

Gourmet 211

Chapter 211: Making Charcoal Out of the World Tree

Perspiration was pooling in Chairman Kang Minhoo's hands while he stared at the TV screen.

[Player Carr has started to run towards Player Minhyuk while shouting loudly!]

[Do they know each other?]

His son, Kang Minhyuk, also had a dream. He wanted to become a world-class gold medalist in kendo. That was his child's dream. After he won that unofficial competition, he got a chance to spread his wings. Unfortunately, not long after that, a disease called 'eating addiction' struck him.

However, Kang Minhoo knew that his son fought against this disease more fiercely and strongly than anybody else. Minhyuk kept on working out and exercising, even though it would have been alright to stop. Minhyuk kept on exercising even though something bad had happened to him. Minhoo knew that part of it was to solve the 'regret' from that time. Although he was not able to become a 'gold medalist', perhaps Minhyuk could solve that regret right now.

However, the commentators were saying the opposite.

[No matter how fast Player Minhyuk dealt with those four players with his amazing abilities, his opponent is still Carr, a gold medalist.]

[It's a losing battle.]

Then, the swords of the two young men collided.

Clang!

Minhyuk quickly swung his sword and defended against Carr's attack. Then, he dug in and penetrated Carr's swing in an instant as he made to stab him in the stomach.

Clang!

Carr gently parried before aiming for Minhyuk's head.

Once.

Clang!

Twice.

Clang!

Thrice.

Clang!

Strangely, Carr did not create any gap. No, he even allowed Minhyuk to counterattack.

Shwooooook!

Carr then twisted his body to dodge the sword that was aiming at his flanks, while quickly slashing down on Minhyuk.

Clang!

Minhyuk shifted down and rolled once, effectively dissipating the force of the attack from behind.

Dash!

Carr began to run backwards while Minhyuk ran after him.

Clang, clang, clang, clang!

Sparks kept on pouring out whenever their swords met. Carr ran until he got near a wall. Then, he stomped towards the wall, before kicking off and used the rebound as a driving force to add power to his stab. However, Minhyuk skillfully twisted his body and avoided the attack, before sending his own attack towards Carr's neck.

Vwoooooosh!

Carr shifted the center of his gravity with a twist of his toes and avoided the attack. The sword of the two of them continued to clash.

"W...wow..." Jacky burst out in admiration. He thought that Minhyuk would not be able to hold out against Carr. Contrary to his expectations, Minhyuk was not losing ground against Carr's flamboyant sword skills.

[Wh...what's going on...?]

[Player Minhyuk is not losing an inch of ground with this fight against the gold medalist Carr...!]

[Something entirely unbelievable is happening right in front of us!!!]

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The cheers and screams in the audience stands were getting hotter and hotter.

Meanwhile, Carr was left in shock after clashing continuously against Minhyuk. He thought, 'His skills are not rusty at all...!'

Minhyuk's skills that he thought should have rusted through the years, did not rust at all. It even looked like Minhyuk had been undergoing special training for a long time.

Flash!

In that moment of distraction, Minhyuk stabbed towards Carr's neck. Carr quickly stretched out his sword to parry. A chill ran down his spine. He knew that if he had failed to react quickly, his head would already have flown far away.

Locke and Khan were also battling against the other players.

"Khan. Throw it to me!"

"Okey dokey!" Khan said as he swiftly punched the face of one of the players that blocked their way.

"Urgh!"

Then, Khan grabbed the player that was holding onto his bruised nose, before throwing him to Locke, who was lying on the floor.

“Hello?”

“...!”

The player that fell down in front of Locke was none other than Aegis, a mage player. He was very shocked when he felt the hands that dragged his body.

Locke’s legs had not recovered yet! However, he had been learning wrestling for five years already. It was a skill that he had learned since he got beaten by Lee Sungmin and his group.

Grab—

Locke squeezed the neck of his opponent tightly. Not long after, Aegis passed out.

[Due to difficulties in breathing, you will be temporarily knocked out.]

“One man down! Another one! Throw another one!”

“Wait!”

Even though Locke’s legs were still recovering and were quite uncomfortable, he was still doing quite well. The same was true for Khan.

Meanwhile, Carr was getting restless. He thought, ‘These crazy bastards. What the hell!’

Khan and Locke were also putting pressure on him by doing this. This made Carr realize that he would be at a disadvantage if he failed to beat Minhyuk down.

Then, at that moment...

[There are 10 seconds left for the Blessings of the World Tree.]

[9 seconds, 8 seconds, 7 seconds, 6 seconds, 5 seconds...]

...the Blessings of the World Tree was coming to an end.

Carr’s mouth immediately curled up in a grin. He knew that Minhyuk’s level was only 355. Even though he made a tremendous show of power in the Speed Eating Contest, it was still a competition for production classes. There was a difference between heaven and earth when one compared the production classes and the combat classes. It was not a gap that Minhyuk could overcome easily. He believed that as soon as the Blessings of the World Tree ended, Khan, Locke and Minhyuk would all die quickly.

Then, the notifications rang.

[1 second.]

[The Blessings of the World Tree has ended.]

A smile formed around Carr’s mouth. He quickly took a step back as dozens of swords appeared around him.

[Chaotic Sword Manipulation.]

[Several dozens of swords will be fired from the Crown Prince’s body.]

Dozens of sword beams flew from Carr's body. At around Level 490, Carr could unleash a formidable force with his swords that had an additional 100% attack power.

Shweeeeeek!

A sword quickly flew straight towards Minhyuk.

"Like the Wind," Minhyuk said, activating his skill and moving instantly to a distance of three meters.

The distance between them widened, but it seemed like the Chaotic Sword Manipulation was like a homing missile as it followed him around. After using 'Like the Wind' once more, Minhyuk triggered his Rampant Sword.

[Rampant Sword.]

[A flurry of rampant swords with additional 30% attack power will be created for 14 seconds.]

Carr's eyes widened when he saw Rampant Sword, with a longer duration, being unleashed. The sword beams that he had created were shot down by the ones that were created from Minhyuk's skill.

Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang!

'How can this be possible...?' Carr thought in disbelief. Cancelling an opponent's attack would only be possible if both players were at the same level. However, Minhyuk's level was only at Level 355. He was even a production class player.

'Come to think of it...'

Minhyuk had shown two skills in the Speed Eating Contest. The first skill was 'Fluttering Sword'. Carr had also seen the Fluttering Sword in the replay and he had seen hundreds of leaves flashing like swords, as they devoured and ravaged his enemies. Such a sword skill was usually only exclusively available to fairly high-leveled sword class players, or to players with special job classes. Therefore, he was quite surprised that Minhyuk could pull out hundreds of such things like that. Even so, he had only seen one sword skill together with Minhyuk's magical abilities.

'No. But the level gap is...'

It was something that could never be narrowed down. While he was lost in thought, Khan regained his strength and began to run and increase his momentum.

[Crazy Priest's Reinforcement.]

[A powerful curse will be applied in both your hands. This curse can cause your enemies to rot in one strike.]

Locke was definitely a damage dealer as well as a healer. However, he tended to lean more towards debuff skills instead of the healing skills.

[Giant's Strike.]

[A huge fist will hit your enemies recklessly.]

Khan stretched his fist quickly as a huge fist formed and hit the players that tried to kill them.

Bang! Bang, bang!

The players were able to defend quickly. However, their arms felt some sort of numbness spread in their arms. They felt as if there were bugs crawling around their arms.

[Your hands are beginning to rot at a fast pace.]

[Your HP is constantly being reduced.]

[Your hands will be incapacitated if you leave them unattended.]

Locke and Khan had been friends for quite a long time so when they fought together, they had some sort of tacit understanding that left the other four players at a loss.

‘I have to get this over with quickly.’

[Eight Legendary Greatswords.]

[Eight strong sword attacks will hit one player. Each attack will have an additional 140% damage.]

A huge greatsword appeared and dropped down from the air. The other swords appeared and stuck to the ground with Minhyuk at the center.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

Minhyuk could see that the swords that got stuck in the ground showed off an unusual energy.

“...I can’t believe that he got caught in such a skill.”

The remarks of Jackal, the second in the official domestic rankings, rang loudly in the VIP stands. Jackal was donned with the name Black Star since all of his artifacts, even his suit, was dyed in black. His words as a Level 472 player proved to be quite catching.

“Ah... Jackal has fought with Carr before, right?”

Jackal smiled bitterly as he nodded at one of the tankers’ words. He said, “That’s right. At first, I thought that it was just a walk in the park, but that skill took me out. That ability can trap and lock people up like bugs caught in a spider web. Its power is so formidable that a player will not be able to penetrate through it. I can tell... because even I was not able to penetrate through it...”

“...”

“...”

The players readily agreed with him. After all, Jackal was strong enough to be ranked second in the official local rankings. Not long after, a woman suddenly said, “Wait... I think he’s going to break through it?”

“...What?”

Their heads turned around. They saw Legend Guild’s guild master, Genie, sitting with her legs crossed.

“Everyone, I believe you have only seen only one side of the Frying Pan Killer. Right?” She said confidently.

Minhyuk keenly felt a sense of danger so he hurriedly tried to avoid it. However, a notification suddenly rang.

[You can't escape while the skill is still in effect.]

‘What kind of fraudulent ability is this...’

Then, the eight greatswords that surrounded him started to glow brightly. Minhyuk realized that he could not avoid it, so he decided to break it, and quickly activated Fluttering Sword.

Swoooooooooosh—

Hundreds of falling leaves fell on the eight three-meter long greatswords around him. Suddenly, a bright flash erupted from one of the greatswords.

Ping—

The flash that appeared instantly slashed Minhyuk's arms. His HP got cut down by at least five percent. Then, one after another, the swords flashed and attacked Minhyuk's body.

Ping, ping, ping, ping—

“Kghhk!”

Minhyuk's body started to bleed after being torn by the flashes of light. It seemed like it was not just Minhyuk's Fluttering Sword that had a long cast time. Even Carr's skill also had a long cast time. However, the first to activate the skill was Carr. The greatswords flashed brightly as they slashed through Minhyuk's body.

Ping, ping, ping, ping—

[Your HP has dropped below 60%.]

[Your HP has dropped below 40%.]

[You have received a critical strike.]

[Your head will start to feel dizzy due to continuous bleeding.]

[Your HP has dropped below 20%.]

[Your body movements have been restricted.]

Carr smiled wickedly. He believed that it was about time for Minhyuk to collapse from the bleeding that he was experiencing. However, contrary to his expectations, Minhyuk did not collapse. Even the wind around him began to blow intensely.

Vwoooooooooom—

At that moment, a flash pierced through Minhyuk's neck.

‘I won...!’

Carr felt gleeful. He did not forget to stare straight at Minhyuk. This was something that he did not wish to miss.

[You have used the Armor of Immortality's special ability.]

[All of your HP and MP is refilling at a high speed.]

Flash!

Minhyuk's wounds began to regenerate at a speed visible to the naked eye. In just a flash, his HP had already been restored to 100%.

‘What kind of ridiculous thing is this...!’

Carr looked on in horror, and chills ran down his spine when he saw this scene play out in front of him.

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Another flash went straight towards Minhyuk's body. However, the cast time for the Fluttering Sword had finally ended. Five falling leaves flew towards the rapidly approaching ray of light.

Flash—

The two powerful forces met in the air and cancelled each other out.

Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping—

Then, lights flashed and burst out at a high speed from the eight greatswords. However, Minhyuk's falling leaves flew rapidly and extinguished the flashing lights in the air.

‘He still used his most powerful skill.’

With this, Minhyuk was left without any other powerful skills. The only thing that he had left would be the Dark Fire Storm that he had used back then. Carr, or Da-Woul, believed that it was ridiculous for someone like Minhyuk to confront him with just that one skill.

At that moment, the falling leaves started to attack the eight greatswords directly after extinguishing the flashes of light.

Clang, clang, clang, clang!

Crack!

The eight greatswords started to crack and break one by one.

Clatter!

Then, one sword broke and faded away in a burst of light. It was at that moment when Minhyuk heard a notification in his head.

[You can now get out of the skill.]

“Like the Wind.”

Then, he stabbed the ground with his sword as if he was already planning on doing this from the very beginning.

“Blooming Sword.”

Shake!

Carr felt the ground beneath him shake and tremble. He suddenly felt great danger. Without any hesitation, he swung his sword which was glowing with a golden light.

[Sword of Extinction.]

[You can nullify the enemy's skill. However, you will be left defenseless for 0.3 seconds.]

The effect of the Blooming Sword suddenly disappeared.

‘I can only use Sword of Extinction thrice.’

Carr found it surprising that Minhyuk had skills other than Fluttering Sword. However, he believed that Minhyuk would not have any other skills. No, he firmly believed that there would be no more skills left in his arsenal. At that moment...

“Splitting Sword.”

Swooooooosh—

Vwoooooooooooooong—

...Minhyuk swung his sword twice in the air, as two crescent sword lights flashing a dangerous red were fired straight towards Carr.

[Sword of Extinction.]

[You can nullify the enemy's skill. However, you will be left defenseless for 0.6 seconds.]

Using the Sword of Extinction would result in instant penalties, such as 0.3 and 0.6 seconds of defenselessness. It was only a short period of time, but in a fight between rankers that had monstrous speed, even a short amount of vulnerability could lead to serious consequences.

“Crazy bastard! Are you a damn swordsman, a Food God or a mage?!”

“...”

Minhyuk did not answer Carr and just continued to use his skills against him.

“Like the Wind. Scattering Sword.”

Vwoooooooooong!

The distance between him and Carr was narrowed in an instant. Scattering Sword was one of the skills that had evolved into the ‘Demigod’ rank. The skill previously dealt consecutive strikes but after evolving, it had now turned into a skill with eight times the force condensed into a single strike. If one assumed that Minhyuk usually had an attack of 500, then this single strike from the Scattering Sword would have an attack of 4,000.

Shwaaaaaaaaaaaaa—

The sword emitted a powerful force that tore the air as it swung down towards Carr. Carr instinctively moved and used his skills.

[Crown Prince's Quick Sword.]

[A quick sword that can cut down your enemies.]

Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping—

Carr's sword moved quickly as it slashed at Minhyuk's body. He thought, 'What kind of monstrous HP is this...!'

Carr was in shock. It seemed like Minhyuk's HP was already comparable to his own. He knew this since Minhyuk was able to take on his strikes without even staggering or collapsing.

At that moment, he suddenly felt a tearing pain in his back.

Slash!

[Physical Damage Reflection! Returns double the damage received.]

[You have received a critical strike.]

[Your HP is dropping at a rapid rate.]

Carr finally felt danger. He was reluctant to use his final Sword of Extinction, but for some reason, he believed that Minhyuk would not have any more skills left after this. So, he gritted his teeth and used the skill.

[Sword of Extinction.]

[You can nullify the enemy's skill. However, you will be left defenseless for 1 second.]

He had no defense for one second. Minhyuk quickly took advantage of the gap as he slashed down on Carr.

Puhaa!

[You have received an additional critical wound.]

[Your body will temporarily be paralyzed.]

