruu family, Rimee Ruu, went. Little did I know how it would affect my fate...

4

“See, I really love Ai Fa, and I loved Gil Fa too. When Gil Fa was still alive, he and Ai Fa played with me lots and lots!”

A few minutes had passed.

The mysterious young visitor, Rimee Ruu, was jammed in between Ai Fa and me, smiling widely as she talked. It was hard to imagine that she had just been bawling her eyes out.

I had invited her into the house and tried to console her to get her to stop sobbing, but those tears kept on flowing from her big old eyes. And yet she stopped in an instant when Ai Fa said, “I was lying when I said I hated you,” while rubbing her temple like she had a headache.

“But still, it isn’t a good idea for any member of the Ruu family to come near me, when I’ve earned the animosity of the Suun clan. I must have explained that to you countless times by now.”

“We’re not afraid of the Suun family! My papa is always saying so! And they won’t last long with that dummy of an heir they’ve got, either! The Ruu clan will be leading the people of the forest’s edge before too much longer!”

“The fact that the head of your household, Donda Ruu, is that sort of person only makes the matter that much more important. If your two clans fight, it could lead to the destruction of our entire settlement!”

Once Rimee Ruu’s tears had stopped, Ai Fa started acting even colder than usual. But in spite of that, there was a bright smile on the young girl’s face. She sure did look cute...

She must have been around seven or eight years old. I mean, she certainly was small. She only reached up to around my chest. Her hair was short and reddish-brown, and was fluffy in a way that reminded me of a dandelion. Her skin was naturally a dark, chocolaty sort of color, and her eyes sparkled the hue of a clear spring sky.

Her clothes were made of a beautifully patterned cloth and wound from her right shoulder to down past her hips, making for a little miniature one-shouldered dress. Her slender legs and arms were completely exposed, but she was still just a child so there was nothing wrong with that.

And hanging in front of her chest was a necklace made using three fangs and tusks. There was no way such a young child went out hunting giba, so I figured it either had to be some sort of amulet, or was just purely for decoration.

“Hey, you’re an outsider, aren’t you?” Rimee Ruu asked, looking at me with her big round eyes. They really were a pretty shade of blue. And though they were both blue, they were completely different from Ai Fa’s eyes, which were a deeper color that sometimes reminded me of a burning flame.

“Supposedly a ’spicious outsider is staying at the Fa house. And he may be a forn... foreigner who will cause us trouble, so until we know who he is, I shouldn’t go there. That’s what my papa told me!”

“Hmm. And yet you went and came right here?” I responded in a kindly manner, despite the fact that my attention was half on the giburger steadily losing its heat.

“I didn’t! But then today, I saw you wearing Gil Fa’s clothes! I thought that meant you weren’t an outsider anymore!”

I’d already more or less figured as such, but it seemed that Gil Fa really was

the name of Ai Fa's father. At the moment, I was having trouble figuring if it was alright or not to keep throwing his name out there so lightly.

"Hey! Since you gave him clothes from our people, that means he's part of your household, right? So that makes him your husband, doesn't it, Ai Fa?"

"As if I was following that ancient custom! It was an eyesore always seeing him look so filthy, so I simply lent him some spare clothing!"

Yeah, that stung. But still, her face was beet red. I prayed that wasn't purely out of anger, to offset the pain.

"Rimee Ruu, it's time for you to leave! I have no intention of being the spark that kicks off a battle between the Suun and Ruu families. Leave this place, and never return."

"I don't wanna! My papa only told me not to go near outsiders. So if this guy isn't an outsider anymore, then it's fine," Rimee Ruu responded with a chuckle.

The red-faced Ai Fa simply responded, "Do as you please," and picked up the half-eaten plate of food. All of a sudden, the little girl's face lit up with curiosity.

"Hey, what's that? Why does it smell like that? Is it giba meat? And what's that flat thing that's the color of a poitan?"

Rather than responding, Ai Fa silently resumed eating. I reached out to do the same, but the young girl's head suddenly turned towards me.

"You two carried a whole giba back before, right? Is this the meat from that giba? Why is it in a shape like this? And where'd the poitan soup go?"

"Um, you see... I made this. It may be a weird shape, but this is giba meat, and this one is a poitan."

I didn't have the skills necessary to ignore such an innocent child, so I ended up responding as such. The look of curiosity in Rimee Ruu's eyes grew even stronger, and the words I had been expecting ended up coming out of her tiny mouth next.

"What does it taste like? I want to try it!"

While holding back a sigh, I turned and looked at Ai Fa.

“Hey, Ai Fa. Is there any taboo about giving food to people from another household?”

“As if such a thing would be a taboo...” Ai Fa responded with a look of extreme displeasure, but at least for now she didn’t stop me.

Well, I didn’t mind then. I could be a bit of a glutton, but not *that* much of one. Besides, as a chef, getting a third-party’s opinion was incredibly valuable.

“Alright then, go ahead and have a taste. It’s completely different than usual giba meat, so don’t be too shocked, okay?” I said, offering her my plate. Then the young girl smiled and opened wide with an “Aah.”

Didn’t she have any wariness about her at all?



While sensing Ai Fa's cold glare on my right cheek, I cut a mouthful sized bit of burger and sliced aria in half, then spooned it into her little mouth.

The girl's tiny mouth closed shut, and she started to chew. Suddenly, her big, round eyes grew even rounder.

"Um, how's it taste?"

"Aah."

That's no surprise.

Well, I suppose I could let her have a second bite. But any more than that and it might have an impact on my nutrition, you know?

As that thought passed through my mind, I broke her off a bit of poitan, too.

Chomp.

Nom nom.

Gulp.

Her eyes went wide.

It was rare finding a kid who made so many faces that perfectly matched such varied sound effects.

"It's..."

"Hmm?"

"It's delicious!"

With that, she grabbed hold of me.

Ah, so it felt this shocking to suddenly get grabbed by someone who lost control of themselves, huh? I really will have to apologize to Ai Fa for doing that.

No, wait, this was no time for that!

Rimee Ruu's tiny fingers had a tight grasp on my t-shirt, and she was now shaking my body with an amount of force that was hard to imagine coming from a child.

"It's delicious! Seriously yummy! How is it this tasty?! This is giba meat,

right?! So how is it so soft?! Come on, tell me!”

It took so much effort to squeeze that praise out of Ai Fa the first night, but now it was being fired off non-stop like it was nothing.

But still, it was high praise, and as a chef that was definitely nice to receive.

And man, she was way too strong. Did people in a hunting community really start building up their muscles differently when they were this small?

“Will you please stop that? You’re interrupting the meal,” Ai Fa butted in, saving me. She then grabbed hold of the girl by the scruff of her neck and easily pulled her off, apparently having finished cleaning her plate at some point.

“A meal is a means to stay alive. Did the head of your house not teach you that to interrupt one is taboo, as to do so is to threaten the life of another in a way?”

“I’m sorry...”

Rimee Ruu quickly bowed her head, still half suspended in the air by Ai Fa. Then in no time at all, a downhearted expression shot across her face.

“It really was yummy. Thanks. And I’m sorry for getting in the way. I...” she said, then tilted her head to the side suddenly, looking rather cute. She really was an expressive kid.

“I don’t know your name. What is it?”

“I’m Asuta Tsurumi. If that’s too hard to say, you can just go with Asuta.”

“C-Churu...? Okay, Asuta. I, Rimee Ruu, offer a sincere apology to Asuta of the Fa household.”

“No, it’s fine. You just surprised me is all. And thanks for the praise. Oh, and thanks for stopping her too, Ai Fa.”

“Hmph,” Ai Fa let out a curt snort, and she sat back down where she was originally seated.

Rimee Ruu sat right down where Ai Fa released her, but then she wrapped her arms around her little legs and didn’t say a word.

I don’t really get the people of the forest’s edge...

Still, though she may have acted pretty wild, this was the first person of the forest's edge that I'd met after five days in this other world who didn't avoid Ai Fa. The rest of them were too afraid of the Suun family to have anything to do with her. In comparison, this girl was showing such open fondness towards her that it was hard not to smile. It really wouldn't be so bad to get along with her a little more openly...

In the end, though, neither of the two girls said another word, so I just sat there and silently kept on eating. It had gotten pretty cold, but it was still tasty. The dish had turned out great, at least in my opinion.

"That was good. Now then... It's gotten pretty dark out, so will you really be alright heading home on your own, Rimee Ruu?" I asked. In response, the girl suddenly looked up from her cradled knees, making a face as if she had just remembered something.

Just when I thought she was about to stand up, she instead planted both legs on the rug, then presented both of her arms to me.

"I, Rimee Ruu of the Ruu household, have a request for you, Asuta of the Fa household! Please, won't you lend me your strength?"

Troubled by the sudden question, I looked to Ai Fa out of the corner of my eye. She was seated with her knees up, furrowing her brow in displeasure.

"Please grant the elder of the Ruu household, Jiba Ruu, the blessing of your different cooking! Jiba Ruu, she... At this rate, she's going to die soon!"

The tears started pouring from Rimee Ruu's big blue eyes once again. She wasn't sobbing wildly this time, though. Instead, she seemed to be bearing it, not letting out a sound as they rolled down her face.

5

"Do you intend to go to the Ruu house, Asuta?"

It was nighttime now.

"I'll come again tomorrow morning," Rimee Ruu had said with a bow, and then she left. "You can wait till then to give me your answer. I'll spend tonight

getting my family to say yes,” she added on the way out.

After placing the utensils and cookware we had used into the metal pot, my work for the night was done. Normally I’d spend some time talking to Ai Fa, and then drift off into sleep. But this time, Ai Fa had sat there, expressionless and silent, for a long while.

I really did need to learn the common sense of this other world. So before sleeping, I’d ask her about all sorts of things like the vow held by the people of the forest’s edge and their taboos, or anecdotes about the kingdom and gods, or about the Genos post town I still hadn’t seen. But today, I didn’t try to ask her anything.

And when she finally did talk, it was just to ask me that question. She was sitting with her back against the wall, and her gaze was fixed on the darkness out past the window, rather than trying to look at me.

The stove had died down, leaving only the candles to light the dark room. In that light, the side of Ai Fa’s face looked strangely cold. As I stared at it, I quietly responded, “I was thinking... that I’d like to.”

To let the elder of the Ruu household, Jiba Ruu, taste my food... Rimee Ruu’s request had come out as a bit of a mess, but it wasn’t all that confusing of a matter.

As an 80 year old woman, Jiba Ruu had lost almost all of her teeth, and was no longer able to eat proper meals. For now, the most she could do was wash down finely minced giba meat and vegetables with soup, and apparently she could handle less and less each day.

“There’s no point to living on by having to constantly fill the inside of your mouth with this awful muddy soup...”

Apparently she had spent each and every day saying things like that, tears streaming down her face.

Just a few years ago she had been happy and healthy, but now her heart was completely withering away too. Just how much must Rimee Ruu, the youngest daughter of the family, have suffered?

When I thought about her pain, it made me really want to go.

“But you can’t give your approval, right, Ai Fa?”

“The Suun family leads the people of the forest’s edge, but the Ruu family is no lesser in terms of size. And there has been animosity between them for generations,” Ai Fa responded in an emotionless voice.

“Animosity?”

“Over 20 years ago, one of the Suun clan kidnapped a girl who was supposed to marry into the main Ruu house. The men of the Ruu house charged the Suun home in a frenzy, but the former leader of the Suun clan said that girl had committed infidelity with someone from another house and was punished for her crime, and then presented her corpse to them.”

I was at a loss for words.

“In all likelihood, she killed herself before they could have their way with her. But as there was no proof, all the Ruu men could do was sheathe their blades while muttering curses. After all, a battle between the Suun and Ruu would effectively mean civil war for the people of the forest’s edge, and perhaps our total annihilation. But if the Suun family hadn’t returned the girl, the Ruu family would have taken up blades. They wouldn’t do that for the sake of a corpse, though. So the clans cut their ties, and even now the animosity between them remains.”

“That story just sickens me. So the Suun family is a clan of good-for-nothings, then?”

“Well, at the very least, it seems the bloodline of the family head can’t produce a man who’s a decent a human being,” Ai Fa muttered, her expression and tone unchanging. “And then two years back, after my quarrel with Diga Suun began, the head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu, came and asked me to marry into his family.”

“M-Marry...?”

“He said with a laugh that if I did so the Suun family couldn’t lay a hand on me, and if they tried to anyway, he’d grind them into dust. But when I turned down that offer, my relationships with the Ruu family were also cut off.”

“Ah... So that’s what you were talking about when you said you didn’t want to

be the spark that kicks off a battle between them.”

“Even without the backing of the Ruu clan, I won’t go and yield to someone like Diga Suun. I don’t intend to have anything to do with either side.”

“I see. I get it, now. So if I lend my support to the Ruu family while being under your care, that wouldn’t exactly be something you’d be happy about.”

With that, I gave a heavy sigh.

Ai Fa remained looking away, but her lips twisted into a scornful smile. That grin was just way too unlike her.

“But even so, you want to help Rimee Ruu, don’t you? That’s the type of man you are, Asuta.”

“Hmm? Well, yeah... She seems like she’s a good kid, and I’d also like to help her grandmother remember the joy of eating, too.”

“That’s what I thought. In that case, do as you please.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing complicated. If you want to help Rimee Ruu and Jiba Ruu, then just cut all ties with me. Then you just need to rely on the Ruu family. See, simple, isn’t it?”

“What’re you saying? I can’t go changing partners so willy-nilly, like some kind of hussy.”

I shrugged my shoulders, still completely unable to grasp how Ai Fa truly felt.

“It’s not like I’m *that* worried about it. It’s a shame, but I’ll go ahead and turn down Rimee Ruu’s request.”

“...Why?”

“No matter how cute of a kid she may be, I only just met Rimee Ruu, and I’ve never even seen her grandmother. You may think me cold-hearted for it, but I’m not willing to support them strongly enough that it puts you in a bad position.”

“But why...?” Ai Fa asked, whipping around. There was a look of utter shock frozen on her face. I couldn’t help but smirk at the way that she was acting

more and more unlike her usual self.

“I mean, you’re more important to me than someone I only just met and a complete stranger. Geez, don’t make me go and say something so embarrassing!”

Ai Fa didn’t respond.

“What? It’d be a problem if I got involved with the Ruu clan, right?”

“As you’re at least temporarily considered a member of the Fa clan, if you were to help the Ruu clan, then it’s possible that Donda Ruu would repay that debt by once again offering to have me marry into the family. And if I were to turn them down again it would be like dragging their family’s name through the mud, which would truly earn me their animosity.”

“That old guy sure sounds like a pain in the butt... By the way, aren’t there any charming young gentlemen in the main Ruu house? I mean, we’re talking about Rimee Ruu’s big brothers, right?” I asked, half out of jealousy and half out of pure curiosity.

The response I got back was a blunt, “I decided to live my life by hunting giba. Women gather herbs, tan hides, and simply wait for the men to return home, which doesn’t suit me. Instead, I plan to live my life in the forest as a hunter, and die there too. That was the decision I made when my father, Gil, passed away.”

“Hmm... What a waste, when you’ve got such a pretty face.”

She didn’t respond to my teasing. Instead I just saw some unknown passion in her eyes, flickering like a will-o’-the-wisp.

“At any rate, it’s not anything for you to worry yourself over. I’ll turn down Rimee Ruu’s request and we’ll keep on going as we have been. I mean, it doesn’t seem like the people of the Ruu clan will get angry with us over that.”

Rimee Ruu had said something like, “I’ll talk my papa into it!” In other words, this whole thing was her idea alone, and the other members of her family would likely be against the idea of seeking help from some suspicious outsider.

“Why...? If you just cut ties with me, you would be able to do as you pleased.

So why won't you do so, then? And it should be far more desirable for you to rely on the Ruu clan rather than a loner like me."

"That wouldn't be desirable in the least. You've helped me out so much, so I can't stand even the idea of leaving you like this to run off with some complete strangers. Hey... You've been acting odd for a while now, haven't you? Just what exactly do you want me to do?"

Ai Fa didn't answer me. So I stood up, and plopped myself back down right in front of her. Though that passionate flame still burned in her eyes, Ai Fa looked down.

"Ai Fa... If I'm nothing but a burden to you and you want me to leave here and now, then that's what I'll have to do. But that's not how it is, right? If it was, then you could just come out and say so."

"..."

"I don't understand, so please tell me what you're thinking. I want to hear it in your own words. I'll base my actions on what you want me to do most."

Ai Fa slowly lifted her face, and looked straight at me. With that violent flame still in them... her eyes started to water up just a bit.

"It's been two years now since my father, Gil Fa, passed away," she whispered with her cherry blossom-colored lips. "Up until then, both my father and I got rather close to Rimee Ruu. We didn't have any official relationship with the Ruu clan, but I had met Jiba Ruu, who doted on her granddaughter, many times since I was very little."

"I see..." I responded, my heart breaking upon seeing her eyes wet with tears.

Ai Fa furrowed her brows, looking a little pained.

"I don't wish to enter into a relationship with the Ruu household. But even so... It would pain me to see Rimee Ruu and Jiba Ruu suffer."

"Then... Do you want me to cut all ties with you, and then help Rimee Ruu and them as someone completely unrelated?"

The instant I said that, I was grabbed by the collar. Her eyes that were like a blue flame glared at me, almost as if they were eating into me. And then... The

tears that had been pooling in those eyes started to slide silently down her silky cheeks.

“I...” she started, her voice shaking a bit. “...I don’t know what I want.”

Why didn’t she know? If I just cut my ties with her, then Rimee and Jiba Ruu would be saved. If she wanted to lend them support from the shadows without directly becoming involved with the Ruu family, then that would be the only option. But...

Ai Fa’s fingers were still firmly gripping my collar. It was as if she was worrying that if she let go, I would just up and disappear.

“I see,” I said, placing my hands on Ai Fa’s shoulders.

