

Chapter 1 : Birth of a Dark Gamer

Just imagine a noble, elegant and picturesque life in poverty that you might find nowhere else but in a soap opera. No matter how poor you are, it does not discourage you from showing unconditional love for strangers, and even a piece of bread is there to be shared with a warm smile.

If anyone claimed that such an illusion existed in reality, Lee Hyun would beat him to a pulp, and strike once more to finish him off.

Life was too cruel for the poor. The Labor Welfare Law revised by Parliament made all jobs unavailable to minors. Illegal though it was, Lee Hyun had worked in every kind of trade imaginable.

From the age of 14 he took to sewing stitches in a factory. The salary could only be called meager, but he was able to eat for free.

However, underground with only 2 ventilation fans running, his health extremely deteriorated. Thanks to his damaged lungs, he gained heavy medical bills.

Then it was a job at a gas station and occasionally he even went around pulling a handcart collecting and selling recyclables.

But no matter how hard he had worked, the money left in his pocket was chump change.

As a minor, he was forced to get a job illegally. This fact was used by his employers to mercilessly work him to the bone.

He lived this life of exploitation until 20 years of age. Thanks to it, Lee Hyun knew very well the value of money. However, things would be different now. Finally an adult, and with it came an ID card that would allow him to legally work.

Inserting the ID card in his wallet Lee Hyun mumbled.

"I have to work until my body practically breaks down. I should be able to deal with 3 jobs a day."

When he was a kid, his parents died, his family now consisted of only his grandma and sister.

"Alright. From now on we'll be rich."

Lee Hyun pledged to do so and returned home.

"Did you come just now?"

His grandma was lying down snuggling in a blanket. After falling down the stairs a few days ago, she got a dislocated hip rendering her unable to go to work.

Although taking medicine, with the household struggling she could not go to the hospital to receive proper treatment and thus could only rest at home.

Not receiving treatment, every night she could only groaned painfully.

Whenever Lee Hyun entered the house, he felt his chest suffocating. It was a lifeless home with an aloof little sister and an old grandma. Even if he didn't know it, it was probably why he disliked coming home even more.

"Hayan?"

"I have no idea. She went out and didn't return. She might be hanging around with the bad crowd again, not sure."

Lee Hayan was his little sister. He had not seen her face very often recently.

"It's going to be okay. What could happen?"

"You are her one and only brother. A brother should protect his little sister."

"Yes."

Lee Hyun smiled wryly and went to his room. Even if he was forced into physical labor or driving a taxi, he wanted to send his little sister to college.

For a while now she had been drifting off the rails, but she was bright and intelligent, unlike Lee Hyun. He believed that in college she would meet a good husband and be able to live well. He also wanted to repay his old and ailing grandma for all she sacrificed to raise Lee Hyun and Lee Hayan.

"Right, look for work tomorrow. There will probably be an employment test as well....."

Muttering, Lee Hyun turned on the computer. The old computer buzzed to life. As soon as it connected to the internet, as routine, he accessed a game. That game was Continent of Magic. A classic game released 20 years ago. An online game that once created a frenzy of gamers in the Republic of Korea.

That game remained at the pinnacle until just 3 years ago. Lee Hyun's antiquated computer assembled by combining parts from here and there was not capable of handling most games. Nothing but Continent of Magic ran smoothly.

It was the first game he'd ever played, but only during the game could he have a feeling of enjoyment.

Lee Hyun's playing style was very peculiar. He did not associate with the people around him and instead hunted all day long. After killing monsters and raising his level, he headed to harder hunting grounds. He did not participate in sieges or guild wars at all.

He found pleasure in the game by gradually improving his character's abilities and upgrading equipment. He once hunted for 200 hours straight without catching a wink of sleep. It wasn't unusual for him to struggle for a month to raise one level or catch a single monster.

Some might question what kind of fun he was looking for, but for him it was fun watching his character grow stronger and when he was able to defeat monsters he was previously unable to, he was thoroughly delighted.

In a short period of time, Lee Hyun had reached the highest level. He had attained the ultimate state where levels no longer rose.

In the decades of Continent of Magic, it was the first and last record in history. When Lee Hyun looked around back, he found none who could rival his character in supremacy. In hunting grounds where others struggled as a party, he singlehandedly wiped out all the monsters.

After climbing to the highest level, he alone hunted all the ultimate monsters, including Dragons.

