

지갑송 퓨전 판타지 장편소설

레벨업하는 몬스터 1

A Monster Who Levels Up

- 레벨업하는 몬스터 -

- Part 1 -

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[Fantasy-Books]

– SYNOPSIS –

This is a story of a man named Kim Sae-Jin, who one day, inexplicably wakes up as a Monster. Follow him and his perilous journey to get his life back as a Human, all the while growing even more versatile as a Monster in the process. This should be... complicated, somewhat.

PROLOGUE

He became an orphan very early in his life due to a calamitous tragedy.

Barely at the tender age of 7, when it would only be normal to look for his mom's guidance whenever something vexed him, *he* had to go to an orphanage because none of his relatives wanted to take him in.

The orphanage's director wasn't a human trash that treated children like dirt but at the same time, wasn't a sparkling example of how to be a nice person, either.

Wanting to leave such an orphanage as soon as possible, *he* found a job and started working right after graduating from the Elementary School. While resembling a very thin stick, thanks to his tall-for-his-age height, convincingly lying about how old he actually was proved to be rather easy. Of course, on that one occasion his lies were exposed, he got chased away from the workplace without receiving a paycheque, but well, that was to be expected.

Regardless, *he* continued to work tirelessly during the night and slept in the Middle School during the daytime; and this was how he lived his early life.

Around this time, *he* stopped utilising the bed in the orphanage as well. Honestly, *he* found it more comfortable to sleep in the school's infirmary, or among the wary gazes of the homeless occupying the subway station.

He couldn't be sure, but maybe the reason for his height remaining the same from 6th grade in Elementary School probably had something to do with this unhealthy lifestyle.

Whatever the case may have been, through all the rough and tumble, *he* succeeded in becoming completely independent upon turning 18.

4 years of back-breaking labour after that netted a total of \$8750 which sort of enabled him to rent out a single room for himself.

Other people might have found this space a seriously tight fit, but for him, it was the safest and most comfortable place to put his feet up and take it easy.

And within this comfortable environment, his own home, *he* allowed himself to have a dream of a better future.

If it was under any other “normal” circumstances, *he* would’ve surely achieved that idyllic life he had dreamt of in the near future.

[Innate Trait Progression: 100% Complete]

System has activated

– Change in species due to host’s Innate Trait Progression: Human → Monster

[Name: Kim Sae-Jin]

[Age: Roughly 22 Years Old]

[Height: 172 cm/ Weight: 65kg]

► Status

[Physical Strength 13]

[Endurance 12]

[Agility 16]

[Energy Manipulation 6]

[Mana Affinity 1]

[Magic Strength 1]

[Luck 3]

► Trait: [Monster]

[Rank: Rare]

[Trait Level: 1]

- Species changed from Human to Monster. Once per 24 hours, the host can maintain the Human Form for (60 Minutes) that is calculated from the numerical value of [Energy Manipulation] stat.
- Stats of the Monster Forms will be reduced during the Human Form.
- Currently maintaining the Brown Wolf* Form.

Currently available Monster Forms*: Orc, Wolf, Goblin.

[*Forms: living as a chosen Monster. When certain conditions are satisfied, Monster's rank will rise. Example: Orc – Orc Warrior – Great Orc Chieftain]

[*Brown Wolf: Strength and Defense increase by 3, Agility increases by 6. When in Human Form, the effects will be reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$.]

...That was until this f*cking Trait ambushed him out of nowhere.

CHAPTER 1

BECOMING A WOLF (1)

For the first week after unlocking his Trait, Kim Sae-Jin lived in isolation like a mental patient.

It was totally understandable as, for 23 out of 24 hours in a day, he suddenly had to exist as a Monster.

The bosses at his part time jobs sent him various messages and phone calls, but they all entered in one ear and left through the other without really registering in his brain.

Two of them showed concern, but the other one threw verbal abuse like there's no tomorrow. But then again, it was understandable where they were coming from.

The only thing Sae-Jin couldn't get a grip on, was the absurdity of his current situation.

And after another week passed by, the small, meticulously-kept room which he took great pride in, became a messy cesspool of untidiness.

It was par for the course, really. The effing claws on his paws would leave behind unsightly scars all over the place no matter how softly and gently he walked around.

Like this, where a living couldn't really be called a living anymore, another 4 days went by.

Only then, did Sae-Jin finally come to accept his predicament.

A body length of around 2m, a shoulder height of around 1.2m, a tail length of around 50cm, a body weight definitely exceeding 90kg. And a coat of brown fur.

At a glance, they might sound like the specs of a still-growing tiger, but unfortunately, those numbers belonged to him.

Sae-Jin was actually a Brown Wolf now.

A Monster that was considered as the weakest prey there was, always targeted by

those conceited idiots who proudly label themselves as the “Knights”, “Mercenaries” or “Hunters.”

Also, too ambiguous to be called a true, bona fide Monster – striding the imperceptible boundary between a beast and that of a full-fledged Monster, it was not easy to categorise this creature.

On top of being the newbies’ preferred choice of hunting material, a wolf was usually massacred on sight without mercy because of the following traits:

- 1, There were plentiful of them like a mob,
- 2, They were slightly troublesome for regular citizens to deal with.

That was Sae-Jin’s form, currently.

He found it difficult to accept this initially for obvious reasons. And after finally coming to terms with it, he then realised that wasn’t the end of his troubles, no. Now, he had to madly formulate plans to “safely live.” His desires to continue breathing was a lot stronger than he expected. At least there was the cushion of \$3500 in his bank account, which he was definitely thankful for.

Sae-Jin quickly decided to maximise his Human Form during the precious 1 hour window.

For his food, Sae-Jin bought easy-to-prepare TV dinners from a convenience store 5 minutes away and always ate them while in his Human Form. His pride as a human being wouldn’t have it any other way. And he made sure to leave himself a 30-minute breathing space in case of an unforeseen emergency.

Then he practiced controlling the strength of the Brown Wolf Form in order to perfectly mimic the creature. After 4 days of concerted effort, he even figured out how to retract his sharp claws.

Meanwhile, whenever there was a chance, he changed into a Goblin Form and began cleaning the mess in his home. A 140cm-tall Goblin might have a small stature but it possessed a surprisingly supple pair of hands for a kind of jobs that demanded precise craftsmanship, which was perfect for taking care of the household chores.

Those ugly claw marks remained here and there, but before long, Sae-Jin’s room

regained its former spotless, clean appearance.

But the biggest issue still had to be solved: living expenses.

Without paying the monthly rent, he was surely living on a borrowed time here.

That's why he used the bracelet computer, something that was discarded into a corner of the room a while ago.

Sae-Jin was going to search for how to [Start Earning From Home,]

...But then, stopped. As a high school dropout, with only a middle school graduation certificate, he just knew it would be impossible to find someone willing to let him work from home.

He gazed at the hologram display projected in the air with a tinge of regret, slowly stroking it. Then a thought suddenly came to him, and Sae-Jin searched for topics regarding the Monsters.

That's how he accidentally found a hint that could potentially save his life.

Seeing the topic of the discussion, a powerful glare of bright light burned dangerously in both of his eyes.

Q: [Does the Lycanthrope, the top-dog in the Wolf-type Monster pecking order, really exist?]

A: [According to the 1st Generation "Soo-ins" (*TL: literally humanoid beastman in Korean*) who crossed over the World's Rift, they did exist in the legends. Able to seamlessly change their shapes unrestricted from a fearsome bipedal wolf to a perfect appearance of a tailless human, one could say that they share some similar racial traits with Soo-ins. In truth, though, the class of incredible power they wielded was on another scale altogether, apparently, and couldn't even be compared at all. But owing to their unique trait of violent nature, they ended up going extinct and have become the creatures of legends instead.]

The Lycanthrope. It was a mythical Monster Sae-Jin had heard about at least once from somewhere.

An unfathomable existence, that could freely become a flawless human despite being a Monster and vice versa. It was different from the Soo-ins who could alternate between an animal and a humanoid form. More than anything, the human form assumed by a Lycanthrope didn't leave behind a tail.

“What if...”

Definitely, the effing Trait told him that “when certain conditions are satisfied, the ranks of Monsters will rise.”

He intuitively understood then. The only way for him to exist was to exploit this rule.

Didn't matter what the conditions were, he had to quickly complete them in order to evolve over and over again.

There was a chance that his evolution could go down the wrong path but this was the only avenue left for him in the end.

He promptly stood up. The things he had to do were already set in stone.



The mountainous regions of Gangwon Province had been designated as the Monster's Territory for a very long time.

Low tier Monsters such as Wolves, Orcs and Goblins, mid tier Monsters such as Trolls and Gargoyles, and finally, high tier Monsters like Ogres and Wyverns, occupied this Territory and called it as their home.

One of the world's most diverse Monster ecosystems existed within the borders of Gangwon Province in the Republic of Korea. Naturally, Monster-hunting Knights and Hunters flocked here, aiming for this perfect place to earn money in the “Home of Monsters.”

“Hey!! Stay with me!!”

However, it was only possible for the Knights possessing at least the ranks of mid to high tier to delude themselves into mistaking this place as nothing more than an easy gold mine.

Most people saw the mountains as Hell on Earth, where ferocious Monsters engaged in brutal conflict against each other, and to those who bet their lives in order to earn a living by catching these rampaging creatures, all of them wished to abandon this horrible killing field and never to return here as soon as they got their exit passports.

“You are almost there, don’t you faint on me, now!! Stand up!!”

One could receive the much-needed aid from the military at the borders of Gangwon Province.

A low tier Hunter named Kim Tae-Jo couldn’t spare a thought to wipe the streaming blood off his forehead. He was too busy slapping the cheeks of his comrade, who was lying sprawled on the ground, unmoving.

“.....I... can’t... go on.”

Tae-Jo’s comrade could only mutter out dispiriting words. This man’s eyes were deeply closed, the flames of life ready to extinguish, one of his legs missing.

It was a gruesome sight if one took a closer look. Even a quick glance could tell these two Hunters had went through a terrible ordeal at the hands of a vicious beast judging from the deep teeth marks on the wound.

In the beginning, their party consisted of 3 low tier and 2 mid tier Hunters but they ran into a Monsterised Great Tiger.

Their luck was really bad.

Monsterised Great Tigers lived in the deeper parts of the mountains, existing to compete against more powerful Monsters up there. In other words, they never bothered to come down to the lower grounds near the borders at all.

But the party did meet a Great Tiger, which was akin to getting struck by a stray lightning in broad daylight while out on a stroll. It was simply unheard of.

“Hey!! Stand u...”

Kim Tae-Jo couldn’t finish what he wanted to say.

Because, from somewhere nearby, he could hear the guttural “*Krrrr*” growling of a

beast.

“.....”

Holding his breath, Tae-Jo slightly tilted his head towards the direction of the sound, and found a lone wolf, its fur shining brown and clearly starving from a prolonged hunger.

It was just a pile of skin and bones, its eyes bloodshot, attesting to how famished it was.

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“...Sh*t...”

A Brown Wolf was the weakest Monster out there. Normally, 3 low tier Hunters could take it down – no, if it was weakened by as much as this creature, then only 2 should be enough to hunt it down.

But the current situation was the worst. His comrade was missing a leg, and by dragging the grievously wounded man all the way here by himself, Tae-Jo was near his own physical limit as well.

“...Go away!! Away, I say!!”

Tae-Jo desperately shouted. But overcome by avarice, the lone Brown Wolf continued to drool nonstop and slowly advanced towards him. It looked as if the Wolf was cautiously assessing the situation of the meal that took too long time in coming.

“Oh, god damn it!!”

There was no other choice. Tae-Jo had to abandon his comrade and make a run for it. However...

– *Krrrrrrng!!*

The exhaustion from pushing himself to the limit and the Brown Wolf’s fear-inducing growl conspired to freeze his legs; they wouldn’t budge.

And also, no matter how starved, Tae-Jo realised that the famished Wolf was still faster

than him, and it wouldn't let one of the free meals run away just like that.

“This... this son of a bi*ch. I caught hundreds of bastards like you until now...”

Tae-Jo swore in resignation, knowing well that his number was up. He grabbed the shotgun that no longer had any Mana bullets in it. If the lady luck smiled on him, then he could land a hit in the head of the Wolf and knock it out. That was his hope.

“.....”

Tae-Jo swallowed his spit loudly.

That, became “the” signal.

The Brown Wolf disregarded everything and kick the ground, crazily dashing in towards him.

Scared, he could no longer dare to watch and squeezed his eyes shut, and swung the stock of the hunting rifle hard.

Kwajeeck!!

The noise he heard was slightly different to what he was expecting, a dull sound from a blunt impact. Rather, it was similar to a neck snapping.

“...??”

Tae-Jo carefully opened his eyes after hearing that strange sound.

Stronger bout of despair slammed into him as soon as he did that.

“Huh...?”

There was another Brown Wolf in front of him.

But this one was a giant – a tiger. Its huge body was like that of a tiger just before going through a Monsterisation.

This massive Brown Wolf had its fangs deeply buried in the neck of the unlucky Wolf aiming for Tae-Jo's and his comrade's lives.

The size differences between these two wolves made calling them the same type of Monster a laughable notion. Of course, the famished Wolf was atypically smaller than normal, but still, Tae-Jo had never ever seen nor heard of a Brown Wolf this massive before.

“God damn it.”

Tae-Jo couldn't help but to mutter out swearing again, being on the receiving end of such a huge Brown Wolf's gazes.

The incredibly sharp eyes of the Wolf burned in the flames of pure, unadulterated and much deserved confidence. Being stared at by such powerful, and somehow, courageous eyes, Tae-Jo felt indescribable pressure weighing down on him.

He had to accept the reality of his situation.

So, this is it. Looks like this is where I meet my maker.

Meeting a Monsterised Great Tiger, then this Tiger-sized Brown Wolf.

My luck's finally become pretty damn good isn't it. Yep, it's so effing good today, it has turned into my last bloody day on earth!!

“...Fuu.”

Completely resigned to his fate, Tae-Jo could only sigh and close his eyes again.

Heavy rustling of paw steps teased his eardrums like a distant hammer being struck.

However... no matter how long he waited, the expected agony of death didn't materialise.

Confused, Tae-Jo ever so carefully reopened his eyes.

“Eek!!”

Right in front of his nose, stood the Brown Wolf.

But it was the strangest thing, ever.

The wolf was inserting its sharp fangs between the gaps of his fallen comrade's

armour and was in the process of lifting him up.

“What... what the hell?”

Tae-Jo briefly entertained the idea of this Wolf playing around with its food but had to kick that thought to the curbside on the double by the next gob-smacking actions of the creature.

The Brown Wolf gestured with its sizable head as if it wanted Tae-Jo to follow it, and begun carrying the wounded comrade in its mouth towards the direction of the military base to the West.

CHAPTER 2

BECOMING A WOLF (2)

'He's following well,' thought Kim Sae-Jin as he took a glance at the overly cautious male Hunter behind him.

It was a bit of a waste to leave behind the carcass of that dead Brown Wolf, but Sae-Jin figured that little guy wouldn't be worth much as a material seeing how weak and famished it was. At most, the Korean government's reimbursement would be worth less than \$440 US. He would have to derive satisfaction from knowing that he was able to help these two Hunters today instead.

After walking for an unknown amount of time, the exit from the mountainous regions' border could be seen in the distance. A signboard near it said, "From here on, the number of Monster encounters will increase."

Confirming their location, Sae-Jin lowered the unconscious Hunter, who had a faint pulse, to the ground and glanced back.

"Heup!!"

The Hunter following Sae-Jin made a funny noise as he hurriedly held his breath in fear. Feeling rather mischievous after seeing that nervous appearance, Sae-Jin decided to pull a prank at the scared man.

– *Krrrrng.*

"Eeeeeeeek!!"

Sae-Jin found the panicky reaction of the Hunter falling on his butt absolutely priceless.

'Have a less dangerous life, Mister.'

The funny reaction caused Sae-Jin's lips to twist upwards. He then lightly patted the shoulder of the sacred and sweaty Hunter with his front paw, and stepping past, he leisurely headed back towards the forest.

Left alone, Kim Tae-Jo remained there utterly dazed for a long time. The massive Brown Wolf had long disappeared into the thicket, but he failed to understand what had just happened... this maddeningly weird experience.

Somehow recovering from the shock, he recounted the events from several moments ago. That big Brown Wolf... That Monster... It rescued him.

Unsure of whether he was dreaming or not, Tae-Jo sharply slapped his face.

“Ouch.”

It hurt. Therefore, it was definitely not a dream. Still dazed, Tae-Jo’s stares fixed on the direction where the mystery Brown Wolf had gone off to.

“...*Cough, cough.*”

“Ah, Sang-Yun!! Can you hear me?!”

The wounded comrade, Sang-Yun, coughed weakly, breaking Tae-Jo’s dazed state. He quickly shouldered the fellow Hunter and stood up.

“Heeeey, over here!!”

Tae-Jo shouted out aloud and soon, he could see some sort of stirring by the guard post building over yonder by the exit.

“Please help!!”

After determining the location of the desperate voice, soldiers hurriedly ran towards his direction. A relieved smile broke out on Tae-Jo’s face as he realised that he’d be able to live for another day, all the while momentarily forgetting about the dream-like event of a Wolf saving him.



“A Spirit Beast?”

“That’s right. That’s the only fitting explanation for what happened. That massive size, that display of human-like intelligence...”

Once more, Tae-Jo's expression became profoundly moved after recalling the event as he sipped some warm tea.

"But, can a Monster evolve into a Spirit Beast?"

A soldier manning the border exit guard post tilted his head in puzzlement and asked, unconvinced.

Spirit Beasts were creatures seemingly blessed by Divine Spirits. They were unfathomably mysterious beings; their physical abilities and mental prowess were greatly enhanced as they accepted the aura of Mother Nature. They were essentially different from the vicious beasts with Mana that ran amok, and so, were treated differently as well.

"If it's a Wolf, then there's a good possibility. Right now, Wolves are treated like Monsters because of their vicious nature but, originally, they were wild animals to begin with."

"...If that's true, then, wow... that's some mystery."

The soldier couldn't fully believe Tae-Jo's words. That was because, a Spirit Beast wasn't some common existence. For instance, the legendary creature, Nine Tailed Fox, was included in the category of Spirit Beasts.

Facing the sceptical attitude of the soldier, Tae-Jo creased his forehead while opening his mouth.

"There is no *ifs*. It's the honest truth. I really did encounter... Ah, that's right!!"

Suddenly remembering something really important, Tae-Jo shouted out and shot up from his seats.

"The Recording Lens!! I was wearing the Recording Lens at the time!!"

A Recording Lens did what its name implied – it recorded images reflected on the retina. Dirt-poor hunters like Tae-Jo, who could only survive day to day by earning his keep the hard way, wore this lens every now and then when going out on a Monster hunt. It was for that off chance of seeing a rare Monster that could be worth something. That, or if there happened to be a particularly detailed recording of a hunt, he could sell it off to make extra cash on the side, calling it "educational material."

“...Eh?”

“Just wait a dang moment!! I’ll definitely show you!!”

The soldier worried about seeing blood pour out for a moment as Tae-Jo hurriedly began digging into his eyeball, fishing out a single lens.

“Here, here, take a good look!!”



“Achoo!!”

Around the same time, in a nearby cavern Kim Sae-Jin in his Goblin Form suddenly sneezed out during the middle of dismantling a Monster corpse.

“...**sniff**”

He wiped his itchy nose with the bloodied hand and finished organising the extracted Monster materials before putting them away, then took a seat on a stone chair.

“*Keuheng.*”

One of the Goblin’s traits was “unable to stay still.” It was practically impossible to remain still in the Goblin Form as a result. Blowing his nose, rubbing his hands for no reason, making weird noises – they were instinctual habits and Sae-Jin ended up doing them involuntarily.

Sae-Jin deeply hated this side of the Goblin Form so he promptly changed back into the Brown Wolf Form. Lying snugly on the flat stone bed, he willed the Status Window to appear before him.

► Trait [Monster]

[Rank: Rare]

[Trait Level: 3]

– Species changed from Human to Monster. Once per 24 hours the host can

maintain the Human Form for 70 Minutes, calculated from the numerical value of [Energy Manipulation] stat.

– Stats of the Monster Forms will be reduced during the Human Form.

– Desire to sleep has been lost.

– Currently maintaining the Brown Wolf* Form.

► Status

[Physical Strength 16]

[Endurance 15]

[Agility 19]

[Energy Manipulation 7]

[Mana Affinity 1]

[Magic Strength 1]

[Luck 3]

[*Brown Wolf: Strength and Defense increase by 5, Agility increases by 8. During the Human Form, the effects will be reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$.]

The results of a month's effort was his Trait level increasing by a whopping 2.

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–Krrrrng.

Sae-Jin growled. He was dissatisfied and angry at the slow rate of his progress.

It was almost a month ago when he resolved to become a Lycanthrope. He packed all his meager belongings together and set off to the Gangwon Province. It was like doing a Time Attack in a video game – his previous home in the suburbs of Songpagu was 30 minutes away from the mountains of Gangwon, a feat impossible if it weren't for the advent of the Mana Trains. (*Songpagu is a suburb in the capital Seoul and its defo much*

further than 30 minutes from Gangwon.)

Cutting it fairly close, Sae-Jin cautiously evaded the eyes of the military and the Knights Orders, and successfully sneaked past the borders of the mountain region undetected.

At first, he had no idea what he should do. Suddenly barging into the land of Monsters, Sae-Jin had to repeatedly suffer through confusion and chaos. And when Monsters challenged him, he fought them off by turning into either the Orc Form or the Wolf Form and survived.

It was a painful experience. The smell of raw flesh stuck between his teeth nauseated him, the unpleasant sensation of pummeling the life out of his victims with a blunt weapon – all these experiences were something he just couldn't really get used to. He even cried himself to sleep every night thanks to the anxiety of steadily losing his humanity gnawing at him.

But the feeling of disgust lessened as time passed, and even though he couldn't readily accept them, just like that, Sae-Jin was progressing step by step towards achieving his goal.

The first thing he did after entering the mountains was to find and secure a nice cave that couldn't be located by the Hunters. He turned it into his base of operations. Then naturally, he started living there for good.

Utilising the Goblin Form's surprisingly deft hands, he remodeled the interior of the cave, and to withstand the cold weather, he lined up the fur of several Monsters around the place.

There was a stream nearby so that was drinking water taken care of; he also roasted the meat of wild animals he caught for sustenance.

After that, all he did was a nonstop hunting.

When he was at a level 1, pretty much every single Monster he fought posed a serious threat to his life. That was even including the other, common-variety Brown Wolves.

So he used his head a little. Sae-Jin only picked on those poor wolves that were rejected from its own pack or were too dull-witted, and by relying the Orc Form's much greater physical strength over that of his victims, he smashed their skulls in. After smashing

10 heads, his Trait had its very first “level-up.”

But the changes he went through were slightly different than expectation. Sure, both the bodies of the Orc Form and the Brown Wolf Form became a lot bigger and his stats became just that stronger, but weirdly, the Goblin Form stayed the same.

However, what he wanted wasn't this type of “growth.” What he came here for was to “evolve.”

Such as to become the higher ranked Monster in the Wolf species after the Brown Wolf, the Grey Wolf. For the Orc Form, it was the Orc Warrior. For the Goblin Form... uh, whatever was higher up.

Instead of the evolving, his Forms remained the same and only the “stats” improved.

Sae-Jin didn't lose heart though, and just poured in more effort. He thought that maybe he just needed to level up once more.

It was disappointing but at least the hunting became easier with his Trait Level being 2 now.

Even if he fought against other Brown Wolves, he was over 1.5 times larger, and it was evident that the disparity in strength was greater still. In other words, he became the top predator in this neighbourhood almost in an instant.

But leveling up became increasingly difficult. From Level 1 to Level 2, he only had to spend 3 days and kill 10 preys. However, for Level 3, even nearly 30 days and 100 kills proved to be insufficient.

Frustrated, Sae-Jin thought about heading to a hunting ground with higher tier Monsters only to give up on that idea.

That was because, in the world of Monsters, the difference in power between two tiers was like heaven and earth. It was actually that enormous.

The easiest example was to compare a Brown Wolf to a Grey Wolf.

The Brown Wolves were ranked lowest tier, and the Grey Wolves were also ranked as a low tier, just one place above them. That was it.

But if Brown Wolves wanted to hunt down one Grey Wolf, then at least a single pack consisting of over 12 individuals were needed.

That's why, without any other choice he had to repeatedly grind away like crazy in this lowest-level hunting ground for the past 31 days. Finally, he was able to level up one more time.

But perhaps inevitably, what awaited for him was the growth of his stats and not the evolution of his Forms. His size and overall power might have grown to a point where he could rival a Grey Wolf, a creature that could easily contend with a full-size tiger, but in the end, he still couldn't become a one.

'Just what is it that I need to do?'

An unexpectedly cute sound escaped his nostrils as he sighed in his Wolf Form. None of the hapless Hunters would've thought he was cute though as they would be too busy running away like scalded cats after encountering his massive Brown Wolf Form.

As he was sinking deeper into his worries, suddenly, strange texts popped out in front of his eyes.

[Condition Complete: Minimum Reputation.]

- The minimum of 100 people have engraved the existence of "the Brown Wolf" into their minds. All stats rise by 1.
- The Grey Wolf Form is available for host instead of the Brown Wolf. All stats related to the Wolf Form will be adjusted accordingly.
- "The Grey Wolf's Sense of Smell" will be available during Human Form. (*Active Skill*)

► Status

[Physical Strength 22]

[Endurance 21]

[Agility 28]

[Energy Manipulation 8]

[Mana Affinity 2]

[Magic Strength 2]

[Luck 4]

[*Grey Wolf: Strength and Defense increase by 10, Agility increases by 16. During the Human Form, the effects will be reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$.]

“...Fuuheng??”

This inexplicable change was so out of nowhere, Sae-Jin was momentarily at a loss for words.

But after recovering quickly, using the pair of inquisitive, excessively round eyes he ascertained the condition of his new body.

Definitely, he had changed.

His previously doggy-brown fur had completely morphed into a new shiny, grey coat.

CHAPTER 3

BECOMING A WOLF (3)

A Monster's remains could be either useful or useless for several purposes.

If a monster's bones were sturdy and its skin tough, then they could be recycled as base materials for making weapons to fight against other Monsters, and if the Mana accumulated into the heart and became a Mana Stone, then that Monster's carcass would be used up as the basis for creating magic and miracles. Miracles, because scientifically-unexplainable magical effects could be given to people and items they wield by the so-called "enchanting" effect.

The one tasked with the disposal of the Monster remains was the Government. This arrangement came about because those in power wanted to correctly gauge the situation within the Monster territory and to provide the adequate response if needed; and also to prevent the greedy and money-craving private entities from potentially defrauding the Knights or the Hunters.

But the "The Monster Remains Disposal Through Public Enterprises Act" couldn't be found anywhere else except only in South Korea. That was why this country was called a Heaven for people making a living off Monster remains and consequently, there was a higher ratio of Knights, Mercenaries and Hunters among the Korean population.

"Two Brown Wolves. Here's the government reimbursement of \$880 as well as your new Low Tier Hunter licence. Congratulations on your promotion of rank, sir."

Currently, Sae-Jin was inside the government-run "Monster Store" where the remains were disposed off. This was the place where the remains could be sold, the various equipment bought and at the same time, get the administrative works done.

And that was to determine the ranking of the Hunters. This was directly tied to his or her current results, while the said results could be calculated via the number of Monsters hunted down and killed. So, the Hunter's union handed over the full responsibility of assigning the hunter's rank to the Monster Store a long time ago.

"The rest of the remuneration amount should be deposited into the account number you have provided us with, after the final calculations are carried out. Anyways, isn't

your dismantling skill really great? And the achievements you have piled up so far is also amazing... It's scarcely imaginable that you've been a Hunter for only a month now."

The female government worker smiled as she spoke up to here.

"...Is that right. Wasn't aware of it."

Maintaining his expressionless face, Sae-Jin just grabbed his new Hunter licence and turned on his heels to leave.

Sae-Jin received the title of Lowest Tier Hunter around 30 days ago. The registering process was really simple and easy. All he had to do was to catch a single Monster and bring it in, thus becoming a Hunter from then onwards.

After becoming a registered Hunter, Sae-Jin decided to sell around 2~3 portions of Monster materials every 4 days or so. More than that, it'd be too eye-catching and he might be seen as someone suspicious, and due to his current condition, he'd rather avoid such kind of attention with all his might.

Obviously, Sae-Jin wasn't the only person in the entire world to possess a Trait but, nobody in their right minds would believe the crazy talk of 'a Trait changing a person from a Human to a Monster.' It'd be more believable, instead, to claim that a Monster was posing as a human. Actually, there was an incident like that not too long ago, and the new term Monster Man was coined from that very incident.

'... 40 minutes left.'

This Store was the closest to the Monster Field but to someone like Sae-Jin whose very life was directly linked to the ticking clock, he still had to leave quickly.

- Yesterday afternoon, around 7 o'clock. At the mountain regions of Gangwon Province, a strange incident occurred in the so-called 'Monster Field.'

Sae-Jin's footsteps were halted by the sounds drifting from a television. The interior of the Monster Store was configured similarly to that of a modern bank and for those waiting in queue, a hologram TV with absurd clarity was installed here.

-This was an incident in which one Brown Wolf rescued Hunters from the dangers of getting eaten alive by another Brown Wolf. Recorded by the Low Tier Hunter Mister

Kim Tae-Jo using a Recording Lens, these images were uploaded to Social Networking sites and were widely shared by many people. Shall we take a look?

The anchor stopped here, and the projection changed to the playback of a blurry recording.

– Out of Mana bullets and his stamina depleted, stranded in a life or death situation, Mister Tae-Jo runs into a starving Brown Wolf. Unable to abandon his grievously wounded comrade, Mister Tae-Jo resolves to meet the Wolf head on and he grabs the shotgun with both of his hands.

The ugly shape of the starving wolf threateningly growling was the first image seen on the projection.

– He swings the rifle with all his might but as if he has given up, Mister Tae-Jo closes his eyes.

Then the projection blacked out for a moment.

– When nothing happens after a passage of time, confused Mister Tae-Jo ever so carefully reopens his eyes.

Now visible in sight was an image of another Brown Wolf, much bigger than the one before. The neck of the starving wolf that threatened the Hunters was pierced by the fangs of this creature.

– This giant Brown Wolf suddenly appeared and bit to death the other wolf attacking Mister Tae-Jo. However, Mister Tae-Jo still couldn't escape the feeling of despair. Because he thought this giant Brown Wolf would surely kill him now. But, this Wolf was different.

Instead of attacking, the Brown Wolf picked up the as-good-as-dead fellow Hunter in its mouth before trotting off to somewhere in a relaxed manner.

– Seemingly making a gesture with its head to follow it, the wolf carries the fainted fellow Hunter and begins to head off to an unknown place. Mister Tae-Jo watches on dazedly for a moment before hurriedly getting up, cautiously following the creature.

Walking for a while, the blurry images of the distant border post finally appeared on the projection. Then the wolf put down the Hunter in its mouth and returned to the

forest.

– After seeing the border post that can help the injured Hunter, this wolf lowers the man and coolly walks away.

The final shots were of the wolf's rear end, leisurely sauntering away.

'... That was cool?!'

– Right now, this recording has gained incredible fame in portal sites, Social Networking sites and various community chat rooms after being uploaded to Mister Tae-Jo's own SNS profile. The netizens are showing hot reactions at the recording, saying "Why does that wolf have such a handsome face? I want to keep him, no, I want him to keep me", "I might fall in love even if it's a Monster", "I nearly fainted at the broad, dependable back in the final frame."

"Heuheum."

Sae-Jin's back straightened in pride for some reason. 'Was it that cool?'

– After studying this strange incident, the experts are cautiously theorising that the wolf might be the 'growth type Monster' or a Spirit Beast.

– *"A growth type Monster... there were a number of them in the past but they have gone extinct for some time now. As the name implies, it's a type of Monster that could grow. If it's a Wolf, then it'll grow from Brown to Grey, from Grey to Ebony..."*

<<<<

...It seemed that the experts' words always get cut off in the middle.

– Yes, it's a really puzzling incident. If it's a Monster like that, even I'm tempted by the prospect of being protected by it at least once. And now, moving onto the next item. This morning...

At the words of the beautiful anchor, Sae-Jin's face reddened somewhat and he even coughed in embarrassment.

"Oho, how mysterious. I was out catching wolves yesterday, now I feel a little bit regretful."

“But wasn’t that an Ebony Wolf?”

“Still. Aren’t they all wolves?”

From somewhere, the conversations of Hunters waiting in line could be heard.

Sae-Jin took a glance at the direction of the voices, and thought that their outwardly aura was no joke. On their backs, they were carrying... bazookas?!

Feeling somewhat intimidated, Sae-Jin left the Monster Store in a hurry.



Exiting the Store, he caught sight of the road packed with throngs of people busy coming and going.

He couldn’t help but wonder whether this was humans being ignorant to the inherent risk posed by the Monsters. Right next to their doorsteps were the mountains of Gangwon Province, the so-called Monster Field, yet he couldn’t see a speck of worry in the faces of the passing crowd, or from the skyscrapers tall enough to stab the blue sky above.

Of course, the tallest building of them all was called the Eden and it was considered the Holy Land of the Knights, and the fair number of the crowd walking around should be either Knights or Hunters that could single-handedly kill a Monster, so, well...

“...Fuu.”

Sae-Jin grandly sighed out. He just wanted to vent his frustration out. He felt wronged that all these people were living their everyday normal lives yet why only he had to go through such an unfair torment all alone. Unfortunately, he didn’t have a lot of time remaining to lament on his troubles. He only had 30 minutes of Human Form left.

– But I’m okay with it.

Sae-Jin was trying to return to the Monster Field but the sound from an outdoor advertisement shown on a billboard display entered his ear. His sense of hearing had sharpened up considerably after receiving his Trait and he instinctively turned his head towards the direction.

– Even if the injury is grave, even if all my limbs are broken until I can't use them anymore, I'll fight on. I'm not doing it for wealth and honour, but for the people out there.

The images were from an interview with a Knight, blood all over his body, seemingly having prevented an attack from the Monsters just now.

A pair of earnest-looking eyes, a manly jawline, hair dyed in blonde – even Sae-Jin knew of this particular Knight. Treated as the hottest commodity and appearing just about everywhere in mass media and countless talk shows, and possessing a Trait called “the Saviour of the Light,” Knight Kim In-Soo.

– My name is Kim In-Soo, a Mid Tier Knight from the Gaebyeok Knights Order. (*Gaebyeok means Genesis. Left as it is because, well, Genesis sounded too foreign.*)

The advertisement promoting the Knights Order ended with the images of Kim In-Soo's face superimposed on top of the Order's Crest. Staring at the ad wordlessly, Sae-Jin's chest tightened with equal parts of indescribable bitterness and emptiness.

'It's also a Trait but... it's so different.'

Sae-Jin could only try to appease his aching heart and the deep sadness dwelling within with a grand sigh, before pitifully shuffling away.

His destination was the lonely and distant, impressive mountain peak, slightly hidden from the view by the drifting fog and clouds – the Monster Field.

It might have been incredibly dangerous there, but it was also a paradoxical place where Sae-Jin of now could feel most at home.

CHAPTER 4A GOBLIN'S KINDNESS (1)

Quickly shaking away the negative emotions that would always invade his mind whenever he went outside, Sae-Jin returned to his cave, one that resembled a respectable dwelling... more or less. He then set about formulating a new plan.

Now that he was a Grey Wolf, he could go a bit further away to hunt. The issue was... it was still undoubtedly dangerous. Even though his Trait Level was at 3 and had advanced from the Brown Wolf to a Grey one, the Monsters in the Low Tier hunting ground remained a tough challenge.

Besides the Grey Wolves within the Low Tier hunting ground, there roamed Monsters such as Orc Warriors, Skeleton Soldiers, and Trolls, each of them possessing powers greater than that of a Grey Wolf. The reason why these wolves were acknowledged as Low Tier creatures and could survive in this hunting ground was simply because they formed large hunting packs.

‘It would have been nicer still if the Orc Form evolved as well.’

Judging by how only the Brown Wolf Form evolved, all three of his Forms – Orc, Wolf, Goblin – must have had different criteria, specific conditions assigned for each of them. If his Orc Form evolved into an Orc Warrior, then it wouldn’t be a problem to continue using the same hunting pattern for catching Brown Wolves, but... unfortunately for him, that wasn’t the case. Right now, his Grey Wolf Form possessed higher Physical Strength stat than that of the Orc Form.

‘It means I must hunt in the Wolf Form... ’

Sae-Jin emptied all the complicated worries out of his head and stood up to leave. Sitting here wracking his brain cells wasn’t going to give him answers. For now, he’d go out there and take a look-see first.

He moved all four of his feet and left the cave.



– *Krrrrrng...*

As expected, the laws of Low Tier hunting ground was far more dangerous than that of the Lowest Tier areas. The viciously growling Grey Wolves with feral eyes couldn't be compared to that of the lowly Brown Wolves at all.

If it was just comparing the body sizes, then Sae-Jin's current Grey Wolf Form was 1.5 times larger than the normal ones, but...

– *Kwawawal!!*

– *Khwal!!*

The spectacle of 6 ferocious Grey Wolves pouncing on a patrolling Orc Warrior and ripping it to shreds, was something he didn't find enjoyable or impressive to witness.

– *Pureung...*

Losing his motivation, Sae-Jin turned around and went another way. From his back, noises that eerily sounded similar to dogs voraciously chewing on a toy and a desperate, pained scream could be heard. Knowing that he wasn't on the menu for those wolves today could only give him a small sense of relief.

He then headed towards the outer area of the Low Tier hunting ground. This was after rolling his head around for a bit. Numerous Monsters inevitably gathered around a drinking water source such as rivers and lakes, which could create a potential killing field of sorts. Because of this reason, most of the physically weak Low Tier Monsters that lived in groups settled down in outer areas that were as far away as possible from the said water sources.

For instance... Monsters such as Goblins.

– *Krrrrrng...*

Sae-Jin's thoughts proved to be correct.

His eyes sharpened abruptly, a deeply sinister grin plastered on his lips. In the distance, he saw a bonfire burning brightly, illuminating a quaint little village

consisting of several primitive huts.

Sae-Jin slowly approached there. It was quite likely that he had found a village of Goblins nestling in this Low Tier hunting ground that practiced in medicine and witchcraft. These Monsters possessed pathetic physical strength. The things he had to be wary of were: if it was a Goblin practicing medicine, then he needed to look out for poisons; if a Goblin dabbled in witchcraft, then he had to be cautious against curses. However, it wasn't easy to defend against such attacks, so if a Goblin's rank was higher than Low Tier, then regardless of their own ranks, Hunters and Knights would see it as the number one Monster to avoid like a plague.

– *Khreng Kkheng!!*

– *Ddhkeeng!!*

Sae-Jin spotted two green-skinned Goblins. One of them had tattoos plastered all over its body. Must've been the so-called "Elite Goblin."

'They are medicine-types,' thought Sae-Jin.

He used his nose to make sure. The super sensitive olfactory sense of the Grey Wolf caught the unmistakable whiff of herbs, confirming his thoughts.

– *Khreng!!*

– *Khreng!!*

Two Goblins performed some sort of a farewell ritual and parted ways. Seeing this, Sae-Jin quickly lowered his body and hid in the tall grasses.

The one with lots of tattoos on its body, began walking towards where he was hiding. Judging by the binocular-like object as well as a pair of shoes the creature held in hand and wore on its feet, it seemed like this Goblin was heading out either to scout or to gather medicinal herbs.

Sae-Jin's heart beat faster and faster the closer the Elite Goblin got. One footstep, two footsteps. Unaware of the danger lurking in the bushes, the prey unhurriedly walked closer to the trap, and seeing this scene, Sae-Jin's muscles tightened in dreadful anticipation, unconsciously salivating.

As the time to pounce neared, he slowly rose up half way, his ears flattening to reduce air drag as much as possible. However, Goblins were clever and alert Monsters to begin with, and an Elite Goblin was even more so. In order to catch one, he had to exercise utmost discretion and maximum wariness.

–... *Khrrng?*

As expected of a perceptive creature, the Elite Goblin stopped just short of the trap, sensing the aura of uneasiness permeating in the air. But Sae-Jin didn't wait and kicked the ground, pouncing on his prey.

Ignoring the distance, the terrifying beast rushed towards his target like a crashing wave of a tsunami.

'... It's far.'

It turned out, the Goblin was just out of the initial reach. To make the matters worse, the creature had regained most of its composure as well. As a matter of fact, the damn thing had pulled out a primitive blow gun and was trying to shoot it at Sae-Jin's direction. As befitting of the moniker "Elite", there was not a single shred of fear showing in its calm demeanor. All those tattoos weren't just for a show, indeed.

'Son of a bi*ch!!'

But Sae-Jin was far more desperate than the Goblin. His desperation, fuelled by the emotions of heartache and fear, pushed him past the physical limit of the Wolf's four limbs, and like grey-coloured tempest winds, the Grey Wolf stormed in and sunk his fangs into the neck of the Goblin before it could mount a counterattack.

Almost at the same time, an alert window popped up as if it was a message of his victory.

▶ [Complete: breaking past the limit while running] Active Skill "Whirlwind Dash" has been acquired.

– Instantly raises the dashing speed. (Can be used in Human Form.)

– Calculated from the numerical value of the current Agility Stat, the skill can be safely activated (2 times) per day; exceeding this amount will put strain on the body.

Kwajeek.

Sae-Jin broke the neck of the Elite Goblin while reading the pop up notice. The dead Monster's blood seeped into his mouth, past his fangs. Then another notice window popped up into his view.

► [Complete: Traditions of Goblins, Inheritance of Memories.]

– Drank the blood of a Goblin specialising in medicine. Now, while in either the Goblin Form or the Human Form, the host can freely activate “the Elite Goblin's medicinal knowledge and concoction skill”.

Sae-Jin tilted his head slightly. Was this a good thing? But since he was as good as in the middle of enemy encampment, he wasn't able to afford time to ponder this new development.

–Khreng Kheng!!

The hullabaloo raised by a beast's hunt roused a pack of Goblins and they were busy heading this way.

Sensing the overwhelming killing intent, Sae-Jin didn't even look back once as he fled the scene. The countless poison darts, obviously fired by the irate Goblins, inundated the air behind him, but a Grey Wolf's running speed was far greater and rapid than they were.



The sight of a Grey Wolf excitedly shaking its hips with a booty of an Elite Goblin dangling in his mouth while walking back to his home in the Lowest Tier hunting ground could easily be described as endearingly humorous, somewhat.

“...?”

But in the middle of this trot, Sae-Jin suddenly caught a faint but pained whimpering from somewhere.

After carefully lowering the Goblin down, his ears stood up sharply to listen.

<<<<

–... *Ha, ahhh...*

So weak, it might die out any second, but it was there for sure.

It was a moaning of a person in trouble.

There was no need to think too deeply when a human wanted to help out another human being.

Sae-Jin picked up the dead Goblin again and quickly dashed towards the direction of the dying person.

After running full speed for a minute or so, he found a gravely injured figure lying on a thick grass. The injury on this person was terrible enough to make him turn his head away.

He could see intestines within the torn abdomen, crimson blood spilling out, and intermittently, the whimpers managed to escape from the lips in between the bubbling red stuff clogging her mouth.

Even though it was an incredibly serious wound that would have killed a person instantly, this person, a female, was still clinging on desperately. Her consciousness had abandoned her, but she kept on moaning in pain while both her hands were rolled in tight fists, as if she could not accept the fate of her impending doom.

– *Khrrrng...*

Sae-Jin knew who this woman was. Her race was an Elf... like human, her profession a Knight.

The daughter of the Master of the Raven Knights Order, reputedly the strongest Knights Order in South Korea, and only a step away from accomplishing the feat of the youngest-ever Knight ranked Highest Tier in the history – some even going as far as uttering that she could be THE representative of the whole nation and some outright admitting that she was the most beautiful female Knight in the nation – Kim Yu-Rin.

The claims of being the most outstanding beauty wasn't all empty talk, tough. Even while precariously striding on the boundaries of death, Yu-Rin's beauty still wasn't going anywhere.

But the description of her stunning beauty and admiration for her personality had to wait for now. All the honour and glory could only be maintained if one managed to live.

Putting down the dead Elite Goblin, Sae-Jin quickly assumed the Orc Form. As a giant Orc, this slender woman felt lighter than a feather. So, he even hoisted the Goblin carcass he was planning to discard over his other shoulder and hurriedly ran towards his base of operations.

He just hoped that he could make it in time.



Sae-Jin placed the woman down on the stone bed and changed to the Goblin Form. "Thanks" to his short height, he had to climb up on the bed to diagnose all of her wounds. And just like that, like a lie, he could tell exactly what potion he needed to make, and the ingredients necessary to make the said potion.

'A dream-inducing grass, jejeung liquid, a scorpion grass, and... a single low grade Mana Stone.'

Sae-Jin began rummaging through the belongings of the dead Elite Goblin. Thankfully, he found all the necessary ingredients as mentioned as well as a mortar and pestle inside the small rucksack it carried on the back. And the most important item in concocting the medicine, the low grade Mana Stone, he just happened to have a couple on hand, so that was that taken care of.

Sae-Jin began implementing the steps to create a potion as engraved in his brain.

Dividing the ingredients in equal measure, he poured all his efforts grinding them in the mortar. When the herbs were powderized to a certain degree, he then added the Mana Stone and resumed grinding away. That's when the miracle happened. The solid Mana Stone melted into a liquid that emitted a clear blue light, as soon as it interacted with the rest of the ingredients.

It didn't look any different from other emergency medicine on sale in the stores, but the effects would be heaven and earth in difference. Using the knowledge of herbs now firmly rooted in his head, Sae-Jin could ascertain the comparative advantage. It seemed like he made a mid grade potion. If the widely available emergency medicine could only heal the surface wounds, then his own miraculous potion would not only mend the deep injuries but also replenish the lost blood as well.

Sae-Jin applied some of the liquid on the woman's wounds and poured the rest down her throat.

And then, the miracle began. The frightening injury on her abdomen, with the internal organs on show, slowly but surely started to regenerate by itself, and her pale complexion that seemed to indicate that death was just around the corner, regained some of the lost colours.

“Whew...”

Sae-Jin breathed out a sigh of relief, seeing the recovery of the woman below. Suddenly, several message windows popped up and obscured his view.

[Condition Cleared: A Goblin's Kindness.]

- Must administer a necessary aid to at least 1 human being. All stats rise by 1.
- The host can now assume the “Medical Goblin” Form instead of “Goblin” Form. All stats related to the Goblin Form will be adjusted accordingly.

▶ Acquired the passive skill “Goblin's Craftsmanship.”

- The host will receive bonus attributes when performing all jobs related to craftsmanship. (Manufacturing, Cooking, Cleaning, Healing, etc.)
- The skill's effectiveness will be reduced during the Human Form.