I could feel the warmth coming off her smooth, exposed shoulders... and also the way that they were trembling ever so slightly. Without even thinking, I pulled her in closer. Ai Fa’s slender body fell up against my chest, offering no resistance whatsoever.

“Well if you don’t know, then there’s no helping that. I mean, I’m not exactly sure of the best path, myself.”

That smell of Ai Fa’s that I loved so much gently tickled my nose. As the scent filled my heart, I quietly came to a realization.

“But I know clearly what I want most. If you won’t tell me how to proceed, then is it alright if I choose what to do?”

Ai Fa didn’t say a word.

“I want to help out Rimee Ruu. However, I also don’t want to have to leave you. So as a freeloader of your household, I want to fairly and openly help those people you hold dear,” I said, giving Ai Fa’s complexly done up blonde hair a gentle pat. “Who cares about the animosity between the Suun and Ruu clans? I mean, do you really have to abandon people you care about over such a stupid grudge? Just leave the heavy matter of the future of the settlement up to the old fogeys, since it’s their responsibility anyway. It’s not right to bury your own feelings over something like that.”

“...”

“I’ll save them. As if I care about what Rimee Ruu’s father will say about that. And if he starts bugging you about marriage again, then tell him to bring you a man who’s even tastier than any giba first!”

Ai Fa didn’t respond to what I had said. She just kept on clinging to my collar as her tears streamed down onto my t-shirt.

Chapter 5: The Ruu Clan

1

And so, we ended up heading to the Ruu's main house. I was glad that was what we decided on, but it wasn't as if there weren't any issues whatsoever. I first learned of that the next morning, when Rimee Ruu showed up as promised.

When I returned from cleaning and started working on my old man's knife she suddenly popped up. And when I told her, "I'll help," she broke out in a huge smile of pure joy and yelled out, "Thank you!" And then she added, "In that case, come to my house before sunset! I'll be sure to get the ingredients all ready!"

I couldn't help but tilt my head with a, "Huh?" upon hearing that. "What do you mean, 'ingredients'? I was planning on cooking here and then delivering the finished dish."

"You can't! You need to eat food in the house where it was prepared!"

I didn't really get it so I asked for more details, and apparently that was part of the vow taken by the people of the forest's edge. Or to be more precise, it said, "When treating someone to food, you must eat the same dish in the same place as them."

In other words, it was probably meant to prohibit people from harming others using cooking.

"Hmm. It still hasn't fully clicked with me, but does that mean I just need to go to the Ruu household, cook food, and have your grandmother eat it along with me?"

It added a bit of pressure, cooking in a place I was visiting for the first time, but that wasn't enough to discourage me. The real issue was still to come, though.

“Yeah. But it’s not just Granny Jiba. It’ll be tough because there are a lot of people in my house, but I’ll try hard to help!”

“Huh? So I have to make enough not just for your grandma, but the rest of your family too?”

“Yeah. I mean, that’s what it means to borrow someone else’s stove, right?”

“Is that how it is?”

“Of course it is! You’re really weird, Asuta!”

I’d finally been recognized by the girl of seven or eight years old as a weirdo. Come on, give me a break... I mean, I just haven’t studied all the customs of the people of the forest’s edge just yet.

“Alright, got it. So I just need to make food for the whole family, right? It’s not like I don’t want to, and it’s honestly more worthwhile to cook for a large group of people anyway. So, how many people are there in the Ruu household?”

“Um...” Rimee Ruu murmured, and then she started counting on her fingers. By the time she had folded down the little fingers on both of her hands, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking, *Oh, come on!*

“So, counting me, it’s 13 people!”

“T-Thirteen, huh? That’s quite a large family.”

“Ah, but Kota Ruu is still just one year old and only drinks milk, so you just need to prepare for 12. And the other women in the family who were supposed to be in charge of the stove will help out!”

“12 people, huh? Well, if that’s all then I should be able to manage. There’s no problem if we go with the dish from last night for everyone, right?”

“Yeah, of course! I’m really looking forward to it, too!”

“Hmm... Well, thinking more on it, just feeding your grandma this one time wouldn’t have solved the issue here anyway. If I give the women of the Ruu family a lecture on how to make a delicious meal, then that would make things easier from tomorrow on...”

“What’s a ‘lecture’?”

“Ah, well, I can’t be manning the Ruu stove each and every day, right? So I’ve got to teach you and the rest of the women how to cook tasty food for your grandma.”

“Huh?! We’ll be able to make food that yummy?!”

“The way I managed the heat last night was a little tricky, though. Hmm... Ah, if you have a family of 13, then you probably have more than one pot, right?”

“Pots? We have four of them.”

“Four?! That’s great!”

Ultimately, I ended up getting a little worked up. I’d be using four pots to make food for 12 people... No wait, adding in me and Ai Fa, it was 14 in total.

I was up against an old lady with hardly any teeth, as well as a powerful man in the settlement who was likely less than fond of outsiders. Honestly, I could feel my spirit as a chef getting a bit fired up by this development.

“Got it. Well then, I’ll prepare the giba meat over here, so could you make sure we’ve got enough aria and poitan for everyone? And then we’ll also need rock salt and fruit wine.”

“Huh? But we’ve got lots of meat at our home, though.”

“The meat’s the most important part. If I get the chance, I’d love to instruct you all on how to prepare giba meat so it’s nice and tasty, too.”

In the back of my mind, I had already started plotting out how the cooking would go. As I did, Rimee Ruu walked on over my way and timidly grabbed onto the hem of my clothing.

“Thank you so much, Asuta. Now Granny Jiba won’t have to keep sobbing and saying how she wants to die. I’m really grateful you’re doing something so big for us.”

“Don’t cry, you big dummy. I mean, it’s not even like it’s a guarantee just yet that everything will go smoothly.”

“No, it’ll be fine! Your cooking really is yummy!”

Then Rimee Ruu turned to Ai Fa, who had been silently working on her blade

in a corner of the room.

“Thank you too, Ai Fa! Once Granny Jiba’s all better, we’ll all play together again! Well then, see you this afternoon!”

“Ah, my cooking needs some extra time to prepare, so is it alright if I show up a bit earlier?” I added, in place of the still silent Ai Fa.

“Yeah! No problem!” Rimee Ruu responded with a brilliant smile, and then she left the house.

Geez, that girl was a bundle of energy in a completely different way than Ai Fa. I couldn’t help but break out in a smile, too.

“What are you grinning to yourself about? You really are gross.”

“Oh hey, you finally said something, Ai Fa! What you said may have been incredibly rude, but I’m still a little relieved!”

“You’re so tiresome...”

She just kept on carefully looking over her gleaming, silver blade, not even so much as glancing my way as she sat with her back against the wall. And her face remained every bit as expressionless as always, too. Well, she showed her weakness to someone like me just last night, which I’m sure she was seriously regretting. I could certainly sense something like that about her.

“Still, I never figured we would get pressured into sitting down to dinner with them, too. You must have known it from the start though, right?”

“Of course. That’s what it means to man someone else’s stove.”

Hmm... That was a splendid custom, having some responsibility behind manning the stove.

“That means I’ll definitely be meeting Rimee Ruu’s father face to face, though... You’ll be coming with me, right?”

“What are you, an idiot? You think I’d send off someone who doesn’t even properly know the ways of this world to someone else’s house, all on his own?!” she practically roared as she glared at my legs. “...If you don’t intend to cut ties with me, it’s only natural that I accompany you.”

“Right. You’re really saving me. I mean, I’d feel pretty lonely on my own.”

I walked a few steps closer to Ai Fa, and sat down so that I was just barely out of reach. Her gaze remained fixed in place, so it fell somewhere between my feet and my chest.

When I planted my hands on the floor and looked up, though, rather than her gaze, it was the tip of her blade that pointed at me.

“I’m sorry. It was just a joke.”

“I can’t believe you... Do you honestly think that you can man the Ruu family stove like that?”

The tip of her blade pulled back, but her glare remained every bit as sharp.

To be honest, this was the first time since waking up that I’d locked eyes with Ai Fa today.

Sometimes her face was really easy to read, and right now she was clearly getting worked up. She soon declared in a harsh tone, “To man a house’s stove means to take that family’s very lives into your hands. So if a member of the Ruu clan becomes sick from your cooking, neither you nor I will get off lightly. We may have both ears cleaved off, or all our teeth broken, or even be exiled from the forest’s edge!”

“Huh... I’m surprised you gave such an important task to me like it was nothing.”

“I don’t give the slightest damn about such old-fashioned customs! Many of the people of the forest’s edge still do, though!”

“Okay, I get it. But there’s no way that I’d give anyone food poisoning. Just who do you think I am?”

I had intended to get a quip like, “A 17 year old chef trainee?” back, but Ai Fa just bit down on her pink lips and didn’t say anything for a while. Her face was flushed beet red, and she was wearing the expression of an unruly child.

However, this was all very much just like her. Compared to how she was all down in the dumps and acting unlike herself last night, this way was far more adorable.

Anyway, after a rather long period of silence, Ai Fa muttered, “I was just telling you not to take this too lightly. I’m more aware of your skill than anyone. I’m sure you’re capable of saving both Rimee and Jiba Ruu. But it’s also still very possible for you to let your guard down and get tripped up.”

“Whoa... I’m honestly a little moved, here.”

I’d love to move a little closer and take her by the hand if I could, but with the way she was today she may really kill me if I did that, so I restrained myself.

“If you’re willing to say all that, then I’m sure I’ll be fine. Don’t worry, I swear on what little honor I have that I’ll save them.” And then I dared to add, “For your sake too, Ai Fa.”

I’d be wielding my kitchen knife for the sake of people who were precious to Ai Fa. As if I’d let my guard down or get conceited in a situation like this!

As I looked at Ai Fa’s perpetually angry face, I could feel a burning-hot fighting spirit running through my entire body.

I would complete my task, no matter what. All for the sake of the first person I thought of as precious in this other world.

2

“Wow... So this is the Ruu clan’s headquarters, huh?” I said in admiration without even thinking about it.

Judging from the position of the sun, I estimated that the main Ruu home was about an hour south of the Fa house. There wasn’t any big imposing building there, though. In exchange, there were a greater number of buildings clustered together here than anything I had seen yet in this world. Naturally, there was still plenty of space between them, but the difference between this and how other dwellings were spaced out was pretty easy to notice.

In the center of the buildings was a yellow, trodden down space that looked like a sort of plaza. The total area was about half the size of a school’s grounds, and surrounding it were seven wooden houses. And each of those homes were at least twice the size of Ai Fa’s.

Even if the family has 13 people in it, they still shouldn't need this many houses, I thought, tilting my head.

“The one to succeed the family becomes the new head of the clan, while their brothers take wives and live in a new residence nearby. Most of these belong to such brothers, I’d say,” Ai Fa explained while holding a bundle of five kilos of giba thigh meat carefully wrapped up in a pseudo-rubber tree leaf.

I gave a nod and said, “I see,” holding a similarly wrapped 5 kilo bundle of shoulder roast. “So what about this plaza in the center? It seems big enough that you could probably hold an athletic meet here.”

“An ‘athletic meet’? This space is meant for wedding or funeral services. If you gathered everyone related to the Ruu family, without a doubt you would end up with more than 100 people.”

So of the 500 people of the forest’s edge, one fifth of them were related to the Ruu family? Well, if you think of it as just being a settlement of 500 people, I suppose it’d be full of relatives in no time at all without fresh blood coming in.

“Anyway, that’s enough idle chatter. Let’s get going,” Ai Fa said and got moving into the plaza, with me following along after her. When we reached the center of the plaza, a small figure came darting our way from out of the shadow of the middle of those seven buildings.

“Ai Fa! Asuta! Welcome to the Ruu home! You really did come early, huh?”

Naturally, this was Rimee Ruu.

By the way, the sun was currently midway between its zenith and when it started to set. By my estimate, it was probably a bit past 3 PM.

“Is it still too early? I was just thinking I’d like to have some leeway for getting things done.”

“You’re fine! Oh, and let me hold onto your steel!”

Ai Fa silently handed over her blade and knife. I hadn’t considered this, so I was left feeling a bit flustered.

“Hey, Rimee Ruu... I wanted to cook using my own knife, but is that not going to work out?”

“Hmm? We have plenty of knives for cutting meat, though.”

“No, you see, mine’s made a bit differently,” I said, pulling out my knife from its sheath at my hip like I was in a yakuza movie or something.

By the way, back in Japan wearing a colorful vest over a t-shirt, with my waist to my shoes covered all in white, and a white towel wrapped around my head would be considered a rather unique sort of hybrid fashion. I really would have liked to undertake this challenge in the pure white outfit chefs prided themselves on, but I ultimately ended up deciding it was best not to play up how I was a foreigner too much, resulting in this ensemble.

Anyway, Rimee Ruu looked over my knife with great curiosity, and then let out a, “Hmm...” and tilted her head. “Then just let me hold it until we get to the stove! I can’t show you around the house while you have a weapon, after all!”

I gave a sigh of relief, and then handed the young girl the kitchen knife.

While reverently holding a large blade, two small knives, and my kitchen knife in her little hands, Rimee Ruu said, “Well then, follow me!” and turned around.

There was no telling what may happen, but at any rate I stood at the entrance to the Ruu household. The people we ran into between the entrance and the back of the building, though... were all soft, supple women.

Right, I suppose the men must all be out in the forest at this time of day.

I still compared pretty darn pathetically to them, while Ai Fa looked perfectly normal, but at any rate, we both soon found ourselves with six women standing in a row in front of us.

“I brought some visitors! This is Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan!”

None of them so much as hesitated to shoot curiosity-filled gazes my way. I’d been politely ignored by everyone for the last five days, so this frankly came as unexpected. Rather than being treated as if I wasn’t there, I was actually the center of attention.

There were thirteen people in the family, and it wasn’t strange at all for half of them to be women. Still, this was kind of overwhelming, somehow.

There were three married women wearing a single long cloth outfit each. The

other three were all unmarried, with long hair and only their chests and waists covered.

One of the married women was an old lady. However, she didn't seem to be the Granny Jiba I had heard so much about. After all, she was pleasantly plump and still seemed to have plenty of energy about her. Plus, the smell of animal fat was positively wafting off of her.

Another of the married women was middle-aged. She must have been about my old man's age. She looked to have a seriously healthy and robust physique, and on top of that she was also pretty tall. Honestly, she was giving off the impression of a dyed-in-wool mother.

The rest of the group, meanwhile, were still young. Two of them seemed to be older than me, both looking to be somewhere around 20. Of those two, one of them was wearing a long outfit and was cradling a very small baby.

Then there was one who looked to be around my age, and one who looked to be younger.

That added up to six of them in total. Adding in Rimee Ruu and the baby brought the total up to eight.

"That's Granny Tito Min, and next to her is my mama, Mia Lea. And then there's my brother Jiza's wife Sati Lea, and her baby Kota. And lastly there's my big sisters, Vina, Reina, and Lala!"

"Hey, don't just throw them all out there at—" I started, only for my heart to skip a beat. "Hey, did you just say Reina?"

"Yes?"

The girl who seemed to be about my age tilted her head, looking confused. Her hair was black, a somewhat unusual color for the people of the forest's edge, and she had it done up into two braids. The way she was short and compact with a totally innocent expression on her face reminded me of Rimee Ruu... And sure enough, she had dark skin and blue eyes.



Well, that's no surprise. Seriously, what was I thinking?

This girl just happened to have the same name as my childhood friend is all. And she was completely different from the Reina I knew, anyway. My old friend had a more childish face, and she wore her hair short. Plus she just plain wasn't this much of a beauty. The only real similarity was that they both only came up to about my shoulders.

"Sorry, it's nothing. I just happen to know someone with the same name, so I reacted without thinking."

"Oh, my. You're acquainted with someone who shares my name?"

The way she broke out in a positively cherubic smile was just like Rimee Ruu, too.

Ah, my Reina could probably pull off a smile like that, as well. Actually, the way that she was more innocent and childish than her age would imply was also a lot like this girl and Rimee Ruu.

"I am the head of the Fa clan, Ai Fa, and I have come here together with this man, Asuta. At Rimee Ruu's request, we have been invited to man your home's stove," Ai Fa declared, using a somewhat stiffer tone than usual.

The old woman who smelled of animal fat responded, "Welcome, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan," her voice deep yet gentle in a way that perfectly suited her appearance. "The Ruu family welcomes you. Lala, take her hunter's cloak."

"Huh? Me?!" said the girl who looked to be the youngest, sounding clearly displeased. She must have been around 13 or 14. She had a stubborn look on her boyish face, and her limbs and torso were slender, but she was actually a bit taller than that Reina girl. Her hair was a more brilliant shade of red than Rimee Ruu's and was done up into a ponytail, and her eyes were a vivid blue that was like the color of the sea.

Although she was reluctant, the girl named Lala approached Ai Fa and took her cloak. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Tito Min granny giving a wide grin.

"You said you wanted to start working the stove as soon as possible, so we

hurried up and dealt with the fat already. We'll leave the rest up to you, though. Um, who was supposed to be in charge of the stove today, again...?"

"Me, Granny Tito Min, and big sis Reina!"

"Ah, that's right. Me, Rimee, and Reina will help you out."

"Got it. Thank you!"

This honestly felt like something of an anticlimax. I'd worked myself up to be plunging into enemy territory, but these people... I mean, they all seemed totally gentle and downright friendly.

The only one who didn't look to be having a good time was that red-haired Lala girl, as everyone else was wearing wide grins. The difference between them and the people I met at the river where I did the washing or along the way there was positively striking.

They seriously were calm and composed despite being faced with Ai Fa, who had once turned down a request from the head of their clan to marry into the family, and some stranger from a foreign country (actually another world entirely).

"Um... There's something I'd like to confirm before all that..." a strangely coquettish voice called out. It had come from the younger girl who was still older than me, but didn't have a baby. Her long chestnut-colored hair ran down in a straight line over her right shoulder. And her body, with only her chest and waist covered, had some insanely sexy curves about it.