Carr was flustered. However, he had a skill prepared for situations just like this.

[Emperor's Grace.]

[The Emperor's knights will appear to protect you and only defend you in the event of an enemy attack.]

Dozens of translucent knights appeared in front of him. However, all they could do was defend. Minhyuk hummed as he observed Carr. Then, he approached him quickly.

"Sword of Fury."

Shweeeeeeeek!

A red air strongly formed around his sword. When Minhyuk tried to force his way in, the translucent knights threw themselves forward and defended against him.

Baaaaaaang!

In Sword of Fury's case, all of his enemies within a two-meter radius would be struck. As soon as his sword struck forward, more than half of the dozen of knights disappeared. However, there were still half of them left.

‘Crazy shit... When will this stun be lifted? This time, I’m sure that he will have no more skills left.’ Carr thought. Alas...

Shwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

...wind began to blow around Minhyuk’s body once more.

Carr was familiar with this skill. It was the powerful skill that broke through his Eight Legendary Greatswords. It was the very first time that his greatswords were broken as well. However, he strongly believed that the cooldown of such a great skill was quite unimaginable. Therefore, he could not believe his eyes when he saw the skill being used so quickly again.

“W, what the hell! This is impossible...!” Carr shouted in horror, panic starting to settle in. Unfortunately, no matter how much he shouted that it was impossible, the scene in front of him remained real. This was the reality.

“Fluttering Sword,” Minhyuk said deeply. This was the Fluttering Sword that he had kept in advance using his ‘save’ skill. Then, hundreds of falling leaves began to fall around him. Minhyuk swung his sword as strongly as he could.

Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping—

The hundreds of fluttering leaves flew rapidly towards Carr and his translucent knights. For the first time since playing ‘Athenae’, Carr felt a sense of crisis and dread.

Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping!

The knights that were protecting him disappeared as soon as the leaves made contact with them. They scattered with the wind after being hit directly by such an attack. Then, a leaf suddenly penetrated Carr’s chest.

Fwoosh!

“Urgh!” Carr groaned as he staggered back. The fact that his armor got pierced through made him realize that Minhyuk’s attack power was comparable to his own.

Clang!

Carr could finally move! He quickly tried to avoid the incoming attacks, but it was too much for him to defend against hundreds of falling leaves. What was worse was that Minhyuk also narrowed the distance between them to join the falling leaves that he had unleashed.

“Like the Wind,” Minhyuk said, appearing in front of the desperately struggling Carr. Without any hesitation, he stabbed Carr’s chest.

Stab!

“...!”

Carr did not want to admit the situation in front of him. He was not able to beat Minhyuk in a sword match before, and now, he was also unable to beat him even after using his power in the game ‘Athenae’. Now and even in the past, he was still not able to win against Minhyuk.

Puhaaa!

Minhyuk coldly drew the sword out of Carr's chest and took a few steps back. Carr's body slowly fell down. He was forced to log out. Then, Minhyuk shot the remaining leaves towards the players who were attacking Khan and Locke.

Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping—

The bodies of their enemies collapsed at a rapid pace.

The stands were all covered in silence. After all, the reality that something unbelievable had happened in front of them was something that was hard to swallow. The silence was only broken when one player stood up in the stands.

“W, waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?Really cool!”

“Waaaaah.?Oh my goodness!”

[Ah... Ah... Pl...Player Minhyuk forced Player Carr to log out!]

[The strongest contender for the MVP, Player Carr, has been forced to log out and disappear!]

[That's not all! The players who were pressuring Players Khan and Locke are disappearing one by one!]

[Huh? But Paladin Neville is not logged out?]

[They're talking.]

[Paladin Neville is healing Locke's legs.]

[Looking at the situation, I think they made a compromise. I believe that they told him 'You're going to~ die~' ?if he did not heal Locke's legs.]

[After the treatment, Neville escaped and disappeared like the wind.]

[One thing is clear now.]

[Yes. You're right.]

[Khan, Locke and Minhyuk. One among these three people will be crowned as the MVP!]

[There are 20 minutes left in the War of the World Tree!]

[The MVP for the War of the World Tree will go to Player Locke.]

[Player Minhyuk quickly climbed to second place but I think it's still a bit too much for him to climb to the top within a short 20 minutes.]

[However, it's still surprising that he was able to beat the other players and climb to second place in just 20 minutes.]

“Uwoooooooo!” Locke screamed after he won the MVP. Applause rang loudly in the stands with plenty of swears aimed at him still mixed in. However, this was the first

time that he won something, in his life. He had always been in last place. Whether it was in appearance, grades or everything else. For the first time in his life, Locke was named MVP and won the honor of participating in?Athenae: World War.

Then, Locke strode towards the players' waiting room. A man who had been waiting for him opened the door.

"Let's go inside."

It was none other than Minhyuk.

"Let's go."

Locke went inside arrogantly as Minhyuk rubbed his shoulders.

"Feeling refreshed?"

"Yeah. Refreshed."

"Would you like a glass of water?"

"Yeah! Grab me a glass of water!"

Minhyuk rushed to get him a glass of water. After taking a gulp, Locke could not help but let out a gasp of admiration.

"Kiyaaa. The flavor of the water that our Minhyuk brought is shooo gwoood!"

"Haha. I'm glad that it's to our Locke's liking."

There was only one reason why Minhyuk was flattering him! It was because of one thing. Locke looked at him as he grinned. He decided to stop teasing Minhyuk any further, as he absorbed the MVP trophy. Then, he gave Minhyuk the World Tree that he had received.

"Take it. I already know that you want to make charcoal out of the World Tree."

"Ahyuu...?What are you saying... Haha. How can I be so shameless!"

Locke stared at him. In the first place, he would not have been able to win and get first place, had Minhyuk not come to save him. It was enough that he was crowned the MVP. After all, this title had already given him the honor of participating in the?Athenae: World War.

"So, you don't like it?"

"No. I like it."

Then, Minhyuk snatched it quickly. He was, after all, someone that would not refuse a gift.

"Hiyaaa. It would be great to make charcoal out of this, right?"

Minhyuk smiled happily. The World Tree, shaped like the organ, was kept in a transparent round glass. As he looked at the World Tree happily, Minhyuk spoke up.

"But, don't we still have some work to do?"

“What do you mea... Ah!”

Locke and Khan nodded with wide grins on their faces. It was time for them to give Carr a big slap in the face.

The five reporters, including Go Eun-Ah, were left in confusion.

“Why is the interview going to be conducted in the waiting room?”

“I know. Our numbers are even too little.”

This was because the trio that was the hottest topic in the War of the World Tree had requested to have a quiet interview in the Players’ Waiting Room. In addition, only the five reporters who were affiliated companies to Joy Co. Ltd. were allowed inside.

Not long after, the reporters came inside. However, just when they were about to turn the camera on, Locke suddenly said, “Ah. I’m a bit nervous.?Hoo! Hoo!?Please wait.”

“I’m so nervous. I think my chest is thumping wildly?”

“He’s got camera phobia, so whenever a camera is in front of him, he will drool and make weird noises.”

Then, the three people began to talk nonsense.

“I’m sorry, but can you go over there to help him relax for a moment before having the interview?”

They pointed towards the changing room inside the players’ waiting room. In fact, this was the game’s waiting room so the changing room was a bit meaningless. It was said that the coliseum, as well as the waiting room, were all tailored after the athlete’s waiting room and coliseum of the Olympics.

“Please take away all the cameras! Whenever I look at the camera...?Ugh!”

They all went into the changing room.

“At this rate, will we even be able to do an interview...?”

“Those people are weird.”

The reporters whispered in the small changing room.

Then, at that moment...

Bang!

...they heard the door slamming open. The reporters suddenly started to pay attention to what was going on outside despite their confusion. Just then, they heard a familiar voice.

“Hey! You f*cking bastards!”

“Huh?” Go Eun-Ah asked dumbly, eyes wide in shock. It was because that was Carr’s voice.

Chapter 213: Delicious Grilled Eel

Minhyuk and his friends looked at Carr. ‘How can he be so predictable?’ was what ran through their heads. They had completely grasped his personality. After all, he had already done this once before. After losing to Minhyuk back in middle school, Carr, or Lee Da-Woul in reality, had immediately gone to the players’ waiting room and caused a huge ruckus before going away. Right now, he was again making a scene, just like he did back then.

“You’re toying with me, right?! You, Kang Minhyuk! How dare you mock me just like you did before?! How dare you!”

“What are you talking about? I would like you to leave. Isn’t it only polite to not do something like this in the players’ waiting room?”

“Polite?! Polite?! You f*ckers!”

Kick!

Carr kicked the chair that was right next to him. Minhyuk had already predicted that this would happen. He knew that Carr had a hot-tempered personality that did not care about anything else once he got angry.

“Because of you...”

“Why is it because of us? You lost because you’re weak,” Khan said.

Carr just snorted as he mocked them. He said, “One win, and it goes to all three of your heads.”

Then, the three of them crossed their legs and nodded at the same time. They said, “Yeah.”

Carr’s face flushed red but Locke, took this opportunity to say, “I’m sorry, but at least we’re not as low-class as you to threaten other people. After all, you were the one who threatened me first. Didn’t you tell me that you will tell the whole world that I used to be a loner? So, I got angry and did that whole ‘Uweeeeeeck!’ fiasco. It made me into a ‘rude and unlikeable’ person that the whole nation hates. So, what are you talking about here when you lost to us once? Are you here to blame us for winning the competition?”

To be honest, nothing came to Carr, even if he wanted to retort. However, he was too agitated at the moment, that all he wanted to do was curse at them. He said, “That’s right. Anyway, a loner and an outcast like you will not be able to live until the end. The same goes for you, Minhyuk. Khan, you? Your life will not be smooth sailing either, because I’m not going to let this slide in?Athenae.”

Locke immediately quipped, “‘That’s right’?you said? So, you admit it? You admit to threatening me first?”

“Revealing that shitty life of yours? Sure. I’m going to get someone to do it all on the internet...” Carr jeered, before a sudden flash appeared from somewhere.

Click, click!

There were several cameras sticking out of the changing room, capturing everything that had just happened.

“...”

Carr was both confused and flustered. When he realized what happened, he started trembling violently. He had made himself out to be the gentleman and polite gold medalist in front of the media. He was even chosen by plenty of women as the ‘Number One Polite Male to go on a Blind Date with’. Alas, there were plenty of reporters in front of him, and the entire fiasco had been recorded.

Minhyuk, Locke and Khan all simultaneously crossed their hands on their chests as they spoke one after the other.

“We wanted to tell you.”

“Just in case, we wanted to give it to you if you came.”

“We prepared a present for you?”

“...!”

Then, they stretched out their hands as if they were giving out gifts to him. Starting from the left, Minhyuk pulled out his hand from his chest and raised his middle finger at him.

“Eat shit~”

Locke, who was in the middle, also popped his middle finger out.

“Eat two shits~”

And finally, Khan, who was on the right-most side, pulled out both of his hands and raised two middle fingers at him.

“Eat three shits~”

Then, the three of them all puffed their cheeks out as they blew their tongues at him. The three of them all looked at him with unkind gazes saying...

“Hey, you’re the f*cker!?Ptew!”

“Hey, you’re the f*cker!?Ptew!”

“Hey, you’re the f*cker!?Ptew!”

They showed very fantastic chemistry.

Alicia and Lucia were both waiting in front of the players’ waiting room. Since they both knew Minhyuk, they decided to come here and congratulate him.

Lucia’s cheeks flushed a deep red as she thought,?‘Minhyuk...’

She had failed to meet him during the previous competition! She even sent whispers of?‘Do you want to eat ramyeon?’?to Minhyuk. However Minhyuk, who was afraid for his food, always avoided her.

‘But today!’

She was sure that she would be able to talk to him if she sent him her congratulations.

Meanwhile, Alicia felt her heart shake for the first time when she watched Minhyuk fight against Carr. This was the first time that she had experienced something like this in her life. He had become more likable in her eyes after she watched him easily defeat Carr, who was believed to be ranked number one in the unofficial rankings.

“Lucia. Men usually like innocent looking women with long hair. The kind that looks good in jeans.”

“Hoho. Unnie~ What are you talking about? Men like women with a chic bob. And what men really like the most are women with a sensual body, right? Hohoho!” Lucia said, puffing her chest up with a wide grin on her face.

A strange war of nerves broke out between the two women. It was a scene where two of the most beautiful women in the country were arguing about such things just because of one person.

Some of the other players saw them acting like this.

‘Ar...aren’t those two Lucia and Alicia?’

‘Th...those two are very famous because they never talked to men...!’

‘I...I’m a bit envious of Player Minhyuk!’

‘I’m very, very jealous!’

The players reacted like that since the two of them were so beautiful. Meanwhile, Cain had a hand on the hilt of his sword as he watched the two of them. He thought,?‘This wolf bastaaard! I’ll pull every single one of your toenails as soon as you get out!’

Cain still believed that Minhyuk was the one who seduced the innocent Lucia.

At that moment, the door suddenly opened. Alicia smiled softly as she shyly tucked her hair behind her ears. She was the epitome of purity itself.

“Wow. T...too beautiful...” ?One of the players exclaimed in shock.

On the other side, Lucia posed in a way where she highlighted her ample chest and voluptuous figure.

“Isn’t that too sexy?”

“Wow. She’s really pretty. Isn’t that pose too eye-catching?”

Just as expected, Cain gripped his sword tightly. When the two girls saw Minhyuk come out, they thought...

‘Lucia~ guys like innocent and pure girls, you know?’

‘Hoho, unnie~ guys like sexy and provocative women.’

The two of them saw Minhyuk running out hurriedly.

‘Did he miss me since it’s been a long time since we last met? Is that why you’re running like this?!’

‘Y...you’re running to see me!! Are you going to give me, Lucia, a big hug?! I missed you too!!’

That was what the two of them thought.

As for the one who was running? Minhyuk looked like he was in a hurry, but he stopped for a brief moment just as he was about to pass by them.

“Ack!? Lucia, hello! Alicia, hi! Well then, everyone, hello! Hello! I have to go eat eel! Bye everyone!” Minhyuk greeted them politely. Once he finished greeting them, he quickly dashed off and disappeared from the hallway. The speed at which he made off was so fast, that it was as if there was fire licking at his feet.

“...”

“...”

Both Alicia and Lucia were caught off-guard, and turned speechless.

“J...just now, what did Player Minhyuk say?”

“He, he’s going to eat eel, I think...”

“No... Does it even make sense for him to go and eat eel, instead of talking to these two pretty women?”

Alicia and Lucia both chuckled forcefully.

“Hohoho! We can’t help it if it’s eel! Hohohoho!”

“R...right? Lucia? Hohohohohoho!”

That’s right. The top beauties of the country, Lucia and Alicia, were worth less than an ‘eel’ in front of Minhyuk.

At first, right after the competition, the number one real-time search term in Navar was ‘War of the World Tree’. However, the number one real-time search term soon changed within a few hours.

[1. Carr, rampaging in the waiting room.]

At the same time, a lot of articles popped up on the website as netizens strongly criticized his actions.

[Guys. Is it true that Carr threatened Locke?]

