

Gourmet 551

Chapter 551: Ordinary Life

In one of the meeting rooms at the topmost floor of Ilhwa Group's Head Office, one of the branch managers was giving his report on their company's performance this year. Naturally, Kang Minhoo, the chairman of Ilhwa Group, sat at the head of the long table.

"Compared to last year, Ilhwa Group's sales have increased by around 20% this year. Ilhwa Electronics, Ilhwa Construction, Ilhwa Distribution, and even our affiliates that have been behind their rival companies in terms of performance have all recorded higher sales compared to our competitors."

Hearing this, all of the major shareholders and board members in the room could not erase the smiles on their faces. Even Chairman Kang Minhoo had a pleased look. After all, he was well aware of the praises that he would receive soon.

"I'm sure all of our board members are already aware about the reason but everything is thanks to Food God Minhyuk, who happened to be our very own Chairman Kang Minhoo's son."

Kang Minhoo was delighted, his heart thumping like crazy.

The increase in their sales? Of course, that was a good thing. However, that was not what made him feel delighted. When Minhyuk started suffering from eating addiction and disappeared from the chaebol community, plenty of rumors about Minhoo finding someone else to fill in the position of successor started to circulate. However, Kang Minhoo did his best and endured for the sake of his son.

And now, his son had done it.

'I'm so proud.'

Kang Minhoo was not being proud of himself nor what he did. Instead, he was proud of his son. And the board members and shareholders?

"Kang Minhyuk is like the chairman! He's already helping the company even though he hasn't started running it yet."

"Kang Minhyuk is a very talented person. He will definitely lead our company to a brighter future."

"Hahahahahahaha!"

The meeting room was filled with smiles. And Kang Minhoo, who usually never said much in these meetings, opened his mouth, "You know..."

"Yes, chairman!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Yes, sir!"

“My son gave me this on my birthday.”

It has started again! Again! The story of how Chairman Kang Minhoo’s son bought him a suit!

“I wonder where he bought it? The texture of the cloth is quite nice to the touch. Huh? I think he asked an Italian designer to make this. Ah, you know what? That rascal has a very good eye for fashion. Just look at this suit...”

The board members and shareholders had a premonition that they would have to stay inside the meeting room for five straight hours the moment the chairman started his story about how his son bought him a suit. To prevent this, one of the board members hurriedly called out, “Chairman.”

“Yes?”

“Will your son attend the first birthday party of the granddaughter of Daehan Group’s chairman?”

Daehan Group’s Chairman Eom Jin-Woong and Kang Minhoo clashed not too long ago. It was Eom Jin-Woong’s side that issued the order to release news about Minhyuk’s eating addiction and take that opportunity to grab ahold of Ilhwa’s weakness. However, it became a blessing in disguise. Minhyuk was able to overcome that disaster by himself and turned it into his, and Ilhwa’s fortune.

However, even if they were bitter enemies, Kang Minhoo had to endure. This was the case for all chaebols. As long as there were big happenings and events, they had to attend. As such, Kang Minhoo had to attend this birthday party.

Kang Minhoo could only smile bitterly in answer. He could not give a definite answer to that question. His son, Minhyuk, was not yet completely cured. Although he had improved by a lot, they still did not know what would happen if Minhyuk went to a place where a feast was laid out in front of him.

Knowing the implication of that smile, the people in the room either coughed in embarrassment or smiled bitterly.

Death, or Jung Ji-Hoon, was someone that lived almost his entire life with a huge burn mark on his face. But thanks to Minhyuk introducing him to a top class burn treatment specialist, his face had been cured to the point that no one would know that it once existed if they saw him from afar.

After coming out of his capsule, Ji-Hoon looked at the mirror and smiled at his reflection. Because of the trauma caused by people calling him ‘monster’ after seeing his burn marks before, Ji-Hoon was still awkward around people and still had a hard time interacting with anyone in reality. It was also because of that trauma that his hair remained long and tangled. Despite his unkempt appearance, Ji-Hoon felt happy, and of course, grateful to Minhyuk.

Ji-Hoon’s phone rang just when he was about to get some breakfast. The name displayed on the phone was none other than Minhyuk.

“I, I should answer the phone, right?” Ji-Hoon stuttered. He still felt awkward answering phone calls.

[What are you doing?]

“I was just about to eat.”

[What, what are you going to eat?!!!]

“Uhm, I’m just going to heat up some leftover spicy braised chicken and eat it together with some green onion kimchi?”

[Kyaaah!!!]

A smile bloomed on Ji-Hoon’s face. Who would ever imagine that the Beyond the Heavens’ King was someone that found joy in such a small, mundane meal? At this point? Everyone. But that was Minhyuk’s charm.

[Hey.]

“Huh? What’s the matter?” Ji-Hoon finally asked about Minhyuk’s reason for calling. Minhyuk was his benefactor so whatever it was that he wanted to do, Ji-Hoon would do his best to fulfill it.

[Would you like to go out with me and play?]

“Huh...?”

...Except for this. Just like mentioned before, Ji-Hoon still felt awkward when dealing with people. That included going outside of the comfort of his own home. Even though he had already received treatment for his burn marks, he still had to hype himself out to go out once every two weeks. And that was even an outing at night too.

“Oh... uhm...”

[Come on! Let’s play!!!]

“Don’t you have other people to go with? Are they busy...?” Ji-Hoon had to wonder if Minhyuk’s other friends were busy playing the game since he had to call a loner like him for an outing like this.

But then, Minhyuk said...

[Others? I didn’t contact them, though? I want to hang out with you. Come on, I can only go out once a month to play... play with me...]

“...”

Ji-Hoon’s smile widened at Minhyuk’s words. Minhyuk could only go out once a month to play yet he chose to hang out with him on that day? There was no greater pleasure than this to a friend. Just like him, Minhyuk rarely went outside. To think that it was him that Minhyuk contacted when he was allowed to go out for the first time.

Hence, Ji-Hoon decided to be brave for once, “Alright.”

[Woohooo! Then, I'll meet you at your house!]

Then, the line was cut off. The moment the phone call ended, regret washed over Ji-Hoon, "Wh, what should I do?! How does one hang out?!!!"

Ji-Hoon had never gone outside for leisure in his entire life. If he was not panicking, then he would also realize that the same was true for Minhyuk. However, Ji-Hoon was panicking, restlessly moving around his house.

"Right, in that drama that I watched before, they dried their hair before going out!"

It was something that was trivial but Ji-Hoon slowly recalled these mundane and ordinary things that people did when preparing to go out. The first thing that he did was to dry his hair. Then, he spent time pondering over the thirty colognes that he bought and never tried on before. He even called for a men's stylist to his home and finally chose a newly bought casual suit to wear. Ji-Hoon carefully left his house after receiving Minhyuk's call and hearing that he was already waiting for him outside.

'When was the last time I went out of my house with the sun still up?'

Ji-Hoon could no longer remember. But that did not matter. The crippling fear that was threatening to devour him was what was important. What would he do if Minhyuk was disappointed after seeing his gloomy, dark, and timid appearance? What if Minhyuk decided to distance himself after this? Even though Ji-Hoon wanted to stretch his shoulders out and be confident, his head still could not help but bow down from the anxiety.

When he finally took a step outside, Minhyuk was there to greet him, "Yo! My friend!!!"

"Oh, yeah... hi?"

"Oh, your outfit slays, huh?"

"Wh, what slay? You, you can't kill people in real... life?"

"What I mean is that your outfit is great."

"A... aha! So, it's a new slang? Hahaha! I, I, I, I know that! I also know that!" Ji-Hoon talked loudly, trying to hide how intimidated he was in this new experience. He talked so loudly that he looked like he was angry. Which, at this point, made Ji-Hoon realize that he made a mistake. However, Minhyuk did not care at all.

"It's been a long time since the two of us last went outside, huh?"

"That, that's right."

The two of them had similar situations. Ji-Hoon fidgeted. He felt like he wanted to go back inside. But before he could do so, Minhyuk's arms were already slung over his shoulders.

"Let's go!"

"Where are we going?"

“We’ll roam around and play in the streets of Seoul. But before that...” Minhyuk looked at Ji-Hoon and continued, “Should we get a haircut?”

Ji-Hoon’s hair was long enough to reach his chests, covering his face completely. And since he did not care for it properly, the strands were tangled and the ends dry.

“O, okay...” Ji-Hoon answered, his body gripped with anxiety as the two of them headed to a salon.

Ji-Hoon still had his head bowed down even when they arrived at the salon. He was even startled when the hair stylist touched his hair gently and carefully, “Ah. I’m, I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” The hair stylist smiled.

This was all still strange and scary to Ji-Hoon. His mind went into overdrive, thinking that others would point fingers and whisper about him. His anxiety reached an all time high. When the hair stylist left for a moment, Minhyuk, who was sitting next to him, said, “Ji-Hoon.”

“H, huh...?”

“You’re already cool enough.”

“Eh?”

‘So suddenly?’

“You’re a very considerate guy, someone that will come running when I ask for help. You’re a very cool guy and you are not short of anything. Also...” Minhyuk sounded embarrassed which made Ji-Hoon turn his head to look at him, “...you’re a very precious friend of mine. I wish both you and I can go out confidently in the world.”

This was also the reason why Minhyuk went with Ji-Hoon for his very first outing. Ji-Hoon smiled, “Right...”

Then, the hair stylist appeared and asked Ji-Hoon, “How would you like me to do your hair?”

“Please do what looks best on me.”

“Hmmm. I think you will look good with brown hair and a 7:3 part, of course we will perm the part to fix it. Would you be okay with that?”

“Yes.”

The hair stylist then began to work on Ji-Hoon’s hair with his scissors. The face hidden behind a curtain of hair was now slowly being revealed the more his hair got styled and cut.

‘Right. You and I can also live a normal and ordinary life.’

Ji-Hoon did not want to live the life of a loner anymore. He wanted to change. He wanted to go to karaoke with friends, singing and drinking through the night. He also wanted to experience those struggles in one’s love life and cry with those very same friends.

Yes, a normal and ordinary life. That was what Ji-Hoon wanted to have.

Snip, snip—

Just like how his hair was being cut off, Ji-Hoon also began to let go of his thoughts and shackles from his previous way of living. He kept his eyes closed and looked forward to a future that was different from before.

As his hair, which was quite long earlier, reached the tip of his nose, the staff of the salon began to flock around Ji-Hoon. They whispered amongst themselves as they looked at Ji-Hoon, careful not to alert the man on the chair.

“...That’s the guy from earlier, right?”

“Y, yes.”

“Amazing...”

After finishing the haircut, the hair stylist dyed Ji-Hoon’s hair and permed it. However, Ji-Hoon still did not open his eyes. Even after the perm had set in and they had to wash his hair, Ji-Hoon still did not open his eyes.

“We’re going to wash your hair.”

“Minhyuk, please hold my hand...”

“...”

Minhyuk quietly held Ji-Hoon’s hand and guided him to the washing area until he went back to his seat and dried his hair.

“Sir, I’m very sorry... but can I put a bit of make-up on your face? Your face is very easy to put make-up on.”

“Ah. Yes, it’s alright.”

“Hiyaa~ The hair stylist is giving us some service~” Minhyuk’s voice floated in Ji-Hoon’s ears as he felt the hair stylist put wax on his hair and shape it with the hair dryer, his nervousness spiking. This was his very first time stepping out in the world in a very long time, but he was glad and thankful that Minhyuk was accompanying him.

“All done. *Phew~?* I’ve never felt so happy doing hair and make-up like this.”

But Ji-Hoon still did not open his eyes. Then, Minhyuk said, “Wait. Don’t open your eyes yet.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Ji-Hoon felt Minhyuk guiding him to stand up and go somewhere. After taking a few steps, Minhyuk said, “We’re standing in front of a full-body mirror. Okay, you can open your eyes now.”

Ji-Hoon’s body trembled at Minhyuk’s words. The surroundings turned quiet as they waited for him to open his eyes. This was Ji-Hoon’s first step towards a normal and ordinary life. A new life, a change for someone that was called a ‘monster’. Then, Ji-Hoon slowly opened his eyes. Ji-Hoon was left speechless when he saw his figure reflected in the mirror.

A tall stature standing at 180 centimeters, wearing a casual suit and stylish loafers. That was the figure that was reflected in the mirror. When he looked up, what greeted him were his soft and wavy brown hair which covered a part of his big and round eyes that were framed by his double eyelids. His white skin shone, highlighting his straight nose and sharp jawline.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“You’re really handsome!!!”

“Wow! I really had a hard time trying to hold it in!!!”

“Oh my god!!! You’re really cool!!!”

“You’re really handsome, do you know that?”

The hair stylists that were struggling to hold it in during Ji-Hoon’s transformation all cheered loudly. For the first time in his life, Ji-Hoon let out a bright, wide smile, one that was not like his awkward smile from before, as a drop of tear trickled down his cheek.

Then, Minhyuk spoke with a beaming smile, “Congratulations on finally taking a step in living a new life.”

1. ??, refers to business conglomerates as well as the people running said businesses.

Chapter 552: Ordinary Life

Minhyuk and Ji-Hoon both had something in common. The two of them did not have many friends outside of the game, and were mostly cut off from the rest of the world. They were also both single since birth.

What would two people that lived like this, wanted to do when they finally stepped out into the world? It was actually really simple: the trivial and mundane. All they wanted to do was walk around outside like normal people.

“Ugh, uuuuuuugh...!”

“Keok! Is, is this what they call... the hell train...?!”

Just like ordinary young men, the two rode the jam-packed subway and experienced the hell of being sandwiched between a lot of other people. Once the doors opened, they both ran out as if they were running away from monsters.

“Ji-Hoon, let’s run! Quick!”

“Y, yeah!”

Both Minhyuk and Ji-Hoon became the fastest people to escape the subway hell and jump on the escalator. As the two exited the subway station, they were greeted by the view of Mt. Namsan’s peak reaching the skies.

“Wow. Look at those two. What amazing proportions...”

“So handsome...”

“Look at the guy with the wavy hair. Doesn’t he look quite handsome?”

“I think the person right next to him, the one wearing the mask, is more handsome?”

“But why is he wearing a black mask with a skull print?”

“The two men went to Namsan...”

But it did not matter to the two men how the others viewed them.

“Let’s race! Let’s see who’s faster between us!”

“Heoooo! Why did you start first?!”

Minhyuk and Ji-Hoon ran towards Mt. Namsan, giving their all. They would run until they were out of breath, rested for a while, and took off again, continuing that cycle until their bodies were covered with perspiration.

They finally arrived at Mt. Namsan. The two did not even need any words as they stood at the top of Namsan Seoul Tower and took in the panoramic view of the city beneath them.

“Yahoooooooo! Freeeeedooooooooom!!!” Minhyuk shouted loudly, startling Ji-Hoon and the people around them.

Ji-Hoon hesitated as he looked at the people that turned to look at Minhyuk with his sudden outburst, “That’s embarrassing. What, what are you doing?”

“Embarrassing? Doesn’t matter. What matters is that the two of us are having so much fun right now!”

“...”

And Ji-Hoon, who heard Minhyuk’s words, thought: *That’s right! I decided to change. What does it matter if it’s embarrassing?*

“I am veeeeeeeeeeery handsoooooooooooooome!”

“...???”

That was right. Ji-Hoon was slowly allowing his inner self to awaken, after receiving people’s praises. The two screamed like crazy before drinking some water and coming down from the tower. Then, they went to Hongdae, the vibrant street of youth, and watched the people come and go while looking at their outfits. They also went to the cinemas and watched a horror movie.