“...Eh?”

Not only did the Goblin Form evolve, he even ended up getting a skill to boot.

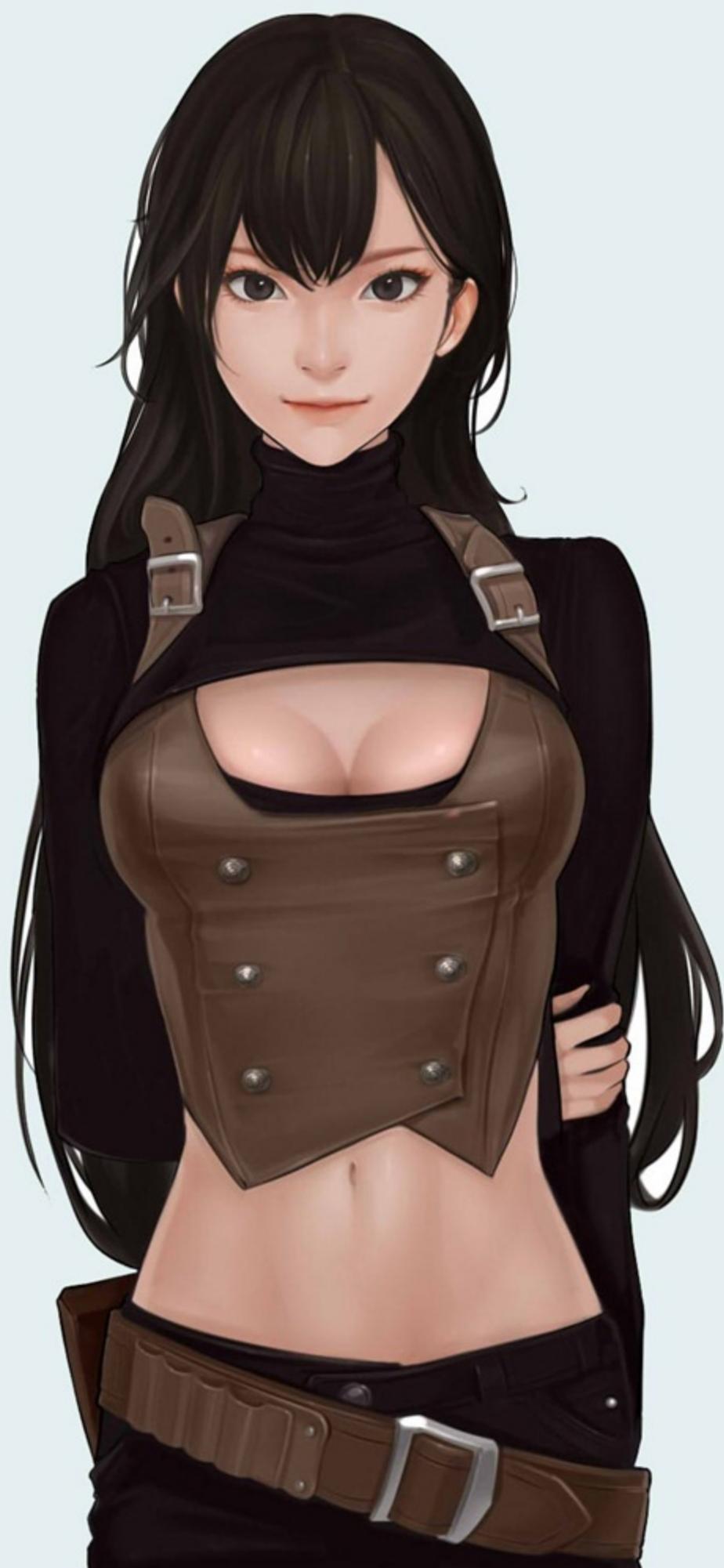
Sae-Jin toiled hard for the whole month, hunted like crazy until it felt like his back would snap into two, and still, he couldn't even get a sniff of a skill during all that time, but here he was, getting three of them in one day!!

Was this emotion that he was feeling right now one of profound happiness, unbridled panic, or inescapable emptiness?

Whatever it was, Sae-Jin just sat there, unmoving, and stared at the message windows.

Meanwhile, without a fanfare, a single modest tattoo manifested on his forehead, just like that.

Kim Yu-Rin



CHAPTER 5

A GOBLIN'S KINDNESS (2)

The rain started to fall. At first, the drops were light and fleeting, but soon intensified and flooded the small streams flowing down the mountains, as well as rapidly filling up all the basins here.

'Looks like it'll last a while.'

Sae-Jin finally let out a sigh after gazing at the rain for a long time. He was worried. What could he say to the resting woman behind him? What excuses sound plausible enough to prevent her from murdering him? For a highly ranked Knight like her who was aiming to become a person of the Highest Tier, it'd only take a single punch to erase any and all hints of the existence of a single Low Tier ranked Goblin.

"...*moan*..."

But he couldn't continue worrying and agonising for any longer. Even though it hadn't been an hour since the treatment, Kim Yu-Rin let out soft moans as if she'd regain her consciousness any time now.

The pitiful Goblin nearly jumped out of his skin from the sudden moaning and hurriedly ran towards the side of the woman.

"Are you al..."

A sudden thought popping out in his head stopped his words from coming out.

'A Goblin isn't supposed to talk in a human tongue.'

Having thought about it for a bit, he knew it just couldn't be helped. Really, a "regular Goblin" wasn't supposed to save a human. The usually-starving Goblins wouldn't be picky when it came to the matters of filling up their bellies, after all.

"...Hmm...?"

Tossing this way and that, fighting the various pains and aches, Kim Yu-Rin finally

opened her eyes. She could see a stone ceiling through the heavy, sleepy eyelids. Silently observing the unfamiliar ceiling for a short moment, she then suddenly sat up like a lightning bolt.

“...Euk!!”

Unfortunately for her, her action caused the still-healing body to scream out in pain. Her face crumpled in agony, she caressed the abdomen that was torn to bits just over 30 minutes ago.

But it was rather odd.

It was definitely true that the claws of a Sabretooth Tiger gouged a chunk out of her tummy. The horrible residual pain felt very real too. Yet, her abdomen felt just fine to her touch as if nothing was wrong.

“How are you feeling?”

Out of nowhere, she heard a voice of a man.

Yu-Rin let out a breath of relief and turned towards the source of the voice.

In the critical moment, she used the extra teleport scroll which she packed just in case, seeing that the others weren't working for some reason, but even that ended up sending her to a wrong place, so she thought she was going to die. But fortunately, a passerby happened to...

“Ah, I'm...”

A Goblin stood there.

Not only that, it spoke a human language. In Korean, no less.

She was going to get up and offer a bow of gratitude to her benefactor but right now, it felt like her head was flickering into a total blankness. The Goblin in front of her continued to yap on about something, but she couldn't hear any of it. No, her brain actively denied it.

“...What... what the hell?”

Thinking that she must be still suffering from the aftereffects of trauma, she deeply closed her eyes and reopened them. But it was the same as before. She rubbed her eyes and stared again.

“Uh...”

No matter what, the situation remained the same.

“What the hell? Am I going crazy?”

Unable to hold it in, she dazedly spat out the words.

“Nope, I’m real.”

Sae-Jin was also somewhat frustrated. That was because Goblins had really poor *abilities* to string together a decent sentence, unfortunately. Even the most unwanted, useless traits were beginning to mirror the real thing, it seemed.

“Wah, it really spoke. Maybe I’ve died already?”

Yu-Rin covered her face with both her hands and lied back down on the stone bed.

It took quite a long time before she could come to accept her current situation.



Sae-Jin did his best in trying to convince Yu-Rin while facing down her disbelieving gazes. One mistake, and he’d be a dead meat in seconds, that’s why.

Sae-Jin’s story was simple but plausible. His story was that, he was different and cleverer than other Goblins ever since his birth, and after growing disillusioned from the deceitful ways of Goblins, he ran away, then he met a Hunter and although imperfect, learned to speak the language and the mannerisms of humans. Of course, the Hunter met his end in an unfortunate incident some time later.

It wasn’t the most detailed and water-tight setting or a plot, but thankfully, Kim Yu-Rin didn’t suspect his words too much.

Her openness was partly because whether it was a Goblin or not, he was still her saviour, and also because not much was known about how various Monsters lived day-

to-day. After all, if there was a Monster capable of taking on a human shape, then surely, there must be a Monster that could speak a human language.

“...So that’s what happened... Regardless, thanks for saving me.”

With a more relaxed manner, Yu-Rin gently rubbed his head while smiling weakly.

Even though it was gentle gesture, Sae-Jin’s body went rigid. Finding this funny, Yu-Rin lightly giggled out.

“Haha... You’re a strange fellow... Euk.”

Her body condition still didn’t allow her to leisurely laugh out, and she had to grab her abdomen while her face crumpled from the stabbing pain. Sae-Jin quickly gave her another batch of the pre-made potion that suppressed pain and healed the wounds.

“Should I drink this?”

Seeing Sae-Jin nod his head, Yu-Rin smiled and took a big gulp of the potion.

“...Wah?”

Yu-Rin let out a gasp of pleasant surprise almost right away. Like a miracle, all of her pain simply disappeared as if it was all but a lie.

“You got some sick skills, don’t you?”

She smiled brightly and resumed rubbing the head of the Goblin in front of her. It looked like the little guy enjoyed her gesture, she figured.

“Thanks. Really, really, thank you. I made it because of you.”

To Knights who constantly clashed against Monsters, Goblins were nothing more than a lump of bad memories they’d rather soon forget. Poisons and curses were two of the most difficult elements to deal with for the human Knights that lacked the resistance to them. And of course, the ugly outer appearances of Goblins only added more to that negative impression.

But right now, for Kim Yu-Rin, the fact that a lifeform known as a Goblin was standing in front of her didn’t matter one bit. This Goblin that possessed intelligence was

unexpectedly kind and she found it rather cute as well.

“...Ah?”

As she absentmindedly rubbed the Goblin’s head, the bracelet tightly wrapped around her arm suddenly started vibrating.

It seemed like the Order was calling her, at a quick glance. It was likely that they were trying to contact her after she failed to return long past the end of her assignment.

“That’s right, my assignment...”

Her assignment... was unfortunately, a failure. On top of that, she could have suffered the fate of an indescribably gory death, too.

But thanks to her heaven-defying luck, she met this Goblin and was able to overcome her fate. And now, this encounter had given her a chance instead.

‘An investigation will find the evidence left behind by those who tempered with the teleport scrolls, and the two Knights that shoved me into a sure death situation before escaping by themselves, Yu Jong-Yun and Kim Sa-Rang... No, it’s safe to assume the entirety of the 2nd team are involved here.’

In just over 2 years, Kim Yu-Rin’s father, Kim Hyun-Suk would have to step down from the position of the Knights Order Master, after his term of office comes to an end.

And the favourite to fill the position was not the current Vice Master of the Order, Oh Jong-Hyuk, but was, in fact, Kim Yu-Rin. The current situation was at point where two opposing sides, one supporting Yu-Rin and the other the dissatisfied Vice Master, were engaged in shadowy struggles for power, and what had happened to her today could be best described as a result arising from the said struggles.

<<<<

Was it necessary to stoop so low like animals just because *they* felt like the time was running out, with her rank advancement ceremony being next month, she angrily mused. Yu-Rin ended up gritting her teeth.

Those six bastards that abandoned her right in front of the cave of a 40-year old Sabretooth Tiger, a creature so tough that a highly ranked Knight would find it difficult

to fight against it alone; and the mysterious identities of the ones responsible for making 7 teleport scrolls, her Mana enhanced armour, and even her weapons malfunction at the critical moment.

“Thanks. Because of you, looks like now I can pull out all the weeds in one go.”

She had no choice but to cool her boiling anger for another day in the future.

Kim Yu-Rin gently smiled and continued to rub the head of the Goblin, before slowly speaking up towards the bracelet.

“Upper Tier Knight, Kim Yu-Rin, will return...”

Yu-Rin then stopped and took a quick glance at the Goblin, before breaking out in another soft smile and changed the contents of her message.

“No, I shall return in about 3 hours time. It’s raining too hard. And because of heavy rainfall, a landslide blocked the exit of the cave I’m in.”



Sae-Jin and Yu-Rin talked a lot during those 3 hours.

Rather than a conversation, though, it was clear which role belonged to who.

Since it was difficult to form a proper sentence as a Goblin, Sae-Jin naturally ended up in the role of a listener and Yu-Rin as the talker.

“Haaaah, how could it be possible that I never got to enjoy a romantic relationship once in all 27 years of my life... Ah, but it’s not a problem unique to me, nope.”

‘... Why is she so lively like this? She sounded so cold and unapproachable in TV interviews.’

Sae-Jin found it wondrous just how easy-going and talkative Yu-Rin was, which was totally out of his expectations. When he saw her on TV, she seemed more calculating and cold rather than someone easy to talk to.

“Honestly, I really adore gifts like plain and cute dolls, you know? But the boys only see the *Knight* side of me and end up giving me only the useless presents like knives

and swords and magic armaments, so how can I go out on a date with knuckleheads like them?! And also, when I kick them to the curve because of their mistakes, they spread around rumours of me having high standards and try to make me look weird...”

But Sae-Jin was satisfied right now. Who would be able to listen to the private grumblings pouring out from the Korea’s most famous female Knight like this?

He listened to her complaints for the next 3 hours all the while suitably responding at the right moments and pretending to not understand when difficult words came by.

Actually, he was busy observing her face. Even after spending 3 hours staring at it, he simply couldn’t get enough of her beauty that easily transcended past every praise laid down before her.

Finally, like a sign, the rain stopped falling and the sunlight brightened the sky just as the end of the promised 3 hours came.

“When I have the time, I’ll come and visit again. It may be a little late... but I promise to definitely repay you properly then.”

In the face of the imminent end to their short meeting, Yu-Rin hesitated somewhat, turning to look at him several times.

It seemed like she wasn’t happy with the level of gratitude shown to her saviour and felt apologetic about it.

But Sae-Jin didn’t feel that way. Instead, he was so thankful, he might even go mad from the excitement.

Yu-Rin gave him a fang of the Sabretooth Tiger as a compensation. Befitting a Knight of her calibre, she didn’t just single-sidedly lose to the Monster but actually managed to successfully break one of its fangs.

If it weren’t for the recently acquired knowledge of the Goblins, he’d have treated this fang as nothing more than some expensive japtem, but now, it was a different story altogether. The fang itself was a Mana Stone and at the same time, an ingredient in concocting medicine. If he carefully added other ingredients to it, then he could make 10 bottles or more worth of potions with various effects and properties.

A hurried, cursory recollection of the potential uses revealed that he could make a

potion to drastically increase his constitution and thus show a tremendous prowess during a hunt, or concoct something like the one he made Kim Yu-Rin drink just now and sell it to the public – the possibilities were truly endless.

As an added bonus, he didn't have worry too much about gathering attention if he started making and selling potions. Normally, it was possible to sell, once cleared of having side effects and approved for consumption, the privately-brewed potions even while maintaining a relative anonymity.

'In other words, I can make a profit of a minimum of \$440K.'

As long as there was a healing effect, even the lowly emergency medicine that wasn't treated as a proper potion was worth \$175 per bottle. He also remembered seeing in a news segment that, in a test performed on medicines concocted by a human, a dark Elf and a Goblin using the same ingredients, the stuff made by the Goblin turned out to be the best of them all.

'And I happen to be a Goblin. A great Goblin, no less.'

With this, he could earn enough money to buy equipment and also buy himself a nice house in Gangwon Province.

"Thank you!! Take care of yourself!!"

Sae-Jin bid Kim Yu-Rin farewell with a pair of very happy eyes. Right on cue, a clear sunlight descended down between them. It was especially a nice weather to say goodbyes.

"...Ri, right!! You take care of yourself as well!! Don't go to dangerous areas!!"

Yu-Rin's voice was trembling slightly, wet with heavy emotions. She felt a tad sad seeing the bright expression of the Goblin – after all, she had opened up her heart to it for the past 3 hours and in the process she grew closer to this creature.

But she couldn't delay matters any longer.

Yu-Rin hardened her face and turned around, commanding her heavy feet to move.

"Yeah!! You too!!"

Hearing that somewhat ordinary voice, she was pretty sure the short time she shared with the intelligent and kind creature would remain etched in her memories for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER 6

A GOBLIN'S KINDNESS (3)

A week after the unexpected meeting with Kim Yu-Rin.

First, from the fang she gave to him as a present, Sae-Jin was able to create 4 batches of potions. One potion for strengthening the constitution of its drinker, and the other three, healing and regenerative effects. He'd stashed the former for himself when he went out on a hunt, but the rest, he decided to sell them off.

He was already getting fed up with this living-in-a-cave lifestyle, plus with the Energy Manipulation Stat now at 8, which made it possible to maintain the Human Form for at least 80 minutes every day, Sae-Jin decided it was high time he bought a house near the Gangwon Province. Of course, as expected of a place called the "Paradise for the Monster-related industry", the exorbitant land price here was second only to the capital city, Seoul, ensuring that even if he started working to his bones starting now, it'd still take a long, long while before he could afford one. *(Lit said "A Mecca for the Monster-related industry. Changed for obvious reasons.)*

Whatever the case may have been, currently Sae-Jin was standing in front of a building called an "Alchemy House" that reeked of a bitter aroma of the herbs and was filled with the bubbling sounds of chemicals boiling in their pots.

While there were less than three Alchemy Houses existing in any given large metropolis, these exceedingly rare organizations were the only place where the administration of the verification process, which assigned the grades as well as handled the distribution of the potions created by the alchemists, could be done. But, even though it was true they were hard to find, for someone like Sae-Jin who literally lived inside the borders of Gangwon Province, seeking out one of these so-called homes of an alchemist proved to be rather simple, with their continued survival intrinsically linked to that of the Monsters' existences.

"Hmm..."

Even though he wore the robe supposedly favoured by alchemists, and had the hood pulled right up to match the outer appearance, Sae-Jin's actions of curiously surveying the surroundings easily revealed his status as a complete noob at these sort of things.

“Is there something I can assist you with, perhaps?”

An employee came in closer and politely inquired after noticing him meandering.

“...I’m here to sell some potions I’ve created. But I haven’t sold one before, nor have I any prior *fame*. Is it still possible?”

“Ah, yes, of course. Would you follow me this way, please?”

Didn’t matter what territory or nation, the number of alchemists were always much lower than that of magicians, and consequently, they were treated as one of the most valuable human resources out there. And, even though there was this whiff of a newbie coming off of Sae-Jin, his word and posture were undoubtedly that of a real alchemist, so the male employee made sure to remain courteous while guiding him.

Sae-Jin promptly found and sat down on a nearest office chair, and nervously waited as he kept an eye on the watch but soon enough, the male employee sat on the opposite side with a document of some kind.

“This is the application form. The verification process will commence after you write down the name of the potion and its effects here. When the product’s been verified to be free of any side effects and its medicinal efficacy ascertained, a grade will be assigned according to its medicinal strengths, and afterwards, the potion can be sold on the market.”

Potions brewed by the skilled hands of alchemists enjoyed a far greater demand than the supply could ever meet. Those commonly available ‘emergency potions’ sold in Monster Stores, mass manufactured with 10th grade Mana Stones, couldn’t even begin to compare in performance and overall quality.

And the popularity enjoyed by the potions brewed by a well-known alchemist was such that potential buyers had to reserve their share very much in advance in order to purchase one.

Strangely enough, it wasn’t the alchemist’s name that garnered the attention, but the potions themselves instead. It was because, alchemists loved anonymity and believed hiding one’s true identity from the public was a matter of professional virtue, so the only avenue available to truly flaunt their abilities was through their potioncraft.

It was a given, then, the alchemists painstakingly chose suitable names for their

creations and didn't hesitate to pour every fibre of their beings and every ounce of their talents into bettering the potions they made.

Of course, the rumour on the street was, that for those famed alchemists who had already achieved great acclaim and were well known throughout the world, they could afford to just deal directly with the Masters of the Knights Orders and the CEOs of the corporate worlds.

"If you wish to keep your identity hidden, please check that box labeled Anonymous over here."

Sae-Jin unhurriedly jotted the words down on the application form. For the potion's effects... healing and regeneration.

All of a sudden, the body of the male employee trembled noticeably from the shock as he took a sideways glance at the contents Sae-Jin was writing down.

When Sae-Jin glared at him questioningly, the employee scratched the back of his neck and sheepishly made an excuse.

"Ah, my apologies. It's because regeneration is quite a rare effect... to clarify, did you mean regenerative recovery of the wounds, instead? Usually, a potion will be graded lower Mid tier even if the regenerative effects prove to be minor. And on top of that, there is also a healing effect as well... Hahaha. As long as there are no side effects, this potion will be graded as High, surely? Many Knights Orders and hospitals were getting concerned at the shortage of High grade items lately... so this is great news."

Sae-Jin lightly smirked at the employee. He knew there wouldn't be any side effects with the potion. Since a word like perfection was not nearly enough to describe the skills of an Elite Goblin capable of combining the ingredients and the powder of the Sabre-tooth Tiger's fang down to a nanogram accuracy.

"I've completed the form."

"Ah, thank you. Just in case, have you brought along a sample of the potion?"

The employee asked Sae-Jin as he handed over the form.

"Well, rather than what you'd call a sample, I've got the finished product here with me."

Sae-Jin produced a glass bottle containing the potion from the robe's pocket. A clear blue light emitted from the liquid inside and the small area around the bottle glowed softly as a result.

“ ... ”

In that moment, the male employee became completely speechless. After a lengthy deliberation brought on by the indescribable beauty of the potion, the only thing he could do was to swallow back his saliva, hard.

There was just no way a novice alchemist could concoct a medicine that had both the effects of healing and regeneration. But there could be no doubt as to what this clear blue liquid emitting the brilliant glow was. Even without testing, even without assigning it a grade, this could only be the “Healing and Regeneration” potion.

“...This... Please, wait a moment.”

The male employee quickly recognised it as an item he was not qualified to handle. A value of a potion with healing effects was higher than other variety of potions. Obviously, people with jobs fighting back the tides of Monsters, Hunters and Knights, as well as the civilians occupying regular positions would have found such potions quite a necessity.

“Sorry, but I don't have much time.”

Unfortunately, he just couldn't afford to delay any longer, so Sae-Jin stood up to leave. Seeing this, the employee went into a full-on panic mode and he quickly grabbed Sae-Jin's shoulders and made him sit back down.

“Wait, wait, wait a moment, please!!! Just one moment!! The Manager will...”

The employee was desperate in his plea. In reality, the Alchemy Houses were actually high-stress organizations dyed in the colours of cutthroat competition and the pursuit of the robust bottom lines.

To be in a better position to receive the “financial assistance”, the twenty-odd Alchemy Houses spread throughout the country were engaged in a bloody war of results, and the matter of which potion came out of which House located in which province played the most important role in achieving the best results. In the situation where a quality potion came up for sale, then the House would occupy a more favourable position

when the inevitable petty squabbles should break out between the Knights Orders and various other institutions that wanted the potion for themselves.

That was why the employee was adamant about keeping Sae-Jin here, but he was firm with his reply.

“You don’t need more than a few drops for the verification purposes, so I shall leave behind three. There shouldn’t be a problem for me to return at a later date after the testing process is finished.”

“Ye, yes, that is true, but... Wait, the stamp. Did you already stamp your *jijang* on the form?” (*A jijang is literally a finger stamp.*)

The alchemists wishing to stay anonymous were specially managed through their *jijangs*. So, while most employees didn’t know of the name nor the face of an alchemist, they could still tell which potions were brewed by that particular person.

“Yes, I did. I saw the blue-coloured number 30437 spreading out on the form.”

That number meant that his application was 30437th for this particular Alchemy House. Seeing that there were less than 1000 variety of potions on the market, there was no real need to ask just how many aspiring alchemists out there had to taste despair during the grading and verification processes.

“Yes... in that case... please promise me to come and visit us later on!! That you’ll return to us!!”

The employee bowed down and shouted out aloud. It was loud enough to reverberate around the interior and caused the surrounding gazes to focus here, but to those familiar with how the Alchemy Houses operated behind the scenes, it was only at the level of yet another day at work.

“Ah, yes. Well, do you have a preparatory bottle for the samples at hand?”

At his words, the employee hurriedly moved to find a sample bottle, and Sae-Jin left the Alchemy House after leaving behind precisely three drops worth of his potion inside of that tiny little glass bottle.



The downtown of the city was filled with all sorts of sounds. Conversations from the passing traffic of people tumbled around one another, mixed with the various noises of the city – Sae-Jin found it hard to adjust after getting used to the stillness of the mountains.

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But even among this jumble of sounds, there was this one voice that attracted his ears especially so.

– Knight Kim Yu-Rin, there are only 2 weeks left until your Highest Tier Knight ascension ceremony... How are you feeling right now?

The sound was coming from a wrist-mounted hologram TV displayed in the electronics store, the projection showing an interview performed by a reporter with Kim Yu-Rin.

– Not too bad.

–... Yes? Ah, haha. Ahahahaha. Is that so? Of course... Hahaha. It wouldn't be bad at all, hahaha!!

The reporter could only just about diffuse the tricky situation the uncomfortably short answer brought on with several awkward laughs.

Sae-Jin smirked lightly as he watched. He knew why she acted that way, after all – something about the phobia of being in front of cameras or something like that.

– So, so then... let's proceed to the next question. Ah, yes, after being voted No. 1 as the most beautiful Knight by the male counterparts, can you please tell us how you feel...

The reporter forgot the rest of his question momentarily after he got properly sucked in by the infinitely clear gazes of Yu-Rin staring at his face. It might have been an ordinary gaze in truth, but her beautiful face made it seem much more extraordinary than it really was.

– Obviously, it's not bad, as well, no? Ah, no, wait, that's... what was it again...?

The reporter finally managed to open his mouth and sprouted nonsense for a second or two, before his professional mentality brought back his game face back on and he quickly changed to another question.

– Ah, that’s right. Can Miss Yu-Rin enlighten us to what your ideal man entails? It’s just that, several hotly trending male Knights have all chosen Miss Yu-Rin as their ideal partner, you see.

–... An ideal man...?

– Yes, yes.

Yu-Rin thought deeply for a moment, before breaking out in a grin.

It was short, but stunningly beautiful enough to dye not only the projection but the entire grey street surrounding the store with brightness. The reporter was lost for words again, while Yu-Rin replied with that dazzling smile still on her face.

– I prefer a man that’s like a Goblin.

–... Yes? What do you mean by that...?

– Except that he’d have to be intelligent and kind. In other words, a Goblin that’s both kind and skilled.

– Ah...

The reporter ended up interpreting her words that sounded unrealistic as something like ‘*no ideal man for me out there*’, or such.

– Ye- yes, of course. Thank you for your candid replies. As expected of the youngest ever Highest Tier Knight, the qualities for your ideal partner are indeed very unique.

But Sae-Jin was different. He stood there staring at the image of Kim Yu-Rin for a long while with a huge smile on his face, before entering the shop properly.

“Welcome~.”

“Ah, yeah, how much for that wrist hologram TV? Oh, wait, will it work even deep inside a cave up in the mountains?”



While the employees of the Alchemy Houses were mostly the “specialists” who gave up walking the paths of alchemy mid-way, the roles of Managers could only be filled by the actual alchemists. An alchemist had to register a minimum of three potions in the bestseller list in order to either open up an Alchemy House or to sit in the apprentice position of a Master.

The Dark Elf alchemist Hazeline, who rose to the Alchemy House Manager’s seat at a young age of 31, was currently making an unreadable expression on her face as she examined the sample potion left behind by the mysterious visitor earlier today.

“...Hey, why am I even looking at this? Hell, this doesn’t even need to get verified, either. At the very least, it’s a mid grade. And at most, a High grade. It’s been awhile since I saw a potion this bright and clear. And like a schmuck, you sent away the guy who brewed this by saying that you needed to test it?!”

“My apologies... I have no excuses.”

“Oh well, at least, with him leaving the sample behind here, the possibility of us doing business together is rather high, so no need to apologise. Anyhow, what’s it called?”

“Ah, that is... it’s a little strange.”

The male employee hesitantly checked the application form Sae-Jin wrote, but in the end, stutteringly read aloud what was written on the paper.

“A Goblin’s Kindness. That’s the name of the potion.”

Hazeline



CHAPTER 7

A HEAVENLY GIFTED HUNTER (1)

It was an ordinary afternoon.

And just like any other day, Sae-Jin came to the Monster Store to unload the Monster materials when, out of the blue, the lady government official demanded to see his Hunter Licence.

“Here, please take this newly issued Hunter Licence.”

After the official did this and that with the new card, he noticed that there were new and different words from before added to the front of it.

“*The Heavenly Gifted Hunter...?* What is this?”

Sae-Jin asked, his head tilting slightly.

“Ah, that is what you call a Title... It’s just a nice, simplified way to describe your current set of abilities.”

“Eh?”

“Didn’t you bring in Monster carcasses worth 23 creatures within your first month as a Hunter, Mr. Kim Sae-Jin? Because you satisfied the conditions, a prefix was added to your job description. Overflowing with a great talent, that’s what the title Heavenly Gifted means. It’s really a rare and wonderful Title, you know. You can’t receive it if you’ve been a Hunter for over 6 months, and also, the Knights Orders actually do prefer this Title over the likes of *The Seasoned Pro* or *The Distinguished Individual*.”

The government official explained with ardent fervor and zeal, but Sae-Jin showed little interest as he lightly nodded his head. After all, this wasn’t a very helpful tale for someone like him who could only maintain his Human Form for 80 minutes a day.

“...Thanks, I guess.”

“Ah... wait!!”

When Sae-Jin turned around to leave, the government official shot up from her seat and lightly held onto his sleeve. As he frowned and stared at the official with questioning eyes, she quickly pushed forward a paper at him while her cheeks reddened in a bashful manner.

“This... Please take a look at this!!”

“...Huh?”

A government official's trying to sell me something? Even though Sae-Jin was slightly speechless, he ended up finding the shy female official twisting her body in embarrassment, objectively speaking, rather adorable in his eyes.

There was still... 66 minutes left.

“What am I reading here?”

He asked out aloud as he checked out the writings on the paper. The large words “Public Recruitment for Hunters by Pabaek Knights Order” were written on top, and below that were some fine prints detailing what’s what.

“Pabaek is a government-owned Knights Order with its headquarters located in our neck of the woods, and currently, they are looking to hire capable Hunters. Of course, it’s true that only the ranks of Mid Tier or higher can possibly apply, but... I’m sure that Mr. Sae-Jin’s Title will receive a favourable consideration in this case! Besides, the plan was to upgrade your ranking to low Mid Tier or higher as soon as Mr. Sae-Jin satisfied the required amount of hunting experience, you see.”

To clarify, the widely accepted *definition* for a low Mid Tier Hunter was “Can hunt a Low Tier Monster if three people with similar skill sets gather”. And for a low Mid Tier Knight, it was the exact opposite – “Can deal with more than three Low Tier Monsters at the same time, alone.”

That’s why Sae-Jin’s existence was a little, no, *very* special to the eyes of this lady official. In most cases, Hunters formed parties of three or more when moving about, yet here was a man that always came in alone, and always left by himself as well.

“Well, are you... interested in taking this opportunity? If you want, it’s possible to apply right here and now. Mr. Sae-Jin will be accepted right away when you submit your application, I’m sure of it! In the past, Hunters with the Title *Heavenly Gifted* all got

scouted by the famous Knights Orders even before they've been active for less than a year. Heck, some even went and converted their professions and became Knights in the end, you know!"

She became slightly desperate and her grip on Sae-Jin's sleeve got a little stronger.

He was going to decline right away, but then, he found it a bit regretful too, looking at the lady official's round, clear and sparkling eyes. It was a sight of a woman actively pursuing him, something he had never experienced before in his life yet.

A man's worth was indeed judged by his abilities, thought Sae-Jin. To see a cute woman, a well paid government employee to boot, acting so aggressive like this... It was indeed a mystical yet somewhat difficult new world for him to tread in. If it weren't for his Trait of being a "Monster" he wouldn't even have a chance to do so, but at the same time, he couldn't really go around boasting his achievements either, precisely because of his condition as a "Monster"...

"...Is that so?"

When Sae-Jin's lips wiggled and formed an indecipherable smile, she mistakenly thought the talk was proceeding swimmingly, and so she smiled happily and added a bit more to the sales pitch.

"Yes, of course!! Hehe... By the way, there's... a favour I'd really, really love to ask you related to this..."

It was right at this moment. Sae-Jin swallowed that mysterious smile back down. His intuition, forcibly cultivated by being subjected to many painful things at a young age, went off like an alarm bell in his head. It said, don't listen to the rest, just leave as soon as possible.

"So... when you are recruited, please, would you mention my name, Kim Hye-Jin, as the person who recommended you... What the, wait a second!! Please, just a second!! Mister Sae-Jin!!"

Before she could finish her sentence, Sae-Jin was already leaving the Monster Store at a walking speed that bordered on a full-on sprint.



Hunting became a lot easier, after his Goblin Form morphed from being what he previously thought of as a useless burden to one of the most valuable assets in a single day. That was all thanks to, of course, the Body Strengthening potion and its effects.

After “doping”, the Orc Form now exhibited strength that equalled an Orc Warrior’s. But as Sae-Jin went around with a steel mace bought from the local Monster Store, when it came to the matters of overall destructive power, he could easily overwhelm an Orc Warrior that only knew how to wield a crude weapon.

His *doped* Grey Wolf Form might have displayed a similar level of increased destructive prowess, but unfortunately, the Wolf’s limbs strengthened so much that he couldn’t fully control the resulting speed boost so, for now, until he got more familiar with the changes, he had to hunt in a form that most resembled a humanoid shape – an Orc.

“Geuahahahah–!!!!”

And the warcry he made just now before the battle, was completely instinctual. When in the middle of the battle, the rabidly-boiling fighting spirit made him feel like he was an invincible warrior from some legends of the distant past, and it became harder to endure the rapidly-mutating madness without roaring out aloud.

“—”

But his opponent didn’t respond at all. Par for the course, really. Its entire body made up of bleached bones, this bastard was not much different from a corpse reanimated by a Lich using Mana.

Kwaahahng!!

A dull-bladed scimitar collided with a steel mace. There was no need to even confirm the end result. The forest shook violently from the explosion of noise and the shockwave from the collision, while the skull and the scimitar of the Skeleton Soldier were literally blown into smithereens. Standing proudly amidst the broken white bones scattering in the air, an Orc was busy enjoying the wonderful taste of his victory.

[Condition Complete: Required Experience Points Attained]

- ▶ Trait Level now increased to 4.
- ▶ All Stats rise by 1, and all Stats related to Forms will be adjusted accordingly.

And his happiness could only double while silently observing the message window popping up into his view.

His elation couldn't last for long, though.

The tall grasses shook, and there were sounds of feet leaving traces on the ground. He had sensed people's presence nearby.

They weren't close, but neither could they be described as far, so Sae-Jin quickly assumed his Human Form. His survival depended on it.

In truth, the most dangerous element for Sae-Jin in the Monster field wasn't Monsters but fellow humans. With the notable exception of Trolls, he could more or less contend with the rest of the Monsters found in this Low Tier hunting ground, but then, there were the existences called the "Knights" whose powers were just too ridiculously beyond the realm of the common sense. One mistake, and if he got spotted by one of them, then it'd be curtains for him, just like that.

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That's why he always maintained all five of his senses at the highest possible state of awareness. The clothings he wore during his Monster Forms were different from when he was in the Human Form, and thankfully, when he changed, the clothes changed along with him like magic, making it possible to pull the ruse off rather splendidly.

"...Huh, it was just a person?"

Just in time, as Sae-Jin was relaxedly reaching down to grab the Mana Stone from the fallen Skeleton's remains, a party of Hunters emerged from the bushes. This 4-person party carefully studied Sae-Jin's apparels for a bit before offering greetings when they saw the mace in his hands.

"Ah, hello there!"

Hunters were not “friendly” with Mana, and as a result, their bodies weren’t as powerful, so they couldn’t utilise close-range combat weapons. The only remaining weapon of choice for them was the type of guns that fired Mana bullets. That’s why these Hunters mistook Sae-Jin as a Knight instead. Plus, there was that deafening noise earlier, so they assumed his Knight rank was, at least, a Low Tier.

“Haha, what a coincidence. It’s quite a rare thing to run into other humans in a Monster field, see...”

A guy who seemed to be the leader of the party approached Sae-Jin while carrying a disarming smile. But when Sae-Jin showed no reaction and simply stared back at him, this Hunter promptly produced a business card from his inner pocket and handed it over.

“We’re Hunting Team 1, from the Taereung Knights Order. My name is Kim Ji-Han, an upper Mid Tier ranked Hunter, and these guys are... well, it doesn’t really matter. They are just still young hatchlings, after all.”

On the face of this rather expensive-looking business card, the letters “Upper Mid Tier” were embroidered in gold ink. It seemed like that a veteran Hunter employed by the Knights Order brought along a bunch of promising eggs on a demonstration hunt for the express purpose of educating the young ‘uns.

“Is that right.”

“Yeah, hahaha. These guys here somehow managed to hit the rankings of lower Mid Tier within 2 years, but the fact they are still clueless hatchlings, that haven’t changed at all... Oh, if it’s not much trouble, may I inquire which Knights Order you’re affiliated with...?”

Kim Ji-Han asked in a friendly voice. He figured that making a friendly connection with a Knight would never be a bad thing and only prove advantageous for him in the long run.

Of course, that was only if Sae-Jin was a Knight in the first place.

“...Ah, I think you’re mistaken about something here... I’m not a Knight.”

Sae-Jin replied while pocketing the business card.

At the unexpected answer, Kim Ji-Han's head tilted slightly while carrying a confused expression on his face. Then his gaze drifted towards the scattered remains of the Skeleton Soldier on the ground. To utterly annihilate a Skeleton like this singlehandedly, and to claim he wasn't a Knight?

"...So that means..."

"Ah, I'm also a Hunter. Good to make your acquaintance. My rank is a Low Tier."

Ignoring the flabbergasted expression of Kim Ji-Han, Sae-Jin offered his hand for a shake while smiling amiably. Somehow grabbing hold of the offered hand, Kim Ji-Han continued his disbelieving expressions.

"Ah... well, that was a joke... right? Haha, well, your sense of humour is pretty good, I must say. But, you know it's not permitted, right? A Low Tier Hunter isn't permitted to hunt in the Low Tier hunting ground alone. I mean, if a Low Tier rank can chase down a Monster alone, then why stay as a Hunter and not become a Knight instead, right? Ahahaha!!"

"Haha... is that so? But it's the truth."

Sae-Jin could now maintain his Human Form for 90 minutes thanks to his level up just now, but that was still not enough. He quickly pulled out his Hunter licence and showed it to Kim Ji-Han.

"Uh? This is a real Hunter licence... eh?"

Ji-Han's eyes and mouth widened as he discovered something incredulous on the card after he examined it back to front.

"The Heavenly Gifted...? Could this be..."

Ji-Han momentarily stopped talking and simply studied the man in front of him. The Heavenly Gifted – this was one of the greatest Titles available among the Hunters, only granted to those who could, within the space of half a year from the beginning of one's career as a Hunter, kill over 20 Monsters in a month.

Those possessing this Title were all invariably got scouted by the biggest Knights Orders and it was a common occurrence to see many of them switching their profession to that of a Knight instead.

At the back of the licence, there was Sae-Jin's hunting record, and as expected, it was quite a remarkable thing. Maybe it was all down to the difference in talent. 23 Monsters in a month, and to top it off, all self dismantled and disposed of. This record was so overbearing that, even though Kim Ji-Han knew this guy's ranking was two tiers lower than his, he found it impossible to say anything about it.

"...This...!!"

As Kim Ji-Han studied the licence some more, his eyes lit up brightly all of a sudden. He finally noticed the space for "Affiliation" was blank.

Regular Hunters hunted in either one of two ways. One was to form a temporary party with other Hunters, and the other was, like Kim Ji-Han here, to become a Hunter employed by a Knights Order and hunt in a designated team.

But it wasn't a given that the former was a worse choice than the latter, and that the latter option wasn't always a better of the two. There were enough Hunters out there choosing the first option simply because they didn't enjoy being in a strict group environment and all its accompanying rules and regulations, even though they possessed enough skills and abilities to enter a Knights Order.

"You're not affiliated with anyone yet?!"

"...Ah, yeah. Somehow, it's like that, but I like moving solo. I'm not thinking of joining anyone."

Sae-Jin was adamant, but Kim Ji-Han thought that he was clearly the latter case. So, with a smile on his face, he presented Sae-Jin with another business card.

This time, it was for the "Taereung" Knights Order.

CHAPTER 8

A HEAVENLY GIFTED HUNTER (2)

Kim Ji-Han handed over the “Taereung” Knights Order’s business card to Sae-Jin.

“...As I mentioned before...”

“I know. The thing is, though, human minds can change at any time, no? Honestly speaking, trying to tough it out alone, especially in our profession as Hunters where we already enjoy a pretty short life expectancy, isn’t going to work out in the long run. Of course, I’m sure there are pluses to going solo. But hell, don’t you agree that being unable to participate in The Fissure Exploration is too big a missed opportunity?”

In this world, there existed a separate dimension called The Fissure. A place that existed between dimensions, a world between worlds – that was a Fissure. There were numerous, countless Monsters infesting a Fissure, and the only way to “erase” one was to kill every single Monster residing within it. And there was the matter of pure, hard net profit that could be earned when erasing a Fissure which was at minimum, over \$890K, or, as much over \$9 million. It didn’t matter if you were a Hunter or a Knight, participating even once in a Fissure Exploration was a sure-fire way to earn not only great fame and acclaim, but a healthier bank balance as well.

“Give it another consideration. When paired together with a Knight, a Heavenly Gifted Hunter can shine even more, you see. Ah, right. Before that... Did you take down that Skeleton Soldier using that mace?”

Kim Ji-Han asked in a tone of voice that implied he couldn’t understand how it was done. It was just plainly impossible for a regular person to defeat a Low Tier Monster alone, after all.

“Yes. It’s a quality weapon for sure but... my family members all had inherited strong constitutions.”

“Oh... if you say so...”

In today’s world where the abilities “Mana Utilisation” and “Mana Affinity” were strictly divided into two distinct categories, the normal remained within the bounds

of the common sense, but there was no longer any limits applicable for the ones deemed exceptional.

Those with good Mana Affinity didn't need any special teachings to accumulate Mana other than to just breathe, and in time, they could become the proverbial super-men that were fundamentally different from the likes of normal citizens out there.

Although few in number, these Superman types did exist among the Hunters. They were existences that fell just short of becoming a true, full-on Knight as even though they possessed enough affinity with Mana, they still lacked the necessary Mana Utilisation, so most of them ended up eking out a living as Hunters. Of course, it was still a special power that the regular, powerless people wished they could have it too.

“Alright, I'll think about it. Now then, excuse me, I'm running out of time.”

There were still around 10 minutes left in the clock, but Sae-Jin felt it was slightly burdensome to deal with people right now.

“Right. Well, if you change your mind, we'd appreciate it greatly if you give us a call first. Our Taereung Knights Order is famous for treating all its members very well, regardless of whether it's a Knight or a Hunter, you see.”



Maybe it was in consideration of a Grey Wolf's supposed strengths, the agility, his overall size didn't increase even after the the Trait level hitting 4 but, his ferocious, dangerous aura now easily equalled that of a great tiger. And hunting became quite easier too in the Wolf Form without resorting to doping now.

Most of the Low Tier Monsters died after a single surprise attack from Sae-Jin. He'd saunter into a thicket to hide and wait for a prey, and in that moment when one entered the killing zone... With a shocking explosion of speed that didn't even leave behind a blur, his fangs would sink deep into the necks of his victims. If one was tempted to describe this hunting method, it'd be “One Hit, One Kill.”

Sae-Jin abused the newly acquired active skill “Whirlwind Dash” which made catching at least two Monsters in a day a lot easier than before.

Even today, Sae-Jin was leisurely drifting around searching for prey in his Wolf Form.

Its sensitive nose was truly outstanding. Plus, this sense of smell wasn't some abstract, ambiguous nonsense that was like, "it smelled heavy so it's close by", or "it smelled faint, so it's far." Nope.

[Southeastward, 680 metres, Humans, 3 presences]

Yep, that's how this system worked. By receiving this wonderful assistance of the cheat system, he was able to hunt over 10 Monsters in the period of past 3 days.

'Humans again?'

There were more people hunting in the Low Tier ground than compared to the Lowest Tier, so it was a common occurrence to run into other humans. Carrying a dissatisfied expression, the wolf slowly began to vacate the current position.

"Today's luck is good."

"...!!!"

Out of the blue, a voice of another person entered Sae-Jin's ears as he began wading into the tall grass. It was really close. Strangely, there weren't any scents in the air so, while panicking, he quickly scanned the surrounding area. About 200 metres from where he was, he felt a presence. Could he run away? He thought about it, but deemed it too dangerous. Immediately deciding what to do, he changed into the Human Form right away.

"...It's a human."

Fortunately, thanks to his deft timing, he was safe. Sae-Jin calmed his heart and turned to look at the owner of the voice.

It was, weirdly enough, a party of two. One was a girl young enough to be under the legal voting age, and the other was a huge dude wearing a formal three piece suit that seemed totally out of place here.

"Well, hello there~."

The girl studied the lone Sae-Jin in curiosity for a bit before greeting him with a little nod of the head and slowly got closer.

“My name is Yu Sae-Jung, a Low Tier Knight.”

The bob-cut hair that came down around her neck, a straight nose and a pair of intelligent eyes – she should definitely be a teenage girl when considering only her young face, but the slick, urbane aura she gave off made her seem much older and experienced.

“Ah, hello.”

Unwillingly shaking her hand, Sae-Jin reaffirmed that he had made the correct decision. Since she was a Knight, even if he assumed a Monster Form and hoofed it, the whole thing might have turned into one tiring mess. Meeting face-to-face once and parting ways smoothly was a hundred times more preferable.

“And this here is a Low Tier ranked Hunter, Yun Do-Han.”

“...How do you do. It’s nice to make your acquaintance. I’m named Yun Do-Han, a Low Tier Hunter.”

As the man bowed his head, Sae-Jin’s face dropped slightly in amazement. Yun Do-Han’s looks and the get-up all made him look like a highly-ranked Knight or some such, but in the end, he turned out to be some measly little Low Tier Hunter, of all things...

“Were you in the middle of a hunt? Your stealth skill is seriously incredible. And I don’t see any special equipment on you, even.”

Yu Sae-Jung scanned Sae-Jin from top to bottom, and sent him a compliment in a soft voice.

Nowadays, networking & making connections in a hunting field were seen as more important than the whole “graduated from the same school, came from the same neighbourhood” schtick, which Yu Sae-Jung was acutely aware of. Of course, there was that unwritten rule of how the potential persons making connections needing to possess outstanding abilities first, but here, unknown to himself, Sae-Jin had passed this young girl’s initial test.