Though, for Lee Hyun, he had lost all interest. Nowadays with the technological advances, the ultimate goal of every game was to equip itself with the virtual reality system.

A truly splendid game named Royal Road, referred to as the standard for virtual reality. Beginning with a fully implemented world, the game contained tens of thousands of races and users. Over tens of thousands of jobs and hundreds of thousands of skills.

You could enjoy adventure as you desire or even go sea fishing with friends for days, as long you don't encounter whimsical typhoons of course.

The massive scale of freedom was amazing, but best above all was the wondrous game's system. Royal Road had the reputation of inducing the ultimate fun a human could enjoy in a game.

"Well for me, that's all just a pie in the sky."

What could Lee Hyun expect from a computer slowed down by a slightly more complex web page?

Popular as it was, to install the equipment that realized virtual reality would cost over 10,000,000 won. If he had that kind of money, under any circumstances, his grandma's medical bills, otherwise it would go to his little sister's college tuition. And now to diligently earn money, the game had to end.

Are you sure you want to delete your account?

Yes / No

Lee Hyun brought the mouse cursor over 'Yes'. Now, with a single click of the mouse, the treasured character he raised would disappear forever. The moment he flexed his finger, a thought raced through his mind.

'Can I sell my character for money? Account sale I think.'

Somewhere it seems. A newspaper or something said buying and selling characters was common. And that story meant money. It dawned on Lee Hyun that if he was going to delete his character anyway, it wasn't a bad idea to sell to others.

Lee Hyun began searching through the internet looking for a character trading site. One search resulted in dozens of sites, and among them he located and entered the one with the largest trading volume.

"So I just post my character here for a price and it's done?"

Lee Hyun uploaded pictures along with his own character.

Highest level in Continent of Magic with the best equipment coming from Dragons that was worth 30 trillion marks.

He decided to begin the auction with the initial price of 50,000 won. He was afraid no one would bid if he asked for too high a price.

The auction deadline was one day.

Waiting for a long time for big money to come was unlikely. To get a job though he needed a decent suit of clothes so he was in a hurry to get money right away.

Typically there was a range of characters and items to determine the price, but the auction content of other people could only be seen by paying members so Lee Hyun was denied access.

Lee Hyun finished posting and went to sleep. Waking up early the next day, he planned to stop by a nearby employment office.

Not even an hour after Lee Hyun posted, the netizens that occupied the virtual space began heating up the internet.

Initially, no one believed the auction post. With the last patch of Continent of Magic, they were well aware the levels increased significantly higher.

The maximum level limit was 200.

In the entire server, no one who achieved such a state could be found, possibly because the figure itself was practically impossible for any man alive.

And now, there was an auction post with the character that rose to the highest level for sale.

"Some guy's playing a prank on us."

"What sort of moron posted this boring stuff?"

"This has happened so frequently it's no longer fun."

Several people commented in this fashion. Passing by some advised no one be fooled while others gave thanks for making them laugh.

From the early 21st century, phishing entries became a trend and because they were duped so often, they thought it was one of such cases again.

"No, never....."

"Can't be."

Netizens tried to ignore the auction post. But their curiosity could not resist and they entered to see the post once again.

Auction posts unconditionally required screenshots of the character to be shown.

Each of the files attached to the posting were opened. The character info was truly outstanding. Various stats hit maximum and equipment items were indeed fantastic.

"Where the hell did he get those weapons?"

"Full set of Red Dragon Armor along with Red Dragon's Backbone Shield? Wow....."

"He says they were conferred by the Black God of Valor."

People admired it quite a bit. Somehow it did not seem like a normal phishing post. To forge such detailed images, a great deal of effort would be needed.

"This guy definitely spent a lot of time on it."

"The interface is Continent of Magic, but what game did he import the equipment from?"

Among those present at the auction post were current graphics designers. Looking at the base photo, they tried to find a blind spot.

"No matter how well-crafted the picture is, microscopic traces remain. Even if it looks perfect in the eyes of the public, when you apply the latest technology, the fake parts will be revealed."

The designers magnified the images by a factor 10,000, tracked down the pixels, studied every shade, and even scanned the photo files in 3D trying to prove it was a forgery. But their attempts proved futile. Finally they were forced to acknowledge.

"All these images are real."

"I'm the chief designer of LK Co. I guarantee this picture hasn't been altered in anyway."

Contrary to their expectations, the graphic designers began to confirm the authenticity of the images.