“A, aaaaaack! He, help me... The, the zombies... the zombies are here!!!”

“...Aren’t you a summoner that summons zombies?”

They also went to the arcade and stood in front of the punching machine, just like two normal teenagers.

“Make a wish! If you get a high score then it will come true!”

Baaaaaaaaaaaaang—

Tiririri~

They laughed and giggled at the loser before going to the karaoke to sing.

"Bingsu~ Patbingsu~ I love you, I love you."

"Chicken soup~?Ooooooooooh!!!"

"N, no... why does the song start with food and end with food?"

The two also went to Myeong-dong to look at foreigners and try some street food.

"Are, are you alright?"

"I took this newly developed drug, the KD-11, so I'm fine. But there can be severe side effects if I use it frequently, so I can only go out once a month."

"Y, you said that you're alright, but why are you drooling so much?"

"Sluuuurp!"

They even greeted a few Japanese tourists as they walked around Myeong-dong.

"Su, sugoi ne!!!"

"Nan desu ka?"

"Sugoi ne!!!"

"B, baka...???"

"Sugoi!"

.

Ji-Hoon, who only knew the word *Sugoi*, kept on repeating the same word as a greeting and Minhyuk, who was beside him, kept on laughing at his antics. The smiles on their faces did not fade away, as they continued to walk amidst the bustling streets.

Minhyuk and Ji-Hoon were both very happy. For them, this ordinary life was a blessing. Even the boring and mundane things that people would repeat every single day, were considered miracles to them. They were both very thankful for this, their spirits still high as they ran to take Myeong-dong's subway and experience the subway hell again.

There was one thing that people from the countryside always wanted to do whenever they visited Seoul. And that was none other than eating ramyeon by the Han River. In fact, this was the activity that Minhyuk was looking forward to the most.

"Oh, oooooooooh... the, the water is coming out!!!" Minhyuk exclaimed when hot water came out of the dispenser after he placed his disposable bowl under the faucet.

The two divided their jobs. Ji-Hoon was in charge of heating the hot bars and the frozen dumplings in the microwave, while Minhyuk was in charge of cooking the ramyeon, making sure that the noodles were cooked well by lifting the noodles up from time to time. After cooking their meals, they sat under a tent that was facing the Han River.

Not long after, they were able to set up a very appetizing ‘Han River Ramyeon Table’. Their table was filled with steaming ramyeon in disposable bowls, piping hot dumplings and hot bars, stir-fried kimchi and convenience store kimbap, the perfect food for the slightly chilly weather and the cool breeze from Han River.

“What a great day,” Minhyuk said, looking at the Han River, as the wind caressed his face.

Minhyuk was given the opportunity to eat these dishes in real life once a month. The amount of calories that he could eat on this day had to be equal to or less than 2,000 calories. This limit was given after Jinhwan, Minhyuk’s personal doctor, said that his eating addiction might worsen if he ate a lot after drinking the newly developed drug.

However, even though he could only eat a certain amount, Minhyuk was still grateful to have the chance to eat food in reality.

As the cool breeze continued to ruffle their hair, Minhyuk lifted the bowl to his lips. He gently blew on the soup before taking a sip. The soup tasted both spicy and refreshing, a taste that would immediately make one shout, ‘*Kghhk~*’ the moment they had a sip. With the bowl close to his lips, Minhyuk grabbed his chopsticks and lifted a mouthful of ramyeon.

“Hoo, hoo! *Sluuuuuuuuuurp!*”

A burst of exclamation escaped from Minhyuk’s lips the moment he bit on the chewy noodles. It was so delicious that Minhyuk felt like he was about to cry. Then, he clamped a piece of stir-fried kimchi, placed it into his mouth and exclaimed, ‘*Wow~*’. Then, he slurped another mouthful of noodles before picking up a piece of dumpling. The juices of the meat inside the thin skin of the dumpling flowed into Minhyuk’s mouth the moment he bit down on it.

Ho~

Minhyuk rolled the still-steaming piece of dumpling in his mouth before gulping everything down. He slurped another mouthful of noodles, before moving on to the convenience store bulgogi kimbap. Finally, he dipped a piece of kimbap into the ramyeon soup, before placing it in his mouth.

“Super! Amazing!”

The flavors of the sour, crunchy pickled radish and the slightly sweet bulgogi created a perfect harmony inside his mouth. Then, with a final mouthful of noodles, Minhyuk finished his Han River Ramyeon. He took a sip of the soup before picking up a piece of hot bar. The pleasant texture and rich flavor of the hot bar immediately brought a smile to his face the moment he chewed on it. After eating all of the dishes that he could eat, Minhyuk grabbed a can of refreshing *sprite*, opened it and...

Fwish—

...drank everything in one go.

Gulp, gulp, gulp, gulp—

“Kyaa~”

The exhaustion of the day seemed to be washed away by the cool and refreshing taste that lingered in Minhyuk's mouth.

"Do you want to eat some more?"

"No, I'm fine."

Of course, Minhyuk wanted to eat more. Even if he took the drug for his illness, this feeling of wanting more had already become a 'habit' ingrained in his body. Thankfully, his strong mental power was enough for him to suppress such thoughts.

After finishing his meal, Minhyuk stared at the Han River for a long time. Time passed by just like that. Minhyuk and Ji-Hoon finally stood up from their seats, took the subway back and arrived in front of Ji-Hoon's house again.

"You didn't have to take me back," Ji-Hoon said, staring at Minhyuk for a long time, who was smiling at him. Thanks to Minhyuk, he had so much fun today. He even gained the confidence to go out on his own.

"Minhyuk," Ji-Hoon called out, "Thank you."

"Well."

The two of them smiled at each other for a long time until Ji-Hoon asked, "Are you going home now?"

Minhyuk shook his head. Ji-Hoon tilted his head, wondering if he still had some place to be after playing around all day like they did. Then, a black limousine suddenly stopped in front of Minhyuk as the driver got out of his seat and opened the back door for him.

Minhyuk smiled lightly and said, "There's still somewhere I have to go."

At Daehan Group's Chairman Eom Jin-Woong's granddaughter's first birthday party.

Anyone that attended this birthday party would say that this was way over the top to be called an ordinary birthday party. After all, South Korea's most prominent figures, from politicians to businessmen, were attending.

Of course, Chairman Kang Minhoo of Ilhwa Group was also one of the attendees.

"You already have a granddaughter. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

Kang Minhoo shook hands with Eom Jin-Woong, someone that he had a feud with not too long ago. Eom Jin-Woong hated Kang Minhoo while Kang Minhoo just retaliated as punishment for what he did to them. However, even if they did not like each other, this was not the time nor place to fight. It was a celebration after all.

The moment Kang Minhoo entered the scene, plenty of political figures and business giants immediately flocked towards him. And standing right next to them were their wives and children, all dressed up for the party.

“Oh my~ So, Chairman Kang is here. Hahaha. This over here is my son.”

“Ah, so you’re that child that recently topped the exam and entered Seoul National University?” Kang Minhoo smiled softly at the young man that greeted him with a bow.

As Kang Minhoo walked forward again...

“Hello, Chairman.”

“Assemblyman Jeong.”

“You look younger every time we meet. Ah, this is my daughter.”

“Your daughter is quite beautiful. Maybe it’s because she resembles your wife. What a relief that she did not take after you, huh? Hahahaha!”

“I know, right? Hahahaha!”

Every time he tried to walk forward...

“Chairman, this is my wife.”

“Chairman Kang, this is my son.”

“Chairman.”

“Chairman.”

“Chairman Kang.”

...someone would approach Kang Minhoo and greet him with their family. They would either brag about their grandson, granddaughter, or wife, or their son that went to law school, or a daughter that became a celebrity. All of them approached him with their families.

“Damn bastards...” Eom Jin-Woong mumbled, a sigh escaping his lips as he watched Kang Minhoo’s figure from afar.

This was what always happened whenever Chairman Kang Minhoo participated in any kind of event, and Chairman Kang Minhoo participated in a lot of business gatherings and celebrations. Kang Minhoo was an upright man, yet he had always been participating alone for nearly a decade. Kang Minhoo’s wife had died early and Kang Minhyuk, his son, was suffering from eating addiction.

That was the reason why he had always been alone, despite being the object of envious gazes from the people.

Eom Jin-Woong hated Kang Minhoo, but he could not help but feel sorry for the man after seeing him alone for so long. In the ten years that Kang Minhoo came alone, the people would always whisper among themselves, ‘*He came alone again?*’. This was also the reason why Chairman Kang Minhoo felt both grateful and bitter whenever he appeared in events like this.

Once all of the greetings were over, Kang Minhoo was left alone once again. He could sit down but he remained standing with a bitter smile on his face for quite some time.

‘No, I’m fine,’ Kang Minhoo comforted himself.

So what if he was the only one who could not attend with his son? He was very grateful that his son, who was suffering from a terrible disease in the form of eating addiction, was already slowly moving forward. He was already satisfied just by being able to see his son smile happily, cry, and make friends.

‘That’s right. I’m alright.’

But that was something that was far from the truth. Kang Minhoo was not alright. He was not alright being alone, amidst these laughing, chattering people and their harmonious families.

Kang Minhoo has been doing his best for his son for the past ten years. He tried so hard to endure all the hardships, working twice, even three times harder than anyone, just so he could shut down rumors and those that voiced concerns about him needing someone else to become his successor.

Actually, Minhoo did not find it hard at all. He just hoped and wished that someday, one day, he would be able to sling his arms around his son’s shoulders and brag to others that *‘This is my son.’*? while laughing happily.

“Phew...” In the end, all Kang Minhoo could do was lower his head and sigh. But then...

“Dad.”

...a familiar voice, a voice that he knew too well, rang in his ears. When Kang Minhoo turned around, he saw his beloved son greeting him with a bright smile on his face.

Chapter 553: Ordinary Life

Food God Minhyuk was now one of the world’s prominent figures. It could be said that his popularity and impact was larger than any of the Hollywood actors of this era.

Back in Minhyuk’s teenage years, while still suffering terribly from eating addiction, he did not attend school. Despite that, he was able to stand at the top and become the nation’s academic champion. He was also good in swordsmanship and kendo, and could stand toe-to-toe with Olympic Gold Medalist Dawoul.

Most importantly, he was the king of games, a person loved by the entire world.

“Is, Isn’t that Minhyuk...?”

“My god...”

“The Food God? Wow, look at those proportions...”

The entire venue where the birthday party was being held was shaken by Minhyuk’s arrival as he stood beside his father, Chairman Kang Minhoo, with a wide smile on his face. Minhyuk was someone that they could not easily meet. To be exact, not even assemblymen, hospital directors, and business presidents could meet him.

In just an instant, the entire venue's focus turned to Minhyuk.

Meanwhile, Minhyuk was telling Kang Minhoo about the drug and his circumstances. Minhoo smiled softly, "Once a month." Even though it was only once a month, his son was still allowed to go out. This was great news for both Minhoo and Minhyuk.

"Chairman? Why didn't you tell us that your son is coming today?"

"Your son is very handsome."

...people began to flock around them.

"Wow... I can't believe I'm seeing the Food God here..."

The eyes of the children of those business conglomerates all shone with envy. Everyone present could not take their eyes away from Chairman Kang Minhoo and Minhyuk.

"I hope my son and the chairman's son can get along well. Haha!!!"

They were all trying hard to gain a connection with the Food God, Minhyuk. Kang Minhoo's son, Minhyuk, was this kind of person, someone that could take everyone's attention away. And Kang Minhoo, as his father, was the proudest of them all for having such a wonderful son as him. Kang Minhoo wrapped his arm around his son's shoulders and proudly said, "Thank you for looking at my son in a good light."

"I don't think I will ever see your son in a bad light!"

"Hahahaha!"

Kang Minhoo's long awaited dream finally came true.

When the birthday party started, Daehan Group's Chairman Eom Jin-Woong was smiling brightly when he saw his son and daughter-in-law enter the venue wearing hanbok.

'I'm sorry.'

Eom Jin-Woong tried to keep Ilhwa Group in check by exposing Minhyuk's eating addiction to the world. Back then, he was able to taste the bitterness of life from Chairman Kang Minhoo's hand. It was only then that Jin-Woong realized that the fact that he was pushing his son to get their company to the top was not necessarily a form of love.

Perhaps it was because...

'I'm getting older too.'

...his cold-heartedness after working as the chairman of their company was slowly fading as time went by. Now, all Jin-Woong wanted to do was to live a life where he could shower his son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter with love. That was why he wanted to do something for his son and daughter-in-law.

For the event, he had hired Kim Seokhyun, Athenae's famed Twilight Chef Black. Kim Seokhyun was the only Korean among the top ten world class chefs and his dishes were said to be loved by everyone.

From what Jin-Woong had heard, his son and daughter-in-law's way of enjoying their free time was to visit different restaurants. At first, Eom Jin-Woong scolded his son saying that he should look at more documents if he had the time to do something like that. But now, he thought that it was very fortunate that his son was able to find a place where he could find solace from working at such a stressful company like theirs.

Once the party ended, Kim Seokhyun would make a table of feast for Eom Jin-Woong's son and daughter-in-law. Just when the party was just about to end, Jin-Woong's secretary rushed and whispered to his ears to give a report, "Chairman, Chef Kim Seokhyun was said to have been caught in a traffic accident while on his way here."

"Wh, what...?"

For Eom Jin-Woong, this was a report that was enough to make everything fade into black. It was common for meals to be served during a first birthday party. But this birthday party was said to be different since everyone was supposed to eat together after the formalities of the birthday party ended. The birthday party was set up this way because Chef Kim Seokhyun and his entourage of chefs were supposed to make a show and cook in front of everyone here.

But Kim Seokhyun would not be able to come here?

"How, how about the other chefs?"

"All of the other chefs have arrived."

"..."

At the very least, there was a silver-lining in this catastrophe. However, Eom Jin-Woong could not help but feel heartbroken. All he wanted was to feed his son a very special meal on this special day. The fact that giving his son a gift and his blessings was close to being ruined nearly made Eom Jin-Woong faint.

Then, Jin-Woong's secretary said, "Chairman, if you're willing..." his gaze turning to Minhyuk, "...why don't you try asking for Mr. Minhyuk's help?"

"What...?"

Chairman Eom Jin-Woong's face turned ugly at his secretary's words. It was not because he hated Food God Minhyuk, but because he was fully aware of what he did to the boy. The fact that he published the secrets of Ilhwa Group's chairman's successor about having a rare disease, which was a terrible disease that could lead to death, was a huge deal. A normal person would have already collapsed from the pressure of this secret being exposed to the world. What more for someone suffering from eating addiction, patients who were known to have contracted several mental health issues like depression and panic disorders?

Of course, the Food God was able to turn this disaster into a blessing for him, but perhaps Eom Jin-Woong was someone that he wanted to kill. Despite all these, Eom Jin-Woong still felt greedy. As Eom Jin-Woong passed by his son and daughter-in-law, he heard their conversation...

'The Food God's dishes. Ah, I want to try it once in my life.'

'Me too.'

'But the Food God is a very busy person. Perhaps we will never be able to taste it in our lives.'

Jin-Woong's son smiled bitterly when he said that.

As a father, Eom Jin-Woong wanted to ask for his son but for some reason, the words seemed to be stuck in his throat.

"Would he even help me? A person like me?"

"We will only know if we ask."