“Yeah. It’s better to erase all traces of yourself when tracking a prey. Like the way you have erased your scents.”

“Ah...”

As soon as Sae-Jin eyed her bracelet and spoke, she let out a soft cry.

“You’ve got a pretty sharp eye, there. By the way, I still haven’t caught your name as yet...”

“Ah, my name is Kim Sae-Jin. A Low Tier Hunter.”

As soon as he finished speaking, her body shook for a very brief moment. And then, with her head slightly tilted in uncertainty, she began questioning him with a voice that was a degree colder than before.

“...Is it okay for a Low Tier to move alone like this?”

“I’m still alive, so yeah, it’s okay.”

The initial interest she showed, had completely deserted her after his short reply, and so, she gave him a curt little nod. Obviously, she too had mistook as him as a Knight, just like others had so far.

“Yes, well. Whatever... Do carry on with whatever you’ve been doing until now. Seems to work for you, so.”

She derisively snorted once and turned around. And seeing that cold demeanor, Sae-Jin couldn’t help but to frown a little. Seriously now, just how old was she to live her life so cold and calculating? Sae-Jin shook his head in disapproval before heading towards the opposite direction.

But his feet became ensnared by the message window popping up in front of his view.

[Eastward, 500 metres. A Troll in a Ravenous State]

“...Oh, f*ck.”

A Monster with a face that resembled a withered, cracked bark of a tree, and the body size that could reach well over 3 metres tall when fully grown. And capable of making shrewd movements that contradicted its giant body.

A kind of Monster that made people automatically swear out, that was a Troll in a nutshell. Didn’t matter whether it was a Low Tier, a mid Low Tier, a Mid Tier, or a upper Mid Tier. All of this Monster’s characteristics were equally applicable to every

Tier there was. Of course, since it resided in the Low Tier hunting ground, this Troll was weaker than the others in different areas. But the real trouble was that Ravenous State warning.

Trolls were unique in that they rarely displayed what could be seen as the common species-specific behavioural patterns and habits. That's why Monster researchers preferred to study Trolls, and they were sometimes called the only Monsters to possess "individual personalities."

In the middle of those individual personalities, Ravenous State was the rarest and also happened to be the most concerning one, too. As the title implied, it really, really craved for food. What differentiated this state from the others was, Trolls suffering this infliction grew stronger the more Monsters they digested.

To make matters worse, the Troll in the Ravenous State would see unprecedented growth potential in this place, the Low Tier hunting ground. After all, it was the most powerful Monster roaming this area and there was literally nothing here that could oppose or threaten its growth, so a Troll would soon grow strong enough to rival a Mid Tier creature in terms of pure strength.

"...Wait!!"

After hesitating for a moment or two, Sae-Jin quickly ran towards Yu Sae-Jung on the other direction and grabbed her shoulder. Even if her conducts were uncool, it was still the right thing to do to warn her of the impending dangers, after all.

"...What the, hey, what gives!!"

Totally unaware of the approaching disaster, Yu Sae-Jung slapped his hand off her shoulder in irritation.

"What is your problem?"

<<<<

The guy next to her also butted in.

Even though he was pretty well built, since he revealed his rank as a Low Tier Hunter earlier, Sae-Jin didn't really feel scared of this man. And as if he could understand his own shortcomings, he withdrew behind Yu Sae-Jung with a slight fake cough when

Sae-Jin glared at him.

“Hey, mister. What the hell are you trying to...”

“There’s a Monster up ahead. We better evacuate.”

No matter how urgent Sae-Jin appeared and sounded, she just disregarded him coldly before letting off yet another derisive snort.

“Fu. Only a trashy Low Tier Hunter like you would think of running away from a Low Tier Monste-”

Unfortunately for her, she couldn’t get to finish her hostile words of clear ridicule.

– Grrrrrrr...

Strangely enough, a Troll’s growl sounded rather similar to that of a common wild beast.

There it was, approaching them so fast with its huge 3 metre frame, and a face that seemed to be half burnt by the ghostly flames of the Underworld. Outwardly resembling a craggy hill, this Troll stopped in its tracks and surveyed the meals that were discovered coincidentally with a pair of greedy, oppressive eyes.

Affected by the terrifying visage of the Troll, Sae-Jin’s eyes widened in shock and stark fear, and at the same time, Yu Sae-Jung very slowly turned her head to see what was behind her.

“...Ah, f*ck.”

When that evil face filled up her view, she reacted similarly to how Sae-Jin did a bit earlier. Waking up from the fear-induced daze thanks to her swearing, Sae-Jin offhandedly thought that only now she was acting like a real teenager.

“...Do-Han Oppa? Do-Han Oppa!!” (*Oppa: a term of endearment for an older male used by a younger female. Also lit. means older brother.*)

“Eh... ah!! Ah, I got it!!”

She hurriedly called out the name of the dazed Yun Do-Han while drawing her weapon,

a sword, hanging from her hips. It was then when Do-Han suddenly took on the posture to start running.

“...But we’re in the Low Tier ground, though?”

The distance between this hunting ground and a military base with a Knight capable of dealing with this kind of threat was quite considerable.

“He’s different from a trashy Hunter like you so don’t worry about him. And you’ll get in my way, so please, back off to the side, will you.”

Was it the ambitiousness of a youth, or naïve bravery? Yu Sae-Jung prepared to engage the Troll alone and raised her blade straight. And at the same time...

Ta-aaaa-ang...

Yun Do-Han ran off at near the speed of sound.

Sae-Jin didn’t need to ask to figure out what happened. That kind of improbable movement could only be explained away with the involvement of a Trait.

– Grrrr...

The Troll got annoyed as one of its meals, Yun Do-Han, managed to disappear, and it began to growl even more aggressively than before.

“Fuu...”

She took one deep breath. As Yu Sae-Jung concentrated, azure-coloured Mana began to infuse with the blade of her nice sword. That was one of the most famous Mana Utilisation skills employed by the Knights, the “Mana Blade.”

‘That isn’t going to work...’

Sae-Jin knew that was not enough for this Monster. And he noticed that the girl’s slender arms holding the sword were trembling ever so slightly. It was a sign that she was already affected by the fear of the enemy even before the battle, and soon, that would lead her to an inevitable defeat.

Even though he wanted to lend a hand here, without a weapon it was just impossible

for him to intervene. The steel mace he praised so much was currently nicely asleep in the corner of his cave at the moment, as he was planning to hunt as a Wolf today.

‘Time to run.’

Out of ideas, Sae-Jin was about to run with his tail firmly between his legs when,

[Condition Complete: Encountering an Overwhelmingly Stronger Monster.]

- The host has encountered a Monster with near zero percentage of victory. All Stats will rise 1.
- The Orc Warrior Form is available for the host instead of the Orc Form. All stats for Monster Forms will be adjusted accordingly.
- The Skill “Warrior of Reversal” has been unlocked.

▶ Active Skill “Warrior of Reversal” [Current Skill Level: F]

- Available during all Monster Forms.
- For 5 minutes, Strength increases by 200%, Endurance increases by 100% and resistance to Pain increases. *(During Human Form, the time is reduced to 1 minute.)*
- When activating this Skill in Human Form, the Stats will be based off on the Orc Warrior Form.
- Calculated from the current Strength and Endurance Stat, the skill can be activated for *(1 time)* during a 24 hour period.

Just like that, another one of those evolution message windows rose up before him.



Yu Sae-Jung

CHAPTER 9

A HEAVENLY GIFTED HUNTER (3)

Sae-Jin's eyeballs busily rolled around, trying to take in all the words appearing on the various message windows. At a cursory glance, they all sounded pretty dang great. However, what was up with this seriously bad timing – right now, he couldn't even let out an exclamation of happiness for this unexpected evolution.

'... That's not a bad skill at all.'

The fact that the Orc Form evolved into the Orc Warrior Form was great, but his attention was currently with the new skill "Warrior of Reversal". It was truly a wonderful skill since he could use it even in the Human Form. And just as its suggestive name implied, the skill could change the outcome of *any* situation. In other words... a situation exactly like this one here.

'Now, what should I do about this girl, really...'

He looked at Yu Sae-Jung with complicated eyes. Even though she was facing the Troll with outwardly overflowing confidence, she probably knew better than anyone that it was nothing but a false bravado. Really, anyone with eyes could tell that this Troll was in the Ravenous State, what with its appearance of falling gobs of drool from the lips and all.

Plus, this Monster was most likely a low Mid Tier threat now, judging by its huge size and the tyrannical aura oozing off from it. Nominally, a Low Tier Knight should be able to deal with a Low Tier Monster alone. To be ranked a Low Tier at that young age, her talents were something to be really proud about, but unfortunately, it was still way too much for her to fight a low Mid Tier Monster by herself.

"...**Sigh**..."

Sae-Jin let out a grand sigh. It'd take at least 1 minute for that other dude to arrive at the nearest Knights Order base, judging from his running speed. However, what about the time needed for the help, in the form of high ranked Knights, to arrive here?

– *Kwhaaang...*

Taking time to think things through was an unaffordable luxury at the moment. Yu Sae-Jung's mana-infused sword clashed with the Troll's fist, and the resulting explosive shock waves, along with a roar, violently shook the lands they were standing on. She somehow avoided getting knocked out in a single punch by the skin of her teeth, but that was it, that was her limit.

– *Vuwuououong...*

Her face was now full of panic, quite unlike 5 minutes ago when it was still full of arrogance and relaxed demeanor. But Trolls knew no such thing as mercy. The huge fists of Troll created a dark shade as they rained down on top of her head like a torrential rainfall.

Sae-Jin clenched his teeth. He still felt fearful no matter how his burning emotions egged him on to face the bastard. He wondered if this was what the firefighters felt when trying to step into a maelstrom of an inferno.

– *Thkwang!!*

While he was hesitating, Yu Sae-Jung's body got struck by the Troll's fist and was flung away like a thrown baseball. Her fine sword got disintegrated into equally fine powder, and her cool overcoat-like battle armour became an ugly, twisted wreck, losing all its effectiveness in the process.

– *Khung, khung.*

The Troll made a huge racket as it advanced forward. And when it got near the downed Yu Sae-Jung, the bastard raised its huge hand up.

‘... What the?’

Quietly and weakly staring at this unfolding spectacle, Yu Sae-Jung couldn't even think about closing her eyes anymore. She just couldn't believe that this was happening for real. This crazy situation, this incredible pain that didn't even allow her to voice out how much it hurt, all of them felt like a bad dream to her. She just wanted to run away from this terrible nightmare. Only if she could wake up from this dream right away...

The Troll's huge hand slowly descended.

It was a trick of her mind, the slowing down of the time itself. Every thought fled from

her head, leaving it completely blank. It was at this very moment.

– *Kwhang!!*

A man causing a whirlwind to kick up appeared out of nowhere and blocked the fist of the Troll. Only with his body, nothing more than his two pairs of arms and legs, and strangely no emission of Mana coming out of him at all. This guy had stopped the Troll's advances simply with his own physical prowess and nothing else.

His clothing got torn apart due to the Troll exerting a massive, awesome pressure and the ground supporting him caved in, but his stance didn't crumble one bit. He was truly taking the Troll head on.

Yu Sae-Jung observed this improbable spectacle completely speechless. This was an unreal scene that flew in the face of common sense. Since it was more dream-like than an actual dream itself, she somehow managed to convince herself that this was indeed reality and that it was indeed happening right before her eyes.

“...Go!!”

The guy hurriedly shouted at the stupefied Yu Sae-Jung. But, perhaps due the prior impact, she was suffering from dizzying tinnitus in her ears and couldn't hear him well. She shook her head hard several times and only then could she get what he was shouting at her about.

“Get the hell away from here, you damn idiot!!”

Right now, Sae-Jin felt like dying. The weight of this effing Troll was, simply put, completely, utterly insane. His bones felt like turning into smithereens from the cruel pain. But, he had no choice but to endure. He had to, since the reason for this all effort of buying time, the girl, still seemed out of it and was simply there spectating this scene.

“...!!”

Maybe him mixing in insults woke her up, she finally seemed to get the gravity of the situation and began dragging her broken leg, somehow gaining a distance away from him. When she was well out of the danger, Sae-Jin quickly rolled his body out of the way.

– *Pwuaaang!!*

With an earth-shaking explosion, a crater in the shape of a Troll's fist was carved right on the ground where Sae-Jin had been standing just now.

– *Krrrrr...!!*

Seemingly pissed off at the sudden, unwelcome entrance of a hindrance, the Troll snorted out in anger and faced towards Sae-Jin's direction.

And at the same time, strength deserted Sae-Jin's body. Indeed, 1 minute was a really short amount of time.

Weirdly, though – he didn't feel any pain, even after the skill had ended.

Most likely, bones in both of his arms, as well as the nerve endings, got badly damaged in the encounter. He couldn't feel his arms at all as if they weren't there in the first place.

– *Miss Yu!!*

– *That son of a bi*ch!! Hey!! Stop right there!!*

But, like the timely blessings from the heavens, a booming, powerful and manly voice resounded from a distance. When the Troll heard that domineering lion-like roar, it showed signs of pure panic and hurriedly turned its head.

“You foul creature!!”

A *baldy* exploded out like a bullet from the tall grasses, splitting the air with his mighty sword that gleamed with a sharp metallic sheen. Then, towards the Troll, he shot forward a crescent shaped sword aura that was keen enough to tear out the sky. The supersonic aura didn't even give the Monster any time to take evasive actions, and it penetrated the torso of the creature unopposed, and soon after, the Troll's body split in half and fell in a heap as if it was nothing to begin with.

“Sae-Jung, are you okay?!”

The Knight that made all of Sae-Jin's death-defying efforts look meaningless by killing the Troll in one shot, hurriedly ran towards Yu Sae-Jung, who was lying sprawled on

the ground with broken legs and her body utterly incapacitated.

“Sae-Jung!! This can’t be!! How did your beautiful face get so...”

The man raised a huge fuss and gently hugged Sae-Jung’s body.

‘... My body won’t move.’

Out of the blue, Sae-Jung coughed out a clot of blood.

“Oh, my god!! What the hell!! Sae-Jung!! Sae-Jung~!!”

The man’s face turned red and pale all at once as he cried while fussing over her, but at the moment, Sae-Jung’s thoughts were focused on something else, so what this guy was doing only ended up bothering her.

Her face had become swollen up in the meantime and it was difficult to keep her eyes open. But she still forcibly pried her lashes open to take look at one specific person, a man.

His clothes were torn to shreds, revealing the hidden ripped, hard muscles like that of a Greek statue underneath. The limp arms on his sides were darkly discoloured beyond the purplish hue, his legs shaking uncontrollably as if he’d falter at any moment.

The man who had saved her, she didn’t even know his name. But it seemed like he did mention it before... she must’ve forgotten it. She found herself pathetic, realising this. She should have remembered it.

It was then, the man gazed at her direction briefly, before turning to walk away to a destination unknown.

Yu Sae-Jung wanted to reach out her hands to the man walking unsteadily on his legs, seemingly only seconds away from collapsing on the ground. But her body would not move. She just wanted to ask him to wait for a second. But she seemed to have lost all feelings in her mouth, too.

“...”

So, the only thing she could do for now, was to engrave the back of the man as her

heavy eyelids slowly closed down on her.



Fighting the urge to give up and fall down, he continued to push his body hard. Finding his bloodied and damaged body bothersome, Sae-Jin promptly changed into the Wolf Form as soon as he couldn't sense the presence of people. The wounds and the weakening consciousness remained the same, however. But he forced the two okay limbs to run as if his life depended on it. To lose his consciousness in the Monster Field was the same thing as dying, after all.

<<<<

He ran without a rest until he finally arrived at the cave. Changing back to his Human Form, he hurriedly drank the potions he brewed earlier on. His arms couldn't move, so he had to pop the lid of the bottle open with his lips, but fortunately, his wounds recovered almost right away, so that was that.

But it was another matter altogether for his wavering consciousness. It seemed like this was one of the backlashes of using that skill. Sae-Jin passed out on the ground and fell into a deep slumber.



The greatest Knight Order in Korea was, nominally, the Raven Knight Order, but if the Knights Orders were grouped separately into the privately run entities and the government-owned ones, then the story became slightly more murkier to tell. Of course, the Raven remained as *the* example for other Knights Orders to strive for. But when discussing the private Knight Orders, the matters became complicated somewhat. There were 2 Orders considered to be in the top flight, 9 Orders in the mid tier, and further 12 smaller Orders out there, with all these numerous organizations busy competing against each other.

One of those 2 top dogs were called "Saebyuk" Knights Order, which was in turn, owned by a very powerful global conglomerate "Saebyukdahl". When the Order opened its doors, people regularly disparaged it for being a lowest ranked Order with only a wealthy patron supporting it like a personal plaything, but thanks to the rapid development brought on by that absolutely enormous wealth, the popular consensus had reversed and they were now treated as the very models of modern miracle. If the

question of who the top Knights Orders were came up, the names of the “Raven”, “Goryeo” and Saebyuk would have been mentioned. And of course, Saebyuk Order’s financial treatment was incomparably better than all its competition. (*Saebyuk literally means a dawn, Saebuykdahl is a moon appearing at dawn. Goryeo was a name for an ancient Korean kingdom.*)

“It was not the fault of uncle Hyun-Oh. So, please stop apologising. It’s actually all my fault...”

And Yu Sae-Jung just so happened to be the granddaughter of Saebuykdahl’s Chairman, one of the world’s biggest corporations, as well as the daughter of the current Master of the Saebuyuk Knight Order. She was an incredibly *giant* existence, a child born with an unobtainium spoon firmly stuck in her mouth, and was important enough to make a famous High Tier ranked Knight like Park Hyun-Oh to fret over her like this.

“...No, that’s not it. Whatever the case may have been, I should’ve been right there, watching out for you...”

Not only her background was very impressive, her talents were just as perfect, however, as she received the official government acknowledgement as a Low Tier Knight at the young age of only 17 years and 45 days. This was only a month off from what Kim Yu-Rin had achieved – a Low Tier Knight at 17 years and 6 days – which only served to showcase Yu Sae-Jung’s amazing talents that were basically without equal among her peers.

“Enough with the self pity, seriously, and I hope you have already uncovered the information I asked you about?”

“...Eh? Oh, that?”

The very first thing Yu Sae-Jung asked for after waking up from the two-day long coma was about the identity of a certain man. A mystery man that Park Hyun-Oh couldn’t recall as he was far too focused on saving Yu Sae-Jung at that time – but she insisted that this mystery guy was the one who saved her life.

“Wait a minute, you haven’t even bothered to check, have you?”

Yu Sae-Jung’s eyes grew sharp enough to give chills at the sight of Park Hyun-Oh’s hesitating appearance.

“No, no way!! Honestly, even I thought it was unlikely. I seriously thought that maybe you were seeing things. I mean, it’s plainly impossible for a Low Tier Hunter to stop a Troll all alone. However...”

He stopped speaking for a second as he began rummaging through his pockets, before he fished out a bronze-coloured Hunter licence.

“Here it is, for real. Even I was surprised, you know. Found it among all the shredded clothing on the ground.”

Since Yu Sae-Jung couldn’t move her body due to the paralysis, Park Hyun-Oh had to bring the licence card right before her eyes.

“A Heavenly Gifted Hunter, Kim Sae-Jin... Wait a minute, a Heavenly Gifted?”

“Yeah. That’s right. It’s been a long time since I saw one of those titles, but hell, if you think about it, it makes perfect sense. I mean, all the Hunters with that crazy title were a bit... *abnormal*, weren’t they?”

“...You can find him, right?”

“Of course. Already began looking for him. It’s only a matter of time before he’s standing right in front of you. Oh, right, before that, you are not...”

Suddenly, Park Hyun-Oh narrowed his eyes and intensely stared at Yu Sae-Jung.

Unlike her age, her actions were very grown-up but in the end, she was still a child. She was at an age where it wouldn’t be strange to find her head full of unrealistic fantasies and useless ideas of romance. So, what if, in that dangerous life or death situation, she had developed a crush on the man that rescued her...

“Fuhut. No freaking way. That’s not it. Me, I’m not a child. It’s just that... it’s like what Grandpa always have said. *If it’s a favour, repay it as soon as possible, and if it’s a grudge, grind it out as long as possible.* I’ve deeply engraved that teaching into my heart, is all.”

Yu Sae-Jung carried an assured smile of denial, before she remembered something important, and asked with her brows raised high.

“That’s that taken care of, but more importantly, can I be fully healed? I’ve heard by accident that my current paralysis is pretty serious.”

Park Hyun-Oh stiffened up momentarily.

“You heard that? I thought you were asleep.”

“Yeah, you guys did say it’s really serious.”

Only 10 years ago, paralysis like Yu Sae-Jung’s would have been a very painful and incurable condition, but that wasn’t the case any more. With the advent of alchemy and its continued research and development, nowadays it only took a single potion to cure it.

But her paralysis was more severe than the usual case, so it was determined that a powerful potion with a upper Mid grade or higher was needed to heal her.

“Don’t you worry about that. I just got a news that there’s an Alchemy House in Gangwon with a supply of upper Mid grade potions that can heal and regenerate. The effects of Gangwon’s output has always been good, and since the Chairman made that very generous deal under the table with the House, we’ll get the first dibs when they get the stuff.”

“...Is that so? That’s a relief.”

Yu Sae-Jung nodded her head without showing much interest.

“What’s the name of the potion though? Is it a product from one of the workshops on the Eastern Seaboard? I did hear they were still on strike. But did they end it?”

“Nope. They are still doing that industrial action thing. This is a new product. And I do mean, like brand-spanking new. I hear it’s from a totally unknown personage, who just appeared outta nowhere, and left a seriously incredible product behind, just like that. The people handling the stuff apparently raised a huge ruckus saying that a new genius has appeared or some such.”

“Okay, fine. Just tell me the name, will you.”

“Well, yeah, the thing is... it’s something of an untrustworthy name, you see.”

Park Hyun-Oh hesitated somewhat to say the name out aloud, but under the sharp gazes of impatient Yu Sae-Jung, he finally relented and stuttered out the name.

“I did ask a few times if it was real... Well, the potion is called... A Goblin’s Kindness.”

CHAPTER 10

A GENIUS OF ALCHEMY (1)

“A Goblin’s Kindness? What kind of a name is that?”

Yu Sae-Jung frowned a little as she spoke. It was just too weird a name to place her full trust in.

“You think so too?”

The credibility was everything to a potion, and so, it would be named accordingly to reflect the assigned grades and its medicinal effects. Take the reputable, widely recognised “Drent” series of potions for example; for the shallow exterior wounds such as cuts and bruises, there was the potion called “Drent’s Emergency Treatment” for the job, but if you were looking to cure something more substantial, say, like a serious disease, then there was the upper Mid grade potion named “The Miracle of Drent.”

On a side note, the Drent was the name of the legendary Tree of Life from the Elven myths that could supposedly revive even a dead person with an elixir concocted with only a single leaf.

But, there was this insurmountable gap between the *credibility* and that of a “Goblin”. Instead, it’d be hundred times more correct to argue that there was a deep mistrust and hostility between the two. Despite all that, the alchemist still chose to stick with “Goblin” as the name of his potion...

“I was thinking the same thing initially, but when I heard the explanations, it all kind of makes sense. I mean, Goblins’ abilities to make potions are something else, right? Seriously, there are idiots crazy enough to raid a village of Goblins specialising in medical concoction, never minding all that poisonous gases and hazardous material just for a chance to pilfer some potions, you know. And I hear it’s been registered in the registry of the *Naming Series* already. I guess there is a lot of expectation riding on this potion.”

A “Naming Series” was a type of a registered brand trademark.

When the anonymity is valued to such degree in the world of alchemy, the only avenue left to determine the credibility and the apparent effects of a potion was through its name – it could be confusing to the potential customers if another alchemist came up with a different potion but named it similarly, not to mention create distrust towards the makers of the potions themselves, so this trademark scheme was vigorously upheld as one of the absolute laws in the alchemists' society.

“Really? So the effects have been confirmed for real?”

“Obviously. Come on, honestly, would our Chairman and the Order Master try to buy something that's shady? And also...”

Park Hyun-Oh stopped his words, quickly scanned the surroundings, and suddenly leaned his face closer to Yu Sae-Jung's ear to whisper the rest of his sentence.

“The Manager, the Dark Elf Hazeline, already has given her affirmative, so you don't have to worry.”

There was no real need to whisper in this single person “VVVIP” hospital room, but well, he was treating her as a royalty here so it was only natural for him to act this way.

The actual reason why the alchemists thought of anonymity as a virtue was that currently, almost half of all active alchemists were from the race of the Dark Elf. They were the type of people that hated exposing their outer appearances and always concealed their bodies with thick robes.

Many people assumed that the Dark Elves were incredibly beautiful since they were called Elves and all, but as they hated bright places with lots of humans with mad zeal, the number of witnesses who had seen a Dark Elf's real appearance was extremely low, as well as no records to speak of, either.

Heck, there was even a sinister rumour floating around, which was now accepted by some circles as truth; in it the person who uploaded a very first picture of a Dark Elf online was hunted down and murdered by the very same Elf.

“Hazeline – she did? Then, it should be alright. So, when is the product expected to *definitely* come in?”

“Huh? Well, she did say it won't be too long... Wait, let me quickly pop out and make the call, and ask her.”



“Please wait for just a bit longer. Soon it’ll be... here, surely?”

“...Hazeli... – no, Manager Hazeline, what is the meaning of your sentence at the end? Feels like you’re deliberately trying to obfuscate...”

“...You’re mistaken.”

“...Fuhu. Manager Hazeline. Our little Miss is a Knight of only 17 years young. She should be out there training and enjoying her life, not confined to a sick bed and doing nothing...”

“Yes, I’m well aware of that. Just as I have told you before, please just wait for a bit longer!”

The Dark Elf Hazeline ended the call in irritation and chucked the mobile phone on the desk. It was easy to tell that she was not in a particularly good mood, judging from her exaggerated heavy breathing, deeply shut eyes and fast massaging of her temples.

“Aieek..... Just when is that guy coming here? Didn’t he say he got the completed potions already?”

Her ultra sharp eyes were immediately directed towards the waiting Alchemy House employee. The poor guy was already in a state of high stress before and now, he was sweating profusely as he barely managed to open his mouth.

“Ah, yes, I’m not really... He did mention that he had three completed potions in his possession..... We did call him on the phone number he wrote down but so far there were no answers...”

“Haa... Damn it all, this is pissing me off!! Seriously, I swear these human idiots must think that potions are hammered out in a single day! The reason for all this shortage of potions is because the alchemists are sick and tired of all this bloody nagging by the thoughtless sons of idiots!! But instead of fixing the error of their ways, these sons of bi*ches... Awooo, this f*cking sh*t!!”

As the steam of her fury reached the proverbial top of the head, she rolled her fist tightly before slamming it down on the desk.

- Tuong...

Quite unlike all the explosive anger she had displayed just now, the resulting sound was rather adorably small; the door to her office flew open right at the exact same time.

“He, he’s here, Manager Hazeline!! That alchemist from before, he has arrived!!”

At the hurried yell of the employee, Hazeline’s eyes went round, her body shooting right up from the seat.



There were two types of alchemists out there. The first was the commonly known types that did the Transmutation and the Reconfiguration, while the second of the lot spent their entire lives trying to understand the mysterious liquid called potions. (Some anally retentive experts would call these two alchemists with separate terms, the former retaining the alchemist moniker while the latter, potion crafter.)

Even though their main skill sets used for their craft were different, the alchemists all still possessed one habit that was the same. And that common habit was, their preference towards the darkness.

“...Do you find the coffee to your liking?”

In this dark but surprisingly un-gloomy room, where even the sunlight failed to reach, the only thing brightening the place was Hazeline’s dazzling smile.

“Yes.”

Sae-Jin, to the best of his abilities, played it cool and lowered the cup nonchalantly, but he found it rather torturous to look at the face of the Elf in front of him. That was because, she was one of the most stunning women in the world, as befitting the “race of beautiful people”, the Elf.

The shiny alabaster skin that didn’t seem a right fit for a *Dark* Elf. With an indigo-coloured straight, long hair, and the finely crafted, beautifully harmonious facial features where there simply wasn’t adequate enough a word to describe how gorgeous she was.

“Now that the introductions are done, should we get straight to the main topic, Sir Alchemist?”

Hazeline the Dark Elf had revealed her face, her name and her race openly to Sae-Jin.

He had to wonder whether she was mistaking him as one of her own race, as her open demeanor was quite a departure from all the rumours he had heard before. Easily reading into his confusion, she quickly moved to clarify her position, saying that she was trying to show some courtesy towards him.

“It’s fine. We’re talking about the potion I’ve brewed, yes? I’m also well aware of how *good* my potion is. It is my life’s greatest achievement, after all.”

Even though he spoke with such confidence, he knew very well that he was sprouting bullsh*t right now.

The Elite Goblin’s knowledge base was full of compounding methods that easily exceeded the methods of top alchemists, and on top of this, Sae-Jin possessed the top ingredient, the fangs of a Sabre-tooth Tiger, so instead of a life’s greatest achievement, he just needed around 7 days to brew this potion.

And that 7 days were actually for fermenting the contents which was an unavoidable process in making this potion, so...

“Of course, we are also well aware of the difficulties. In order to create a potion this effective, you must have struggled and toiled hard for many years. As a fellow alchemist, I understand it all too well.”

Sae-Jin nearly spat out the coffee percolating in his mouth after seeing how grave she sounded and how serious her face looked. He still somehow managed to maintain his poker face, wiping his lips as if to get rid of hot coffee and nodded his head.

“It’s good that you understand.”

“Indeed. Since it’s such a good potion... A few customers, having heard of the news, are wishing to purchase the goods even before it’s on sale. And these here are the letters sincerely requesting you to sell it to them.”

Hazeline pushed forward five stiff papers towards him. On them, there were instantly recognisable names of Knights Orders, big corporations and famous wealthy

individual written in large fonts.

'How many zeroes are there... \$360K, \$440K, \$623K...???'

And the numbers written below each name was the kind of amount Sae-Jin wouldn't even dream of seeing in his lifetime.

"These are the legally approved sales commissions. There's a policy allowing an alchemist to deal directly with private individuals or entities provided the amount of product sold is less than half of your current stock. Of course, the government takes the cut in the tune of 48% as sales tax but since the potential customers add something a little extra on top of the market price when buying the product, in the end, it just doesn't matter at all."

"Sounds good."

When Sae-Jin nodded his head in satisfaction, Hazeline who was observing his reactions carefully continued with her words.

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"The thing is, though... in order to secure commissions like this, not only the efficacy of a potion but the role of the Alchemy House is also very important, so we would be obligated to take a certain percentage as well. If a House with no connections receive goods like this, they would just put it up for sale in the markets without thinking too deeply about other matters. That is why..."

Hazeline slowly swallowed her saliva. Even though this was a normally accepted part of the Alchemy Houses' modus operandi, she was feeling nervous at the moment because of the incredible potion this person had brought in.

"In a sales commission like this, the House usually takes about half of the agreed amount... We are prepared to lower that to 40%, no, make that 35%, specially for you. Any lower, then, even other Alchemy Houses will find it difficult to match. If you don't believe me, you can ask others. It's a pre-tax deductio..."

"Fine. It's all good."

Sae-Jin nodded his head, having no other opinion regarding this matter. Whether it was a Dark Elf, a regular Elf or a High Elf, he had not heard of instances where Elves

defrauded the other party, and on top of that, the stuff she said matched with what he found online.

For obvious reasons, relying only on the information gathered on internet for something of this much importance would be foolish and undeniably pathetic. But that kind of thought was applicable only if when one didn't know of the Dark Elves' and alchemists' natures.

They all pursued anonymity. Once that was secured, these people communicated and acted more lively than before. And let's not forget, the Internet was *the* perfect place to communicate anonymously.

Stories of half the alchemists being gaming addicts didn't just come to life out of nowhere, after all.

“...Eh?”

When the conclusion came so easily, Hazeline couldn't help but stare dumbfoundedly. But like a pro, she quickly regained her wits, and before Sae-Jin could potentially change his mind, moved to put the finishing touch to the deal.

“If, if that's the case, then all you have to do is to stamp your *jijang* on the sales request form with the highest amount written on it!! The corporation Saebyukdahl is offering the highest amount with \$623 thousand US... Ah, wait, where did the stamping ink disappear to?!”

As she raised a royal ruckus while fetching the ink pad, Sae-Jin watched her and floated a mysterious smile. It was a deeply satisfying sight to behold, to see another person losing their marbles over him, something a socially underprivileged like him wouldn't get to experience under normal circumstances.

“Here it is!!”

When Hazeline hurriedly handed over the ink pad, Sae-Jin leisurely studied the contents of the form once more before stamping his *jijang* on it.

“Whew... Oh, by any chance, do you have the finished products with you at the moment? You did mention that you have three bottles back then, yes? We need the minimum of 2. The law says we must put the half of the stock on the open market, so the other can be sold through the sales commission.”

“Oh... Well, I have brought all of them here with me.”

Hazeline’s eyes shone as she stared at the sight of Sae-Jin rummaging through his bag.

“A total of 4 bottles. All with the same medicinal effects.”

“Oh, Ohhh!!”

Finally. The 4 bottles of potion emitting the exact same brilliant light as the samples revealed themselves to the world, and on Hazeline’s face an uncontrollable, wild grin broke loose. But remembering her stations as the Manager of the Alchemy House, she quickly erased the ungainly smile right off her face.

...Of course, by then it was already too late, though.

“It’s perfect. All 4 of them. What a relief~~”

She couldn’t prevent her sentence stretching out at the end from the unbridled happiness, however.

Hazeline picked up one of the bottles, then she shook it, smelled it, studied it from several angles before putting it down, nodding her head in satisfaction afterwards.

“We don’t need to test them. Oh yes. They are perfect. Perfect...”

She then asked Sae-Jin very cautiously while staring at one part of him that wasn’t covered up by his robe – his lips.

“Weeell, there is something I’m slightly curious about. Just from where... did you study this level of alchemy? If it were any other normal alchemist, they would usually send in incomplete potions as examples to get a verdict on... It’s your first time and the product itself is beyond reproach, so even though I know I’m out of line, I still wish to inquire you.”

“Hmm...”

At her inquiry, Sae-Jin briefly showed hesitation but he already had thought of a suitable story before coming here so he told her that.

“My master once taught me this. If there was even a fragment of doubt existing in your

thoughts, then you are in the wrong, so throw away all useless ideas and devote yourself completely to the craft until you reach the true pinnacle. I am just following this teaching to the letter.”

Alchemists and Wizards valued their master and apprentice relationship far, far greatly than any other professions out there in comparison, and because of this fact Hazeline nodded her head as if she was convinced.

“You have a truly wonderful master. I’m sure he’s feeling quite proud of you as we speak. After all, his apprentice has become a great alchemist in his own right.”

“Ah... Yes. It’s just that, it’s regretful that he had to pass away before seeing me succeed.”

Although he knew she wouldn’t ask him for the master’s name, but Sae-Jin still felt anxiousness creeping in up his legs, so to make sure, he hammered in the final nail in the coffin.

Plus, technically speaking, he wasn’t telling a totally cock and bull story anyways.

He did have a “master” that passed on all the knowledge and technique, after all.

...Even though he bit that guy to death.

“Oh, how unfortunate.”

Hazeline, who didn’t know the actual truth, bitterly accepted his version of the story and showed a heavy, sorrowful expression.

“Well then, if that is all. I’m running short on time.”

In the blink of an eye, 30 minutes flew past, so unable to dilly dally any longer, Sae-Jin stood up first to leave. Hazeline followed him and also stood up, and reached out with her hand for a shake while carrying a content smile.

“For you Sir Alchemist who chose us, we’ll definitely make the *Goblin* series known as the best potion brand in the world. You can place your trust in us. I’m planning to hold a press conference right after this meeting is done. Nowadays, playing up the mass media is an important marketing strategy, you know.”

“Ahaha. Well, thank you.”

Sae-Jin faced her gorgeous smile and shook her hand firmly.

CHAPTER 11

A GENIUS OF ALCHEMY (2)

As soon as Sae-Jin left the Alchemy House, Hazeline grabbed her phone and called a certain someone.

“Hello, Sir Knight?”

“Hello, Miss Manager. I’d like to apologise for my earlier behaviour. I just happened to see the poor little Miss lying in the hospital bed before the call, so I just ended up losing my cool for a moment...”

His voice wasn’t all that apologetic, but never minding that, Hazeline spoke in a rather leisurely fashion.

“Oh, no. It’s fine. You see, the product came in just now.”

“Oh!! Really!!”

Right away there was a loud yell. She could already imagine the sight of Park Hyun-Oh shooting up from his seat, his eyes bulging and yelling at the top of his lungs on the other side of the line. A slight sneer formed on Hazeline’s lips.

“Fuhut. Yes. However, as I’ve mentioned just now, the product has only arrived here recently, so even though I’m planning to give it the highest grade myself, the Central Association must test it too in order to issue the sales permit for us.”

“Ah, there’s no need!! What kind of a fool would question Miss Hazeline’s discerning eyes? In any case, I shall be there shortly. Please wait for me!”

“...Fuht. Alright. Please be careful on your way.”

Disconnecting the call, Hazeline let out a breath of satisfaction and leaned her body against the back of the chair.

For her, it’s been 3 years already since she took a step back from the world of alchemy after feeling intense dislike at the effing corporations and the foolish men and women

of the Knights Orders.

Of course, even though she was no longer on the frontlines, the overconfident bastards still continued to harass her, but right in this moment, she felt good enough to soar high up in the sky. A brief moment when the dynamic between the monied “haves” and those who serve gets turned on its head, like when perfectly concocting a potion, or a well-made potion coming in through her doors.

‘... Since he said shortly so maybe he’ll take 5 minutes tops.’

The high ranked Knights of the Saebyuk Order could utilise private jets that burned Mana Stones as fuel source. It was indeed a clear waste of resources to fly a supersonic jet to come to Gangwon Province from the capital city of Seoul since this wasn’t an emergency situation, but taking into account the identity of the patient, he probably couldn’t delay the matter any longer.

To greet the incoming guest, Hazeline put on the previously-discarded robe and pulled up her hood.

‘But I won’t hand it over that easily.’

The idiots weren’t aware of the fact that the alchemist had already left his *jijang* on their sales request letter. If that’s the case, then... she’d wring them out for all their worth, and make their innards boil with anxiety until they had melted into nothingness.

This was the kind of a light revenge only she could do, but when seen from the perspectives of those on the receiving end, it was probably the cruellest, vilest form of “*habit*” there was.

“Ah! That’s right!”

She nearly forgot to do something else before all that. Hazeline hurriedly grabbed her mobile phone and called another person.

“Hello there, reporter Yun Hui-Jeong. It’s been a while. Oh, it’s nothing special. It’s just that a noteworthy potion is finally available here after a really long while. Hmm? Oh, we’ve got a quite a stock. 4 bottles. It’s amazing, yes? Even for me, handling 4 bottles of a potion this incredible is a first. Yep. Oh my, thank you so much. I shall send over someone with all the necessary info. I’m expecting to receive the sales permit in 3

days, so when the time comes, please write up a nice piece for me.”



[The very first output of a genius that appeared like a meteor, the High grade potion, “A Goblin’s Kindness” hits the market.]

[From Gaebuyuk Daily, written by Yun Hui-Jeong, a staff reporter.]

8 o’clock this morning. A potion with a unique name called A Goblin’s Kindness, brewed by a certain alchemist, was issued with the sales permit from the Central Alchemist Association.

The very first thing that grabs the attention is, of course, that name. It is said that the reason for the alchemist who brewed this potion borrowing the Goblin moniker, which could be seen as a minus, was because of a simple, yet hard to imagine hypothetical case of what would happen if Goblins showed kindness towards humans and used their potion making skills.

And to surprise us even more, his potion was deemed to possess perfect healing and regenerative properties by the Association and was assigned the High grade as if to imply that the alchemist must have had perfectly replicated the craftsmanship of a real Goblin. What’s more, this potion, A Goblin’s Kindness, just happens to be this alchemist’s very first creation.

...

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...

This potion will go on auction which is scheduled to commence at 12 o’clock 8 days from now, on the premise of “Yoseon” Alchemy House located in the city of Wonju, Gangwon Province. With this potion, A Goblin’s Kindness, appearing like a sweet relieving rain in the times of seemingly unending drought, this reporter hopes that this event can perhaps inject some sense of life, even if it’s small, to the market that has fallen into doldrums of late.



The mood in the headquarters of the Raven Knights Order located in the suburbs of Jongro, Seoul, was in somewhat heightened state with the appearance of a High grade potion after more than a half a year of shortage.

The Raven Knights Order that set its sights beyond the borders of Korea and competed for the top spot in the global stage, regularly battled the rare Monsters ranked upper Mid Tier or above, or those bastards that suddenly appeared and started attacking without a warning. The thing was, these upper Mid Tier Monsters each possessed unique special powers, making them true walking disasters and when confronting these creatures, the Knights' abilities proved to be rather inadequate most of the time.

In all honesty, rather than calling it inadequate, it'd be far more correct to say fear had crippled them.

After the unchecked, uncontrolled development of the Earth's environment, the Healing magic had currently all "died away", leaving the treatment of injuries caused by the Monsters to potions and the modern medicine. However, even though the modern medicine could reconnect severed limbs, it was not possible to regenerate what was lost, so the Knights ended up trusting and depending on potions over that of the modern medical technology.

But for the past half year, the supply of upper Mid grade potions that allowed the Knights to battle higher Tier Monsters without hesitation had dried up. Not only the potions with healing, regenerative capabilities, but also elixirs that boosted the physical strength for a brief period of time had vanished, too. So, when the news of the appearance of a higher Tier Monster spread around, the situation had devolved into a point where Knights couldn't relaxedly choose to go out and hunt them anymore.

"Did you hear the rumours?"

"Yeah. Got a weird name, though. But, uh, can our Order secure it?"

"Come on, why not. And I hear it's 40 ml per bottle, too. On top of that, 2 bottles for sale in one go."

"40ml should be enough for 6 people... With that, maybe, we can now finally hunt down that newly hatched Basilisk, right?"

The interest shown by the Knights of the Raven Order towards this High grade potion that had appeared out of nowhere was rather understandable.

“Hmm...”

In the front lobby of the Knights Order, Kim Yu-Rin was sighing out while reading the information sheet delivered from the Alchemy House for the new potion's effects and the expected prices. Even though there should be a lot of competition to secure this potion brought on by the long absence of one, she knew that if it was the Raven Order, there would be no problem acquiring the product at the end of the day.

‘2 bottles... That means another 2 was sold through private commissions already.’

Kim Yu-Rin was crumpling her face in dissatisfaction. The Alchemy Houses gave out information first to those entities holding a favourable relationship with them in this kind of private sales commissions. In other words, the Raven Order that hadn't received the heads-up wasn't enjoying a cordial relationship with this particular House.

‘If it's Yoseon Alchemy House, then it must be Hazeline's doing.’

Kim Yu-Rin slowly massaged her aching temples as the mug of Hazeline floated up in her mind.

Hazeline and Kim Yu-Rin. These two shared a bond that was thicker than blood of siblings, stretching back for almost 20 years.

However, that powerful friendship became twisted real fast thanks to a certain single incident. Which happened to be a stupidly, unbelievably simple misunderstanding. But more misunderstandings continued to pile up on top of another, turning the situation far worse, and once the relationship began to break down, the downward momentum couldn't be stopped any more.

Their fast deteriorating relationship finally came to a head 3 years ago that resulted in a very serious event.

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Hazeline had poisoned Kim Yu-Rin's potion, and when Yu-Rin managed to survive after fighting desperately for her life, she cut Hazeline's arm clean off.

This ugly event remained a secret until now, only known to these two after they silently made an agreement, which led to either one not laying blames on each other nor telling anyone else regarding this matter.

And now, a few years had passed since both of them stopped caring about each other and lived their own separate lives. During that time, Kim Yu-Rin had fought hard and successfully claimed the prestigious title of the youngest-ever Highest Tier Knight, and Hazeline had created an elixir called “A Fairy’s Liquor” to regenerate her lost arm and in the process had climbed up to the position of the Alchemy House Manager.

Like this, they both had firmly grasped the futures that were far brighter than their past but in the end, could only become the worst of the worst enemies possible. And now, the sporadically-recalled good memories they once shared together had lost their luster a long time ago.

“Miss Highest Tier Knight Kim Yu-Rin!!”

While she was swimming in the recollections of the past, someone had walked up closer and started chatting her up. When she turned her head to see who it was, she saw quite a number of Knights gathered there.

“Uh... What seems to be the problem?”

When she replied in her usual deadpan expression, the group of Knights consisting of 5 men and 3 women smiled brightly and presented a simple square box to her.

“It’s a congratulatory gift for you, Miss Yu-Rin!! Congratulations on your ascension to the Highest Tier!!”

Acting as the representative of the group, a male Knight with a cute enough face spoke. He was Kim Soo-Gyeom, a junior Knight that served as a direct apprentice working under Yu-Rin for 2 years while she was still a Mid Tier Knight.

“Oh, right. Thank you, everyone.”

Yu-Rin lightly patted the head of the male Knight that was as tall as her and received the gift. Kim Soo-Gyeom acted shyly at her touch and swallowed his saliva.

“Please open it!!”

Their strangely flushed expressions seemed to indicate that the present inside this box must have been a very nice stuff indeed. Seeing their excitement, Yu-Rin's own expectations rose as well as she opened the lid of the box. She already knew it was useless to expect much, though.

“...”

– “*Surprise!!*”

Yu-Rin confirmed the contents of the box and observed the faces of the knights in front of her with the corner of her eyes. Theirs were full of expectations. She didn't want to disappoint them.

“Oh, oh... This, I really needed this. Thank you so much, everyone.”

Befitting her reputation, she didn't jump up and down in joy but instead, just made an expression that displayed her gratitude. Thanks to her prior experiences, her acting skills were rather exceptional. No, in reality, it shouldn't even be called acting. She would've been happy with just the sincere words of the fellow Knights congratulating her.

“I'm really sorry about this. If it's a product of *Zenobis*, then it must have been really expensive...”

She spoke apologetically as she picked up the pair of gauntlets painted jet black. They were light but incredibly sturdy pair of armoured gloves, with the brand *Zenobis* stylishly carved on the sides. Since *Zenobis* was a exclusive workshop that only dealt with rare, high grade metals as the bare minimum requirement, the price of these gauntlets must have easily exceeded hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“No, no, not at all. We're just sorry that we couldn't get something better to show how grateful we're regarding everything you've done for us until now.”

“I haven't done much, though. Ah, right. By the way...”

Yu-Rin carefully observed the reactions of the knights before asking them in a cautious manner.

“Did they only have the colour black?”

“Eh? Ah... No, no way. They had only the bright colours for the ladies’ use. So we specially requested for a custom paintjob and had gauntlets painted in black. The colour definitely won’t fade, so you don’t have to worry.”

“Ah, oh.....”

