

## **Animalands After-dark, Expanding love**

A gentle breeze flows through the city. The leaves have turned a blend of red, orange, and yellow. Signs of autumn are always beautiful to see. Shigeru and I are walking to work and seeing the scenery of Kyoto. Each day goes by peacefully. No drama. No outbreak of feral creatures. Just me and my husband living a happy life together.

Every weekday, he drops me off at Kyoto's five star buffet, the restaurant I work at. I'm a chef that helps cook all the foods. Soups, salads, meat dishes, pretty much everything you can imagine to find at a Nippon restaurant. I love how peaceful the atmosphere is, and everyone that comes to eat is super friendly. The food I make is often praised by our customers, which incentivises me to try new dishes. That resulted in our restaurant getting so popular, that I was promoted to head chef.

My shift often ends at 4pm. That's around the time Shigeru returns home from mercenary work. He actually works two jobs; running a dojo to teach self-defense, and going on missions for the Kodama Mercenaries. I used to join them for work, but I put that behind me a long time ago. Now, I just want to pursue my dream of becoming a master chef.

That dream kinda had an interesting effect on me. Ever since I was focused on my chef dream, I made a habit of taste testing my food to make sure I got the flavors just right. I also ate more food than I usually do. It adds up pretty fast, and I was noticing some changes in my weight. I was getting heavier. Nobody seems to have noticed, or maybe they're just being polite and not bringing it to my attention. Whatever the case, it made me wonder whether I should pay more attention to my weight.

The months go by as fast as the flowing river. Winter was coming, and it triggered our bodies to develop winter coats to keep our bodies warm. My winter coat wasn't the only thing that grew though; my belly did too. My eating habits got out of hand, and now I am getting fatter. I practically had the body shape of a bear. That's what I thought when I looked at myself in the mirror; I was actually starting to like it.

One Saturday morning, I felt Shigeru's grip on my side as I woke up. He was still in a deep sleep. He probably didn't realize he was pinching my side. Now I understand why they call them 'love handles'. I let out a laugh, and nuzzled Shigeru's neck to wake him up. "Good morning." I said in a sing-songy tone. My tender touch was enough to wake him. He let out a yawn while sitting up.

"Good morning, Animus. That was the best sleep I ever had."

"Really?" I sit up, staring at him with a puzzled expression.

"Yes. You kept me warm all night, and I couldn't help but rest my head and arm on you. I'm sorry if that bothered you."

"Not at all. I hardly noticed." We both get up from bed, stretching our bodies. I run my paw down my fluffy arm, then set my paw on top of my tummy. I run a few circles and ruffle my own fur while looking down. "Shigeru. Can I tell you something?"

"What is it?"

"I've been gaining weight lately, and I don't know how I feel about it." I walk around the bed and stand in front of my mate. "I kinda like it, but I'm nervous about what other people will think. I guess I haven't completely gotten over my shyness."

I've been with Shigeru for several years. We talk to each other about everything, no matter how personal or embarrassing it can be. Whenever I get indecisive about stuff, I often ask for his opinion to help broaden my perspective on things. He just looks into my eyes with an unchanged expression, looks down at my tummy, then back at my face. A smile formed on his face.

"If you want my opinion, I think you look cute."

I was honestly surprised by that answer. My eyes widen, and I look down at my tummy again. "Really? You've been pretty quiet about this. Did you notice, or..."

"I honestly didn't notice until last night. You were just so soft that I drifted right to sleep." He holds my paw while we walk over to the mirror. We stand in front of it, his arms slowly wrap around my body while he rests his head on my shoulder. "Remember the day you wanted to build muscle? You were a thin leopard back then. Thanks to our friend's training, you and I developed strong, muscular bodies. Now that we're done fighting, you have the choice to be whatever size you want. No matter what people say, you should be the size you're happy to be."

I felt emotionally moved by his words. I turn around and wrap my arms around him. We shared a loving hug that filled my whole body with a wave of happiness. "You always know just what to say. For now, I'll keep this look. I'll even go back to the gym to maintain my muscles."

"Good. As long as it's something you want to do, I'll encourage it."

"Thanks! Alright, I'm going to cook us some breakfast."

"Allow me to help. I'm in the mood for pancakes."

We go into the kitchen and start up the burners. Saturdays are sometimes our cheat days, so we like to make high carb foods, such as pancakes, or waffles. While I worked on cooking eggs, rice, and spinach, Shigeru was mixing a big bowl of pancake batter. I wondered how many pancakes he was going to make as I mixed all the ingredients into an omelette.

Some time later, everything was cooked and set on the table. I was shocked by the large stack of six pancakes in the middle of our rice and egg omelettes. We set them aside for now, and eat the omelettes first. Each bite was kinda spicy, but I love how packed with healthy nutrients it has. If I'm going to maintain my current look, I've got to make sure I go easy on the bread each day.

After Shigeru finished his omelette, he rips a big chunk of a pancake with his jaw, and happily chews it. He nods satisfyingly, sets three pancakes on a plate, and scoots his chair closer to me. I gulp down my egg, and glance at him. "Huh?"

"Is it okay if I fed you?" He looked so shy asking that. He's always been stoic and serious around our friends and strangers. But when it's just the two of us, he's a lot more open about his emotions. His tender, gentle voice always makes my heart sing too. I smile, and lean close to him, signaling my consent. "Thank you. Have as much as you want."

"Three slices is more than enough for me."

He dips a piece of pancake into a small cup of maple syrup, and feeds it to me. I bite down on the fork and slide the pancake into my mouth, savoring every sweet, fluffy bite. Shigeru repeated this motion until I had eaten my pancakes. They were thick and fluffy, making my belly expand slightly.

With my food eaten, I was feeling full. I lay back on my chair and let out a content sigh. Shigeru moves to sit beside me, and starts caressing my belly. I put my arm around his neck and rested my head on his shoulder, enjoying every second of the massage I'm getting. "You're really spoiling me, Shigeru."

"You deserve every second of this, my light. I want you to feel like a king."

"I want to treat you like a king too. I love you so much, aibo."

"And I love you, aibo."

We both stare lovingly into each other's eyes. This moment made my heart soar. We lean close, and press each other's lips together. Once, twice, we surrendered to passion, sharing a long, intimate moment together worshiping each other's bodies. Thanks to his love, I feel comfortable having a muscle-gut look now.

The End!