Chairman Eom Jin-Woong turned silent. Even if Minhyuk made excuses, Jin-Woong would understand. After all, he was sure that the boy would never lend him a hand. Jin-Woong's secretary hurriedly rushed to talk to Minhyuk since the birthday party was about to end. For a moment, Eom Jin-Woong felt the boy's gaze lingering on his back. Eom Jin-Woong felt both embarrassed and ashamed. This would be recorded as one of his greatest embarrassments. Then, his secretary came back.

"Chairman."

"Right. He probably refused, no?"

"No, not at all."

Chairman Eom Jin-Woong looked at his secretary in confusion.

"Mr. Minhyuk is actually worried if it was alright for someone like him to cook on such a special occasion."

"What...?"

The secretary looked back at Minhyuk with a soft smile on his face as he continued to speak, "He said that he might be the Food God inside the game, but in reality, he's just a patient suffering from a rare disease. He said that if you don't mind that then he would do his best to help you."

"..."

Eom Jin-Woong's face turned a bright shade of red, *'I'm very embarrassed.'*

Jin-Woong was someone that was already well past sixty, while Minhyuk was only a young twenty one years old boy. Yet such a young man was so understanding, his mind as broad as the sea. On the other hand, what was he? Someone that tried to destroy that very man's life? At that moment, Eom Jin-Woong felt like he could not raise his face from the shame and embarrassment that washed over him.

The politicians and businessmen that attended the first birthday party held quite a bit of expectation after hearing from Chairman Eom Jin-Woong himself that the birthday banquet was different from

the ordinary banquets. When all of the formalities ended, chefs began to enter the venue. It seemed like the banquet was truly different. After all, they could order whatever they wanted to eat and the chefs would make it for them on the spot.

Eom Tae-Woong, Chairman Eom Jin-Woong's son, smiled widely, "Thank you, father." Eom Tae-Woong's father, who had always been harsh towards him, took a lot of time and prepared this for him. Who would not feel moved?

That was when the main event kicked off. Minhyuk, who was one of the first birthday party's guests at first, suddenly appeared and stood in the middle of the nearly forty chefs that arrived. He took off his coat, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, donned an apron and washed his hands clean.

"...What the...?"

"The, the Food God is cooking?"

"Heok...!"

Exclamations burst out from all over the place while Minhyuk looked around at the forty chefs that surrounded him. His eyes were as sharp as when he was on the battlefield. He looked like he was the main chef in charge of a hotel's kitchen with his aura alone.

Then, Minhyuk turned to look at Eom Tae-Woong and his wife and asked, "Do you have something that you want to eat?"

"Huh? Ah, ah...! Yes!"

Eom Tae-Woong wanted to try and taste Minhyuk's dishes just once in his life. He was so shocked by the sudden turn of events that all he could do was turn to look at his father, Eom Jin-Woong.

"We haven't had a proper meal since this morning."

"We were so busy preparing for the first birthday party."

After hearing their words, Minhyuk pondered for a moment, "Will it be alright if I cook beef seaweed soup, bulgogi and japchae for your main dish? I don't think it's good for your empty stomachs to have dishes with stimulating flavors from the get-go."

"That's good!"

After hearing their consent, Minhyuk turned around to prepare cooking. The other chefs, who received the orders from the other personnel also began to move. All of the chefs were wearing their white cooking uniforms. On the other hand, Minhyuk, who started cooking in the center of them all, was only wearing an apron over his suit. He definitely stood out among everyone.

'It is also important to consider the viewer's enjoyment whenever there are many people watching you cook.'

Although what Minhyuk was cooking was only a simple beef seaweed soup, it could look different depending on how he would cook it and how the people saw him do it. Minhyuk immediately pulled out the knife.

Tak, tak, tak, tak, tak—

Minhyuk started chopping the carrots the moment the knife was out. When the attendees saw his skillful display of knife skills, they were in awe. After all, Minhyuk was able to chop the carrots into nice thin pieces with just his knife alone.

Actually, the other chefs were also doing splendid work. However, the gazes of the guests were trained on Minhyuk, who was standing in the middle. Minhyuk chopped the vegetables and stir-fried the meat for the japchae. And during the process...

Crackle—

...he made use of the oil and lit up a burst of flames in the pan.

“Wow.”

Clap, clap, clap, clap—

Initially, a lot of people voiced their concern about the Food God’s cooking. He might be good at cooking inside Athenae, but would that be true in real life? Those concerns were unfounded, as it turned out. Athenae was a ‘virtual reality’ game. The feeling of moving one’s hands and body inside the game felt almost the same as in reality. Minhyuk had lived as the Food God for only a short period of time in Athenae, but if all of the meals that he ate and cooked were combined, he might as well have surpassed the chefs here purely with the amount of dishes that he cooked.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

Plenty of the women present looked at the Food God admiringly as he cooked.

‘Wow... a man who can cook.’

‘Isn’t he too sexy?’

The muscles and veins lining Minhyuk’s forearms, which moved and twitched with every move that he made, stood out from under the folded sleeves of his shirt.

Minhyuk also stir-fried the meat for the seaweed soup, poured some water inside the same pot and added the soaked seaweed inside. He cooked the various dishes that he promised to make with quick movements and no errors at all. In just a blink, the other chefs had finished cooking and Minhyuk was the only one left.

But as if they were possessed, everyone present just stared blankly at Minhyuk.

Right after he finished cooking, Minhyuk quickly plated the beef seaweed soup, japchae and bulgogi neatly on their respective bowls and plates with side dishes of vegetables and egg rolls on the side.

If someone else saw the spread of dishes that Minhyuk cooked they would probably say, *‘Was that all that the Food God can make?’*.?However, most of the time cooking for someone was dependent on the other person’s situation and circumstances. Just like how one had to mind their manners when going to a fancy restaurant, the chefs also had to take into account the dishes that their clientele wanted to eat. Also, a dish was not guaranteed to be delicious just because there was caviar and foie gras added on them. Expensive and high-quality ingredients did not necessarily entail a very pleasing taste to the palate.

“Wow...”

Eom Tae-Woong and his wife looked at each other, both of them gasping in awe. Both of them were busy people that could only grab a simple meal or some chicken breasts with the short amount of break time that they could afford. That was why they could not hold back the smiles that graced their faces at the simple, yet warm, spread of home cooked food placed in front of them.

Eom Tae-Woong grabbed his spoon and took a sip of the seaweed soup.

“Huh?”

The seaweed soup had a stronger and richer flavor than ordinary seaweed soup. Another spoonful and he could not help but let out a sigh of admiration.

“How can it taste this good?”

“You’ve seen how I cooked longer than the other chefs, right? Personally, I prefer seaweed soup that has been boiled for a long time. I believe that its flavor and taste would be better if it was done that way.”

“I see.”

Eom Tae-Woong could not hide the sighs of admiration that escaped his mouth with every bite of the dishes that he ate. The dishes created with the Food God’s ‘know-hows’ were so delicious that his title was truly well-deserved.

Meanwhile, Eom Jin-Woong, who was standing from a bit further away, saw how Minhyuk’s arm shook slightly.

‘He must be having a very hard time because of his illness...?’

Eom Jin-Woong was both in shock and admiration. The young man was still fighting against this illness as he cooked.

After the two people finished their meals, they both turned to Eom Jin-Woong and said, “Thank you, father.”

Chairman Eom Jin-Woong smiled softly. When the first birthday party finally ended, Eom Jin-Woong stopped Minhyuk, who was about to leave, and said, “For the longest time, I was a horrible father to my son. But thanks to you, I was able to become a good father today. What do you want and need from me, I will give you anything within my power?”

The possibility of Ilhwa Group and Daehan Group becoming strong partners under Minhyuk’s leadership was very high if he accepted this offer. After all, Minhyuk was Ilhwa’s successor. If it was now, Eom Jin-Woong thought that he could do anything for the young man in front of him, as long as it did not harm his company.

Minhyuk smiled softly, “But I don’t want anything at all?”

“...What?”

“I didn’t do it because I was hoping for something. I was able to cook something which made this birthday party enjoyable.”

Minhyuk's words brought Eom Jin-Woong to a daze. His gaze remained blank as he said, "I'm sorry and thank you."

Eom Jin-Woong, the most powerful man in Daehan Group, uttered his most sincere and heartfelt words to Minhyuk. Minhyuk just smiled at him, bidding his goodbye as he walked out of the venue with his father, Minhoo.

"Tae-Woong."

"Yes, father?"

Eom Jin-Woong watched Minhyuk's back until it disappeared from his sight.

"Grow with that child. That child will become the strongest in the world."

Chapter 554: God of Cooking's Trial

The topic of conversations all over the world revolved around how the Food God knocked down Akhan. Many people were shocked and amazed by the fact that the Food God was able to obtain the title of being the first player ever to create an 'Absolute God's Secret' during his time of crisis.

[No other player would be able to hold a candle to the Food God now. He's the only king in Athenae and is an absolute existence that holds plenty of cards in his hands.]

[No one can hold a candle to the Food God? That's quite an assumption. Let's all keep in mind that the Food God is, after all, also a player. Just one wrong move and he could be wrenched out of the game rankings.]

[The fact that the Food God is amazing can never be denied. However, I'm sure that it's only because he obtained the title of becoming the very first player that created an Absolute God's Secret, right? Didn't the whole world witness it though? Besides, the Food God's Absolute God's Secret was sealed. Right? That was Athenae's way to maintain balance.]

[That's right. You can't call the Food God the best of the best with just one Absolute God's Secret. Besides, he still lost the Absolute God's Secret that he created right away, right?]

[The Food God's Absolute God's Secret has been sealed. If a player with an unsealed Absolute God's Secret appeared in front of him then, I believe the Food God has no choice but to admit defeat.]

[The Food God... Haha... His Absolute God's Secret got taken away as soon as he created it. So pitiful.]

Plenty of people were showing their interest in the Absolute God's Secret that Minhyuk had created. Some even wondered if the Food God would be able to dominate the world once the servers have integrated with this Absolute God's Secret. But in the end, Food God Minhyuk's Absolute God's Secret was sealed away.

[Rankers from all over the world are now gearing up to gain more power and build their own kingdoms. Their first target will definitely be the Food God's Beyond the Heavens Kingdom. Will they be able to hold on to their kingdom?]

Many of them believed that the Food God would collapse once the continents integrated.

Joy Co. Ltd.'s Headquarters.

Tens of thousands of calls poured down on them each and every single day after Akhan revealed to the public that he was one of Athenae's early developers. President Kang Taehoon immediately announced that the only thing that was similar to the Athenae that Akhan helped develop and the Athenae of today were their main frames. As for the rest of the game? Of course, they were completely different.

However, Kang Taehoon's words could not calm the public's seething anger. Rumors about Joy Co. Ltd. using Akhan to create issues and attract players even started to circulate.

President Kang Taehoon looked out of the windows of the conference room. It seemed like he was deep in thought while each of the heads of Joy Co. Ltd.'s departments all tried to suggest a solution from behind him. Some of their suggestions were borderline absurd but Park Minggyu's proposal topped the cake. It was very groundbreaking, "We have to cover up an issue with a newer issue. It has to have a huge impact that the entire world would be covered with articles about it."

"At the level of that issue, only an issue at the scale of Athenae: World War would work, right?"

"We can't just suddenly hold an Athenae: World War."

President Kang Taehoon looked at Team Leader Park Minggyu, his head still deep in his thoughts, *'Cover up an issue with another issue. What is the best way for us to go about with this method?'*

Then, it came to him.

"How about holding a new event with double the EXP acquisition and drop rate when hunting during the continent integration event 'The Stars' Path'?"

"...That's quite an impressive idea but the problem is that the event should have an equal, or even bigger impact than Athenae: World War."

President Kang Taehoon hurriedly sat down with a wide smile on his face, "Everyone, hear me out. The Stars' Path is unimaginably wide. It's around a few continents combined together, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Right."

That was also why Joy Co. Ltd. had to create many NPCs and build many dungeons and hunting grounds inside the Stars' Path.

"Then, why don't we hold a 'Battle of the Thrones' at the same time as the servers' integration?"

"A Battle of the Thrones?"

"Battle of the Thrones?"

Everyone present in the room waited for Kang Taehoon's explanation, their eyes stained with curiosity. What did President Kang Taehoon mean when he said Battle of the Thrones?

"How many kingdoms will be established in Athenae a month from now?"

"A safe estimate would be around three kingdoms."

"And a year later?"

"Around eight, give or take."

"There are countless forces and groups that are consolidating their power and preparing to establish their own kingdoms. Besides, the players are all curious about how kingdom warfare between players of each country would go."

"Don't tell me..."

"That's right, each country will participate in the Battle of the Thrones. Each country can only select one 'king' who will become the central figure of a kingdom established inside the Stars' Path."

"So, what you mean is that each of the countries that will participate in this, will be able to establish a kingdom inside the Stars' Path, and these kingdoms will fight against each other?"

"That's right. If Athenae: World War is a competition where they had to use individual players with special abilities and skills to fight against each other, then the Battle of the Thrones would use millions of people. Just because a few of the country's players are strong does not mean that they would be able to win."

"There's no guarantee that Beyond the Heavens Kingdom will be able to cinch the victory."

"That's only natural. The Battle of the Thrones is a battle between kingdoms. You can't change the tide of war just because of one outstanding individual."

"However, I believe there will still be a problem," Team Leader Park Minggyu interjected calmly, "All of the kingdoms will most definitely form an alliance to attack the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom."

Almost everyone present in the room groaned at Minggyu's wake up call. Unfortunately, the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom might very well become a victim in the 'Battle of the Thrones'. But...

"Then, what if the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom win the Battle of the Thrones?"

"..."

"..."

“...”

“...”

“...”

It was like a punch in the gut for everyone present. What would happen if they won? The Beyond the Heavens Kingdom would definitely grow more extraordinary. As the very first nation and kingdom built by a player in Athenae, Beyond the Heavens Kingdom would probably be in a position where they could hold out and endure against wars like that.

“You might have already guessed this, but the people will definitely turn their attention to Beyond the Heavens Kingdom the moment the continents have finished integration. But, if the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom wins against an alliance of kingdoms, they will be able to show the world that ‘*You can’t even win against us when you’re all allied?*’. So, it’s not necessarily a crisis for them, you know?”

”If several countries form an alliance to attack the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom, then we can give Beyond the Heavens Kingdom some advantage by giving ‘penalties’ to the allied forces. That way, we can adjust everything and achieve a balance to some extent.”

Snap—

President Kang Taehoon snapped his fingers. Just like he expected, Team Leader Park Minggyu came in clutch. That was how they continued their meeting, completing the outline of the Battle of the Thrones. The only thing left was...

“What else should we do?” President Kang Taehoon looked at the people around the table and continued, “Production Team, start preparing a more detailed outline for the Battle of the Thrones. Planning Team, come up with a story that will go along with it. Customer Center Team, prepare an announcement for the upcoming Battle of the Thrones.”

“Yes!”

“Yes!”

“Yes!”

Everyone immediately went outside to fulfill their duties. Before Team Leader Park Minggyu stepped out of the room, he said, “We’ll have to monitor the players that are most likely going to cause an unexpected commotion before the Battle of Thrones, right?”

“You got it right.”

Joy Co. Ltd. began preparing for the biggest event since Athenae opened.

Minhyuk had now grown to hate the Absolute Gods. He was absolutely sick of them. They were the ones that decided to interfere with him because of their inferiority complex back when he was tasked to build a building in honor of King Valex.