"Asuta of the Fa clan... You were born in a foreign nation, weren't you? Is there some reason that you didn't raise the matter of where you were born?"

"No. It's not like I'm trying to hide it, exactly."

I had discussed that matter with Ai Fa pretty early on. What sort of stance I should take in this world when I couldn't prove who I was, I mean. I didn't exactly have many options, though, so it made for a pretty easy decision.

"Apparently the country I was born in is completely unheard of in this land... I come from a place called Japan."

This was the path Ai Fa and I had chosen: Telling the truth.

“Six days ago, I awoke at the forest’s edge at the base of Mount Morga, but I frankly haven’t the foggiest as to how I got here. The people here know nothing of a country called Japan, and I’ve never heard of the Amusehorn continent before, either. And yet we’re still able to converse with one another. I still have absolutely no clue as to what happened.”

If you keep on building up your lies, eventually it will all come tumbling down. And on the off chance there was someone else in this world who had the same thing happen to them, trying to do so may lose me the chance to find them.

And so, I decided to leave what I didn’t know as a big question mark and openly expose my background. I did leave out the particularly crazy point about how I was supposed to be dead only to come back to life in a whole other world, though.

“Hmm... A foreigner who hasn’t ever heard of Amusehorn? And for such a person to be right smack in the middle of the continent...”

Her strangely drawn out way of talking and the sidelong glances her eyes made, along with everything else about her made this girl seriously sensual. But the way that she had her doubts about that matter showed that she was surprisingly the most cautious member of this group, and that she may have been a pretty quick thinker. I made sure to make a mental note of all that.

“I really don’t have any clue about what happened. Anyway, Ai Fa is the one who found me out there in the forest, and she’s been helping me out a lot ever since. Well, apparently she’s also been worried about letting me wander around when I don’t even know the laws of the forest’s edge, too.”

“Hmm... I didn’t know that you were such a good-natured girl, Ai Fa of the Fa clan... I thought the only thing you had any interest in was hunting giba like a man...”

There wasn’t *exactly* any ill-will behind those words, but it was a combative enough statement to make Ai Fa break out in a frown. The older girl, meanwhile, just shot the naturally silent Ai Fa a sidelong glance and gave a little “Hehehe...” Then she continued on, “Well, at any rate, I’ll be looking forward to all this. And I mean, you came here for the sake of our precious Granny Jiba, didn’t you? Apparently Papa Donda wasn’t too happy about it, but we’re all

welcoming you with gratitude, right?”

“Right. Much obliged,” I responded, looking like an idiot. This time around she brought her fingertip up to her plump lips and gave a little giggle. Was she the sort that had to imbue her each and every action with sex appeal...?

“I’m Vina Ruu, the oldest girl of the Ruu family. The next youngest is the black-haired Reina, followed by the red-haired Lala, and lastly Rimee. You’ll meet my brothers when they get back from the forest, alright?”

Next up, her smooth arm with just the perfect amount of oil on it moved to point out the older women.

“This is Tito Min, the wife of the previous head of the clan. She’s our grandmother, and she’ll be helping you out. Next to her is our mother, the current clan head Donda’s wife, Mia Lea. And then there’s my eldest brother Jiza’s spouse Sati Lea, and her son Kota. Our poor great-grandmother who you’re trying to take pity on is sleeping inside the house. We’re counting on you, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan.”

3

“Please, follow me.”

The one leading the way was the second daughter of the Ruu household, Reina Ruu.

Rimee Ruu was dealing with our blades, Tito Min Ruu was cleaning up from when they wrung out the fat, and the rest of the women each departed for their own tasks, meaning our little gathering dispersed pretty quickly.

The stoves were installed in the rear of the house. Apparently, when a house was this big, the reception room and kitchen were kept separate. There was a small separate building less than half the size of the main home, which served as the kitchen and pantry, as well as the place where giba were dissected.

“Huh? Those are stoves there too, aren’t they?”

Off to the side of the building were two stone stoves like the one in Ai Fa’s home, sitting there conspicuously. They were outdoors, but were stocked with

firewood and even had roofs installed overhead. And both of them were wide open in the front, making it sort of feel like I was being stared at by blank faces.

Neither of them had an iron pot on them, though.

“These are used for grilling meat. Papa Donda likes it better to have giba that way than in a stew,” the slender girl with long, black, braided hair said with a smile.

“I see! Giba meat makes a lot of smoke when you grill it, so something like this sure would be helpful. If you don’t mind, could we use these today, too?”

“Huh? You’ve grilled giba meat before, Asuta?”

I was a little taken aback when I looked into the girl’s big round eyes. What was that about? It felt strange, somehow, having this girl with the same name as my childhood friend call me by name. Well, my Reina kept on calling me “Asuta-chan” even when we were in high school, though.

“Yeah. In fact that was actually part of tonight’s schedule. Is that odd or something?”

“Yes, well... I heard from Rimee that she had eaten incredibly soft meat. I was sure that meant you were going to boil the giba meat...”

“Oh, I see. That really did use a cooking method that involved grilling, though. Well, it involves all sorts of crazy techniques, but I’ll handle all the confusing parts, so just lend me a hand, alright?”

“Of course! Jiba Ruu is a precious, irreplaceable member of my family, so I’m truly grateful to you! And I’ll give my all, too!”

This girl really may have been a lot like Rimee Ruu. She was bright, innocent, full of energy, and had an incredibly honest look in her eyes. On the other hand, though I don’t really care myself, she was pretty darn short, and in terms of build, she seemed to have inherited the same genes as that bundle of sex appeal that was her older sister.

She had a fine amount of meat on her arms and legs, and her chest and rear had some rather womanly curves. Her waist pulled in tight so she certainly wasn’t fat, but... Well, let’s just say I had trouble knowing where it was alright

to look.

In the first place, the women of this settlement just wore way too little. Not only did they just cover their chests and waists, but it was with a thin cloth wrapped around them, which made the contours of their bodies stand out more than they needed to.

And unlike the other women I'd seen around the settlement up until now, these girls had on "decorations." A bracelet made of grigee fruit was the norm around here, but in addition to that, they had on shiny, dark grey, metallic hair accessories, earrings, leg bracelets and the like. And also...

"...Ah. That necklace..."

"Huh?"

"You're all wearing necklaces with three horns or tusks or whatever. Is that a good luck charm or something?"

"Yes. You see, we women don't hunt giba, after all. So the men give us horns and tusks. They're imbued with the hope that we live a healthy life here at the forest's edge," the girl explained with a joyous smile, holding the necklace that had been swaying on her boldly rising and falling chest. "Children receive them from their fathers, and wives from their husbands. As proof that we didn't hunt them ourselves, they're made with just three tusks and horns, rather than a full set."

"Hmm... That's an interesting custom," I responded. As I did so, I felt a sort of crackling feeling on the back of my neck and turned around, only to find Ai Fa glaring at me with a truly chilling gaze as she leaned up against the wall of the building.

I hadn't gone and forgotten you, of course. My attention just got a little diverted when we arrived at the building, my master.

"Umm, you said you had four pots, right? For now, let's just light up one of these ones outside."

"Right. I'll show you the way," Reina Ruu said with a smile, then walked in Ai Fa's direction.

After giving a slight bow to my blank-faced benefactor, Reina Ruu slid open a door that was right next to Ai Fa.

“This is the kitchen.”

I walked forward with a “Hey there,” to Ai Fa, but my beloved benefactor simply frowned and passed through the door before me.

What was that about? I didn’t really get it, but this may turn into a real pain. But at any rate, I walked on inside, too.

“Wow... This certainly is something, isn’t it?”

The room looked to be only about twelve square meters in size, but it also didn’t have all that much furniture, making for a rather open room. In the center were the four stoves, lined up facing one another. I was a little impressed by the way that there was a log set up off to the side of each one as a surface to work on, as well as a jar with plenty of water.

The floor was simply the exposed ground, the walls were made of wood, and the ceiling had the beams showing, which wasn’t much different from Ai Fa’s home. However, along those walls were knives both big and small, ladles, what looked like a wooden pestle, and a doorless shelf lined with bowls and wooden utensils.

This really was a proper kitchen. A cookhouse.

Though I hadn’t expected it, I could feel my heart beating a little faster.

As I inspected the various tools on display, Reina Ruu, who had been crouched down in front of the stove, gave another carefree smile and then called out, “Is it alright if I light the fire? I’m prepared to do so.”

Prepared to do so, she says... She was incredibly innocent, but she also had some definite elegance about her.

By the way, they lit their stoves the same way that Ai Fa did. That meant tying something called lana grass that had been all dried out to the tip of a thin bit of firewood, then quickly rubbing it across the other firewood until the friction ignited it like a match. Then you simply transferred the fire to the firewood before that ember died out.

I still failed two out of the three times I tried, but Reina Ruu naturally managed it on her first try.

“Great. Now could you fill up the pot halfway with water? And use a strong flame?”

“Right,” Reina Ruu responded, then briskly transferred the water.

...I soon sensed a gaze on my neck again, but at this stage I still shouldn't have made any mistakes yet.

“Alright, Ai Fa, hand me the giba meat. And um, you, is it alright if I lay the meat out on this surface?”

“Yes, of course. Um, and if you don't mind, could you please call me Reina Ruu?”

“Ah, right. It just feels a little strange, since I know someone with the same name.”

After receiving the package of giba meat from Ai Fa, I opened up the pseudo-rubber tree leaf. As I did so, I caught sight of Reina Ruu staring at my face from the side and smiling.

“Was this other Reina an important girl in your life, perhaps? Is that why it's hard to call me by that name?”

“It's not exactly like that, but still...”

Why was it, then? I didn't even know the answer myself. But I mean... She was probably the person I had spent the most time with outside of my family, so even though I didn't have even a hint of romantic feelings for her, when I thought of how I'd never see her again... It really hurt.

So I didn't want to say that name too often, or hear it either.

I figured that wasn't the kind of thing I should be telling to someone who just happened to have the same name, though.

“Huh...?”

As I opened the leaf bundle, a small, dark brown hand overlapped with mine. When I looked up in surprise, I found that Reina Ruu's face had gone from a

bright smile to looking like she was about to cry.

“I’m sorry. I said something I really shouldn’t have, didn’t I? I never intended to make you look so pained, Asuta...”

“No, not at all! I’m totally fine! I was just doing a bit of thinking!”

What was going on? I didn’t come all this way to act out a romantic comedy, did I?

Ugh, the back of my head was hurting. It felt like a drill made of ice or something was grinding on in. Did I have the talent of a master fencer or something, to be able to sense someone’s glare physically like that?

It was then that I felt something slash across my back as someone said, “Thanks for waiting! Here’s your knife, Asuta!” causing me to scream out, “Agh!” I had thought a certain someone had gone and cut me with a kitchen knife.

“Rimee, you shouldn’t play around with knives!”

“Huh? But it’s in the sheath still, so it’s fine!”

As I wiped cold sweat from my brow, I quickly snatched the knife away from Rimee Ruu.

“A-Anyway, I’m going to cut up the meat, so could you get me enough poitan for everyone? And then add all of them to the pot once it reaches a boil.”

“Got it! Let’s go to the pantry, big sis!”

“Right.”

The two close sisters left the kitchen, leaving just me and my benefactor there. I hurriedly got to work brushing off the pico leaf stuck to the block of thigh meat, then took a quick glance to the side as I inserted the knife.

My benefactor was sitting cross legged with her back to the wall.

“...It doesn’t seem there’s any task for me here at all.”

“That’s not true! You’re my emotional support! It’s because you’re sitting there watching over me that I’m able to relax and cook!”

“What are you getting all worked up over?”

I am *not* getting worked up. If anything was getting to me, though, it's the way that your voice is cold and low right now.

Still, this was a valuable chance to have a one-on-one conversation with Ai Fa. At any rate, I decided to force out the feelings that had been building up inside of me, even while wincing from her cold glare.

"You know, the Ruu family are a lot friendlier than I'd been expecting, somehow. I kind of imagined a much more hot-blooded family of hunters, you know?"

"As if I'd understand how you think. And besides, this is my first time meeting any of the women of the family aside from Rimee and Jiba Ruu."

"Ah, so you've met the men, then?"

"Donda Ruu took his three sons along when he asked me to marry into the family. If you want to see hot-blooded folks, then just wait for sunset."

"Hey, it's not like I *wanted* that..."

By the time we reached that point in the conversation, the two sisters had made it back. They were each holding what looked like a sort of flat basket, which had a mountain of those pseudo-potatoes, the poitan, in it. 14 people x 2 each = 28 total, which was certainly a sizeable amount.

Still, the sisters had one more helper behind them now. It was Granny Tito Min Ruu, with her plump physique and hair that was going white.

"Sorry for the wait. I'll be helping out now, too. Ooh, this is a splendid giba leg."

With her wrinkly face with a great complexion to it, she then turned towards Ai Fa.

"Ai Fa of the Fa clan. I heard that you've been managing the Fa house all by yourself, so does that mean that you're the one who finished off this giba?"

"Yes, that's right," Ai Fa responded with a nod, her tone completely unchanging. She did move to stand up, though.

"That's certainly something. And the Fa bloodline has grown much thinner than the other houses, hasn't it? I truly can't even imagine your way of life, for a

woman like you to live all on her own without relying on anyone.”

“It’s really not such a big deal. My father had taught me how to hunt giba, as well as everything else I needed to survive at the forest’s edge. I’m able to keep on living just fine on my own.”

“Living, and then dying too?” the old woman asked, wearing a smile as if she had seen through something. Ai Fa opened her mouth to respond, but then closed it again without saying anything. “If a woman goes hunting, then she can’t give birth to children, right? You’ll live on your own and die the same, and the Fa clan will go down with you. Would you be satisfied with that, Ai Fa of the Fa clan?”

“There are countless examples of clans that have died out like that even here at the forest’s edge. It’s not as if every house possesses the power of the Ruu clan.”

“Oh? And what is power, then? Reina, Rimee, or I most certainly couldn’t take down a giba. No, not just that, there likely aren’t many men who could hunt down a giba on their own, either. By that way of thinking, there are few folks out there as powerful as you, wouldn’t you say?”

“That’s...”

“But the Fa bloodline is wasting away while the Ruu bloodline prospers. Now why is that...? If you think on that question, maybe the Fa bloodline won’t need to end after all.”

“Hey, what are you talking about, Granny Tito Min?” Rimee Ruu asked, looking quite bored as she poked at a poitan. Her grandmother looked back and narrowed her eyes, seeming like she was rather enjoying herself.

“The day will come when you understand, Rimee. Now then, it looks like the pot has started boiling, doesn’t it?”

Apparently they didn’t use last names when talking amongst family.

“Ah! I’ll put them in!” Rimee joyfully declared, grabbing a thin kitchen knife from the wall. Then, she looked down at the bubbling pot and let out a, “Huh?” along with a tilt of her little head. “Isn’t this way too little water? And also, we’re gonna heat all these poitan in just one pot?”

“Yeah, that’ll be fine. If you want to eat poitan like you had last night, then chuck them all in.”

“Alright!”

She cut into the poitan in the mountain, and then plopped them into the pot one after another. It was around that time that I finished cutting the thigh meat. After cutting off the fat that I’d use for cooking, I cut up the red meat into bits that would be easy to mince, so it wasn’t that big of a hassle. There was probably roughly five kilos of the stuff in total.

Then, Granny Tito Min turned to me with a smile.

“Asuta of the Fa clan. You’re more skilled at cutting meat than even women are, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I was a chef in training back in my country.”

“Hmm...” Granny Tito Min shot back, her eyes narrowing even further. “A woman who hunts giba, and a man who specializes at the stove. You two certainly make for an interesting pair. I suppose there may not be any need for me to go butting in, after all.”

“That’s right, Granny Tito Min. It’s not good to go butting into the affairs of other houses,” Reina Ruu chimed in, using a somewhat childish tone.

There was a really cozy feeling in the air, somehow. I didn’t let that get my guard down too much, though.

I looked over to see how Ai Fa was getting along, only to find my benefactor with a rather sour look on her face.

4

Now then, time to change gears and focus.

I got the feeling that I had been distracted by the voices all around and had been starting to neglect the task at hand. And doing something like that would soil my honor as a chef, wouldn’t it? And if that happened while I was using my old man’s knife, he would never forgive me.

“The cooking method for these poitan isn’t actually that tricky. I’d imagine you could even start making them yourselves tomorrow, assuming your grandmother Jiba Ruu likes them.”

As I made that statement, I saw the poitan start to boil. When I went to stir them with a ladle so they wouldn’t burn, I found that they were already getting pretty sticky.

“Um, could it be that you intend to heat them until all the moisture is gone,” Reina Ruu asked.

“That’s right,” I replied, only for a troubled look to appear in her round eyes.

“But if you do that, the poitan will harden like clay, won’t they? I don’t think it would be possible to eat that...”

“Huh? You’ve heated a poitan that much before, Reina Ruu?”

Reina stopped and stared for a second, but then responded, “Yes!” with a twinkle in her eyes. “I tried out all sorts of methods to see if there was a way to make poitan easier to eat. Everyone yelled at me not to waste food, though.”

Huh? Despite what she was saying, there was a wide grin spreading across her face. Why would she make an expression like that now? It couldn’t be because I called her by name for the first time, right?

Gah. Focus, focus...

“Well then, I’ll leave the poitan up to you, Reina Ruu. Still... I’m glad to hear someone amongst the people of the forest’s edge was experimenting with cooking methods, too.”

“Right. If Granny Jiba hadn’t ended up like that, I don’t think the matter would have ever bothered me, though... So I just need to wait for all the moisture to be gone?”

“Yeah. And take care so that it doesn’t burn.”

“Right!”

Now then... There was still some time till sunset, but we had taken care of everything that we could for now.

“Now then, I’m going to start preparing the giba meat. Regulating the heat is pretty tricky with this cooking method, by the way. But I think you could apply it in a lot of different situations, so definitely feel free to memorize it.”

As I said that, I went ahead and opened up the bundle of shoulder roast. When I did so, Rimee Ruu let out a big, “Huh? That’s a weird shape! Is it really giba meat?”