Yu-Rin thought that the bright colours would’ve been better. But she couldn’t make a retort at the smiling face of Soo-Gyeom and instead, ended up weakly smiling as well.

Kim Yu-Rin, in her 27 years of life. Every single gift she had ever received in her life was all battle equipment, exactly like this.



Around the same time, Sae-Jin came to the Monster Store to unload the materials but was now staring at the TV projection with a deeply satisfied expression.

– It’s been half a year but finally, a high grade potion is available for purchase in the market. Named A Goblin’s Kindness and coming in 40 ml bottles, the price for this potion has been set to around the \$350,000 which is on the upper side of the range, but regardless, the influx of request for purchase has been coming not only from the local Korean organizations but from international entities as well. And ever since the Yoseon Alchemy House registered the brand trademark “Goblin”, people have been eagerly waiting to see if there would be other potions with different medical effects than ‘A Goblin’s Kindness’ that appeared in the market.

“Excuse me? Excuse me? I said, excuse me!!”

The government worker became fed up with Sae-Jin who was concentrating only on the TV and ended up raising his voice at him.

“Oh, sorry. My bad.”

“Here, please take this. Mister Kim Sae-Jin has successfully increased his rank from a Low Tier to a mid Low Tier, after accumulating over 60 days worth of hunting experience...”

Sae-Jin couldn’t focus on the procedure for long and his entire attention returned back to the sound coming from the TV.

- And when it became known that this was the alchemist's first product, a huge amount of attention from the Korean and international community chatrooms has been solely focused on him, going as so far as to nickname the mystery alchemist as the "Goblin Alchemist" or even "The Genius of Alchemy". But the Alchemy House responsible for the circulation of the potion, Yoseon, has strongly suggested to curb the excessive attention focused on the mystery alchemist as they worry this sudden unwarranted scrutiny placed on the person in question might negatively affect him...

CHAPTER 12

A SPIRIT BEAST, THE DIVINE WOLF (1)

“Will it really remain as a series of potions? It kind of looked like our honoured genius alchemist is working alone without a workshop... Ah, but how could he meticulously craft this kind of potion all by himself? Looking at things like this, you can really feel that geniuses do exist in this world for real.”

Right now, they were taking a short break from answering the endless deluge of phone calls. When the employee spoke in admiration, Hazeline let out a sigh and leered at him.

“...Uh-whew. What will I do, when even you start referring him as a genius? That’s just an empty shell of a praise tacked on the guy to make the mass media and the Knights Orders sweat extra hard for a bit. So, what d’ya mean, he’s a genius?! Just give it a rest, already. A genius, a greatest, a maestro, a virtuoso – none of those words should mix up with our profession, and neither should we try to use them.”

“Eiii... But it’s all coming from the community chat room sites first. Right now, even the Alchemy Cafe is in an upheaval. They are asking if they could meet him...”
(TL: a Cafe is not a physical coffee shop but an internet forum a la Discord or Reddit. Just your everyday Korean slang term...)

Feeling good in the knowledge that this great sales result would lead to fat bonuses for everyone, the male employee was chatting away in a high-enough spirit, but he calmed right down the moment he came in contact with inexplicably icy gazes. He had stepped onto a potential land mine without realising it. Seeing the sight of Hazeline lightly biting her lower lip with the corner of his eyes, the employee’s forehead broke out in drops of sweat.

“Hey, you. Are you still looking at *those*? Didn’t I repeatedly tell you not to waste your time in those damn gossip sites? Because that’s where the f*cked up bastards hiding behind the veil of anonymity spread around vile, baseless rumours!”

“I’m truly sorry.”

The employee apologised in earnest as he knew the Manager deeply hated excuses

and hasty explanations.

“Fuu... No need to apologise, instead, just go and do your job. I’ll make sure to ask what our *genius* alchemist’s deepest thoughts are or what the plans of his future happen to be.”

“Yes!”

The employee left her side and as soon as all signs of people around her were gone for good, Hazeline grabbed her mobile phone. She was acting complete opposite to how she’d been coldly treating her subordinate just now, her demeanor currently full of respect.

– *Ring, ring.*

She waited for a while, but in the end, all she got was “The person you dialled is busy...”

“He said he’s got only a home number so why isn’t he picking it up?”

Hazeline cocked an eyebrow in dissatisfaction. She’s been calling the number 10 times already, but for some reason she couldn’t even get a single answer.

– *Ppiiii... Please leave a message after the tone.*

“Hello... Sir Alchemist? This is Hazeline speaking. I’m the only person who knows this number so please relax. The reason for me calling you this time, is... I was wondering if you’d like to have a work-related dinner with me some time...”



Thanks to Alchemy, his worries over money had been solved. The reserve price for his potion per bottle was \$450K US. On top of that, he had already sold 2 through the sales commissions, one for over \$620K, and the other for over \$530K.

Even after deducting the sales tax and the Alchemy House’s cut, he would still end up pocketing well over \$1.3 million US. This was an amount he’d never even dreamt of having in his life. However, he also couldn’t have imagined seeing this amount leave him in one go, either.

The minimum cost of a single, unattached house located the *closest* to Gangwon

Province's Monster field easily exceeded \$1.3 million.

At first, when he heard the amount he just couldn't believe it but after hearing the explanations, he understood the reasoning, just a little.

The house he looked at had a garden the size of 60 *pyung*, (nearly 200 square metres) an underground bunker equipped with a generator, and had been "insured" with a Knights Order for a "prioritised protection" in case of Monsters' appearance – and to top that all off, the whole building was reinforced with magic engineering to withstand assaults from Monsters of Mid Tier or lower. Hearing about all these points, even Sae-Jin ended up thinking that 1.3 million was on the cheaper side.

He returned to the cave, thinking that spending all that money at once seemed wasteful but he couldn't chance it in an apartment complex with his condition as was, and also the issue with the time reared its ugly head while considering locations further than this, so he decided to settle in that house as soon as the money came in from the completed sale of the potions.

'Well, that's that, but I wonder when I'll evolve again.'

The worries and fears he had certainly lessened with the promised income but couldn't completely be assuaged. The core issue he had, "Can I live on as a Human?" was still there.

Now, he could maintain his Human Form for 100 minutes but really, that didn't exactly qualify as being a human, after all...

'The condition needed for the evolution of the Brown Wolf to the Grey was the Minimum Reputation.'

He evolved together with the message that said about 100 people became aware of his existence. If the rest of the evolution was tied to this concept than that meant he had to deliberately expose his Grey Wolf Form to as many people as possible.

"Fuu..."

However, that was easier said than done; most would try to hunt him down the moment he showed up. Sae-Jin could only sigh out grandly.

But there wouldn't be any changes if he stayed put like this. He'd be able to find even

a sliver of hope only when he started moving his body and hit the wall head on.

‘Well, let’s avoid the Knights for now, and show up only in front of the Hunters.’



“Can we do it?”

“No problem, no problem~ No need to worry so much. It’s just a Low Tier creature with a slightly bigger body. Other Hunters are just exaggerating the truth.”

One was a Mid Tier, another a low Mid Tier, and lastly, another low Mid Tier. This temporary party of three Hunters consisted of one woman and two men. The woman was full of high spirits and took the lead but the following two men had their shoulders slumped. It was as if they were being dragged along by the woman in front.

“When three Hunters gather, we can bring down any Monster! Isn’t that what you guys have said? That’s why we became companions, right?”

“Hey, that story is already 15 years old. And back then, we were Knights, not Hunters.”

“Whatever, dude!! Why are you guys acting so down, anyways? If it’s a Wolf the size of a tiger, then the remains would fetch quite a nice price and if we find a mid rank Mana Stone in its heart... you know what that means, right?”

She spoke loudly and happily while making the round coin gesture with her fingers but the dark shadows on the men’s faces showed no signs of alleviating.

There was a rumour floating around the Low Tier hunting ground of late. The insidious rumour spoke of a unique Monster prowling the area, the “Unique Grey Wolf.”

The number of Hunters witnessing this tiger-sized Grey Wolf had already surpassed high tens, and after earning its nickname “Unique Grey Wolf”, the various stories related to this creature had upended the mood of the Hunters Cafe. In fact, the mood had almost reached a point where TV stations might send people to investigate it. *(TL: again, the Cafe here is not an actual shop, but an internet forum.)*

But quite unlike any other Hunters who would have prioritised their safety first, this woman had dragged these two guys along while raising a fuss.

“I said, no problem, no problem at all~”

The unique Monster, or possibly a mutated one. The term referred to creatures that had went through changes induced by an inborn condition or acquiring something along the line, and began growing in an unnatural way until it became far stronger than all of its peers.

The famous examples included the Sabre-tooth Tigers, the Manticores – a Monster with a Human head, a lion’s body, and wings of a bat – and the Dragon Turtles.

These were top tier Monsters that even a party full of High Tier Knights would find difficult to hunt, and these creatures were usually found in the unreachable high and remote parts of the Gangwon’s mountains where they would continue their lonely but battle-filled existences.

But to think, there was a unique Monster roaming around freely in the Low Tier hunting ground? This woman was thinking that... this was simply a stupid, unrealistic rumour that even the resident Knights tasked with combating the non-standard Monsters had found utterly laughable.

But the two men thought differently. A Grey Wolf with a size of a tiger. They definitely saw its bright and fearsome eyes. Not personally, of course, but online in the Hunters Cafe.

Its amazing figure standing proudly and staring at the Hunters with the full moon serving as its backdrop, made them stunned at its gorgeousness rather than stunned into fear, made them sense its nobleness rather than its savagery.

“You also saw that, right?”

“I did, but so what? I’m telling you it’s not a unique Monster. If it was one, then the Knights would have mobilised by now. And if this bastard was strong, then why the heck are there so many witnesses? They all would have been dead already.”

What she said was true. Unlike the regular, garden variety Monsters, those labelled as Unique were capable of unleashing special attacks based around magic, which would create equally unique signatures. If that signature was felt, then the resident Knights would be swarming the Low Tier hunting ground, busy patrolling the place high and low.

Plus, the testimonies of the eyewitnesses were a bit weird as well.

They said that the huge Wolf just appeared like a ghost and blocked their paths until the Hunters chose to retreat. They did add that they got scared of its intense eyes and its size, and were too busy running away with tails between their legs, but it meant that this creature didn't come out to hurt people.

“It's just a slightly bigger wolf. And we know that all bigger Monsters have Mana Stones in their hearts. Sure, it should be as strong as it looks, but... hell, as a Mid Tier Hunter, I didn't bring this bad boy just for a show!!”

She pulled out a handgun from her back pocket. Called KM-758, it was an expensive gun designed to chamber and fire rounds of armour-plated Mana bullets that were especially effective against the beast type Monsters.

“Eh? Where did you get that from?”

“This Mid Tier ranked lady is on another dimension from you guys. I bought it from the cash I earned by participating in hunting with various other parties. With this bad boy, as soon as we find this Wolf, it's as good as a dead meat.”

At the entrance of the weapon that was far more trustworthy than her words, the men began to regain some of their former courage.

– *Awooooo...!!*

However, as soon as they gained some confidence, a powerful fear assaulted them right away. The howl of the wolf piercing the night sky easily swallowed up the budding seeds of courage in their hearts.

“What, what was that?”

<<<<

Grey Wolves never howled. It was because not only their vocal chords were deformed, the tactic of hiding in the shadows then stealthily assaulting their prey was their most preferred method to hunt and also the reason why these creatures could still live in the Low Tier hunting ground. In other words, they wouldn't deliberately make a noise to spoil their hunting opportunity.

If that's the case, then just what was making that howl?

All three of the Hunters, even the woman who was so full of bravado, ended up sticking *very* close to each other, their bodies shaking like leaves.

– *Awooooo!!*

The fear that struck them once more came from a lot closer than before. In the end, all three Hunters fell on their butts while holding hands and their bodies planted against each other's. Even though it was simply a cry of a wolf, they just couldn't recover from the assault of the fear on their senses that made their bodies go numb.

These poor fellas could never ever had posited that there was a magical effect applied in the howl itself...

"I, I, I've already lo, lo, loaded the gun so, no nee, need to wo, worry!"

She grasped the gun with her shaking hands. At the same time, the shivering men recalled with some difficulty the rules of Hunters. They must never surrender to the encroaching fear. The moment they fear the Monster, their lives would be forfeit.

One man brought out a rifle, the other a shotgun. With the sounds of firing pins being cocked, all three of them finished equipping their weapons.

Rustle

They heard the sounds of grasses covered in descending darkness being disturbed. The tightening, dreadful anticipation suppressed the fear and terror, and the three briefly regained their cool-headed Hunter's appearances.

They placed their index fingers on the triggers and took aim towards the direction of the sound.

A minute that felt like 10 passed by, and finally, the Monster revealed its face.

But the Hunters couldn't find the right reaction to this totally unexpected appearance.

– **growling**

The sight of a green skin, a crude metallic weapon held in one hand, and a bone

necklace hung around its neck, stopped their mouths from operating. Was this an Orc Warrior? No, it couldn't be. An Orc Warrior lacked enough self awareness to decorate itself.

The creature that overtly showed off its body and busy sending combative gaze over at the Hunters... it was an Orc Jaguar. A confrontational individual that possessed strength surpassing an Orc Warrior, it was a low Mid Tier Monster that *loved* bloody battles.

A low Mid Tier creature. Something that shouldn't even be here in the Low Tier hunting ground.

"...I think, maybe the machine dividing up the Tiers is malfunctioning again."

Because of its natural inclinations towards combat, Orc Jaguars went around searching for enemies to fight, but one of them coming down to the Low Tier hunting ground was extremely rare. There was a machine installed between the low Mid Tier and the Low Tier hunting grounds that was designed to stop Monsters from getting all mixed up.

But it could only lead the Monsters to behave a certain way and was not what one would call a foolproof system, so every now and then, there were "accidents" like these.

"...I'm really sorry. We came to catch a wolf but something f*cking worse showed up instead."

"We ain't dead yet. And didn't I tell you to fix the way you speak? How come for the rest of your life..."

– *Ghwoaaaa!!*

Their conversation got interrupted by the Orc Jaguar's roar. The three Hunters exchanged several knowing looks. If two of them bought time, then one would be able to survive. So, *you wanna live? Nope. What about you? I don't want to.*

As expected, the camaraderie built up over the past 15 years was unshakeable. All three of them said no and just grinned. And finally, they decided to just work together.

BANG!!

The male Hunter with the rifle took aim at the Orc Jaguar's neck and pulled the trigger first. But the Mana bullet designed for the Low Tier Monsters couldn't pierce the thick skin of the target.

The Monster got enraged by the attack that managed to tickle it and pounced towards the Hunters.

Next was the Hunter with the shotgun.

BLAM!!

The scattering Mana buckshots struck all over the body of the Orc Jaguar. But again, there was no effect.

Finally, only the handgun was left. But she knew. This Orc wasn't a beast type. This gun was them just struggling uselessly...

Rather than her own death, her eyes teared up in apology at the thoughts of dragging her friends to their end here.

And in that moment when she squeezed the trigger of her gun in regret.

Bang!!

The movement of the Orc stopped.

"...?"

The three Hunters stared in panic at the Orc that was literally a stone's throw away from them.

But it wasn't that the Orc had stopped.

Instead, it was busy looking at the right arm that held the crude weapon.

The eyes of the Hunters also followed the line of the sight.

And there was a lone wolf busy chewing on the arm of this Orc, having appeared out of absolutely nowhere.

It was a Grey Wolf.

And it was the very creature the Hunters were looking for, the Grey Wolf with a tiger-sized body.

CHAPTER 13

A SPIRIT BEAST, THE DIVINE WOLF (2)

At first, Sae-Jin howled in order to warn them of the incoming danger. There was an Orc Jaguar heading towards the three Hunters, after all.

Unfortunately, it seemed there was an unexpected effect of a skill attached to his howl.

► [Condition Complete: Drove a minimum of one person to the state of terror with the wolf's howl] Passive Skill "Howling" acquired.

– While in the Wolf Form, the host can affect the emotional state of targeted individuals with his Howling. Example: Fear, Terror, Mysteriousness, etc.

'What the hell...'

Instead of running away, the Hunters that heard his cry fell on their asses after their legs gave up on them. And the Orc Jaguar was slowly approaching those poor suckers.

A short time later the Hunters and the Orc clashed. The trio had fallen into a state of panic but somehow recovered just in time and started firing their guns.

– *Blam!!*

Sae-Jin dashed towards the scene as he listened to the sound of the gunshot. He just couldn't sit back and watch, knowing that he was partially responsible for this mess, even though he didn't plan things to happen this way.

Fortunately, Sae-Jin arrived in the nick of time. Moving fast enough to cause a storm of winds, the wolf opened wide its maws and bit down hard on the right arm of the Orc Jaguar.

Kwajeek.

But what he got was a sensation of blockage, the lack of the satisfying penetration. It was not possible even for the incredible biting strength of a Grey Wolf to pierce the

tough and thick skin of an Orc Jaguar. When the Orc looked at his way indifferently, Sae-Jin couldn't help but busily move his eyes and take a glance at the creature.

“—!!”

The Orc roared in irritation and swung its arm hard, throwing Sae-Jin off it. He quickly regained his footing after being thrown off and took some distance, but the explosive speed of the Orc Jaguar was much faster than his expectations. As befitting of the moniker, “Jaguar”. Its speed didn't lose out to that of a Grey Wolf at all.

It seemed to take only a couple of steps, but it had arrived at Sae-Jin's location and slammed down its weapon at him.

Khoong!!!

Sae-Jin just about dodged the strike by twisting his body.

“*Ghuoaar!!*”

Annoyed by the agile movement of the Wolf, the Orc Jaguar began pounding away like crazy with its blunt weapon. The accuracy was pretty damn low but the destructive power behind each strike was no laughing matter. Sae-Jin twisted around like a snake and avoided the crazed attacks. But the ground below could not withstand the aimless poundings and became overturned like a crop field ready for seeds to be planted, while numerous debris – pebbles, soil, weeds – flew up in the air.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Meanwhile, the three stooges Hunters sat there and stared at this scene in a total daze. It was like they were stuck inside a dream. It had to be a dream since this event they were seeing couldn't be reality, as the Low Tier Monster Grey Wolf was fighting tooth and nail with an Orc Jaguar that was considered to be one of the strongest even in the low Mid Tier rankings.

As they watched the proceedings in a daze, the woman suddenly raised her gun towards the battle.

“Hey, hey, what are you doing?”

One of the men panicked and tried to stop her. The other guy did the same. The two of them thought that instead of trying to agitate the two Monsters, it would be a far smarter choice to escape during this time of reprieve.

“An Orc Jaguar is known as an obsessive Monster. It’s got a good nose too, and it will never let a prey it found escape like that. Dunno if that Wolf intervened in order to buy us time to run, but it’s *the* correct choice to help it out right now.”

What if the wolf targets us next after the Orc Jaguar is dead?! The male Hunter couldn’t spit his words out. If it weren’t for that wolf, they would have died already, and if that wolf couldn’t defeat the Orc, then they would still die anyway.

“Aim mainly at the eyes, between the eyebrows, mouth, and under the arm.”

They had received the ranks of low Mid and Mid Tier at the age of 23, meaning all three of them had enough skills to roll around in this rough world by themselves. They quickly reloaded their guns and took aim at the battle of a Wolf and an Orc. Even though the Orc exposed a lot of openings because of its lack of palpable intelligence, all of them proved to be useless in the end. The Hunters had to aim at those weak spots where there wasn’t much covering of thick skin, or where there weren’t any to begin with.

Kwaaaahng!!

The Orc pounded hard once more, but it was yet another miss. It ended up destroying the poor ground again, so it widened its eyes in anger and searched for the slippery Wolf.

And when it stopped its movement for a brief moment, an oval shaped object with a pointy tip sliced past the wind and and struck one of the Orc’s eyes.

“Kuoarrrrr!!”

It was a Mana bullet. As the bullet that was densely infused with Mana came in contact with the Orc’s retina, it exploded – and the hulking creature spouted blood as it stumbled backwards just a little.

BlamBlamBlamBlam!!

As the flurry of bullets flew at it aiming for the weak spots, the Orc raised its arm and easily swatted them away.

With one of its eyes gone, the focus of the Orc Jaguar's fury switched its target from the Wolf to the three Hunters. Its anger boiled so much that it'd pounce on the three humans at any moment.

"It's coming!! Separate, now!!"

When the Orc unwisely started moving towards the Hunters while ignoring the Wolf, Sae-Jin's chance had come.

He activated the skill Warrior of Reversal.

Almost immediately, his muscles grew at an incredible speed and vitality filled his body. When the fighting spirit that could not be doused burned powerfully inside him, Sae-Jin decided to relieve this feeling with him ripping out the back of the Orc's neck.

The Wolf, with its body completely transformed, assaulted the back of the Orc like a raging, crashing storm wave.

He only needed two full steps. Wind gathered below his paws and using the propulsion from them, he charged into the Orc's back.

Kwajeek.

Sae-Jin finally succeeded in piercing through the skin. But, it still wasn't a fatal enough wound. So, he shook his head around in order to further tear open a larger chunk of the wound.

"Khoarrrr!!"

The Orc screamed in pain and tried to pry the Wolf off from its back. But Sae-Jin's temporarily enhanced jaw strength could ignore the creature's desperate shakings. While biting deeper into the neck of the Orc, he sent out signals with his eyes at the Hunters. It was their turn to shine, now.

*"...*breathing heavily*..."*

The woman Hunter aimed the handgun with her imperceptibly trembling hands. The

target was the Orc's left eye.

The Orc raged around powerfully, but she didn't hesitate one bit as she squeezed the trigger.

The steel-encased Mana bullet drew a clear trajectory as it flew towards the Orc. Literally, it was clear to see. Its speed wasn't of a regular bullet. As if it was a flower petal blowing around in the wind, the Mana bullet slowly approached the Orc.

It was a built-in feature of this high priced firearm designed to maximise accuracy.

The damage from the speed of the bullet would lessen but since it was going to explode once entering the target, the design of a steel-encased Mana bullet was also focused solely on achieving high accuracy.

She manipulated her Mana and guided the trajectory and the direction of the bullet in real time. The bullet constantly changed its aim as the Orc violently struggled until finally, it struck the creature's eye.

A small explosion followed right after. A fountain of blood poured out from the Orc's eye.

“Whew.”

It was a bull's eye. She breathed out a sigh of relief.

Even though the Orc had become completely blind, the Wolf remained biting into the neck for a few more seconds before separating from the creature.

“*Khwo- kheu-*”

The back of the neck chewed out by the Wolf looked as if it'd split apart in any second, and from the eyes damaged by the bullets blood poured out like a fountain. The Orc Jaguar let out a weird whimper and threw its two arms around, but even that didn't last long.

“__”

The creature fell on top of the grass and stopped moving shortly thereafter.

“Haah...”

When the battle ended, the three Hunters fell on their asses again as the strength abandoned their legs.

Sae-Jin was breathing heavily as he spat out the blood pooled in his mouth. And before long, a new message window popped into his view.

[Condition Cleared: A Cooperative Hunting.]

- Succeeded in a cooperative hunting with at least the minimum of 1 Human.
- It’s now possible to change into the Ebony Wolf Form instead of a Grey Wolf. All Stats related to the Forms will be adjusted accordingly.
- The skill “The Scent of a Wolf” will apply even while in Human Form.

▶ Passive skill, “The Scent of a Wolf” [Level: F]

- The strong odour of the Ebony Wolf. Depending on the gender, race, characteristics and tendencies, the effects will vary.
- This skill will also remain active during the Human Form.

It was a joyous message no matter how many times he looked at it. But just like before, he couldn’t shout out in happiness as the timing proved to be a bit wrong as well.

<<<<

“...Hey, hey!! Look at that!!”

The woman Hunter suddenly raised a ruckus as she began pointing at Sae-Jin.

Actually, he had no idea what the process of his evolution looked like. All he could derive from the dazed, mouths-wide-open appearances of the three Hunters were that, maybe, it must have been rather mysterious or somewhat bizarre to look at.

Sae-Jin remained standing proudly for a bit and gazed at them, before rapidly dashing away.

And the only ones left behind were the three dazed Hunters still acting like they were swimming inside a dream.

“Hey, did you see that?”

“Yup.”

“Its fur changed while brightly shining and all that, right?”

“...Yup.”

When the Wolf’s body was enveloped in the mysterious azure light, the previously grey coat became dyed in jet black colour. This was a kind of an incredibly rare event that couldn’t be seen again even in a dream.



It was at night. With a full moon looming large, a huge crowd of people had camped in the the Monster field’s Low Tier hunting ground. But it wasn’t just people only. There were also numerous trucks, antennae, cameras and mics that couldn’t normally be seen in a place like this; in other words, they were news crews and their accompanying vehicles. Under the curious gazes of one or two onlookers, the reporters were all in the midst of busy reporting on something while being protected by the Knights.

“...Can you tell me what is going on here?”

Sae-Jin cautiously approached one of the Knights on duty and asked. He assumed the Human Form and ran all the way out here, after suddenly catching the whiff of so many people and getting surprised by that.

“It’s to film a report. You probably have heard of the rumour, too, right? They say it’s a Spirit Beast or something... Obviously it’s all nonsense. But nowadays, what with folks being emotionally dried up and all, stuff like this... Tsk, tsk.”

The Knight who was normally stationed around these parts clicked his tongue in annoyance as if he didn’t like getting called out in the middle of the night.

There was this hot new story tossing around on the Internet as well as on various newspapers. It was about a certain Grey Wolf that morphed into an Ebony Wolf – a story of a Spirit Beast. This story came to life after three Hunters gave a clear, concise

eyewitness testimony as well as uploading the photos of the Orc Jaguar's remains to the Hunters Cafe.

The Hunters all spoke of the event where, after the Grey Wolf aided them in defeating the Orc Jaguar, its body suddenly became dyed in the azure light, then all of its fur turned black in colour.

The eyewitnesses guessed that this wolf was one of those growth-type Monsters, but as the story spread out like a wildfire, people, including the so-called experts, concluded from the creature's actions that it must be a Spirit Beast instead.

The reason was simple. Monsters tried to devour humans, but this particular wolf helped them out. And after the part about its fur changing colours were emphasized, a certain persuasive speculation gained traction where people wondered if this wolf was the same one that saved the Hunter Kim Tae-Jo way back then.

"What will happen if this wolf shows up?"

Sae-Jin carefully asked again.

"Probably nothing more than getting shot at by the cameras."

"Huh... So it's not going to get hunted down?"

"Fuhut. Hey, Mister Diligent Hunter, I get your dedication to your work, but if we try anything here, the public will crucify all of us."

"Ah."

"But man, between us, aren't these news reporter people dumb as hell? I mean, a wolf is a very skittish creature, so why raise so much fuss as a group...?"

The Knight stopped talking and looked around. The Hunter he was talking to just now had suddenly vanished.

"Where did he go?"

He just dropped the matter and switched his focus back to the guarding duty.

5 minutes passed, and then 10 minutes flowed by.

The original aim was to film the approximate location where the Spirit Beast had appeared while expecting nothing much to happen, so when that was all done, the reporters got ready to pack up and leave.

But it was at this very moment.

– *Awoooooo...!!*

A cry of a wolf resounded loudly in the air. The cameraman busy loading the van with the equipment and the lady reporter climbing aboard the passenger seat all stopped in utter shock and quickly turned their heads towards the origin of that sound.

And they saw a lone wolf, framed by the full moon on its back atop the nearby mountain peak, gazing back at them. The dignified stance that couldn't have possibly belonged to a wolf, the majestic body overflowing with confidence. The black fur coat that seemed to shine softly under the moonlight, and a pair of golden eyes that burned brightly. And finally, a mysterious howl that could shake their souls.

“...”

A wolf was not a tiger, but everyone gathered here could definitely feel the same thing. The wolf that was proudly surveying the ground here was definitely the “Sangun”. *(TL: it's a Hanja word that means a few things – one, meaning the guardian of the mountains, two, literally a fierce tiger, and the MC from a Naver webtoon, Brother Tiger Bar Khan. I thought the author meant the first two, so left as is.)*

“...Hey, wake up!! Start filming already!!”

The dazed members of the press began to move in a hurry. They hefted the cameras and began hunting for the best angle to capture the view of that proud creature.

“Huh...”

The Knight who sneered in contempt just now was left speechless as he stared at the distant wolf. He scoffed and said there was no such thing as a Spirit Beast. But even he couldn't call that creature a Monster. Certainly, not after seeing this unexplainable aura of divinity wrapped around the Wolf.

“!!”

“H, hey!!”

“What the hell?!”

There was a sudden collective cry of shock. Not content with just the appearance alone, there were several blue coloured blobs of Mana rising all around the wolf like the ghostly flames of the Underworld.

“D, d, did you get that?? Hey, I said, did you film that sh*t?!”

It'd be a huge scoop if captured on film. A guy that looked like a producer or a director yelled loudly while making a shocked expression. At this shout, the cameraman nodded his still-dazed face but at the same time...

“Hey, where did it go?!”

As if the previous event was nothing but a passing dream, the Wolf's presence had disappeared completely.

CHAPTER 14

A SPIRIT BEAST, THE DIVINE WOLF (3)

– What the!! Hey, did you get that? Oii!! I said, did you film that sh*t?!

The loud shouts of the TV crew could be heard.

– Were you able to witness that? Around the wolf, several strange ghost lights have started appearing one by one, as if the creature can manipulate Mana... huh?

Next, it was the turn of the reporter to shout out aloud beyond the scope of the camera lens.

But not minding that, the wolf turned around and lightly hopped down from the mountain top. The camera hurriedly chased after it, but by then, it was gone without a trace.

“Hmm...”

Hazeline frowned slightly as she watched the hologram display projected from her mobile phone.

A Spirit Beast, the divine creature. A being of mystery that a person may or may not get to see even once in his or her entire lifetime.

When she was 25, she got to see a Spirit Beast, the “Black Turtle”. Even though it was massive, because of its laid back nature, it didn’t enjoy moving around too much. Found originally in Eastern China, it was a creature that would have lived its days in a lazy stupor and barely moving one of its legs, but in the end it was murdered because of a child of some wealthy personage from the Middle East who suffered from a deadly illness.

The child suffered from the Mana Overflow. To cure this worst kind of Mana-related inflictions that couldn’t be cured by any known potion to man and subjected its sufferers to a hellish torment before killing them, the Black Turtle that had lived for 400 years or more in various worlds out there was turned into a medical ingredient in a single day.

knock knock

The sound of knocking on the door brought Hazeline back to the present from the reminiscence of the past and she took a glance at the watch to confirm the time. It was now 11:50. It was also the time for the appointment with *that* alchemist after finally getting one phone call through to him.

“Please come in.”

The figure entering through the gap between the smoothly opening doors was a robe-wearing man.

“Welcome back.”

“Yes, it’s good to see you again.”

The two shared a handshake and sat down on their seats while gazing at each other.

“Have you been well? You...”

Hazeline tilted her head in confusion. Something was different about him... Soon, she was able to figure what that difference was after she sniffed the air.

“I see you bought a perfume...”

The subtle yet pleasant scent coming off of Sae-Jin tickled her nose. Not too light, nor too gaudy, the odour settled in the air rather wonderfully. She ended up unconsciously closing her eyes and savoured this scent before regaining her senses, and made a fake cough.

“Heuhm. It’s nice. If it’s not much trouble, can I inquire as to where you purchased this perfume?”

Hazeline possessed a very sensitive nose making her very interested and knowledgeable towards the topic of perfumes. It’d be difficult for her to ignore this wonderful new scent at all. She just had to have it ready in her home or she’d never be satisfied.

“I didn’t use one. It’s all natural.”

Sae-Jin just smiled and shook his head.

Hazeline's brows wiggled a tiny bit. There definitely wasn't a scent like this the first time they met. At the time, he had no body odour. So why was he trying to sell such an unconvincing lie?

"Ah, is that so~ You have a... very nice natural odour."

But Hazeline could only perform the "Capitalist Smile" for now. As he currently held all the cards in this transaction, she just could not afford to make him unhappy.

"Ah, yes. Thank you."

Sae-Jin swallowed his saliva while feeling complicated, and replied to her. He could pretty much tell what she was thinking right now. She probably thought that he was lying through his teeth. But he was helpless to fix this misunderstanding. The Scent of a Wolf was a passive skill that couldn't be switched on and off at will.

"Haha, well then, is it okay if we end the prologue here?"

When Sae-Jin nodded in agreement, Hazeline pulled out a paper from one of the drawers in the desk. It was a regular A4 paper with nothing on it.

"This is?"

"As I've mentioned over the phone yesterday..."

Hazeline spoke as she handed over a pen. On a side note, it was only yesterday that Sae-Jin belatedly realised he could actually receive phone calls directed to his home via his bracelet TV.

"...Please write down all the ingredients you'd like to acquire. We'll source them for you. As long as it's not something like a heart of a person or a fang of a Sabre-tooth Tiger, it's possible to procure them within a month. One of the roles the Alchemy Houses perform is the circulation of medical ingredients, you know. Ah, you don't have to feel burdened about this. It's not a free service so you'll have to purchase them from us. But we'll be able to sell you at cost. It'll probably be about half of what you'd pay for in the open market."

"Oh, right. Thank you."

Sae-Jin picked up the pen and thought hard about what to write when his eyes inadvertently caught the images floating up from the hologram display above her desk.

It was the scene of the Ebony Wolf framed by a full moon, the one where he deliberately showed up for the TV cameras as a... bit of a service.

At the time, it was one of those nights that made his emotions go a bit hot headed, so he ended up creating this mess... but now that he got to see his actions in the broad daylight, his face got all reddened up.

“Ah, Spirit Beasts are a no-go.”

Misunderstanding the reasons for his gazes, Hazeline raised her index finger and waved it side to side while making a serious face.

“Hunting down a Spirit Beast is morally and legally prohibited, you see. We have no idea if the Spirit Beast has a direct influence in the area it resides in. There might be a big disaster like a landslide occurring if we hunted down that Wolf.”

That was what happened back when the Black Turtle was killed. As soon as it died, the Mana dwelling deep within the ocean floor that lost the focal point overflowed and resulted in a massive tsunami wave sweeping up the entire Eastern Seaboard of China.

“Right. No, definitely not. We should never kill such a cool wolf.”

He swallowed the rising laughter back down and genially spoke in a natural manner. While obviously unaware of Kim Sae-Jin being that very wolf, Hazeline looked at the display and continued with her speech.

“Yes, well. It is a cool creature, what with its somewhat dependable appearance, and also its personality of helping people out, too. But most of all, I love those eyes that resemble the full moon. It’s really understandable why all the girls are going crazy in the social networking sites nowadays. Honestly, even I shared a couple of posts on the *Profile Book*. Oh, by any chance, do you also do Profile Book?”

(TL: 프로필북 literally profile book. After a short Googling, I think it generally means Facebook-ing, twitting and posting social media comments. At least, that was the impression I got. Left as is.)

“Heuheup... No, no. I don’t do social media.”

Seeing Hazeline giggle like that, even Sae-Jin ended up leaking out a mysterious smile. She looked at him with eyes full of questions but he pretended that nothing was wrong and started writing down on the paper.

A Goblin's Kindness was impossible without the fangs of the Sabre-tooth Tiger, so he wrote down ingredients for other potions. He even thought of their names in advance. The potion to strengthen the stats of the drinker would be called "A Goblin's Rage", and, and...

"If you can find these, I'll be grateful."

When he handed over the paper, she studied every word in detail, even though she was acting disinterested by the contents. It was a normal list of ingredients that didn't seem to differ from what other alchemists would have asked for.

"Alright. As soon as we procure them, I'll give you a call. Oh, and... if it's okay with you, will you be partnering us on your next batch of potions as well...?"

"Yes, let's."

Sae-Jin spoke without a hint of hesitation. In all honesty, he couldn't really go anywhere else anyway, because he could only remain as a human for 2 hours a day.

"Wah, Really? You truly are wonderfully decisive, sir. Normally, other alchemists would be reluctant to choose but Sir Alchemist doesn't..."

"It's Kim Sae-Jin."

He told her while studying her eyes. He could see the surprise in her jewel-like eyes at his sudden self introduction.

"And my race is human."

<<<<

Sae-Jin reached out with his hand. Hazeline stared at the hand for a moment in a daze, before breaking out in a smile and shaking it.

"Yes, Sir Alchemist Kim Sae-Jin. I'll do my utmost best to make sure you won't regret choosing Yoseon Alchemy House."

As the handshake ended, the two stood up from their seats.

“It’s just about lunch time, but have you eaten yet?”

“Yes, I have already.”

“If that’s the case, why don’t we, together... eh?”

At Sae-Jin’s reply, Hazeline tilted her head in confusion, wondering if she’d heard wrong.

An Elf like her was not at all accustomed with rejections such as this. And from a *man*, no less... it was obviously the first time in her life. Even if it was a gentle no.

“I already had lunch.”

“But, but it’s only now 12?!”

“Ah, I usually eat my meals a bit early. My apologies.”

Of course, he had his own unfortunate reasons for doing this, but the deeply shocked Hazeline could only nod her head after blinking repeatedly in disbelief for a while.

“Ah, yes, well, yes, well... Of course... Of course it is, of course it has to be...”

“Yes. Well, when we have the time later. Then, please excuse me.”

His last words landed the decisive blow.

Hazeline’s mouth hung loose. She just could not figure out this situation no matter what. He said *when we have the time later*, but she was the one saying that, usually. She was not the one on the receiving end. It was a kind of unwelcome shock to her system that she could never, ever grow to understand.

She watched the back of Sae-Jin leaving her office in a daze and totally crumbled into her seats right after.

“...”

And she remained in that position for 10 minutes, looking like as if her soul had been

sucked out.

sniff, sniff

By sheer accident, she ended up smelling the air around her. The scent was gone now. She felt a bit regretful.

sniff, sniff

She thought that she had become a Soo-in (*beast man*) but it really could not be helped.

There was a trace of that scent lingering inside her nose, making her miss it even more now. Even though it had been only 10 minutes.

“I should’ve just asked...”

If it could make someone miss another with only its scent, then it was without a doubt, an excellent perfume.

If it was at this level, then she should have found out what it was even at the risk of annoying him. She muttered slowly, her face full of regret.

She continued to sniff the air for a while, before finding herself browsing the Internet for men’s perfumes.



Sae-Jin could often overhear people talking about the Spirit Wolf Beast everywhere as he walked. Students, Knights, even magicians – it seemed like every resident living near or on Gangwon Province had talked about the wolf at least once. And more flesh was getting added to the story of the Spirit Wolf Beast, just like that.

Since now he could remain a bit longer as a Human, Sae-Jin chose to walk into the Monster field the official way, through the Reception area by the entrance. This was the place where the Hunters and Knights could take a short respite before going on a hunt or after completing it.

It wasn’t originally a quiet place to begin with, but now, with the numerous reporters mixed in, trying to get more stories on the Spirit Beast, it was a lot more chaotic than usual.

“Ah, now that I think about it, that thing’s cry was like, there’s a Monster up ahead, so don’t go~ That’s what that meant, right? It was a real smart thing to turn back then, after feeling uneasy of that howl.”

“Does that mean you Mister Hunter also got to see this Spirit Wolf Beast?”

“...Eh? Ah~ well, no. But, but, I really did hear it with these two ears of mine, I did!! It was going *Awoooo* and everything. Ya also know well, that wolves in the Monster field never cry, right? Seriously, when I was thinking, did I go in too deep~? This wolf cries out and I got so surprised, I just bolted right outta there.”

“Does that mean, this Spirit Wolf Beast has helped people out before?”

“Yep, that’s right. I’m telling ya right now, ya really can’t see a cleverer creature than that guy. Oi!! That man over there, that’s the Hunter who got help from that Brown Wolf – hey, hey Mister Kim Tae-Jo!! Come over here. This reporter wants to ask ya something...”

Sae-Jin smiled in satisfaction while hearing all these conversations.

To him, it looked like the momentum of the story would continue to gather for a while longer as those people wanting some attention ended up telling tall tales and outright lies.

CHAPTER 15

THE MANA STONE OF A BEAST (1)

On top of the cold stone floor, Sae-Jin opened his eyes. He could *see* Hunters in the far away forest, while the noisy chirping of birds disorientated him. A Wolf could look a little further away, and hear a little bit more.

He got up from the spot, his four black legs moved.

Before he knew it, it felt like he had completely adapted to using four legs instead of two. Because of this, a whole bunch of swear words suddenly rushed out of his mouth.

The amount of time available for the Human Form was 2 hours a day. If he could be a human for only 2 hours then maybe he wasn't a human anymore.

At the growing disquiet, he got straight up and changed into his Human Form.

Sae-Jin stared at his legs with his own two eyes, then touched his face with his own two hands. They were all exact the same as before. He was truly relieved. Tears welled up at the corners of his eyes.

It was especially difficult in the mornings after nights of sleep.

He always suspected if the him now was stuck inside of a dream. Often times, he wished he was, as a dream would've been better.

It was very painful living as a Monster. The taste of blood and flesh was still stuck between his teeth, the sensation of ripping away lives whole with a mace – he just couldn't get used to them. If anything, all those things just served to wear him down to his bones.

“...*sigh*...”

Sae-Jin let out a deep sigh. But his tight chest and ominous feelings wouldn't just go away like that.

And the unusually drab, grey morning sky was making him feel even more depressed

than before.

At least to somehow cheer himself up, he switched on the micro TV.

With a soft whirr, a hologram projection spread its light on a wall of the cave.



“Pant, pant, pant...”

An Orc Jaguar was on the run from *something*.

A creature like the Orc Jaguar possessing such a deep desire for battle and victory was on the run? That was simply nonsensical. But right now, this very Orc was beset with terror even from the sound of rustling grass behind it.

The smell of a wolf, the odour of a predator, was making this once-brave Orc scared out of its wits.

The Orc’s eyes hurriedly searched behind its back. It couldn’t see anything back there. But that accursed smell was still lingering there. So the Orc spared no efforts and put strength in its legs to run away.

– Awoooooo!!

A Howling dipped in magical power tore through the sky and grabbed hold of this fleeing Orc’s legs. It felt like all the muscles on its body were going numb from the sheer terror.

The Orc intuitively sensed the encroaching death and as it turned its head around... a huge shadow of a jet-black wolf rapidly descended down on it.

“Kwek-”

With its throat grabbed tight, the Orc couldn’t even let out any particular scream, only a small whimper, before its life was snuffed out.

“Khrnng.”

After clearing its nose, the wolf pierced into the heart of the Orc with its razor-sharp

claw. When the hard tip of the claw penetrated past the soft tissues of the heart and touched something solid, the wolf closed his eyes.

Then, something mysterious happened.

An azure aura slowly rose up like a smoldering veil and began covering the Wolf from the claw buried in the heart of the dead Orc to the rest of its black body in a thin, nearly imperceptible layer. This blue light lingered around for a moment before entering the creature, causing him to open his eyes in satisfaction.

[You have absorbed the Low Grade Mana Stone of an Orc Jaguar.]

- Physical Strength and Endurance rise by 0.5.
- Agility rises by 0.2.
- Energy Manipulation rises by 0.05.
- If ?? more Stones are absorbed, the native skill of the Orc Jaguar can be acquired.

‘That’s quite a lot. Was it because I got an Orc Jaguar, even though it was still a juvenile?’

Sae-Jin, now in his Ebony Wolf Form, grinned slyly.

He discovered this way of *utilising* Mana Stones rather coincidentally. It truly was through a completely lucky chance.

Around 10 days ago, Sae-Jin watched a documentary on his TV inside the cave. And in this particular documentary, the makers were explaining why the predatory Monsters, such as a Troll in Ravenous State or a Two-Headed Ogre, became stronger after eating other Monsters.

At the end of the programme, the experts concluded that these Monsters possessed special digestive system that could absorb Mana Stones.

Those words ended up rousing his curiosity, so Sae-Jin picked up a lowest grade Mana Stone he planned to sell later on and promptly swallowed it.

Just like that, an alert window popped into view at the same time.

[Condition Complete: Absorb a Mana Stone.]

► The Passive Skill “A Growth Type Monster” has been acquired. [Skill Proficiency Level: F]

– When coming in contact with the Mana Stone of a Monster, the host can now absorb a minute percentage of its abilities.

– A greater percentage of the Monster’s abilities shall be absorbed when the Skill Proficiency Level increases.

He felt like he just hit the jackpot. Sae-Jin then quickly went and ate all 10 Mana Stones stored in the cave. All his Stats ended up rising by around 6, but unfortunately, the most important one, the Energy Manipulation, only rose by a paltry 0.6. But he wasn’t disappointed at all. He did find a new way to increase that important stat, that was why.

He then really focused on hunting afterwards. He would kill at least 7 to 8 Monsters in a day and absorb their Mana Stones.

The stronger the Monster, the higher his Stats rose; as to which Stat rose and when, that depended on the Monsters he hunted down. Following the traits of Monsters, if it was an Orc, then his Physical Strength increased; if it was a Wolf, then his Agility rose; if it was a Goblin, then the increase centered around Mana Affinity and Magic Strength.

After focusing solely on hunting for 10 days...

► Status

[Physical Strength 49]

[Endurance 48]

[Agility 63]

[Energy Manipulation 14]

[Mana Affinity 9]

[Magic Strength 9]

[Luck 8]

[*Ebony Wolf: Strength and Defense increased by 26, Agility increased by 40. During the Human Form, the effects will be reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$.]

Finally, Sae-Jin grew strong enough to easily bring down an Orc Jaguar. Of course, it wasn't a fully grown one, just a runt young enough to be called an "*Orc Student*", but still.

'All that's left to do is to evolve...'

Sae-Jin sighed, it coming out as a *prreung~* from the maws of the wolf.

As far as he knew, or for that matter the rest of the world, Ebony Wolves were the strongest species of the wolf-type Monster in the Monster field.

In other words, if he could evolve just one more time, he could very well become either a Lycanthrope, or a Werewolf.

On a side note, the differences between a Lycanthrope and a Werewolf were quite clear to see, up to a point.

A Werewolf was purely a *beast*. However, a Lycanthrope was considered a *person*, just like Vampires, Humans, Soo-ins, and Elves.

A Werewolf possessed a skill to morph into a *Human*, but in the end, its nature was still that of a vicious beast.

A Lycanthrope possessed a skill to change into a *wolf-man*, but at its core, it was a human being.

Looking at things this way, then Sae-Jin was closer to being a Werewolf rather than a Lycanthrope. That was because of his Trait changing his species from Human to Monster.

But a Werewolf was incomparably weaker than a Lycanthrope. One could understand this point when seeing that, while the latter became a legend, the former remained at the level of a rare Monster.

But he didn't really care which one he'd evolve into.

As long as he could spend the day as Human while not worrying about that damnable time limit...

Even with just that, he'd be happy enough.



Tadahk, tadahk.

While making similar noises to what a puppy would make when running on a stone surface, Sae-Jin returned to his cave.

<<<<

Changing back to the Human Form, he brought out the micro TV, placed it on a nice spot and lied down on the stone bed.