However, the interference this time could be said to be worse than what they did back then. After all, they sealed Minhyuk's newly created Absolute God's Secret Skill Lightning, the skill that he created by using his three God SP points, right? That was why Minhyuk was furious.

'Let's turn this crisis into an opportunity.'

Minhyuk thought that perhaps this was a good thing. He knew that the many nations would aim for the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom once the continents have integrated. In fact, there were many forces that were still thinking about how they could tear up and divide the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom for themselves. And the announcement that Minhyuk could not use his Absolute God's Secret was like the final nail in the coffin, especially for those that thought of taking over Beyond the Heavens Kingdom.

However, little did they know, Minhyuk had also received a very shocking quest reward when he killed and punished all of the fourteen elders and Akhan.

'I can get any ability, artifact, artifact material, ingredient or hidden and secret quests where I can get outstanding rewards that I want.'

In fact, Minhyuk was very grateful. Somehow, without meaning to, they had done him a service. It was like helping him to hide the power that he gained from other's prying eyes. Besides he wanted to show them, as if the Absolute Gods were watching him, how wrong they were to stop him.

"Do you think doing that will really stop me?" Minhyuk said, quickly choosing the reward that he wanted, "I want a reward that will unseal my Absolute God's Secret."

Right away, the notifications rang.

Ring—

[Tracking how to unseal the Absolute God's Secret: Lightning.]

[Tracking... 6%... 14%... 22%... 39%... Ring!]

[Tracking has been successful!]

The tracking was successful and it brought a smile to Minhyuk's lips. It was very important for him to know that there was a way to unseal it. Then, the notifications rang again.

Rank

: ???

‘Cairon Continent’s Abyss Village...’

Minhyuk had little to no information about Abyss Village. Because of that, he decided to consult with Haze or Aruvel, the Great Sage and the best selling erotica author. So, he stood up and moved.

Abyss Village had a hidden meaning. The word *Abyss* meant a deep and bottomless pit. But the Abyss that existed in Athenae was different. After all, it was a world that was different from the world that everyone knew.

The name ‘Abyss’ was given to Abyss Village because it was a village located close to the gates that connected to another world. There were even stories about how one would be able to see the ‘World of the Gods’ if they passed through the gates of the Abyss. Some say that they would lay witness to the world of the Great Demons while some say that they would be able to see the world where all the previous generations’ Legendaries were living. There were so many stories about Abyss that the truth about it had never been confirmed.

The cranky old lady Arlene clicked her tongue, “Damn bastards! You want to make another ridiculous trial like before?!”

Arlene cursed as she looked up at the skies. Arlene was the crankiest and most ill-tempered person in the entire Abyss Village.

“But he just would not stand down!”

For once, Arlene thought that she should try and help to keep him from collapsing just like ‘that person’ did in the past. But there was a problem. The ingredient that she needed could only be found in the Abyss.

Arlene watched the sunset for a long time before sighing and trying to walk back to her shabby cabin. But then, she saw a young man walking with his back towards the sunset. For a moment, Arlene was left in a daze, unable to take her eyes off of the man’s gorgeous looks.

“Huh?”

Why was the man walking while gnawing on a piece of chicken leg? That was not all.

Gulp, gulp, gulp, gulp—

“Kyaa~ The scenery is so good!”

The man gulped down the contents of an entire can of coke in one go and smiled pleasantly. Arlene felt quite a familiar feeling bubble up in her chest, the same feelings that she felt in the past.

‘He’s just like you.’

Finally, the man appeared in front of Arlene.

“Hello, grandma!” The young man hurriedly put his chicken and coke down as he bowed and greeted Arlene politely. Arlene looked at the young man’s face for a very

long time, making the man turn embarrassed as he continued to open his mouth,
“My name is Minhyuk.”

Special Players Management Team.

Today, as usual, Lee Minhwa was digging into her cup noodles, her late-night snack, while watching the monitor. She blew on her cup and took a sip of the warm soup.

“Kggghk~ I’m alive again~”

Lee Minhwa looked very happy, as if she had everything in the world. But the events that unfolded on the monitor in front of her caused her mouth to drop wide open. A bright red light flashed as phrases started to appear on the screen.

“Team, Team Leader!!! Team Leader!!!” Lee Minhwa shouted, her voice very haggard and urgent.

Team Leader Park Minggyu hurriedly rushed to check what was happening on her monitor. But the words that appeared on the screen also brought a huge shock to Minggyu, “What...?”

And the words that appeared on the monitor...

[Player Minhyuk has made contact with one of the Absolute Gods.]

[She was the master of the previous Food God.]

[She once bewitched all of the gods with her dishes.]

[She is currently in disguise and living in Abyss Village.]

[She is one of the Absolute Gods living under the name ‘Arlene’.]

[She is the God of Cooking.]

Chapter 555: God of Cooking’s Trial

Team Leader Park and Employee Lee Minhwa were both flustered after seeing Minhyuk meet with the God of Cooking. So far, no other player had made contact with any of the Absolute Gods. Even Supercomputer Athenae had only expected this to happen once all of the servers had integrated.

“Team Leader, what do we do...?”

Team Leader Park stared at the monitor for a long time after hearing Lee Minhwa’s question. The God of Cooking was the master of the previous Food God. In fact, the Food God’s cheat-like cooking skills were the abilities that were born with the God of Cooking’s god-like skills as the framework and base.

“Miss Lee Minhwa.”

“Yes, Team Leader.”

“What can the Food God gain from the God of Cooking?”

Team Leader Park did not ask the question because he did not know. It was because in this situation, the Special Players Management Team had the job to report and check all of the rewards that any of the special players might get.

“The God of Cooking’s amazing tools, artifacts, even her very own cooking ingredients. Or...” Lee Minhwa’s lips thinned into a straight line before continuing, “...a buffed dish with more amazing effects.”

Minhyuk actually did not have any information about the woman named Arlene. The only reason why he came to her was because he could obtain the rewards that he got from killing Akhan and the fourteen elders from her and unseal his Absolute God’s Secret.

However, Arlene only continued to stare at Minhyuk’s figure, even after he bowed politely in greeting.

‘What’s wrong...? Why does she keep on staring at me like this?’

This was the woman with the hint to unlock Minhyuk’s Absolute God’s Secret! Minhyuk believed that she was an extraordinary woman and would have already probably noticed who he was right away even without him introducing himself. As he watched the old lady’s mouth slowly open, Minhyuk could not help but gulp dryly.

“So handsome...”

“...???”

“You’re definitely my type.”

[You have received Arlene’s favor.]

[You have received Arlene’s favor.]

“...???”

Minhyuk was very flustered by this very unexpected situation. The woman was a complete face-con! He was very surprised to find that her favor towards him had increased when all he did so far was to breathe in her presence. When he saw her squint, he hurriedly brought up the main reason why he came here, “Th, thank you. I heard that Grandma Arlene is looking for ingredients so I came here to find out if I can help.”

Arlene looked at Minhyuk in doubt. She wondered if he already knew the ingredients that she needed before coming to her. Arlene was not someone that anyone could just find because she could not be found through the quests that foreigners received. That was why Arlene was convinced that the young man in front of her found her through some other means. Of course, Arlene knew who Food God Minhyuk was. After all, she used to watch him before. Plenty of thoughts flashed in Arlene’s head when she saw another Food God coming to find her.

‘Perhaps this is fate?’

Food that she made with her ingredients and someone to eat that food. Arlene could not help but smile bitterly.

'Ah, fate, what a very mysterious and wonderful thing.'

"It would be hard for you to get the ingredients that I want. Ah, before everything, you look like you're a chef?"

"How did you know?"

If one looked at Minhyuk's appearance, they would not think that he was a chef. After all, the stylish and cool armor, as well as the sword on his waist, would definitely steer them away from that thought.

"You have thick and rough calluses on the tip of your index finger. It's something that you'll only get if you always hold a kitchen knife."

"Ah..." Minhyuk looked down at his hands. Athenae was a virtual reality game and they implemented things like this very well. True to Arlene's words, the pad of Minhyuk's index finger was covered in thick and rough calluses. With this fact alone, Minhyuk could already tell that the NPC in front of him was one of the 'cooking-related' NPCs. Even her desire to find ingredients was a testament to that fact.

"I can't tell you the reason why right now but I lost my power to make buffed dishes for a while."

God of Cooking Arlene was one of the Absolute Gods, but even with her identity, there were things that she could not do. Above the Absolute Gods stood Athenae, the God of Origin. When the Absolute Gods suddenly decided to go down to earth whenever they wanted, Athenae imposed sanctions on them and sealed their powers. These sanctions were imposed so that the Absolute Gods would not be able to reveal their power on earth. That was why even though Arlene was the God of Cooking, she could not use her skills and make buffed dishes.

Right now, Arlene was nothing more than an old lady with excellent cooking skills. That was also why Arlene was going to find a talented chef and ask him to make her a buffed dish. The effect of the buffed dish made from the ingredients that she was trying to get her hands on would allow her to awaken her powers for a moment. Besides, this process was also a test, one to determine if the man in front of Arlene could take her quest.

"I want you to go to the Abyss Field, find these ingredients, and cook a dish for me."

Ring!

“...”

Minhyuk was very shocked when he saw the rewards.

‘My skill proficiency will increase?’

Minhyuk’s cooking skill proficiency could not increase anymore since it had already reached its limits. Actually, since it had already reached its limit, Minhyuk’s cooking skill was already showing tremendous power.

However, the rewards marked in quests were usually what the player could get. This meant that even if the level of Minhyuk’s skills were at the limit, he could still increase his proficiency.

*‘Don’t tell me, this person...?’*Minhyuk thought. There was only one person that could give this much reward, especially when it was related to cooking.

“Are you...”

“Even when I look at you again and again, you’re still handsome... Haaaa...” Arlene said strangely as she looked at Minhyuk.

“...”

Minhyuk thought that perhaps that was not it.

‘After all, there’s no way that a god would be this?perverted right?’

Instead of asking about her identity, he asked her another question, “Can you tell me why you’re looking for ingredients that have not been revealed yet?”

“There’s this old friend that I really want to lend a helping hand to.”

Minhyuk nodded. Since Arlene was already an old lady, it was only natural that she would want to help that friend of hers.

“What kind of place is the Abyss Field?”

“Well, I can’t tell you that. But it’s a very special field that I was managing before. But I’m sure you’ll find out the rest once you arrive there,” Arlene was not a kind and generous person. Those were the only words that she left for Minhyuk.

Before Minhyuk left, he asked, “If I pick ingredients other than what you asked me to take from the Abyss Field, can I eat or take them away?”

“If you can, then sure.”

“Oh. Then can I take it as you not minding me eating as much as I want?”

“Right,” Arlene answered confidently. With that, Minhyuk, whose eyes turned into crescents, turned around with a dark smile on his lips. Arlene just grinned, “That is if you can though?”

Arlene’s quests were never easy. Besides, even if Minhyuk inherited the power of the Food God, Arlene did not have any reason to help him. In the first place, Arlene was a cranky old woman. So, why would she help him?

“Well, I don’t think you will even be able to get one~?”

In fact, the only one capable of getting ingredients from that field was Arlene herself. This was because her DEX had exceeded 6,000! More than 6,000 DEX! If others heard about this, they would say ‘As expected of an Absolute God!’.

Alas, unbeknownst to her, Minhyuk’s DEX had already exceeded 5,000 and it could exert power beyond 11,000, thanks to Ellie’s Kitchen Knife’s special effect.

Land of the Gods.

The Land of the Gods was the world where all of the gods lived. Some used to call this place heaven because of the celestials living there. And these celestials were currently gossiping.

“Did you hear? The guy that came up from earth killed the Winged Hydra.”

“I heard that too, but did you know? I heard that the guy also hunted the Four-Headed Gryphon.”

“Why in the world is he hunting those beings that even the gods from heaven can’t hunt?”

“From what I’ve heard, it was because he received a trial from the Absolute Gods.”

“Hoo~ Did you say the Absolute Gods?”

“That’s right. But do you know what’s more surprising?”

“What? What?”

The celestials that were talking suddenly turned to one person alone.

“The Absolute Gods did not expect the guy to do a good job like this so they’re preparing a more difficult trial.”

“Hoo~ Isn’t this similar to saying that the Absolute Gods are furious?”

“Hey, what do you mean furious? The Absolute Gods are just going back on their words, right? Since the guy is able to overcome the trials that the gods have made, they are just trying to prevent him from becoming stronger. That’s why they’re making more difficult trials. What kind of gods are like this?”

“Shhh! You’re going to lose your head if they hear you. Actually, I heard that the guy already went through dozens of crises and close calls with deaths but he overcame everything.”

“He’s a really great guy.”

“What’s his name again? Ah, I definitely heard his name but I just can’t remember his name. I’ll come back and tell you when I hear his name again.”

One of the celestials rushed to find out about the guy’s name.

Arlene came up to the Land of the Gods for a moment and frowned at the scene that was presented to her. Three thousand of the prisoners locked up in the Heavenly Prison were all collapsed on the ground. Among the corpses that littered the ground sat a man that was bleeding all over and sat feebly. In fact, it would not be strange if that old man died on the spot right now.

But he was a strange man. Despite bleeding profusely, his eyes were still filled with boundless vitality and sharpness. From what she heard, he had overcome countless crises.

Then, she said, “The next trial that you have to face... you have to win against one of the gods. The Absolute Gods changed the scheduled trial on a whim.”

The man just silently listened to Arlene’s words.

“That’s why I will file a complaint. Since they changed the rules of the trial on their whims, I will demand that I be allowed to cook a dish for you.”

“Urk!”

Blood spurted out of the man’s lips the moment he let out an unwanted cough. He just stood up with a nonchalant look on his face while saying, “I have to hurry. He’s waiting for me.”

“Are you damn crazy?! You can’t move right now!!!”

It would not be strange if the man died right there and then, but he kept on standing up and trying to fight. Arlene looked at the man in frustration, her lips stained with a bitter smile. Because this man was such a person she felt like she was seeing her former disciple, the Food God, in him. That was why she decided to reach her hand out and help him. And for the first time, Arlene asked the man a question, “What kind of person is he for you to be this desperate to meet him again?”

A small smile graced the corners of the man’s lips when he heard her words, “A man that is sometimes like a child, sometimes like a very dignified adult,” the man’s eyes sparkled as he recalled his memories, “He’s someone that became another son to me, someone who lost his own son. He filled my hellish life with brightness, happiness, and blessings.”

Arlene felt her heart clench tightly at the smile on the man’s face.

“He’s also someone that can make the impossible possible. He cares a lot for the people around him, that’s why there are a lot of people that pledged their loyalty to him.”

The man in front of Arlene kept on moving forward for such a person. And Arlene? She could only smile silently at fate. The person that this man, this retainer, in front of her was trying to go back to, had somehow found her to find ingredients for her.

‘Ah, fate is truly wonderful.’

The celestial that rushed away to find out about the name of the guy that was suffering from the trials that the Absolute Gods were giving came back to the gossiping celestials, “Guys! I found out his name!”

“What is it? What’s his name?!”

All of them had great expectations. After all, this man was charging forward in the Land of the Gods and putting all of the Absolute Gods into an embarrassing situation! He was only human but he was challenging the path to becoming a Demigod.

“From what I heard, he’s reached the realm of legends in the spear in the human’s world! But what’s shocking is the fact that he’s already a gray-haired old man!”

“Is, is that true?!”

“Hoo~ He’s an old man?!”