“Hmm? What’s so strange about it? It’s just the meat from between the giba’s back and shoulder.”

“Wow! I’ve never eaten that before!”

“Huh? But big families like the Ruu clan bring back the whole giba, right?”

“That’s just to skin off the pelt. We only eat the rear legs, Asuta,” Granny Tito Min replied.

“But why? The rear legs alone shouldn’t be enough feed such a large family, surely.”

“It is, because the men of the main Ruu house hunt two giba a day. The hind legs provide enough meat that sometimes we even have some go bad.”

“Two a day...?” I was a little shocked to hear that.

Well, if we’re talking a giba in the 70 kilo range, then the rear legs would amount to about 20 kilo, which meant two would add up to 40 kilo... It certainly would be hard to eat such a large quantity of meat in a single day. Even considering the amount that they smoked, the legs really may be enough.

Something else came to mind, too: One giba’s horns and tusks only got you enough aria and poitan for ten people. That meant that hunting one giba a day wouldn’t provide enough for the 12 people (plus one infant) of the Ruu family. It left quite a surplus, but they needed to take down two a day.

Of course, I did understand that this system would always result in excess meat. That was plainly clear even from looking at our pantry.

The meat from the giba Ai Fa took down six days ago was around 45 kilos, which shrunk to about 40 kilos after the pico leaves absorbed the moisture. But Ai Fa and I could only eat around a kilo a day and it would only stay preserved

for about 20 days, so at this rate I'd end up having to smoke over half of it.

On top of that, Ai Fa needed to hunt down one giba every five days for their tusks and horns, so the only choice for handling that excess was to simply leave it for the animals out in the forest.

And so, since it was a waste to use all that meat I had carefully bloodlet and prepared just for smoking, I was actually happy for the chance to use up around 10 kilos of the stuff today. Plus it was just sad to imagine a family this size having only ever eaten thigh meat.

As I cut up the shoulder roast, I glanced up at the bright, cheerful face of Granny Tito Min, who was standing right in front of me.

"So after you skin the giba and removes its tusks, horns, and hind legs, you just throw the rest of it away?"

"That's right. So that it does not end up in the hands of the people of the forest's edge, we throw it down into the valley. There's a mundt nest down there, so they return the souls of the giba to the forest."

"Wait, 'so that it does not end up in the hands of the people of the forest's edge'...?"

"Yes. If someone who lacks the strength to hunt giba was to find it they may end up eating nothing but discarded meat, giving birth to a people lacking in pride."

The pride of the people of the forest's edge, huh?

Seeing as I was born in another world, I couldn't just accept that quite so easily.

Well, what I could accept least of all, though, was the way that they treated such delicious roast and rib meat as garbage!

"Just for reference, what becomes of families whose men are injured or grow old and are unable to hunt giba?"

"They have no choice but to rely on extended family. And in cases where family cannot support them, they need to rely on a more powerful family in turn. But as long as they are capable of at least doing some sort of work,

everyone should have the right to eat giba meat, even if they cannot hunt them down.”

“I see.”

That explanation was enough to quell the ethical concerns I was having.

“I got it, now. Thank you. Now then... After the meat is more or less cut up like this, the next step is to beat it into ground meat with your knife.”

Once more, my attention turned back to cooking. It wasn't the time to be gathering information right now.

“It's easier to use a bigger knife to start with. You can rely on the weight of the knife rather than putting too much strength into it, then tenderize the meat thoroughly like this.”

“What's that?! It looks fun! I wanna try!”

“Hmm? Right, then... I suppose I can leave that much up to you.”

We still had leeway left, after all. And as long as I handle the finishing touches, it should be fine. Plus thinking of tomorrow on, it was important to teach them at least a bit about making giba meat taste delicious.

“Whoa, it's all slimy! This is neat!”

If you just heard that you would think she was playing around, but I couldn't see anything unsafe about the way that Rimee Ruu was handling her knife. Though she was still young, she seemed plenty capable when it came to work around the house.

“U-Um, Asuta...! I'd like to give that a try, too!” said Reina Ruu, looking over my way as she continued to stir the poitan soup.

Even if she didn't ask so desperately, there was still 14 people worth of giba meat, 7 kilos or so in total, to make into hamburger meat. If she wanted to pound it, she could do as much as she pleased.

“Ah, the poitan are looking pretty good. Um, could you carry them like that?”

“Two of us can carry them if we pass a pole through to act as a grip!”

“That would be a big help. Well then, Ai Fa...”

“If this is all you need, then I should be able to handle it,” Reina Ruu said with a smile and a grigee pole in her hands.

In that case, it would be Ai Fa and Reina Ruu... Or so I thought, but my animal instincts were screaming that I shouldn’t pair those two up.

And so, I passed the grigee pole through the sideways handles while taking care not to get burned, and then Reina Ruu and I carried it on outside.

Ai Fa didn’t have as much of a chilling gaze right now, but ever since she had that conversation with Granny Tito Min, she seemed to have been thinking about something with a bit of a gloomy look in her eyes. And man, I hated that. Ai Fa all down in the dumps was the last thing that I wanted to see.

“So, what do we do with this pot now?”

“Right, we should place it in a spot where it’ll get lots of sunlight, and then let it dry out. And I suppose we should spread a bit of water around the outside of the pot so that it doesn’t burn.”

“Got it!”

In spite of my current concerns about Ai Fa, I couldn’t help but be impressed by the work ethic of this Reina Ruu girl. Not only did she work swiftly, she was also a quick learner. I guess this was what you’d call being highly intuitive. You could tell her one thing, and she’d learn ten. And just like Rimee Ruu, she seemed to earnestly have a strong desire to learn the techniques in order to help out her grandmother.

Not long after we carried out the poitan, Reina Ruu set to work pounding the meat and did an even better job than Rimee Ruu, resulting in such beautifully minced meat that I didn’t even need to add any finishing touches. And there were plenty of knives so Granny Tito Min joined in too, meaning it wasn’t long before the seven kilos of giba meat was converted into a little pink mountain.

They really were excellent pupils.

“Huh? Asuta, there’s still meat left over here! Should I make this all slimy, too?”

“Ah, just leave that as is. It’s for a bit of something different.”

I figured if her teeth were so bad we might need some soup, so I set aside three kilos of the roast for that in addition to the seven kilos of meat we had for the burgers. Rimee gave a disappointed sounding “Tch!” and pouted.

“It’s a little out of order, but let’s prepare the aria next. We need a number of other things for this, so could you lead me to the pantry, Rimee Ruu?”

“Yeah!”

“Ah, and could you please light the stove for another pot soon? Ai Fa, I’ll need your help carrying things, alright?”

With an indifferent expression on her face, Ai Fa took her back off of the wall.

Tito Min took charge of the stoves, while the other four of us headed off for the pantry.

There were three doors to the small building, leading from the right to left to the kitchen, the pantry, and the dissection room. When Rimee Ruu led me through the middle door, I couldn’t help but let out a “Wow...”

I hadn’t been expecting this.

The pantry had rows and rows of ingredients I had never seen before all lined up.

“What is all this? It’s amazing, like some sort of mountain of treasure!” I yelled out, unable to stop myself.

Doorless shelves lined the roughly 12 square meter-large room. On them were stupidly big pumpkin-looking fruits that were bright red like a tomato, green vegetables that looked like roses made of lettuce, some mysterious mass that looked like a bundle of coiled snakes, a blue-skinned fruit that was all spikey like a durian... At any rate, there were a whole ton of ingredients aside from just aria and poitan.

There were the familiar pico and lilo leaves hanging from the walls. Hanging next to them, though, was a mysterious two meter-long plant that was thick like bamboo but also hairy like burdock root, as well as what looked like yellow dried persimmons.

And yet, I didn’t see the giba meat anywhere. There was a door in the back of

the room, though, so that was probably where they stored it. In other words, this 12 square meter-large space was almost entirely filled with new ingredients. Honestly, it made for a truly heavenly sight.

“Asuta, the aria are over here!”

Rimee Ruu had been darting amongst the shelves, and now she was approaching a corner on the right side of the room. Sure enough, there were both aria and poitan over where she was. And a truly impressive number of them, at that.

“So there really is a huge variety of vegetables in this world, too...”

“World...? But yeah, it’s neat how the taste changes depending on what you put in the pot! I really like tarapa! And big sis Reina, you’re fond of tino leaves, right?!”

“But Rimee Ruu, people can live off of just aria and poitan, right?”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah, apparently so! But it’d get boring eating the same thing each and every day, right?”

I see. So all these foods were luxury items for a powerful family, huh? But I’m sure they were still highly nutritious. Even if they were luxury items, they probably weren’t full-on indulgences.

Now that I thought of it, all the women here had some meat on their bones, aside from Rimee and Lala Ruu. Plus, they looked incredibly healthy on top of that. And ever since I figured out the poitan was a grain I had been thinking that the aria being the lone vegetable in a diet may be a little insufficient, so I assumed they must have been getting the missing nutrients from these vegetables.

But still... No matter which vegetables they may be using, they’re still just chucking them in a giba stew with dissolved poitan, right?

What a waste. I mean, just imagine all the fantastic dishes I could make with all these ingredients... Ah, just thinking of it caused me to tremble.

“Do you want to use these ingredients too, perhaps?” Reina Ruu asked with a reserved smile.

Though I could feel myself being incredibly tempted, I ultimately gave a firm “No,” back. “There’s no time for tasting, so although it’s a shame, we’d better not. It would be a real issue if I used ingredients I had never seen before and ended up wrecking the dish, right?”

I mean, it had taken me four whole days to figure out the poitan. I couldn’t exactly just toss aside Ai Fa’s feelings and my pride as a chef to head off on that adventure.

Now that I think of it... I thought, turning around to look at Ai Fa, only to find her looking at the various ingredients with little interest. *Right... She needs to take down one giba every five days in order to obtain the bare minimum amount of food we need. I can’t let myself go getting all envious of folks who are better off...*

As someone who grew up in an eatery, I had nothing to do with ingredients like caviar and foie gras. So I just had to think of these as similar luxury items, outside of the reach of common folk.

At any rate, we grabbed enough aria, fruit wine, and bundled up rock salt for 14 people, and left the pantry.

And then... they were there waiting for us.

“What’s this? Giba crap? Don’t go leaving junk in the middle of my path!”

His thick, vulgar voice resounded like thunder. And I could clearly see the tension in Ai Fa’s face.

“Hmm? Oh, Papa Donda, welcome home! You’re pretty early today, aren’t you?!” Rimee Ruu happily exclaimed while holding the wine flask as she ran towards him.

Immediately after we left the pantry, we had found four men with an animalistic stench about them standing in our way. The large man in the lead who had stared down at the pot of poitan in disgust was now glaring straight at me past Rimee Ruu.

“Oh, so you’re the outsider who’s been staying in the Fa house? I’d heard you were pale, but man are you ever one white kid!”

Even the breath of this large, bearded man stunk of animals.

Naturally, this was Rimee Ruu's father, the head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu.



Chapter 6: Blessed Night

1

The aura these four men of the Ruu family were giving off was seriously fierce.

The one standing in the lead must have been the head of the clan, Donda Ruu. I had little doubt about that, thanks to both his age and his personality. I'd guess his height at over 180 centimeters, and his weight at no less than 90 kilos.

He had on a giba fur cloak, a sleeveless vest, a cloth around his waist, a necklace made with a crazy number of fangs and tusks, footwear held on by leather straps, and a positively massive blade and knife. The other three were all dressed in the same manner. They didn't hold a candle to the overpowering presence of Donda Ruu, though.

He was a mountain of muscles from his arms to his shoulders to his thighs to his calves, his chest was incredibly bulky, and his waist was thick like a massive old tree. And his face was overpowering too, with blackish-brown hair reminiscent of a giba's stiff fur, a beard on the lower half, a big mouth, nose, and eyes, and deep wrinkles on his skin that reminded me of the cracks you would see on a rock face.

The man should have been decently along in years, but it was hard to remember that when looking at the piercing glare from his blue eyes, his massive boulder-like frame, or the almost physical pressure coming off of him. This was clearly a man full of vitality, whose mind also remained sharp.

To sum it all up, this brawny, huge man was like a giba given human form.

Compared to that, well...

The men standing behind him at least looked like actual human beings. The one on Donda Ruu's right in particular looked rather gentle and good-natured. He may not have been as big as his father, but he was still awfully big. His arms

looked to be about as thick as my lower legs, and they were currently easily carrying a young giba that must have weighed around 50 kilos. His face also had the same sort of deep, rocky wrinkles as his father, but his dark brown hair was cut short, and perhaps because of his thin eyes, he looked like he was grinning about something. On top of that, his mouth had a very calm expression about it, too. But though he seemed gentle and good-natured, he looked like his large frame held even more power than his father's, making me clearly feel that he was someone I would never want to piss off.

He seemed to have a number of years under his belt too, but the other two were definitely still young. One looked to be a bit older than me and was both slender and tall, with a taut face that reminded me of a young wolf. He had a bit of a long face with a high nose, and a rigidly tight mouth. Honestly, he may have just been a pretty handsome man. He had black hair, which was rare for the village, and he grew it out long and tied it up behind his neck. However, his wide, slitted eyes beneath his thin eyebrows were just like his father's, glaring like some sort of wild animal. In terms of the impression he gave off, he may have actually been a lot like his old man.

The last of the brothers was clearly younger than me. Back in my world, he probably would have been in middle school. He was a bit shorter than I was, which made him look strikingly small compared to the other men. Of course, despite that, there wasn't even a hint of weakness about him, and together he and the previous man were carrying a giba that looked to weigh around 100 kilos on a grigee pole. His yellowish-brown hair was neither long nor short, his eyes were a bit of a pale color, and if it weren't for the rebellious, bratty look on his face, he would actually probably be pretty cute. His face honestly reminded me a lot of that Lala girl who unhappily took Ai Fa's cloak. By the way, on his opposite shoulder from the grigee pole he had the first bow and arrows I had seen in this world.

At any rate, those were the men of the Ruu family; the head of the clan, Donda Ruu, and his three sons.

"Ooh, this is a nice way to greet me, Rimee!" the girl's father said, his rough fingers snatching the container of fruit wine from his daughter's arms.

"Ah, you can't! We need that for cooking!"

“Ha! ‘Cooking’... that’s a pretentious little word you used there.”

He pulled the lid off of the container with his tough white teeth that looked like a giba’s tusks, and then poured the red liquid inside down his thick throat. The fruit wine wouldn’t have as much alcohol as your average wine but it should still definitely have some, and yet he drank it dry in one go and then threw the empty container on the ground.

“Hey there, little Fa hunter girl. We haven’t met since your father passed away, so I guess that means it’s been about two years now, huh? This is our first time seeing each other in a good while, but I don’t believe I heard a greeting out of you...”

His fiercely shining eyes were fixed clearly on Ai Fa. My benefactor, meanwhile, practically pushed me aside and stood face to face with the large man.

“It has indeed been a while, Donda Ruu, leader of the Ruu clan. I am visiting here today as per a request from Rimee Ruu, accompanying the member of my house known as Asuta as he mans your stove.”

“Hmph. I see you’re just as much an uncute brat as always. Even though if it weren’t for that sharp glare of yours, you’d be every bit the looker your mom was.”

His massive face that was like a mix between a giba and a lion got so close to Ai Fa’s that it was almost touching her nose.

“I see you’re still pretending to be a man, hanging giba horns around your neck. So you still don’t understand that no matter how much you may polish your skills, you’re still just a weak little woman, Ai Fa of the Fa clan?”

“I protect my house, as the head of the Fa clan. And I’ve achieved that for two years, now.”

Surprisingly, Ai Fa didn’t back down even an inch despite being faced with such a terrifying man.

I couldn’t see her expression from where I was standing, but the fire burning in her eyes surely wasn’t losing out to Donda Ruu in the least.

It was almost as if a wildcat were facing off with a herd of giba.

“Ha! What do you think of that, Darmu? Maybe we should have you marry into the Fa clan instead, huh? Then their clan wouldn’t have to die out. You’d have to handle the stove and raising the kids, though!”

The large man’s thunder-like laughter boomed through the air.

The second young son, the one with the same eyes as his father, responded. Those violent-looking eyes were glaring at Ai Fa with clear scorn.

“Sorry, but I’ve got no interest in a woman with eyes like a beast. You know, rather than a man or a woman, she’s really just a good-for-nothing.”

Instinctually, I started to step forward. However, Ai Fa, who was standing diagonally in front of me, soon took control of the situation.

“We have to prepare dinner. We’ll see you again once we’re done.”

“That’s right! We still have a lot of cooking to do! Papa, you and my brothers better not get in the way!”

I suppose even this massive beast of a man was still just her father to his daughter. When Rimee Ruu picked up the empty container and started complaining, she didn’t show even the slightest hint of being intimidated.

On the other hand, Reina Ruu, who was holding a flat basket filled with aria, looked a little troubled by the face-off between Ai Fa and the men.

Donda Ruu looked at his daughters, gave another “Ha!” and then turned around. “How ridiculous. It’s still this bright out, but you’re putting off other work in order to prepare dinner? There’s no point to wasting time and effort when it comes to devouring the life of a giba!”

“I told you, it’s for Granny Jiba! The food Asuta makes is really soft and yummy!”

As his angry youngest daughter yelled that at his back, Donda Ruu changed his tone just a bit.

“When people of the forest’s edge become unable to eat giba meat, they simply die. Even if that’s a member of the Ruu family, and our great elder at that, we simply can’t go against the natural laws of the forest.”

With that, he started walking heavily off. And then, something unbelievable happened: Rimee Ruu landed a flying jump kick squarely in the middle of his back.

“Papa Donda, you dummy! Why do you say such awful things about Granny Jiba?! Don’t you care about her?!”

“That’s right! Granny Jiba is the oldest person not just in the Ruu family, but in our whole settlement, right?! Should the head of the Ruu clan really be looking down on her like that?!” Reina Ruu loudly added, her eyes tearing up a bit.

