

CHAPTER 05

A Variety of Methods



By late afternoon, the courtyard smelled of cut herbs and heating charcoal. Selina sat at the spice table sorting rosemary from thyme. Rachel labelled serving dishes. Zara worked at the grill while Baby V mixed drinks.

Heat pressed down beneath the cooking-shelter roof. A fan turned above the preparation table, fluttering Rachel's labels whenever it faced her. Selina kept one hand on the herb basket; every few moments she lifted a stem to smell it, then laid it in the appropriate pile. Out by the fire, Zara shook the coals into an even bed.

Tony was attempting to carry three pineapples at once.

"Two trips," Alfred advised over the radio.

"That's exactly what they're expecting."

Hykarl took his place beside the cooking fire with the tongs held like a ceremonial baton.

"Behold," he announced. "I am meat. I bring meat. I cook meat. The fire obeys ze Kapten!"

A small puff of smoke blew directly into his face.

He coughed with authority.

Zara turned a tray towards him.

Fat hissed at the edge of the grill. Hykarl followed the sound with professional attention until he realised Zara was looking at him rather than the tray. Behind her, steam lifted a saucepan lid by a fraction and let it settle again. The entire kitchen seemed very certain about what it intended to do to dinner.

“Roasted.”

“Steamed,” said Miss Q, indicating a separate covered dish.

Rachel lifted a bunch of herbs.

“Stuffed with these.”

Hykarl looked from face to face.

“Alfred,” he whispered into the radio. “They have different plans for me.”

“They’re discussing dinner.”

Tony recovered a slipping pineapple against his chin.

“You introduced yourself as the ingredients, boss.”

“SCARY,” Hykarl said. “DEATH BY COOKING.”

Baby V brought him a glass of water.

“Relax, darling. We’re keeping you for company.”

He accepted the glass with both hands.

“For company. Yes. Good. That is a very good - ”

The sentence departed without him.

Baby V smiled.

“He was calmer about the roasting.”

Miss Q unrolled a length of baking paper.

The paper made a long, dry whisper as it opened across the table. Q smoothed it with both palms. Selina placed the herbs within reach, then glanced at Hykarl over the rim of her cup, waiting to see how far his imagination would travel without assistance.

“There’s also en papillote.”

Hykarl backed into a charcoal sack.

“NO WRAPPING. I CAME HERE FOR - FOR RESEARCH. NOT TO BECOME AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN.”

“The sea bass, Kapten,” Alfred said. “We’re wrapping the sea bass.”

Tony considered the paper.

“The look could work. Streamlined.”

Selina watched Hykarl inspect the quickest path to the jetty.

“Predictable,” she murmured.

He stopped.

“What is?”

“You looked at the boat before the fish.”

He looked at the fish.

“Routine maritime awareness.”

She folded a little rosemary into the paper and slid the packet towards Q.

“What if someone wrapped her arms around you?”

Hykarl’s fingers tightened around his glass.

“That application would require separate consideration.”

Tony set down the pineapples.

“Postponing evacuation, Alfred.”

Zara rescued the tongs from beneath Hykarl’s elbow.

“Come stand here. You’re on the cooler side. Turn these when I tell you.”

“I possess extensive experience.”

“Good. Wait.”

He waited.

For a few breaths they worked shoulder to shoulder. Zara watched the food; he watched for her signal. When she stepped around him to reach the salt, he made so much room that his heel found the charcoal sack again. She moved it out of his way with her foot and continued cooking.

“Now.”

He turned them neatly.

Zara nodded.

“There’s my useful captain.”

Hykarl examined the tongs.

“The hinges,” he said, “may require inspection.”

“Later.”