[Yes. It's true. Although there are a lot of speculative comments coming in right now, it was something that was officially announced by Locke himself. And Carr was also sitting beside him during an interview a few days ago. There must have been some bad blood between Carr and Minhyuk before. He used the excuse of exposing Locke's past to threaten and mock them.]

[So, Locke cursed at him and pretended to vomit because he was angry about what he told him about his friend?]

[Right. It seemed that Carr threatened him because he knew that Locke would be ridiculed if his past was known. It turned out that Locke did not care about that. All he wanted to do was to protect his friend. Wow. When I saw this, I felt that's what a cool guy should be.]

[Agree. Even though Locke is ugly, he's still really cool. Wasn't he the best during the games too? Even when his legs were uncomfortable, he was still able to beat the other players around.]

[That's true. He's become the best damage dealer in our country with this game. Even Minhyuk was crowned as our country's real best player when he easily killed Carr.]

[Ah, but thinking about that Carr bastard... I really hate what he has done so far. Pretending to be a good person with good manners. Ptew!]

[Did you close your Carr insta account?]

[Carr would be buried and ostracized anyway, right? I heard that all the advertisements and schedules that he had previously will now be blown away. He even has to pay a penalty because he went to the winner and threw a crazy tantrum.]

[Life will really get back to you when you do evil things.]

[Come to think of it, isn't Player Minhyuk too quiet? Many people are curious about Player Minhyuk's future plans. Am I right?]

[Of course. It would definitely be a big hit if Player Minhyuk took a video and uploaded it. He's not filming any commercials or anything, right? I wonder where he is and what he is doing now?]

Shwaaaaaaa—

Minhyuk brought the World Tree to the kiln as he amped up the temperature to 1,300 degrees. Then, he left it there for quite a long time.

Minhyuk wiped the sweat that dripped down from his forehead due to the high heat, with the towel that was hanging on his neck. After quite some time, he pulled out the World Tree from the kiln. As he pulled it out from the kiln, it was glowing red, just like a fiery jewel. Then, he started the process of cooling down the fiery red World Tree with sand and ash.

Charcoal was usually divided between white charcoal and black charcoal. Currently, the charcoal that Minhyuk was making was the charcoal that was best suited for grilling meat. It was none other than white charcoal. White charcoal got its name due to the white matter that usually got stuck on the surface of the charcoal while it was getting cooled down by the sand and ash.

Minhyuk worked tirelessly for a long time. He was very determined to eat 'grilled eel', so he was happy even though the process was too long. Soon, this long process was finally nearing its end.

After finishing the long and tedious process, his charcoal was finally completed. As soon as the charcoal was completed, he received notifications for the quest reward as well as ‘Gorac’s Special Skill’. However, Minhyuk decided to put it off for a while. Minhyuk believed that it was only polite to give his all to the grilled eel. There were four 3,000 year-old eels with him. Among the four, two would be grilled with salt, while the other two would be grilled with a marinade.

“Oink!” Beanie cried out as it sat on Minhyuk’s other side. It was looking at the eels excitedly. These were the eels that Beanie received after winning first place!

Minhyuk quickly prepared his setting. The ‘Fire from the World Tree Charcoal’ was burning in front of them. A grill with holes in between was placed neatly on top of the fire. There were also seasoned perilla leaves, sliced ginger, a steaming bowl of eel soup, kimchi, as well as dips made of soy sauce. He even brought out red pepper sauce, spicy dipping sauce, and sliced garlic. He also did not forget to bring out some freshly washed perilla leaves and lettuce. All of these side dishes were placed neatly beside the grill.

“Do you feel your energy increasing already, Beans?”

“Oink!!”

Beanie nodded furiously as it watched Minhyuk lift the eel that he had prepared earlier with his tongs.

As soon as the eel made contact with the grill...

Sizzle—

...smoke rose from the grilling pan accompanied with the sizzling sound of meat being grilled.

“The 3,000 year-old eel grilled in charcoal made out of the World Tree!”

‘No matter how I look at it, isn’t this a combination that’s bound to be really delicious?’

Minhyuk watched the eel as it slowly got cooked, before flipping it over once.

Sizzle—

Smoke rose once more. Minhyuk saw the juice dripping slowly from the grilled eel in front of him. The smoke rose as soon as the juices dripped and made contact with the charcoal. He could see the oil glistening brightly on the surface of the eel.

‘Aaaaaaah! This is art!’

It was a fierce art that would make those standing in front of it feel the harshness of the waiting time. Minhyuk made sure to protect the juiciness of the eel by flipping it over and over before cutting it evenly.

“Oink!”

Beanie quickly raised its paws as it looked at the well-grilled eel. It was as if it was telling him?‘Let’s eat first! Oink!’ . Of course, the same food setting and grilled eel was created in front of Beanie.

At Beanie’s polite words and actions, Minhyuk slowly picked up a piece of grilled eel. He could see that the surface was still glistening and sizzling with oil.

“Hoo! Hoo!”

Minhyuk gently blew on the steaming grilled eel with great anticipation, and placed it in his mouth.

Chapter 214: Delicious Grilled Eel

“Hoo—” Minhyuk blew on the steaming grilled eel and placed it in his mouth. The grilled eel was perfectly grilled. Every single bite of the golden, grilled eel was crispy and bursting with savory juices. It was as if the crispiness and juiciness were testimonies to how well the eel was grilled.

Minhyuk nodded and smiled happily after he tasted the original flavor of the eel. Then, he slowly picked up another piece of meat while wondering about how he would eat it. After a moment of pondering, Minhyuk chose the perilla leaf. He grabbed a piece before adding half a spoonful of steaming rice on top of it. Then, he placed the grilled eel that he had dipped in soy sauce on top of it. He also did not forget to add a slice of ginger. After adding everything that he wanted to eat, he rolled the leaf and placed it in his mouth.

Chew, chew.

Minhyuk savored the scent in his mouth with great gusto. The unique fragrance of the perilla leaf made him feel comfortable and relaxed. Every time he chewed the wrap, the taste of the perilla leaf, the distinct flavor of the grilled eel, as well as the sliced ginger would meet and dance in his mouth.

“Haha. Isn’t it delicious?”

It was so good that Minhyuk’s mouth curled into a smile uncontrollably, one hat came out because of how delicious the food was.

Eel was an ingredient that was good for replenishing energy, generally considered to be one of the best ingredients that were good for one’s health. As soon as he tasted the deliciousness, Minhyuk could also feel the heat that was climbing in his body. It was the power of the 3,000-year-old eel that could warm up the body even during the harshest of winter days.

When Minhyuk looked in front of him, he could see Beanie eating happily as well, scooping up a spoonful of rice with its tiny little paws, before placing it in its mouth. After it chewed the rice in its mouth well, Beanie stretched out its spoon towards the eel soup and took a sip, savoring the flavor of the various ingredients that were added to the soup. It could taste the flavor of the soybean paste, the dried radish stems, as well as the perilla leaves.

Minhyuk said, “Beans, one of the biggest charms of the eel soup, or even the bone hangover soup, is the dried radish stems.”

He then took a sip of the eel soup while lifting some dried radish stems up. Having been boiled in the soup, the dried radish stems absorbed much flavor. He quickly placed the dried radish stems on

top of his rice before chomping on it. As soon as he chewed, the soup that was soaked up by the dried radish stems flowed out and spread in his mouth. He happily tasted the soft texture of the radish and rice.

Then, Minhyuk quickly picked up another piece of grilled eel meat before dipping it in his previously prepared sauce and placing it in his mouth. The spicy and sweet flavor of the sauce, together with the delicious protein from the eel, tasted fantastic in his mouth.

This time, Minhyuk spread a piece of perilla leaf that was seasoned with soy sauce on his plate. Then, he placed a large piece of eel meat on top of it before rolling it up and placing it in his mouth. The seasoned perilla leaf had a savory and tangy flavor to it that added some salty and sour flavor to the meat.

‘Isn’t this plain grilled eel wrapped with seasoned perilla leaf very delicious?’

As he munched on this delicious combination, Minhyuk took two cans out of his inventory.

Fwiish—

Minhyuk opened one of the cans, poured it in a glass with ice and placed it in front of Beanie.

Fwiish—

Then, he also opened a can for himself. It was beer. Minhyuk felt the icy coolness through the can of frosted beer. He said, “That’s right. Beer should taste like this!”

Beer tasted the best when one drank it after toiling in front of the warm and fiery charcoal. So, Minhyuk gulped it down happily after working hard.

‘Doesn’t the first sip of beer taste better if you drink it all in one go?’

Gulp, gulp, gulp, gulp, gulp—

“Kyaaa!” Minhyuk exclaimed in awe.

“It’s amazing! Really great!” He cheered loudly, smiling happily at the taste of the cold beer. This time, Minhyuk picked a piece of lettuce and perilla leaf, placing them on top of each other. Then, he dipped the piece of eel in spicy dipping sauce and placed it on top of the leaves. He also did not forget to add garlic, ginger and a chili pepper on top of it. Eating this combination allowed him to enjoy the tingling sensation of the spicy and strong ingredients.

Minhyuk wiped the sweat off of his forehead after eating a big wrap like that. Then, he grilled the ones that he had marinated earlier.

Sizzle—

.

He silently lifted the tail while he grilled the marinated eel. It was popular knowledge that the tail of the eel was filled with nutrients. Minhyuk asked aloud, “It’s good for energy, right?”

The problem was that there was nothing written about it. However, the texture of the tail was very elastic and chewy. As soon as the marinated eel was grilled, he quickly cut off that piece and

chewed on it. The marinated eel was just like marinated pork and beef ribs. It could be seasoned and marinated with red chili paste, or soy sauce. However, Minhyuk preferred the red chili paste marinade better. Hence, his marinated eel looked glossy with its red seasoning.

The plate was filled with the freshly cooked and glistening red marinated eel, and Minhyuk brought it close to his mouth. Then, he placed some sliced ginger on top of it before placing a portion in his mouth.

“Hmm. Delicious!”

The combination of the sweet, spicy flavor of the red chili paste and the tangy flavor of the ginger created a perfect harmony. Then, Minhyuk chomped on the grilled marinated eel with some rice. The grilled marinated eel tasted delicious even if he did not add anything to it.

Sometimes, Minhyuk would even pick two large pieces of marinated eel and place them in his mouth all at once. The texture and flavor of the eel gave his mouth a strange feeling of pleasure and happiness.

Finally, Minhyuk added his remaining rice into the pot of eel soup and finished everything. He did not even forget to tilt the earthen pot and scrape it down to the last drop. After finishing everything, Minhyuk smiled in satisfaction.

“Waaaa!Delicious!”

“Oink!”

Beanie was also smiling in satisfaction.

After they finished eating, Minhyuk heard the notifications once more. When all the notifications finished ringing, Minhyuk decided to open the ‘notification window’ to check everything one by one from the very beginning.

Demoness Gremory was looking at a man through her crystal ball.

[Ore Pordinium? What’s this? What’s the Hero’s Will quest?]

‘Are they almost there?’

The Episode Quests: People who received the Will of the Heroes all had one thing in common. The players that would clear this quest would be able to obtain special ores.

Gremory did not know who the man projected in the crystal ball was. Unbeknownst to her, this man was the 31st ranker in Korea’s official rankings. He was known as Shining Ron. Based on the situation, Gremory could tell that it would not take too long until the day when someone completed the ‘Hero's Will’ quest. The minerals that they would get from these quests would give them a variety of special powers. These special powers would be the force and strength of the ‘heroes’.

Gremory remembered the foreigner who had presented her with dried black bean noodles, tangsuyuk, and plenty of other foods not too long ago. The foreigner, Minhyuk, had the antarinium.

‘The most powerful mineral.’

He was also able to finish all of Gremory's trials without a hitch and was even able to strike a deal with her regarding the 'antarinium'.

'But didn't he just place it in front of me as soon as he said that?'

Then, another thought suddenly popped up in her head.

'He's not going to do something weird with that mineral, right?'

However, she dismissed it as a pointless thought. No matter how much he liked to eat, there was no way that he could use those minerals to eat, right?

However, Gremory's expression was suddenly distorted. She thought, 'He wouldn't put it in his mouth and think that it's some sort of candy, right?'

Grin—

Gremory grinned at the thought. It seemed like she had lost her mind for a moment there.

[Eccentric Chef]

[You have made a Grilled Eel with Charcoal made out of the World Tree and a 3,000-year-old Eel.]

[Food God's Greatness dwells in this Eccentric Dish.]

[Adding up your Eccentric Score.]

[Your Eccentric Score is 68.]

[You will be able to acquire bonus stats based on your Eccentric Score.]

[You have acquired +3 on all five of your basic stats.]

[The Unique ranked 'Eccentric Grilled Eel' has been born.]

'Food God's Greatness dwells in this Eccentric Dish?' Minhyuk thought for a while. Then, he understood. According to the 'Athenae' system, medicines could not be cooked. However, thanks to Minhyuk's 'Food God's Greatness' he was able to ignore such limitations. Right now, he had cooked a dish of the greatest medicines. On top of that, there was his Eccentric Chef and Food God's Greatness ingrained in the same dish. It seemed like the effects did not disappear but got ingrained inside of the dish instead. Then, he looked at the notifications about the 3,000-year-old eel.

[You have eaten the 'Eccentric Grilled Eel'.]

[You have acquired 121 STR and 113 STM.]

[You have acquired 200 Command Points.]

[You can save 21% STR, 20% STM and 20% DEX.]

[You can save 40% Elf Affinity.]

[You can save the Skill: World Tree's Grace.]

Acquisition and Save were two different things. Acquisition meant that the things that he acquired were permanent, while 'Save' meant that he could delete the effects saved from the previous 'Eccentric Dried Black Bean Noodles' and save a new power. It had the same principle as unequipping old artifacts and equipping new and better artifacts.

When he ate the dried black bean noodles, he did not hear the notification 'You can save' since he did not have any saved abilities back then. Of course, Minhyuk saved the abilities that he could save from the grilled eel. As soon as he made his choice, he heard the notifications about the saved skills.

Then, he went to check the notifications window once more. He was checking the last notification. It was a notification for quest completion.

[You have completed the?Class Quest: Make a Special Tool.]

[You have acquired Gorac's Special Skill: 'Gorac's Ingredient Creation'.]

"Oh...!" Minhyuk exclaimed happily. He had a good feeling about this skill. So, he quickly checked the information.

(Gorac's Ingredient Creation)

Active Skill

Level: 1

Mana Required: 1,500

Cooldown: None

Effects:

?This ability can help you make various seasonings from minerals. You can easily grind minerals and turn them into condiments.

?Creating ingredients is based on your level. There may be other ingredients and materials that you still can't make yet based on your current level.

"Yes!" Minhyuk shouted in glee. This was a very useful skill for him. He had tried time and again to make antarinium into a 'condiment', but he had failed every single time. He did not know if this skill could really grind the anatrinium into a condiment. So, he immediately tested it out.

[Do you want to use Gorac's Ingredient Creation?]

"Yes."

[Antarinium is a mineral that can be made into a great seasoning. It can also be used as a substitute for red pepper powder.]