Donda Ruu simply let out a disinterested “Hmph,” and disappeared into the shadow of the building.

“Well then, shall we finish putting away the giba?” a deep voice asked as if nothing had happened. The mood had been incredibly tense, but that actually helped to calm things down a bit.

“Right. Now that I think of it, we actually haven’t given our names yet, have we? I’m the oldest son of the Ruu family, Jiza Ruu. Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa house, you have my deepest gratitude for coming to help the elder of our clan, Jiba Ruu.”

Naturally, that had come from the large man with the good-natured look and narrow eyes.

“With that said, the Ruu family letting someone else man their stove is something that likely hasn’t occurred since we devoted our blades to the western god Selva. Please understand that our clan’s head, Donda Ruu, is not in a position where he can openly welcome that.”

“Heh! Pops has always been soft on little Rimee!” the yellowish-brown haired boy chimed in. With that, Rimee Ruu turned to face him.

“Oh, you want to go at it, *little Ludo*?!”

“Hey, a squirt like you has no right to call someone else little!”

The two were glaring at each other, reminding me of little puppies. Compared to what had just happened, it was a downright adorable sight.

“That little fellow is our youngest brother, Ludo Ruu. And this is the second

son, Darmu Ruu. It pains us all to think of Jiba Ruu's future. If you're able to save her soul, then you'll earn the true gratitude of all of us, as well as our deep respect."

His mouth was making a relaxed smile, but perhaps because his eyes were so narrow, I couldn't read how he was really feeling.

"...However, if you injure the members of our family while manning the Ruu family stove, we'll have no choice but to take up our blades. Please make sure to keep that in mind. Well then, let's get going, Darmu, Ludo."

The three brothers disappeared into the dissection room, carrying the two giba along with them. Once they were fully out of sight, I gave a deep sigh.

"Man... They sure were something. This was actually my first time seeing any of the men of the forest's edge up close and personal. Are they all like that?"

"The Ruu clan holds an especially great amount of power amongst the people of the forest's edge. It's only natural that the men who support that family would also be strong," Ai Fa said, looking me in the face for the first time in a while. "Even if you're getting cold feet now, there's no turning back at this point, Asuta."

"Nah, maybe it's because I'm used to living with such a scary benefactor, but I'm not losing my nerve at all... Ow!" That was me being kicked in the leg. "But still, it's certainly the case for the father too, but that oldest brother is seriously scary. This is honestly getting me all fired up!"

With that, the two close sisters suddenly turned toward me in perfect sync.

"Asuta, you're amazing!"

"Huh?"

"The one who's scariest when you get him mad is big bro Jiza. I still weep like a little kid whenever he scolds me."

"H-huh..."

"And... he was actually the one who was most opposed to inviting you two here, not papa. He places rules above everything else, so apparently he really couldn't accept the idea of letting someone else man our stove."

“That’s important information, so thanks. Now I’m getting even more fired up!”

I wanted to scratch my head, but both my hands were occupied by aria, so I couldn’t.

“Anyway... Rimee Ruu, is there any fruit wine left in the pantry? To be honest, we’ll be in trouble if we don’t have any to work with.”

“It’s fine! We’ve got lots, because papa will sometimes drink three or four in a day! And it’s a bit of a trip to the post town to be doing that very often.”

Phew, that’s good. Looks like we’re still hanging in there, somehow.

At any rate, what I had to do still hadn’t changed. I just had to use everything available to me to make the best dish that I could.

I’m not just up against Granny Jiba. There’s also that father who’s like a giant giba, and the older brother who looks like he might be in charge behind the scenes. My life might really be in danger if I don’t satisfy all of them...

With such an intense clan head and heir, the future of the Ruu clan was certainly secure.

Ah, now that I think of it...

This actually wasn’t my first time being face to face with one of the men of the forest’s edge. The night after I was dropped into this other world, I met a perfectly fine example of a man. One who planned to use Ai Fa’s despair over losing her father as part of a wicked plot, had the tables turned on him, and was tossed into the river. Yes, a *splendid* person indeed.

That guy’s the heir to the Suun clan, right...?

Didn’t that go to show that if there was a war between the Suun and the Ruu, it was already clear who would come out on top?

As such silly thoughts floated through my head, I returned to the kitchen alongside my benefactor and the rest of the women.

“Oh, my... Are the preparations for tonight’s dinner already complete...?”

By the time this new person arrived, we really were just about to hit the climax of our preparations. The aria and giba soup was complete, and we had already baked up a good number of the watery poitan, so all that was left was cooking the hamburger patties and aria.

“Oh, how strange, Vina. It’s rare for you to come here to the kitchen when you’re not on duty,” Granny Tito Min said, turning to the girl.

The one standing in the doorway looking us all over was Vina Ruu, the oldest daughter of the house. She was listlessly playing with her long, chestnut-colored hair and giving a seductive smile.

“I wasn’t busy, so I figured I’d come take a look... but by all appearances there isn’t anything left for me to help with, though.”

Just as she had guessed, we had already finished the preparations for dinner, even though there was still a good bit of time till sunset. What led us to this result was the fact that Rimee Ruu, Reina Ruu, and Tito Min were all far more skilled than I had expected.

But, well, that was a happy miscalculation, I suppose.

“All that’s left is to cook the giba meat, so it’s fine! Big sis Vina, if you help out all the cooking will end up as a charred lump, so could you leave us be?”

“Cut it out, Rimee. Not in front of the guests...” Vina Ruu said, her overly elegant limbs wriggling in embarrassment.

That girl seriously was like a bundle of sex appeal.

“Still, I’m just a bit worried... I mean, Papa Donda certainly seems like he’s been in a bad mood since yesterday, right?”

“Oh, just don’t pay him any mind! Asuta and Ai Fa came here and took on this big job all for Granny Jiba’s sake,” yelled out Rimee Ruu from her place at Ai Fa’s side, and then she puffed up her cheeks.

Just an aside, the person standing next to me right then was Reina Ruu. Vina Ruu’s pale eyes gently moved back and forth between me and her little sister.

“You may say that, but if Papa Donda or Jiza get angry, it’ll be a real problem,

right? What do you think, Reina?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Asuta really is amazing at cooking, after all! I’m sure Granny Jiba will happily eat this meal!” Reina Ruu said, with such overwhelming trust in me shining in her eyes that I couldn’t help but feel a little grateful.

After looking into her sister’s eyes, Vina Ruu gave a “Hmm...” and broke out in a smile that told me she was enjoying herself. “Your specialty is manning the stove, Reina, so if you’re willing to say all that, then I feel a bit relieved myself... By the way, what is all that stuff piled up there?”

“Ah, this is poitan. When you heat up poitan, dry it out, rehydrate it, and then bake it, it ends up like this,” I replied, only for Vina Ruu’s slightly droopy eyes to shoot open wide in surprise.

“This is poitan...? And that meat is in a sort of strange shape, too...”

“Ah, with that we chopped giba meat down into fine bits and then reformed it. Doing so makes the sort of tough giba meat a whole lot softer,” I replied, causing Vina Ruu to give another “Hmm...” as she thought the matter over.

“I’ve never seen such strange cooking even in the Genos post town. You really did come from a far off country, didn’t you?”

“That’s right. This stuff isn’t considered strange in the least back where I come from, though,” I replied, then I looked back toward Reina Ruu at my side. “Still, it’s probably pretty hard to memorize this cooking method after only seeing it once, right? It may be good for you to try putting meat chopped up like this in broth from tomorrow on...”

“Put it in broth, you say?”

“Yeah. If it’s chopped up this finely, you can pretty much drink it down without any real chewing. And don’t you think that if you put it over a little heat after chopping it, it’ll strengthen the flavor and make it taste even better?”

“Chop up the meat, heat it a bit, and then add it to the soup, right? In that case, should I use a low heat and cook it slowly like we’re doing today?”

“That’s right. You’d probably be fine adding the sliced meat and aria together at the end, but I really do think it’s best to add the finely chopped meat at the

start and then cook it over a low flame. It'll act as more of a stock that way, and make the whole soup more delicious."

"I understand. Thank you so much... You really do know all sorts of surprising things, don't you, Asuta?"

"No, well, it's just that my family made a living by cooking, so I guess I've picked up a few tricks."

When faced with such a look of earnest respect, it was frankly a bit painfully embarrassing. I mean, I was still just a half-baked chef in training, after all.

But even so, Jiba Ruu was someone precious to Ai Fa and she had grown so weak, so I wanted to do anything I could to help her reclaim the joy of eating.

Ai Fa had said that eating was a means of continuing to live. Even if they were a people who didn't pay any heed to the matter of taste, as long as they still placed such importance on eating, then I should be able to draw forth that joy.

Both Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu had called my cooking delicious.

I've sought out meaning, and value, and happiness in delicious food. In that case, I should still be able to be of use, even in this completely different environment with its own sense of values.

I have no idea what sort of prank threw me into this world, but I'd still live my life in a way that was true to myself. My one and only redeeming feature was my cooking skill, but if I could use that to help even a little to heal the hearts of the people Ai Fa cared about, then what more could I wish for?

It was then that a third "Hmm..." escaped from Vina Ruu's sensual lips. "You're a mysterious man, Asuta. I had heard that people who made a living as chefs only existed within the stone walls of the city..."

"I wasn't born in any place as impressive as the capital. I guess we can just chalk it up to having different cultures, though."

Just what was Vina Ruu's attention fixated on? She didn't have the open animosity about her that Donda Ruu and the other men had shown, and she didn't seem all that wary of me, either. However, I also couldn't wipe away the impression that I was being calmly, carefully inspected.

“Well, I’m not all that well versed in cooking anyway. But if you can cause Granny Jiba to find at least a little happiness in life, then I would really appreciate it. So give the rest your all, I guess.”

With that comment, Vina Ruu exited the kitchen.

Once that supply of excess pheromones was gone, I silently breathed a sigh of relief.

“That Vina Ruu certainly is unusual.”

“That’s certainly true. Vina may just be the most different one out of all seven siblings,” Granny Tito Min replied in a rather informal tone, looking rather pleased. “She’s certainly not a bad person, but there are times where I just plain have no idea what she’s thinking. I mean, she’s already 20, but she hasn’t seriously considered any talks of marriage.”

“Huh... That’s certainly unusual, considering how lovely of a woman she is.”

The instant I said that, stares suddenly shot my way from all directions. Well, maybe that wasn’t the right way to put it, since there were only five people here in the kitchen, myself included.

“So you like women like big sis Vina, Asuta?” Reina Ruu asked, staring intently at my face with a strangely pained look.

“Hmm? No, I meant more in a general sense rather than my own point of view, you know?”

“...Right. Even I think of her that way, despite being family.”

So then why were you looking at me like that?

“But big sis Vina is 20. You’re 17 just like Ai Fa, right, Asuta?” Rimee Ruu asked. She had a bit of a puzzled look on her face.

“W-what does my age have to do with this? And wait, why is everyone paying so much attention to what I said in the first place?”

“...When you so openly praise a woman, it’s only natural to think that you may wish to take her as a wife,” Ai Fa chimed in, despite having been silent for quite a while now. Her chilly tone and gaze had me at a loss for words, but I soon pulled myself back together.

“Oh, is that so? I suppose I acted pretty ill-mannered there. I’m still pretty inexperienced with the customs of the forest’s edge, so I beg your forgiveness. But I most certainly didn’t mean it in that way.”

“You don’t need to be so formal about it. There isn’t anybody around who would feel bad about having a family member praised, after all,” Granny Tito Min said, but Reina Ruu still looked depressed, Rimee Ruu kept looking at me with a puzzled expression, and Ai Fa... Well, with the way she was turning her face away, I certainly couldn’t say that she was in a good mood.

I really didn’t mean it that way, though...

I mean, I wasn’t exactly in any position to go falling head over heels for anyone right now, anyway. But this was a whole other world. Their views on love and marriage were probably totally different then they were back in my world, so I’d have to be more careful about how I treated such matters in the future.

But still, at any rate...

At least for now, Ai Fa had a monopoly on my heart.

What exactly was this feeling, anyway? Was it gratitude and a desire to repay my savior? The natural affinity felt for someone I was living together with? A feeling of respect for her and her character? Even I didn’t really get it.

But I definitely thought that it was only because I had someone like Ai Fa around that I was able to live confidently in this other world. That much was for certain.

“Well then, should we get started on finishing up?”

When I said that, everyone’s varied expressions gained a bright, lively hopefulness once again.

We may have been from different houses and walks of life, but right now we were all able to strive for the same goal: To bring peace of heart to Jiba Ruu, the oldest of the people of the forest’s edge.

The time to settle things had come at last.

It was twilight, the time when day blended into night.

We were in the banquet hall, which was lit by candles placed here and there throughout.

Reina Ruu was accompanying the grand elder of the Ruu family, Jiba Ruu, who was staggering into the room. With that, everyone had gathered at last.

The room sprawled out over twice the area of Ai Fa's, at around 30 square meters. There wasn't much difference in the room itself, but the walls were imposingly decorated with the men's swords, bows, fur cloaks, and short spear-looking weapons suspended from what seemed to be hooks made out of giba bones. And on the wall behind the head of the household was a monstrously huge giba's pelt and ominous skull. Just how much must that beast have weighed when it was alive?

Given my occupation, I shouldn't have had any real interest in pelts or animal skeletons, but even I couldn't help but feel a little in awe at the size of the thing.

"Hmph. Looks like we're all finally here," Donda Ruu contemptuously muttered as he heartily chugged down fruit wine.

Jiba Ruu sat down quietly by his side. It was hard to tell if she was incredibly small, or if the man was just far too big, making her look that way.

She wore not only the normal single-piece attire of a married woman, but also a cloth jacket that looked like a shawl, and something that seemed like some sort of magical tool jangling around her neck. She was so small that she almost looked like some sort of shriveled up fruit.

It was hard to tell because her back was bent, but she was definitely at least shorter than Reina Ruu, and her silver-haired head didn't look like it would come up much higher than Rimee Ruu's.

That hair that was utterly lacking in color was done up in twin braids like her granddaughter standing by her side, and her face made me think of a wrinkly monkey. In fact, she was so wrinkled that I couldn't even tell where her eyes were.

The fingers peeking out of her shawl were like withered branches, looking quite thin and weak. It was as if her very existence was a dying flame flickering out, and when Reina Ruu sat down beside her and let go of her hand, the old woman practically seemed to collapse from exhaustion.

Well... At least she still has the energy about her to get up and walk.

The idea of having an old woman like this primarily subsist off of meat was ridiculous to start with. Still, the die had already been cast. The only thing left was to watch how it played out.

There were two stoves installed at the sides of the dining hall, and on top of each was an iron pot making a cute little boiling sound. They weren't for cooking, though. Rather, they were little stoves meant for keeping in the warmth.

They didn't cook here in the dining hall, and the pantry was in a separate building entirely, so the smell of fat hadn't seeped into the room that strongly. As a result, the only scent filling the air was that of our cooking.

There were fourteen of us seated in an elliptical shape, almost as if we were being sandwiched between the stoves. And at the peak of the ellipse were the head of the clan, Donda, and the clan elder, Jiba. Ai Fa and I were down one step lower, facing each other. Off to my right were the three brothers, Jiza, Darmu, and Ludo. A little further away were the sisters Lala and Rimee. On the left were the next oldest person, Granny Tito Min, the clan head's wife Mia Lea, the oldest son's wife Sati Lea, and the eldest daughter Vina. To the left of Vina Ruu was a bowl meant for Reina Ruu.

As the representative of those who manned the stove today, Reina Ruu was set to help Jiba Ruu eat, after which she would begin her own meal. Apparently that wasn't something special for today, and was a role that someone needed to take up every day. After all, in her old age, Jiba Ruu now had difficulty eating on her own.

By the way, Sati Lea Ruu's infant Kota Ruu was slumbering away in a cradle behind his mother.

"We give thanks for the blessings of the forest..." Donda Ruu declared in a tone far more solemn than I would have expected from that beast of a man. He

held up a finger on his left hand — so thick it looked like he was wearing gloves — to his bearded mouth.

“We offer our gratitude to Tito Min, Reina, Rimee, Ai Fa, and Asuta, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night...”

Everyone repeated those words and gently moved their fingertips across their lips. It was the exact same ritual Ai Fa performed each night before dinner. She had only ever muttered the words in her mouth, so I had never been able to pick up what she was saying. So it was a prayer like this, then? It was sort of a strange feeling, realizing that Ai Fa was quietly chanting my name every night.

And after that prayer was done, dinner kicked off very suddenly.

They didn't seem to especially be waiting for Ai Fa or me to pick up our spoons or anything. In other words, if we had poisoned the food, we could have wiped them all out while being just fine ourselves. I guess trusting the other person wouldn't do such a thing was what it meant to let them man your stove.

That's precisely why we weren't allowed to fail. Or perhaps I should say why I wasn't allowed to fail.

It may have been true that all five of us made the meal together, but I was the one giving the instructions. If something were to go wrong tonight, it would all be my responsibility. Anyone who said otherwise would simply be trying to take the load off my shoulders.

I wouldn't let them lay even so much as a finger on Rimee Ruu, Reina Ruu, Tito Min Ruu, or Ai Fa, naturally.

So I'm counting on you, Reina Ruu. Please do a good job of supporting Granny Jiba, I yelled out in my mind as I finally picked up my bowl, but my attention was on Reina Ruu drawing close to Granny Jiba just a few meters away.

As per Rimee Ruu's request, tonight's menu was the same as last night's: Hamburgers made with giba meat topped with fruit wine sauce and roasted aria. For tonight, though, that was accompanied not just by baked poitan, but also by giba soup.

The soup wasn't the main dish, though. It was ultimately just a side, using a moderate amount of meat and aria. That was what was being heated up in the

pots at the moment.

After the prayer had finished, Granny Tito Min stood up, and then started pouring soup into the bowls of the folks silently eating away. All the while, Reina Ruu didn't move an inch after drawing close to Granny Jiba.