Everyone was in shock. The existence that threatened even the gods was an old veteran?!

“His name is...” Everyone turned silent as they looked at the celestial in curiosity and bated breath.

“...Ben.”

Chapter 556: God of Cooking’s Trial

A long time ago, the humans referred to the Abyss Field as the Gods’ Land, after a chef accidentally discovered this rich and abundant place. From what the chef saw, the Abyss Field cultivated ingredients bearing special effects. These effects had never been seen on earth, and could easily surpass any of the famed medicines on earth. Rumors about the Gods’ Land started to circulate which fueled everyone’s greed.

The people from all over the world started to flock to the Abyss Field. However, it did not take too long for them to stop challenging the Gods’ Land.

However! If there was really someone that could harvest these ingredients, then the words of Jackson, an adventurer that explored the Gods' Land, "This is as good as discovering a mine with a rich vein of ore." would be very apt for them.

And right now, Minhyuk has entered this very same Abyss Field.

[You have entered the Abyss Field.]

[You can only get out of the Abyss Field if you harvest three ingredients.]

[Otherwise, only your death will allow you to leave the premises of the Abyss Field.]

"..."

Minhyuk frowned at the notifications that rang in his ears. He had just entered the field but an ominous notification was already ringing in his ears? Actually, it was not that surprising since the way here was also fraught with many dangers despite Arlene pointing out the way to him. However, it was quite a given that the path would be difficult, since the only thing that Arlene pointed out to him was that he would be able to get to the Abyss Field if he entered through the small waterfall near the cabin where she lived. Furthermore, he could only get out of this place only after harvesting three ingredients.

"Let's see," Minhyuk mumbled, looking around the field. The Abyss Field was quite an unusual place. It was dark, gloomy, and dreary, with no sunlight at all. However, the ingredients were growing abundantly in this place.

Then, Minhyuk suddenly exclaimed, "What, what the hell..." his body trembling fiercely, "There's, there's mango here?!"

It was not just mangoes. There were also stone fruits and other fruits that did not appear in his country, or even in the Asgan Continent. Actually, Minhyuk was really, *really* fond of mangoes. A scoop of ripe mangoes with their golden yellow-y goodness would definitely bring a smile to one's face as its fresh and sweet flavor spreads in one's mouth. And the fruits that Minhyuk did not and could not see in Asgan Continent? They all looked scrumptious.

But even though he wanted to gorge himself out on these fruits, Minhyuk shook his head, *'I need to find the ingredients for Arlene first.'* He must never forget his duty. First things first, he had to find and harvest the ingredients for the dish that would release Arlene's power for a moment.

Each dish would exhibit different special abilities depending on the ingredients used on them. The first thing that Minhyuk did was to check the information of the sweet potato that was, strangely enough, hanging and growing from a tree.

?You can choose between the two: giving a buff effect or giving a permanent effect.

?If buff effect is chosen:

?STR will increase by +9%.

?Physical, Magical Attack, and Defense will increase by +16%.

?If permanent effect is chosen:

?STR will increase by +4%

?Physical, Magical Attack, and Defense will increase by +0.3%.

“...???”

For a moment, Minhyuk wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him. According to the description, this sweet potato has an ‘Abyss Ingredient Grade’ of C. It was a grading system that seemed to be different from the normal grading system, so there might be discrepancies with what Minhyuk was aware of. However, the fact that the sweet potato was only at C-grade with this much effect was already quite shocking.

“...Will, will it give you buff effects even if you don’t cook them?”

.

On top of that, it gave whoever harvested the sweet potato the choice of having a buff effect or a permanent effect. It was completely up to the person that harvested it.

“Crazy...”

Minhyuk continued to move forward, checking the ingredients’ information along the way.

?You can choose between the two: giving a buff effect or giving a permanent effect.

?If buff effect is chosen:

?Chosen skill’s level will increase by +1.

?If permanent effect is chosen:

?Chosen skill’s proficiency will increase dramatically.

“...???”

Even the other ingredients...

“...???”

“...???”

“...???”

Every time Minhyuk looked at an ingredient’s description, question marks would pop out in his head. Even the power that they had received from the ‘Ingredient Heaven’ from the Farmer

Kingdom, the Rocard Kingdom, could not rival the power that these ingredients had. These were truly overpowered ingredients. With this, Minhyuk's suspicions had been confirmed.

'Arlene...'

Arlene, who was hiding herself beneath the mask of a 'perverted' grandma, was most definitely the 'God of Cooking'. Minhyuk and Arlene had only met in the past through the notifications of a 'bet'. Also, she was the master of the previous Food God.

'I can get a lot of things from this place.'

Of course, that was only if he could get the ingredients safely. As Minhyuk continued to roam around the place, he saw an unusually large statue of a cow in the middle of the field. Minhyuk immediately checked its description.

????

????

"God's Delicacy...?!!!"

Minhyuk recently ate one of the God's Five Delicacies, the 'Deep Sea Snow Crab', after he successfully hunted Asura. The taste of that snow crab was beyond anything that he could ever dream of. It even increased Minhyuk's Physical Attack and Defense, as well as his Magical Attack and Defense permanently by 10%. On top of that, there was an additional 10% buff effect that could overlap with other buffs for a week.

Right now, a similar delicacy with powers similar to that was now standing just a few meters away from him.

'And each part has a special ability?!'

It could be interpreted differently. In a sense, each part could have a different special ability. Simply put, this cow with permanent and buff effects could be divided and eaten separately, which meant that several people could obtain either permanent or buff effects depending on the part that they ate.

'I'll definitely get that one.'

Although he did not know how he would get it, Minhyuk was sure that he would be able to get a hint once he got the ingredients.

Minhyuk had already chosen some of the ingredients that he needed earlier. One was the 'wild ginseng'. The wild ginseng that grew here had received the Abyss' energy and was said to have the ability to release sealed powers. The others were jujube and garlic. For the jujube, it could rejuvenate and help someone gain a stronger vitality and power than before. As for the garlic, it could raise one's skill level.

'These ingredients are too damn OP. With these, there's nothing that I can't do.'

Of course, these ingredients were all A-grade ingredients and would definitely be harder to get than other ordinary ingredients. But nothing would be done if he did not try. So, Minhyuk grabbed a hoe to dig up the wild ginseng. Just one wrong move in digging the wild ginseng and he would damage its roots, so he had to be careful. The moment he hit the ground...

[You are now challenging the wild ginseng.]

[You cannot dig or harvest any of the Abyss' crops easily.]

"...?"

However, unlike the notifications, Minhyuk's hoe gently and easily dug the ground. He was even flustered by the fact that it was easier than what he thought.

'Come to think of it, with Ellie's Kitchen Knife's special effect, my DEX has been doubled. Which means that I have around 11,000 in my DEX, right?'

Minhyuk was confident that even the God of Cooking has a lower DEX than him. In the first place, no one would be able to keep up with Minhyuk's DEX, especially with his overly high DEX acquisition rate and various special effects.

But was there something in the world that one could get so easily? Of course not. Just when Minhyuk was about to slam his hoe on the ground again...

Thump— thump—

...the sound of hooves scratching the ground rang in his ears.

"..."

Minhyuk felt a very unusual energy from behind him, his head turning to look at the direction of its source. That was when he saw a huge bull, around three meters in height. Its red, angry eyes stared at him as it charged forward. Shockingly enough, the bull's hooves were not touching the ground. Its feet were gliding ten centimeters above the ground as it ran towards him. As for its speed? Even Minhyuk was having a hard time following its figure with his eyes.

"Like the... Keheook!"

Baaaaaaaaaaaaaang—

The bull had already slammed into Minhyuk even before he could use Like the Wind to escape.

[The Slaughterer's Armor's durability has dropped by 30%!]

[Artifacts with infinite durability will not be destroyed. The Slaughterer's Armor has already started to repair itself.]

[Your HP has dropped by 60%.]

[You have received a huge impact. You cannot move your body at will!]

Swoooooooooosh—

The impact of the collision made Minhyuk fly tens of meters away. In fact, he only stopped when his body got embedded in a rock.

“This is crazy...!” Minhyuk shouted in shock, his body unresponsive to his will. The fact that the durability of his Slaughterer’s Armor, a god-rank artifact, had decreased by 30% and his HP by 60% was very shocking.

‘This is almost the same as Asura’s damage, huh?!’

No, the damage was actually higher than the damage that Asura could deal.

“Urk!” Minhyuk vomited a mouthful of blood as he looked at the crazy bull, its name immediately appearing above its head.

[Sealed Bull Demon King.]

[Level ???]

“...!”

The Bull Demon King was a close friend of Sun Wukong, the Great Sage, Heaven’s Equal, and was also known as the King of Great Power. According to his description in the *Journey to the West*, the Bull Demon King was the most powerful monster to have ever existed on earth. Of course, that was only based on the famous novel and story. He might be different here in the Athenae worldview.

However, something bothered Minhyuk.

‘Wait, the Bull Demon King is in the Athenae worldview?’

In fact, a hunch was already starting to form in his head.

‘There’s another worldview that we do not know of yet?’

Athenae was a world with never-ending possibilities. That was why Minhyuk believed that this theory was possible.

Minhyuk immediately turned vigilant. He was now sure of one thing. That ox head rice soup guy over there was very strong. Fortunately, he was sealed. Minhyuk stood up after finally regaining control of his body. He was very surprised to discover that the bull did not attack him again.

There was something that he wanted to check so Minhyuk filled his HP and swapped his armor with the Monarch’s Armor before carefully approaching the wild ginseng with his hoe. Even after he approached the wild ginseng, the bull did not show any adverse reactions. But the moment he raised his hoe to dig, the bastard came charging at him.

“Like the Wind!!!”

Minhyuk hurriedly used Like the Wind, his body barely avoiding the bull’s charge.

‘Right. Let’s try digging the ground once and avoiding the bull with Like the Wind...!’

Minhyuk thought that he could make do with this trick, but quickly gave up on the idea when he saw the bull turn around and charge at him again. The more the Bull Demon King charged, the bigger his body became. From the four meters, five, six, eight, ten, fifteen, twenty meters until it grew large enough to cover almost half of the Abyss Field.

“How can I avoid this crazy bastard...”

Baaaaaaaaaaaaang—

“Keuaaaaaaaaaack!” Minhyuk screamed, his body flying away once again. This time, the HP that got shaved off of him was higher than before. The damage that the Bull Demon King dealt was tremendous. In the end, Minhyuk’s HP fell to zero and he was only able to stand up after ‘He who Overcomes’ got triggered.

‘How am I even supposed to kill that guy?’

Minhyuk gasped as his body collapsed on the ground. He hurriedly ate to refill his HP again. He could tell that the Bull Demon King’s HP was also very, very high. Which meant that killing him would be very hard. Aside from that, Minhyuk also learned that digging and harvesting the ingredients were very easy after testing it with his hoe earlier. The only problem was the damned sealed Bull Demon King. As long as the cow was there, Minhyuk would not be able to harvest any ingredients. In other words, Minhyuk was presented with a situation where everything was laid out in front of him but he could not eat them.

“Why can’t I eat them when they’re all in front of me...?!!!”

Then, it suddenly came to Minhyuk just when he recalled Kim Cheonji’s lines from *A Lucky Day*, “Do I really have to hunt him though?”

The Bull Demon King was a monster that Minhyuk could not hunt at this point in time. But... did he really have to?

Soon, Minhyuk’s lips were stretched into a wide and evil grin, a great idea popping in his head.

Arlene was a complete oddball. She was showing mercy by helping Ben, yet she was also showing cruelty by forcing Minhyuk to gather ingredients for her in that place. She could, in fact, already imagine Minhyuk being brutally trampled on and beaten by the ‘Sealed Bull Demon King’. The reason why the humans that visited the Gods’ Land all gave up eventually was because of the existence of the sealed Bull Demon King. After all, no one was capable of dealing with the sealed Bull Demon King.

‘Let’s check to see how hard he’s working, huh? Or... maybe he’s already dead? Fufufufu!’

Arlene also lost a bet against Minhyuk in the past and was forced to give the boy her secret, the ‘Overlapping Delight’. That was why she was over the moon with whatever bad thing that happened to Minhyuk. Although she was pretending to be a magnanimous person, Arlene was a very petty person deep inside. The incident from before made Minhyuk look hateful in her eyes. However, that feeling had abated for a bit, after seeing how handsome the boy was.

Arlene continued on her merry way only to be appalled by the scene presented to her when she arrived at her destination, “What, what the hell?!”

Abyss Field was the field that Arlene took care of and nurtured for thousands of years. She knew it like the back of her hand. But now? All of the crops were gone. And in the middle of the field sat Minhyuk, who was munching happily on a mango the size of his head.

“Aaaaaaaaahm! *Chomp!* It’s, it’s sweet...!”

A bright smile bloomed on Minhyuk's face.

As for the Bull Demon King? He was sitting in front of Minhyuk, his long tail swishing left and right as he happily cried out, 'Mooooo!'.

At that moment, one thought flashed in Arlene's head, '*My, my farm is over...!*'?Of course, she would be able to get it back up and running again, but it would definitely take a lot of her time. Just when Arlene felt her heart ache and tears well up in her eyes, she heard Minhyuk say, "Hey, ox head. Should I give you a name?"

"Moo?"

Arlene watched the interaction between the two, her heart filled with confusion and shock. The Bull Demon King tilted his head, waiting for the name that Minhyuk would give him. In fact, even Arlene was waiting with a strange sense of anticipation in her body. Even though he was sealed, he was still the Bull Demon King.

'He will definitely get a good name, right?'

That's what she thought.

Then, Minhyuk said, "Your name shall be Hanwoo. Han. Woo."

"Mooooooooooo!!!" The Bull Demon King cried happily after getting his new name, 'Hanwoo'.

Meanwhile, Minhyuk wiped the drool dripping down his chin as he thought, '*Beef should definitely be Hanwoo, right?!! Yeah, yeah. That's what I'm saying. Keuhahahahahaha!*'?That was right. Minhyuk gave the sealed Bull Demon King the name 'Hanwoo' because he wanted to eat him.

On the other side of the field, Arlene tilted her head in confusion, '*What's Hanwoo?*'.?And along with that thought, another question popped in her head...

'What the hell happened here?'

Chapter 557: God of Cooking's Trial

Minhyuk came to a conclusion. He would never be able to hunt the sealed Bull Demon King. However, he also realized that he did not need to hunt the Bull Demon King. His only goal in coming to the Abyss Field was to gather ingredients and cook a dish to unseal Arlene's powers. Of course, it would be great if in the process, he was able to get other ingredients. Because of that, Minhyuk changed his mindset and decided to coax the Bull Demon King to his side.

The method that Minhyuk chose to use was simple.

'Let's get him to eat.'

It might be simple but it was the best method. Minhyuk slowly took out some hay from his inventory. One might wonder why Minhyuk had some hay in his inventory, but it was not that surprising since Minhyuk always carried anything that was edible with him.

“Cow head? *Coochiecoo*~ here’s some of your favorite hay~” Minhyuk shook the hay in his hands confidently, knowing that the sealed Bull Demon King would not attack him unless he did something to the crops in this place.

The Bull Demon King looked at the hay, a corner of his lips curling up into a smile.

“Mooooo~”

Yes. He was smiling. To be exact, he was mocking Minhyuk. But that was not all...

Pooooooooooooot—

...he even farted loudly and strongly to the point that his tail swished upwards from the force.

‘That ox head rice soup bastard...!’