Then real users of Continent of Magic appeared. The moment they saw the images, they shouted in surprise. From the beginning they suspected nothing.

"It's real. Character named Weed. This user's damn famous."

"The equipment is his, but I didn't know he reached the top level, really impressive."

Lee Hyun always played alone, intentionally avoiding hunting grounds with lots of people. He never participated in sieges, and minor disputes were usually ignored and passed by. But rumors about him never ceased to stop.

Slaying Dragons and Krakens deemed simply invincible and sweeping through the highest level hunting grounds all single handedly.

Not associating with other people didn't mean they couldn't recognize him. Among the remaining users, he was already a legend. Only Lee Hyun was oblivious to the fact that he was a celebrity.

"So the equipment is real?"

"Then, this can only be called jackpot....."

The initial price for the auction was 50,000 won. Excluding the character value or equipment, just owning it alone according to current prices made the amount was far too low.

People hurriedly began to write down their bids. It went up in a flash from 50,000 to 300,000 won, all the way until 700,000 won. An hour had not passed before it exceeded 1,000,000 won.

The value of selling just one piece of equipment, there was no need to be hesitant about the loss. The bid began to skyrocket.

By this time, many people stopped participating out of desperation because they imagined to some extent the auction's closing price.

Although the number of players in Continent of Magic decreased over time, after the servers integrated into one and became free of charge, there were still quite a lot of users.

Initially, it was the players of Continent of Magic who drove up the price, and following them were the wealthy office workers who increased the price further.

At one time, when the game was created, Continent of Magic kept the Republic of Korea up all night. The highest level character in that game, owning that antique had such value that you wanted to show it off to others.

The shrewder among the office workers quickly phoned their similarly aged bosses.

"Director-nim, is that you?"

-Why are you calling me at midnight? Do you want to get fired?

"Eh? That, well..... Director-nim, did you play Continent of Magic in the past?"

-Yes, what of it?

"The highest level character in Continent of Magic is up for auction. I thought Director-nim would surely be interested in it....."

-What! Wi, Weed you mean?

"Yes. So Director-nim knows. Character is level 200. Stats and equipment are filled to the max.

Then followed the explanation.

-Right now. With your own money call for 30,000,000 won right now. I'm going back home right now to check it out, try to get the first place bid.

In the current age, people who hold key positions in companies belonged to a generation that played online games in the middle of their youth. They boosted the price range.

In large portal sites and every game related website, the hot topic talked about was the auction of the highest level in Continent of Magic. Many people started searching and instantly the keyword ranking shot skyward. From this point, the real auction began.

In the meantime though, Lee Hyun was sound asleep, completely unaware of this.

"Nogada... 50,000 won per day. Washing dishes in restaurants, 30,000 won. Supper, ham hocks....."

He was busy summing up what to do the next day in his dreams.

With the people's attention all focused on certain person, the auction price was soaring.

So far, nobody knew who Continent of Magic's highest level was, but it invoked a desire to possess and show off the eternal character of the once greatest game.

The auction price finally exceeded 100,000,000 won.

At this point, ownership exceeded the market price for the individual holdings and equipment. Some people lamented over their lack of money and dropped out of the auction.

"I think the guy selling this character is a big-time weirdo."

"How could he set the auction period for such a priceless avatar to only a single day?"

"Was he damn sure he would receive the maximum possible price for it?"

In this manner people commented the auction post to soothe their sorrows. Before long, the number of comments went beyond 900.

The auction was automatically extended a few times, and when it exceeded 300,000,000 won, several companies became actively involved.

The simple matter of the auction, the only thing people knew was that there was no end in sight. If the deal was settled for a colossal sum, numerous people would hear about it through news or word-of-mouth, the publicity effects were formidable.

To place just one ad required a pile of money, also, after painfully spending money to make an ad, people still did not bother looking closely at it. However, what about news of the highest level character being sold for a small fortune? People's interest and attention would be concentrated.

Each company's public relations department approached with such a perspective. Digital media intensified the competition, game broadcasters wanted to acquire the highest level character. The value or market price of the character was not a problem. Organizing a series of specials about the famous game in the past and then casting the character in question would increase the reliability and public image of the broadcasters.

Fierce competition led to the price skyrocketing, and the surge in the number of visitors made the item trading site smile with satisfaction.

The auction finally came to an end.

Five game broadcasters battled one another, but piercing through all the competition, the one that made the successful bid and received the character was CTS Media. The latest situation was its rapid expansion and increase in broadcast share that made it a promising company to go to. By intervention from the president's secretary, the winning bid was written and submitted as the auction ended.