Everything was going according to plan.

As that was going on, I checked how tonight's dinner had turned out while also looking around at everyone else. And honestly, they were all just silently shoveling food into their mouths.

When we brought out the dishes before dinner, they were all saying stuff like, "What's that?" "Is this really giba meat?" and "What's this weird flat thing?" like Rimee Ruu had done last night. But once I offered a simple explanation and told them how to eat it, they were so silent that you would almost think you were at a wake. They all still reacted differently though, with some looking clearly displeased, some with eyes sparkling with curiosity, and some who sat there quietly with a blank expression on their face from start to finish. At any rate, they all kept their mouths shut and waited intently for Jiba Ruu to get seated.

And now, there was a sort of impatient, bated-breath feeling in the air as everyone single-mindedly moved their spoons.

Hamburgers made with giba meat. Giba and aria soup. Baked poitan. These three items combined to a single set meal.

Women ate less than men so I used around 300 grams for their hamburgers, while the men got about 700 grams, and Ai Fa and I got our usual 500 grams. I went especially light on Granny Jiba's, though, using only around 200 grams.

Oh, and as a special point of note, I was able to make full sized burgers rather than mini ones this time around. The Ruu household was equipped with several stoves, so I could just use the standard method of cooking the surface over a high flame and then following up by steadily cooking it through over a low flame. The women got one patty while the 700 grams for the men were split in two, but at any rate everyone got nice, thick, bulky patties.

And naturally, to pack in plenty of flavor, I baked them with fruit wine at the

end. But at any rate, I figured the change in size alone would have a great effect on the final product. I mean, with this, I had cleared away my one point of dissatisfaction, that the mini-burgers had felt a little lacking.

It really had turned out to be the right answer, as when I bit emphatically into my three-centimeter thick hamburger, even more juices flowed forth than last night, filling my mouth with a tremendous intensity of flavor. The chewy texture that had already been there was only enhanced, and on top of that the inside hadn't been cooked on a high flame this time around, making it even juicier and softer.

At least to me, this was a first-rate dish that I was highly satisfied with.

As for the Ruu family's reactions... Well, they were still silent.

Some were making the same bitter faces as they did before eating, some looked to be relaxed and enjoying themselves, and some didn't have an expression on their faces whatsoever. I couldn't really especially read their impressions. Maybe it really was a custom to stay silent during the meal, the same way that Ai Fa did.

By the way, a representative of those showing dissatisfaction was the chief, Donda Ruu, one of the pleased ones was the seductive older daughter, Vina Ruu, and Darmu Ruu was part of the expressionless group. They all seemed to fall somewhere in those patterns, though.

Rimee Ruu was naturally chewing away with a big smile on her face, but her big blue eyes occasionally looked over at Granny Jiba with clear concern.

"Here, it's dinner time, Granny Jiba. It was specially made to be extra tasty today. Our visitors put in the effort to make something especially delicious for you," Reina Ruu told her grandmother, bringing the wooden spoon up to the old woman's mouth. On top of the utensil was giba soup and torn up bits of baked poitan. Looked like my plan was moving along smoothly.

"Granny Jiba should be able to eat meat this soft, too!" Rimee Ruu had happily declared. But as someone from a different world, I couldn't wipe away the impression that a hamburger was too heavy a dish for a woman over the age of eighty.

And so, I felt it was best to do things in order.

First up was baked poitan soaked in soup. Next up was aria from the soup. And if she made it through all that, then we would go with the giburger. However, the burger would be soaked in soup too at first. That way, even someone without teeth could have the ground meat practically melt in their mouth.

If she was able to eat all that and seemed to be up for eating the burger as is, then she could go ahead and give it a try.

I didn't even know how many teeth Granny Jiba had left to start with, after all. And I figured that even if she didn't make it all the way to the burger, it should still be fine. That was why I had prepared the giba soup. Essentially, I had made it just for Granny Jiba's sake. It was just that it turned out well enough that I'd have no problem adding it to the regular menu, so I figured it was good to let the others have their fill, too.

But even so, this menu was ultimately meant for Granny Jiba. And so, I cut down the aria thinner than was my personal preference, then cooked them so thoroughly that they hardly had any crunch left to them. Plus, I had already used plenty of giba meat in the burgers, so I didn't think of the amount used for the soup as anything but a means of providing the stock.

That was the core of what made this a menu especially prepared for Granny Jiba.

"Ah..." Rimee Ruu let out in a quiet whisper. Naturally, I had noticed the change, too.

Even when Reina Ruu had called out to her, Granny Jiba had just slowly shook her head, but now she looked like she had given up on everything, and was finally slurping down the contents of her spoon.

"See, isn't it good? And we've got a whole lot left," Reina Ruu happily declared, then dropped some more torn up poitan into the bowl.

However, Granny Jiba didn't move. It wasn't proper to think this way, but it was almost like she had passed away after that single bite. She wasn't even trembling at the moment.

“What’s wrong? It’s delicious, right? Rimee, Granny Tito Min, and I helped to make it, too.”

Reina Ruu thrust the wooden spoon towards her mouth, seeming to be rushing things a bit. There was no need to get impatient, though. It was fine to let her eat at her own rate. As I thought that, however, Granny Jiba’s mouth opened slightly. With a look of clear relief, Reina Ruu slipped the spoon in through that crack.

“Well then, shall we try some aria next? It should be nice and soft and yummy, too.”

When we were cooking, I had Reina Ruu give everything a taste test. After all, I figured if she was going to be suggesting food to Granny Jiba, who had been avoiding meals, it was best that she was also familiar with how everything tasted.

“You’re putting so much thought into this for Granny Jiba, who you’ve never even met...” Reina Ruu had said with teary eyes, but it was only natural to think all that through, considering my position. After all, it was also for Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu’s sake, as they cared deeply about Granny Jiba. Plus, I was a chef. Just how delicious would she find my cooking? Any chef who didn’t consider such a thing was hardly qualified to be a chef at all.

“It’s good, isn’t it? Well then, do you want to try a little meat? The meat is also really soft.”

Reina Ruu spooned up some giburger at last, about half of a mouthful, which she then dipped in the soup.

How would this go?

I had chopped up the diced aria mixed in with the burgers even more finely than usual, but still, I made them in the usual manner, more or less.

I instructed Reina Ruu that at first, she should avoid the harder surface as much as possible and stick to the softer inside. If all of her molars were missing, then it was possible the ground meat and aria could get stuck in her throat, so I made sure Reina Ruu was thoroughly warned of that risk.

At any rate, the chunk of meat and soup slid into Granny Jiba’s mouth. Her

wrinkled mouth started to chew away. And then...

Clear tears started to flow forth from where I figured her eyes must be.

“What delicious meat... Is this really, truly giba meat...?”

That withered voice clearly resounded throughout the silent banquet hall.

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“Yes, it’s giba meat. It’s delicious, right? How about some more?” Reina Ruu asked, clearly tearing up a bit herself. While still holding her bowl, Rimee Ruu started openly sobbing. And Ai Fa... Ai Fa stopped eating, looked down a bit, and tightly closed her eyes.

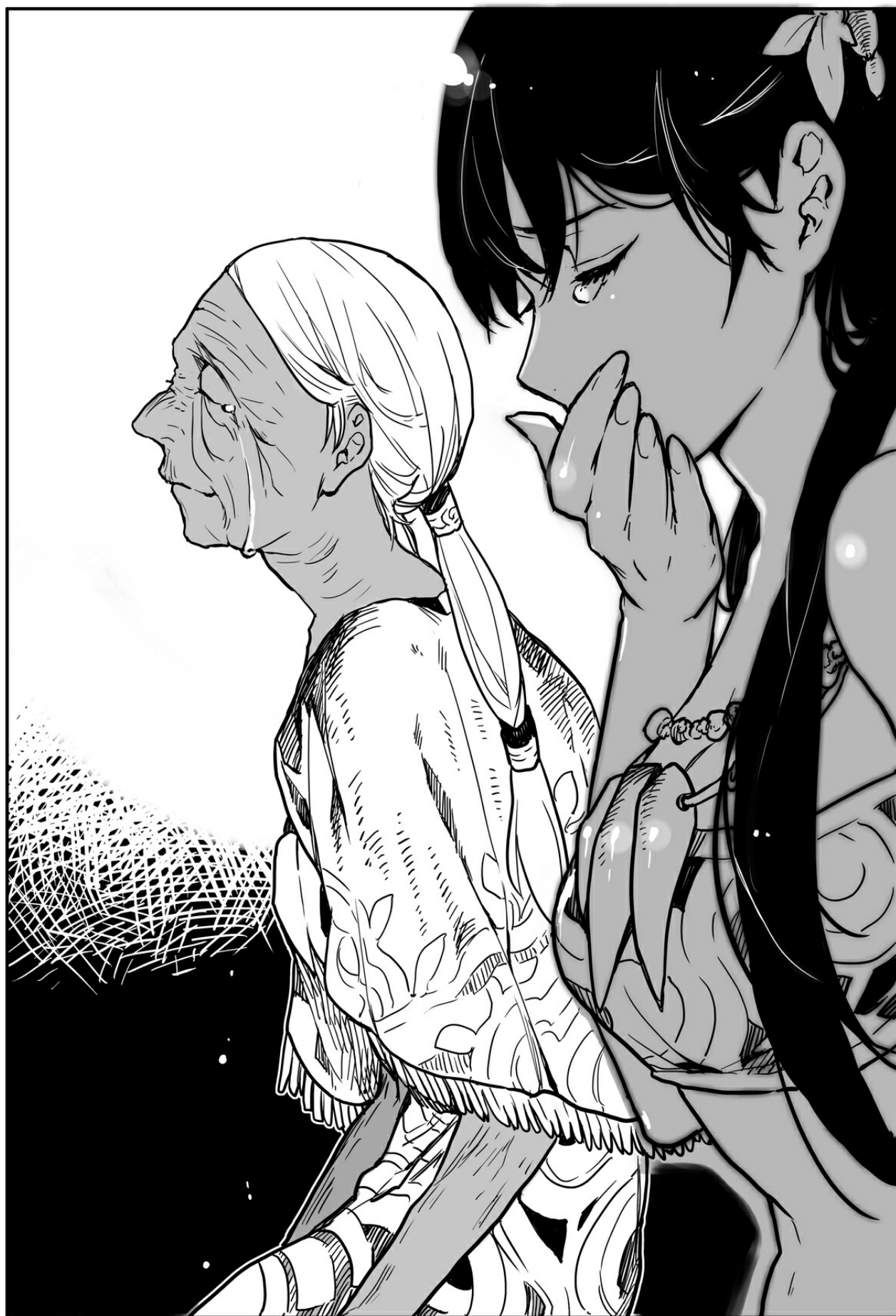
“Then how about trying the meat on its own? This red stuff is made with fruit wine, so it’s really sweet and tasty.”

After Jiba Ruu had eaten a number of mouthfuls, Reina Ruu sliced off a bit of giburger and offered it to her grandmother as is.

I figured the old woman’s front teeth must have been all gone. At any rate, Jiba Ruu opened her mouth wide and it looked like a cave, which the giburger was then enclosed within.

With a very clear chewing sound and a lot more obvious effort, Granny Jiba chomped down on the meat.

“It really is delicious... So very tasty... I can’t believe that giba can taste this good...”



“What’s so good about it? Meat that’s so flabby I’d think it’s gone bad isn’t fit for people to eat!” a voice like thunder roared. Naturally, that was the head of the clan, Donda Ruu.

Apparently he had finished his meal before everyone else, so he threw down his empty bowl and seemed to almost desperately gulp down fruit wine.

“Of course it was sweet when you went and poured fruit wine over it, but the aria are so mushy it’s practically like they’re rotten! And hey, you didn’t just use giba legs! There’s shoulder and back meat mixed in here too, isn’t there?!” Donda Ruu roared, his disheveled hair like a mane as dangerous-looking wrinkles formed on his face. “Only scavengers like the mundt eat the giba’s torso! I’m not some beast from the forest! I’m a human being! A proud hunter of the forest’s edge! Just what the hell were you thinking, making me eat the same thing as a mundt?!”

“You certainly are a yappy child. You really haven’t changed at all since becoming head of the clan, have you?”

Granny Jiba’s eyes, hidden within her wrinkles, slowly turned to face the head of the family.

Donda Ruu may have led the family, but at the same time, he was also this woman’s grandson.

And yet, the man glared back at this old lady who must have been less than half his size with a fire burning in his eyes.

“If this is what mundt eat, then I’d have to say they’re living better than us humans. Well, that may actually be the truth of the matter out there in the forest...” Maybe I was just imagining things, but the old woman’s voice sounded noticeably stronger than it did just moments ago. “But if that’s how you want to think, then that’s all well and good, clan chief Donda. It’s up to everyone to decide what they believe... And this old lady believes this meat is right and proper.”

“Amazing... Granny Jiba is all full of energy and talking like she used to...” Rimee Ruu muttered.

I still couldn’t quite tell where the old woman’s eyes were, but this time they

turned steadily to face in that direction.

“You helped make this too, didn’t you, Rimee? It’s incredibly delicious. Thank you, Rimee.”

“Not at all!” Rimee said while shaking her head, then started shoving the rest of her hamburger in her mouth as tears streamed down her face. After watching over that sight for a short while, Granny Jiba muttered, “Ai Fa... Are you there?”

I looked over to my side, and saw Ai Fa’s shoulders suddenly twitch.

“I’m sorry, but this old lady’s eyes really have given out. I can’t see a thing in this light... If you’re there, could you come this way and let me see your face?”

Ai Fa wasn’t moving, so I said, “Hey,” and nudged her in the side with my elbow. She shot me back a seriously dangerous glare, but then she slowly stood up. And for some reason, she was firmly holding me by the wrist.

“Huh? Hey, hold on!” I yelled out and then hurriedly placed my soup bowl on the floor. Pulled along by strength that paid my intentions no heed whatsoever, I was dragged over alongside Ai Fa and ended up kneeling next to Granny Jiba. Donda Ruu, meanwhile, was glaring at me with a seriously overwhelming look in his eyes.

“Jiba Ruu... I am Ai Fa, of the Fa clan. This is Asuta, of my household.”

Naturally, Granny Jiba couldn’t see me either, but at any rate she reached her wrinkled fingers out towards Ai Fa’s face. Her dry, rough fingers that looked like little more than skin and bone touched Ai Fa’s silky smooth cheek.

“Ah, it’s been a while... How many years has it been, now? I’ve been wanting to see you for quite some time, Ai Fa.”

Now that I was seeing her up close, I could tell clearly that Granny Jiba was a proper human being, rather than some dried up old fruit. Both her face and fingers were wrinkled, her large nose and thin lips had what almost looked like fine fissures running through them, like her age had been carved into her, and perhaps because of her lack of front teeth, it was hard to understand what she was saying. But underneath her drooping eyelids, there were blue eyes shining with an inconceivable amount of wisdom, and her face like a dried fruit wore an

expression that was overflowing with affection.

What a truly kind face. What a soft, gentle expression. It really may have been the first time in my life that I had ever seen an old lady wear such a joyful smile.

“Reina Ruu, you should partake in this delicious meal, too. Ai Fa, will you help this old woman to eat?”

“...If that’s what you wish for, Jiba Ruu.”

As Ai Fa gently took Jiba Ruu by the arm, Reina Ruu stood up while wiping away tears from the corners of her eyes.

“What do you want to eat? Meat? Or poitan?”

“Giba meat. This truly is delicious meat...”

Ai Fa remained expressionless as always as she somewhat clumsily brought the spoon to the old woman’s mouth.

“Ah, it’s so good. You made this, didn’t you, Ai Fa...?”

“No, I largely just watched. This meal was made by your family, as well as Asuta here.”

“Asuta...”

With that, her terribly thin eyes pointed my way. If I were this close to that eldest brother, Jiza Ruu, would I be able to tell how he was feeling, too? Because right now, a light of clear jubilation was shining forth from this old woman’s hardly visible eyes.

“Asuta of the Fa clan... You made this meal?”

“Yes, at Rimee Ruu’s request. My father was a chef in a far off nation. I was nothing but a trainee who assisted him, but if you like what I’ve made even so, then I greatly appreciate that.”

Granny Jiba’s hands wandered through the air, trembling as they went. After silently looking over at Ai Fa, I nervously took hold of them. Her dry, wrinkled fingers felt even more withered than an old branch, but I could feel a clear warmth from them as they gripped my hands.

“Thank you... It had become tiresome for this old woman just to keep on

living. I'm not able to walk properly, and I couldn't even eat a proper meal... I've just been growing old while being nothing but a nuisance to my family. Every day, I did nothing but suffer, questioning why the gods hadn't taken this ancient soul up into the skies."

"You're not a nuisance!" Rimee Ruu shouted out, only for her red-haired sister by her side to give her head a nudge to quiet her.

"You see, this old woman came here to this forest back when she was five years old. Yes, I was one of that initial thousand to renounce the Southern God Jagar and devote ourselves to the Western God Selva."

"I see..."

"But I just couldn't come to love this place. The southern forest was a bountiful place, and the only animals that would attack people were large monkeys and poisonous snakes. And we could pick fruit whenever we wanted... At times we would dig up bugs from the earth, and we would eat lizards that sparkled all the colors of the rainbow... The people from the city looked down on us as savages, but I was happy..."

Granny Jiba's eyes no longer seemed like they were looking at me or Ai Fa. As she gazed at some far off place, tears started to well up in her now crystal clear eyes.

"But our forest was burned down by soldiers, and we fled to the west. Then, we moved in here to the western forest's edge. The people of the western capital ordered us to hunt giba, and forbade us from laying a hand on the blessings of the forest. But even so, everyone still seemed happy at the start. There wasn't any more need to eat lizard meat, or gather rotted fruits and mushrooms. We could eat as much giba meat as we wanted, and partake in the fruits of man's fields, they said..."

"Right..."