[The grinding of Antarinium has started.]

The figure of antarinium appeared in front of Minhyuk. Then, it was sucked into a grinder with a lot of demonic patterns engraved on it.

Crush, crush, crush!

A loud noise rang in the surroundings as red powder began to fall. Underneath the grinder, a large bowl started to get filled with red pepper powder. Minhyuk smiled happily when he saw the antarinium being ground into red pepper powder. Notifications rang loudly in Minhyuk's ears the moment the antarinium finished grinding.

[You have completed the Class Quest: Special Seasoning.]

[You have acquired one of Gorac's Artifacts.]

When he heard the notifications, Minhyuk immediately closed his eyes and prayed, 'Please. Please let it be something that can help me make something delicious! I'm begging you!'

And surprisingly, his desperation and prayers bore fruit. What appeared in front of Minhyuk was none other than a 'Gigantic Mixer and Bowl'.

Beas Village was a village located just below the Berest Mountains. It was a village that did not have a huge population and even NPCs that moved in and out of the village were only a few.

About two months ago, both Beas Village and the Berest Mountains opened to the public. Plenty of players cheered happily when they saw this information on Athenae's official website. It was because Beas Village and the Berest Mountains were the 'meeting venues' where players all over the world could meet for the 'first time'. This was the place that Joy Co. Ltd. prepared to test what would happen if people from all over the world met.

However, not long after, plenty of the players were left in disappointment. The only reason was because of the 'warp stone'. Before one could enter Beas Village, they would need to have a 'warp stone'. This warp stone could not be bought with money and could only be received through a quest. The quest was mostly available to high-leveled players. Due to this hurdle, it was rare for players to actually step foot in Beas Village.

Even now, there were only 30 global players in Beas Village.

Step, step—

Right now, there was a man walking out of Beas Village. He seemed to be heading for the Berest Mountains. The man was grinning as he walked with his robe and staff.

'I'm finally here! Berest Mountains!' The man thought as he grinned widely. The man had collected a lot of information about the thousand-year-old ginseng all the while completing the quest 'Hero's Liberation'.

'It's the thousand-year-old ginseng that can increase mana reserves by 1.5x!'

He never dreamt that he would be able to step foot in this place. The man was none other than Ali the 'Black Mage'. Excited, he started walking towards the Berest Mountains.

Chapter 215: Samgyetang with Thousand-year-old Ginseng

[You have acquired the 'Automatic Mixer and Bowl'.]

[The 'Automatic Mixer and Bowl' has turned into 'Gorac's Cancelling Mixer and Bowl'.]

[Gorac's Lightning Millstone, Gorac's Aging Jar, and Gorac's Cancelling Mixer and Bowl are part of an artifact set.]

[You are the first to gather all three artifacts of a set.]

[You have gained 500 REP.]

[Gorac's Cancelling Mixer and Bowl has evolved from Unique rank to Disaster rank.]

"Oh?"

Minhyuk had realized earlier on, that Gorac's artifacts would only show their true power when two of the artifacts were brought together. However, he was not aware of a case of having the third artifact. He quickly checked the information of the artifact.

(Gorac's Cancelling Mixer and Bowl)

Rank: Disaster

Restriction: Gorac's Artifact Set

Durability:?

Special Effects:

?Magical Defense will increase by 50% just by having the item in your possession.

?Passive Skill: Automatic Stirring Mixer

?Active Skill: Cancel

Description: This is one of the artifacts of a set hidden by Gorac. Only when two of the artifacts in a set meet will they be able to show their true strength.

(Cancel)

Artifact Skill

Level: None

Mana Required: 2,500

Penalty: -1 on all five basic stats.

Cooldown: 480 hours

Effects: Cancels and nullifies all skills and magic within a five-meter radius from the player.

"Oh...!" Minhyuk exclaimed in admiration. It was an incredibly useful skill. Minhyuk stared at the skill in awe. No, he was not staring at the skill 'Cancel', but rather, at the skill 'Automatic Stirring Mixer'.

"Kgghk!?This is such an amazing ability~?Kyaa!"

Then, he turned to look at the 'Cancel' skill again, with a subtle expression, before saying, "Well, this is useful~"

That was it. Cancel was a very formidable skill that could bring horror to other players. The Millstone of Lightning had two powerful skills: Lightning, and Lightning Hell. However, the

strength of the skill Cancel was comparable to those two. After all, it was a skill that could nullify all skills and magic within a five-meter radius of the player. In other words, even if Minhyuk was surrounded by enemies, he would still be able to exert tremendous power if he nullified all of the lethal skills and attacks directed at him. However, even if he knew that, Minhyuk still thought that the skill 'Automatic Stirring Mixer' was the best.

"Beanie agrees with me too. Right?"

"Oink!"

[Beanie agrees with you.]

Beanie even nodded furiously with its shining eyes.

'Of course! The function of Automatic Stirring is definitely the best! Oink!'

Then, Minhyuk took something out of his arms. It was none other than the World Tree.

'Hmm...'

The World Tree had no other special ability. It was the part of the World Tree that was shaped like an organ inside a transparent glass. While thinking about what he should do to the rest of the World Tree, Minhyuk recalled something.

"Ah...!"

At this very moment, there was one thing that came to Minhyuk's mind. It was none other than? samgyetang. Samgyetang was considered to be one of the top healthy foods during the summer. It was a dish that could restore and replenish one's energy. It also contained a variety of ingredients that could also help in maintaining energy like jujube, ginseng and wood. The wood could come from a variety of trees, like the castor tree, the lacquer tree, or sometimes even the oriental raisin tree.

'How about making samgyetang with the remaining branches of the World Tree?'

Then, he had an idea. It just so happened that summer was already approaching in reality. He wanted to take this opportunity to try and do that here in?Athenae. He wanted to try and make samgyetang properly with the World Tree.

While browsing and selecting the ingredients, Minhyuk saw one ingredient.

'Thousand-year-old ginseng!'

The thousand-year-old ginseng was one of the best medicine that was made public in?Athenae. It was considered the best medicine simply because it could increase the player's mana reserves, in other words, their MP, by 1.5x. For example, a player with an existing 10,000 MP would immediately have 15,000 MP after eating the ginseng. This was how miraculous the item was.

However, there was no information about the exact location and related quests on the official website. Minhyuk was clear that it was going to be something that was difficult to get, but he still wanted it. Hence, Minhyuk sent a whisper to his guild's informant, Abel.

[Minhyuk: Abel~!]

[Abel: Oh, Minhyuk! Hi.]

[Minhyuk: Yes, hi! I'm not going to beat around the bush. Do you have any information on the thousand-year-old ginseng!]

[Abel: Thousand-year-old ginseng. Of course I do.]

[Minhyuk: Oh, Abel is so cool! Just sending a whisper to Abel is making me feel like I'm a cool guy! Uhh. Manly, charming, a man among men...!]

[Abel: Thank you. So, let's talk about the terms for exchange? ^^]

As expected, life was filled with twists and turns. There was no such thing as a free lunch in this world, and Abel did not fall for Minhyuk's flattery.

[Minhyuk:...??]

[Abel: Let's meet and talk?]

[Minhyuk:?? Ok.]

Director Kim Daesik brought a box containing his belongings to the Special Players Management Team. He called out, "Let's relax. Being in the Special Players Management Team is very relaxing and comforting!"

He then placed his box on Team Leader Park's usual spot. ?After the competition, Team Leader Park immediately went on a seven days, six nights vacation. In fact, while Director Kim thought that it was a very long vacation, Team Leader Park Minggyu had told President Kang Taehoon in a tearful voice, 'I haven't had a day off in seven months!'

'Just come back.'

That was the reason why Team Leader Park went on a trip. Meanwhile, Director Kim Daesik sat back down after taking a cup of coffee and turned towards Lee Minhwa, who had turned into a panda, her eye circles deep and dark, "Let's take it easy. Take it easy. Huh? All we need to do is to tap the keyboard a few times while looking at the monitor, and make a report on the special players. We're not responsible for everything in our company. Right?"

"Hohohoho. I...is that so..."

However, Lee Minhwa thought...

'Director Kim is originally from the 'Event Preparation' team, but the biggest event was the competition that ended not too long ago. The Athenae: Korean War. Maybe that's why he's free now. And since we needed someone who can do any department's job, he's temporarily placed here.'

However, Director Kim Daesik welcomed the opportunity. He believed that the Special Players Management Team, a team that was not involved with developing anything nor creating NPCs, was a very relaxing and comforting environment.

On the contrary, Team Leader Park left for his vacation while shedding tears.

‘I’m finally going on a vacation! Hahahahaha!’

‘Team Leader. Can we contact you if we have any problems with the Special Players...’

‘Nope. I’m not going to pick up! Hahahaha!’

‘Yes...?’

Team Leader Park looked happy while Director Kim Daesik took over the throne in the meantime. Director Kim Daesik was even looking at the tables and numbers on his table.

“What’s this?”

“Ah. It’s a table based on the ratings of the special players. We use it to manage the players.”

“I see.”

While he was looking over his workspace, Director Kim Daesik stopped at one part of the table. He saw a name encircled with a red pen, and there were even special symbols written above it.

[★★★★ Dreaded players ★★★★★]

As for the name written below it...

[Food God Minhyuk. Pay attention.]

“W...what’s this?”

“The player that needs monitoring the most.”

“No, well, how special is this player for you to spend that much time monitoring him?”

Director Kim Daesik clicked his tongue because he felt that they were too sensitive when it came to doing their jobs.

Lee Minhwa just thought,?‘...I can clearly remember the team leader’s face when he wanted to rip his head off!’

She grinned widely. Not long after, Director Kim turned to look at Player Minhyuk on his monitor.

“Hmm? He’s going to see Veron. Veron is an NPC that gives beans that will allow him to go to Beas Village. Let’s see.”

Tap, tap, tap, tap!

Director Kim could not help but frown when he poked around and tapped on his keyboard.

“Someone at Player Minhyuk’s level won’t be allowed to take on the quests in Beas Village. He’s just wasting his time.?Tsk, tsk!”

Director Kim clicked his tongue before leaning back on his chair. He thought,?‘The Special Players Management Team is truly heaven!’

He did not know the ‘disaster’ that was coming for him.

Minhyuk was walking to meet NPC Veron.

Based on the information that he got from Abel the Informant, he knew that he would only be able to obtain the thousand-year-old ginseng if he went to a place called Berest.

Berest was a place that Minhyuk knew of. It was the ‘meeting place’ for players all over the world. However, it was very difficult to enter Berest and its nearby villages, so it was actually rare for players to go there.

Minhyuk arrived in front of a small cave where Veron was currently located. Veron was known to be a ‘farmer’. He lived in a remote cave while growing and tending to a garden in front of it.

‘He said that I can use the mysterious seeds that I will get from Veron to get to that village. Right?’

Then, Minhyuk stood in front of the cave, waiting in a polite manner. It seemed like he was very determined to eat the ‘Samgyetang with Thousand-year-old Ginseng’ this time.

He pondered deeply on how he should knock on the cave. Then, someone chuckled from the side and said, “Boy, who are you?”

Veron heard the reason why Minhyuk came to his cave. He learned that Minhyuk was a foreigner who wanted to go to Beas Village. However, Veron knew that this foreigner did not have the power to fulfill his ‘request’. In other words, his level did not meet his requirements.

Minhyuk’s level was at Level 355. He was not qualified to go to the village since the town was filled with Level 400 players.

“Go back. I don’t think you’re strong enough to do me a favor.”

“Sigh... As expected, that’s it. Right? But... I heard that all I need to do is plow the field...”

“That’s right.”

“Then, I’ll just help you!”

“...You just want to try and help?”

“It’s not just that. I heard that Mister Veron is an excellent farmer and that you have special fruits and vegetables. I wish I could get a little bit of them in exchange...”

“It’s truly too much for me to do on my own, so I’ll be happy if you help me. Ah. Then, how about I give you as many ingredients as the fields you plow? How’s that?”

“Yep! That’s good!”

“Wait. It’s not as easy as you think. Plowing a field is a lot harder than it looks.”

Veron said that since he knew how hard it was for the foreigners to plow his fields. Then, the two of them started to plow the fields. To his shock, he saw that Minhyuk could easily till and plow the land with just a strike of his pickaxe! He realized that Minhyuk was far superior to himself and he was even hardworking!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Take some rest.”

“No! Considering the fruits and vegetables that you grew, this amount of labor is nothing!”

“Hahahaha. This boy. Your words are really pleasant to hear.”

Then, Minhyuk heard a notification.

[You have received Veron’s favor.]

[You have received Veron’s favor.]

[You have received Veron’s favor.]

Veron’s favor towards Minhyuk was increasing rapidly.

During the two days that Veron spent with Minhyuk, he learned about one thing. Minhyuk liked to eat everything, but he would not give you anything. On the contrary, Veron lived in the wilderness. He did not have the time to savor delicacies or eat meat. Right now, Minhyuk was grilling some pork belly.

Sizzle—

“Ah. As expected! Eating pork belly after farming is the best!”

Minhyuk was working diligently as he grilled the pork belly, kimchi, garlic and onions on top of the griller.

Veron watched him make a wrap before placing it in his mouth directly. He could not help but say, “Cough, cough!?Can I also have some pork belly with you?”

“No. I don’t think that’s possible.”

“H...how come...”

Veron could not understand it at all. He thought that Minhyuk would share some with him since he was craving it so much!

“Because you’ve told me that I can’t go to Beas Village since I’m still not quite there yet. I’m glad that the two of us have grown close during this time, but I love food too much. I don’t think that you and I are close enough for me to share pork belly with you. It’s the same thing when you told me that I’m still not strong enough yet.”

“Keuheuk...”

Veron knew that Minhyuk was twisting the dagger that he stabbed himself with earlier! It was like Minhyuk was blatantly telling him, ‘You did not request me to do this, but I still did it!’.

Meanwhile, Minhyuk was happily wrapping some pork belly, garlic, ssamjang, seasoned green onions, and grilled kimchi on a piece of lettuce.

‘It looks so delicious... I think he can taste the pork belly every time he chews. And there’s also the onions, garlic and kimchi that were grilled in the oil of the meat...! I... I want to eat. I really, really want to eat!’

Veron sat near Minhyuk as he started to eat his ‘vegetarian meal’ with the spinach and bean sprouts that he had grown himself.

For most people, there was something like that, right? The smell of pork belly or pork belly that came from a meat restaurant when one just ended work and left the building! Or the smell of pizza or chicken in an elevator! It was a smell that could stimulate appetite and evoke great hunger!

Veron could not take it anymore. He did not want to just watch Minhyuk eat. So, he approached him and said, “I can’t request you for a favor yet, but I can show you a shortcut to Beas Village. What do you say? How about exchanging this information with pork belly?”

Minhyuk, who was munching on a pork belly wrap, smiled brightly. This was the outcome that he had wanted, something that he planned right from the beginning to the end!