Minhyuk hated anyone, even cows, that played around with food. However, he could not get angry since his goal was to appease and coax the cow head in front of him.

‘He’s not your ordinary cow, he’s the Bull Demon King.’

At that point, Minhyuk realized why the Bull Demon King reacted like that to hay. There was no way someone like that would just eat hay. Thankfully, Minhyuk had a way to check what the Bull Demon King wanted to eat the most. It was none other than his ‘Create a Recipe’ skill, a skill that could show what the other wanted to eat the most.

[Creating a recipe that the other party desires.]

[You can now check the recipe for Various Mixed Vegetables(?).]

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

????

“Hmm...”

Minhyuk groaned lightly. For the first time since his acquisition of the skill, the Create a Recipe skill presented him with plenty of ‘???’. It was basically telling him that the Bull Demon King did not really know what he wanted to eat, but he knew that he wanted to eat a dish with many vegetables.

‘A dish filled with vegetables...’

Minhyuk pondered deeply about a dish that matched the requirement, a dish that had a lot of vegetables in it. Minhyuk thought deeply and only came up with two dishes.

‘Bibimbap and japchae?’

Finally, he decided on what dishes to cook.

Special Players Management Team.

Team Leader Park Minggyu groaned as he watched the scene on the monitor, “Why does this happen wherever Player Minhyuk goes...?” His words were a bit slurred but what Minggyu meant to ask was why did new and special things always happen wherever Minhyuk went? “Employee Lee Minhwa. Do you know the story about the Sealed Bull Demon King?”

“Yes, of course. The Bull Demon King is one of the Four Great Heavenly Kings from the new world that is yet to be opened. Even though his power is currently sealed, the power that he can still wield now is powerful enough to decimate an entire territory. Once the seal has been lifted, the power that the Bull Demon King can exert will be beyond anyone’s imagination.”

“That’s right. And what’s the most important takeaway here?”

Lee Minhwa looked at the monitor and said, a slight tremor in her voice, “An easter egg will be triggered when someone achieves a high level of favor with the Sealed Bull Demon King.”

Park Minggyu nodded as he watched Minhyuk start cooking through the screen of the monitor.

Minhyuk started making the bibimbap and japchae.

The good thing about bibimbap was that one could use any kind of vegetables in it and it would still match well. Spinach, Chinese bellflower, bean sprouts, cucumbers, shiitake mushrooms, zucchini, sprout vegetables, any kind of vegetable would go well with it. Also, the ingredients used for bibimbap could also be used for japchae. Minhyuk blanched the spinach and stir-fried the shiitake mushrooms, zucchini and julienned carrots one after the other in a frying pan.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

Smoke fluttered from the pan as the sizzle of the oil rang in the air. Since the vegetables were going to be used for both bibimbap and japchae, it was better for Minhyuk to stir-fry them for some time. After the vegetables had been tossed in the pan for a bit, Minhyuk moved to add a spatula, no... based on the Bull Demon King’s size, fifty spatulas of hot rice in a bowl.

‘Since I will dig the ingredients while the Bull Demon King is eating, then I should prepare a lot of food for him.’

The warm white rice was made from high-quality rice that Minhyuk was sure would taste sweet the moment it entered one’s mouth. Then, Minhyuk placed the stir-fried vegetables on top of the hot rice. For bibimbap, the color of the ingredients was also a very important factor. Using vegetables with the same colors would not look pretty when plated. Minhyuk gently placed the bean sprouts, the julienned carrots, the stir-fried zucchini and the shiitake mushrooms around the bowl. Then, he placed the sprout vegetables on top of everything before proceeding to fry some eggs.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

The eggs that Minhyuk fried were the ‘Gryphon’s Eggs’, an ingredient that he acquired before. Its description said: ‘eggs with no known use’, but since the Bull Demon King was also a ‘monster’, Minhyuk thought that he might enjoy the Gryphon’s Egg. The huge egg was fried perfectly, with its golden yolk sitting in the center.

After preparing the bibimbap, Minhyuk immediately prepared the japchae. Since the basic ingredients were similar, the preparations were also similar. Minhyuk stir-fried and blanched the same ingredients that he used in the bibimbap. Minhyuk hesitated when he was about to stir-fry the beef.

‘Feeding beef to a cow...’

Right then and there, Minhyuk decided to skip the beef and just cook japchae without it. Minhyuk quickly wore clean rubber gloves and began to mix the various vegetables and the perfectly-cooked glass noodles. Whenever he found the taste to be bland, he would sprinkle a bit of soy sauce in it before mixing it again. Once it was done, he sprinkled some sesame seeds and plated it prettily. When he finished preparing all of the dishes, Minhyuk called out to the Bull Demon King, “Cow head.”

“Moooo?”

“How about this?”

The Bull Demon King looked a bit interested but he still snorted and showed Minhyuk his damn rotten smile, “Mooooooo.”

“...”

Minhyuk’s expression turned ugly after seeing the Bull Demon King’s smug grin.

‘This is not working either?’

No, things could not continue on like this. If the situation did not change, then Minhyuk would probably really have to die here. That was when Minhyuk realized that he had forgotten something, *‘I forgot to add some to the japchae...’*

So, Minhyuk made a show of placing the bibimbap and japchae in front of the Bull Demon King as he popped open the bottle of his addictive sauce. A savory and mouth-watering aroma drifted in the air from the bottle in Minhyuk’s hands.

Sniff, sniff—

The Bull Demon King’s nose twitched at the scent. The addictive sauce in Minhyuk’s hands was none other than sesame oil. It was a bottle that Rocard Kingdom’s Queen Iris had gifted Minhyuk. In fact, it was so amazing and hard to come by that they could only give Minhyuk one bottle of this. Minhyuk had tasted this sesame oil with his soy sauce egg rice and found the taste to be so delicious that he almost drank every last bit of it.

“Mooooo...?” The Bull Demon King cried out in doubt and confusion. The mysterious yet savory scent floating in the air stimulated his appetite. There were cases where a person would smell the savory scent of sesame oil in the air and unknowingly taste the flavor in their mouth. That was what the Bull Demon King was experiencing right

now. Minhyuk also poured the golden sesame oil over the bibimbap, making the scent in the air stronger and tickling the nose and the appetite of the Bull Demon King.

“Moouoooo?”

“That’s right. That’s right. Come closer.”

The Bull Demon King, with his tail swishing from left to right, approached the bibimbap and saw the beautifully arranged vegetables with their bright and wonderful colors on top of the rice.

“Moouooooo!”

There was also the scent of the savory sesame oil and the spicy gochujang tickling the tip of the Bull Demon King’s nose.

“Ah. Wait a moment, I’ll mix it for you,” Minhyuk said, mixing the huge bowl of bibimbap for the Bull Demon King. When Minhyuk poked the Gryphon’s Egg, the golden yolk flowed gently down the rice and mixed together with the rest of the dish. With this, the scent of the sesame oil spread even further.

Drip, drip—

“Whoa, whoa. You’ll get in trouble if you drool over your own food,” Minhyuk said when he saw the Bull Demon King drool, the dish in his hands turning even more appetizing the more he mixed it.

Shwa— shwa, shwa—

The sound of the dish getting mixed together was divine, its color turning more beautiful as it caught on a red hue. When everything was finally mixed together, the Bull Demon King immediately buried his head and took a bite of the bibimbap.

“Moouoooooooooooo!” The Bull Demon King raised his head and cried loudly.

Minhyuk could tell that this cry was a cry of joy. Seeing that it was finally his time, Minhyuk immediately ran with his hoe.

Thump— thump—

[You have acquired the Abyss’ Wild Ginseng.]

Minhyuk was in a hurry, he had to quickly gather the ingredients that he needed before the Bull Demon King finished eating. He had to move even faster after seeing the Bull Demon King eat huge amounts of food with every bite. As for the Bull Demon King...

“Moouoooooooooooo!”

...he could feel the crunch of the vegetables with every bite. The Bull Demon King was not like any ordinary cow, he was more of an omnivore. Amazed by the savory flavor of the sesame oil, the crunchy texture of the vegetables, and the spicy taste

lingering in his mouth, quickly finishing bibimbap. The Bull Demon King then turned to look at the japchae filled with colorful vegetables right next to him.

Chomp, chomp—

The Bull Demon King buried his head into the bowl of japchae and was once again impressed by the savory flavor and chewy texture of the noodles. The Bull Demon King hurriedly finished everything. Then, he jerked his head back to look at Minhyuk. The Bull Demon King was only tasked to stop anyone from harvesting the ingredients in the Abyss Field. Thankfully, Minhyuk was already almost finished with harvesting the final ingredient.

“*Phew...*” Breathing a sigh of relief, Minhyuk turned vigilant when he saw the Bull Demon King approach him.

‘It’s alright. I already got everything that I need.’

There was a chance that the Bull Demon King would still charge at him and attack. If that happened, then he would surely die. But contrary to his expectations...

“Moouoooo?” The Bull Demon King cried gently, his tail swishing gently to express his friendliness towards Minhyuk. Then, the notifications rang in Minhyuk’s ears.

[The Sealed Bull Demon King can be with you.]

[Even though you can be with the Sealed Bull Demon King, you still do not have the right to summon him.]

[You can now receive help from the Sealed Bull Demon King.]

“Moouoooo?”

Minhyuk gently rubbed the head of the Bull Demon King. This was the start of the relationship between Minhyuk and the Bull Demon King, or ‘Hanwoo’, who would rescue him from countless dangers in Athenae in the future.

With this, Minhyuk was no longer restricted by Hanwoo the Bull Demon King and was able to harvest all of the ingredients that he could get his hands on in the Abyss Field, with his high DEX.

Minhyuk waved to Arlene, who was still reeling from the shock of seeing the scene in front of her. The teary Arlene had no choice but to approach Minhyuk.

“You’re here? Haha. I was able to get all of these. But don’t worry, I still have a conscience!”

This was the Abyss Field that Arlene cared for and cherished like her own child for a thousand years! Hearing Minhyuk’s words, Arlene nodded, *‘That’s right. Since you have a conscience...! I’m sure you left a lot for me!!!’*

But then, Minhyuk handed over one ingredient to her, a very, very small mango.

“I had a hard time controlling myself just to save this for you. I always thought about eating this, you know?”

“...”

Arlene trembled fiercely as she looked at the mango in her hand, dumbfounded. She, the God of Cooking, felt tears start to well up in her eyes again.

Chapter 558: God of Cooking's Trial

The entire world cheered when they saw Joy Co. Ltd.'s announcement.

[Joy Co. Ltd.'s Announcement.]

On the same day as the server integration, we will be holding a 'Battle of the Thrones'.?

The Battle of Thrones is open for all countries with an Athenae Server. Only one person can be chosen as king per server. Each king is given the chance to choose one 'agent' that will act on their behalf. Each country can only send out 1,000 NPCs and 50,000 players to participate in the battle. In the case of death during the Battle of the Thrones, all NPCs will be revived in their respective continents. The rules and regulations that the players should be familiar with will be explained below. Please click on the number for a more detailed description.

- Each server can only choose one king to participate in the Battle of the Thrones.
- The chosen king will be able to exert a stronger power than usual.
- The simplest method to bring down a kingdom is to destroy the king's statue located deep inside the kingdom's castle.
- For kingdoms that form an alliance and cooperate to attack another kingdom, the kingdom they're attacking will receive special privileges.
- A contribution system will be activated during the entirety of the event. Kingdoms with the highest contribution will receive special privileges.
- Once the kings have been selected, each kingdom must create and submit their own castle's blueprint. (Athenae will automatically assign and build a castle for the kingdoms that failed to submit their blueprints.)
- Kingdoms that will participate in the Battle of the Thrones will receive rewards based on their final rankings. The king of the kingdom that will rank first will receive a special reward.

The notice was great enough to invoke the cheers and applause of many. Although it was only an event inside the game, each of the participating country's governments had started to make their moves.

[China's movements are quite unusual, or so I've heard? There are rumors that they are trying to equip their own Battle of the Thrones' participants with artifacts.]

[France's movements seem to be quite extraordinary too. I don't understand why the governments are intervening just for an event in a game.]

[Me, I can understand it. Athenae is already considered to be another world. It is a game that is loved by many people all over the world. The world is teeming with countries that can't wait to snap their jaws at each other and devour the weaker ones. A lot of countries want to take this opportunity to show the world what kind of country they are, an underdeveloped country or a developed country. They are trying to show the world that they have the upperhand in this match and will definitely be unmatched.]

[Instead of doing it in reality, where wars and indiscriminate killings are frowned upon, they're trying to determine who has the upperhand and who is stronger inside this virtual world?]

[Yep, yep. That's about right, I think? It's great enough that each of the countries' governments are paying attention to the matter. How much criticism do you think a developed country would receive if they ranked low in the Battle of the Thrones?]

[That's right. The developed countries would want to keep their place while the underdeveloped ones would want to take those places. We can expect each country to go all out and fight with all they got in this.]

[It's going to be aired at the same time all over the world, right? This event will definitely have a huge impact on the world.]

[I already can't wait for it.]

Joy Co. Ltd.'s intentions were successfully realized with this announcement. Their original intention for this event was to create a bigger issue to cover up the issue of Akhan being an early developer. And they succeeded. Akhan's story was slowly buried into dust as expectations for the Battle of the Thrones soared.

Since the Battle of the Thrones' announcement was done in a hurry, the date for the start of the battle was only four days away, on the same day the Server Integration would take place.

Obtain ingredients from the Abyss Field and cook a dish that would unseal Arlene's power.

This was the trial that Arlene presented to Minhyuk. Actually, the reason why Minhyuk came here was so he could recover his Absolute God's Secret, which was sealed by those damn gods, to its original state. This was something that he had to do and for some reason, he was also tasked to gather ingredients for the dish that she had to cook for her friend. Of course, Minhyuk gained a lot during the process too.

'If I cook dishes with these ingredients for the people in Beyond the Heavens Kingdom, they'll be able to gain tremendous power,' Minhyuk thought as he looked at the God's Carefully Nurtured Abyss Cow sitting quietly inside his inventory with a pleased smile on his face.

Surprisingly enough, the way to obtain the God's Carefully Nurtured Abyss Cow was very simple. All Minhyuk had to do was harvest 50% of the ingredients in the Abyss Field. What's more, this was the Abyss Cow with special effects for each part.

After Minhyuk acquired the cow, all of the parts that were marked with a '???' had been revealed.

?Each cut of meat of God's Carefully Nurtured Abyss Cow will give you a choice of selecting between buff effects or permanent effects.

That was why God's Carefully Nurtured Abyss Cow could be considered as an excellent and outstanding ingredient that could easily surpass any god-grade ingredient in existence.

For the ingredient's buff effect and the permanent effect, if the permanent effect had the effect of increasing AGI by 5, then the buff effect would be able to increase the AGI by 15. It was a tremendous increase in force. However, the buff effect would disappear in a short amount of time.

In other words, these cuts could give Minhyuk and his guild members an insane increase in power depending on the situation. Also...

'What if I cooked God's Delicacy with the ingredients grown in the Abyss Field?' Minhyuk gulped dryly at the thought. To that extent, one could say that the power of the ingredients that Minhyuk 'obtained' from Arlene was enormous.

Now, it was time for Minhyuk to do something better. He took out a huge cauldron filled with water together with the ingredients that he harvested from the Abyss Field; the wild ginseng, the jujube, the garlic, the onion and many more. Then, Minhyuk lit a fire under the cauldron.