Lately, this was his only method of relaxation. After finishing the hunt, he'd watch TV for the rest of the day with his tired and aching body.

Since this was the only Human-like "hobby" he could do, he kept on watching it until bedtime, even if all of the programmes on were extremely boring.

– Today afternoon, the President...

It wasn't interesting, so he changed the channel.

– Haaa... Seriously, isn't there any talented people in the Gaebuyuk Knights Order? Can't you even properly cook rice?

– I-I'm sorry. I'm not used to doing this...

A programme about trying to survive on some remote island somewhere, came on. Famed for his icy-good looks, the superstar Yi Seon-Jae, who didn't look at all his age

of mid-40s, was busy berating a Mid-Tier Knight named Kim Si-Eol. (TL: the author literally said it was a programme about making three meals a day on a remote island...)

– But hey, what does a Knights Order do nowadays? Haven't we *not* have an incident of Monsters raiding cities for the past 5 years?

– Yes, well. That's true. We... are focusing on clearing out the Fissures.

– Is that so? But seeing how you have come all the way out here, you probably didn't have much to do in the first place.

The chemistry between stupid-faced Kim Si-Eol who couldn't do anything properly and Yi Seon-Jae who continued to score with barbed comments was fun to watch. Sae-Jin even giggled at several moments, too.

'..... I wonder, can I also make an appearance on TV?'

A strange thought suddenly bloomed in Sae-Jin's head as he continued to watch the TV and chuckle.

No matter how effed up it was, he still received a *superpower*, so such a thought inevitably had to spring up in his mind, seeing that he lived as an orphan with no hope and prospects for 21 years of his life. And that thought, was about being loved by many people out there.

Nowadays, the gap between a Hunter or a Knight, and that of a celebrity was quite small. There were even TV shows dedicated to Hunters and Knights only, so it was possible to become famous by killing enough Monsters to raise one's rank to a Mid-Tier if one was a Knight, or High-Tier if one was a Hunter.

'As if...'

Not too long after, Sae-Jin returned to reality and vigorously shook his head to disperse the unrealistic dream out of his mind. And then, he changed the channel right away.

– 3 o'clock this afternoon, a Werewolf was witnessed coming out from a Fissure in Gangbukgu.

"*Khrreung!!*"

Sae-Jin's body shot up from the bed the moment he heard the news.

– Slightly resembling the legendary Lycanthrope, but quite different in nature, the Werewolf is a rare Monster that hadn't been seen for past 30 years. After cleaning up the Fissure in Gangbukgu, the Raven Knights Order has announced plans to craft equipment from the remains of the Werewolf, as well as to auction off the recovered Mana Stone.

“Ghrrrung!!”

As soon as he heard the words Mana Stone, Sae-Jin nearly pounced into the hologram projection.

– The auction containing the Werewolf's Mana Stone as well as other loot recovered from the Fissure will be held at Hyunwol Auction House located on the island of Sebit next week Tuesday, 1 PM. The Werewolf's Mana Stone has been rated at only a upper Mid Grade, but its selling price is expected to be, at minimum, \$1.76 million US, to the maximum of \$3.5 million US, due to a high number of collectors desiring this rare item.

“NOOO!! Why the f*ck is it so expensive?!”

Sae-Jin became so emotional, he inadvertently changed back to the Human Form and yelled out loudly.

Money!! Money!!

Truly out of the blue, he found himself needing a lot of money.

Of course, the chances were, he'd go through no changes whatsoever even after absorbing that Mana Stone. But there was a *possibility*. Even if it was minute, for Sae-Jin who was in the deepest bowels of despair it was worth betting everything he had.

“MONEY!!”

He yelled out even louder and stood up from his position.

Sae-Jin anxiously paced around the interior of the cave for 10 minutes while biting his fingernails. The voice of the anchor continued to reverberate in his head.

The expected price of \$1.76 million minimum, the maximum of \$3.5 million...

The expected price of \$1.76 million minimum, the maximum of \$3.5 million...

'I don't have enough money.'

Sae-Jin bit his lower lip, hard.

Then, he spotted the micro TV's call function.

There was only one number showing up in the list of the recent calls – Hazeline.

They only saw each other twice now. And the amount he needed to borrow was, at least, \$1.76 million.

Any sane person would know not to make that call.

But for a guy with a pair of bloodshot eyes and his thoughts stuck in despair, such a thing as *sanity* had imploded a long time ago.

– *ring, ring*

His breathing became harsher every time there was a ring.

He didn't want to miss this opportunity. The Werewolf's Mana Stone – from a rare Monster that had not been seen in the past 30 years. If he missed this chance, then there may never be a next time for him.

– *"Hello, this is the Manager of Yoseon Alchemy House..."*

"Miss Hazeline!! This is Kim Sae-Jin speaking!!"

Sae-Jin hurriedly shouted out her name in an urgent voice, causing Hazeline to answer in panic.

– *"Ah, hello, Sir Kim Sae-Jin. Is there something wrong?"*

"I need to apologise to you beforehand, but may I ask you for an important but selfish favour?"

– *"Y-yes? Why so suddenly... ah, yes, it's possible. If it's you, Sir Alchemist."*

Hazeline made a calm reply. She was probably thinking that it couldn't be something big.

Or, even if it truly wasn't something big as she suspected, she could have figured that having Sae-Jin in her debt may prove beneficial in the further development of their business relationship...

“Can you lend me some money? I will definitely, definitely, without a doubt, work hard and repay you with my potions.”

It just so happened to be that she was right.

And he dearly wished to get into an enormous debt with Hazeline.

– “... *Eh?*”

A short sound of incredulous shock leaked out from the receiver of the phone.

CHAPTER 16

THE MANA STONE OF A BEAST (2)

“What are you talking about, out of the blue...? First, please calm down, take a deep breath, and then talk to me. I’m not going anywhere.”

Hazeline carefully admonished him. She wasn’t sure of what happened, but the alchemist seemed to be in a lot of hurry and was *thirsty* for something, unlike last time they met.

Fortunately, Sae-Jin was able to follow her advice. *Hoo-woo*. For about a minute, the sound of deep breathing came out of the receiver, and his relatively calmer voice followed soon after.

– *“An item I must procure right away has become available. I’m well aware that the proceeds from the sale of the potions haven’t come in yet. However, right now, I have 10 bottles of potions finished and in stock. I won’t ask money for them, but can you help m...”*

“Huh? You already have 10 in stock?!”

Sae-Jin was in a serious hurry but Hazeline’s thoughts were focused elsewhere.

How long has it been since he was here beforelast, but he already brewed 10 more?

Of course, she didn’t expect every single one of them to be a High grade potion like before. If that was the case, then he’d be The Alchemy Personified. But, to have created 10 potions in less than a month – if they were around Mid rank in grade or lower, then well, it was comparable to the level of an alchemy workshop. It was an utter nonsensical joke no one would believe if a lone alchemist, a human at that, managed to match a workshop’s output.

– *“Yes, I have 10 bottles. I can guarantee their efficacy. One potion can greatly increase the constitution, another is an inferior version of ‘A Goblin’s Kindness’ that has recovery effects, while the other one increases resistance towards elements...”*

“Eh, eh? Hold on, what did you say just now?!”

Hazeline shot up from her seat in shock. Now, it was her turn to feel restless. Not only she couldn't figure out how he had brewed 10 potions so quickly, but she also heard the "increases resistance towards elements" bit. THAT, was a serious *problem*. Because, that kind of potion no longer existed. Or more correctly, the recipes for those potions were all long forgotten.

Around 60 years ago, among the "first alchemists" to cross the World's Rift and settle down on Earth was a certain household named Rodes.

Often referred to as the Rodes Family, their alchemy skills were truly peerless, and it was not wrong to say their alchemic legacy became the forefather of the modern alchemy.

And just like the modern day alchemists, the Rodes Family was very secretive and never shared their formula with anyone. As a consequence, there were numerous potions only they could make, and amongst those, one of them happened to be the "Element Resistance" potion.

But around 30 years ago, the Rodes Family suddenly disappeared without a trace – as if they didn't exist in the first place. So, all the recipes and formulas for the Rodes Family potions also vanished along with them.

Not only the Rodes Family left behind an indelible mark on the world of alchemy, they also left behind a mystery that could not be solved by the current level of modern day alchemists.

They were seen as a source of inspiration, as idols for adulation, and a great motivational factor for many alchemists, thus becoming a legend in the process.

And now, this one guy was busy saying that he had created a potion that only a Rodes could have made...

"W, w, wait a minute. What potion did you say it was? Elemental resistance?"

– "... Yes, I did."

At his composed reply, Hazeline nearly fainted on the spot. She so badly wanted to go to where he was and confirm the truth of this potion for herself.

"B, but how? No, wait – where are you now? I'll come and see you...!!"

– *“No, that’s a little inconvenient for me.”*

Sae-Jin replied carefully at her strangely excited reactions.

But Hazeline was feeling really, madly frustrated right now. This conversation was now at a level well past the realm of strange and into something completely crazy.

So, so many, countless alchemists, including Hazeline, formed research groups in order to challenge the mystery of element resistance. The reasoning for the “Great Alchemy Conference” that occurred 5 years ago was precisely that – to recreate all the potions that had vanished along with the disappearance of the Rodes Family. They focused on 5 items back then, and one of them was this Element Resistance potion.

But this gathering, organised by the Knights Orders and led by them instead of alchemists, dissolved after not only failing to discover the recipes, they couldn’t even figure out the ingredients used for the potions. Deep mistrust ended up developing between each alchemist that had participated, and towards the Knights, as a result.

“...Ah, no. Well... if Sir Sae-Jin really brewed a Resistance potion... we need to meet first. We should talk about this only after we meet personally! I, I will go to you. Where are you?”



That very same day, two of them met in the Yoseon Alchemy House.

“A Mid grade. It should be around the Mid grade.”

Hazeline spoke while examining the scarlet-coloured liquid contained in a potion bottle.

Her breathing was rising up rapidly. Using her 17 years of alchemy experience, she confirmed it. This looked exactly the same as the illustrations of “Rodes’ Element Resistance” potion she had seen. It was really the Element Resistance potion.

Even though it was rated at a rather lowly Mid grade, there was little doubt Knights Orders would go mad with desire for this potion. The elemental attacks of the Monsters rated upper Mid Tier or higher were very difficult to deal with, after all.

The physical damage could be negated with armours, but these armours couldn’t

protect the body underneath against the attacks of flames and ice spewed out by, say, a Dragon Turtle or a Wyvern, so the Knights had to defend using only the Mana Barriers.

But unless one was a High Tier Knight, it was difficult to endure the incredibly high Mana expenditure. Even those amazing Highest Tier Knights didn't dare to casually engage Monsters that used innate elemental attacks without a recovery potion.

However, the story changed a great deal with the Element Resistance potion in the picture. This was a potion used exclusively for the subjugation of the top ranked Monsters. Following the standards set by the Rodes Family, a Mid grade could negate as much as half of the damage from the innate element attacks. That meant a High Tier Knight would have a far easier time fighting the Monster as the amount of Mana devoted to maintaining the Barrier would decrease.

“This potion... did you make it alone?”

“Yes. It was difficult to brew them so I could only brew two bottles' worth.”

Sae-Jin nodded his head. This Element Resistance potion had a painstakingly exacting compounding requirements. Not only did it require over 20 different types of ingredients, it also required him to be very careful when combining the said ingredients. Hell, even with the Goblin's Craftsmanship skill, he ended up failing numerous times.

Actually, the reason why he made this potion was to increase his proficiency with that very skill. The thing was, he received more skill proficiency points when he failed making potions, compared to when he was successful.

“...”

At this very moment in time, the two people gazing at this potion were thinking two very different things.

Hazeline was momentarily speechless after hearing him say “could only brew two bottles.”

She became hopelessly curious to the identity of the man in front of her. How could he drag the recipe of a potion now long forgotten back out of the abyss all alone? Just how could he...

‘Maybe, it was his master?’

That was when a lightbulb went off in Hazeline’s head.

The Rodes Family hid away from the view. Some said they were murdered by other jealous alchemists, some said they simply had returned to their original world. But they were all just theories. The only real fact remaining, was that they just vanished into thin air like blowing dust.

What if, the reason why they disappeared was because they felt sick and tired of alchemy...

It made a certain amount of sense. Great things were expected of the Rodes Family and thus they received huge product orders compared to other alchemists, and the burden and the enormous pressure created by those demands would be like an axe hanging over their heads.

When a famous alchemist had enough of all things alchemy, there were two avenues left to tread for this person.

<<<<

Either he or she start raising a successor, or like Hazeline here, become a Manager of an Alchemy House.

But a Rodes would never, ever choose the latter!!

“...Hmm. Never mind that, what is this favour you want to ask me?”

Hazeline worked hard to maintain a poker face while asking him, as things began falling into their logical – her logic – place rather quickly. Alchemists highly valued the master and apprentice relationship above all else. There was no need to ask about an uncertain matter and potentially sour their current relationship, after all.

“By any chance, have you already heard of the Werewolf’s Mana Stone? The story came out this morning.”

Sae-Jin too did his best to maintain his poker face. The minimum expected price may have been \$1.76 million, but it was expected to be sold at the max amount of \$3.5 million. Even if he used up the remaining half of the Sabre-tooth Tiger’s fang and

concoct more High grade potions to sell immediately, the proceeds from the sale would only come in after at least a month's time.

So, Hazeline's assistance was a necessity if he wanted to buy the Werewolf's Mana Stone.

Although this was only their third time meeting like this, Sae-Jin didn't really have anyone else to rely on besides her. Plus, he was feeling confident, as well. He could create potions on the same level of Goblins, so who can refuse him outright?

"Ah, that. Yes, I saw it. But why would you... Perhaps?"

"Yes. I truly wish to purchase that Mana Stone. But the problem is..."

...*I don't have the money.* Sae-Jin just couldn't say that out loud. So, he pushed forward the potions that were as good as money towards her.

"..."

Hazeline was busy punching the numbers on the *calculator* in her head as she gazed at those potions.

The Element Resistance potion. Nominally, since it was rated a Mid grade it'd be priced around \$45 thousand US at most on the market, but through a sales commission, she should be able to extract as much as \$350 thousand US. It was a shocking amount of money considering that only one person could drink this potion.

The other potions were also quite useful as well. But taking into account the sales tax, the total would not go over \$530 thousand US. Adding the proceeds from the sales of A Goblin's Kindness potions, \$2.47 million after tax. The Mana Stone of the Werewolf was expected to go for \$3.5 million. So, there was a shortage of another \$1 million or so.

However – there was something far more valuable than a million dollars to consider here.

It was the future relationship between these two people, Hazeline and Kim Sae-Jin.

If this man was indeed the successor to the Rodes Family legacy, or... even if he wasn't, there was a need to maintain a good relationship with the talent of the century like

him.

'I can't afford to let him go.'

She was already half convinced anyways. This man had to be the God of Alchemy, Rodes' apprentice.

Without that explanation, there was just no freaking way he'd be able to perfectly replicate a potion that had been lost to the world for almost 30 years!

"Hmm..."

Hazeline was feeling relieved that she had met this man only recently. If it was in the past, when she was still full of pride in her own alchemy skills – if she met him then, who knows what kind of mess she'd have created out of jealousy and pettiness.

"I will definitely procure it, that much I can promise you. Please be rest assured. I've earned quite a bit of money up until now. Even though I look like this, I was quite a famous alchemist and a Wizard in the past, I'll have you know."

Hazeline smiled brightly as she spoke, and that caused Sae-Jin to break out into a deep grin of his own as well.



In the empty Manager's office, after Sae-Jin had left. Hazeline logged onto the Alchemists' Cafe after 3 years of absence. It was a type of specific job-related forum where only the current or former alchemists could join. She stayed away due to various reasons but today, she became curious if there was any new information regarding Rodes Family and so, here she was.

"...It sure is lively here."

She muttered to herself. Even though it had been 30 years since the disappearance of the Rodes Family, it seemed that there was still a lot to talk about. There was a dedicated thread for all topics Rodes-related, and the last message was posted only about 10 minutes ago.

Out of all the *stuff* that piled up during the last 3 years, she compiled only the posts that required a "VVIP" clearance to read and carefully went through them. But, very

little contained anything useful to her, if any.

“...Tsk, my eyes rotted for no reason.”

Hazeline logged off, after finding nothing useful.

CHAPTER 17

THE MANA STONE OF A BEAST (3)

Located on the island of Sebit, the famous Hyunwol Auction House was considered as one of the world's best and consequently, the auctioned items were of equally high quality as well. They only dealt with rare loot dropped by the Monsters defeated by the Knights Orders based around Seoul; they also selected only the uniquely named "Branded Goods" out of all the equipment submitted by various smithies around the country. *(TL: the author used the term "명품" in this sentence. Lit. means named products/luxury goods, etc. Thinking back to Zenobis gauntlet from one of the previous chapters, I decided to go with "Branded Goods" until I can come up with a better alternative. Which remains to be seen... oh well.)*

It had been 5 years since Hazeline's last visit to this Hyunwol Auction House. She didn't feel all that much different, however. If anything, she felt like swearing out aloud thinking about how she'd have to tolerate all these people and all that noise they would make.

'It's still the same useless showing off of wealth.' *(TL: author lit. said "useless money party.")*

Just like a party on a boat, there were plenty of colourful lights brightening up the night sky up above the auction house building built on the island.

"We welcome you to Hyunwol Auction House."

An employee bent his back to greet Hazeline. Every employee working in the Hyunwol Auction House possessed quick wits, fast enough to easily determine the high value of the robe Hazeline was wearing.

As soon as Hazeline handed over her VIP ticket, she received a mini computer and a numbered card from an employee behind the counter. The number on it was 77. It was a number that made her feel somewhat confident. Happy at this lucky occurrence, she walked into the auction premise.

"...Mister Sae-Jin? Can you hear me?"

She spoke softly to Sae-Jin who was listening from somewhere via the bracelet on her left wrist. 10 seconds of silence later, he replied back.

– *“Yes, I can hear you well.”*

“I’ve just arrived at the auction house. The auction itself should end in about 3 to 4 hours, and the exchange of ownership will take place tomorrow... I will give you the certificate of transfer as you need to come in person to collect the item. As we’ve spoke before, that is something I can’t do.”

The Werewolf’s Mana Stone was the item put forth by the Raven Knights Order. Even if Hyunwol was commissioned to hold the auction for the items, during the transfer of ownership, the seller (*sometimes a representative*) and the buyer had to meet face to face.

And she could easily guess who the Raven Knights Order will send out as their representative. One of only 41 Highest Tier ranked Knights in South Korea, Kim Yu-Rin.

Hazeline would rather kill herself if it meant seeing that woman’s face. No, scratch that, if the two of them did meet, then one of them would die for sure. Although she wanted to help Sae-Jin out, they’ve only met three times. She wasn’t willing to brave that kind of danger for him.

– *“The time... the process won’t take long, yes?”*

“Yes. It’ll take an hour, max. Since I’ll make the payment today, you can simply pitch up in two days time and fetch the item.”

At Hyunwol Auction House, if one wanted to bid for an item, then that person must possess, on their persons, at least half of the bidding amount, and also must make the full payment within four days of the successful bidding attempt. It was a quite strict policy, but it couldn’t be helped as Hyunwol placed trust and speedy resolutions as their utmost priority.

– *“... Understood.”*

Hazeline could sense the hidden unhappiness in Sae-Jin’s voice even from here. She was curious as to why he put so much emphasis on time but in the end, she simply told him to wait for her and ended the call.

“Hmph.”

Hazeline carefully minded her robe from folding up and sat down on her designated VIP seat. Soon after, people wearing luxurious formal suits or clothing-style armours noisily entered and rapidly filled up the interior.

The auction finally commenced just as Hazeline’s head was getting dizzy from all the people present here.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I warmly welcome you!!”

The announcer with a chiselled good looks greeted the participating audience. Then he lightly introduced the lot on offer for today and without further ado, commenced with the auction proper.

“Introducing our first item – The Dominique’s Necklace!! This is a wonderful necklace said to help with the wearer’s Mana circulation.”

Normally, when a piece of equipment has its maker’s name attached to it, or have its own unique name, then that item was considered as ‘Branded Goods’. The naming of an equipment was actually set in stone by law and had to follow a certain guideline. Didn’t matter whether it was handmade or mass manufactured, if the government agency didn’t acknowledge it, then the equipment’s name had to include its base material and its category. For example – Sae-Jin’s weapon, the steel mace.

If the smith improved his or her skill and became an “apprentice”, then he or she could add modifiers to the names of the items – such as, “Unbreakable” or “Strong.”

Next up was the “artisan”. At the level of an artisan, the government would allow more leeway when naming the items. So, an artisan could attach his or her name to the items, just like the Dominique’s Necklace from before.

And finally, “master”. After climbing the summit of equipment refinement and manufacture, he or she would receive the title of a master craftsman from the government, and could also grab hold of the greatest honour of legally being allowed to name their items any way they see fit.

The master craftsmen, with this honour bestowed onto them, faced no restrictions in naming their products, so stuff made by these people often came with names that had basically nothing to do with their intended purposes. Examples included things like

“Call of the Taebaek” or “The Ideal of Rodes”. With naming senses like these, it was no wonder that there was a rumour floating around, of masters burdened by peer pressure frequenting certain consultancies specialising in finding the perfect names.

‘That’s a good item.’

Necklaces that aided the Mana circulation were hard to come by. It was quite likely the maker, Domenique, would rise from the position of an artisan to a master in the near future. However, that was of no concern to Hazeline right now.

She spent the time fighting off her heavy eyelids, while yawning sporadically.

“And this lot is the item brought to us by Korea’s best Knights Order, Raven – the Werewolf’s Mana Crystal.” *(TL: the author suddenly started calling the Mana Stone a crystal here. Hmm, a typo?)*

Finally. The item she was waiting for had made its entrance. A Mana Stone that was shaped like a wolf walking on four legs, and coloured in the shade of deep grey. Mana Stones rated upper Mid Tier had such defining characteristics. Mana Stones accumulated in the hearts of the Monsters resembled the appearances of their hosts.

“A Werewolf is well known as a rare Monster, and it is believed this was the very first time it had appeared in South Korea.”

The auctioneer broke the ice with a well known fact. Several collectors got ready to place their bids, their eyes focusing on the jewel-like Mana Stone. Hazeline also took a glance at her personal bank balance and checked the amount there.

After quitting the life of a Wizard and an alchemist, she kept most of her assets as hard cash, so she did have enough of an arsenal for this task – \$5.4 million US.

‘Fuu... he will pay it back, right?’

Even though she promised to help him out a week ago, but now, at the thought of spending this hard-earned wealth of hers, uncertainty and worries invaded her mind ever so slightly. He wouldn’t skip town after getting the Mana Stone now, would he?

“The opening bid is set at \$45 thousand, US. The bid increments will be fixed at \$1000. Ah!! First, the gentleman bidder, no 30!! \$46 thousand!!”

The bidding had begun. An overweight human, a Soo-in with a pair of animal ears on top of his head, even an Elf Wizard holding a magic staff. All these people, and more, began the intense bidding war just for the privilege of taking this Mana Stone home.

\$450 thousand, \$900 thousand, \$1 million, \$1.3 million, \$2.6 million. The bidding price instantly shot up towards the expected maximum amount without taking a single break.

“No 48, the beautiful Elf Wizard has put forward \$4.1 million!! The Mana Stone could give her inspirations when practising magic, so it’s an excellent choice!!”

And so, the final plateau had come. The Elf Wizard that called the amount of \$4.1 million carried a victorious expression on her face.

“Is there any other competing bids? The Werewolf’s Mana Stone with near unlimited potential uses!! You may never know, you could gain enormous power of the Werewolf from it!!”

The auctioneer spouted a load of bull crap. Hazeline could only chuckle at his audacity. She was still feeling somewhat regretful at the fact that she had to spend more than half of her wealth to buy a totally worthless trinket... but for the sake of a personal connection, it had to be done.

“3 times, I shall call for 3 more times!! \$4.1 million!!”

As soon as those words came out, Hazeline got ready to submit the bid of \$4.2 million.

“\$4.1 million!! Is there no other bids? This is the final call!!”

But she changed her mind at the last second.

“Oh, oh!! Number 77, a mysterious lady with \$4.5 million!!”

The auction hall grew noisy, and Hazeline grinned deeply.

‘I’ve got my pride as an Elf, so how can I waste time raising my bid by only \$100 thousand?’



“I’ve deposited the money.”

<<<<

“Yes, thank you very much. We’ve confirmed the payment.”

Behind the auction stage, Hazeline was conversing with the agent from the auction house regarding the item she had bought.

“Two days. Please set the schedule for two days later. Oh, and also provide me with a certificate of transfer as well.”

“...A certificate of transfer?”

“Yes. It’s a gift for someone.”

Hazeline spoke as if it was nothing much. Although it was a debt and not a gift, but still, calling it as such made her appear more wealthy. A woman making a \$4.5 million gift, what a cool person.

“Oh... Of course. We understand.”

The agent nodded his head and summoned the employees.



“Fuu.”

Sae-Jin wetted his dried lips as he exited the Seoul Station under the bright glare of the sunny afternoon and climbed aboard the pre-booked taxi.

From the Seoul Station to Sebit island, 10 minutes of ride in the high class taxi that burned Mana as fuel. As soon as he disembarked in front of the Hyunwol Auction House, the security guards there blocked the robe-wearing Sae-Jin’s path after thinking that he was a suspicious person.

“I’m here to collect the item bought in the auction.”

The promised time was 1:10 PM. Currently, it was 1:05 PM. After checking out his certificate of transfer, the security guards guided Sae-Jin in a respectful manner.

He was brought to the front of an elevator used exclusively by VIPs, and as he waited, a sales agent approached his side and while smiling she entered the lift alongside him.

“Are you an alchemist?”

Wizards usually didn't hide their faces with robes.

She asked him out of respect, but Sae-Jin didn't reply back. He simply waited stiffly for the elevator to take him to his destination as quickly as possible.

“...”

When he coldly didn't react to her, she became abashed and her ears and tail stood straight up. A tail, because she was a Canine-type Soo-in. (*TL: a Soo-in is a “beast man”.*)

“To... day's weather is nice, yes? It's the middle of a winter but it's like an early Summer day. I wonder if something's going to happen...”

She bravely continued to chat him up despite the risk of offending him. The sole reason for her behaviour was that, she was a Canine-type Soo-in. The ideal type of mates for a Canine-type Soo-in who possessed a powerful sense of smell, was a man with a nice body odour. And with his passive skill active, the scent spreading out from Sae-Jin's body was as incomparably manly as it could get.

‘... It's really nice.’

A wolf. Yes, it was a scent of a wolf. Making sure she wasn't seen, she sniffed the air and her face softly reddened at the seductive aroma.

Tting –

But the cruel elevator had arrived at the top floor for the VIP guests already. The sales agent regretfully watched Sae-Jin's back as he walked away.

“...Wow.”

The spotless, polished marble floor till lights reflected off; the expansive view out the

window showing the Han river and the beauty of Seoul; an azure shade dying the interior blue to confuse the senses as if one was walking in the sky – this stunning space was the VIP-only Sky Lounge of the Hyunwol Auction House, where no regular folk could ever hope to enter in their entire lifetimes.

“Looks like you’ve arrived.”

As Sae-Jin stepped on the marble floor with a dazed face, having forgotten about his urgent lack of time, a soft yet righteous voice came to him from somewhere.

“Hello there. I’m Kim Yu-Rin, a Knight ranked Highest Tier, from the Raven Knights Order.”

It was Kim Yu-Rin. Completely opposite of when she was talking to the Goblin version of Sae-Jin, she maintained a cold, expressionless face as she offered her hand.

“Ah... yes, how do you do.”

For Sae-Jin, it was their second meeting. But for Yu-Rin, it was her first. Whatever the case may have been, the two people faced each other and shook hands.

CHAPTER 18

THE MANA STONE OF A BEAST (4)

“Please confirm that it is the right item.”

Kim Yu-Rin was still beautiful. Subtly different from back when she was lively and refreshing; though, he still found her current robotic and cold mannerisms just as alluring as before.

“Here it is.”

Kim Yu-Rin handed the briefcase containing the Mana Crystal over to Sae-Jin. From the slight opening, the light shone from the Mana Stone. Sae-Jin spoke while giving her the certificate of transfer. *(TL: no, I didn't make a mistake here. The author again said Mana Crystal in the raw, then reverted back to Stone in the very next sentence.)*

“Thank you very much.”

One more handshake followed that. Their business-like conduct really suited the claim of this meeting being their very first. Their focus was solely on getting the official business completed, leaving a very little gap for anyone else to butt in. Still, Kim Yu-Rin found the attitude of Sae-Jin quite agreeable as he showed no ulterior motives towards her.

“Ah. Well then, you two. Shall we go somewhere and have a nice meal together?”

Suddenly, the Hyunwol Auction House's director spoke after observing the duo for a while.

His suggestion wasn't really a necessary procedure to follow, where the auction house's director takes both the seller and the bidder out for a meal after a successful transaction. Most of the time, it was requested by the buyer, and seller refusing the invitation would be seen as being disrespectful.

One could argue that truthfully, the chance to have this meal was one of the reasons why the final hammer price of the Mana Crystal exceeded the maximum expected amount of \$3.5 million. A chance of having a meal together with Kim Yu-Rin would be

of quite a worth, after all.

“If that’s the case, shall we go? I know a good restaurant frequented by our Knights Order.”

At this suggestion, Kim Yu-Rin assumed a polite smile and tried to guide Sae-Jin.

But, against all expectation, Sae-Jin shook his head.

“Is it possible to delay the meal for a later date? I’m currently running short on time.”

Kim Yu-Rin’s body stopped dead, still in her trek towards the elevator. Sae-Jin couldn’t see it, but her face was strangely distorted at that moment. A profession that was busier than a Highest Tier Knight would be rather difficult to find...

She worked hard to straighten her face and turned around to stare at the lower half of his face before opening her mouth. Because of the robe’s hood pulled low, she could only see his face’s lower half.

“I apologise, but if it’s not today, then I won’t have enough time as well. Another date is a little...”

“If that’s the case, then let us forget about the meal. Apologies, for my lack of time.”

Sae-Jin was adamant in his position. In that moment as she was opening her mouth to say something, Sae-Jin had already walked past her and was entering the elevator.

“W, wait a moment!!”

As she was being flustered after receiving this strange indifference for the very first time in her life, the elevator doors were already closing.

“...wow. Miss Yu-Rin, you just got rejected, right?!”

The junior Knights around her spoke in a shocked tone. They weren’t mocking her, but rather, they seemed to be genuinely surprised as well.

But Yu-Rin dazedly watched for a long time the elevator that had now arrived back down to the 1st floor, unable to even make a retort.



“Take me to the Seoul Station.”

Sae-Jin checked the remaining time after he boarded a taxi. Around 70 minutes. Thankfully, there was enough breathing room left.

Sighing out in relief, he again confirmed that the Mana Stone was carefully housed inside the briefcase. A thick smile automatically spread on his lips.

As soon as he arrives back at the cave in Gangwon Province, he'd absorb this Mana Stone and wait in leisure for the evolution to occur...

But that kind of relaxed thought couldn't last for long.

Kwaaahang!!

First, there was an ear-busting explosion of noise, and right after, an enormous vibration shook the car's frame. This unidentifiable event made Sae-Jin's body float up, and when he came to, he found himself thrown out of the taxi.

“...Oh, sh*t...”

Through the hazy view, he could see cruelly twisted wrecks of cars and debris littering the asphalt. Suppressing the pain from his head and ribs, Sae-Jin confirmed the status of the item in his arms. Fortunately, the Mana Stone was intact.

“KyahakKyahakKyahak~!!”

A wicked cackle dominated his ringing ears. He followed the sound back to its origin, and looked past the twisted wreckage of the car.

Wings of a bat on its back, its looks reminiscent of a miniature devil, a Monster called Gargoyle was there. This bastard mindlessly slammed its body against a poor taxi and totally crushed it.

“...Keuk.”

Sae-Jin's body trembled as he stood up.

As he began to think why on earth a Gargoyle had shown up in the middle of a city, a completely unrealistic sight a hundred times worse than that was unfolding before his eyes.

And that was the countless hordes of Monsters. There were Monsters in the sky and on the streets. From the ragtag groups of Monsters such as Orcs and Skeleton Soldiers, to a Wyvern slicing up the air and blocking the sunlight with its massive body, and even Ogres that violently shook the earth every time they took a step forward. All of this was unfolding in less than three minutes.

Unable to differentiate whether this was still the capital of Korea, Seoul, or a Monster field from this unfolding spectacle, Sae-Jin momentarily stood there, his mouth hanging loose in a daze.

– A Monster Outbreak, 1st level alert!! All citizens must evacuate the area. The Knights Orders will arrive shortly...

Sae-Jin woke up from his stupor thanks to the automated alert coming from somewhere. Only then, did he realise that the Gargoyle was staring daggers at him. With those full moon-like grey eyes.

“..”

He didn't show any further reaction, but slid his hand slowly inside the briefcase. A Gargoyle was a shrewd and cruel Monster. He heard that due to its abundant curiosity, this Monster was known to play around with its human victims.

“Kyaaaaa!!”

“S, save me!!”

“Mommy!!”

At the sudden outbreak of these Monsters' assault, the surroundings had rapidly deteriorated past the level of Purgatory, and now resembled Hell. Wrecked cars exploded and flames rose up from the spot, dyeing the world crimson. Buildings were collapsing, and a child was crying out in terror after losing the sight of its parents.

“...Keeruek.”

But the Gargoyle focused its stares only on Sae-Jin. Seeing its slightly crooked leer, he could tell it was now regarding him as its a plaything.

A Gargoyle was a Mid Tier ranked Monster. Although it wasn't because of its physical strength, but rather, due to its sneaky characteristics that favoured setting up traps and such, but Gargoyles participating in an Outbreak would have its stats boosted to one level higher. It was hopelessly impossible for Sae-Jin of now to defeat this thing.

“ ... ”

Sae-Jin's hand that was soaked in sweat blindly stumbled around inside the case until he could feel what he was looking for. It was hard and cold – the Werewolf's Mana Stone.

[Will you absorb the Mana Stone of a upper Mid Tier Werewolf? Yes/No (Warning: Currently, this Monster is much stronger than the host.)]

Whee-ick.

At the same as the message window popped up into his view, the Gargoyle flapped its wings and took flight. There was that warning, but he couldn't think too deeply about it. Gritting his teeth, he pressed “yes”.

[Synchronising with the Ebony Wolf Form, the absorption of the Werewolf's Mana Stone has commenced... During the process of absorption, it is not possible to change to other Forms.]

And in that moment, Sae-Jin could only open his eyes abruptly.

“Keu-uuuurk!!”

An incredible pain. From all over his body, bones began growing uncontrollably, tearing his flesh and internal organs apart. This indescribable pain, comparable to being pierced by a steel pipe dozens of times in a single second. Tears of blood dripped out from the corners of his reddened eyes and the mixture of spit and blood spewed out from his loosely hanging mouth.

“...Keek?”

At the sight of a man that looked like he was committing suicide, the Gargoyle tilted its head and came in closer.

*“*guttural groan in pain*...”*

All over his body, bones repeatedly stretched then tore out of his flesh before retracting back. The sight of him vomiting out a bucket of blood with a pained whimper every time that happened was enough to make the Gargoyle break out in a grin.

“Keek Keek Keek.”

The Gargoyle slowly flew up and landed on Sae-Jin’s back after he collapsed on the asphalt. It poked his head with its finger for a moment or two, then as if it found this amusing, the Monster cackled again.

“Keek Keek Keek...”

Unfortunately, a Gargoyle was a type of Monster that got bored rather easily. The ugly creature raised its sharp claws with a smile on its face after having instantly lost all interest in him. The claw that could easily rip apart a person’s body like cutting a radish gleamed icily.

<<<<

The bastard’s weapon was raised high in the air. And Sae-Jin’s head would soon be split clean open by those ugly claws...

[The absorption has been partially completed. From now on, “Beast Mode” can be utilised. Beast Mode will automatically activate when the host’s life is in danger.]

It was also at this time when Sae-Jin’s eyes glowed in deep yellow. Right when the claw reflecting the sunlight descended down on his head.

The claw seemed very slow. Also, it looked weak, as if it just might break into pieces after he shook it around a couple of times. Maybe, this was what a predator must’ve

felt looking at its prey.

Sae-Jin lightly swung one of his arms and threw the creature away.

Massive noise of destruction

But the end result couldn't be called "light" at all. The claws of Gargoyle did break apart and scattered in the air, and its body was flung away into distance with a loud, explosive noise as if it was exploding drum barrel.

*"...*heavy breathing*..."*

Only then, did the flow of time restore back to normal; Sae-Jin tried to grasp his boiling heart as he heavily breathed in and out.

Unfortunately for him, the idea of feeling relieved was as distant as it could possibly get.

"...What the..."

His hands had become larger and sharper like that of a beast, and his body was being covered in fur. A tail was coming out of his rear, his jaws were extending, and his teeth were becoming more horrifying.

Sae-Jin dazedly stared at his hand, now covered in black fur. This... was the appearance of the Werewolf in the "Beast Mode". He hurriedly scanned his surroundings. Fortunately, in this hellhole there wasn't anyone with enough leeway to pay attention to his sudden transformation.

"The Human Form. Why can't I change back to the Human Form?"

That was his first question. Why was he now in the form of bipedal beast, instead of a human? Thankfully, the friendly system solved that quandary for him.

[Until the Mana Stone absorption is completed, the Human Form will not be available to the host.]

Right after that message, countless other alert windows swarmed in front of his eyes,

enough to block the entirety of his view.



[Condition Complete: The Heart of a Beast.]

- The host has absorbed the Mana Stone of the mighty Werewolf into his heart. All stats rise by 15.
- When the absorption reaches 100%, in the Ebony Wolf Form the host can activate/deactivate either the Beast Mode or the Human Mode. *(Not possible to change to other Forms until the absorption is complete.)*
- Acquired Passive Skills “Flesh of a Beast”, “High-Strength Claws” and “Predator.”

▶ Passive Skill “Flesh of a Beast” [Skill Proficiency Level: F]

- The flesh is strengthened, and small amount of damage from magic is negated.
- The wounds on the body heal rapidly through the body’s excellent resilience.
- The host can freely manipulate the flow of his blood as well as a target’s. However, a part of the host’s body, such as claws or fangs, must be in contact with the target’s bloodstream.
- During the Human Form, the effects of the skill will be decreased.

▶ Passive Skill “High-Strength Wolf’s Claws” [Skill Proficiency Level: F]

- The claws of a wolf that boast the strength and hardness of steel.
- When the skill level is raised, the “corporeal”, “incorporeal” and even aura can be exterminated.
- During the Human Form, the effects of the skill will be decreased.

▶ Passive Skill “Predator” [Skill Proficiency Level: F]

- The host will grow stronger the more enemies the host eliminates. When a stronger enemy is killed, the rate of growth will be greater.
- The prey can feel fear towards the Predator and could surrender/wish to submit

under the rule of the host.



Too bad, there just wasn't enough time for him to sit down and properly go through all these messages.

“Take the Ogre first!! Leave the Wyvern to the Highest Tier Knight!!”

Knights were already approaching this place. Sae-Jin hid from their eyes and moved as stealthily as possible.

CHAPTER 19

A MANA STONE OF A BEAST (5)

The only difference between an Ebony Wolf and a Werewolf, not taking into account the gap in strength, was that a Werewolf could assume either a beast's appearance or that of a human being. Although nominally he was still in his Ebony Wolf Form, but on the outer appearance alone, it'd be more correct to call him a Werewolf now, instead.

[The absorption is still in progress. Impossible to change to a beast form.]

Sae-Jin gritted his teeth hard. His current form, a bipedal wolf beast, Werewolf, was just too damn eye-catching. That's why he wanted to change into something that moved on four legs but even that was impossible.

'Make one mistake, and I'm dead.'

Right now, he was without a doubt, a Monster. He was the No.1 target for extermination by the Knights or even the Hunters. Sae-Jin lowered his body as much as possible and also used his arms as well to move.

Thankfully, his exemplary sense of smell helped him to find back alleys with no Knights or Hunters present. Plus, an Ebony Wolf was very much specialised in being stealthy. No matter how stuck he was in this Beast Mode, the people busy fleeing the scene couldn't sense his movements that had blended into the shadows.

*"*breaths a sigh of relief, animal style*"*

After walking for awhile, Sae-Jin sensed that he had escaped the initial bloody battlefield between Monsters and Knights and let out a breath of relief. But the surrounding situation still wasn't really safe just because there weren't any Knights nearby. Low Tier and Mid Tier Monsters were attacking buildings, or were busy killing citizens while mowing down the boardwalks.

A Monster fell on top of a car parked inside a damaged building, and the flames erupted from the exploding car. A child fell over as the explosion nearly engulfed her.

But Sae-Jin couldn't do a thing. For his own survival, he had to disregard everything and run.

In other words, he had to disregard the child's cries entering his ears.

"Mommyyyyy!!"

"S, Su-Jung!!"

At the child's cries, the mother's voice called back. The face of a woman who must've been the mother was dyed black.

And there were debris from the building falling on top of this child who was collapsed on the street with her legs bruised.

"...!!"

He didn't hesitate for long. His legs moved first.

He used the "Whirlwind Dash". Covering the distance of more than 500 metres in a single breath, Sae-Jin hugged the child in a protective embrace. Immediately after, a terrifying amount of building materials and steel beams crashed down on them. The mother's tear-soaked scream tore through the air.

'Doesn't hurt.'

As expected, the body of the Ebony Wolf in Beast Mode was sturdy. He couldn't see because of being under a tone of rubble, but otherwise, he could feel zero pain. He quickly confirmed the safety of the sniffing child within his embrace.

Then, he deeply extended an arm and powerfully swung it.

Kwaaaahang!!

The hill of rubble weighing down on the beast's back was scattered into the air.

"Su-Jung... Eeeek!!"

The first person he saw was the child's mother. She was holding a baby in one hand while approaching closer to save her other kid. Unfortunately, there was a single beast

that completely filled up her sight.

A big body that easily exceeded 2 metres in height and a wolf's head that proudly displayed its scary fangs. Although it was covered in black fur, that fur couldn't hide all those intimidating muscles of the beast.

The woman retreated back from the fear-inducing form before falling down on her butt. But within the arms of that horrifying beast was her daughter. She found a sliver of courage and tried very hard to stand up on her two trembling legs...

“Krrnng.”

“Hiyaak!!”

However, the beast moved first. The woman screamed out in fright but the beast simply walked in a thumping footsteps and put the girl down in front of her.

Unable to figure out what just happened, she glanced back and forth at her child and at the beast before finally understanding the situation, then she hugged little girl tightly.

[500 metres, Northward. Numerous strong humans.]

Sae-Jin couldn't just watch this scene of reunion relaxedly. Knights that had quickly subjugated the Monsters were moving out from the origin of the outbreak and were starting to sweep the outer perimeters of Seoul.

He rolled his legs and rapidly vacated out of there.

“This... eh?”

The woman raised her head wondering whether she should thank the strange beast or not, but like a mirage on a Summer day, the wolf beast was already long gone.



The military cordoned off a section of Seoul in order to mitigate the damage from the Monster Outbreak. Sae-Jin could understand this fact without much difficulty by the faint whiff of firearms in the air, and so, instead of trying to leave Seoul, he decided to hide somewhere until the absorption of the Mana Stone was completed.

As he was stealthily roaming around the city of Seoul, he found the entrance to the sewers by chance and hid himself in there.

‘... I feel like dying.’

Sae-Jin lied down on the wet stone floor and breathed heavily. He could more or less tolerate the depressing atmosphere draped in darkness and the eerie, moist air. But he just couldn’t handle the rotting smell. And maybe because of the side effects of the absorption, the strangely cold temperature was also proving to be rather difficult to tolerate.

His eyes closed bit by bit. It was dangerous to fall asleep as someone could find him. But the sleepiness, caused by the side effects of the absorption, easily defeated his worries.

‘Since they are too busy exterminating Monsters, so hopefully they wouldn’t think of coming down to the sewers...’

Hoping this was true, Sae-Jin slowly fell into slumber.



– A Fissure appearing near a nameless church located in the suburbs of Banpo burst open before it could be erased, and this event caused a great disturbance in Seoul. As the credit rating of the Republic of Korea is expected to suffer from the first Monster Outbreak in 5 years, the citizens are bitterly voicing out whether the Knights Orders, who were caught unprepared by the Fissure bursting open, are to be blamed for this...

“Pay no attention to that.”

Right now, after subduing the Monster Outbreak to some degree, tired and injured Knights were taking breaks by lying or sitting down on the grounds. The Highest Tier Knight Kim Yu-Rin consoled a worried subordinate Knight as he was watching the news.

“It’s always the same story after Monsters attack a city, right? Even though it might be tough this time, don’t get too discouraged as it’s not our fault anyway.”

...It’s not our fault but the private security corporations that neglected the repairs and maintenance of the Fissure detection equipment, added Yu-Rin in her head, her face

crumpled in irritation at these thoughts.

Originally, it was left to Knights Orders to monitor the Monsters and possible appearances of the Fissures. However, the government took away and handed the responsibilities over to several private security companies after someone argued nonsensically that the burden placed on Knights Orders trying to manage such a high-tech department as well would be too much for them to handle.

Truthfully, it was responsibilities only in name, as, in all honesty, it was all very unfair type of a deal where they only cared about profits and the real responsibilities were dumped on the Knights Orders' doorsteps. Since it was the Knights Orders that got blamed if Monsters rampaged around, like today, even though it was those f*cking bastards that were getting paid to monitor the Fissures.

“...Yes.”

She left behind the still-depressed subordinate and headed towards the temporary medical facility set up to house the injured people.

But the mood in that place was weird. Of course, there being no horrific injuries like someone losing a limb or something similar like that played a part, but at the moment, Knights were huddled together in one spot and were busy making strange faces while watching the hologram projection from a mobile phone. Their expressions were full of surprise and riddle.

“...What are you all doing?”

Many people lost their lives and the amount of property damage was difficult to quantify. Of course, that didn't mean everyone should observe the sorrowful mood religiously, but still, that kind of behaviour was unfitting of the current situation.

“Huh?! Oh, hello there!”

The Knights hurriedly switched off the projection and greeted her after recognising her face. The Knights gathered here were not from the same Orders but would unite under one banner, the Country, and act together in case of an emergency. So every Knight with lower ranking than Yu-Rin had to show her respect even if they were not from the same Order.

“You don't have to bow your waist that much since you're injured. I'm simply asking

you because I'm curious. What were you all watching just now?"

At Yu-Rin's words, the instigator who showed the projections to other Knights, a male Mid Tier Knight from the Raven Order, Yi Soo-Han answered back hesitantly.

"There was a strange news coming out during the evacuation of civilians, so..."

"What news?"

"Ah, well, it's just that... uhm, Miss Yu-Rin. I'm asking this just in case... but we really did kill that Werewolf, didn't we?"