Chapter 216: Samgyetang with Thousand-year-old Ginseng

Abel had informed Minhyuk from the very beginning, that Veron’s quest was only available to players at Level 400 and above. However, would that even deter Minhyuk? No. He believed that there was no tree that he could not conquer. If he failed once, he would just try again and again. In fact, he saw a way as soon as he came to this place,? ‘Ah, Veron seems to eat miserably. He hasn’t eaten meat!’

There were no wild animals in the near vicinity, so he would most likely eat really simple food.

‘Let’s get close to him first. I’ll help him with farming and increase his favor!’

In fact, it would be quite good if everything worked out well. If this method did not work, then he would had to find another way. As it turned out, it was a success, causing Minhyuk to grin widely.

‘Hehehehehe!’

Minhyuk’s meticulous planning, and his willingness to do anything for the sake of food, had granted him his wish.

“Huh?” Director Kim Daesik exclaimed aloud as he sat up straight in his chair, his leisurely and sloppy posture disappearing in an instant.

“What the hell?”

[Veron will guide Player Minhyuk to a shortcut.]

“...!”

Director Kim Daesik jumped to his feet when he saw the message pop up. He said, “Lee... Lee Minhwa!”

He hurriedly ran towards Lee Minhwa after gathering himself up from the shock.

“What’s going on?” Lee Minhwa asked, tapping on her keyboard to find out the situation. After figuring out the reason for his outburst, Lee Minhwa gave him an answer.

“It seems like Player Minhyuk’s own passive skill? ‘Attractive Mukbang’? has been activated.”

“Attractive Mukbang? What’s that?”

“It’s something known among us here. Player Minhyuk has an innate ability to make others hungry while he’s eating and that ability somehow also applies to the NPCs with high artificial intelligence. Player Minhyuk knows that fact and has been using it to his advantage.”

“B...but can he really do something like this?”

“There’s nothing we can do. The NPCs have a high degree of freedom after all, and their actions are quite hard to prevent. After all, that’s how it is in the setting. The problem is...”

Lee Minhwa’s eyes narrowed sharply as she continued to say, “Beas Village is truly a place that is widely known to be open to players who are at Level 400 and above only.”

“That’s right.”

“All entry quests starts from Level 400 onwards.”

Director Kim nodded as Lee Minhwa continued, “Now that a Level 300 player has entered, the other players will definitely find it weird. After all, there are only Level 400 and above players in that area. Then, they’ll complain. They will ask if it’s a bug, but it’s not a bug.”

“...”

Director Kim Daesik looked at the monitor blankly. There was a player who could beat the setting by using his own passive skill, Attractive Mukbang?

‘Well, this is just a preposterous situation...’

What he did not realize was that the worst was yet to come.

Minhyuk was able to reach Beas Village easily, and at a more comfortable pace compared to other players, since he went through the shortcut that Veron had told him about.

[You have set foot in Beas Village.]

[You have gained 100 REP.]

[You can only stay in Beas Village for 1 week.]

A reward was given when a player had set foot in the village since players needed to work hard for that to happen. Even so, arriving at Beas Village that easily was a considerable privilege. Most of the players gave up halfway through after receiving the Beas Village quest and experiencing great difficulty in the process.

Looking at Beas Village, Minhyuk could see that the village was very small, with only a few NPCs and some players littered here and there. Berest Mountains was located right behind the village, and covered in pure white snow.

Minhyuk followed the route that Abel had informed him. Abel had told him to find 'Luke' the herbalist in Beas Village. In fact, it was quite easy to locate Luke. He was an old man who was garbed in an outfit that was befitting a herbalist. Upon Minhyuk's question, Luke answered, "Information on the thousand-year-old ginseng? There's no such thing as free lunch in this world, you know? If you can, bring me 30 claws of the Vicious Yeti. It's quite hard to dig out herbs in the Berest Mountains because it's teeming with those monsters."

It was a common quest.

Just as Minhyuk was about to leave to do the quest, Luke asked, "Ah, right. Boy, what is your job class?"

"I'm a chef."

"A chef..."

Luke smiled wryly when he heard Minhyuk's words.

"Isn't it better for you to give up the thousand-year-old ginseng and just go back?"

However, Minhyuk just smiled brightly as he answered Luke, "The thousand-year-old ginseng is necessary."

Luke was a little concerned about a 'chef' bringing him the things that he had requested. However, Minhyuk was gone for an hour before coming back again.

"...!"

When faced with the results, Luke could not help but be shocked, since Minhyuk was the fastest person to ever finish the quest of bringing him 30 Vicious Yeti claws.

'Ah. Come to think of it. There was a robed man who said that he was a mage earlier.'

It seemed like Luke felt that both of them were on a similar level.

Then, Old Man Luke said, "You're a lot stronger than I thought."

"Hehe. Thank you."

"The thousand-year-old ginseng is actually hidden at the highest peak of the Berest Mountains. I only know that it is located near the peak, so please keep that in mind."

Luke continued to speak, making sure to emphasize his words. "It is also a fact that the legendary medicine thousand-year-old ginseng is something that I, a herbalist, have not found in more than 30 years."

The herbalist, Luke, knew Berest Mountains as if it was the back of his hands! He had been searching for the Thousand-year-old Ginseng for more than 30 years. However, he had always been unable to find it! It was something that he vowed to find too.

However, Luke sighed as he continued, “For that reason, I have already thought that the Thousand-year-old Ginseng is just a fictional story. It has been 30 years! In those 30 years, I haven’t even seen the leaves of the thousand-year-old ginseng at all!”

He spoke passionately and with great fanfare. It was as if he was spitting out all of the injustices he had experienced in those 30 years. Meanwhile, Minhyuk was quietly using his Ingredient Tracking Skill.

“Boy, are you listening to me?! The Thousand-year-old Ginseng is just a fictional item. I don’t want to see someone else waste their time on something like this too! You’ll never find it! I’m sure~ You’ll never find it! Herbalist Baren, who had been with me for 20 years, had already closed his eyes in eternal peace!”

At that moment, Minhyuk heard a notification.

[Successfully searched for the ingredients.]

[The Thousand-year-old Ginseng is a great medicine that can permanently increase the amount of mana.]

[Can be cooked with Food God's Cooking Skill Level 1.]

[Suggested Menu: Samgyetang.]

Then, an arrow popped out in front of Minhyuk, indicating the direction and location of the Thousand-year-old Ginseng. As he stared at the arrow, he felt a bit sad for Luke who was shouting loudly about the injustices and unfair situations that he had experienced for 30 years of his life. He was so riled up that it looked like the veins on his neck would pop anytime soon.

Minhyuk tried to open the door with an awkward laugh, when Luke suddenly said, “I know of another ingredient, not the Thousand-year-old Ginseng, but something comparable to that! It would be quicker for you to find it!”

“...Yes?” Minhyuk asked, stopping in his tracks to look at Luke.

“Boy, have you heard of the Myriad-year Potato?”

“Myriad-year Potato?” Minhyuk asked again, his ears perking up at the information about more delicious food.

“That’s right. Myriad-year Potato. The story of the birth of the Myriad-year Potato is quite shocking and formidable. It’s even comparable to the legend of our Beas Village.”

Minhyuk listened to him while his hands held the doorknob.

“The Myriad-year Potato was said to be grown and cultivated by the ruler of the Berest Mountains, also known as ‘The Ancient Monarch’.”

“The Ancient Monarch?”

The Ancient Monarch. Minhyuk was quite interested in these three words.

“That’s right. Ancient Monarch. It was a legend from ancient times. The Ancient Monarch was once a very gentle and intelligent ruler. However, one day, the ruler’s consciousness was brainwashed by the Demon Verus’ terrible spirit. He went mad and became a tyrant. It was said that the five knights who served the Ancient Monarch fought bravely to stop him from becoming a tyrant. They were the ‘Five Ancient Guardians’. The Five Ancient Guardians managed to keep the monarch at bay but they could not bear to kill their King, Argan. Hence, they used their lives to lock him in an ancient sculpture before dividing it into five pieces. Those five pieces flew all over the world and he fell into a deep slumber together with those five pieces. It was said that each piece was sealed with the food that the monarch has loved during his lifetime.”

“Sealing them together with food. Why...”

Minhyuk thought that it was somewhat incomprehensible.

“They were loyal and faithful. It must have been painful for them to have sealed and executed their monarch with their own hands. To honor him, they placed the food ingredients together as they put their monarch to slumber in the sculpture. Over time, these food ingredients gained strength from the sculpture pieces and grew comparable in strength to the Thousand-year-old Ginseng. The ingredients also did not go stale or rot. Every once in a while, the pieces of the sculpture would wake up with a fifth of the power of the Ancient Monarch. Those pieces would be very, very strong and ferocious, but it’s not impossible to hunt. That’s why the foreigners gather together to hunt each time they awake.”

“Ah... I see!”

Minhyuk could understand his words to some extent. He had heard of the global players gathering together to do a raid against the ‘Ancient Monarch’. However, he had never heard of anyone obtaining the food ingredients by hunting him. Perhaps, the drop rate was too abysmal.

“I won’t stop you from challenging it. However, I still don’t recommend it.”

At that moment, Minhyuk heard the notifications.

[Cooperation Quest: Hunt the Ancient Monarch.]

Rank: SS

Requirements: Luke’s Favor.

Rewards: The Monarch’s Treasure Chest.

Penalty for Failure: You will not be allowed to enter Beas Village anymore.

Description: This is the Ancient Monarch Raid Quest where players from all over the world can participate in. The hunting cycle is just around the corner.

Minhyuk accepted the quest for now, just in case something happened. Then, he started moving towards the direction where the arrow was pointing to.

Meanwhile, Luke looked at his departing back as he mumbled to himself, “You’ll never find it...”

Tears welled up in Luke’s eyes, which seemed to reflect the 30 years of his wasted time.

Minhyuk continued to follow the arrow only to be left in confusion.

‘Huh...?’

This was because the arrow suddenly started pointing somewhere else the moment he arrived at the peak of Berest Mountains.

‘What?’

Nevertheless, Minhyuk continued to trek Berest Mountains. The place was home to plenty of ice-type monsters. Players were usually hard to find in this place. No, it was safe to say that there was not a single player in sight. The reason was simple, it was because the drops on Berest Mountains were too stingy. In a way, Berest Mountains and the villages surrounding them were merely just ‘meeting venues’. They were practically abandoned. Even Beas Village had a limitation and only allowed entry for one week, so there were really not that many people in this area.

Minhyuk continued his trek only to stop again.

‘The arrow changed again...?’

That was when Minhyuk realized something. He thought, ‘The location of the Thousand-year-old Ginseng is constantly changing...!’

It seemed like this was the reason why no one had found this legendary medicine yet. However, it was completely useless in front of Minhyuk! With his Ingredient Tracking skill, nothing could escape his sights! It would continue to guide him to where the ingredient was!

After a while, he finally arrived at the place where the arrow was pointing at. Minhyuk looked at the knee-deep snow as he started to dig. He dug for a while before he was able to see some lush, green leaves that hang strongly, despite the cold weather. Minhyuk gently reached out and dug out the Thousand-year-old Ginseng.

[You have acquired the Thousand-year-old Ginseng.]

“So, this is the Thousand-year-old Ginseng!”

The Thousand-year-old Ginseng was a wild ginseng that grew for a thousand years.

‘In reality, a Hundred-year-old Ginseng is already precious. I wonder if this thousand-year-old one is truly more precious than that?’

As soon as Minhyuk saw the ginseng, he felt like he had already gained a lot of strength. He thought, ‘Well then, shall we make samgyetang now? Fufufu!’

However, Minhyuk realized that it was too windy and cold out in the open. He knew that his body would warm up if he cooked and drank his samgyetang soup in this freezing weather, but the weather would also interfere with his cooking.

Then, as if a light bulb shone brightly on top of his head, Minhyuk recalled a small cave that he saw before coming here. He quickly turned around and moved towards the cave.

Chapter 217: Samgyetang with Thousand-year-old Ginseng

As soon as he entered the cave, Minhyuk transformed his Barraca's Sword into a cauldron. It was the sort of cauldron that one would see in movies and dramas. Strangely enough, the food that was cooked in the cauldron looked even more delicious and appetizing. The cauldron was filled with jujube, the Thousand-year-old Ginseng, branches of the World Tree, garlic, salt, as well as trimmed pieces of cleaned chicken, and it was already boiling.

The contents of the cauldron had been left to boil for quite some time, so hot steam rushed up when he opened the lid of the cauldron.

"Hot! Hot!"

As soon as the steam cleared up, Minhyuk could see that the samgyetang was already cooked well. He could even see the natural oil from the chicken floating on top of the soup. Then, he scooped up the well-boiled samgyetang on a plate, before preparing some salt and pepper for the dip.

Minyuk first picked up a big piece of chicken leg off of the plate. It was so hot that he felt like his fingertips reddened due to the heat. He hastily licked his finger to alleviate the pain from the heat, before taking a big bite out of the chicken leg.

"Hoo—"

A big piece of meat was torn from the chicken leg, as he sat inside the cold and frosty cave. Minhyuk could even see the hot air puff out of his mouth in every bite. He gently rolled the meat in his mouth and chewed it slowly. Every bite of the savory and chewy meat allowed the flavour to spread out in his mouth. Then, he dipped the chicken leg in the salt and pepper dip.

Chew, chew.

The addition of the salty flavor to the otherwise bland and greasy chicken was like the icing on the cake. Then, using a ladle, he scooped up the white, greasy soup into a bowl. He gently held the bowl with both of his hands as he placed his lips on the lid of the bowl. He then blew on the hot soup before taking a long sip.

"Sluuuuuuurp!"

With just one sip of the soup, the cold that permeated Minhyuk's body immediately went away.

'How refreshing!'

After Minhyuk finished eating the chicken legs, he looked at the chicken breast before tearing it apart. Although the chicken breast was usually quite dry, it had its own charm. Minhyuk used his bare hands to rip the well-ripened kimchi into long pieces. The best food that paired well samgyetang was stripped pieces of kimchi!

Minhyuk quickly placed some chicken meat and kimchi together in his mouth. He could not help but admire the spicy and sour flavor of the kimchi that easily washed away the greasiness of the samgyetang.

Then, Minhyuk silently wiped his greasy hands with some wet wipes once, before starting to eat again. By the time he finished eating the meat, his soup bowl was already refilled with soup. Then, he added some rice and seasoned it with some salt. The resulting gruel made with the soup of the samgyetang and some rice mixed together had a charm of its own.

Minhyuk placed a piece of kimchi on top of his spoon filled with rice and soup. The flavors of the greasy soup, the plump grains of rice, as well as the kimchi danced harmoniously in his mouth. After tasting it, he added some cooked garlic on top of his rice. To be honest, Minhyuk preferred garlic grilled together with meat, but he also liked the taste of this well-boiled garlic that could melt in his mouth. It has such a unique flavor and texture that he could not get it out of his mind.

After he ate the garlic, there were still some leftovers. It was the very core of this samgyetang. The Thousand-year-old Ginseng. Minhyuk quickly picked up the Thousand-year-old Ginseng and gingerly placed it in his mouth. The more Minhyuk chewed on it, the more he realized that the bitterness of the ingredient had toned down after being boiled in samgyetang for a long time. After chewing at least half of the ginseng, Minhyuk said, “Indeed, samgyetang should?definitely?have ginseng!”