He could summon his trailer but Minhyuk felt that there was no need to do so. The reason why he took out a cauldron and not his trailer that could create bulk dishes, was so he could show the God of Cooking his own skills and show her what kind of dish the Food God could make. Also, the cauldron could bring out the most authentic flavor of the dish, the 'chicken soup', that he would make.

He placed the ingredients that he got as they were in the cauldron. He did not cut the wild ginseng, the garlic, the jujube and the onion. Then, he took out a large native chicken and dropped it in the cauldron.

"Why are you cooking there?" Arlene, the God of Cooking, asked curiously. She knew that the cauldron that Minhyuk took out was a very troublesome piece of cookware. One had to continue stoking the fire to control the heat which would produce lots of smoke that hurt the eye.

“The cauldron can take on a strong fire. Also, since it’s made with a thick material, it can preserve heat for a very long time. If I cook with this, I will be able to boil the dish better and preserve the heat for a long time while eating. It also has its own unique charm and effect on the taste of the dish.”

Arlene nodded in answer, opting to continue watching Minhyuk cook.

Minhyuk continued to stoke the fire, the heat from both the fire and cauldron making him sweat profusely. He just slung a towel around his neck and used it to wipe off his sweat, while tending to the fire. He boiled the chicken soup inside the cauldron for a very long time.

“I think it’s already done cooking though?”

“Chicken soup is known for its meat’s superb and chewy texture. But in my personal opinion, just cooking the chicken soup by following the normal amount of time to boil the dish will make the chicken more ‘rubbery’ instead of ‘chewy’. If it’s like that, then the meat will be tough to chew. However, if you continue to boil it like this before serving, then the meat will become softer and chewier.”

Minhyuk cooked the chicken soup for a long, long time. Then, using a wet towel, he grabbed the handle of the cauldron’s lid and lifted it up.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

Seeing the steam rise from the depths of the cauldron, Arlene became curious. She slowly approached and peered at the contents inside. What greeted her was the boiling feast of scrumptious chicken soup. The perfectly boiled native chicken shone with its natural oils, surrounded by whole garlic and jujube, while bobbing up and down in the boiling soup.

Gulp—

Arlene, the God of Cooking who found even a decent dish to be subpar, gulped unknowingly at the sight. At the same time, the notifications rang for Minhyuk.

[You have completed the Chicken Soup.]

[Arlene’s dish is the only dish with the buff effect.]

[Legendary Grade.]

[You have gained 30 DEX.]

[You have gained 200 REP.]

[You have gained 5,000 AP.]

[Your five basic stats have increased by +2.]

The chicken soup was a legendary grade dish! When Minhyuk checked the information and the effects of the soup, he could not help but be surprised.

‘It’s only at legendary grade but the effects that it has is far more powerful than any other legendary grade dish. Is it because of the excellent ingredients?’

Either way, Arlene would be able to check it herself when she ate it. So, Minhyuk just brought out a tray and plated the chicken soup on it. He also prepared and mixed salt and pepper in a saucer and placed some well-ripened kimchi as a side dish. Right after finishing everything, Minhyuk triggered his 'Joy of Eating Together' skill and created the same set of dishes in front of him.

"...What's that skill? I kind of want it," Arlene said, eyes sparkling with desire as she looked at Minhyuk's skill. This was proof that the 'Joy of Eating Together', the Food God's Innate Skill, was a truly special skill.

'Goodness! You can cook for others and eat the same dishes that you served them!'

Of course, the dishes would not have any buff effects. But for Arlene, tasting her own dishes was enough. When it was time to taste the chicken soup, Arlene turned to observe Minhyuk first. She has not actually eaten a chicken soup like this so she wanted to know what to do first. Arlene watched as Minhyuk grabbed a piece of leg from the still piping hot chicken soup and...

"Fwoo! Fwoo!"

...immediately placed it in his own bowl. Minhyuk had to blow on the tips of his fingers to alleviate the heat that lingered in them after taking out the steaming chicken leg. Of course, the first step to this was eating the dish as it was. The heat of the chicken spread in his mouth the moment he took a bite out of the chicken leg.

"Hooo~" Minhyuk exhaled a breath full of steam from the heat as he chewed on the chicken. The meat of the chicken after being boiled for a long time was soft and tender, even its natural oils would spread inside his mouth in every bite. This was one of the charms of chicken soup.

Next, Minhyuk dipped it in salt. The salt perfectly complemented the greasy flavor of the chicken in Minhyuk's mouth, bringing him endless delight. But did Minhyuk stop there? Of course not. He ripped some kimchi with his hands and placed it on top of the chicken meat. The spicy and sour kimchi could wash away the chicken soup's greasy aftertaste that would linger in one's mouth and bring out a shout of admiration. The moment Minhyuk placed everything in his mouth...

Crunch, crunch, crunch—

...a delightful crunch rang loudly in the area.

"Kghhkh~" Minhyuk shouted in admiration, his fingers completely covered with oil.

Meanwhile, Arlene's eyes widened in surprise when the meat of the chicken easily separated from the bones the moment she took a bite out of it. Of course, as the God of Cooking, Arlene was very aware that this was the natural result after boiling something for a long time. But even so, she could not stop herself from admiring the soft and tender texture of the meat that was easily pulled out from the bone. She also copied what Minhyuk did, placing a piece of kimchi on top of the meat and eating everything in one go.

Crunch, crunch—

"Amazing..."

She felt like every bite of the combination in her mouth was washing away the grease left behind by the meat. It was very surprising to witness Arlene, the God of Cooking, use her bare hands to rip the chicken apart and enjoy the taste of the chicken soup in front of her. While she was busy eating like someone was chasing her, Minhyuk stood up from his seat and walked to the cauldron. The boy added some well-soaked glutinous rice, chopped carrots, and green onions inside the cauldron before stirring everything.

“...Huh? When did you finish eating?” Arlene was only almost halfway through her own meal but Minhyuk had already finished everything.

Minhyuk continued to stir the contents of the cauldron, making sure that none of the ingredients stuck to the bottom. By the time Arlene finished eating her meal, Minhyuk had already finished the chicken porridge, complete with beautiful colors from the chopped carrots and green onions. Minhyuk scooped two bowls of the hot chicken porridge and placed it in front of him and Arlene. Then, he began to eat the still steaming chicken porridge.

“Ugh. Hot.”

The heat of the chicken porridge felt pleasant in Minhyuk’s mouth. His throat was also warmed when he gulped down the food in his mouth.

“Hoo! Hoo!” Minhyuk blew gently on it before scooping another mouthful. That was when the salty and savory flavor of the chicken porridge registered in Minhyuk’s taste buds. Just like before, Minhyuk placed a piece of ripe kimchi in his porridge.

‘I knew it! Sour kimchi is a better match with chicken porridge than chicken soup.’

The moment he scooped a spoonful of the porridge and the kimchi and placed it into his mouth...

Crunch, crunch—

The crunchy texture of the kimchi and the soft texture of the porridge met and created a great harmony inside his mouth, his lips curling into a smile.

“Wow...”

“Wow...”

The two people exclaimed in admiration at the same time. Finally, the two finished the last spoonful of their dishes.

“Fwaaa...”

“Fwaa....”

They both let out a sigh of satisfaction after eating a very scrumptious meal. Only after she finished her meal did Arlene realize her uncouth behavior, her face turning a shade of red from embarrassment.

‘I am the God of Cooking! How can I act like that?’

While she was reprimanding herself, the notifications rang in her ears.

[You have eaten the Chicken Soup.]

[You can now use your sealed power.]

[You will only be able to use your sealed power for a total of three times.]

[With the Chicken Soup's buff effects, your cooking skills power will increase by 10%.]

[The buff effect will last for twenty days.]

Arlene's cooking skills, her cooking skills before her powers were sealed, would actually become 10% stronger.

"...???"

Arlene was dumbfounded. All she could do was stare at Minhyuk blankly for a very long time.

Chapter 559: For Ben

The official announcement for the Battle of the Thrones was made four days before the server integration. This was a move that was completely different from what Joy Co. Ltd. usually did. The company would usually make an announcement for an event two weeks prior, to give ample time for players to prepare.

Due to the sudden and unexpected announcement, all of the players were now in a hurry. Guilds from all over the world started electing participants for the Battle of the Thrones and running around to choose which one would become their king. But, the same could not be applied to South Korea. After all, their king had already been confirmed.

That was not the only reason everyone was in a mad rush. The other factor was the 'castle' blueprint. Everyone was only given a four-day time limit to pass their plans. The governments of each of the participating countries even started contacting and hiring world-class architects.

Unfortunately, they were forgetting one thing. The castle that they had to build was going to be used for war. In reality, most fancy and glamorous architecture expressed the soul of the architect and the beauty they envisioned. Of course, outstanding and world-class architects would be able to produce better buildings compared to others. However, the fact that this castle would be used for war meant that they had to create something that would be able to support the people that would stay in it.

Just like the castle that Beyond the Heavens Kingdom had created under the collaboration of their own geniuses and talents.

Golden Hammer Dwarf Lant's best disciple, Olger! He was a genius dwarf that Lant, an existence that was hailed as the king of the dwarves in the entire continent, cherished the most. They also had Athenae's Roadol, the president of Ilhwa Constructions and a legend of the Korean construction industry, who had watched countless war movies and had designed many medieval architecture. There was also Hyemin'sDaddy, the descendant of the God of the Blacksmiths, and Knowledge Star, Tactician Jarod. These four people participated and designed the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom's castle. The four of them spent days and nights, opting to forego sleep to finish the design that was due in four days.

"Everyone will be our enemy. All of them will target us," Knowledge Star Jarod said while everyone nodded in agreement with his predictions. The four of them knew

that the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom would be the target of all of the kingdoms participating in the Battle of the Thrones.

“I think a huge river surrounding the castle is a good idea. We can drop our enemies in the river and deal more damage at the same time.”

“If we’re going to have a huge river, then we have to build a nice and sturdy bridge that will serve as our passage into the castle.”

“The long bridge will also be able to stop the enemies’ mindless charge and limit the number that we have to deal with at the same time.”

“Let’s also add a system that will allow us to control the bridge freely from the safety of the castle walls.”

“There’s a limit to how many magical abilities we can add to the castle. In the first place, it is already impossible for such an ability to be infinite. However, even if we can do it, it will just hold us back.”

“If that’s the case, then let’s just place a huge shield and cover the king’s statue. Let’s also add an attack reflection magic on it.”

“We’ll have to be prepared for aerial warfare too.”

The castle that the four of them were creating was focused only on defense.

The castle was important to keep the enemies at bay, but more than that, Athenae promised great rewards for the kingdom that would create the best blueprint. The country’s server that would present the most outstanding blueprint within four days would be given a special siege weapon in secret. On top of that, their own territory would be available in front of their country’s kingdom for two hours.

Simply put, Athenae would not inform anyone which castle was chosen as the best castle and would just give these privileges to the country privately.

On the third day, Genie looked at the blueprint that was worked on by the brilliant minds, and said, “This is truly the best.”

She was completely fascinated by the building design, immediately sending a report to Minhyuk before submitting the design to Joy Co. Ltd.

Meanwhile, countless famous architects had gathered in Joy Co. Ltd.’s Event Hosting Team to review the blueprints and building designs that the participating countries had sent. Of course, Kang Taehoon was among them.

“The design that China submitted is larger and more beautiful than the Great Wall. But at the same time, it also poses a problem. Because they wanted to make it look cool and big, the practical effects of the castle have been greatly diminished.”

“America’s blueprint is definitely excellent. However, they are overestimating themselves far too much. Their castle is completely focused on attacking. They would have a hard time defending it. This is probably because of their pride.”

“Japan’s castle...”

Surprisingly enough, quite a few countries had decided to rely on the ‘Athenae Produced Castles’. These countries believed that only three to four days of time to create a blueprint was not enough and had decided that it would be better to just rely on the castles created by Athenae. Just one look at the blueprint that China presented and one would understand. The castle might look beautiful, but it was lacking compared to the castles in Athenae.

“Who should we award the Noble Castle Blueprint Award to?” President Kang Taehoon rubbed his chin in thought.

Of course, they had sent the announcement in a hurry but considering that they were true rankers, they believed that they would be able to come up with a genuine and solid blueprint in that short amount of time. Besides they only asked for a blueprint, and not for them to build the castle.

Then, at that moment...

“South Korea’s blueprint has come in!”

All of the architects rushed to check the blueprint. They looked at it solemnly and silently for quite a long time.

“How is it?”

Kang Taehoon was a game developer, not an architect. As someone with only a superficial knowledge on architectures and buildings, the blueprint that Korea sent in was no different than the blueprint for America’s castle to his eyes. But...

“This is very amazing. It’s to the point where I have to wonder if this is a design that one could truly come up with in just three days.”

“The ways they’ve utilized the terrain and their arrangement of the siege weapons in their castle walls... truly meticulous and outstanding. It’s like we’re looking at a blueprint of a castle made by genuine medieval architects.”

“It’s very hard to find any cons to this design. I believe no other castle can catch up to this at all.”

President Kang Taehoon felt proud of the castle created by the Beyond the Heavens Kingdom. This was a fair judgment for all of the servers; there was no discrimination at all. And the fact that South Korea had completely taken the lead in terms of architectural design was enough to make him feel proud.

“Then, the Noble Castle Blueprint Award will be awarded to South Korea.”

It seemed like South Korea was fully prepared.

Just then, Team Leader Park Minggyu suddenly entered the room, “President, the problem that we were worried about has happened.”

“Is it what I think it is?”

“That’s right,” Team Leader Park’s expression was very solemn, “The kings elected by three countries have expressed their intentions to participate in the middle of the Battle of the Thrones.”

“Which countries?”

“France, Japan and...” Team Leader Park Minggyu, with a bitter smile on his face, finished his words, “...our very own, South Korea.”

“...”

The Battle of the Thrones was expected to begin in a few days. In fact, the formal announcement was made just three days ago. Of course, players that were currently engaged in important quests, hunts, and important tasks had no choice but to give up and decline participation, especially if one was in the middle of a quest. After all, they risked failing the quest if they suddenly left midway.

One might then wonder, would everything work out if they could just extract the player from the quest? Yes. But that was impossible. If they did that, then Athenae’s flow might collapse. This was a loophole that they could not do anything about since they prepared the Battle of the Thrones in a hurry.

All they could do was do the next best thing, allow them to participate midway.

“Kings that participate later will be less exhausted and would not need to worry about their skill cooldown. We can expect a lot of backlash from other players if we allow this.”

“Then, are they supposed to elect a new king to replace their initially chosen king?”

That would also be very difficult to do. The kings that were currently chosen and elected by their countries had symbolic meanings, doing so would reject this in the first place.

“Just like what I said before, for kings that will participate in the middle of the event, they will receive less privileges than the kings that participated from the start.”

Kings would, of course, actively seek more power than usual. And for kings that would participate in the middle, they were bound to get less benefits. In other words, Minhyuk, Asgan Continent’s chosen king, will receive lesser benefits compared to other kings. In fact, it would definitely be considered a loss for them. Still, doing so appeases those that might clamor about why some kings participated in the middle. But...

“It would be a different story if they would become strong enough to ignore the penalty of participating in the middle.”

Thanks to the chicken soup that Minhyuk cooked for her, Arlene's power had been unsealed. And just like she said before, all of this was so she could cook for someone. Arlene then instructed Minhyuk to gather the ingredients on her behalf. Minhyuk had been climbing cliffs and fighting monsters for days on end to collect and harvest the ingredients that she needed.