Yu-Rin's face crumpled. What the hell was this guy even saying...?

"Of course. Where did that Werewolf's Mana Stone come from, otherwise?"

"...Right? But, the thing is... looks like there's another Werewolf out there. A citizen took a picture. Even if it's an emergency situation, there's always someone out there filming stuff. Somehow, we convinced him not to upload the footage to SNS for the time being, but... please take a look."

Yi Soo-Han continued with his words as the hologram was projected from the mobile phone.

"Here's the images of the Werewolf but seriously, it's really unbelievable. A Werewolf is supposedly a rare Monster, right? But the thing's even more strange this time around."

The first image shown was the fallen rubble from a building piled up on the ground while a woman was screaming her head out in front of it. Kim Yu-Rin saw this horrifying scene and angrily admonished the subordinate Knight for having a poor taste, but Yi Soo-Han, while sweating heavily, pleaded with her to check out the following image.

"...Huh?"

It was as he said before. The next image was so unrealistic, she had to wonder whether it was Photoshopped or something. With a loud explosion, the rubble flew up in the air, and from there two life forms appeared. One was a beast, while the other was small child with her eyes squeezed shut in its arms.

“It’s strange, right? It looks like the Werewolf was protecting the child. There’s an even clearer recording, too. Since this area was a bit farther away from the original Monster Outbreak spot, a few CCTV cameras managed to survive the chaos.”

<<<<

Yi Soo-Han then played the recordings from the CCTV cameras, and Kim Yu-Rin watched them all with a totally dazed expression. The falling building material on top of the kid. A black lifeform moving so fast, leaving only an indistinct blur on the footage. It was for certain. That Werewolf definitely jumped in among the falling rubble with an intention to “save.”

“I showed this to a handful of Soo-in Knights, and their reactions aren’t no laughing matter. They are raising a ruckus, saying this could be the legendary Lycanthrope. Obviously, it’s all empty bi*chings, though. Ah, I wasn’t swearing – it was really a bi*ch. They were Canine-type Soo-ins.”

At his words, Yu-Rin nodded her head in agreement. Lycanthropes didn’t migrate to Earth. Back on the “other” world, they were the race that received treatments ranging from being shunned to even being subjected to extermination. And now, they would remain simply as creatures of legends, or even from a myth.

“...It is rather strange, sure. But now isn’t the time to watch something like this. Before I confiscate that phone, put it down and concentrate on healing your injuries. And, it’d be bothersome if mass media learns of this information, so you better check your mouth, too.”

“Ah, that... I believe it’s better to let the media know about this.”

“What rubbish are you spewing now?”

Kim Yu-Rin frowned and glared at the man.

“I mean, it’s not our fault anyway but we still have to swallow lots of ill will. So why not circulate this footage to mass media and take the attention away from us? The grieving for the victims can come later... Khm. I’m truly sorry.”

As he was about to carry on with his words, Yi Soo-Han finally noticed that her expressions were steadily getting darker so he quickly lowered his head.

“Better learn to filter your mouth more carefully.”

After spitting out the threatening words of warning, she turned on her heels and headed elsewhere.



Inside the dark and dank sewers where not a ray of light existed. Kim Sae-Jin opened his eyes after getting a whiff of humans.

[300 metres, Northward. One Human, one Soo-in.]

At that moment, his half awakened consciousness felt the coldness. He quickly checked the current situation of his body. There was a lot of fur. He was still in the Beast Mode, but his fears were assuaged as soon as a new message window popped up.

[The absorption has been completed. The Active Skill “Beast Mode/Human Mode” has been acquired. (It’s possible to change Forms from now on.)]

▶ Beast Mode/Human Mode [Growth Level: F]

- Can change between the Beast Mode and the Human Mode in the Wolf Form.
- ▶ Beast Mode: Body changes to a ‘Werewolf’, all Stats related to the Ebony Wolf Form will be increased 3 times during this mode.
- ▶ Human Mode: Body changes to a ‘Human’, all Stats related to the Ebony Wolf Form will not be reduced during this mode.
- Calculated from the current Energy Manipulation Stat, the skill ‘Beast Mode/Human Mode’ can be sustained up to *(450 minutes)* per 24 hours.

▶ Stats

[Physical Strength 134]

[Endurance 133]

[Agility 175]

[Energy Manipulation 30]

[Mana Affinity 20]

[Magic Strength 20]

[Luck 7]

As soon as the messages rose, Sae-Jin quickly activated the Human Mode.

But there was a problem. The difference between the human Kim Sae-Jin and Kim Sae-Jin the Ebony Wolf activating the Human Mode was not..."small" at all.

His height must have grown, judging by his eye level being higher than before, and the muscles on his body at a glance looked like he's been pumping irons all his life, and his... *junior* down there was now the size of a mace...

"Who goes there?"

Out of the blue, a man's shout and the chilly sensation of an ultra-sharp Mana were directed at his location.

"I'm a human!!"

Sae-Jin replied quickly. And at his voice, Knights rapidly approached him.

"Hmm..."

"Oh, my..."

In front of Sae-Jin, two Knights, one male and the other a female, was "studying" his appearance.

"...I escaped from Monsters and hid down here. I took my clothes off after they caught on fire."

After hearing his excuses, the male Knight turned around as if he was unhappy about something, while the female Knight continued to observe his body with her face totally

red. She covered her face with both of her hands as if to imply she was embarrassed, but actually, both of her eyes were busy peeking out from between her fingers.

And her observation continued a while longer until the male Knight finally told her to stop it.

CHAPTER 20

THE MANA STONE OF A BEAST (6)

After receiving the aid of those two Knights, Sae-Jin was able to safely leave the sewers.

“Oh, so your profession is a Hunter?”

However, a slightly irritating problem had developed. Although he wasn't particularly hurt anywhere, the female Knight still dragged him to an emergency ward, and after placing him in one of the sick beds, she plopped down next to him and began asking an endless stream of questions while her black-spotted yellow ears atop her head busily twitched this way and that.

“...Yes.”

Since he wanted to leave as soon as possible, he kept his answers brief, but this woman showed no signs of giving up at all. She even came real close to his side and openly started sniffing him out. As expected, it was his nice body odour causing the problem. To a Soo-in that desired a pleasant body scent over that of good looks, the aroma of a wolf would probably be no different than an irresistible pheromone.

“So that's how it is. I happen to be a Mid Tier Knight, you know. On top of that, I'm a person with an excellent future prospect, too. And my annual salary is pretty high, as well... Ehehehe. We should go out hunting together some time. I'm a Leopard type, I'll have you know. I'm really fast and sturdy.”

Khwoung~ She made an adorable roar and tried very hard to get into Sae-Jin's good books.

Honestly speaking, he didn't feel bad at all. No, he felt rather freaking great. Because, this lady Knight was a stunner. Contrary to her sharp, leopard-like facial features, her actions were cute like a puppy dog's and that helped a lot with how he was feeling right now.

“Ah, you just smiled. That means you'll go out with me, right? We are, right~? You won't regret it! I'll help you raise your ranks by a couple of Tiers in no time!!”

“...Ahaha, no, I’m...”

As they conversed, the atmosphere bloomed in pink colour, but out of nowhere a proverbial dark cloud loomed over their heads. And that was the other male Knight who found Sae-Jin. His face convulsing intermittently, he spoke in a tone that indicated how completely displeased he was at the moment.

“Mister Kim Sae-Jin?”

“...What is it that you want now?”

The male Knight definitely called for Sae-Jin but it was the woman who replied instead in a prickly manner, blocking him at the same time.

“You, go away. Mister Sae-Jin, you are feeling okay, no? Unfortunately, there are a lot of other injured civilians crying out in pain as we speak. If you are okay, then...”

“What do you mean, he’s okay?! Can’t you see he’s suffered a lot? Even his clothes got burnt!! We don’t know if he’s suffering from some kind of emotional trauma right now.”

No freaking way. Sae-Jin chuckled in slight awkwardness as he raised his body.

“I’m fine. Since I’m okay, I should get going. There are promises I need to keep, too.”

“Eh? Why? It’s okay if you stayed a bit longer... oh, that’s right!!”

She grabbed the rising shoulders of Sae-Jin and forcibly pushed him down on the bed. Then she shot the pestering male Knight a sharp glare. But the dude was pretending to know nothing while whistling leisurely.

“No, Miss Knight, it’s just that...”

“It’s Rozen. Call me in the form you feel most comfortable.”

“Okay, Miss Rozen, I am thankful for everything you’ve done for me, but I really have to get going now.”

It was indeed pleasant to receive the undivided attention of a good woman. But, to a person like him that never experienced proper love all his life, such focus felt a bit

foreign and uncomfortable, plus there was the restriction of time factoring in his mind as well.

“...If, if that’s the case, then please give me your phone number!!”

Seeing his unshakeable resolution, the flustered Miss Rozen grabbed hold of his collars and handed over her phone. Sae-Jin just couldn’t find it in himself to refuse her on this one so he gave her the numbers and said his goodbye.

“Please, please let’s go out on a hunt together later!!”

Rozen sounded like she wanted to play online games with him and that made Sae-Jin chuckle softly. There was no meaning behind the smile, though. But her face remained deep shade of red as she longingly gazed his back.

“...Ah. Oi, you wanna die? What the heck were you trying to pull? You pickin’ a fight to death with me, a wild leopard, or something?!”

As soon as Sae-Jin was far away, Rozen’s face crumpled and began throwing sharp words at the male Knight. But his lips arched slightly upwards as if he was satisfied about something.

“What are you on about? I was just following protocol. He wasn’t even injured. Why should he take up a bed?”

“You, today, you...”

For a while after that, she continued to spit out nonstop verbal insults at him.



Sae-Jin walked past the emergency ward, scanning various injured civilians there. There was a guy with serious burns covering up his entire body, while another had slight bruising on the skin.

And as he observed the injuries of the patients, a strange and painful sensation assaulted his eyes all of a sudden.

“Eeuk...”

Leaking out a soft groan, he massaged his temples, while squeezing shut his eyes before opening them.

Then, the world had changed. It was an illusion brought on by the scope of his eyesight widening to an unrealistic level.

A normal person's field of view was 180 degrees. But Sae-Jin could see what was happening behind him as well. And the whole world seemed richer in hue and brighter too. The light from the bulbs stung his eyes, and there were no longer any dark corners he couldn't see.

He stopped moving and stood there like a rock and surveyed the surroundings until he caught a distant reflection of himself in the mirror mounted on a wall of the ward.

The colour of his eyes had changed to a hue of eerie golden shade.

[Condition Complete: Sense at least ten cases of negative aura at once while maintaining the Ebony Wolf Form,]

► Passive Skill "Eyes of the Wolf" has been acquired.

– The host's eyesight has been widened and not affected by the obstruction from light. Also, the host will be able to discern what is normally invisible to naked eyes.

– It's possible to activate this skill during Forms other than the Ebony Wolf Form.

It was another message saying that he had acquired a new skill.

'Discern what is normally invisible?'

His query was quickly answered. There were some sort of strange, ominous-feeling strands of aura dancing above the moaning patients. There were so many colours – blue, green, purple, red, even black. Sae-Jin was actually able to *discern* these strands of "light", with different colours potentially denoting severity of each injury.

As if he got possessed by a spirit or something, Sae-Jin approached one of the patients letting out this mysterious aura. He dazedly stared at this light strand before suddenly recalling a message he had read before.

‘When the skill level is raised, the “corporeal”, “incorporeal” and even aura can be exterminated.’

If that was true... no, he was certain.

The Wolf’s claw could cut away this illness as well... After nervously swallowing down his saliva, Sae-Jin placed his hand at the faintly rising aura and swiped at it with his nails.

SFX for slicing the air and fingers flailing around

But there was no change.

‘Is my Skill Level too low?’

As if to match his thoughts, the system responded once more.

[The Skill Proficiency Level is too low.]

“Huh...”

He let out a groan of acceptance. That was when a nurse asked him if he was a relative of this patient; Sae-Jin shook his head no, and then he left the emergency ward as if he was making a quick getaway.



Until now, he could stay as a human for only 2 hours in a day but now, Sae-Jin found himself with a huge surplus of time. The first thing he did was to head to the one room apartment he had rented on the outskirts of the city. For the last 2 months, he was far too busy living as a Monster, so he couldn’t even tell the landlord he was moving out.

“...It’s been a while.”

A single room in a shabby building, 3rd floor, no. 302. Slightly overcome with nostalgia, Sae-Jin slowly stroked the metal gate. The place’s only security feature was a numberpad style door lock, not a fingerprint nor a retina scanner.

BbipBbipBbipBbip

<<<<

The door opened after he entered the four digit code, and he stepped over the doorsill, entering the apartment...

“Ouch!!”

He bumped his forehead on the low-hanging upper frame of the metal gate.

In the past, there was enough gap there to pass through the metal gate... but now that his body had gotten *sturdier*, he didn't feel much pain. He lowered his head and entered the apartment.

“*sniff sniff*”

The condition of his place remained largely the same as the moment he left, but with the exception of dust that had settled down everywhere. Even though it'd been empty for only 2 months, scents of a person living here had all disappeared without a trace now.

“Mm?”

As he was checking out his home, he spotted a blue light leaking out from his home phone, meaning there were recorded voice messages to listen to. Wondering just who could have left him messages, as something like this had never happened before, he soon thought of one reason for them.

Hazeline. Sae-Jin was asleep for nearly 3 days inside the sewer, and when he asked for the date after waking up, he learned that already 4 days had passed by. Since there was no way he'd call someone during that time, the only possibility left was Hazeline calling him nonstop as he owed her a lot of money.

Feeling apologetic, he quickly accessed the voice messages. There was a total of five recordings.

– *“Mister Sae-Jin? This is Hazeline speaking. I was shocked to find out there was an incident of Monster Outbreak in Seoul... I perused the list of the deceased but didn't see your name on it. You must've made it out okay. When things have settled down, please give me a call.”*

The first message was comparatively calm, and exactly 12 hours later, there was another one.

– *“Has everything settled down? I haven’t heard from you yet. The reports say the incident is now more or less under control... I guess you’re still busy? If you get this voice message, please call me.”*

The next message was 14 hours later, and her voice in the message was audibly trembling with worry.

– *“Mister Sae-Jin? Where are you? Let me come and see you. I think, maybe we need to meet and talk? Also, that Mana Stone was a lot more expensive than the initial estimates. It was over \$4.5 million. Even if you sell all the potions here, after deducting tax and other stuff, it’s only about half of that amount. So, please... Haaa, Mister Sae-Jin. Mister Sae-Jin? Please give me a call as soon as you hear this message.”*

Sae-Jin listened to the next message as sweat drops formed on his forehead.

– *“Mister Kim Sae-Jin. I hope you are not planning to run away using this Outbreak as an excuse. I sincerely wish that you don’t even think of entertaining such a foolish idea. You may not be aware of this, but I have a bit of fame in certain circles. Finding a single person isn’t even a challenge for me. You even gave me your name, too... Wait a second, that is your real name, right? Wait, what if he gave me a fake name?! Oh, no, that’s why!! I thought it was weird that an alchemist was giving away his name too easily... Fuu. I can still find you. No, I will find you. I will chase you down to the ends of this earth, no, even to hell itself. You better believe that.”*

Now it was rage. Her voice itself was boiling with anger, and somewhere in the middle, there were several instances of pronunciation of words being messed up after she gritted her molars hard. Sae-Jin sighed weakly as he listened to the final message.

– *“Mister Sae-Jin. Yesterday I was distraught with emotions so I couldn’t help it. I’m sure you can understand where I’m coming from. If you think about how more than half of your fortune that you worked so hard to accumulate in your entire life just flying away... you wouldn’t be able to sleep at night. You’d be angry and sad, wondering why your money had suddenly grew wings and flew away... I feel like that. To me, past 4 days felt like 3 years. And you also know this, don’t you? Dark Elves don’t easily trust banks so we mostly keep hard cash. Me, I don’t have any other assets. You must not run away without repaying that debt. I’ve shed so much tears and blood earning that money... Please,*

please, just give me a call."

Her heavy, emotional voice became desperately tearful towards the end.

As soon as the last message played out, Sae-Jin quickly called her.

Hazeline answered the phone even before the first beep finished ringing.

- *"Hello?!"*

"Ah, it's me."

- *"Wha....."*

Hearing his voice, on the other side of the line Hazeline was letting out a long sigh of relief. She continuously mumbled "Thank god, oh thank god..." several times, so Sae-Jin started talking first.

"I'm truly sorry. As you have expected, I got embroiled in the Outbreak. And I lost my mobile phone. That's why I ended up calling you so late..."

- *"No, no, it's fine, it's all fine. No, I'm very thankful instead. Actually, I was expecting the worst, at least for about one year, to be honest, but you called me after only four days... Where are you now? Let us meet."*

"Ah, the thing is..."

At her suggestion, he studied the reflections of his face and body in the mirror for a moment.

Kim Sae-Jin in Human Form, and Kim Sae-Jin in the Ebony Wolf's Human Mode seemed similar, but they were actually like two completely separate entities. The latter's face was similar to "normal" Sae-Jin's, but there were different points as well. Firstly, the lines of his face were sharper, and the features were now better defined, too. To put it another way, his previous puppy dog-like face had morphed into a keener, wolf-like visage.

Hell, even the Human Form Sae-Jin was different from the normal human Sae-Jin before the change. Maybe it was because of the sudden explosive increase in his stats, his bone mass and the overall body size also grew by a lot.

Simply put, comparing the numbers of the Human Form and the Human Mode went like this:

The Human Form Kim Sae-Jin was 179 cm tall, weight of 77 kgs and the body in a pretty damn good shape, while the Sae-Jin in the Human Mode exceeded 189 cm in height and all of his 100kgs were mostly of muscles, making his body no different from a living weapon.

‘There will be problems if we meet like this.’

Of course, since he always wore the hood over his head when he met her so his facial appearance wasn’t a problem, but the issue was his hulking frame. Whatever “mode” he chose to go with, he became just too damn big.

“Let’s meet up at a later date. How about a week from today? There is a potion I’m making right now. I can’t vacate the private workshop as I am on the cusp of achieving success.”

– *“Eh? Right now? What potion are you making?”*

“It’s...”

He hesitated for a moment or two, before wetting his lips and replied to her.

“It’s a potion to become taller.”

– *“..... I’m sorry?”*

Hazeline let out a shocked voice, and Sae-Jin ended up biting his lower lip. But it was too late now, no matter how ridiculous the lie sounded. He couldn’t think of any other excuses. Since he didn’t grow by just 2, 3 centimetres, but 7 for one and 17 for the other.

“I’m telling you this just in case, but I will not sell this potion. No matter what happens.”

– *“...”*

He decided to ignore the speechless Hazeline and just keep at it with a straight face.

CHAPTER 21

THE ORC'S FORGE (1)

– Investigators are suspecting the involvement of Vampires for the Fissure's eruption, after discovering numerous skeletal remains and bodies drained of blood at the abandoned church near the eruption's point of origin. With the first Monster Outbreak in nearly 5 years as well as the sudden appearance of Vampires that hadn't been seen in recent times, the citizens are worried that...

In the middle of sorting out things to throw away and things to take with him, Sae-Jin's eyes were pulled towards the images coming out of an old TV. It was a news about the suspected reappearance of the Vampires.

“...”

He unconsciously held tighter the photo frame in his hand after seeing that news. It contained his one and only family photograph. Taken the day before he lost his mother, it was a memento now stuck in the boundary between nostalgia and an old, unhealed wound; this faded photograph signified the final day of his childhood he had shared with her.

When he thought back to that day, perhaps she must have sensed her own death approaching. That day, the one before what *they* packaged it as an “unfortunate accident”. He remembered her unusually bright, yet somehow, unusually sorrowful face. She took the photo with her young son and had the frame made, and in the following morning, she left home for work – and never came back.

Officially, at least, they said it was a car accident. But even in his young age, Sae-Jin suspected something was amiss. If it was indeed a car crash, then her body would not have been that clean, nor would she be that *pale*. When they were putting her inside the casket, she seemed to be in a deep, peaceful slumber instead.

But whatever the case might have been, there was nothing he could do at that time. He was just a 7 year old, recently orphaned kid back then.

– Since the government declared the “war on Vampires” 18 years ago, all Vampires had temporarily hidden from the world, but this incident serves as a proof that they still

operate in underground societies...

Sae-Jin bit his lip without realising it. They were just stinking bats, or maybe just trash, or something much worse than that, like pieces of excrement utterly devoid of any redeeming qualities whatsoever. Because they lived off human blood as their sole food source, Vampires just could not coexist with the rest of humanity. Actually, it wasn't like humanity acted inconsiderately towards them; not at all. But it was they who betrayed the mankind with a reasoning of "animal blood is unfit."

And now, those motherf*cking bat bastards were acting up again...

Sae-Jin clenched his fist and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

The kid from 15 years ago who only knew how to cry was not there anymore.



Orcs were truly special Monsters in that their individual ways of life were remarkably different depending on their rankings.

Orcs and Orc Warriors found in the Lowest to Low Tier Hunting grounds never formed packs. They lived lonely lives, only meeting others out of necessity to copulate and to proliferate. So, they didn't use any weapons, and if they did, it was only to the extent of wielding crude wooden *things*.

But the story changed for Orcs found in low Mid Tier Hunting ground or higher. They were similar in a way to Goblins in that these Orcs gathered in large numbers to form villages, but the difference was that their roles had been clearly divided.

Orc Scouts with their quick feet, searching for the locations of drinkable water and sustenance; Orc Warriors and Orc Jaguars for hunting according to the intel gathered by the Scouts, or to fight other Monsters, Knights and Hunters; Orc Great Warriors that safeguarded the village after having accrued experience and wisdom; And the Orc Chieftain that governed the village itself.

"Hey, wait a sec, is that...?"

"Shh!! You're right. It's an Orc village."

Unfortunately, compared to the level of danger posed, an Orc's remains didn't fetch a

high price. Ignoring the rankings, a lone Orc Great Warrior possessed enough power to fight evenly against a Knight of at least an upper Mid Tier ranking and above.

But even then, the Knights Orders would still raid the village of Orcs with an unmatched madness.

There was only one reason for this – the “Orc’s Forge.”

“Today’s luck is pretty good. Mark the position in the GPS and let’s vamoose, pronto.”

“Okay. But dude, that’s almost a mid-sized village, so how much would it be worth to *them?*”

Within an Orc village, there existed several rudimentary smithies.

One could say that the main job of Orcs living in a village could very well be weaponsmiths, as they individually crafted their own weapons to use. That was the reason why the degree of weapons’ completion differed from an Orc Warrior, an Orc Jaguar and to a Great Orc Warrior.

However, as an Orc’s smithing skills got better the higher its ranking was, those creatures living without a village down by the Lowest and Low Tier Hunting grounds, as well as those in the villages found within the low Mid Tier hunting ground where the skill levels weren’t as impressive, they did not garner much unwanted attention to themselves.

“I hear the boys at the Dawn Knights Order pay the best; last time, they paid plus minus \$440K.”

But right now, the Orc village these Hunters were looking at were located in the Mid Tier Hunting ground. Weapons wielded by the Orc Jaguars were far superior than those made by the regular blacksmiths, and the stuff crafted by the likes of a Great Warrior or a Chieftain would be comparable to those made by master craftsmen, or even exceed them in some cases.

And so, the Knights Orders raided the Orc villages in order to *acquire* these weapons. Obviously, that was because quality weapons were very important to Knights. Even more so, in the case of those possessing excellent Magic Strength. But it wasn’t some selfish, simplistic reasoning of “better weapons make you stronger”. If a weapon’s quality wasn’t up to scratch compared to a Knight’s Magic Strength, then the weapon

wouldn't be able to endure the strain and get destroyed instead.

Currently, the number of Knights ranked upper Mid Tier or higher present in South Korea was around 2500, but the weapons suitable for their levels were estimated to be less than 2000. It meant that, every time 500 or so Knights go out to battle Monsters, they would end up being heavily injured after their weapons were rendered useless in the middle of the fight. It was not possible to import weapons from overseas either, since other countries were also under similar sort of situations as well.

So, most Knights Orders placed a fat reward moolah on finding Orc's Forges. Especially the Dawn Knights Order, as they were in quite a desperate position. They might be flush with cash, but somehow, found themselves urgently lacking in quality weapons.

"I finished marking it in GPS. Let's quickly..."

But there existed a definite reason why the Knights Orders placed such high bounties on finding an Orc's Forge.

Orcs living in the Mid Tier hunting ground placed high importance on the safety of their villages, and could pick up on any minute disturbance as if they were equipped with a high tech radar.

- "*Khwoererer!!*"

The mountain side seemed to faintly tremble at the angry roar.

"That effing son of a...!!"

The 2 Hunters ran hard without even glancing back once. That roar most likely would have been from a Chieftain ordering other Orcs around. If those Orcs were chasing after them, then...

- *KwangKwangKwangKwang!!*

As expected, the foresight of upper Mid Tier Hunters proved to be correct. With dust clouds and weeds flying everywhere, 4 furious Orcs leapt out of the village and began chasing them down. Unfortunately, since the Hunters couldn't utilise Mana, it was not possible to escape from their hot pursuit.

"Do not stop!!"

The Hunters never lost hope amidst this hopeless situation and continued to run hard, but it seemed the heavens had abandoned them as they ended up encountering an even bigger source of despair.

“...Huh.”

That black shape in the tall grasses – at first, it was blurry and hard to tell what its identity was. But as soon as they got close enough, Hunters could see just what it was.

It was the legendary creature that shouldn't be here – the Werewolf. The two Hunters lost all strength in their legs and plummeted to the ground after seeing the bipedal Wolf monster.

‘What a serious bother...’

At the same time, Sae-Jin sighed out as he alternated his gaze between the 2 Hunters squatting on the ground and the 4 chasing Orc Jaguars. He came here in a hurry after catching a thick smell of Orcs, but once more, humans were getting in the way.

As this was the Mid Tier hunting ground, it seemed that Hunters had invested a lot in their equipment, and there were more than a few folks using magical items that eliminated all body odours – making encounters like these a troublesome affair for Sae-Jin. Already, he had run into humans 3-4 times this week alone and as a result, the rumours of a Werewolf roaming the Mid Tier hunting ground had spread online on the Hunters Cafe like a wild fire.

“...F, f*ck... Why a damn Werewolf...”

Fortunately for him, though, those 4 Orc Jaguars would be enough to fill his daily hunting quota. Ignoring the Hunters drowning in the swamp of despair, Sae-Jin kicked with both of his legs and jumped up in the air. The black beast shot up high as if to block out the blue sky above and then, descended towards the Orc Jaguars below.

From his sturdy body, the evidence of the skill “Warrior of Reversal” being activated could be seen as a simmering red aura.

– *“Kkwe-Eck!!”* (TL: it's a SFX for a pig's squeal. I tried my best here...)

First, using the claws that were harder than steel, he pierced the neck of one Orc. After its throat got ripped open, the Orc died on the spot, but there were still 3 more to go.

Sae-Jin took a powerful swipe with his arm at the head of another Orc. The head separated from the body and bounced away like a basketball.

Not even scared by the sight of their 2 comrades falling in the blink of an eye, the remaining Orcs focused solely on attacking him. Receiving the implied orders of “eliminate all trespassers” from the Chieftain, there were no other purposes in these Orc Jaguar’s lives other than to carry it out.

– “*Kwoerererer!!*”

An Orc roared out and struck the beast’s arm with a square iron hammer.

Honestly speaking, Sae-Jin didn’t expect the blow to hurt him. The body of the Beast Mode was several degrees tougher than steel, after all.

<<<<

“...!! Gwoarararar!!” *(TL: seriously, these roaring SFXs are driving me up the walls.)*

However, contrary to his expectations, it hurt like crazy. Enough to make him almost cry, even.

Riding on the wave of his anger, Sae-Jin grabbed hold the neck of the offending Orc. As the blood drained out of its green face, the remaining Orc tried to save its comrade and attacked him.

Ppuck!!

Simple, and powerful sound of impact – Sae-Jin swung the body of the Orc in his hand and struck the head of the other one, killing them both at the same time.

‘Still hurts like hell.’

After finishing the fight, Sae-Jin turned around while rubbing the arm struck by the hammer. He was half expecting to see the 2 Hunters to sit there dazedly looking at him, but no, they had already made their hasty retreat from the scene, leaving only a cloud of dust behind.

“Oh?”

Not giving up on their lives even when struck down by the momentary terror. As expected, something was different about the upper Mid Tier Hunters. Admiring their quick wits, Sae-Jin walked towards the bodies of the Orc Jaguars. And while frowning, he inserted his claw into the heart of one. The sensation of piercing past the flesh and touching the heart remained rather disgusting, still.

[Condition Complete: Absorb 20 Orc Jaguar Mana Stones.]

– The host can now use Orc’s innate skill “the Smithing Technique.”

▶ Active Skill “Orc’s Smithing Technique” [Skill Proficiency Level: F]

– By synchronising Mana in the host’s body with certain metals, rocks and wooden materials, their shapes can be altered at will.

– Depending on the Skill Proficiency Level, the material that has gone through the process of Smithing Technique will acquire new hardness and lightness, and also depending on the amount of Mana used, desired characteristics can be added as well. *(Currently, it’s impossible to bestow magic effects that are not physical in nature.)*

– The skill’s effects will differ depending on the values of the following Stats: Physical Strength and Magic Strength.

– This skill can only be utilised during the Orc Form.

‘Hmm?’

He learned a completely unexpected skill after the absorption was finished. His head remained upright as he tried very hard to understand what those words meant.



– *It’s unknown how Orcs refine, manufacture, and forge metals even until now. The temperature of flames found in the smithies within the villages were measured to be, at most, around 1200 degrees Celsius, which is shockingly low. And it is simply impossible to explain how can the weapons manufactured by the Orcs possess such high quality by looking at that weak flame; even the modern day smithies equipped with bleeding-edge*

technology fail to shed light on the matter – thus, making this question perhaps THE unsolvable mystery of this generation...

Sae-Jin watched the image projected onto one of the walls in the cave with a great focus. It was a documentary titled “The World of Blacksmiths, Part 2: The Secret Wonders of Orcs”. To get a better understanding of what’s what, he even paid a grand total of 50 cents (USD) to rewatch the programme but hell, he instead ended up realising that humans knew only a tiny little bit regarding the true nature of Monsters.

‘Synchronising the Mana inside my body...? Let’s just have a go.’

Although both of his stats Mana Affinity and Magic Strength had increased a good deal, he just couldn’t get to grips with the idea of utilising Mana at all. It was a par for the course, really. In order to wield Mana, rather than pure talent, an advanced education administered early on in the life played a crucial role, after all.

However, even though he might be using Mana, this wasn’t a technique to utilise it, but a skill activated from ‘the System’.

He changed to the Orc Form, picked up a big rock from the vicinity, and activated the skill. Suddenly, the rock was dyed in the Mana’s blue colour.

“Hoh?”

That was the sound of greatest admiration possible to utter out by the layout of an Orc’s mouth. Sae-Jin *fondled* the rock wrapped in Mana. Mysteriously, the shape of the rock changed according to his hand movement. It became a spearhead when he shaped his hands into a sharp triangle, and when he rubbed it in between his hands, it became a thick string.

At the wondrous sight of the rock morphing into different shapes like clay whenever he manipulated it, Sae-Jin lost track of time and regressed back to the days of childish innocence and curiosity. Then, maybe three minutes had gone past like that. The blue Mana infused in the rock dissipated, and its shape solidified into the final form he was making, a star.

[Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: E]

[Due to the rubbish quality of the finished item, the Skill Proficiency Level has decreased to F-.]

“...?”

He was left utterly aghast by this announcement. What was supposedly wrong with his star, anyway?!

CHAPTER 22

THE ORC'S FORGE (2)

'I'm gonna go bat-sh*t crazy here.'

Kim Sae-Jin was in the midst of busy fondling a rock that had turned into mud clay after he *synchronised* it with his Mana, but then, his anger spiked up all of a sudden, causing him to angrily fling it away.

The gap between his imaginations and that of reality was just too damn wide to cross. The human Sae-Jin's head definitely held an idea on what he wanted, and obviously he meant to do it well, but really, with the accursed clumsy hands of an Orc, it was simply The Mission: Impossible. It sure felt like he was back in the Art Class during his student days. The image was in his head, and if he drew it like this and that, then it'd work out alright; however, his villainous *hands* wouldn't allow him to achieve success no matter what.

That alone would have made him rather irritated to no end, but the message window that popped up right afterwards made his blood pressure skyrocket, even if it was only for a short while.

[The Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: F]

[Due to the absolute worst quality of the finished item, the Skill Proficiency Level has decreased.]

"...Euaaaaaakkk!!!!"

In the end, Sae-Jin reverted back to the Human Form and screamed out at the top of his lungs while grabbing his head. He wanted to smash apart that stupid message window right now, that kept on telling him his Proficiency Level would fall when it was already at the rock bottom of F-.

It had been 20 times already. And during those 20 times, only the negative words like

absolute worst, useless, disgusting appeared in the windows.

“Ha-ah...”

Even though he couldn't get anywhere remotely close to tasting success, his entire body felt lethargic and energy-less. It was a signal that his Mana supply was beginning to run dry. Sae-Jin sighed out roughly while laying down on the ground.

“...!!”

And precisely 90 seconds later, Sae-Jin suddenly shot back right up.

He felt like Archimedes sitting inside that famed bathtub of his. His eyes went round as he shouted out aloud.

“Goblin!!”

He'd activate the Smithing Technique skill in his Orc Form and infuse a rock with Mana, then change to the Goblin Form to reshape it. (This Skill could be activated only in the Orc Form but, once activated, it was possible to manipulate the shapes of objects in other Forms as the duration of the Skill only depended on the amount of Mana used up for the maintenance of the ability itself.) To combine the Orc's Smithing Technique with the excellent Goblin's Craftsmanship skill – wasn't this the greatest combination like, ever? He quickly assumed the Orc Form and grabbed a nice-sized rock from the vicinity once more. *(TL: that bracketed sentence in the middle of this paragraph is from the author.)*



“I did it...”

A Goblin with a single line of tattoo on his forehead slowly sighed in satisfaction.

[The Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: E]

[Due to the excellent quality of the finished item, the Skill Proficiency Level has increased.]

It was a feel-good message. A deep grin drew up on his lips.

What he managed to make this time was a type of a dagger. A small sword made out of stone and its blade fashioned into a crescent moon. As it was crafted from a rock, it couldn't be used as a proper weapon but still, he was rather pleased with this outcome, as this was the first time since the activation of the skill he did something right...

...But then, he became dissatisfied all over again.

“Something's not right.”

Kim Sae-Jin muttered to himself. His satisfaction only lasted for a fleeting moment and now, he wanted to make something even better.

This didn't mean blacksmithing was his calling, no.

Something inside him went through an inexplicable change after he absorbed the Mana Stone of the Werewolf, as well as seeing the news about the resurgence of Vampires. One could call it... an ambition. A notion he had never ever held in his poverty-stricken old life. But the Mana Stone of the beast that had now become a part of his heart, desired to make his ambitions into reality. A wolf's ambitions had completely been assimilated with his psyche, the resurgence of the Werewolf's irreconcilable enemy, Vampires, serving as the trigger.

“Hmm.”

However, he was feeling a little lethargic due to the shortage of Mana to have another go immediately, so he decided to take a break first and lied down on the stone bed instead.



A week later, Sae-Jin had left the cave and was walking in the middle of the city for the promised dinner with Hazeline; that was when he discovered a signboard that he wouldn't have found interesting before.

“Tae-Baek Armoury”

A weapons shop with a simple name. But the weight of that name was rather quite heavy. Tae-Baek – it was the name belonging to one of the 17 master craftsmen in

South Korea. Sae-Jin became interested in the store now that he possessed a skill related to blacksmithing, but unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of time left until the meeting with the Dark Elf.

“...An Open Invitational tournament?”

So, rather than stepping inside the store, he took a closer look at the poster plastered on the display window.

[The 4th Republic of Korea Blacksmiths Open Invitational Tournament,]

An opportunity to realise the dream of the talented, aspiring Blacksmiths.

▶ Application requirements: Those wishing to become a blacksmith. *(However, those with the level of artisan or higher are prohibited from entering.)*

▶ How to participate: Physically mail the product to the address provided or visit the premise personally to apply. *(Possible to participate using an alias or in anonymity.)*

▶ Competition process: Preliminary screening, 1st Round of Judging, 2nd Round of Judging, and the Final – a total of 4 stages. In the Final Round, audience may participate in the judging process. *(New equipment must be presented for 1st, 2nd and the Final Rounds separately.)*

▶ Content of awards: Total prize money of \$1 million US *(TL: I've rounded up quite a bit here. The original amount was just under \$885K. Seems a bit on the low side to me, so...)*

▶ Sponsors: Dawn Corporation, Dawn Knight Order, Hyunwol Auction House, Raven Knights Order, etc...

[We eagerly await the participation of many blacksmiths who are fervently fighting to achieve their dreams.]

The very first thought emerging in his head after he dazedly stared at the poster, was the word “debt”. The debt he owed Hazeline was \$4.5 million US. And then, he thought about the house as well. Now that he could spend nearly half of a day as a human being, he would dearly love to graduate from the caveman lifestyle as soon as possible.

“...Hmm.”

He glanced around to see if anyone was looking, stealthily approached the poster, and then...

Rrrrip.

He ripped the poster right off the glass and hurriedly carried it away.



Hazeline, who had been waiting for Sae-Jin in the restaurant, didn't even have enough time to get shocked at his increased size.

“...You brewed all these in just ten days?!”

<<<<

“No, no. Took me half a year. I brought the ones I had stashed for a rainy day. More importantly, how much of the debt would they cover?”

A total of ten potion bottles. And among them, two bottles of “A Goblin’s Kindness” made out of the powdered fang of a Sabre-tooth tiger. While Sae-Jin’s expression was slightly bitter as he found it regretful to use up the remainder of the fang, Hazeline’s face was full of joy and happiness.

“After deducting tax, I think around \$2.5 million, US~ So, if you add up with the potions sold previously, there’s only around \$270K left.”

“Still that much... But of course...”

Their conversation was temporarily cut off. Because, the waiter had brought their food.

“Looks delicious.”

Sae-Jin spoke as he stared at the thick steak. Hazeline nodded, and carefully stored the potions strewn about on the table inside her bag.

“Uhm...”

“Excuse me...”

Before grabbing the knives and forks, they opened their mouths at the same time. Sae-Jin gestured her to go ahead first, so she did.

“Well, can’t you please tell me what perfume you are using right now?”

“...Huh?”

“Wait, it’s not like that. I don’t have any other intentions. I just like that scent, is all. I’d like to sprinkle some on me, and also to smell it in the house, too.”

Hazeline scratched her cheek and coyly asked him. He made a troubled expression and shook his head.

“If that’s what you want, then you should take me home. It’s really not a perfume but my own odour.”

“Eiiii...”

At his words, Hazeline gazed at him with a sly, knowing look. She was expecting as much. Pretending to be not interested, but in the end, wasn’t this a tactic straight out of a *player’s* handbook?

“I’d like to do that as well, but... you also know this too, don’t you? Us Dark Elves are sensitive towards our privacy. So if you find it a bit inconvenient to tell me what the perfume is, just a small hint would...”

“I’m telling you the truth. Really, it’s not a perfume but my own body odour.”

Sae-Jin was adamant. Hazeline’s brows knitted slightly as if she found his unchanging attitude disagreeable, but still nodded her head to show that she understood, albeit reluctantly.

“I understand. Well... if you insist it is, then surely it should be.”

Her lips were pushed out in a pout, and anyone could see that she was obviously upset.

“No, well, if you really want this scent in your home... then you should just take me with you.”

Sae-Jin spoke jokingly after finding her rather adorable like this.

“Fu-ut. Thanks, re~ally, for your suggestion, but I’m fine.”

Hazeline smiled and accepted his joke, and in this friendly atmosphere the lively conversation never once stopped. The one talking was Sae-Jin, and the one listening and laughing was Hazeline.

Perhaps, she was just trying to get on his good side, but even knowing this, oddly enough, Sae-Jin’s confidence continued to soar in front of this beautiful woman. The heart that used to beat irregularly whenever they talked face to face, now remained calm, and there wasn’t even a trace of nervousness in him.

Was this because the effects of “a heart of a beast” – the Werewolf’s – or was it the belief in himself, in other words, confidence and pride, had grown? Whatever the reasons were, Sae-Jin was really pleased about himself right now.

“Oh, by the way, do blacksmiths make a lot of money these days?”

As the thought suddenly floated up, he slightly tested the waters. He figured that, if the Skill Proficiency Level of the Blacksmithing Technique rose high enough, it’d be comparable to the recognised blacksmiths, no, the very best of the lot, even to that of master craftsmen. On top of that, if he combined the Goblin’s Craftsmanship, he’d be able to make products that perfectly married aesthetics and functionality. It was too good a skill to not utilise it.

“If the stuff they make is good, then yes. But could it be as simple as that? You need to possess some talent with Mana if you want to climb up to a certain level in blacksmithing, but if you have enough talent to reach a level of a master, wouldn’t be it better to just become a Knight, instead? It’d get rather boring just hammering away in a sweltering smithy, and as a kicker, you’d need to waste 2~3 years of your life to knock out a single decent item.”

“Oh, wait a moment, please. Blacksmiths can utilise Mana?”

“Of course. Loading the hammer with Mana as they strike down on the metal apparently infuses equipment with it. And higher the amount of Mana infused into an equipment, the better. But, I mean, just what is that? Just depending on luck, is all.”

Hazeline spoke in a disinterested tone, and Sae-Jin floated a deep smile of satisfaction.

He now figured out the rough cause of why an Orc Great Warrior's weapon was better than an artisan's, and able to compare with a master craftsman's. Blacksmiths depended on luck, somewhat, to infuse Mana, but Orcs utilised their physical traits to directly wield Mana when forging their weapons.

"But why are you asking me about that?"

Hazeline asked him while thoroughly chewing the meat.

"...Oh, well. No particular reason. I saw a poster for a blacksmithing competition nearby. By the way, how much is it for a stuff made by an artisan or a master nowadays?"

"Their prices are seriously enormous. There was an axe that was sold recently called the Strength of Rok-Tah. It's a weapon praised by many master craftsmen as well as rated favourably by the critics. Even the mass media played it up, saying it's a birth of a new source of pride for the country. Well, if I remember correctly, the Dawn Knights Order coughed up around \$26 million US for the privilege of taking it home."

Sae-Jin stopped his knife the moment he heard that figure.

"...I see."

He calmed his wildly beating heart and replied in a deadpan expression.

And about an hour later, Sae-Jin returned to his cave in a hurry while being seen carrying a stash of iron ingots.

He wanted to buy raw steel but alas, didn't have enough money for that.

CHAPTER 23

THE ORC'S FORGE (3)

[The Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: D]

[Succeeded in bestowing special characteristics: "Sharpness Level C", "Weight Reduction Level: D"]

[Due to the outstanding quality of the finished item, the Skill Proficiency Level has increased from F to D-.]

Kim Sae-Jin in the Goblin Form murmured in satisfaction as he stroked the dagger. On the short but sharp and straight blade, an intricate pattern carved out by the 10 minutes-worth of the Goblin's exacting handicraft skills was visible, and the hilt made out of a rock was perfectly shaped, as well as also being light in weight.

Actually, he wanted to make a lengthier and more destructive weapon like a single-edged or a double-edged sword if possible; unfortunately, with his current Mana pool and the Proficiency Level, this dagger was his limit. No matter how much Mana he poured in, the Smithing Technique lasted only for 10 minutes, and it proved to be really tough trying to make anything longer than a dagger with the tiny-ass hands of a Goblin during that short period of time.

But contrary to how he felt about the process itself, he was really liking this dagger. This could be called a work of art that combined the Orc's Smithing Technique and the Goblin's Craftsmanship. Of course, since he was the one who made it, there was a little bit of his own pride mixed in there with the evaluation, but then again, the word "outstanding" did appear for the very first time in the message window, so...

'But this is the best I can do right now.'

He would have preferred to raise his Skill Proficiency Level higher before submitting the item for the tournament, but the last day of submission was tomorrow, so it couldn't be helped. He decided that, since he'd be given another chance to craft something new after passing the preliminary round, he'd diligently raise the Level

before the 1st round of judging commences.

Kim Sae-Jin changed to the human form and got up to leave.



“Excuse me, can you tell me how I can send types of armament via mail?”

Looking like a suspicious person while hiding a dagger in his pocket, Sae-Jin lingered around inside the post office before asking one of the employees behind a counter.

“Eh? Types of armament?”

“Yes. I wish to participate in the open invitational blacksmithing tournament.”

It was as if Sae-Jin was looking down on the employee sitting on the chair as he spoke. That was because he was currently in the The Human Mode of the Ebony Wolf Form, and was 189 cm tall as a result.

“A-ha. If that’s the case... It should be here somewhere. Please, wait a moment.”

The post office worker rummaged through one of the drawers and pulled out a sheet of paper. It was the application form for the tournament.

“You can mail the item after completing this form. You’re entering a bit late, though? Most folks came in to apply on the first day of the application period, you know.”

“Oh. Well, I was... it took a while longer to make mine. I hadn’t made anything in advance like the others.”

Sae-Jin sat down on a nearby empty chair. Only three things had to be written on the form – his name, his contact details, and his address. He left the name bit blank for now and filled in the rest. As for the most important “name” part, he found it somewhat burdensome to use his real name, so he jotted down an alias he thought of last night instead.

“Here, I’m finished. How much for the shipping?”

“The shipping cost is taken care of by the Blacksmiths Association.”

“Oh...”

Sae-Jin nodded his head, said his thanks and left the post office.

The post office he visited was located in the city centre of Gangwon Province, so as soon as he stepped out, he was greeted by the throngs of people coming and going. Rather than returning to his cave right away, Sae-Jin blended in with the crowd and took a walk.

He wanted to fully enjoy this partial freedom he had finally earned after swimming inside the misery and despair.

– **SFX for eyes swivelling**

He could hear the sounds of people’s eyes moving.

The freedom earned after the difficult struggle tasted a lot sweeter than he could’ve imagined. Since he possessed an eye-catching athletic physique and a sharp face of an Alpha male, the Kim Sae-Jin of now was quite a different animal altogether from his past. Unlike before, when he had given up on getting the attention of the opposite sex, all he had to do now was to just walk around and ladies would send approving gazes towards him. He even saw someone who consciously made a fake cough and flicked her hair back.

It was, in a word, fun. Really.

“...?”

Then, out of nowhere. A strange scent invaded his nostrils. It was a smell of blood with a faint whiff of brass mixed in that was noticeably different than that of a human being. Sae-Jin turned his head this way and that, trying to locate the origin of this scent.

And soon, he found it. A normal couple, a man and a woman, outwardly not at all remarkable. But the origin of that stink of blood was definitely those two.

Sae-Jin slowly moved his feet. Hiding among the crowd, he tailed the couple. He couldn’t understand why he was doing this. Only that, he was sure of the need to follow them. It must have been his instincts.