Just then, he heard a voice right next to him.

“H... hey...”

The man was wearing a black robe, with a staff in his hand and a hat on top of his long hair that was tied behind him. Minhyuk could also see a huge flame magic casted behind the man. It was Hellfire.

Minhyuk frowned at the sight. First, he hated being interrupted especially when he was having a meal. Second, the Hellfire cast behind the man was a clear indication that the man was ready to PK.

However, the man who was approaching Minhyuk was shocked beyond words, trembling as he asked him, “Th... that’s?not?the Thousand-year-old Ginseng, right?”

Minhyuk hurriedly crammed the rest of the Thousand-year-old Ginseng into his mouth. The man looked at him as if he was crazy as he cursed out, “That is the Th... Thousand-year-old Ginseng!! Which bastard would cook a Thousand-year-old Ginseng and put it in samgyetang?!”

Minhyuk, a person who would usually answer kindly and politely, answered this uninvited guest with a calm, yet blunt, response. He said, “Me.”

Every country in the world had its own ‘Player Killers’. On the Athenae China Server, there was a very notorious ‘Haochen’ guild. Haochen was not a globally-known guild, but it was considered to be one of the ‘untouchable guilds’ in China. There were a lot of ridiculous reasons arising from their guild members, but it was mainly because there was a large number of rankers in their guild.

Although Haochen was not one of the top guilds in China, even a one-year-old baby would know of its name. They would also remember to never enter Haochen’s territory. As soon as they entered Haochen’s territory, the guild members would continue to slaughter the player until they received a ridiculous amount of resources.

In one of Haochen's hideouts, there were currently four influential players gathered together. The guild master was a man named Bedu. He was ranked 61st in the official global rankings. He was grinning widely as he spoke to his guild members, "All preparations are completed. The Monarch will wake up today."

"Yeah. That's right."

Bedu lowered his head and stood up from his seat. They were preparing to make a big swoop in Beas Village. The village was located precisely in the Berest Mountains. They knew that strong players from all over the world would start to flock in Beas Village for the upcoming Monarch Raid. Haochen Guild had prepared a gift for them in advance.

Then, one of the hidden class players, the 'Devil Worshipper' slowly approached Bedu. He was a player with the nickname Kelmenn. Kelmenn opened a small box with two black sculptures inside. One of the sculptures was a hand, while the other was a body. They were none other than the sculptures that sealed the 'Ancient Monarch'.

It was quite surprising that there were two Ancient Monarch Sculptures in Athenae China server. It was due to the fact that the Haochen Guild had devoted themselves to collecting the pieces of this sculpture.

"With the first sculpture, the awakened Monarch in Beas Village will be comparable to a Level 480 boss monster. The fusion of two sculpture pieces will push the Monarch's power to Level 520. If we fuse three sculpture fragments together, then the Monarch's power could increase further."

This was a hidden piece of information that most players did not know. However it was different for Kelmenn, the Devil Worshipper. He was worshipping Demon Verus, so he was able to gather a lot of information from him.

Their biggest problem was the difficulty in reaching Beas Village. However, with a clear goal ahead of them, they were determined to push through. Haochen Guild accepted the quest to go to Beas Village as part of the preparation for this plan. Their plan was simple.

"What would happen if the overpowering Monarch that no one could hunt, appeared and awakened in Berest Mountains where all of the world's strongest had gathered?"

The result was obvious. Every single player would be wiped out and their items would drop.

'The world players will definitely drop noble and honorable artifacts, right?'

Just the thought was enough to send a thrill down Bedu's spine. He was sure that there would be artifacts that he had never seen before. There would also be items that were not available on the servers in other countries.

'Amazing! It's going to be amazing!'

This was the only time that the Monarch would be summoned in Beas Village and Haochen Guild had been preparing for it for two months already. It was time for them to pull in the net.

"Let's go. Let's wake the Monarch."

“Yes!”

They quickly moved out.

“Me.”

When he heard Minhyuk’s words, Black Mage Ali’s face wrinkled. He looked like he was about to break down and cry. The Hellfire behind him slowly disappeared. Then, he leaned against the wall in despair as he thought, ‘I have been looking for it so much but...!’

It took Ali an enormous amount of money and time just to get information on the Thousand-year-old Ginseng. This situation was something inevitable. Especially for Ali, a Black Mage, who did not have the help of an excellent ‘Informant’ in his guild, unlike Minhyuk. He even took on a special quest that told him that the Thousand-year-old Ginseng would change its position every time. Alas, though he took great pains to discover where it would appear, this happened.

‘I came here finally thinking that I would be able to get it. But now?! I can’t believe that he cooked and ate the Thousand-year-old Ginseng in samgyetang!’

The worst part was that the man just nonchalantly ate and scraped away the last bit of soup.

‘It... it looked delicious though...’ Ali suddenly thought.

Samgyetang with the Thousand-year-old Ginseng? That would most definitely be the real soup among all soups!

Not long after, Minhyuk wore his helmet and asked, “What’s your business here?”

After Minhyuk finished his meal, he seemed to be quite wary of Ali. In response, Ali just smiled bitterly while thinking, ‘This idiotic punk...’

Ali knew the reason why Minhyuk reacted coldly. It was only a natural response. No one would be happy if someone popped up beside them with an attack magic spell behind them. That momentary greed had almost cost Ali.

“I’m sorry. About the attack spell a while ago.”

Minhyuk was quite surprised. He thought, ‘Hmm? I’m sure that he’s clearly high-leveled.’

There were only a few players who could use Hellfire. No, they were so rare that players questioned if they really existed. However, the man in front of Minhyuk easily confessed his mistake and even apologized.

Then, Ali said, “That... This may sound like an excuse, but I’ve been searching for the Thousand-year-old Ginseng for two months. When I saw the Thousand-year-old Ginseng being eaten by others in a sa...samgye...?Cough!”

Ali caught himself just as he was about to finish saying samgyetang. He coughed loudly as if to spit out the word that got stuck in his throat.

‘No, but this doesn’t even make sense!’

Ali shook his head as if to clear his thoughts, before continuing to say, “I was so agitated to see you eating that samgyetang with that material. Ah. I’m so stupid that I even thought of PK-ing you for a moment there.”

Ali smiled wryly. Black Mage Ali was a solo player. As a Mage player, his ambition and dream was to become the strongest mage among all the mages, not only in Korea, but also globally. There were no mages named and crowned in the ‘Hall of Kings’ yet, so Ali wanted to become the first one to do so.

Other than that, Ali was a good person. He would protect what he could protect. His only problem was that he was alone when he played the game. That was also the reason why he was unaware of Minhyuk’s identity, despite the latter not hiding his face at all. Ali was in mad pursuit of the Thousand-year-old Ginseng, so he did not have the slightest bit of knowledge about the happenings in?Athenae: Korean War.

“Hmm...” Minhyuk hummed.

Ali realized that Minhyuk was still suspicious of him. So, he hurriedly said, “To be honest, I have been searching for the Thousand-year-old Ginseng for two months. I thought that I could be the first-ever mage to enter the Hall of Kings if I raised my mana by 1.5x. I looked for it for two months and still ended up missing it.?Sigh...”

As Minhyuk watched Ali trying to prove his innocence, he realized something.

‘He’s not a bad person.’

The man spent two months just to find it because he wanted to enter the Hall of Kings? Minhyuk also found it understandable that Ali wanted to become the first mage to ever climb the Hall of Kings.

Then, Ali asked, “Are you a chef?”

“Ah. Yes.”

“I see. It won’t be easy for you to go down then.”

Ali did not care much about Minhyuk’s class. There were various classes that would come to Beas Village and there were various people who could receive quests. It might be hard for people to come up here due to the monsters, but it was not impossible especially if they could avoid it well.

“I’ll help you go down as a token of my apology. Oh, and...”

Ali rummaged through his items. He had received a good artifact a little while ago. Besides, from what Ali could see, Minhyuk seemed to be an unusual chef. To put it simply, a chef who loved to eat! He believed that he would be able to apologize well with this artifact. Ali almost PK-ed Minhyuk, so he would not feel at ease if he just let it go like that.

Ali pulled out a small box while asking, “Have you heard of Magical Snack Boxes?”

Minhyuk tilted his head when he heard his words.?Magical Snack Box?

Ali smiled at him as he handed over the box and said, “A random snack across the world will appear once every day. Let’s see, today’s snack is...”

Not long after, Ali pulled out a snack from the box. It was a ‘Tako Snack’. When Minhyuk saw the snack being pulled out, he thought, ‘...Th...this is a revolutionary item!’

Ali was handing over this extremely amazing item to him willingly. Minhyuk could not help but break out into a wide, happy grin.

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“Th...thank you very much! You will definitely be blessed. You’ll live a long life! You’ll do amazing in the CSAT... No, you’ll definitely be happy!!!”

“...?”

Ali tilted his head in confusion. To be honest, the snack random box was a ‘rare’ artifact, but otherwise, it was something that was completely useless to him. Snacks that one could find in reality were also sold in Athenae, and it was also cheap enough that one could buy with just 500 to 1,000 gold. It was the reason why this item was considered to be something that was worse than normal, even if it was a rare item.

However, Minhyuk was looking at it right now as if he had received a ‘legendary’ artifact. Then, he took the snack out of the snack box.

[You have acquired the Tako Snack.]

It was a snack with a pink octopus printed on the package! Minhyuk quickly tore the package as he took the tako snacks from inside. Then, he placed them in his mouth.

Crunch, crunch—

The first reason why most people like the Tako Snack was because it was crunchy. The second reason was that it was salty. And the third reason was that it was shaped like an octopus. As Minhyuk continued to eat the Tako Snack, the seasonings that coated each piece of snack seemed to stain and stick to his thumb and index finger. He quickly squished his fingers together before licking it. He felt really happy at the saltiness of the seasonings.

“Kghhk!”

“...Y...you like it that much?”

“Yes. It’s very, very, very delicious!”

Ali grinned at him. It was at that moment when the initial tension between them turned less hostile. Then, Minhyuk said, “You said that you wanted to challenge the Hall of Kings, right? I wanted to repay you since I received such a good thing but...”

Minhyuk’s father had taught him that he should give as much as he received.

“Do you know of any quests that might let you enter the Hall of Kings?”

It was common knowledge since the operators had announced that taking on SSS-ranked quests and some other quests would let one enter the Hall of Kings.

Ali answered him and said, “Yes. The operators have announced that we will be able to hear the notification for the Hall of Kings if players are able to hunt the Ancient Monarch at a high speed, or

score points beyond what they expected. Unfortunately, many rankers have tried and failed. That's how difficult it is."

Minhyuk did not know of this, but it really was just like what Ali had said. This was also the reason why the rankers from all over the world would gather in this place from time to time. They were all hoping to be able to climb into the Hall of Kings.

Minhyuk nodded and said, "Should I lend you a hand?"

"Yes?" Ali asked in confusion. He could not understand what Minhyuk was saying.

'Are you saying that you're going to help me reach the Hall of Kings? No, how are you even going to do that?'

"My cooking buff is a bit amazing, you know?"

'Eh?'

Ali smiled awkwardly, but deep inside, he was also wondering how good his cooking buff was for him to call it amazing. However, no matter how he looked at it, the expression on Minhyuk's face was similar to a mother that wanted to let him eat breakfast. It was at that moment that Ali realized...

'Ah, this person does not want to live with a debt to others.'

Ali thought to himself that Minhyuk's cooking buff was something that would definitely not live up to his words, but it was still good if he just enjoyed it. Ali himself was someone who did not have many friends, but he believed that if he got one, then he would definitely take care of them well. As for Minhyuk, he also believed that it would be good if they became friends.

Then, Minhyuk used his Create a Recipe skill.

Director Kim Daesik and Employee Lee Minhwa were both staring at the monitor with bated breaths. They had just been contacted by the Athena?China Branch about the strange and unusual movements of Haochen Guild.

Looking at the monitor, Director Kim could already tell what they wanted to do. He shouted, "Shit...! Once the Monarch wipes off all of the rankers, they will go there and pick up the dropped items!"

It was quite a meticulous and well-detailed plan. They even had a 'Secret Class', the 'Absolute Commander' with them. Among the unique abilities of the Absolute Commander, he had the ability to 'revive' some of his party members who had died. With this revival skill, the party members who had died within 20 minutes would be revived with 5% of their HP. Once all the rankers were wiped out, they would then be revived within 20 minutes. Then, they would take all the items away before disappearing. However, that was not the biggest problem on their mind.

"Beas Village could disappear..."

Beas Village was where rankers would receive the hunting mission was given. The mission prevented the awakened Ancient Monarch from descending down upon the village. So far, the

Ancient Monarch Raid had never failed. Even though the Ancient Monarch was strong, he was still an event monster in the end—a raid boss monster that the united players from all over the world would hunt and kill! However, in the event that the players were all wiped out, the Ancient Monarch would definitely descend upon the village. It was likely that he would kill all the NPCs and devastate the entire village. In all honesty, the system never planned this out.

‘Why will anyone use the sculptures to strengthen the sealed Monarch? They will not even be able to kill him.’

However, the development team did not expect that Haochen Guild would pull a stunt like this.

“We’re in trouble... If Beas Village disappears, then all of the contents related to it will also disappear. In addition, there are a lot of NPCs in Beas Village that can help players transfer to Hidden Classes, Secret Classes and other strong classes...” Lee Minhwa said.

Ring, ring, ring, ring—

Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring—

The phone kept on ringing. It was at that moment when Kim Daesik realized, ‘Th...the Special Players Management Team is the first to notice when something like this happens. I thought that being in the Special Players Management Team would be an extremely easy and comfortable job.’

In a way, he realized that they were the team with the most responsibility, as well as the team that received most of the taunts and bad-mouthing.

Director Kim Daesik quickly ordered the people around him. “Lee Minhwa.”

“Yes!”

“Is there anyone who came to Beas Village who can possibly hunt the Ancient Monarch? Pick about three of the most powerful players.”

Clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack!

Lee Minhwa’s fingers flew at the keyboard. She tapped on the keyboard for quite some time with a hopeful smile on her face.

“Th...there is!”

“Who are they?”

“Black Mage Ali. The number one mage in our country, Ali. He’s there.”

“...I...is that so? Black Mage Ali!!!!” Director Kim Daesik said as he continued to snap his fingers.

‘Our country’s top mage!’

Ali was considered to be the number one in both the official and unofficial mage rankings in the country.

Then, Lee Minhwa continued to say, “And there’s another one!”

The smile of ‘hope’ bloomed on Kim Daesik’s face. He asked, “Who?”

“It’s the Food God, Player Minhyuk.”

“...Good. I think we have hope!”

“And I also want to tell you one more thing.”

“What is it?”

“The two of them are together right now.”

“...I...is that so?”

‘The two of them are both players from our country. Do they know each other? No, that doesn’t matter.’

“What are those two people doing now? Are they already preparing for the raid??!!”

Director Kim Daesik did not know much about Player Minhyuk. He only knew that he was there for food and he would likely only have enough drive for food.