'This cranky old hag...'

Minhyuk thought that Arlene was just making things hard for him. But even if he thought that way, Arlene was the only solution that he had to unseal his Absolute God's Secret.

What if she suddenly decided not to unseal it?

So, he had no choice but to continue to collect the ingredients and of course, and it took quite a lot of time. On top of that, the Battle of the Thrones was set to start tomorrow. Of course, Minhyuk had already expressed his intentions to participate in the middle to Joy Co. Ltd. Still, he had to immediately go there the moment he unsealed his Absolute God's Secret.

"Thank you for your hard work. Ah, now all you have to do is cook this dish and give it to him and you'll unseal the secret that those bastards sealed, right?"

Arlene was aware of everything including the reason why Minhyuk found her.

"I should probably start cooking now, then."

"Of course," Minhyuk nodded, his expectations soaring.

'I'll be able to personally witness the God of Cooking cooking?'

This was a very emotional moment for a Food God like him. And not only that, she was also the previous Food God's master.

"But you know what?" Arlene said, her lips curling up into a smirk. She was a very ill-tempered and mischievous woman. However, this time, the prank that she was going to play was a well-meaning one, "I believe this dish is something that you should cook, not me."

Minhyuk looked at her, bewildered. When cooking, the chef would pour their heart out on the dish that they were making. Simply put, it was more meaningful if the chef cooked for someone precious to them. But Arlene suddenly said that she would not cook for *'him'* and even asked Minhyuk to cook instead?

"Why? Isn't he your precious person? Why are you asking me to cook instead?"

Also, Arlene's seal had been truly hard to unravel. But she completely ignored that fact and even asked him to cook in her stead?

"You're the one that has to do it. He's more precious to you than me," Arlene said, waving her hand in the air. Suddenly, the translucent figure of an old man and a woman appeared right next to Arlene.

Minhyuk felt his heart stop when he saw the old man's figure. Oh, how much he missed this man, how much he missed hearing his voice. Minhyuk recalled how the old man gently patted his

shoulders with his rough hands and said, *'Your Majesty, I'm with you. Please don't worry. Hohoho!'*? This person had been a huge part of Minhyuk's life, someone that sacrificed his own life and even went so far as to sell his soul to the God of Death just so he could protect the people precious to Minhyuk.

Then, the notifications rang.

[The God of Cooking, one of the Absolute Gods, is narrating the story of a king and his retainer.]

[The retainer fought hard to return to his king's arms to the point that even the gods grew afraid of him.]

[The retainer collapsed thousands of times but every time he would stand up and hold on to his spear to protect his king and his promise.]

[The retainer longs for his king, looking forward to the day when he would return to his side.]

[Despite the countless wounds and injuries littering the retainer's body, he always declared that he would never back down.]

Arlene said, "Cook using my unsealed powers."

Then, another set of notifications rang in Minhyuk's ears.

[God of Cooking Arlene is lending you her powers!]

[With God of Cooking Arlene lending you her powers, you will be able to use some of the God of Cooking's power when you cook.]

[Caution! If you use a portion of the power of the God of Cooking, you will receive a five times higher penalty and be forced to log out if you can't get a 'God Grade' dish!]

After the retainer's story ended, the king's story began.

[There was not a single day that the king did not remember his retainer.]

[The wheels of fate turned and the king unknowingly chased after his retainer.]

[The king misses the coffee that his retainer makes.]

[The king... his retainer...]

[The king... his retainer...]

The notifications continued to ring but Minhyuk's eyes were only trained on Ben's figure. He watched as Ben was pushed back by a woman holding an unidentified spear, as Ben hacked and vomited a mouthful of blood and tried to get up once again. He looked like he was about to collapse but he held on to his spear and stood up with all his might.

Minhyuk gritted his teeth, his hands clenched tightly into fists. He did not care about the five-fold penalty. All he wanted to do was fight for Ghost Spear Ben.

So, he said, "I accept. I will use Arlene's power to cook a dish for Ben."

At that moment, Arlene began to narrate a new chapter of the story of the king and his retainer.

[The king declared that he would fight for his retainer.]

Chapter 560: Battle of the Thrones (Top)

Minhyuk, having witnessed how Ben fought fiercely and desperately during the Absolute Gods' trial, did not even care about the five-fold penalty. Even if it was a ten-fold penalty, Minhyuk would still choose to receive a portion of Arlene's power, just so he could cook a dish for Ben.

Now, the challenge that Minhyuk was presented with was to make a God-grade dish in one try. Making a legendary grade dish at one go was already a difficult feat. But Minhyuk was tasked to make a God grade dish, a dish that he had only made once or twice himself.

Nevertheless, Minhyuk still took on the challenge.

Notifications rang in Minhyuk's ears the moment a portion of Arlene's power entered his body.

[Your chances of getting a Legendary Grade dish has been increased by thirty times! Your chances of getting a God Grade dish has been increased by ten times!]

[The effects of your buffed dishes will be 1.3x stronger than usual!]

"...!"

Even though Minhyuk was not able to borrow Arlene's full power and was only able to inherit a portion of them for the time being, just these two notifications alone were enough to take away his breath.

'My chances of getting a legendary grade dish increased by thirty times...?'

The only word that Minhyuk could use to describe this situation was crazy. Of course, his probability of creating a God grade dish also increased by ten times. However, he only had less than a percent chance of getting that dish. This meant that his odds of successfully clearing this challenge was still abysmally low.

Having personally obtained the ingredients according to Arlene's directions, he checked the chicken, which was the main ingredient.

?Can allow one to overcome their limits.

?All stats and skills will increase.

?If you succeed in making a dish out of this chicken, you will be able to create a flavor that is out of this world.

'I thought that it wouldn't matter since Arlene will be the one cooking, but...'

Minhyuk had used an ingredient like this before, the Legendary Giant Cow's Bone Marrow. Back then, he made an 'Ox Bone Soup' for Ellie and allowed her to come back to life, despite being at death's door. Since legendary and God-grade ingredients contained so much power, it was very hard to cook them. On top of that, the probability of God-grade dishes appearing was so low that even if Minhyuk used several higher grade ingredients, it would not matter at all.

'Nevertheless, I will still do my best to fight for him.'

Minhyuk slowly closed his eyes, hoping that his voice would reach Ben as he pondered about how he should go about cooking the chicken.

'It should be spicy stir-fried chicken.'

Minhyuk recalled that one of Ben's favorite dishes was spicy stir-fried chicken. Ben disliked eating dishes with quite a lot of bones in it, but he was quite fond of the slightly spicy flavor that lingered in his mouth. With this, Minhyuk finally started cooking.

The first thing that Minhyuk tried to do was to remove the impurities in the Legendary Giant Chicken's leg meat by putting it in a bowl filled with water but...

Rumble, rumble, rumble—

...something rumbled loudly, as if an earthquake was happening.

"...!"

Minhyuk's gaze immediately turned to the chicken, only to see one of the table's legs, which was made of iron, bending at an unusual angle.

Thud—

Minhyuk immediately hugged the meat to his chest as...

"Ugggggggh!"

...a tremendous amount of weight began to bear down on him. However, Minhyuk just gritted his teeth and endured it. The weight was so heavy that even the ground that he was standing on was already a few inches deeper than the surrounding area. In fact, his descent was only stopped when he was ankle deep in the ground.

"Haaa... Haaa..." Minhyuk gasped, his breathing turning rough with the heavy weight on his arms. The description of the Legendary Giant Chicken appeared in his head.

'It's because it would feel extremely heavy the moment one started cooking it like it's a giant.'

It was at this moment that Minhyuk realized what the description truly meant. Even though he had no idea how he should go about cooking a meat like this, he continued to do so. Minhyuk quickly cleaned the chicken meat. He was lifting just a small piece of chicken yet it felt like he was lifting a dumbbell that was as heavy as ten kilograms. Thankfully, Minhyuk's STR was also very high. After he washed the chicken, he placed the trimmed and cleaned chicken, the cabbages, the gochujang, the sweet potatoes and the rice cakes in the pan.

Rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble—

Of course, another rumble rang loudly in the area. Fortunately, the pan that Minhyuk was using was his legendary frying pan, which, despite the crushing weight, was able to endure it and hold on. Then, Minhyuk turned on the fire and began to cook. Minhyuk felt as if he was turning a very heavy millstone as he flipped the sizzling chicken over to cook everything evenly.

“Ugggggggggh...” A groan escaped through the seams of Minhyuk’s mouth as his arms trembled from the crushing weight of the meat. However, the worst had yet to come.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

[The Giant Chicken has started to spew blazing flames.]

[Your HP has been reduced by 1%.]

A huge pillar of flame engulfed Minhyuk’s entire body. Its strength was so strong that it made Minhyuk suffer even more. For a brief moment, Minhyuk’s hand, which was holding the spatula, stopped.

Arlene, who was watching Minhyuk, rubbed her chin in thought, *‘From what I know, that ingredient is the hardest ingredient to cook among the Five Legendary Ingredients. Actually, it’s really impossible for someone to cook it. Well, except for me.’* Arlene smiled bitterly. She knew that one had to suffer and sacrifice that much to produce a dish with strong powers.

‘Minhyuk. Will he give up in the end?’

The crushing weight of almost a thousand catty and the burning flames would be too much for anyone. However, Minhyuk continued to move, despite the flames engulfing his body.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

The chicken was flipped over in the pan, the gochujang and other seasonings coating it evenly and mixing together.

[You have triggered the Skill: Will.]

[Everything related to DEX will temporarily increase by 24%.]

[You have gained 1 DEX.]

Although cooking the Legendary Giant Chicken only took a short time, it would take a tremendous amount of mental strength and skills to cook the meat. That was why it triggered Will and why Minhyuk’s DEX was increasing at a rapid pace. Fortunately, Will was able to soothe Minhyuk’s burning body slightly.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

With another flip, the Giant Chicken was completely covered with gochujang and the rest of the seasonings. At this point, Minhyuk’s HP only had 30% left after the blazing flames’ continuous gnawing. This was also after he had triggered the Monarch’s Armor’s 100% HP and MP recovery, as well as the skill: He Who Overcomes. Still, Minhyuk continued to cook. He used his spatula and pressed down to cut the chicken.

Sizzleeeee—

Minhyuk continued to cut down on the chicken while the sweet potatoes and rice cakes were being cooked together. Now, all he needed to do was to lower the heat and flip the chicken a few more times and he would be done.

Arlene thought that Minhyuk would end his cooking here. After all, the sweat that covered his entire body was enough proof that he was already overwhelmed by the situation. But... Minhyuk poured udon noodles on the side of the frying pan.

“Crazy... Stop!!!” Arlene shouted in shock. Minhyuk had to stir more if he wanted to soak the noodles in the sauce. Since Minhyuk also had to bear the weight of a thousand catties, moving the spatula so the dish would not stick to the pan and burn would be one hell of a feat for him.

“Do you want to die without finishing your dish?!!!”

Minhyuk’s HP was definitely dropping at a rapid pace. But Minhyuk just smiled at her and said, “Grandpa likes it...”

“...”

“This udon, he likes it.”

Arlene was speechless. The boy’s words only meant one thing.

‘He likes it, so I will do it even if I suffer.’

This was something that Arlene had never seen before; a close friendship between a king and his retainer.

‘You can do it.’

Shwaaaaaaa—

Minhyuk began to move, stir-frying the udon noodles with his spatula so it would be evenly coated with the sauce.

[Your HP has dropped below 15%!]

[You have become light-headed.]

[Your stamina has once again reached its limits!]

[Signs of exhaustion have been observed! Rest is highly recommended!]

Minhyuk’s body felt as heavy as a millstone. As his arms shook and trembled, his mind kept on telling him to fall down and collapse. But he never stopped moving his arms.

Shwaaaaaaa—

For Minhyuk, it did not matter if Ben did not know that he was cooking for him. All he wanted to do was to feed Ben, who was fighting silently by himself, a tasty and fulfilling meal. After all, even though he was a king, the one thing that he was very good at was cooking.

So, he squeezed the last bit of his strength to cook this dish with all his might.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

Anyone that saw Minhyuk's state right now would look at him incredulously. He was risking his life just to cook? Some would ask him: *Do you think this is a battlefield?* If Minhyuk heard that, he would answer: *Sometimes, cooking is harsher and crueler than a battlefield.* For Minhyuk, who almost let go of the last string of consciousness in his body, the thought that Ben wanted to eat this dish was the only thing that spurred him on. For him, this was his battlefield.

[Your HP has dropped below 5%!]

Minhyuk's forehead was covered with a layer of sweat, his muscles already screaming in protest. But he persisted. He mixed the udon noodles well and parted the middle with his spatula.

Shwaaaaaaaaa—

Then, Minhyuk spread a heaping of mozzarella cheese in the middle of the spicy stir-fried chicken.

[Your HP has dropped below 3%!]

The strength in Minhyuk's body was so sparse that he could barely move. But Minhyuk clenched his teeth and used the last bit of his strength left to quickly press on the cheese with his spatula.

Tak, tak, tak, tak, tak, tak—

The cheese began to melt rapidly along with Minhyuk's movements.

[Your HP has dropped below 2%!]

With a final press, Minhyuk felt his consciousness begin to fade. All of the strength left his body as he collapsed on the ground. Arlene hurriedly rushed forward to catch Minhyuk's falling body. As she slowly laid Minhyuk down on the floor, a notification rang in her ears and the rest of the world. Then, a huge pillar of light fell down on the spicy stir-fried chicken.

'Unbelievable...'

Arlene was very shocked to see a light, brighter and more beautiful than any of the other gods', born in the world at this very moment.

'I have only created something like this thrice in my life...'

But the young man in front of her was able to do it. Arlene immediately raised her hands towards the spicy stir-fried chicken.

[You have saved and maintained the Spicy Stir-fried Chicken at its condition when it was freshly cooked.]

After preserving the condition of the dish, Arlene looked at Minhyuk for a very long time. She watched the man, who was now in a deep sleep, mumble, "Grandpa, is it delicious?"

"..."

Arlene laughed bitterly when she saw how Minhyuk still thought of Ben even when he had fallen unconscious.

"I'm sure it will be delicious."

His eyes and body felt so heavy and sluggish. However, the smell that was teasing his nose had Minhyuk instinctively opening his eyes. Through his blurred vision, Minhyuk was able to see a woman moving around busily in the kitchen and cooking something that smelled very nice.

The woman's way of cooking was very different from an ordinary person's way of cooking. One snap of her fingers and what seemed to be salt, which was engulfed in light, appeared and got sucked inside the dish that she was making. Although she was cooking a dish, one could only describe this scene as beautiful.

But before everything...

Creak—

Minhyuk, who raised his body, said, "Wh, what happened to the spicy stir-fried chicken? Did, did a God-grade spicy stir-fried chicken come out?"

"Hush," Arlene said, a meaningful smile on her face, adding the final touches to the dish that she was cooking. She placed the dish in an earthen pot, before bringing it in front of Minhyuk. The dish placed in front of Minhyuk was none other than bean sprout rice soup.

"It's time to eat... Ah, looks yummy..."

Actually, Minhyuk's mouth was already watering even before.

Then, Arlene said, "The reason you came to find me..."

"Yes, what?" Minhyuk tilted his head.

Arlene continued, "...is to obtain a dish that will unseal your Absolute God's Secret. That's the dish that you've been looking for."

"...!"

Minhyuk's sealed power would awaken once again to the world eight hours before the Battle of the Thrones started.