And so, in the middle of tailing them, suddenly his eyesight widened.

The skill that was woven into his primal instincts, the “Eyes of the Wolf”, had seemingly activated all by itself.

In this world where every colour had gained yet another level of richness, Sae-Jin could clearly see it. From the couple, no, more correctly, an ominous aura of blood rising from the man.

‘A... Vampire.’

The moment he realised this, his sanity wavered. His heart began pounding madly, and his breathing became shallow. The murderous desire of the wolf beast tried to rear its powerful head, nearly causing him to rush out and pummel that Vampire’s skull into mush. But the human Sae-Jin endured it, albeit just barely. *Not yet, not yet. Need to wait a bit more. I gotta find the right opportunity to strike...*

Thankfully, he didn’t have to wait for long. The man grasped the hand of the woman and led her into a shabby housing area. To suck dry her blood, most likely. Seeing this, Sae-Jin also moved his feet.



As humans monitored the activities of Vampire species every second of the day, Vampires became very cautious when performing the rituals of blood sucking. Even though it was troublesome, they hypnotised their victims and drank the blood in indoor environments. This had become the unwritten rule for Vampires.

The male Vampire, Yu Sahng-Hyun, pulled the woman inside his home while carrying a satisfied expression. That was because, this beautiful woman under his hypnosis was about to become his own personal blood bank. For a period of 1 year, he’d suck her blood out periodically until her body rapidly withers away.

“...Lie down.”

As he commanded, she showed no resistance and lied down on a bed. The sight of her wearing only a single one piece dress was quite alluring, to say the least.

He slowly approached the woman and caressed her body. From her toes to her shin, then from her shin to her thigh. Inch by inch, creeping up ever so slightly. The heightened sense of touch gave Yu Sahng-Hyun a deep chill down in his loins.

He could no longer hold back his desire and was about push down on her hard, when...

– *Knock, knock.*

There was a sound of someone knocking on the door. For a Vampire who had a superior sense of hearing, this was the absolute worst form of hindrance, like, ever. Yu Sahng-Hyun's expression crumpled into an unsightly mess.

“...F* ... ck.”

Opening wide his bloodshot eyes, he spat out a swear word.

– *Knock knock knock knock knock knock knock*

The unknown person continued to knock from the other side of the door. The knocking had now become more aggressive than before. Enraged by this ill-timed obstruction, Yu Sahng-Hyun growled angrily and stood up. His eyes, burning with a crimson hue, contained a thick killing intent.

– *Knock knock...*

Before the second knock had ended, Sahng-Hyun violently jerked open the door. His original plan was to drag in whoever it was outside by the neck and rip him apart, limb by limb.

“You son of a bi... Keheuk!!”

But before he could act, a hand of a beast shot out and wrapped around his neck first.

Panicking at the sudden attack, Yu Sahng-Hyun clawed at the arm of the beast repeatedly, but he couldn't even leave a scratch mark on the black-fur covered arm.

– **SFX for a door slowly opening**

The half-open door slowly opened, revealing a single man standing there.

It was definitely a human.

That was, only after disregarding the pair of golden eyes shooting out deathly chilly gazes and the arm that was, without a doubt, belonging to a beast.

“Keeeeuk...”

Those were the final images Sahng-Hyun would get to remember.

SFX for breaking bones

With a horrifying noise of something twisting up, his neck bones cracked into bits and pieces.

“...”

Kim Sae-Jin discarded the limp body of the Vampire as if it was trash, and closed the door behind him. He had not a single shred of guilt from taking a life. No, it was more like he had stepped on an insect instead. And if he hadn't killed this bastard, the Vampire would have committed a murder first, so he felt totally justified for his actions that had saved a human being.

He turned his head and checked out the woman still under the hypnosis of the Vampire. Fortunately, it seemed like no harm was done to her yet, as she was simply unconscious, only her clothing was in somewhat of a half dishevelled state.

There was no other particular smell beside the dead Vampire and the woman in this place, so he reverted his arm back to that of a human's. This was one of the ways to use the Beast Mode/Human Mode he had uncovered recently, where he could change a part of his body to that of a Beast's.

Sae-Jin explored the rest of the house. Whether it was due to the house being so shabby, he couldn't spot any CCTV cameras inside or out.

‘She'll probably call the cops later.’

Satisfied, Sae-Jin took one last look at the unconscious woman, and exited the house.

And precisely 3 hours later. Waking up from the hypnosis, the woman screamed at the top of her lungs before calling the cops.

<<<<



Located in front of the Seoul City Hall, was the Blacksmiths Association. Inside this three-storied, plain-looking building, people were busy sorting out all the submitted armaments for the open invitational tournament.

“I wonder, will there be anything interesting this time? The best item we got from the last tournament ended up being ranked only around Mid Quality tier.”

The Highest Knight from the Raven Order, Kim Yu-Rin, asked as she eyed the sorting out process. The Association’s Chairman standing next to her meaningfully nodded his head.

“It should be okay to expect something good this time around. Firstly, the smithies in the Busan and Gwangju areas are participating en masse, and the direct disciple of the Master Kim Tae-Baek also sent in his work, saying he’d like to enter as well. Perhaps, it’s too much to expect a Branded Product but, it’s possible that we might find some High Quality Goods.”

“Oh, is that true?”

Master craftsmen were rather particular about choosing their disciples. Several masters didn’t even bother to have one, and the others would have no more than 1 or 2 at most. The government begged these masters with the promise of a greater level of support if they even as much as showed a hint of raising a disciple or two, but their stubbornness simply knew no bounds.

“Of course. We let them go through the Preliminary already. I’ll introduce you to them at a later date.”

“A direct disciple of that stubborn Master Kim Tae-Baek... Perhaps, is that person who I think he is?”

“Mm. Your thoughts are on the money. That hot-headed geezer would’ve never taken in a disciple, unless it’s his own flesh and blood, no? A 19-year-old flesh and blood, that is.”

Kim Yu-Rin peeked a smile at the dissatisfied voice of the Chairman.

“But didn’t he abandon the first born, saying he didn’t have any talent? I hear he’s the

last born – his talent must be quite amazing.” (TL: the gender of the disciple is not revealed in the raw at this time. Will continue with a “he” until the author clears that up.)

“That’s also true as well. Sent in a sword but, whew, it’s rather quite good.”

As the two of them conversed, the last day for submission was eventually coming to an inevitable close.

“This is the last one!”

And finally. One of the employees shouted as he raised a metal box.

“Can I take a look too?”

“Not a problem. But it’ll be better to not expect much. Since products sent in from all the well known smithies had gone through already, it’s probably something not very impressive.”

“Yes, I’m also aware. But still, it is the final one, so I’d like to be there.”

“Alright.”

The Chairman smiled magnanimously and nodded his head.

“Hey, you over there! Hold it!! Miss Yu-Rin wishes to see it too!”

“Eh, huh? Oh, yes, of course!”

The employee stayed his hands from opening the box and quickly sat up straight.

And people started to gather around the desk with the box on top. Not because the employees were interested in seeing the weapon with a potentially low quality, but obviously, to be around the crazily beautiful Knight Kim Yu-Rin’s presence.

“Shall I open it?”

“Yes. Please go ahead.”

After Yu-Rin had spoken, the employee carefully opened the box.

At that moment the box opened. The light from the lightbulb got reflected by the blade and stabbed the eye of the employee.

“Euk!!”

Ignoring the employee who was busy rubbing his eyes, Kim Yu-Rin and the Chairman took a look inside the box.

“...Huh?”

A stunned gasp leaked out from between the lips of Kim Yu-Rin. The only reason why she wanted to see this item was because it happened to be the very last one submitted to the tournament and thus had some sort of ceremonial significance. In other words, she also didn't hold any high expectations either.

However... inside this box was an unexpectedly good item. Outwardly, it could be called an ornamental dagger thanks to all the intricate carvings, but the sharp aura of Mana infused into the short blade was simply out of the norm.

The cold, grey blade seemed keen enough to slice anything it comes in contact with; the beautiful patterns on the surface and the smooth, clean hilt roused the flames of greed inside her, wanting to possess this dagger.

“...”

Yu-Rin dazedly reached out and grasped the hilt. It didn't feel foreign at all, and she could hold it so comfortably, as if it was a part of her own body. This familiarity showcased that this dagger was meticulously designed with the physiology of the user in mind.

“...It seems that, we might have another good product in our hands.”

The Chairman, also dazed like Yu-Rin, muttered while admiring the dagger.

“Oi, what's the name of the participant?”

At the Chairman's words, one of the employees, who were also stunned into silence by the dagger, hurriedly woke up and fished out the application form inside the box.

“...What the?”

“...Why? Something wrong?”

“Ah, no, that is... the name is a bit strange, sir. It’s The Orc’s Forge – and the sender wishes to be called *Orc* in the shortened form.”

At this terrible name, the Chairman’s brows narrowed. Although they did approve the usage of aliases as well as anonymity for this competition, but to use a Monster’s name...

“It must be a hot trend nowadays, using the names of Monsters on their products. I mean, there’s the Goblin Alchemist and stuff.”

Kim Yu-Rin smiled brightly as if she found this a pleasant surprise.

“And... well, since Orcs are known to make good weapons, I think it’s rather a fitting name. Excuse me, Mister Chairman?”

“Mmm?”

“Rather than the disciple of Master Tae-Baek, can you arrange a meeting with this Mister *Orc* for me? What he wrote does sound a bit strange... but I really like this weapon. If I build a personal connection with this person, I think he’ll make me an excellent weapon later on.”

Hearing her request, the Chairman scratched the back of his head but in the end, nodded his head as if he couldn’t help it anyway.

“If that’s what you want... I’ll try my best. But before that, we should test this dagger first. It’s possible that an artisan or a master could be playing a prank here after deliberately lowering the quality of their work.”

“Yes, of course. Well, thank you for your help, Mister Chairman.”

CHAPTER 24

THE ORC'S FORGE (4)

Ten days following the submission of his dagger to the Blacksmiths tournament, Sae-Jin maintained a regimented lifestyle.

In the mornings, he practised Alchemy and Blacksmithing Technique, and in the afternoons, he went downtown to take a *break*. Even though he called it a break, it was nothing more than him walking around the city's streets aimlessly. But that was enough to put his mind at ease.

And at nights, when the number of Hunters and Knights were few and far in between, he hunted Monsters in the low Mid Tier and Mid Tier hunting grounds. Most of the time, he hunted in his Ebony Wolf Form's Beast Mode, but sometimes, he deliberately went out in the Orc Form too. He did that in order to evolve. Well, the thing was... he ran into a particularly tough wall while performing the Smithing Technique.

[As an "Orc Warrior", Hardness Level: D and the Skill Proficiency Level: D is the maximum attainable limit.]

Unfortunately, though – no matter how many Monsters he hunted, the Orc Warrior showed no sign of evolving.

"Fuu..."

Right now, the time was 11 am. Sae-Jin put the mortar and pestle down after making three bottles of potions. He'd been grinding herbs for so long now, the Goblin's tiny little hands were all swollen up in red and everything.

The potion-crafting proved to be a cumbersome and difficult endeavor. Even though he was blessed with the Goblin's Craftsmanship skill, it's Proficiency Level was still low; and to repeatedly refine ingredients as well as to compound them to the minute, exacting degree, a great deal of his mental strength and focus was required.

[Crafting of the Element Resistance potion has failed. Skill Proficiency Level will be increased.]

He often encountered failure whenever he tried to concoct difficult potions. Just as its high price suggested, the Element Resistance potion was difficult as hell to make. This was his fourth try today, but he hadn't succeeded once. Right about now, he was seriously missing the powder of Sabre-tooth tiger's fang as that thing not only doubled as a Mana Stone but also could greatly bolster the success rate of potion-crafting.

"Haa..."

As he tasted yet another defeat, the strength abandoned him in droves. And the lightheadedness from inhaling the fumes of the ingredients belatedly began to assault him, too.

For the sake of taking a break, Sae-Jin changed to the Human Mode of the Wolf Form and switched on the TV. Without a doubt, proper resting or playing needed to be done in a human's body. Of course, just by being inside this stupid cave, the level of enjoyment he'd derive would be halved – no, maybe even worse than that, but still.

– Precisely 10 days ago, a man's body was discovered in one of the Gangwon Province's rental houses. The victim had died instantly after his neck bones were twisted, and on his neck, imprints of unidentifiable animal claws were discovered. The crack team of detectives investigated the case using that evidence as the lead off point, until they announced that they have made a surprising discovery. As to what that exact discovery is, can you inform us, Professor Kim?

It was a programme related to currently trending news topics. Taking the already happened event as its topic of discussion, the chat show let the anchor and a panel of so-called experts talk about stuff and present information to the viewers. Sae-Jin's ears had to perk up from this show's contents, since it was definitely related to what he had done.

– Thank you. Well, the identity of our victim just so happens to be that of a Vampire. This fact was uncovered by the investigators after they had fast tracked the autopsy. The decision came about after hearing the peculiar testimony of the first person to find the body, as well as the discovery of several blood packs inside the fridge of the victim.

This incident has ignited fierce debate among the public. On one side, there are those

arguing that the Vampires are a sub-species of humans so the perpetrator must be caught and punished, while the other side is opposing that view by arguing that Vampires are the enemies of mankind to be exterminated and thus there's no need to investigate this matter any further.

Also, there are arguments regarding whether the culprit knew the identity of the victim as a Vampire and thus committed this act or not...

Sae-Jin subconsciously leaked a mocking grin. Even after suffering at the hands of these damnable Vampires, there still seemed to be morons busy yapping on about respecting the f*cking human rights of these bloodsuckers. No, at this point, he had to suspect whether Vampire sleeper cells had infiltrated the human society and what not.

Bump.

It was then, as he thought up to this point, his heart suddenly felt like it was going to explode. The insatiable thirst for murder assaulted his brain, telling him to track down every single one of these bastards and massacre them all.

It was a poisonous and powerful hatred born out of the deeply rooted hostility Sae-Jin carried in his heart combining with the primal instincts of the Werewolf.

“...!!”

And that's when he discovered himself busy destroying the floor of his cave with both of his arms changed to that of a Werewolf's. This... was weird. Totally spooked by this... *event*, he quickly assumed the Human Form and flipped the channel.

“Fuu.”

His heart had calmed down somewhat by doing that, but his rage towards Vampires wouldn't cool down so easily. Sae-Jin concentrated hard on the TV in order to appease this boiling anger. Luckily enough, his attention was grabbed by a very interesting program on the channel he changed to.

– A total number of 33 workshops and 1308 blacksmiths have entered in this year's 4th Blacksmiths Open Invitational Tournament.

He remembered hearing that every step of the selection processes by the judges would be televised. And during the Final Round of judging, over one thousand audience

members would participate in finding the winner that possessed the mass market appeal and also, was acknowledged by the professional users.

– The previous tournament's Preliminary saw only 100 participants making it through, but this year, 208 people have managed to reach this stage, ensuring that we will be blessed with a fierce competition to determine the eventual winner. And right here, inside the main headquarter of the Dawn Knights Order, 20 items selected from those 208 participants are on display. The accomplished Knights will lend us their expert opinions on judging these items... Oh, here they are!

Sae-Jin wondered if his dagger was among those on display and looked closer, only to let out a small gasp of surprise after seeing the face of one of the Knights there trying to play the roles of judges.

– To start off the proceedings, we secured the aid of someone that was very difficult to get a hold of. Welcome, the Knight of the Dawn Order, Miss Yu Sae-Jung!!

It was her, the girl Sae-Jin saved from the Troll way back when.

– Oh... yes, hello to you as well.

– I heard that last week, you were promoted to the ranks of low Mid Tier. Now that you are the reigning record holder of the youngest low Mid Tier Knight ever in history, how do you feel right now?

–... I'm not sure. But as I've agreed to do this 1st Round thing, I would like to concentrate only on judging for now.



The Dawn Knights Order got the first dibs on acquiring a single weapon after every round of judging process, thanks to being the biggest sponsor of the tournament.

Obviously, as this was just the 1st Round, even the armaments rated Low Quality would still be rare. But it was still possible to identify the “good seedlings” from early on. That’s why Yu Sae-Jung volunteered and said she wanted to participate in the judging process. She still hadn’t found a weapon that could be called her “primary” just yet.

She already had a sword rated High Quality that other low Mid Tier Knights wouldn’t

even be able to think about touching, but for the granddaughter of the Dawn Corporation's Chairman, it simply wasn't satisfactory enough for both her and her grandpa.

"Haha. Well, then. Please score these 20 weapons on display here after giving them your considered opinions, Miss Sae-Jung. The scores you give them will be combined with the scores from other judges and the winners will be decided from that, so please give it your best!!"

Normal equipment used by the Knights were divided into the ranking system of [Lowest → Low → Mid → High → Highest] in that order. And on the very top, there were those that exceeded these classifications and achieved the ranks of a "Branded Goods" or a "Treasure."

So, a Low Tier Knight would use a Low Quality equipment, and low Mid and Mid Tiers would use up to the Mid Quality. And the Knights of upper Mid Tiers and above, needed at least the High Quality weapons or better. (Of course, this changed slightly depending on the level of the Knights Orders.) *(TL: this bracketed sentence is from the author.)*

"Will do."

Yu Sae-Jung walked with heavy footsteps and took a look at the weapons arranged in a row. Her judging was super quick and rather strict as well. One look, and she gave 2 points, another quick look, then a single point awarded – this repeated for a couple of times. The maximum possible points that could be awarded was 10.

"...Pardon me, but if you could just tell us what's on your mind..."

In a clearly restless manner, the announcer exhorted Sae-Jung who was too busy stabbing the hearts of the blacksmiths countrywide with a lethal blade while not saying a single word.

"Oh, my apologies. It's my first time being on TV."

She quickly lowered her head, and then pointed at the item she gave a single point to, just now.

"That sword is too malleable to be of any use. It's the lower than the lowest quality that wouldn't even leave behind a cut on the bones of a Skeleton. That's why it's only

worth one point. I have to wonder how did *that* get past the Preliminary screening.”

“...Oh...”

The announcer wasn't expecting an avalanche of praises, obviously. Yu Sae-Jung's particularly fussy personality was famous throughout the Dawn Knights Order already. But he didn't expect her to be so ruthless with her put-downs at all...

“Hmm. Alright, please, continue with your evaluations.”

However, wouldn't such a character go down well with the audiences as well? An ice-cold highschool girl with a cute face spitting out decidedly harsh judgements. The announcer's face regained its happy bearings and he relaxedly smiled.

<<<<

“And this axe over here, looks like it might break if I slam it down just once. Oh, it really did break. It's made out of steel but, I think there was a problem with the base material. If not, then..... well, the skill of the smith must've been terrible.”

“Ha, haha...”

After that, she continued to pour out more scorn. Yu Sae-Jung never gave out points higher than a 4. The passing criteria for the 1st Round was, at minimum, “better than Lowest Quality” but maybe she wasn't aware of this little fact, as she continued to slap terrible points to all the equipment she saw.

And so, her evaluations for the 17 weapons ended in a blink of an eye. When she arrived at the 18th...

Yu Sae-Jung's feet that were constantly moving forward, finally stopped still. At this strange behaviour, the camera hurriedly closed in and alternated between her face and the weapon that made her stop.

“Is this one different from the others?”

“...Yes. Quite different. Is it okay if I touch it?”

“Of course.”

Yu Sae-Jung picked up the weapon, her eyes sparkling brightly. It was an expertly crafted dagger, the reflections off its sharp blade imparting a chilly sensation down her spine.

“...And your evaluations are?”

The announcer asked, full of expectations. Even he, who was not a blacksmith, could see that this dagger was an excellent item as well.

“It’s excellent. It’s been crafted wonderfully and the blade is really sharp. The carvings on the blade itself are also quite intricate too... and the feeling of the grip is stable and light as well. Most importantly though, it’s surprisingly easy to infuse it with Mana. On the open market, this dagger would be good enough to earn the ranking of the Low, even the upper Low Quality quite easily. What a pity that it’s a dagger, but still, a very good product. It’s the best among what’s on display here.”

Yu Sae-Jung spoke to the announcer after examining the dagger this and that for a while.

“Is it possible for me to learn the name of the blacksmith who made this?”

“I heard that it’s been engraved at the bottom of the hilt.”

Yu Sae-Jung upturned the dagger and checked the bottom of the hilt. There were exactly three English alphabets engraved there.

“...ORK? Is this supposed to be ‘Orc’?”

“The blacksmith has asked to be called The Orc, apparently.”

“...But isn’t the spelling suppose to be O, R, and C?”

“Haha... well, even I’m not... oh, please assign the points first.”

Yu Sae-Jung gave it 8 points.

“Oh, did you deduct the last 2 points because it’s a dagger?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Haha, but wouldn’t the blacksmith be slightly unhappy if you deduct points like that?”

The announcer was making a small joke. But Yu Sae-Jung suddenly became dead serious and contemplated for a bit, before nodding in agreement and changed her evaluation.

“10 points. It’s 10 points.”

“...”

The announcer’s lips automatically twitched at the sight of Yu Sae-Jung’s rather adorable actions, but since she was quite serious about this whole thing, he worked very hard to swallow his smiles down.

“That 8 points, it was my mistake so please edit it out.”



“Hahaha...”

Unfortunately for her, Yu Sae-Jung’s gaffe wasn’t edited out, and Kim Sae-Jin was busy bursting into laughter.

‘I thought she was picky and rude, but I guess she also has an adorable side, too.’

He felt that she was even more cute now after she had heaped praises on his dagger when she thoroughly rubbished the others so much.

– Now then, next up – we’ll chat with Mister Kim Hyuk-Joon, a Mid Tier Knight from the Gaebyuk Knights Order who’s been igniting the world of celebrity gossip.

Before he knew it, the coverage of the tournament had ended; Sae-Jin checked the current time, and stood up to leave.

It was 1 PM. Time to go to the city.

CHAPTER 25

LYCAN, THE MERCENARY (1)

The temporary resident of a cave in the Monster field, Kim Sae-Jin was about to utilise the *regular* exit route for an afternoon out in the city. What he meant by the regular route was that, instead of him changing to the Ebony Wolf Form and jumping over the wire fences and traversing the wilderness that way, he'd assume the appearance of a human and walk out of the entrance/exit proper.

When utilising this regular route, he had to go through the so-called Rest Stop, a large structure built as a shelter. Inside this building which was the size of the Seoul Train Station's waiting area, he saw Hunters, or maybe Knights, going through a final mission briefing before embarking on another hunt.

"Uh?"

In this place, Sae-Jin found a familiar face he saw on TV just now.

It was Yu Sae-Jung. With her colleagues around, she was intently listening to the words of a man who looked to be the captain of the hunting team.

He tried to figure out if she was nodding her head like *that* because the hunt she was about to participate in was important, when an army of camera-wielding crewmen descended down on the group out of nowhere.

"Be rest assured as we got our own Knights providing protection so, please, just focus on hunting as you'd do normally. We only want to capture your natural actions. Aren't we doing this, because the public's opinion on the Knights Orders aren't so good right now thanks to the recent Monster Outbreak? Let's turn all of that around with this reality TV show! Although we're filming only the pilot episode, but still, please remember that this isn't a documentary but a reality TV!! Please, please remember this. Oh, and... Knight Yu Sae-Jung?"

"Yes?"

"Well, it'll be like, since Miss Sae-Jung is the face of the show, so, we'll have to focus more on you from now on. A cold expression is okay, no, it's more than okay, but please

smile every now and then. That's for the best, you see. If you're cold and distant all~ day long, the viewers might end up not liking you. So, people would think more favourably of you when an unexpected, bright smile breaks out of all that coldness. Like... she's only cold outwardly, but inside, she's kind hearted... like that."

"Oh..."

Yu Sae-Jung had an expression of slight unwillingness, but she still ended up nodding her head, once.

'It's just them filming stuff for a show.'

The guy Sae-Jin thought was the captain of the team, actually turned out to be the producer of the show. Sae-Jin stood there watching for five minutes before moving towards the exit. Actually, he tried to move, but...

"H, hey, please wait a moment!!"



Yu Sae-Jung found the current situation not to her liking. But she couldn't do anything about it. It was decided to give access to her life to these media people already. She also knew that, in order to become a Highest Tier Knight in the future, the goodwill of the public would be important, to a certain degree.

To follow in the footsteps of Kim Yu-Rin, her childhood idol, she was willing to endure just about everything.

"Please remember, it's not a documentary, but a reality TV show!! And... Knight Yu Sae-Jung?"

She disliked this producer who wanted to package the Monster hunts into a reality entertainment TV show, but her father did recommend him, saying the man had the right abilities.

She did her utmost hardest to repress the urge to just get up and run away, and reluctantly made her replies. Even after that, though, this guy continued to yap on and on. So, she answered him insincerely while turning her gaze elsewhere. This was the only way for her to endure this torture.

And that's how, like fate or even maybe a lie, she found him.

"H, hey, please wait a moment!!"

"Eh? K, keuk!!"

At her sudden outburst, the producer got confused but Yu Sae-Jung couldn't care any less even if she tried. She shoved aside the producer blocking her way, then rushed out in front of the man she had been searching for.

"...Hmm?"

"...Is it... really him?"

Now that she was standing before him, Yu Sae-Jung had to take a moment and wonder. The face was the same, but... was his size this big before?

"Excuse me, you're Mister Kim Sae-Jin, yes? From that *time*."

However, the face was definitely the same as the one engraved in her memories, so she worked hard to appear confident. Even if he seemed a bit taller, it was definitely the same guy.

"..."

"I know it's you. Why aren't you answering me?"

When Sae-Jin failed to reply, she narrowed her brows and stared up into his eyes. She was even more convinced now, even though the question of his height entered her mind again. This man's face was completely embedded in her brain and she would never be able to forget it no matter what. Hell, she even saw it in her dreams several times already.

"...Good to see you again."

Kim Sae-Jin thought about playing dumb here. But in the end, he offered his hand for a shake with a smile. After all, she was Yu Sae-Jung – the daughter of the Dawn Knights Order's Master, as well as the granddaughter of the Dawn Corporation's Chairman. He thought that letting go of this chance to build a personal bridge would be such a waste.

“Ah, as I thought... Thank you... for that time.”

And as the two of them shared only this much of conversation, suddenly a camera was shoved in his face.

“Miss Sae-Jung, who is this gentleman?”

The producer asked, his face brightly smiling in happiness. Well, it was an entrance of a new character. Not just any, but a *man*, that made the frosty “gold spoon” female Knight go out of her way to offer a warm greeting. The producer planned to shoot some opening sequences in this Rest Stop but hell, wasn’t this an unexpectedly huge scoop?

“What do you think you’re doing? Get rid of the cameras!!”

Fearing Sae-Jin would escape trying to avoid the cordon of cameras, she grabbed the collars of the producer and shouted in anger. At her unexpectedly sharp reaction, the producer panicked a little. If he got on Yu Sae-Jung’s bad books, then not only in the entertainment industry, he wouldn’t be able to find work anywhere on this planet...

However – his desire regained its vigour the moment he saw the face of the unknown person, Kim Sae-Jin. This unknown man didn’t seem to be too bothered by the presence of the cameras. If anything, a gleam of curiosity could be spied from his eyes.

“Excuse me, mister? By any chance, is it possible for us to film you for a very brief moment? The TBK Production is making a reality TV show about Knights...”

“Hey, you!!”

Yu Sae-Jung pushed the producer back while stealing glances at Kim Sae-Jin. Contrary to her worries, though – he didn’t seem to show any discomfort towards the sudden intrusion of the cameras.

“...It, it won’t take too much of your time. It’s like, it’s the opening, and an unexpected but fateful encounter~~ Stuff like that is good for the ratings, you see. Very good, in fact.”

Sae-Jin slowly scratched his chin and agonised a little about this. For him to appear on TV... Wasn’t this one of his childhood wishes? He felt envious, watching those shows featuring cool celebrities and Knights, wanting to be just like them. But that was a

dream unattainable for a child who was struck down by the sudden twist of fate to become an orphan.

“What type of show is this?”

When Sae-Jin nodded his head slightly, a thick smile drew up on the producer’s face. But Yu Sae-Jung frowned instead and had to ask him first.

“...Eh? Are you okay with this?”

“Oh, well, actually... it’s been a while since our last run-in, so I thought...”

“It’s Yu Sae-Jung.”

“Ahaha. If so, then, we’ll start filming for a bit now. It’s simple, actually. Just talk to each other, as if we aren’t even here in the first place. Well then, we’ll be just over there, so don’t mind us~”

Cameras retreated slowly and maintained a comfortable distance. Of course, it was still noticeable but Sae-Jin did his best to sound natural as he spoke.

“Shall we go somewhere to sit down and talk?”

“Oh? Ah... alright. Good idea.”

The two of them walked towards the coffee shop located inside the Rest Stop.



“Heh... Isn’t this a huge scoop? Who knew, that picky and rude *gold spooner* would be this talkative?”

The producer and his crew members, as well as other Knights, couldn’t stop being surprised and astonished by the sight of Yu Sae-Jung beyond the glass of the coffee shop.

She always maintained a cold, expressionless face and whenever she spoke, it was as if she was throwing rocks out of her mouth with her stiff, officious attitude.

But right now, sitting there talking to this unknown man, Yu Sae-Jung seemed

different. It wasn't on the level of calling her face blooming brightly but at least, she was not icy cold any more. And to top it all off, those cute little mouth of hers busily bobbed up and down to string lengthy sentences instead of her usual short, curt answers.

Those who knew her, ended up wondering if that girl sitting over there was indeed the real Yu Sae-Jung or not...

"Hey! She smiled!! Did you get that?"

"Yep. And it was a close-up shot."

"Ou. Nicely done. Nice. What about audio?"

The producer asked the sound recordist. The man in charge of recording sound raised his thumb up, a deep smile etched on his face.

"The contents of their conversation are pretty nice as well. Seems like that guy is a Hunter, and saved Yu Sae-Jung once before from danger."

"Oooh. And he's a Hunter? But a Hunter saved a Knight? How?"

"They haven't talked about it yet. That part's been glossed over, and they are talking about more mundane stuff now. Oh, wait!!"

Suddenly, the sound recordist opened his eyes wide and let out a loud gasp.

"What?"

"She just asked him to join the Dawn Knights Order. She's trying to scout him."

<<<<



"Would you like to join our Dawn Knights Order? We always welcome a talented person like you, Mister Sae-Jin."

Kim Sae-Jin could only grin softly at her serious offer. Wasn't the way she speak too grown up – even though she was still just a minor, a high school student?

“I’m grateful for your consideration, but... I’ve made up my mind to stay as a solo Hunter.”

He replied “half” politely to her. In the beginning, he spoke in a more familiar tone since there was a bit of age gap between them, but she showed signs of not liking that, so he decided to converse with her in the established conventions of honorific speech. *(TL: the Korean language has a honorific speech pattern which is nigh-on impossible to replicate in full in English. This time, the author used “**함쇼체**”. I TLed it as “speaking half politely” instead.)*

“As a solo Hunter?”

Yu Sae-Jung’s eyes went round as she tilted her head.

A solo Hunter was a person not affiliated with any organizations or Knights Orders. This was pretty rare, even more than the so-called “Free” Knights. That’s because most Hunters couldn’t hunt Monsters on their own. *(TL: the author used the word “**무적**” to describe the Knights in this paragraph. It means, in this case at least, someone who has not been “recorded” anywhere – not with any government, not with any body of education nor business entities, not even families. So, uh, I’m not aware of simpler English term that can accurately imply such a state other than “free”, so I used that word.)*

“...Without a doubt, if it’s you, Mister Sae-Jin, I guess it’s possible. That amazing strength you displayed back then, it was a Trait, yes?”

Sae-Jin’s body trembled for a moment. But he maintained a poker face and sipped the coffee.

“...Yes. You’re correct.”

“If it’s not too much trouble, can I ask you what kind of Trait it is?”

At her question, Sae-Jin pondered slightly, before giving her an ambiguous answer.

“It’s a Trait related to physical constitutions.”

“A-ha.”

Thankfully, Yu Sae-Jung accepted his story without a problem. In a way, his attitude

made sense, as most Knights with Traits tried to keep the detailed information of their abilities under the wraps.

“Oh and, you seemed to have grown taller than before? Must be the result of the Trait’s growth.”

“Eh? Ah... Yes. That’s exactly it.”

This was a more believable excuse than trying to explain via usage of some magical “potion”, which he should have thought of before. Sae-Jin hurriedly nodded his head.

“A Trait, you say...”

Yu Sae-Jung fell into a deep thought while sharply staring at his eyes, almost enough to bore holes in his body. This was one of her habits. When she stared long enough until the other party felt uncomfortable, they would turn away and avoid the eye contact first.

However, Sae-Jin didn’t do that. Actually, he found it rather wondrous the way her jewel-like eyes seemed to wiggle around in a matching rhythm with her flowing thoughts.

“I wonder... although you are a solo Hunter, isn’t it possible to go out on a cooperative hunt with our Knights Order? Your skills have already been confirmed, after all.”

At her words that came out after a short moment of pondering, Sae-Jin grinned slightly while nodding his head.

“Yes, it’s possible.”

“That’s great. Then give me your contact numbers. Unfortunately, it looks like I need to go soon... I’ll give you a call at a later date.”

“Please, try to contact me in the mornings. I don’t have much free time otherwise.”

Yu Sae-Jung handed over her phone. Suiting her personality to a T, the phone was jet-black and simply designed, the feeling of its metal frame icy. Sae-Jin saved his home number on the phone and parted ways with her.



Whenever he walked around in the city, Sae-Jin was in the Ebony Wolf Form's Human Mode.

And as he walked around enjoying the attention from the passers-by, he discovered a flyer plastered on one of the street lamps.

No, it was more like the flyer discovered him instead.

'That smell...'

The thick scent of blood leaking out from that flyer had his eyesight totally under its grips.

[Recruiting mercenaries. For Vampire extermination. Your ranks not important. Remuneration favourable.]

Mercenaries – one of the more famous jobs among those that were born from the entrance of the Monsters to this world. However, the purpose of a Mercenary was different from that of a Hunter or a Knight.

Besides the fact that they get hired with money, they had to kill people every now and then. Of course, those killed were the targets for elimination designated by the law, such as Vampires, Nagas, "Corrupted" humans, etc, etc... In other words, the types that harmed the society as a whole.

But in modern times, facing fierce opposition from many Human Rights groups as well as the change in the Constitution, the so-called "murder-as-jobs" professions began to slowly disappear. And before anyone knew it, Mercenaries, who had lost the meaning to their professional existence, faded away into obscurity, as well.

However – the Mercenaries didn't go extinct. Even though something as important as Mercenary ranking system wasn't sorted out until now and remained chaotic, somehow, thirteen "Mercenary's Taverns" still managed to continue existing throughout the country.

Mercenaries that have remained till the end were the bunch of hard men still

possessing their original inborn nature: a tenacious, unyielding spirit and unshakeable faith. These guys all lost important people to these “enemies of mankind” so they would never give up until they get their revenge of ripping out bits and pieces of those damnable bastards.

As long as there were those who’d rather choose death over that of losing their meaning of existence drew breath, Mercenaries would never completely disappear from this world.

Kim Sae-Jin who lost his mother to Vampires, *knew* these men more than anyone else.

That was why, the beast Kim Sae-Jin just could not leave behind this flyer looking to find Mercenaries to kill Vampires.

He roughly ripped the flyer off the street pole and shoved it in his pocket.

CHAPTER 26

LYCAN, THE MERCENARY (2)

In a Mercenaries' Tavern located on the outskirts of Gangwon Province.

Once upon a time, this establishment was packed to the brim with the voices of drunken Mercenaries, smell of strong liquor, sweat, and sounds of fisticuffs. Back then, 24 hours in a day weren't enough for the working Mercenaries; and when they were sitting here doing nothing, the Master of the Tavern reminded them of their shortcomings, all in a good camaraderie.

But now... all of that was a distant memory.

No one sought out the singularly 'frozen in time' Mercenaries' Tavern. A shabby exterior and the worn, broken down furniture, bottles of strong alcohol going through another stage of fermentation thanks to no one buying them – and an empty wooden board made of cork, bereft of any and all assignments.

Like the dying Mercenaries, a Tavern also forgotten and buried in time.

However, regardless how forgotten this place was, there still was one man resolutely looking after it.

He was Kim Yu-Sohn, a middle aged Mercenary.

Just like everyday, he polished the cutlery of the Tavern, cleaned the furniture, and brushed up the empty cork notice board, believing that, one day, this board would be choke-full of assignments.

SFX for an ill-fitting door sliding open

The wooden door's metal hinges made a sorrowful wail as it opened. The half opened door then made more weak noises before breaking up completely. The man who was trying to open it carefully lowered the broken door down and entered inside the Tavern.

"...Dad."

“You’ve come. Take a seat.”

Kim Yu-Sohn stopped cleaning the furniture and went behind the bar to receive his son.

“It’s been really a long time since your last visit here.”

“...”

The son couldn’t say anything. Even though he had something he wanted to say prepared beforehand, the moment he saw his father’s face... nothing came out of his mouth. As a son, he knew better than anyone what this Tavern meant to his father.

That’s why, the son began talking about his current situation, trying to beat around the bush.

“Dad, I’ve managed to rank up to a Mid Tier Knight in the Goryeo Knights Order recently. My annual salary has doubled as well. Because of that, I’ve decided to look for a house here in Gangwon. Now that I’ve got some breathing space, I thought it was a bit of waste commuting from Seoul all the time.”

“Is that right? Well done, son. Your mother on the other side will be proud of you.”

The father, Kim Yu-Sohn, smiled warmly. The son that was looking at his father with sad eyes, bit his lips and lowered his head.

That was an event of the distant past, long enough ago to cause the memories to become indistinct now.

His mother. His father’s wife. The most beautiful woman for both of these people, lost her life in a manner that was truly depraved and utterly filthy, even to her final moments. The day Kim Yu-Sohn became a Mercenary and not a Knight was this very day. The son’s dream also had changed on that day, too.

The son was always proud of his father’s dependable back, even if he became a Mercenary and not a Knight. Didn’t matter he came back late at night, leaving behind a young child alone; not even when he failed to return home altogether – the boy was still proud of his father.

“...Dad. From now on, let’s stay together. Mercenaries... they are not coming to this

place anymore.”

The son was finally able to force out the words he wanted to say in a trembling voice.

He knew better than anyone, of all the hard work his father had put in. That was why he raged so much when those f*cking mass media people tried to turn everything his father had done into crime.

But now, the times had changed. The war against those bastards... it was now a story from the past too long ago.

“...That’s not it.”

Unfortunately, his father shook his head. At his adamant attitude, the son hurriedly continued with his words.

“I also saw the news about the Vampires. But right now...”

“No, no. That’s not it, my son.”

The father, Kim Yu-Sohn gently stroked the son’s head like way back when his height was much shorter.

“I had a dream. You know very well what it means for me to have a dream, yes?”

“...Yes?”

The son dazedly nodded his head. His father possessed what those great Knights call a special power, a Trait. A strange power, that was distinctly different from Mana and magic.

“I saw the Vampires. I don’t know what their end goal is, but they have somehow become stronger than in the past, and are getting ready to unfurl their wings.”

“...Even still, that is the job of Knights Orders now. Mercenaries are...”

“No. Knights Orders fear the public sentiment. And there are a lot more Vampires out there than you think, existing in many different *places*.”

The son was about to raise his counter argument when Kim Yu-Sohn raised his index

finger and placed it on his lips. *Shh*. He gestured his son to remain silent. Right at that time...

SFX for an old fashioned phone ringing

The unfamiliar sound of a ring leaked out from the old phone that hadn't had a reason to cry in the past several years. The father carefully picked the receiver up. Defeated by his own curiosity, the son jumped over the counter and stood very closely next to his father as well.

"This is the Mercenaries' Tavern."

- "... Hello."

A low, heavy voice came out from the phone.

- *"I'm giving you a call after seeing the flyer."*

"Yes. It's a difficult assignment. That is why..."

- *"Just tell me of their whereabouts. I'll take it from there."*

"But then, how will I be able to tell you're successful or not...?"

- *"I'll discard the bodies where they'll be discovered more easily. The media will then do its job."*

Kim Yu-Sohn smiled thickly as the conversation flowed exactly as in his dream. Next up, he should deny being a Mercenary.

"Alright."

- *"However, there's a problem. I'm not..."*

"Just provide me with your Mercenary Name and a passcode to identify you. That's all I need. I'll take care of registering you as a Mercenary."

- "..."

As if the man on the other side had panicked a little, the conversation stopped for a

short moment. But not too long after, his “name” and the “password” came out accompanied by that deep voice.

“I understand. One week from today, please go to where you found that flyer. I’ll leave behind the new information there.”

– *“Eh? Hmm... Got it.”*

The guy seemed more surprised at Kim Yu-Sohn’s words, but he hung up without inquiring further.

“...Who was he?”

The son asked, clearly puzzled.

“I don’t know either.”

As he lightly replied, for the first time in a long while, the father had to fish out a Mercenary Application form from a drawer.

Back when it all started, in order to apply as a Mercenary, a person was required to provide a thorough proof of his or her background, such as a name, age, and the current physical condition.

But now, the story was different. Since the industry was dying, the details of an application were left to the discretion of the Tavern’s boss. Grinning widely, Kim Yu-Sohn wielded his pen like a sword, and at the totally unbelievable things he wrote down, the son’s mouth flapped wide open as well.

“Wa, wait a second, dad. An A rank?! Isn’t that the highest rank available? You only had one phone conversation...”

“Wasn’t I an A rank before as well? And besides, no one cares about Mercenaries’ rankings anymore. It’s just a set of irrelevant alphabets now.”

“Okay, fine, let’s say we can make a concession on the ranking, but what is up with that name?! By using that kind of a Mercenary name, isn’t it the same as telling the world, *Come and just kill me?!*”

At the son’s worries, the father simply chuckled slightly. Actually, Kim Yu-Sohn found

the name to his liking.

A mythical creature that ripped Vampires to shreds – more than that, a lonely but enraged beast that saw the rest of the world as its enemy.

<<<<

“What’s wrong with the *Lycan*? It sounds cool and all.”

“Dad!!”



For the first time in his life, Kim Sae-Jin bought a miracle of the modern world, the mobile phone. And what a wondrous contraption it was. He could activate it by touching the liquid crystal display, and if he projected the screen in the air, then the images became a lot bigger. At first, he got surprised by the projected images from the screen, but he was more or less used to it now.

“...Wow.”

And now, Sae-Jin was surfing the web using his phone inside a cafe near the Gangwon Province.

He paid special attention to “Neighbour” News and EntertainmentTV – and almost half of all the stories there were related to Yu Sae-Jung. It seemed like the recently broadcasted episode of ‘1st Round of the Blacksmithing Open Invitational Tournament’ had given rise to an ample amount of gossip material.

While sipping his coffee, Sae-Jin slowly read the articles regarding her and all the comments littering the comment section below.

*– I thought she was unlikeable in the beginning, but she was really cute by the end.
⇒⇒⇒⇒ [Upvoted 1093 Downvoted 53]*

∟I actually liked her from the beginning. Honestly, don’t like it if she was trying to curry favours and say nice this and nice that.

⌋Wut; Didn't Yu Sae-Jung try to do that at the end with that one blacksmith? Are your eyes decorations? You bloomin' dinkleberry. (TL: no, the author didn't actually write this. He had the common sense to censor himself... I had to figure out what insult he was writing here, so I improvised a bit.)

*⌋That blacksmith was worth it, that's why, you numbskull. You can see at one glance that weapon was something else. Didn't you see the close up shot? Just shut the f*ck up if you know jacksh*t.*

*⌋Don't f*cking make me laugh. It's still a Low Quality crap no matter how nice it is. Trying to swing your d*ck around with your trashy Lowest Tier~Low Tier Hunter knowledge? Do you even know anything about weapons in the first place?*

⌋Yep. ^^ This dagger received the official rating of Low Quality today ^^ I'll go and take a look myself ^^ Don't believe me, then come yourself, you loser butt monkey bastard. Will send you a PM so you better reply.

“...What the hell?”

Reading this banquet of weird swear words, Sae-Jin's brows narrowed slightly. Since he didn't want to read this junk no more, he scrolled down quickly until he found another interesting article. This one was also related to the Blacksmithing tournament, but instead of focusing on people, it was about the submitted items.

[Through the eyes of an expert, evaluating the selected items from the 1st Round of the Open Invitational Tournament.]

Becoming an artisan at a young age of 36 and raising much expectations to himself, the Artisan craftsman Soh Yun-Han has given his evaluations on the top 10 entrants out of the 40 that had successfully passed the 1st Round of judging.

1.

The Steel Longsword, submitted by the direct disciple of Master Kim Tae-Baek, Kim Soo-Han.

– It's a good weapon. Most of all, the refinement and the steelworking is quite faultless, and smith's blacksmithing skill as well as the important Mana infusion, is exemplary

considering the level of the judging criteria in the 1st Round.

If there is one thing that falls short, then it'd be the fact that the apprentice Kim Soo-Han just so happens to be the disciple of the Master Kim Tae-Baek. This weapon isn't going to 100% satisfy that incredibly weighty expectations. Of course, he could have submitted the worst of his pre-fabricated items for this round as there are still 2nd and Final rounds to go; if so, then that definitely raises the future expectation on this young craftsman.

The evaluation of an artisan: B (a mid Low Quality)

...

...

...

9. The Iron Dagger, submitted by the ORK, the unknown blacksmith.

– To be honest, I was quite astonished. I became so curious, I ended up asking about the information of this blacksmith who calls himself The ORK. First of all, the full name of the blacksmith itself is different from the others – ‘The Orc’s Forge K’. I’ve no idea why he chose to use such a name, but still, what he had crafted caused a huge buzz in this 1st Round of judging.

If you judge it by the criteria of the 1st Round, then it's perfect in almost every way. The only weak link here is the quality of the material used, but the excellent level of Mana infusion more than compensates for that. Every Knight that saw it praised this dagger greatly, saying it's very easy to infuse Mana with the weapon.

Well, there is no point in delaying this. Personally, I'd say this dagger takes the top spot in the 1st Round. To think such a wonderful item would emerge so soon in the 1st Round... The future of Blacksmithing, and the future of this tournament, is going to be a lot brighter moving forward.

The evaluation of an artisan: A (upper Low Quality ~ low Mid Quality)

“...Keheum.”

Sae-Jin let out a fake cough after getting somewhat self-conscious by what he had read.

Ttiring...

Suddenly, a text message flew out of the phone. A very business-like, no nonsense text message was written there.

'It's Yu Sae-Jung. When can we meet?'

He had received Yu Sae-Jung's message she sent to his home because the mobile phone was synced with the landline there. There's that, but why was she calling him already when it'd been only two hours since they parted ways?

Sae-Jin decided not to reply yet, and stepped out of the cafe.

CHAPTER 27

LYCAN, THE MERCENARY (3)

It was at night, with a deep darkness descending down like a fog.