Then, Lee Minhwa said, “They are both eating M... Manila clam noodle soup in a cave!”

“....”

The thought that ran through Director Kim Daesik’s head was...

‘The two most powerful players of our country! The two people who might be able to solve this difficulty that we’re going to face! You’re telling me that the two people that I’m pinning my hopes on, are eating Manila clam noodle soup before this huge disaster?!’

“They’re eating it with some well-ripened kimchi! It really looks delicious! Wow. Look at those Manila clams!!”

“....”

Those were the following words that came out of Lee Minhwa’s mouth as she wiped the saliva off of her chin. Kim Daesik could not help but support his forehead in distress.

‘I want to go home...’

[Creating a recipe that the other party desires.]

[You can now check the recipe for Manila Clam Noodle Soup.]

[The amount of buff that can be used has been decreased due to creating a recipe.]

Minhyuk had thought of making Ali a buffed dish in exchange for the magical snack box that he had received. When he saw the recipe, he immediately thought,?‘Wow! This is great!’

In cold weather, when his hands and feet were freezing all over and his stomach was rumbling in hunger, Minhyuk would zip up his padded jacket up to his chin while he was on his way home. As he walked home, he would see a store that had its window all white and fogged up so that one could not even see the view from the inside. This store was none other than a 'noodle restaurant'.

'When you go to such a place and order some noodle soup, won't you be able to get some steaming and hot noodle soup? And when you take a sip of the hot soup, you will feel that the coldness in your body is melting away and you will release a deep sigh unconsciously? It's that Manila clam noodle soup? I see, Ali is a man with great taste.'

"Do you want some Manila Clam Noodle Soup right now?"

"H...how did you know that? It's because I know that it's best to have some well-ripened kimchi together with that in this weather."

"Of course, I know that. I know that very well! Haha!"

"Are you going to make some noodle soup?"

"Yes. Please wait. Let me look at the ingredients."

Minhyuk first checked the ingredients and he found out that he had enough ingredients for the noodle soup. Additionally, thanks to Minhyuk's skill, 'The Joy of Eating Together,' he would not suffer any loss at all.

'But, will this be enough to satisfy him?'

After he checked the dish ranking and the amount of buff that he would receive based on the ingredients, Minhyuk smiled softly. Of course, he would only know once the system determined the rank but he could predict the general rank with just one look at the recipe.

Minhyuk started his preparation to make some Manila clam noodle soup. He quickly kneaded some flour before slicing them thinly. He also shredded plenty of vegetables before boiling the ingredients together in a cauldron. Just like that, he finished preparing the Manila clam noodle soup. He ladled out some of the soup in a white plastic bowl, before handing it over to Ali.

Ali could not help but gulp at the sight of the large bowl filled with Manila clam noodle soup, as well as the well-ripened kimchi right next to it. He gingerly scooped some noodles out of the bowl. At that moment, the exact same food and setting appeared in front of Minhyuk.

'Isn't that amazing?'

Ali did not expect much from the buff, but he was quite looking forward to the taste and flavor of the dish in front of him. Perhaps it was because he did not care much about the buff and he only wanted to try the noodle soup in front of him, that he could not help but hurriedly scoop out some noodles from the large bowl before putting it in a smaller bowl.

"Wow..."

The chewy and glossy noodles, together with the Manila clams and the shredded zucchini, carrots, and onions all looked so appetizing that he could not help but drool. After gulping down his drool, Ali lifted the small bowl and brought it to his mouth. Then, he quickly took a sip of the soup.

“Hoo. So refreshing.”

“Hoo. So refreshing.”

The same words came out of the mouths of both men. Ali smiled when his eyes made contact with Minhyuk. Then, he focused on his noodle soup again. This time, he picked up some of the chewy noodles with his chopsticks. Then he put it in his mouth and slurped it all up.

“Hoo.”

Ali let out a puff of breath. He could feel the firm and chewy noodles dancing in his mouth with every chew before sliding down his throat.

“I feel like I’m finally alive,” Ali said. He felt like the weight that came down to him today all vanished into thin air. This time, his next bite of noodles was accompanied by the crunchy and red kimchi.

Crunch, crunch!

Ali could not help but laugh happily when he tasted the sweet and spicy flavor of the kimchi in every bite. He said, “Haha. This is really delicious...”

After he burst out in admiration, he took out the ladle from the big white bowl. Then, he started to eat directly from the huge white bowl. A smile lit up on his face as he ate the savory and delicious clams.

Finally, Ali lifted the entire bowl to his mouth as he drank the remaining soup. He finished eating everything, down to the very last drop. Without realizing it, he was sniffing due to the heat of the soup and the coldness of the surroundings.

“Bloooooow!”

Ali finally came back to his senses after he blew his nose.

‘Wow... What kind of noodle soup was that...’

Ali thought that it was the most delicious noodle soup that he had ever tasted in his life. He looked at Minhyuk, the man who made such a noodle soup, in admiration. However, his surprise and awe did not end there, because the notifications for the buffs finally rang in his ears.

[You ate a dish from a recipe specially made for you.]

[You won’t be able to eat another dish from a recipe specially made for you for a month.]

[You can’t receive any duplicate buffs during the duration of the buff retention period.]

[Manila Clam Noodle Soup.]

[Your WIS has increased by 25% and INT by 20% for 20 days.]

[Your skills’ cooldown will be reduced by 20% for 20 days.]

‘W...what did you say?! An increase of 25% in WIS and an increase of 20% in INT? W... what the hell?! Is this some kind of an event buff?!’

Ali’s eyes were wide open in shock and surprise.

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Minhyuk smiled when he saw Ali’s astonishment and shock. He asked, “Is this enough for you to enter the Hall of Kings?”

Ali nodded furiously and said, “O...of course!”

Rankers would be able to shine even more, especially if they had any percentage increase in their stats. The 25% temporary increase in his WIS stat might not be comparable to the 1.5x increase in his mana from the Thousand-year-old Ginseng, but his other special abilities would be able to compensate for the difference, if not outweighing it. There was even a 20% reduction in the cooldown time. Ali was already vastly different to ordinary players in terms of cast speed and with this reduction, his cast speed would undoubtedly be faster. The 20% increase in his INT also meant that his magical attack would also have a temporary increase in potency.

“You’re really an amazing chef! I think you’re leagues better than Black, the Twilight Chef!”

Ali had also tried the Twilight Chef’s expensive dishes, but there was nothing that he could eat that would boost his strength in the rumored traditional Banquet Hall. With the temporary increase in his strength, he thought that it would be possible.

It was also at this moment that Ali believed that he and Minhyuk could have some sort of ‘friendship’, and they could be somewhat called friends. Ali did not have many friends! However, he had long thought of a sign, and when it came down to it, would show great trust between him and his friends. A promise that he would stay with them for a lifetime!

“Minhyuk.”

“Yes?”

“Can you please give me your left arm?”

Minhyuk extended his left arm to him.

“Can we be friends?”

“Of course!”

Minhyuk considered Ali as his benefactor since he gave him that magical snack box. No, Ali was much more than that!

Then, Ali drew an ‘X’ on Minhyuk’s left arm and with a serious expression, he lifted his arm high up in the sky. He said, “This is a sign of our friendship!”

“...?”

Minhyuk stared blankly at him for a moment. However, Ali did not notice his stare, all caught up in his passion as he lifted his hand high up in the sky and said, “Do you know the feeling when

another person dies? When your chest is bound under a spell? No, when you're under a curse? No, when you pass a river of poison?!"

Minhyuk faintly realized something, "I know these lines from somewhere..."

"That's not it! The time when your friends have forgotten about you! But! I don't believe that Minhyuk will forget about me! This is a sign of our friendship! Friendshiiiiiiiiip!"

Ali shouted loudly to emphasize that one word.

Minhyuk stared at him quietly and thought, "This person is an... otaku? Right?"

Then, Ali whispered to him, as if to urge him to respond to his words, "If you join me, I'll treat you to a meal."

"Ooooooooooooh!"

Minhyuk suddenly gained a lot of enthusiasm as he jumped up and lifted his left arm high up in the sky. It was a truly a quick change in attitude.

"No matter what happens, this?X?is the symbol of our friendship! Friendshiiiiiiiiip!"

"Beans, come on! You do it too! Quickly!" Minhyuk exclaimed, as Beanie stood up from its seat on Minhyuk's lap and placed down the bowl of enjoyable noodle soup.

Then, Beanie copied Ali and used its magic to draw an?X?on its left arm, raising its paw high up in the sky and cried loudly, "Oooooooooiiiiink!"

Deep inside its heart, this was what Beanie felt, "This punk master. It's really hard to live as a pet. Oink!"

Ali was beyond thrilled.

'Aaah! What a beautiful scene! This is a very inspiring scene!'

Meanwhile, Minhyuk thought that he should introduce him to Legend Guild's 'Ace'.

At that moment, a rush of notifications rang loudly in both their heads.

[Three sculptures of the Ancient Monarch have fused together.]

[The Ancient Monarch has now become stronger.]

[Due to the increase in strength of the Ancient Monarch, his soldiers have been awakened.]

[The Ancient Monarch's Soldiers have woken up.]

"...?!"

Ali's eyes widened.

'The Ancient Monarch has become much stronger?'

Only powerful players would have gathered in Beas Village to raid the Ancient Monarch. There was never a time when the raid resulted in failure and had wiped everyone out. However, what would happen if the Ancient Monarch became stronger?

‘What’s this? Something must have gone wrong.’

Then, another notification rang.

[The Guardians’ Tower will now be created.]

[The power of the three Guardians dwells in the tower.]

[The tower of the three Guardians will give out scores that are much higher than the regular tower of the Guardians.]

Every time the Ancient Monarch awakened, the Guardian’s Tower would also appear. However, it seemed that the current tower was different from the tower back then. The usual Guardian’s Tower was the guardian of the sculpture and its role was to give points to the players. The ‘Monarch’s Treasure Chest’ that the players would receive, depended on the score that they would get. The scores that could be obtained from the Guardian’s Tower would depend on a variety of actions.

1. A successful attack on the Ancient Monarch.
2. A successful fatal attack on the Ancient Monarch.
3. Successfully hunting the Ancient Monarch’s Soldiers.
4. Dealing the final blow on the Ancient Monarch.

The scores for the four actions were not explicitly stated because several different parties would be participating in the hunt for the Ancient Monarch. The smaller the party, the higher the score that they would get and the higher their score, the higher their rewards. However, on the flipside, if their party only had a small number of members, then it was only natural that they could not raid the Ancient Monarch effectively. All they could achieve was be left behind by the others.

Furthermore, just like what was explained above, the Guardians’ Tower this time would give a higher score compared to the regular Guardian’s Tower. The rewards were likely to be more generous.

‘What was it again? The best reward for successfully hunting the Ancient Monarch?’

Ali furrowed his brows and bit his lips tightly as he tried to recall the information.

‘A...a legendary artifact’s production recipe!’

There were a lot of different probabilities when someone produced an artifact. Having high-grade materials did not necessarily mean that one would be able to produce a high-ranking artifact. Aside from the artifact materials, it would also depend on the blacksmith’s abilities.

However, there was one thing that could ignore all of these, and it was the ‘Artifact Production Recipe’. In other words, if the player followed and collected all of the materials listed in the production recipe, then they would definitely receive the rank of the artifact indicated in the recipe.

‘Wait. The reward should be better than a legendary artifact...’

Ali had a hunch.

‘It’s like they’re saying that there’s a possibility that we could have the production recipe for the best artifact!’

He was thrilled.

Meanwhile, Minhyuk, who was standing next to Ali, also heard the same notifications, but he was looking at something else.

[Surprise Class Quest: The Ancient Monarch's Yearning.]

Rank: SSS

Requirements: Food God

Rewards: Ingredients for Ancient Monarch's Soy Sauce Braised Chicken.

Penalty for Failure: -20 to all Stats.

Description: The Ancient Monarch was one of the Food God's subordinates during his lifetime. When his mind was being encroached by the devil, he had asked the Food God for a favor. 'I don't want to lose my precious subjects. I don't want to kill them with my own hands.' But now, the Food God of the past is dead. Make his wish come true and save Beas Village. If you succeed, then you will be able to receive one of the 'Food God's Divination' through the Soy Sauce Braised Chicken.

'Soy sauce braised chicken...? Food God's Divination?'

Of course, Minhyuk was trembling in excitement due to the soy sauce braised chicken.

[The Guardians' Tower will now warp all the players in Beas Village and Berest Mountains to the mountain range's entrance.]

The two men were suddenly surrounded by light.

The players from all over the world waiting for the Ancient Monarch's raid were all flustered.

"The Ancient Monarch grew stronger?"

"Wasn't he already very strong from the very beginning?"

All of the players present in the area would be warped to the entrance of the Berest Mountains once the Ancient Monarch appeared. Right now, there were at least 50 people gathered together. However, none of these men could match up against the Ancient Monarch. The players were all in a buzz after another man appeared again.

"He's Japan's 'Musashi', Kentaro. Right?"

"Wow. Kentaro...!"

Kentaro was the player who ranked second in Japan's official local rankings. He was standing with his arms crossed with two katanas hanging on his back. There were many strong players here, but it was quite rare for them to see one of the top five players of a country.

"Didn't Kentaro raid the Ancient Monarch before?"

.

Kentaro was famous for getting the Legendary Artifact Production Recipe. Even now, it seemed that Kentaro had obtained the quest to enter Beas Village again. To him, he could not forget the thrill of

that time. When Kentaro dealt the last blow on the Ancient Monarch, the global players were in awe and amazement.

Then, Kentaro moved calmly as he began to speak, “Now that the Ancient Monarch has gotten more powerful, In order to raid him, players should all team up.”

However, 50 people could not team up together.

Kentaro continued to say, “The most efficient number for each team is five. If the positions of the five people are good, the scores will be distributed perfectly. In addition, the limit for each party should be six people.”

Not many among these players would be able to get to the top. On the way up to the Berest Mountains, a translucent passage would be created depending on the number of teams. The players needed to go up this passage as quickly as they could. In a way, this system was meant for people to fight in a team and cultivate teamwork, but one could also say that the members of the team would be competing against each other.

Just as Kentaro had said, this was a common method that most of the players knew of.

[You are required to enter the Berest Mountains within 10 minutes.]

[For players who do not want to join the raid, you will return to the place you last visited before entering Beas Village once you log out.]

“We’d like to invite you to our party!”

“Our party already has a Level 420 archer, Level 421 warrior and Level 417 legendary class player!!!”

“We’re in a hurry. Our strongest combi is a combi of priests, warriors, archers, mages and bandits!”

The players moved quickly while Kentaro was constantly bombarded by love calls.

“Kentaro. Please party with me...”

“Beat it.”

“...”

There were many players that wanted to team up with Kentaro. After all, if their team had a higher team score, they were bound to get greater rewards. Unfortunately, Kentaro ignored the incompetent players who were only trying to ride the bus.

‘From the people gathered today, I can see a few people who stand out from their player IDs...’