It may not have even been necessary for me to chime in at all. After all, the old woman's eyes were now staring at the sights of days long past.

"But this forest's edge turned out to be a horrifying place. In the first year alone, one hundred men were killed by giba. And the following year, we lost

another hundred. Men kept on dying one after another, and then a similar number of women and children would die of starvation. In those first few years, over half of my thousand brethren were wiped out.”

“Right.”

“The Gaaze clan fell to ruin. The Reema clan, too. After that the Suun and Ruu clans took charge of our people, and we somehow managed to establish our current way of life... Eating the meat of giba we hunt down, and selling their horns and tusks for the blessings of the fields, that is. With that, we had finally found a way to survive here at the forest’s edge, but... The whole time, I wanted to return to the forest where I was born.”

I noticed that nearly everyone had finished eating, and were all quietly listening to their elder’s words.

“But our forest burned to the ground long ago, and those who knew it died out one after another, until I was the only one left. I was sad, and lonely, and always thinking of a place that wasn’t here, despite being surrounded by so much family. And giba meat wasn’t even a little bit tasty. The fruits of people’s labors in the fields weren’t delicious in the least. And as I thought that, one tooth after another fell out, until finally I couldn’t even eat giba meat. Ah, I felt like I was experiencing the anger of the western god... But now, I finally feel like I’m back with everyone else. Why did I feel like that, only ever praying to return to the southern forest as soon as I could...?”

Her dry, cracked hands grabbed mine with a surprising amount of strength. At some point, her clear blue eyes had returned back to me.

“I only ever thought of my dead family and my burnt forest. But today, I was able to think of my living family and this forest’s edge. My soul is finally in service of the Western God Selva rather than the Southern God Jagar. I’m here with my family, eating giba meat and staying alive. I feel the need to keep on living. I finally went and remembered something so completely obvious...”

“I’m sure your feelings simply weakened because your teeth fell out and you weren’t able to eat anything delicious any longer,” I said, offering a rather foolish response. Ai Fa looked a touch surprised in response.

I mean, what did you expect? I’m nothing but a chef trainee. There’s no way I

would have the skills needed to carry out a refined conversation with the elder of the forest's edge, who had lived for over eighty harsh years.

"I'm sure you must have thought of those people as precious to you before you started growing so weak. Otherwise, Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu would have never been so desperate to help you. It was precisely because they wanted from the depths of their hearts to save you and make you remember the joy of living that I felt the need to muster up what little strength I had."

Granny Jiba silently turned towards Ai Fa. My beloved benefactor bit down on her lip a bit and glared back at the old woman as if she was angry.

"If you're going to thank anyone, then please thank them. I'm already plenty satisfied just by hearing you say my cooking was delicious."

"It was... It truly, truly was. This old woman hated giba meat, and thought that poitan wasn't meant to be eaten by man, but now I want to eat more. I want to keep on living here at the forest's edge." With a gentle smile on her face, Granny Jiba whispered, "Ai Fa, could you please remove my necklace?"

Ai Fa, still looking angry, did as she was told and removed the necklace, then placed it in the old woman's small hands. With her trembling fingers that looked like twigs, she then removed the giba tusks and horns from their string.

"Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan, Jiba Ruu of the Ruu clan offers you her gratitude. Please, accept it."

There were only three horns and tusks in total, but she offered one each to both Ai Fa and myself.

"Hey, elder, that's...!" Donda Ruu shouted out, only for Granny Jiba to start laughing, her back still facing him.

"It's these giba tusks and horns that govern the lives of the people of the forest's edge. It is my wish that they become the flesh and blood of you two, who I feel a great debt of gratitude towards. I, Jiba Ruu of the Ruu clan, offer your souls my blessing."

That was the very first firm payment I had received for my work here in this other world.

Intermezzo: The Youngest Daughter of the Ruu Clan

Rimee Ruu first laid eyes on that foreigner on the 25th of the yellow month.

After finishing her work for the morning at the river, she took off intently, running down the yellow trodden path through the forest, towards the Fa house. Today was a rare day when she didn't have much work after the sun hit its peak, so she got her mother's permission to go out and then practically flew away from the Ruu home.

As Ai Fa had to take care of her entire household on her own, she was far busier than Rimee Ruu. In the two years since Gil Fa, her father, passed away, they had hardly even had a chance to see each other at all.

When was the last time she had met with Ai Fa? It may have been about 10 days at this point.

Just the thought of getting to see Ai Fa was enough to cause Rimee Ruu to naturally break out in a smile. And yet, no one was at the Fa house. Rimee Ruu thought maybe she was at the river, cleaning up after last night's dinner, but Ai Fa wasn't there either.

Worried and nervous about the thoughts that maybe she was kidnapped by the Suun clan, Rimee Ruu knocked on the door of the nearest house to the Fa home, which belonged to a small clan known as the Fou.

"Excuse me, this is Rimee Ruu of the Ruu clan! Is anyone there?"

The door slowly opened, and a terribly thin, pale woman's face peeked out.

"What is it? What business could someone from the Ruu clan have with the Fou clan?"

"Pardon me! I was looking for Ai Fa. Do you happen to know where she went?" Rimee Ruu asked the woman, who she had seen many times in the past. However, the woman seemed to have wasted away far more compared to how she looked in the girl's memories, and her eyes seemed positively listless. On top of all that, she was cradling a little baby in her arms. The Ruu family had the

baby Kota Ruu around, but this one was even smaller. Somehow, she couldn't help but worry if he would have a chance to grow any bigger.

"Ai Fa, is it...? It seems she headed out to the forest this morning..." the thin woman weakly replied.

"The forest? This early in the morning?"

"Yes... She had some foreigner I didn't recognize with her."

"A foreigner?"

Rimee Ruu didn't quite understand the meaning of the word.

Apparently there were loads of foreigners down in the post town, but they never stepped foot in the forest's edge. The people from town treated giba and the people who hunted them like they were demons.

"What do you mean, a foreigner? What is Ai Fa doing with someone like that?"

"I don't know... She was walking around the settlement with him last evening, too."

"Hmm...?"

She still didn't get what was going on at all, but Rimee Ruu figured that was best to ask Ai Fa directly, so she gave the woman a small bow.

"Thanks! Well then, I'll go wait at the Fa house for Ai Fa to return home!"

"Ah... Please hold on. Um, Ai Fa is still refusing to marry into the Ruu clan, isn't she?"

"Huh? Yeah... What about it?"

"Then... Wouldn't it be best for you not to be involved with Ai Fa anymore, considering you're part of the Ruu clan...?"

There was a desperate light in the woman's lifeless eyes.

"Last night, the eldest son of the Suun clan was prowling around the Fa house... If the Suun and Ruu clans fight, the forest's edge will be destroyed..."

"Yeah, but that shouldn't mean Ai Fa and I can't have anything to do with one

another!” Rimee Ruu said, raising her voice without thinking. The woman shrunk away, looking clearly frightened. She was surely afraid of the Suun and Ruu clans, which held the greatest power at the forest’s edge. And she was also avoiding Ai Fa, who had cut ties with both of them.

That was why Ai Fa was left all on her own.

Feeling a little sad over how things had gone, Rimee Ruu gave a “Goodbye” and one more bow. However, the woman called out to her again.

“Please hold on. I know I’ve already given you impertinent advice, but I think that being involved with a foreigner such as that would also be bad for the Ruu clan. Don’t you believe you should be sure to get your clan head’s permission first?”

The image of her father, the head of the Ruu clan, Donda Ruu, popped into Rimee Ruu’s head. It certainly was true that he was always saying not to get involved with foreigners. Rimee Ruu pretty much never left the forest’s edge, though, so she essentially didn’t have any chances to interact with any in the first place, though. As a result, she didn’t know exactly how strong of a taboo it may be.

If Rimee Ruu were to make the wrong choice here and now, there was a chance she could end up banned from interacting with Ai Fa entirely. And that was something she absolutely couldn’t stand.

I just want to be friends with Ai Fa...

Currently, Ai Fa herself was also trying to cut ties with Rimee Ruu. The reason behind that was the same one the woman had mentioned. Ai Fa had earned the animosity of the Suun clan, and she also shouldn’t have anything to do with anyone from the Ruu clan. On top of that, she had also turned down an offer to marry into the main Ruu household. That hadn’t been enough to result in bad blood, but it was definitely true that Donda had given up on Ai Fa after that point.

Honestly, the idea of Ai Fa becoming part of her family had never felt real to Rimee Ruu, so she really didn’t care about all that. The issue, though, was that nobody was happy about the idea of Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu having anything to do with one another.

“Ah...” the Fou woman let slip in a quiet voice.

Rimee Ruu followed her line of sight, and saw Ai Fa standing there. She was with some unfamiliar foreigner, crossing the road. They were shouldering a grigee pole, which had a large giba dangling from it. While feeling impressed by the way that Ai Fa had hunted down a giba this early in the morning, Rimee Ruu started to carefully examine the foreigner.

A foreigner... Yeah, that was definitely what he was.

His hair was black, and so were his eyes. His skin was like that of the western people, an ivory-white with just a hint of brown to it. And he was still young, probably around Ai Fa's age.

He was dressed kind of strangely, too. His torso and lower body were covered in pure white, and the only skin he was showing were his face and hands, plus he had some sort of white cloth wrapped around his head.

He... Looks pretty weak, somehow.

Though they were both carrying the giba, only the foreigner was breathing heavily and had unsteady footing. If it went on much longer, he would probably collapse.

And yet, for some reason, this foreigner looked like he was really enjoying himself. And oddly, much as his face was every bit as pale as the folks from the city, there was a strong, brilliant light shining in his black eyes. That one point wasn't all that much like the city folk. Though with that said, he didn't resemble the people of the forest's edge at all either. There was a sort of unusual air about this foreigner, who didn't seem to resemble anyone at all.

Well, he doesn't seem like a particularly bad person...

Still, city folk were ultimately still city folk. The people of the forest's edge and the folks who lived in the city of stone just plain didn't get along.

Rimee Ruu had absolutely no clue as to why a person like that was hanging out with Ai Fa.

Before long, the foreigner and Ai Fa disappeared from sight, never even noticing Rimee Ruu or the woman.

“You saw him, didn’t you? We’ve never had a foreigner lurking around the forest’s edge like that before. This may be some sort of ill omen...”

“That’s all the more reason that I need to help Ai Fa out!”

Rimee Ruu crossed her arms and started to think. But no matter how much she thought, she couldn’t come up with an answer. There was a limit to what an eight year old child could do, and this may not exactly be the sort of issue where it was alright for her to go getting involved or speaking up. Considering the circumstances, it was important that she clear up what exactly the taboo involving foreigners was about.

She’d gone and run all this way and not even gotten to say a single word to Ai Fa, but there was no helping that.

After saying goodbye to the excessively worried-looking Fou woman, Rimee Ruu went back down the path she had taken there.

“Hmm? Where did you go off to, Rimee?” her youngest brother, Ludo, asked her when she made it back to the plaza in the center of the Ruu houses. The men didn’t have any work to do till the sun hit its peak, and Ludo had always been an early riser.

Since Rimee had run all the way back from the Fa house, she held onto her elder brother’s arm as she caught her breath.

“Um, apparently there’s a foreigner staying at the Fa house! What should I do?”

“Huh...? What’s that about?”

It wasn’t the sort of thing that was easily explained, so Rimee Ruu decided to tell Ludo Ruu everything that she had seen and heard throughout the morning.

“I don’t really get it. What’s that Ai Fa woman doing getting close to a foreigner? And hey, you still haven’t cut ties with her?”

“Of course not! We’re friends for life!”

“Oh, I see. Well, whatever. At any rate, if you want to do anything about that foreigner, you’re going to have to talk to dad first. The taboo against interfering with folks from the city of stone is especially strict, after all.”

“Is that how Ai Fa ended up doing the bidding of such a weak looking guy, I wonder?” Rimee asked, a desperate look on her face, only to get a, “Don’t be stupid,” back from her brother as he mussed up his yellowish hair. “That woman didn’t back down to our dad or those folks from the Suun clan, so there’s no way she’d let some guy from the city just push her around, right? Actually, it’s probably likelier that she captured that guy and is making him help her out with her work. But honestly, I’ve got no clue what’s going on...”

“That’s true. Just what is Ai Fa doing together with someone from the city...? I’ve been thinking really hard about it, but I still have no idea.”

“Hmph. Still, maybe she doesn’t have anyone left to rely on but someone from the city. She made enemies of the Suun and Ruu, and the other families are so frightened of getting involved that they won’t even come near her.”

“The Ruu clan isn’t Ai Fa’s enemy!” Rimee Ruu angrily yelled out, but her teasing older brother didn’t pull away his shoulder that she was holding onto.

“Even if we’re not enemies, she turned down the offer to marry into the family, so there’s nothing that can be done about it now. No matter how much you may kick and scream, we can’t go saving someone who isn’t even part of our family.”

“Whatever! Little Ludo, you jerk!”

Rimee Ruu stamped her feet on the ground, and then took off running for the house.

“You’re the little one!” she heard her brother yell out from behind, and then she pulled open the door.

Her father wasn’t there, so he must have still been sleeping. In the reception room, her eldest brother Jiza Ruu and his wife Sati Lea Ruu were quietly talking, their son Kota Ruu in between them.

“Oh, my. What is it, Rimee?” Sati Lea Ruu asked with a gentle smile, swaying the cradle woven from grass all the while.

Rimee Ruu was clearly irritated even as she removed her footwear and came into the house, then plopped down in front of them.

“Listen to this! There’s apparently a foreigner staying at the Fa house! What should I do about it?”

Her brother Jiza Ruu was even scarier than their father, Donda Ruu. But he felt stronger than anyone else about upholding the laws of the forest’s edge, so he would surely be the perfect person to say what should be done in this situation. And yet, the words he spoke after hearing Rimee’s full explanation weren’t something she could simply accept.

“It’s for the best that you avoid approaching anyone from the city whenever possible. Until this foreigner leaves, you shouldn’t go anywhere near the Fa house, Rimee.”

“But why? If that foreigner turns out to be a bad person, Ai Fa could be in danger!”

“As long as the people of the city and the forest’s edge each respect their own laws, nothing dangerous should happen. And that head of the Fa clan calls herself a hunter, so no man from town should be able to get the better of her, right?”

“But...”

“The head of the Fa clan brought a townspeople into this settlement by her own discretion. As long as no problems occur as a result, no one can judge her for that. But if you interfere and throw off the equilibrium of things, bringing forth some sort of incident, then the head of the Fa clan will be the one forced to answer for it,” Jiza Ruu quietly explained, his expression remaining perfectly tranquil. “And so, it’s best that you don’t get involved, Rimee.”

Rimee couldn’t accept that in the least. And yet, when Donda Ruu appeared later on, all he would say was, “Don’t go getting involved with foreigners.” He looked so displeased that she was lucky he didn’t come out and say, “Cut all ties with the Fa clan,” so Rimee Ruu couldn’t exactly push the issue further.

Why isn’t anyone worried about Ai Fa?

That was what made Rimee Ruu saddest of all.

Two years ago, Ai Fa received a request to marry into the Ruu clan. Up until then, she hadn’t interacted with anyone from the clan but Rimee Ruu and the

elder, Jiba Ruu, but when Donda Ruu heard how she had thoroughly beaten up the heir to the Suun clan, he found that amusing and tried to set up his second son, Darmu Ruu, with her. It was a pretty ridiculous idea, but at least on the surface, nobody opposed it. The worst that happened was that Jiza Ruu made a bit of a frown.

She had everyone's pity for her circumstances, seeing how she had lost all of her family at the age of 15, and then earned the animosity of the Suun clan, who led their people. On top of that, she was such a strong-willed woman that she would surely be a good fit for the Ruu clan. And so, pretty much nobody objected to the union.

Rimee Ruu felt a little awkward at the idea of having her friend since she was very little suddenly become family, and it just didn't sit right with her. But ultimately she accepted that it wasn't so bad of an idea for everyone, especially seeing how Jiba Ruu's legs had grown so weak that it had gotten hard for her to go visit Ai Fa.

But in the end, Ai Fa turned the offer down. She said that she would become the head of the Fa clan, and live as a hunter. When Rimee Ruu heard that, she was perfectly satisfied with the answer. After all, when her father Gil Fa was still alive, he had taken Ai Fa out into the forest to help him hunt. And Ai Fa always looked like she was really enjoying herself when he did. That had probably been why it just hadn't clicked for Rimee Ruu that Ai Fa would never hunt again and instead just become someone's wife.

At the time, Rimee Ruu was just six so she hadn't thought it through quite that logically, but when she heard that Ai Fa had turned down the proposal, she definitely felt much more relieved than disappointed.

Even if they weren't related by blood, Ai Fa was still very important to Rimee Ruu. And if they could keep the same sort of relationship they had up until now, then that was just fine.

But ultimately, Ai Fa ended up changing after all.

She already had bad blood with the Suun clan, and she started saying that she shouldn't have any ties to the Ruu clan either, even starting to distance herself from Rimee Ruu. On top of that, Rimee Ruu's family seemed to have lost all

interest in Ai Fa, too. At first they were angry and disappointed at the refusal, but before long nobody even bothered to bring up her name.

Even if she didn't become family, nothing about Ai Fa's circumstances should have changed. But now nobody pitied Ai Fa, even though she had no one to rely on, she had made enemies of the clan that led their people, and was left to live all on her own.

Ai Fa's only friends were just her and Jiba Ruu. And Jiba Ruu couldn't even really do much walking nowadays. In that case, she was the only one left who could be by Ai Fa's side.

It was that thought that led to Rimee Ruu heading to the Fa house over and over, even though Ai Fa treated her coldly. That had continued on for two years, but now that foreigner had appeared. Just who was he, anyway?

Both her father and brother had told her to stay away, but she just couldn't leave it be. And so, Rimee Ruu made sure to visit the Fa house nearly every day after first spying that foreigner.

Even if she got close, it should still be fine as long as they didn't notice. Plus, they only ever told her not to approach foreigners. That meant it should still be fine to wait until they were separated and then grab Ai Fa and have her explain.