A man, Kim Ji-Han, was walking on an alleyway while talking to a certain someone on the phone.

“Another one was murdered 3 days ago. Yes. A total of 2. No, I also have no idea. Even the police have no clue, so it’s impossible for me, too. Yes. Both were revenge killings. It’s revenge, because nothing was taken after the commission of the crime itself. Yes, well. I told you I don’t know who it could be. I can’t even get a feel for this guy. But still, I’m checking out all the Mercenary bastards, just in case. I’ll let the result known lat...”

Kim Ji-Han suddenly stopped talking. The reason was because of a man standing by the corner of the alleyway. Since the person’s back was turned away, Ji-Han couldn’t see the face, but it was not too difficult to figure that it was a he judging from the tall height and the athletic build.

“...Please hold on for a second. Don’t hang up.”

Ji-Han held the phone in one hand and slowly approached the man. However, an ominous feeling suddenly brushed by his senses. He realised he should not get too close. The instincts of a Vampire was busy telling him so. So, he began to carefully retread his steps backwards.

“Yeah. I’m going now.”

However, as if to say his worries were false, that man spoke to his own mobile phone and left the alleyway. Breathing a sigh of relief, Ji-Han raised his phone to his face.

“...It’s a false alarm.”

The moment he finished speaking, a giant shadow fell upon him from above. He couldn’t even utter a single word. Terrifying fangs ripped out chunks of his throat, and monstrous hands tore off his arms away.

The blood of a Vampire was cold. An icy feeling akin to taking a cold shower enveloped his body. And at the same time, several alert windows popped up.

▶ The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill “Flesh of a Beast” has risen from F to D.

▶ The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill “High-Strength Wolf’s Claws” has risen from F to D.

▶ The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill “Predator” has risen from F to D.

▶ The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill “The Scent of a Wolf” has risen from D to C-.

– “Oi, oi!!!”

As he was revelling in the ecstasy of his level up, a sound leaked out from the mobile phone that had fallen on the ground.

Kim Sae-Jin lightly stepped on and crushed it.



On the following day, Sae-Jin headed to the coffee shop in order to meet up with Yu Sae-Jung. The meeting had to be delayed for two weeks as both of them were swarmed with stuff to do.

Yu Sae-Jung was waiting for him inside the most luxurious coffee shop in the city. She was sitting alone in a corner of the shop, manning her phone. Even though she still had that youthful feel of a high school girl, there was a sophisticated aura oozing off from her as well.

Sae-Jin carefully approached her and sat on the opposite side. Suddenly, the attention of the surroundings focused here.

“Ah, you’ve arrived? It’s been a while.”

Yu Sae-Jung spoke in a relaxed manner as she shut the projections off.

“Were you looking at something?”

“News articles. Another murder of a Vampire happened yesterday. I hear this is the third victim already.”

Sae-Jin’s heart missed a beat there. But he quickly adjusted his mind and relaxedly nodded his head.

“Oh. I also saw that. By the way... what is that next to you?”

He didn’t want to deliberately walk down this conversational path and give himself more pain, so he changed the topic and asked her about the rectangular box next to her instead.

“Oh, this? I wonder, will you recognise it if you see it...?”

Sae-Jung placed the box on top of the table with a strangely excited voice. And with her lips twitching in a barely concealed smile, she opened the lid of the box.

“...Huh?!”

Kim Sae-Jin was left utterly shocked. However, the reason for that was rather different from what she was thinking of.

“Seeing your reactions, you must have seen that program I was in? This is that dagger. The Iron Dagger with excellent Mana infusion.”

Sae-Jung had a boastful smile on her face. It was as if she was proudly declaring, *Hey, I’m this kind of a woman.*

“...This, how did you get to acquire this dagger?”

He asked in a serious manner. He was genuinely, really dying to know. This dagger was, without a doubt, his creation. But it was now in the hands of another person without his approval. Well, the organisers of the tournament did say they would take care of selling the submitted products, but still, they didn’t even ask for his opinion...

“Our Knights Order is the biggest sponsor of the tournament so we can choose one

item each Round before anyone else can. So, we quickly took away this dagger.”

“...Oh, is that right? Then, did you get in touch with the person who made this weapon yet?”

Yu Sae-Jung shook head with a regretful expression.

“I couldn’t. I really wanted to, but strangely, this person wished to be contacted through post only. And the address isn’t for home but actually, just a post office in Gangwon as well... I did send him a letter, but seeing that there’s no reply yet... he probably didn’t receive it.”

“Ah. Oh...”

Now that he had heard her reasoning, the blame lied solely with his memories. He smiled apologetically and scratched the back of his neck.

“By the way, does Miss Sae-Jung need something like that? I thought you already possessed better weapons.”

“Yes. That is true. But this dagger, there is something special about it. Normally, daggers with short blades don’t have a good built in Mana infusion so it’s harder to wield Mana with it, but this one is different.”

She said that, and while gripping the dagger, sent in her Mana through to it. *Sshhrung*. An eerily chilly noise accompanied the Mana Blade quickly rising out from the dagger’s blade itself.

“How is it? It’s great, right? If it’s this much, it can more than work as my backup weapon. That’s why I bought it.”

“Ah, haha... It’s a good purchase. Such an item is hard to come by, after all.”

Finding her bright, satisfied expression as if she was a kid who just received a new toy rather adorable, Sae-Jin ended up smiling happily along her as well.

“Yes. I also think the same. The carvings on the surface of the blade is also really intricate, too... It’s almost like it’s a work of art, you know? Even my father was tempted by this dagger.”

Yu Sae-Jung retracted her Mana and carefully stored the dagger back inside the luxurious box. He felt rather happy for some reason and stared at the box for a bit. Since his work was stored inside a luxurious container, didn't that mean his dagger was also a luxurious item?

“...”

However, Yu Sae-Jung misunderstood the intentions behind his gaze. She hurriedly shoved the box inside her bag. It was a rather disconcertingly hurried manoeuvre.

When Sae-Jin looked at her quizzically, her body trembled for a moment as she avoided a direct eye contact.

“...Are you worried about me asking you for it?”

“...!!”

It seemed like he hit the nail on the head. Yu Sae-Jung's face visibly stiffened, and it was dyeing in the colours of an unwilling defeat. Her expression was like, *I shouldn't have boasted about it to him* – and after biting her lower lip, she reluctantly opened her mouth to speak.

“...If... you want it, I can give it to you. Y, you are my benefactor, after all... Of course I must give to you... If you want it...”

She inserted her imperceptibly trembling hand inside the bag to search for the box. However... instead of the box containing the dagger, she started pulling out stuff like her make up, purse, books, a gold bullion... A gold bullion?! Something with a rather enormous implication popped out in the middle there, but actually, it was all her ploy to waste time for as long as possible.

“...It's fine. I can't use weapons like that. I can't use Mana.”

<<<<

“Is that true? What a shame, then.”

As soon as Sae-Jin said those words – Sae-Jung spat out a big sigh of relief and started shoving all the junk on top of the table back inside her bag.

“That’s that, but why are we meeting here today?”

When Sae-Jin asked her for the original reason for the meeting, her eyes opened wide after realising that she had forgotten all about it.

“Ah, that. Hunting, I suggested before that we should hunt together. I should apologise. Two days from now, I’m scheduled to go out on a hunt. I’d like Mister Sae-Jin to accompany me.”

“Oh... It’ll have to depend on time... How many hours are you planning to spend hunting?”

Since the amount of time he could spend as a human was limited, it would not work for him if the hunt took too long to finish.

“Around two hours. I also have other things planned afterwards, so I can’t hunt together for too long as well.”

“Mmm... It’s fine, then.”

Kim Sae-Jin smiled and reached across for a handshake.

Two hours. There were more than enough people willing to pay a handsome amount just to meet with Yu Sae-Jung. For a person of her status, he was very much willing to invest just two hours of his time.

“I’ll see you then.”

As she began shaking his hand, a black car came to a halt in front of the coffee shop. That was some terrific timing, that.

“I’ll be going now. Oh, do you need a lift?”

“No, thank you. I’ll be fine alone.”

“If that’s the case, then I shall go ahead.”

Sae-Jung walked upright first and then suddenly, started walking awkwardly as she left the shop. It seemed like she was not used to walking in high heels just yet.

Watching those high school girl-like actions, Sae-Jin smiled slightly before he himself vacated the coffee shop.



After separating from her, Sae-Jin went to the same lamp post where he had found the flyer. As before, there was another flyer there. Outwardly, it was an ad for “house for sale” but it was actually the information on his next job, judging by the thick smell of blood coming off of it.

‘Gangwon Province, Hoengseong County, Starlight Apartment immediately available to buy!! Call 05-01-0239-4039.’

The location was the Starlight Apartment in Hoengseong. And the difficulty was... 05. The Vampire he took care of yesterday was 02, so in comparison, this one should be 2.5 time more difficult.

“...Hmm.”

Sae-Jin agonised for a moment. He was getting stronger, somewhat, after hunting numerous Monsters and absorbing their Mana Stones, but...

As he continued to agonise, the OLED exterior billboard hanging on a building showed a breaking news.

– Now, we bring you a public announcement from the Special Investigation Division of the Police regarding the serial killings of Vampires.

– How do you do, this is Chief Yu Baek-Song from the Special Investigation Division of Police.

That was the famous Chief of Special Police that even Sae-Jin knew of. Probably, she was the most famous person in the entire country.

Long, white hair. A pair of sharp but also elegant eyes, lips etched with a determined spirit. Outwardly appearing as a beautiful woman, she was the sole Divine Beast type Soo-in in South Korea. She was the White Tiger, Yu Baek-Song.

The bloodline that was widely acknowledged as possessing a superior strength than a regular Highest Tier ranked Knight flowed within her.

– The days of sanctioned killings ended in utter failure a long time ago, leaving nothing but bloodshed and hatred behind. We at the Special Investigation Division, in order to prevent the repeat of the past mistake, will swear to the high heavens to spare no efforts in investigating the series of murders involving Vampires. We have determined that all three murders were a hate crime committed by a single individual.

Even Sae-Jin felt momentarily pressured by someone as important as Yu Baek-Song personally announcing that on TV.

– And now, as a part of our ongoing investigation, we shall reveal the identity of the prime suspect.

Ever since he used the name Lycan, he was prepared to face suspicions from the Vampires, but still, his heart had to skip a beat here.

But that was just only for a moment.

– The prime suspect calls himself The Lycan, and he is a human Mercenary ranked A, the highest. Operating for almost 2 decades now, and his job completion rate at 100%, he is confirmed to be a true veteran among veteran Mercenaries. Operating only in the shadows, and as a consequence, little if any people know about him, this Mercenary even has earned the nickname of the Legend...

The highest ranking. Completion rate of 100%. A veteran. And a Legend, etc, etc... Hearing all that nonsensical description of himself, only then did Sae-Jin understand what the Tavern Boss meant by, when he proudly boasted there was no need to worry about the exposure of his identity.

The governing oversight of Mercenaries had collapsed a long time ago. So, as long as a Boss said so, it became truth. On top of that, there weren't any other Mercenaries to dispute that as a lie. The Boss already fired the first salvo by saying that very few people knew of him but even without such deception, Mercenaries were strictly independent-minded individuals anyway, so they would hold little to no interest in other Mercenaries' affairs.

– That's all we have uncovered so far. That is why, we are searching for those who have worked together with this Lycan in the past 20 years. Citizens, perhaps retired Mercenaries...

'Looks like I'll have to lay low for a while.'

The fake information on the application form had become a veil that completely covered the truth but, the existence of Yu Baek-Song still placed a great deal of pressure. The relationship between a wolf and a tiger was that of a prey and a predator so there was that, too. Of course, a wolf that grew up completely in an unnatural manner like him would eat up a tiger easily, but Yu Baek-Song wasn't just any tiger. She was a Divine Beast, a bloody White Tiger, to boot.

CHAPTER 28

CHANGES IN THE DAILY LIFE (1)

– According to the current estimates, a total of around 2000 Vampires are living peacefully while consuming the blood of livestock. The government is currently protecting their identities which helps them enjoy a smooth integration with the society. And the increase in the number of Vampires seeking this protection of the government seems to be a fast-growing trend as well. I believe the reason why the Special Investigation Division of the Police has designated the serial killings of Vampires as hate crime, is because the authority doesn't believe they aren't serious enough in nature.

– However, weren't all three murdered Vampires drinking the blood of humans? And on top of that, human remains were discovered in their homes. Not to mention, the last Monster Outbreak near the nameless church was the work of the Vampires as well.

– Of course, those incidents are being thoroughly investigated, as revealed by the investigators themselves. But, those incidents and this one is a separate issue. And, even if Vampires had committed such an atrocity, the punishment should not be immediate execution. We even established a special communication channel for Vampires as well, so this...

From the TVs installed inside the waiting area of the Rest Stop, the conversations that made Sae-Jin uncomfortable continuously leaked out. From his point of view, he just could not understand.

Vampires consuming the blood of livestock – what a pleasant idea.

However, the real nature of Vampires wasn't like that. Vampires had a totally different origin from the Soo-ins, who had blended in with the rest of humanity by suppressing their nature and even going as far as mating with humans, knowing that their identity might be lost in the process. After all, they weren't being referred to as *bats* for no reason, were they? These bastards betrayed others as if enjoying a meal...

“Mister Kim Sae-Jin. Mister Sae-Jin!!”

Sae-Jin woke up abruptly from the thrall of TV's broadcast by the call of the approaching Yu Sae-Jung.

“What were you doing? You didn’t reply even though I was calling for you.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. My bad. I was thinking about something else. Let us get going, then. So, which hunting ground did you say it is?”

“The low Mid Tier hunting ground.”

Sae-Jung promptly answered. Sae-Jin fell into a slight contemplation. Currently, he was acting as a perfectly normal *human* Kim Sae-Jin. In other words, his Stats were in the lowered state. If he was to do rough evaluation of his rank in terms of the Knight ranking system... no matter how favourable, a Low Tier at most.

“...Alright. Sounds good.”

It sounded about right, a team of a low Mid Tier Knight and a Low Tier hunting together in the low Mid Tier ground.

“Oh, by the way, what is your current Hunter ranking? Back then, you were ranked a Low Tier, yes?”

“I rose up by two ranks and now I’m a Mid Tier.”

Yu Sae-Jung’s lips became o-shaped in an expression of admiration after hearing his words. It had been only four months. The difficulty of raising the rank by two during that short amount of time would have been unimaginably high, no matter whether one was a Knight or a Hunter.

“As I thought, your speed of growth is really fast. By the way, is that a weapon on your waist?”

“Eh? Oh, this? Yes, I also use a close-range weapon. As you already know, it’s because of my Trait. But, well... it’s nothing much compared to a Knight, so it should be better to just think of me as an assistant for today. Back then, I just got lucky, is all. As I have said before, I can’t use Mana. Like a musclehead, all I’ve got is my physical strength.”

Seeing Kim Sae-Jin speak as if it was nothing much, Yu Sae-Jung lightly smiled and nodded her head, telling him not to worry.



There was a lot of danger lurking around in the Monster field. As the instances of sudden Monster encounters were rather common, even the Knights thought better of hunting solo in a ground with the equivalent rank. 'Hunting solo' in this case meant either a Knight moving alone or a Knight and a Hunter forming a pair to hunt together.

"I'll help you pile up good achievements today. For the next two hours, let's catch five Monsters, which should be enough."

Regardless of the dangers, Yu Sae-Jung was, outwardly at least, full of confidence. She was full of energy seemingly because she wanted to make up for the defeat of the other day, or maybe to show off the different and improved side of her.

"Alright, I'll be in your care, then."

Sae-Jin replied with a smile.

And with the end of the conversation, the hunt began in earnest.

20 minutes passed as they searched around the low Mid Tier hunting ground for a Monster, until finally, a faint smell entered Sae-Jin's nostrils.

[Northward, 300 metres, one Schemer.]

A Schemer was a skeleton-type Monster wearing a special robe. This robe featured an amazing protective colouring ability that allowed the sly Monster to blend in with the surroundings and perform sneak attacks that were difficult to avoid.

Since it carried around a "Death Scythe" constructed from Mana, those who had witnessed a Schemer for the very first time mistook it as the so-called Grim Reaper and therefore, a very powerful Monster; but in reality, as long as one was wary of its sneak attacks, it didn't amount to much.

But spotting it was terribly difficult, so a Schemer fell into the category of the troublesome Monsters to deal with in the low Mid Tier hunting ground. Especially so, for a Knight like Yu Sae-Jung here, who enjoyed going out on a solo hunting. She was mindlessly walking straight towards the Monster's direction, never in her wildest dreams imagining that there was a Schemer waiting for her there.

“Hold up for a second.”

Sae-Jin grasped her shoulder.

“...?”

Yu Sae-Jung floated a big question mark above her head. Sae-Jin simply pointed towards the seemingly empty Northerly direction.

“...What is it?”

“It’s a Schemer.”

“...Eh?”

She narrowed her brows. A Schemer was nearly impossible for a human to spot. Only a Knight with a rank of high Mid Tier or High Tier could just barely perceive the feelings of danger...

“I’ve got a knack for stuff like this. I can sense nearby Monsters like a clairvoyant.”

Before Yu Sae-Jung could make a retort, Sae-Jin picked up a stone and threw it at the Schemer’s position. “They” said that action was better than words, and seeing it personally would be the best proof there was.

Ppuck-

The stone drawing a parabolic line flew until colliding with the empty air. The Schemer slowly revealed itself after getting struck unexpectedly on the back of its head by a rock.

“See? It’s your turn now. Charge~!”

Kim Sae-Jin refreshingly smiled.

Yu Sae-Jung was momentarily lost for words at his ability to find a Schemer, but still quickly drew her sword out and rushed forward. Already, the weapon’s blade was gleaming in the layer of blue Mana.

At the sudden attack of its enemies, the Schemer raised the scythe to resist, but her

sword that cut straight down ignored such a pathetic attempt at defense and cleaved the Monster and its weapon in half. Just like her personality, her swordsmanship was straightforward without any unnecessary add-ons.

The fatally wounded Schemer became a heap of dust as it fell, and on top of this mound of dust laid a brightly shining Mana Stone.

“...”

Even though she had oh-so-easily taken care of the Schemer, Yu Sae-Jung still carried a confused expression on her face as she looked at him.

“I’ve got a good perception and an eyesight.”

Sae-Jin made an excuse as she continued to gaze at him, but it was not enough to completely dissolve her curiosity. A Schemer wasn’t a Monster that could be located by some perception and an eyesight... But what could she do? The person himself said so.

“Let’s go somewhere else.”

Kim Sae-Jin pushed the back of still-unconvinced Yu Sae-Jung and urged her towards the next prey.



Their hunting proceeded without a hitch. The commonly occurring sudden encounters never happened once. As soon as Sae-Jin located Monsters, Yu Sae-Jung would rush out and cut them down. If there was a group of Monsters, then Yu Sae-Jung took the front and Sae-Jin brought up the rear. The strength of the *human* Kim Sae-Jin wouldn’t be able to defeat a Monster from the low Mid Tier hunting ground, but it was enough to buy them some time which helped Yu Sae-Jung a lot.

Like this, the number of Monsters they were able to hunt during the two hours together was 15. This was the highest in Yu Sae-Jung’s career, all thanks to Sae-Jin’s ability to locate Monsters like a radar.

“My pockets are full only after two hours. I didn’t expect this... Looks like we’ll make a pretty good pair, don’t you think so?” *(TL: the “pockets” here aren’t literally her trouser pockets, as you’ll see below.)*

Yu Sae-Jung spoke as she hefted the Expanding Pocket full of Monster remains. (TL: “확장주머니” lit. *Expanding Pocket*.)

“I agree. Us two, work better than expected.”

Sae-Jin replied while smiling lightly. At his joking tone, she narrowed her brows and stared at him with serious eyes.

“I’m serious. Normally, a Knight would pair up with other Knights or Hunters of equivalent ranks, you know? But I don’t want to pair up with another Knight as that would divide up the achievements. That’s why I paired up with Hyun-Oh Oppa back then.”

“Hyun-Oh... Oh, you mean that Bullet Man?”

“Yes. You also know his nickname? He’s the butler in my house. No, wait a sec, please don’t change the subject. So, what do you think about me?”

Yu Sae-Jung clearly addressed Sae-Jin in a manner that, if anyone ever heard only this part of the conversation, it would have splendidly raised a misunderstanding.

If any old hot-blooded man heard that, he’d accept the proposition in a heartbeat, full of joy. But seeing Sae-Jin take his time and agonise over the decision, she sighed out in frustration and continued with her words.

“Let’s just do it together, since it’s possible to pair up even if we’re not from the same Knights Order. We’ll divide our earnings 9:1. No, I can do a 10:0, even. Of course, the 10 is for you.”

<<<<

This was, indeed, the *majesty* of the gold spoon. Maybe it was because of the debt of \$4.5 million US, or maybe because his greed over wealth had increased, whatever, the talk of money greatly interested him.

“Let’s aim high and grow together.”

Yu Sae-Jung reached her hand out for a shake, her face solemn.

She didn’t want to let go of someone like him.

Initially, she met him to repay the debt of saving her life but after spending this short amount of time together, she now understood the true value of this man.

Normally speaking, there wasn't a lot of Hunters with abilities out there, and someone with a "detection" ability would be even more difficult to find still.

No, if it was at a level of spotting a Schemer that easily, then the situation was well past being rare now. (Even the 2nd generation Soo-ins that made up the majority of Soo-ins nowadays found it difficult to spot a Schemer, as their animal-like senses were noticeably weaker compared to the pure-blooded 1st generation.) *(TL: this bracketed bit, again, isn't mine, but from the author.)*

On top of this, Sae-Jin's physical prowess was nothing to scoff at, either. She estimated that his ranking would have been in the upper Mid Tier, and the only reason why he remained in the Mid Tier was probably because of the fact that the required quota of hunting experience had to be fulfilled first.

"As you may well know, I'm a rea~lly sturdy, strong and stubborn golden rope."

Yu Sae-Jung was taught to give precedence to what she needed over what she wanted. And now, the person she needed was standing right in front of her eyes...

"What are you waiting for? Take my hand."

Sae-Jung waved the hand offered and urged him for a shake. Sae-Jin agonised for a bit longer, before laying out a single condition first.

"Twice a week. 2 hours a day. And please, give me all the recovered Mana Stones."

He then waited for her reply.

"Alright, that's not so hard."

With those light words, a bright smile filled with sincerity greeted Sae-Jin. He too assumed a smile and smoothly took her hand.

"You promise? Let's do a stamp, too..."

She even tried to do a thumb-and-index finger stamp.

And at the same time, a new alert window floated up to his view.

[Condition complete: Forming a pair.]

▶ Acquired the Passive Skill 'Pleasant Voice.' [Skill Proficiency Level: F]

- The host's voice will have a positive effect during negotiations and persuasions; and can evoke empathy in interpersonal relationships.
- This skill only becomes active when the host is in a human's appearance.

"Ah..."

Sae-Jin looked at that window, stupefied. It seemed like his belief that skills could only be earned in Monster Forms was quite wrong.



"Ha-ah..."

Kim Sae-Jin returned to his cave. A sigh leaked out of his mouth first. It was gloomy and soggy and hard and... his body was itching to leave this stupid place as soon as possible.

'... The proceeds from the sales of potions – should I just ask for a half of it now, and promise to make up for it later?'

He thought about the proceeds from the potions for a bit. Whatever he wanted to do, he needed a home first and foremost... He was getting this close to making his escape from the stupid cave. But since it was already in the middle of the night, he might as well ask later.

He brought out his mobile phone, switched on the internet connection and projected it to the wall of the cave.

"...Why is it all about Yu Sae-Jung again?"

As he was surfing the net – the activity that had become an indispensable part of his daily routine – he saw that the No.1 real time search result was about Yu Sae-Jung. Not

thinking too deeply about it, he clicked her name.

The very first thing that showed up, was articles related to the TV show *The Qualities of a Knight*.

“Ah-ha...”

Kim Sae-Jin nodded his head, realising that the stuff shot a few weeks ago had now become another trending topic. It seemed like this type of reality TV featuring a Knight going out on a hunt was a first of its kind, and as a character, Yu Sae-Jung had gone down quite well with the audience. It might have been an average sort of an idea at the least, but if the producer did his job smartly, there was certainly a possibility to do something big with the show.

The top trending stories related to her on the website were of fairly simple topics. Like, how did her hunt progress, how much hardship did she face during her hunt, and finally, what Yu Sae-Jung was like. The last one was a bit out of kilter with the others, but the rest had taken up more than half of the coverage and was incredibly popular as well.

He found all of them very interesting to read... until he got to see what the 7th real time trending search topic happened to be.

“...What the hell is this...”

At 7th, three words “Kim”, “Sae” and “Jin” was written there.

He thought it was someone with the same name and as he was thinking that, the list of the real time search topics began to change. And just like that, new words showed up on the 10th.

The Hunter Kim Sae-Jin.

“...?!”

CHAPTER 29

CHANGES IN THE DAILY LIFE (2)

At first, he panicked. As easily demonstrated here, Sae-Jin's identity wasn't worth much to dig up. What troubled him more, though, was Hazeline. Under the context of having a friendly relationship, he had shown her his real face, after all.

Of course, he was not worried about his secrets being exposed as Dark Elves hated meeting people in the first place as well as placing a huge importance on being trustworthy, but still, he did feel somewhat uncertain as there had never been a precedence of an alchemist moonlighting as a Hunter on the side.

"...But man, this is so weird."

Whatever the case may have been, his name, face and the job description was exposed here for all to see in the top portal site of South Korea, Neighbour, and he found all these oh-so-strange. And the photo of his face taken from the side was showing his ungainly chin line as well.....

'After becoming a Mid Tier ranked Hunter at the young age of 22, Kim Sae-Jin is acknowledged by other Hunters as one of the top prospects of the future, having already received the title of the Heavenly Gifted.'

The journalists seemed to love fabricating stories. He had no clue just who had acknowledged him as a top future prospect. But he had to concede that reading such rumours about himself was a fun thing to do. Likewise, he found the words written in the article itself, as well as the comments in the comment section, rather interesting too.

– He's got a nice enough face, got a good build, his height is just about right, so he matches up well with Yu Sae-Jung, me thinks. [Upvoted 983] [Downvoted 482]

*↳ Matching up well, my a*s. You really think a romance between a regular Hunter and an unobtainium spoon is possible?*

↳ *Me agree. The Dawn ain't the name of your pet dog. They are duking it out for the top position in the country. Plus, Yu Sae-Jung is still a sophomore in a high school.*

↳ *Oh and BTW, what's Yu Sae-Jung's real height?*

↳ *Saw it personally, it's between 159~160. But me thinks she's got a complex about her height, always insisting that it's 164.*

↳ *⇒ ⇒ That was really cute. "I told you, it's 164!! Not 159!!!"*

Obviously, not every comment posted would be of nicer opinions but still, he found it fun just reading all the replies.

That night, Kim Sae-Jin stayed awake while reading all the articles related to himself and the accompanying comments sections.



In the following afternoon, Sae-Jin headed to the Yoseon Alchemy House to meet up with Hazeline. Since he was going to ask her for another big favour, he took along 9 bottles of potions as well.

He handed the potions over as soon as they met, and he waited until her face was glowing with ecstasy and happiness before bringing up the real reason for his visit today.

“The rest of the money... can I repay you slowly over time? Right now I'm running short on funds...”

Hazeline showed a brief panic, but soon, nodded her head with a magnanimous smile on her face. Her reason was simple enough – the alchemist she was going to work together for a really, really long time shouldn't be left destitute, after all.

She immediately transferred \$1.7 million US out of \$4.2 million accrued from the sales of the potions so far. She even added that he could take his time to repay her.

Sae-Jin thought that she was really one cool woman.

[The persuasion has been successful. The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill “Pleasant Voice” rises.]

And there was an unexpected bonus to boot as well. As Sae-Jin was glowing in the satisfaction, Hazeline remembered something and asked him about it.

“By the way, what was that reality TV show all about? I was really surprised to find that you are a Hunter. And also, friendly with the granddaughter of the Dawn Corporation Chairman, too.”

“Oh... that? That’s my side job. I was getting a cabin fever stuck in a workshop churning out potions, so was trying to de-stress when I accidentally ran into Miss Sae-Jung... that’s about it.”

“Is that true? How mysterious. But well, it really doesn’t matter what you do on the side anyways. And with Yu Sae-Jung... Keheum.”

Fortunately, Hazeline didn’t try to dig in deeper.

To her, who knew about Sae-Jin, it was understandable to a degree – since the near-crippled Yu Sae-Jung was able to quickly recover soon after taking the potion brewed by none other than the alchemist Kim Sae-Jin right here.

‘Have the Dawn made contact with him already?’

While making such wild guesses, she inwardly accepted why Yu Sae-Jung and Kim Sae-Jin were so friendly with each other. It was a totally plausible scenario. No matter what other people said, the Dawn Corporation was the biggest company in the country. And if they wanted to find someone, it wouldn’t be hard for them at all.

“Ah, right. Sir Alchemist, you do know that, by law, direct dealings between people are prohibited, and you must go through an Alchemy House, yes? If you receive a sales request, please, you must inform us first.”

Hazeline was sincerely asking for something that made no sense from Sae-Jin’s point of view.

“Huh? Oh. Of course. I’ll do just that.”



Kim Sae-Jin bought a detached single-unit house near the Monster field of Gangwon with the money received from Hazeline. But the house cost him a whopping \$1.6 million, instantly depleting his bank account and making him feel bitter inside.

The house had two floors above ground and one basement floor. He decided to use the above ground floors as the living space, and to convert the basement into a workshop where he could do his blacksmithing and alchemy work.

With the remaining funds, he went around and bought various furniture. Besides the obvious things like a bed and a set of couches, he also got himself proper potion crafting tools and storage cabinets to store both the ingredients for potions as well as the metal ingots for blacksmithing.

Although he purchased so many things while feeling excited for the future, there was still a week left before he could move into his new home. He had to learn the hard way that the dates of buying a house and then moving in, could be quite different from one another.

After all that, the remaining money was around \$2600 US.

Currently, Sae-Jin was inside his cave.

Inside this dark, gloomy cave, he was concentrating on making the next weapon for the 2nd Round of the Blacksmiths Tournament, which would take place in a week's time as well. He initially thought that once some leeway was found, he'd not want to do this thing again, but no, he was getting really fired up for this. The reactions of the media and the general populace were like a drug to him. He wanted to be praised by them some more. He wanted these people to see his hard work and go bonkers mad with admiration.

And his desire helped him to find the true value of the Orc's Smithing Technique – the potential of this incredible skill.

And that is the “bestowal of special characteristics.”

It meant, as the words implied, to enhance an armament with special powers. At first, just like those simple minded Orcs, he only thought about one dimensional special traits like “sharper”, “sturdier”, but things were different now.

The flexibility, fluidity, flammability, density, melting point, boiling point, electrical and heat conductivity, viscosity, spectrum of colour for the material's absorption of light, magnetism, and etc, etc... there were numerous chemical properties to consider. Depending on the Proficiency Level, the Orc's Smithing Technique could combine these properties and bestow them.

The blade that could bend like a snake to attack the enemy at the will of its user, the whip sword; an invisibility cloak that manipulates the refraction of light to fool the eyes, etc, etc – the possible types of armament he could create through the Smithing Technique were truly limitless.

Of course, the weapons with such added attributes that were made by human smiths could be found every now and then out in the market. But they were simply the results from nothing more than lucky accidents. As an Orc, though, Sae-Jin could bestow all these special attributes at will.

But for now, his Skill Proficiency Level was too low, so he still had a long way to go. There wasn't a single sign of the Orc Warrior evolving to the next level, and no matter how many Mana Stones he absorbed, the amount of Mana he possessed remained the same as before.

[The Smithing Technique has been completed.]

<<<<

[Hardness Level: D]

[A new attribute has been added: Flame Damage Level D]

[Although the degree of completion is exemplary, the current Skill Proficiency Level limit for the Orc Warrior is D, and thus the Level can not be raised any more.]

'... So this is the best I can do.'

The weapon Sae-Jin crafted just now was a sabre. Beautiful patterns on the surface of the sleek, smooth and ashen-coloured blade imparted the feelings of noble elegance.

The attribute bestowed to the sabre, the Flame Damage Level D, did not mean that flames were literally lit on the blade itself. When a Knight breathed Mana into the

weapon, only then the effects of ultra high temperature would show itself. In other words, the melting power comparable to a furnace would be added on top of the Mana-enhanced cutting power.

“Hee-yah...”

He was really chuffed at this weapon, completed after dozens of attempts over the last several mornings.

But his head was getting dizzy now. So, he promptly lied down on the cold, hard floor and fell into a restful slumber.

That night, he dreamt of a dream where he was receiving a lot of praise from the mass media.



It was a clear afternoon. And it was finally the day for him to move into the house of his dreams. Sae-Jin was busy placing the furniture with the aid of the workers from the moving company, when...

Vvroong...

The phone he placed in his back pocket silently vibrated.

[Let's go hunting today at 2 PM.]

It was a text message from Yu Sae-Jung.

In the three weeks following the broadcasting of that TV show, he went out on a total of five hunts as a pair with her. And everytime that happened, the attentions of the world focused on him. Hell, there was even an incident where another Hunter took a paparazzo shot of him and uploaded it to a SNS.

But Yu Sae-Jung didn't seem to mind that at all. She concentrated only on hunting and treated Sae-Jin no differently from before, regardless of whether they filmed her or not.

[No can do. In the middle of moving house today.]

And somehow, Sae-Jin could speak to her without using honorifics now.

From their second hunting onwards, he felt that they have become friendly enough so he started omitting the honorifics every now and then, but at that time, Yu Sae-Jung didn't like it and became rather curt with her response. So, he replied in kind.

Initially, he just wanted to test the waters, but then, even Sae-Jin became stubborn about this matter and ended up not using the honorifics at all for the rest of the hunt's duration. He thought it was par for the course. After all, he was older than her by 4 years.

The hunt that was supposed to last for two hours was cut in half as a result. Actually, she became pretty peeved and returned home early without saying anything. However... she called him back precisely after a week had passed by.

Well, that's how the human relationship generally worked – the one in need would make the approach first.

From then on, Yu Sae-Jung resolutely endured Sae-Jin speaking without honorifics. Nowadays, her face colour remained the same even if he spoke to her without one.

When he asked her how she felt about it, she said that initially at least, she didn't want to see him ever again but it became unbearably frustrating when teaming up with other Hunters – so she gave up and called him in the end. Sae-Jin naturally felt quite proud of his own skills after hearing her confession.

[How come?]

[Will take too long to finish up here.]

[But that's no good. I don't have any other free time beside today this week.]

[Let's hunt next week, then. I can't today.]

During this exchange of texts, it was plain to see who was in the advantageous position.

Yu Sae-Jung didn't send any more texts as if she got peeved again. Not really caring about that, Sae-Jin pocketed the phone and went back to work. After all, she'd call him again in her own time. Indeed, this was only possible because this lady Knight had

become too dependent on the abnormally talented Hunter's abilities.

“Thank you for all your hard work~!!”

And finally – 4 PM. The placement of furniture was completed with only one hour of human-time remaining.

This was his home. Even though he had to take on a debt to purchase it, Sae-Jin was still overcome with emotions and he took his time surveying the spacious house.

Each of the rooms here was as big as his one room apartment. The longer he gazed at his house, the closer he got to shedding tears of happiness.

CHAPTER 30

CHANGES IN THE DAILY LIFE (3)

“Ah... So the Dawn managed to take that potion, too? They aren't messing around, are they?”

The headquarters of the Raven Knights Order, inside the rest area for the waiting Knights. The words of a disappointed Knight spread around like an infectious sigh. Inadvertently eavesdropping on the side, Kim Yu-Rin's body trembled ever so slightly.

“Right. They are very aggressive nowadays. Don't forget, they also hit jackpot with this year's Blacksmiths Tournament, too. They say a lucky son of gun would fall into a lap of a beautiful woman even when tripping over backwards. Not only two unexpectedly great weapons showed up, there's the hidden master, too – that gathering of small fries all of a sudden became a meeting of the masters.”

“Oh, that's right. There was the tournament, too. What was it again? The Orc's Forge? What was it like in the 2nd Round? Did you see the item?”

“I didn't see it but the Seniors did, though. And I hear it's pretty incredible. It's supposedly the same rank as the last year's winner, at around Mid Quality, even though it has been the 2nd Round only. Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do but to sit on the sidelines sucking on our thumbs. Since the Dawn has the first refusal and what not.”

The male Knight massaged his temples, as if the mere thoughts of this event irritated him to no end.

“Haa... That's why the boys from the Dawn Knights Order are strutting around like that... After seeing their irritating mugs, how the hell am I supposed to carry on like this?”

Their conversation was full of complaints about the Dawn Knights Order's aggressive rise to the top spot. On the side, Kim Yu-Rin let out a long sigh and roughly tousled up her hair into a mess.

“Oww, sh*t...”

If taking into account the end results only, what was happening now seemed like entirely her fault.

Firstly, the Goblin Alchemist. This alchemist, who had caused an uproar in the worlds of alchemy and with the Knights as well, was in a tight relationship with the Yoseon Alchemy House. It was suspected that they had secured the exclusive rights to distribute the Goblin series of potions.

And the reason why the Raven Knights Order didn't receive the necessary info regarding the "Goblin Alchemist" was... because of the blood feud-like animosity existing between her and Hazeline.

Next, the Blacksmiths Open Invitational Tournament. The reason why the Dawn poured so much money to sponsor the competition was to secure the rights to acquire the outstanding weapons from each of the judging rounds.

If it was in the past, the Raven would have rallied other Knights Orders and opposed this, saying granting such rights was utterly nonsensical rubbish but the quality of the tournament's participants were in a clear decline from before, so the Dawn was left to do whatever they pleased.

Heck, Kim Yu-Rin herself argued that investing in other projects with that budget would be a wiser move.

However, such an estimation ended up dramatically missing the mark. It was fine even when the apprentice of Master Tae-Baek entering the competition. But then, the Orc's Forge happened. Nothing was known of this unknown person – the gender, age, even the race; but for sure, his sudden appearance was completely out of everyone's expectations.

Only yesterday, Kim Yu-Rin was there at the 2nd Round of judging and personally saw the weapon submitted by this smith – 'the Hotly Burning Flame Steel Sabre.'

She was utterly stunned by the gorgeous elegance of the sabre, and was left even more speechless at the name modifier she had never seen before in her life.

At first, she was puzzled by what this Hotly Burning Flame thing might be. But after testing it for less than five minutes, she was able to definitely understand what it meant.

And then, she was entranced by it.

As she infused Mana with the sword, the Mana Blade took on a crimson hue and that reddish blade aura boiled at high temperatures. As the Quality was only rated around the Mid rank, she couldn't infuse a lot of Mana into it but still, it was an incredible feat that the sword could add the effect of heat to the Mana Blade.

It was a very good weapon. It was so good, the Raven Knights Order just had to take it with them. It was that excellent.

Unfortunately, that was just a pie in the sky for her.

The issue was the 'rights to the first refusal'. As long as the Dawn Knights Order wasn't made up of dummies, they would definitely choose this sabre. At the thought of giving up on this wonderful weapon without a fight, only to obediently hand it over to the people of Dawn, made her lose last night's sleep.

"You idiot idiot idiot..."

"S, stop that, please!!"

Unable to hold back anymore, Kim Yu-Rin began hitting her head in regret when, Kim Soo-Gyeom suddenly popped out of nowhere and tried to stop her.

"...Mmm. How long have you been watching me?"

Now thoroughly embarrassed, Yu-Rin scratched the back of her neck and stared at him. He had a shortish stature and a cute face, but contrary to that young appearance, he possessed a genuine talent that promoted him to a Mid Tier Knight at a tender age of 23 – one of the brighter future prospects of the Raven Knights Order.

"Just now. I was training with Senior Jong-Suk and wanted to take a short break."

"...Is that so?"

Yu-Rin let out another long sigh. Kim Soo-Gyeom gazed at her with worry before handing over a cup of warm coffee.

"Mm?"

“Please, don’t mind too much about those things. It’s not like as if Miss Yu-Rin knew what was going to happen, anyway...”

“...You’re right. Thanks.”

She lightly brushed the head of the young Knight she found adorable for worrying about her. His cheeks blushed softly at her actions.

“By the way, you think the Goblin Alchemist definitely made a deal with the Dawn?”

Yu-Rin asked while sipping the coffee. Kim Soo-Gyeom came from a prestigious family background. Currently, his father was serving as a judge. And his uncle was the vice chief of the Wizards’ Association. So, when it came to intel, he should be better informed than her.

“I also don’t know the details, but... it’s almost a sure thing? Judging by the potions all entering the Dawn’s pockets. They are openly being favoured, aren’t they?”

“...Do you know what kind of terms they offered him?”

“Eh? Ah, from what I hear, the rumours say the Dawn has offered the alchemist his own private workshop and an unlimited supply of ingredients, to boot. That’s how we get the nonstop flow of the potions.”

The Goblin Alchemist, a genius alchemist who appeared like a meteor. His name might be a little irksome, but the capability and talent displayed were good enough to be referred to as the second coming of Rodes. On top of that, he was also quite diligent with his work – earning the title of ‘the Chief of a Workshop’ by producing over 50 bottles of potions in just under 5 months since his debut.

“Oh, and a private jet, too. There was a rumour of them buying him a private jet as well.”

“What, a jet? Haaa... I’ve got no answer for that. Not even one. I mean, do they have a surplus of money like air or something...”

She found herself sighing a lot more nowadays. The fact that the country’s leading Knights Order, the Raven, couldn’t have an amiable relationship with the rising star of alchemy, was a fatal chink in its armour. And to think, the blame laid solely with her...

'... Hazeline.'

However, when a certain person's mug floated up in her mind, Kim Yu-Rin ended up gritting her teeth. Until the end, like a stubborn mule, she was getting in Yu-Rin's way. What an evil bi*ch.

"...Hey, Soo-Gyeom. Can you find out something for me?"

Kim Yu-Rin asked him in a powerless voice. He quickly nodded his head.

"Of course. Just give me the word."

"That Goblin Alchemist. Dig out his identity for me, will you."

"...Excuse me?"

Soo-Gyeom was taken aback and had to ask her again. Keeping the identities of alchemists were an unspoken rule that had been in practice for a very long time. Especially more so for a Knights Order, as they had a indelible symbiotic relationship with the potion making alchemists.

"Well, it really can't be helped, right?"

Kim Yu-Rin just couldn't accept this lying down without doing something. The number of times the Raven Knights Order failed to attend the auction venues for the potions was already way too high, because the Alchemy House informed them of wrong dates by a mistake. Allegedly. So, she decided that she needed to act, even if it meant clashing against Hazeline once more.

"Even then, even if you meet the alchemist, what will you do? I don't think we can offer better terms than what the Dawn has offered him."

"Well, that..."

Kim Yu-Rin massaged her temples and agonised deeply, before spitting out the only idea that managed to pop up in her mind.

"Well, let's just hope that Mister Goblin is a dude."

"Eh, eh?! Wha, what are you talking about, Miss Yu-Rin?!"

It was just a joke. But the reactions of Kim Soo-Gyeom was something else. He stood right up, his face crumpling in an unsightly manner. Both of his tightly clenched fists were quaking visibly.

“That, that, that...”

Yu-Rin snorted after finding his current actions where he couldn't even string proper words together rather ridiculous.

“...I was just cracking a joke. You think I'd do something like that? As a Highest Tier ranked Knight of the Raven Order, I feel that I should have a chat with this alchemist at least once. Sitting on our a*s'es doing nothing won't solve anything, after all. Besides the matter of the potions, there are more important things to consider, such as our fame and the pride of being the best in this country.”

<<<<

“R, right, of course.”

Only then, Kim Soo-Gyeom was able to calm down and sit back on his chair.

“Check it out for me. We can't let the people over at Dawn take everything away. Especially now, when we are conflicting more and more over the issues of the 'Fissures'”

“...Will do. But seriously... you wouldn't do *that*, would you?”

Kim Soo-Gyeom asked her timidly, like a rabbit. Yu-Rin chuckled lightly and replied.

“Obviously. What do you see me as?”

“...Yes. Well then, I'll do my best and see what I can find out.”



On a certain afternoon, drowsiness brought on by a full belly slowly consumed an ebony-coloured wolf lying sprawled on a sofa, making it slowly drift in and out of sleep. But then, a mobile phone went *vrrroong* and woke up the creature.

Opening its eyes, the wolf extended one of its legs. The paw that looked no different

than that of an animal suddenly became a person's hand as it grasped the phone.

[An incredible weapon came in during this round of the tournament. Would you like to see it?]

It was a text message from Yu Sae-Jung.

It had been a month and a week after their first hunt together. The number of times they hunted as a pair was 8. Nowadays, she sent him text messages like this quite often. Even if there was no scheduled hunting, she'd message him at least once every two days. It was the proof that she and Sae-Jin had grown quite familiar with one another.

He stared at the message for a moment, before slowly moving his fingers.

[What? Is it a weapon from that blacksmith called The ORK or something?]

Even before he had the chance to put the phone down, the reply rushed in.

[Yeah. This time, it's a sabre but it's just an amazing thing. There's a special attribute added to the weapon and when you pour the Mana in, it becomes dyed in red and starts boiling. Add that together with the improved cutting power, I think it's going to show off some shocking potential. Regrettably, I couldn't swing it, though.]

[Is it okay to tell me that? Isn't that a spoiler territory?]

[Ahh, it's fine.]

A short reply, and then the images of the sabre in question flooded his inbox. As if she was taking pics of a delicious food, there were several shots taken from differing angles, and some of them even had filters applied as well.

[Looks good. Are you going to use this one too?]

[I'd like to, but can't. Others might see it in a bad light. If I wish to take the final winner of the tournament, I have to let this one go. I'm really excited to see what will come out in the finals. (smiles)]

He felt quite proud when she started praising the weapon.

If someone like Yu Sae-Jung who was famous for being blunt without caring for other people's feelings was this enthusiastic, he could expect to see some favourable reactions this time as well.

[By the way, do you have time this week Friday?]

[I might. What, another hunt?]

[Yes.]

Sae-Jin grinned slightly. It seemed that all the messaging to and fro was to butter him for this moment, to ask him out for a hunt.

[Okay, cool. How about 2 PM?]

[Yes. It's cool. (thank you)]

[By the way, you don't have to do those emoticon thingy towards the end, you know.]

[I know. Oh, and it's not "towards" but "at". You are fine with the regular grammar, but why do you always get this one wrong?] (TL: weell, this line had our MC speak in a local dialect and Yu Sae-Jung is admonishing him for the grammatical faux pas. It's literally untranslatable to English. So I ended up making stuff up. Please bear with me on this one...)

"...Keheum."

[My bad. I didn't receive proper education. I'll engrave it to my heart.]

[(LOL) (it's okay)]

"...Fuuhu."

Sae-Jin scratched his head while sighing, unable to figure out whether she was making fun of him or not.



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