Over time, the number of people from all around the world that came to Berest Mountains for this specific raid had continued to decline. Compared to the novelty of the first time, they would often be rewarded with treasure chests. However, most players were either too lazy, or stingy. After all, it was too inefficient for them, especially if one calculated the time it took to complete the entrance quest.

Kentaro had an artifact, a 'Measuring Pocket Watch'. It was an artifact in the shape of a pocket watch, but instead of showing time, it would show the other person's level. This artifact was a 'legendary artifact'. In a fight against a player or a monster, this artifact was quite handy.

There was a man that suddenly caught Kentaro's eyes. He was a man wearing a black robe and was presumably a mage. Next to him was a man wearing shabby armor, a rapier on his back, as well as an old, rusty helmet. Kentaro quietly aimed his Measuring Pocket Watch at the man wearing the black robe.

[You have activated the Measuring Pocket Watch. You can only use it five times a day.]

[The Measuring Pocket Watch is checking the level of the targeted player.]

Clack—

The cover of the Measuring Pocket Watch opened on its own.

'...Ho?'

Kentaro's eyes were filled with intrigue and curiosity. That guy in the black robe...

'He's at least at Level 470?'

The Measuring Pocket Watch would not show an accurate number, but it showed the approximate range.

Then, Kentaro approached him and said, "I need a mage player. Would you like to join me?"

Ali, the mage player wearing a black robe, nodded in greeting when Kentaro asked.

'Kentaro... I don't like the rumors surrounding this guy but...'

If he worked with Kentaro, he would most likely be able to enter the Hall of Kings. So Black Mage Ali nodded.

"Alright. Ah, he's my friend. Can he come with us?"

"Is that so? Wait a minute. The time now is..."

Kentaro glanced at the man next to him as he used his Measuring Pocket Watch.

Clack—

Kentaro's brows furrowed when he saw what was written on the pocket watch.

'350?'

This was a player who should not be able to enter Beas Village.

'Is this a bug?' Kentaro thought, 'He's just a burden.'

Then, Kentaro asked the man firmly, "Excuse me, but what is your level?"

Minhyuk answered his question right away. "It's Level 355."

"...!"

Ali turned to Minhyuk in shock. He thought, ‘You’re only at Level 355. How can you be in Beas Village...’

Then, Kentaro smiled bitterly and said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think it’s possible for you to come with me. As you know, the level of the party members is also very important in this party hunt. It’s a team score after all. Ah, of course, the smaller the number of people in the team, the higher the score... but they will not be able to make it to the summit.”

“...”

Ali realized that Kentaro was trying to tell him to leave Minhyuk behind. Since Minhyuk had still not logged out yet, he was required to join a party. He could not return anymore.

On the other hand, Ali wanted to enter the Hall of Kings, and for him to do so, he needed to team up with Kentaro. If he teamed up with Kentaro, it was likely that he would get a high score. Those with the highest score on the team were likely to be rewarded well and possibly crowned in the Hall of Kings.

There was a lot of buzz from the surroundings.

“Level 355?”

“Crazy... Who would even want that player as their party member?”

“If I accept that player, the team score will decrease, and so will the Ancient Monarch’s rewards. Right?”

“I think that player should go up there alone.”

“Kghk!?Level 355?”

Ali looked around and said coldly, “Everyone, shut up!”

“...”

The surroundings turned quiet. Then, Ali said, “I’m going up with this guy alone. Since we are? ‘friends’.”

Ali raised his left arm which was marked with an X. Next to him was Minhyuk, who did not pay attention to whether the other players were cursing him or not. He just munched on some cream bread while thinking ‘Kyaa! Cream bread is so delicious!’. He also lifted his left arm.

“I’m refusing you. I’m going to accompany this person. We’re friends.”

Minhyuk shouted brightly while he ate his cream bread. He said, “Frieeeeeeeeends!”

Beanie also hurriedly lifted its left arm while standing on Minhyuk’s shoulder.

“Oooooooooink!”

It was at this moment when ‘Ali’ had made the best choice of his life.

Kim Daesik jumped up from his seat. He took a deep breath to calm himself down before saying, "Th...those fools!"

They were currently in a situation where they did not know whether Beas Village would disappear or not. In such a situation, trouble actually came up between the three strongest players present. Director Kim Daesik could not help but collapse into his seat as he stared blankly at the monitor.

"It might have been possible if those three people were together but..."

Judging from the situation, only the two people, Ali and Minhyuk, would go up together. Of course, Kentaro's actions were comprehensible, but Director Kim Daesik was mad due to other reasons.

They could hear the players' voices through the speaker.

[This is why Koreans can't make it.]

[They won't be able to see the face of the Ancient Monarch.]

[Accompanying a Level 355 player? They're both going to die. A mage with low HP needs to have a dedicated and outstanding tanker in front of him, but what can a Level 355 player offer?]

"How dare you look down on our Korean players!!"

It was this part that made the anger in Director Kim Daesik boil! The mockery from the world! He gulped down some cold water fiercely, but whether it was to relieve his anger or moisten his throat, no one knew.

Then, Lee Minhwa called out and said, "Director."

The furious Director Kim Daesik turned his head towards her.

"I think that this situation is good."

"Huh?"

Lee Minhwa, who had just removed the label of being the new employee, was now one of the core team members. Since she always served beside Team Leader Park Minggyu as an assistant, she could easily predict more than what Director Kim could.

"Players Ali and Minhyuk are both unimaginably strong. Since it is quite difficult to clear the raid with only a few team members, the other players would have to match and recruit five people in their teams. That also means that there are many people who will share the scores. But! I think that those two will be able to do their parts well. In addition, Player Ali is..."

She smiled.

"He's not just the number one in the official and unofficial mage rankings in our country. His strength is just a little below Alex, the number one player in the Official Global Mage Rankings. However, Ali also learned a higher class of magic."

"...!"

It would not make sense that the staff in other teams would know about everything in the world. As for the Special Players Management Team, they had richer data compared to other teams.

“Th...then there’s hope? With just the two of them?”

Lee Minhwa nodded. A thought suddenly flashed through Director Kim Daesik’s head.

“But....if the two of them successfully killed the Ancient Monarch with a high score, what would be the reward?”

“Based on the current ‘score-based rewards’, there’s an ‘unreachable score’.”

Director Kim nodded as he continued to listen to Lee Minhwa.

“When someone reaches that unreachable score, the Ancient Treasure Chest will reward the method of creating Demigod artifacts.”

Kentaro laughed at the three fools in front of him that had their arms raised to the sky. He said, “I see. I understand.”

He thought that perhaps the robed guy was infected by the idiotic thoughts of the Korean next to him. However, Kentaro still believed that people should have a clear and distinctive line between their public and private lives.

To him, Ali had now missed an opportunity to receive great rewards. A variable had risen but instead of that variable, he should have chosen the rewards. And now, the worst combination for a mage was formed in front of him.

Kentaro turned around and moved off to find members for his party again. Of course, there was no party who was willing to receive the Black Mage Ali and Minhyuk.

“It’s fine. I’d rather be with Minhyuk than be with those people,” Ali said, in case Minhyuk felt sorry for him. Minhyuk just nodded silently at him. Then, the notifications rang.

[Please enter the Berest Mountains.]

[The passageway to Berest Mountains will appear according to the number of teams.]

[You cannot leave and escape the passageway given to you and hunt on other passageways.]

[The number of monsters, ranking of monsters, as well as the traps that will appear, will be the same for each and every team.]

[Additional scores will be rewarded to the team that arrives the earliest at the summit where the Ancient Monarch resides.]

Just like in the notifications, even if the party had a smaller number of members, the strength and number of the ancient soldiers and warriors would not be lowered. This was the reason why the most optimal number of members in a team was five.

In total, more than ten teams entered their respective passageways. The passageways were covered with transparent barriers so they could see each other, but they were not able to pass through this

barrier. Other parties had at least 4~6 people entering their passageways, while Minhyuk and Ali was the only 2-man team that entered their passageway.

Kentaro began to climb upwards through the passageway that he entered with whom he thought were the best members that he had recruited.

‘The strengthened Ancient Monarch...’

They were unclear about how strong this mob boss would be, which might be a huge problem. Hence, he needed the best combination for his party.

“Jun, you said that you’re a tanker, grab the aggro in front, the archer player, Barmas and I will hit them hard. You might already know this, but my damage output is high enough, so you don’t have to worry about that. In addition, if the mobs get crowded, our mage player, Burrow, should use an AOE magic from time to time to fend them off.”

“Yes.”

Everyone seemed to have a strong faith in Kentaro’s strength, especially since he already had experience climbing the Berest Mountains to hunt the Ancient Monarch.

Not long after, the ancient soldiers appeared in front of them. The ancient soldiers were wearing leather armor with ragged and torn capes fluttering behind them. They were also holding a long spear in their hands.

‘It’s no different from before.’

They would experience and encounter a variety of things the further they climbed the mountains. As Kentaro recalled the process that he went through previously, he remembered that there were only three teams that were able to climb the mountains. In fact, he knew that the fastest team to climb would most likely be the one to hunt the Ancient Monarch. In addition, the higher their score, the higher their rewards. This would allow the fastest team to monopolize the Ancient Monarch.

Shweeeeeeeeeek—

Then, the battle against the five ancient soldiers began. Jun stood at the forefront as he strengthened his body and prevented their spearheads from touching the rest of his team members.

Bang! Bang, bang!

“Keuhack!? These bastards are a pain! If you use defensive skills, their spears get stuck!”

The player priest immediately cast heal as tiny lights wrapped around tanker Jun’s body. Kentaro gripped his katanas tightly. His moniker, ‘Musashi’ was actually his legendary class.

“First strike. Quick.”

[First Strike. Quick.]

[A single blow will attack the enemy quickly.]

Light flashed from Kentaro's katana as he struck out once.

Shwaa!

An ancient soldier was pierced through by the katana, but he just stood there without moving.

[You have acquired 5 team points.]

[Each person will gain 2 individual points.]

If the overall score of the team was high then the rewards for all of the team members would also increase significantly. Among the team, those with higher individual scores would also get much better rewards compared to the rest of the team.

Dash—

Kentaro quickly dashed forward and dealt with the ancient soldiers with his flamboyant sword skills. He said, "Let's go up as fast as we can to hunt the Ancient Monarch."

Seeing that the first mobs were not that different from his previous experience, Kentaro started to become arrogant and conceited, even though he did not know how strong the Ancient Monarch was now. All that he could think of right now was to go up as fast as he could and monopolize the Ancient Monarch.

He looked around at his surroundings and saw the different teams climbing up through the different passageways. The situation was still normal, since the ancient soldiers were only 40% stronger than usual. However, the problem was that ancient warriors would also appear which meant that the difficulty would increase as they climbed up.

At that moment, Kentaro's eyes passed by the figures of two men. They were the Black Mage Ali and the Level 355 player earlier. He asked aloud, "What are they doing?"

The unidentified man was running fast while Black Mage Ali was chasing after him. There were more than 30 ancient soldiers pursuing them. He could see that there were even ancient warriors among the mobs. Suddenly, something amazing happened. The mage player wielded his staff as a black ring rose over the heads of the ancient soldiers.

'Undead Boom?'

Undead Boom was a magic that could only be performed by a high-leveled mage. This magic was clearly divided between success and failure. If the mage succeeded, he would be able to kill all of the undead mobs at once. The probability of success would increase depending on the mage's level. In all honesty though, it was quite hard for a high-leveled mage to kill the undead mobs with Undead Boom.

However, Kentaro was shocked by what he saw.

"...!"

It was not just one! Completed black rings were formed over the heads of forty ancient soldiers.

"Wh...what the hell?!"

Kentaro had never seen such a powerful display of 'Undead Boom' in his life. Then, he saw Ali lift the staff high up in the sky. A powerful, brilliant and bright light burst out of his staff. Then...

Bang! Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

...out of the 40 ancient soldiers, more than 30 exploded.

‘Crazy shit...! High-leveled mages said that the success rate for the undead boom was just at 40%...!’

To think that there was someone who was able to hunt with such a huge undead boom?

‘I think he’s a very unexpected high-level player, right? But that’s fine. The other guy is a burden to him anyway.’

Kentaro sneered while staring at the man named Minhyuk. Then, he said to his party members, “Let’s go! Quickly!”

“Yes!”

Kentaro and his group quickly climbed up the mountain.

After using Undead Boom, Ali heard a notification.

[You have acquired 158 team points.]

[Each person will gain 75 individual points.]

Great Undead Boom was a skill that would simultaneously cast the Undead Boom skill on all undead monsters within a 20-meter radius. In addition, the probability of success and failure was dependent on the WIS, INT and the mage’s class.

‘I didn’t know that Minhyuk has such great aggro...’

Ali shook his head as his brows furrowed. He thought,?‘Strange... why does that aggro skill look so familiar?’

He had heard something about it once, but it was just a vague piece of memory so he thought little of it.

Among the fallen ancient soldiers, ten ancient soldiers and one ancient warrior remained. In the event of failure, Undead Boom would not deal even 1% of damage, but would instead eat away at the mana of the player. In other words, the risk was high. Even so, Ali was already at a point that was higher than the rest of the mages so he believed that his skills were more than enough. He was confident in himself.

Still, he quickly moved in front of Minhyuk using Blink.

“Minhyuk, stay behind me! I still have a lot of MP!”

It was all thanks to Minhyuk’s buff ability that he had gained an additional 25% of MP. His MP’s natural recovery was also increased due to the increase in his WIS and INT.

“Firewall!”

A great wall of fire rose from the ground! The fire blocked the ancient soldiers and created a gap. In that short gap, Ali quickly cast and fired his magic.

“Fireball! Fireball! Fireball! Fireball!”

A huge fireball that was extremely different from a regular mage’s fireball shot out from Ali’s staff.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

‘What the hell?! Why is this punk not dying?!’

Ali’s face suddenly distorted. An ancient warrior garbed in thick golden armor approached Ali’s giant fireball without even a wince.

‘Don’t tell me that they have 100% magical defense?!’

Sometimes, monsters that had high magical defense would break through and achieve such a skill. Mages were most powerless against such adversaries. These kinds of monsters would reduce magical damage by as much as 80%.

‘We’re in trouble. If all the ancient warriors are like this...’

His magic would become useless. Then, at that moment, he heard the voice from behind him say, “Please wait. Like the Wind.”

Dash!

Ali heard the sound of the wind passing by his side as he stared at the gigantic 2.5metres ancient warrior that was holding a greatsword in front of them. At that moment, Minhyuk’s sword moved.

Shwaa—

It was just a single blow. And with that one blow...

Plop!

...the head of the ancient warrior fell down. Ali’s head turned to look at the fallen head, before turning to Minhyuk. He alternated between the head and Minhyuk five times within three seconds. He thought, ‘Wh...what the hell?’

What was going on? Then, the information about someone suddenly popped out in Ali’s head. The problem was that he just could not remember the name, no matter how hard he tried.

His head blanked out like a white sheet of paper as he unconsciously asked, “Y...you. Just who are you?”

At his question, Minhyuk just raised his left arm with the ‘X’ and said, “Frieeeeeeeeeeeeend!” before he grinned.