Unfortunately, she just didn't seem to be able to find a chance. They seemed to be practically stuck together both day and night. The only real opportunity was when Ai Fa headed out to hunt when the sun hit its peak, but Rimee Ruu had work back home at that time.

As she idly wasted away time in that manner, five days had already passed before she even knew it.

I ended up being late today, too...

The path she was running intently down was already getting dim and gloomy. Today she helped out peeling pelts, so she was running especially late.

At this rate she definitely wouldn't make it back to her house in time for dinner and her dad would end up roaring at her, but Rimee Ruu had reached a mental state where she just couldn't sleep peacefully if she hadn't checked that day and made sure that Ai Fa was still alright.

Just what does Ai Fa intend to do with that foreigner?

As she observed them closely, she couldn't sense even a hint of anything dangerous going on. Every once in a while they would quarrel, but neither of them seemed to ever get seriously angry. Even so, she couldn't see the reason behind Ai Fa letting some foreigner stay in her house.

Did that foreigner want Ai Fa as his bride, perhaps? Or was he just letting himself in uninvited?

But still, if Ai Fa didn't feel that way about him, surely she never would have let him stay there, and if she was going to respond to his feelings, something was bound to happen. But at least for now, Ai Fa hadn't cut her long hair that was proof she was unwed, nor had she started wearing a one-piece outfit.

I'd hate it if Ai Fa ended up leaving the forest's edge...

That was the greatest source of worry for Rimee Ruu.

At that moment, Ai Fa had cut all ties with the people of the forest's edge. Rimee Ruu and Jiba Ruu were the only ones left who would call her a friend, and even then, she was trying to separate herself from them, too.

Was it really possible to keep on living all on your own? Rimee Ruu couldn't even imagine it.

And so, it wouldn't be strange at all if Ai Fa had grown sick of the forest's edge and was thinking of moving to some far off land.

I mean, I want Ai Fa to be happy, but...

But, she would also just hate it if she could never see Ai Fa ever again. If they were separated for life, that would be unbearable.

That may have been why Rimee Ruu had ended up visiting the Fa house in this manner, day after day.

Just like Ludo Ruu and Jiza Ruu had said, it was hard to imagine that pale townspeople getting the better of Ai Fa. But wasn't it possible that she would choose to leave the forest's edge and go off on a journey with him? Perhaps it was because she couldn't shake that feeling of unease that she felt the need to constantly confirm that Ai Fa was still there.

By the time Rimee Ruu finally reached the Fa house, the sun was approaching the western forest. The second that she saw the light from candles through the latticed windows, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness... She's still there.

Now she just needed to make sure Ai Fa looked alright, and then she could head straight on home for the day. As that thought ran through her mind, she crept up to the window as quietly as possible.

Suddenly, Rimee Ruu felt the urge to shout out, "Ah...!"

Ai Fa and the foreigner were eating dinner. And that foreigner... He was wearing the clothing of the people of the forest's edge. He still had a pure white cloth around his head and chest, but the vest he had on top of that was clearly the sort her people wore. And on top of that, it was definitely the clothing that Gil Fa wore when he was alive.

Then this foreigner really is marrying into her clan? He's going to be Ai Fa's husband?

Suddenly a whole new sort of unease and doubt welled up inside of her. Which is to say, she couldn't help but wonder if this foreigner was qualified to be Ai Fa's husband.

Rimee Ruu got as high up on her tippy toes as she could manage, and peered at the two of them through the lattice. She was an expert when it came to hiding her presence, so surely even someone as sharp as Ai Fa wouldn't notice.

It seemed that the two of them were having a bit of an argument today, too.

"Huuuuh? Why? Are you still angry about what happened around noontime?" the foreigner asked, clearly lacking any restraint.

Outside of its pale color, the profile of his face didn't seem to have anything special about it. City folk had womanly faces to start with, so he probably looked pretty average. He really didn't stand out at all. Well, outside of the light shining strongly in his black eyes, that was. He really did have mysterious eyes. Despite that strong light, they also looked uneasy, somehow. They looked kind like a woman's eyes, but also strong like a man's, which made them pretty hard to pin down.

The one thing Rimee Ruu could say, though... Was that she didn't find them unpleasant.

"Noontime? Ah. You mean when you lost control of yourself and acted insolently. I had already completely forgotten about that," Ai Fa replied in a low voice.

As Rimee Ruu wondered with a tilt of her head just how the foreigner had "acted insolently," the expression on the man's face took another sudden shift. He went from looking positively panicked to a bit suspicious.

"You forgot... Then why won't you tell me your thoughts?"

"Stop asking! If I don't want to tell you, then that's all there is to it!" Ai Fa suddenly shouted out, causing Rimee Ruu to shrink back. The foreigner looked surprised, too.

This foreigner's expression sure did shift around a lot, which made it easy to read his emotions. The bigger surprise, though, was how open Ai Fa was showing how she felt. Why was her face going so red, and why was she looking down a bit, and what was with the way that she was hiding her face behind that wooden bowl? That may have blocked the foreigner's view from where he was sitting, but since Rimee Ruu was observing from the side, she could see Ai Fa's face clearly. And right now, Ai Fa was looking seriously embarrassed.

"Just drop it! Don't look at me!"

Ai Fa wasn't the sort to let others see how she was feeling very often. Whether she was happy or sad, the most there would ever be was a slight shift in her eyes or mouth, which made it pretty hard to tell how she was feeling inside. And that trend had only grown stronger ever since Gil Fa had passed away.

And yet, here Ai Fa was openly showing how she felt, which seriously surprised Rimee Ruu.

Meanwhile, the foreigner gave a sigh, sounding a bit disappointed somehow, and then seemed to get lost in his own thoughts.

That must have been why he hadn't noticed that Ai Fa had lowered the bowl and started focusing intently on his face. And now, she seemed to have broken

out in an ever-so-slight smile.

With her cheeks still red, Ai Fa was staring straight at the foreigner's face, looking terribly satisfied, and also extremely happy. The gentle, kind light in those blue eyes of Ai Fa's that she loved so much reminded Rimee Ruu of when Gil Fa was still alive.

Ai Fa...

Ai Fa had never made a face like that in these past two years. Ai Fa's expression had frozen stiff into something icy cold, as if a part of her heart had died alongside her father.

Then it must be him, right?

Where he was born didn't matter. As long as he brought peace to Ai Fa's suffering heart, Rimee Ruu didn't care if he was a foreigner or whatever.

As that thought passed through her head, she looked at the foreigner and saw that he was looking down a bit and seemed to be smiling, too. He had appeared to be disappointed just before, but now she could see the same joy and satisfaction in his black eyes that she had observed in Ai Fa's as he looked at the strange meat in front of him.

He must have felt the same way as Ai Fa. After all, families tended to be that way.

Ai Fa had lost Gil Fa, and she had refused the offer to marry into the Ruu clan. But sure enough, it seemed like she still needed family after all. It was just too sad for her to keep on living all on her own.

Rimee Ruu wiped away the tears that had steadily built up with the back of her hand, and then called out in an intentionally cheerful voice, "Hey, what is that that you're eating?"

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, “Cooking With Wild Game.” I’m the author, EDA. I would definitely feel grateful if you remember me.

This work was originally serialized on the novel publishing site “Shousetsuka ni Narou (Become a Novelist)” in August of 2014. As I write this afterword in January of 2015, the ending for the folks of the forest’s edge remains far off in the distance, and the series is still in progress.

It’s thanks to everyone who supported me as the book was being serialized that I now have the honor of getting it published like this. I truly am grateful, from the depths of my heart.

I tried my hardest to make something that would be enjoyable both to the people who have supported me up until now, as well as the people picking this book up for the first time, but how do you think it turned out? I’d certainly be glad if it meets your tastes.

The protagonist is thrown into a parallel world, and forms bonds with others by using his cooking skills! I started writing this story thanks to the inspiration of that single idea. From there, though, things sure have developed in an interesting way, sometimes going just as originally planned and other times diverging greatly, and with unexpected characters playing big parts while characters who were supposed to be important fade into the shadows.

It’s precisely those uncertain elements that give a story its dynamism, though! Or at least, that’s what I tell myself as I struggle onwards, day by day. I’m half anxiously watching over Asuta, Ai Fa and the other characters, wondering what their fates will be myself, and I think that’s what makes it so much fun. And nothing could make me happier than if you readers have shared in that joy.

Just let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, Kochimo for your wonderful illustrations, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it. And with that, I put down my

pen.

Well then, I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

January 2015,

EDA

Bonus Short Stories

Rimee: Zero

The youngest daughter of the Ruu house was born when Ludo was seven years old.

“She’s all wrinkly and red. She’s not cute at all.”

Ludo Ruu poked the cheek of the infant sleeping in the cradle woven out of grass.

“Cut that out. What if you end up getting the baby sick by touching her with your filthy hands?” his sister Vina asked in a relaxed voice. She had just turned 12, and always had a sort of sleepy look about her.

“They’re not filthy! I just washed them! And wait, she isn’t sick already? I mean she’s so small and wrinkly and red...”

“Babies are all like that at first. Lala was too, right?”

“I was only two when she was born. I don’t remember that at all.”

“Oh, is that so? I get the feeling that you were even smaller than this, you know...”

“Stop messing around! There’s no way that’s true!” Ludo angrily yelled, smacking his sister on her rear, which had gotten unusually large all of the sudden recently.

“Oww... What are you doing...?” Vina asked, ruffling her angered brother’s hair.

“What are the two of you up to?” their eldest brother, Jiza, called out through the door. Ludo and Vina stopped in their tracks in the middle of their grappling and slowly turned to face their big brother. “Don’t make such a fuss around the baby. Infants are very weak just after being born, and even something slight could lead to a mistake that can’t be taken back in such a situation.”

Jiza was 15 years old. He was the oldest son of the Ruu house, and was already doing a fine job as a hunter. He had a grinning expression on his face as always, but his presence was still enough to get Ludo and Vina to hurriedly separate themselves.

Vina slumped her shoulders, while Ludo shot his brother a look of dissatisfaction.

“But Vina was saying I was even smaller than this when I was a baby. There’s no way that’s true, right big bro Jiza?”

“Hmm? Well, this child is a girl, and I do get the feeling that you were bigger... But still, you shouldn’t let yourself get worked up over things like that. What matters is the future, so you should make sure to eat properly and grow into a fine hunter.”

As Ludo gave a “Tch!” his mother returned from the elder’s room, held in his father’s arms.

“Oh, you looked over her for me, Vina and Ludo? Thank you. We’ve finally decided on her name.”

“Hmm, so what is it...?”

“It’s Rimee. The youngest daughter of the main Ruu house, Rimee Ruu. I hope you two will help so that she grows into a splendid young lady,” their mother Mia Lea said, looking incredibly happy and proud.

Even amongst the prosperous Ruu clan, Mia Lea was the first one to birth seven children. And their father Donda may have been an incredibly blunt person, but his eyes seemed to have a gentler look about them than usual.

“Rimee, huh? Hey, they say your name is Rimee,” Ludo said, reaching out and poking the baby’s cheek. With that, her tiny eyelids slowly opened, and her pale blue eyes looked at Ludo. Then she let out a weak sounding, “Gwah,” and her already wrinkly face wrinkled even more. Since she had only just been born her eyes must not yet be able to see, and she shouldn’t have been able to properly change her expression. But somehow, that wrinkled face looked like she was smiling happily at Ludo.

A Day Reminiscing About Her Father

“Why do you always insist on wrapping that scrap of cloth around your head?” Ai Fa asked, I believe on the third day after I started staying with her.

By “scrap of cloth” she meant my towel. For me, it was an absolutely indispensable part of my cooking attire.

“Why? I mean, so no strands of hair fall down when I’m cooking, I guess,” I replied as I chopped up ariana atop the metal lid, which I was using in place of a cutting board.

Ai Fa, who was sitting off to my side with one knee up in the air, shot me a dubious look and tilted her head.

“Why do you need to keep your hair from falling down while cooking?”

“Why? Well, because it’d be unsanitary, I suppose.”

“What does ‘unsanitary’ mean?”

“That it’d be bad if germs and stuff got into the food.”

“What does ‘germs’ mean?”

“Um, ‘germs’ refers to bacteria that are harmful to humans... In other words, they’re dirty, I guess?”

“Your hair is dirty?”

“My hair isn’t especially dirty! And I guess I don’t know if germs even exist in this world in the first place, but still, it’d be gross if hair got in the pot, right?”

“Not especially. You just have to remove it, and it’s fine.”

What was going on? It was really rare for Ai Fa to argue about something like this.

“No, but you see, I’d find it gross if there was hair in the food I was eating, so I’d prefer to just leave this thing on.”

“I see,” Ai Fa replied, the tone of her voice dropping.

I stopped and turned around without thinking, and found Ai Fa making a sort of childish, dejected looking face.

“W-what’s up? What’s the matter? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?”

“That’s not it. I just thought you could take off that cloth scrap for a bit before the sun sets and it gets dark.”

I didn’t get it at all.

But, well, there was still plenty of time till we ate, so I could go ahead and indulge my benefactor’s request for a bit. And I mean, I didn’t exactly feel comfortable either, seeing her so down in the dumps.

“Here, is this alright?”

I placed my knife down atop the lid and then tore off my towel. Ai Fa’s eyes immediately started sparkling and she began patting my head.

“...It’s black.”

“Yeah. That was the most common color back where I came from.”

“I see. It’s not something you see very often at the forest’s edge. If it was a bit lighter, though, it wouldn’t be all that rare.”

Pat, pat. Pat, pat.

Ai Fa had an incredibly innocent, pure look on her face. And well, I certainly couldn’t calm myself with things like this.

“Hmm, it sure is black...”

“Gyah!” I yelled out loudly without thinking.

Ai Fa had slowly gotten into a kneeling position, and then started rubbing her cheek up against my head.

“W-W-What the...?! Ai Fa, seriously, what are you doing?!”

“Hmm? I’m not especially doing anything in particular.”

After that period of doting on my head, Ai Fa quickly and suddenly pulled back.

“I am satisfied. My apologies for the interference. Now return to your work.”

“Satisfied...? I don’t get what you mean! Don’t go toying with this young man’s pure heart!”

“What are you getting angry about? If I’ve caused you discomfort, then I apologize,” she said as if it was nothing, then cast her gaze downwards.

“It’s just... Today is the day that I lost my father.”

“W-What?”

“And my father had the same color hair as you do.”

“...”

“That’s all it is. I didn’t mean anything by it,” Ai Fa stated, glaring at my face with her usual wildcat-like stare.

“With that said, I’ve gotten hungry. When will dinner be ready?”

I gave a deep sigh.

“Just hold on a little longer. The meat should be nice and heated soon...”

“Hmm...”

It was a truly peaceful day.

Friends Old and Young

Five years ago, Ai Fa befriended members of the Ruu clan that she had just happened to become acquainted with: The Ruu clan elder, Jiba Ruu, and the youngest daughter, Rimee Ruu.

It happened on a yellow dirt path that had been cleared and trodden down in the forest. Ai Fa and Jiba Ruu were sitting off to the side of the trail, as Rimee Ruu ran about amongst the grass. Ai Fa was 12 at the time, Jiba Ruu was 80, and Rimee Ruu was only three years old.

“I’ll be 13 tomorrow,” Ai Fa said to Jiba Ruu with a smile, her eyes positively sparkling. “Then I’ll finally be allowed to go out into the forest with my father. I’ll be able to work as a hunter.”

“Is that so...? Good for you.”

“Yeah,” Ai Fa responded with a hearty nod, but she looked just a bit worried.

Ai Fa was tall for her age, and her face was already that of an adult. Though

with that said, the expression she wore was much more innocent and fitting for her age.

“What’s the matter? Are you worried about something, Ai Fa...?” Jiba Ruu asked the girl with a gentle smile. Her face was wrinkled like a dried fruit, but the sparkling eyes that could be just barely be seen behind her drooping eyelids were incredibly clear and kind.

“You see... I was wondering what you thought about a woman like me being a hunter, Jiba Ruu...”

“Hmm? I don’t think that’s anything all that strange. Everyone has their own path. I believe I told you as much on the day we met, too, did I not?”

“I’ve memorized those words well, of course. What you said then made me incredibly happy, and I felt that you were absolutely correct,” Ai Fa replied, looking straight into Jiba Ruu’s eyes. “But how should I put it...? Those words were based on your thoughts and will, not your emotions. What was worrying me was how you really felt, but... No, I just can’t put it quite right.”

“Hmm, you’re still quite young, but you have some rather interesting thoughts, Ai Fa...” Jiba Ruu said with a smile. “It’s rare to find such thinking amongst the people of the forest’s edge... In other words, you’re asking not whether it’s right or wrong, but whether it makes me feel happy, or glad, or irritated, yes...?”

“T-That’s right. You really are amazing, Jiba Ruu. I couldn’t explain right at all, but you still got what I was saying.”

“This old lady thinks you’re much more amazing, Ai Fa, thinking about matters like that at such a young age... And you don’t have anything to worry about,” Jiba Ruu said, patting Ai Fa’s blonde-haired head with her hand that looked like a withered tree. “It makes me happy too, seeing you walk with your head held high down the path that you believe in. And you don’t just think it’s correct, but you also find joy in it. Hunting giba is quite dangerous, though... Just make sure you don’t push yourself too hard and leave Rimee and I to grieve, alright, Ai Fa?”

“Understood. I promise that I won’t push myself too far,” Ai Fa energetically replied, then stood up in a bit of a rush. “Hey, Rimee Ruu! Don’t get too close to

the forest! You'll end up getting bit by a poisonous snake or lizard!"

"Wah!" Rimee Ruu happily yelled out as she started running away from Ai Fa, while Jiba Ruu lovingly watched over them.

Three years from then, Ai Fa would lose all of her family and be left on her own, and Jiba Ruu would become too sick to walk around outside freely.



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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 1

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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