"Hello."

Lee Hyun received a phone call waking him up from his sleep in the morning.

The construction job from the day before exhausted him and he had fallen asleep. He earned only 30,000 won. It was less than average because he was told off for being incompetent.

-Hello.

Unexpectedly, coming from beyond the receiver was the voice of a beautiful woman.

"Um... looks like you called the wrong number."

Lee Hyun, certain that nobody in her right mind would ever call his house tried to put down the receiver.

However.....

-You tried selling your account over the internet, is that not so?

"Correct."

-This is CTS Media Incorporated. I am the president's secretary Yoon Nahee. We have deposited the amount of the current successful bid to the auction into your account, you can confirm on the item trading site, and please do not hesitate to contact us.

"Wa, wait a minute. There was a successful bid?"

-Hmm. Yes, there was. May I ask if you have not checked it yet?

"No, I was a little busy....."

Yoon Nahee of CTS Media.

President's secretary, even going so far as to work in financial resources, she was no ordinary woman. Also knowing 8 languages, all those around her were busy flattering her. But the fact that he did not check the auction of such a fortune was enough to overwhelm Yoon Nahee.

"How much was the successful bid?"

Lee Hyun was filled with unease. Hoping for at least over 200,000 won to pay the medical bills, he figured he should ask, but the voice Lee Hyun heard over the phone stunned him into shock.

-3,090,000,000 won.

Originally, Lee Hyun's character, Weed, according to the market price was 150,000,000 won.

Nowadays, games at the height of popularity, the equipment alone could pass for 100,000,000 won, but if it's an old game, the market price is on the extremely low side.

However, several factors including the limited auction deadline, the one-of-a-kind rarity and his fame led to it ultimately being over 3,000,000,000 won. The auction itself was newsworthy, which was exactly what CTS Media aimed for.

However, Lee Hyun replied bluntly.

"Are you kidding me?"

-What?

"I can't believe you called me just to talk about something as stupid as that. I'm hanging up now."

After putting down the receiver, Lee Hyun bitterly laughed.

"How did she know about the auction post? And how did she get my number to play a prank?"

Lee Hyun believed none of it. It sounded far too absurd.

However, the moment he accessed the site, his auction post floated on the main screen of the item trading site. Countless people posted comments in real time, and the auction's successful bid amount was as she said, 3,090,000,000 won!

Lee Hyun managed not to faint only because of his grim tenacity.

'If this is a dream, I hope I never wake up.'

The next day, Lee Hyun confirmed the money receipt that more than 3,000,000,000 won had really been deposited into his own account.

He pinched his flesh until blood could be seen, unmistakably reality! Lee Hyun rushed to show his grandma the bankbook. He still did not dare tell her in its entirety.

"Grandma, I made money."

"Yes."

His grandma replied helplessly. It had been only 3 days after his ID card was issued. He could not have earned much.

"Well, good work, Hyun-ah."

"It was not that much trouble, grandma."

Lee Hyun handed her the bankbook.

"What is this?"

"Look. This here is the money I earned."

His grandma rubbed her dim eyes a couple of times while looking at the bankbook. The amount stamped into the account, the reaction was disbelief.

"You, did you steal? No, no, this amount of money can't be stolen....."

"What I did was sell my game account."

"Account?"

"It's complex to explain... anyway, I obtained this money legally."

"Then really....."

His grandma, filled with rising emotion, softly sobbed.

"Hyun-ah, like others, we can now live without worrying about water and electricity bills anymore?"

"Of course. We can even own our own home."

"You can go back to school..... and Hayan can go to college. We no longer have to live envying others."

His grandma was moved to tears. It was the same with Lee Hyun.

While remembering the suffering and bitterness he received.

"Now we can live happily together, grandma."

"Yes, of course."

With the tough times together, the two people were thrilled that much more. After several days they obtained a new house and received treatment at the hospital. In addition to his grandma's hip, she was sick in many other ways and had to be admitted to the hospital. His little sister Hayan was also delighted. But their happiness was short-lived.

The men dressed in black suits. The ones he did not want to see most came to the hospital.

Black suited men with fresh from the store shoes, they literally pushed into the hospital room. Well-built, even though only 5 came, the hospital room seemed to be filled.

All other patients panicked in fear so with help from the caregivers, they quietly slipped out.

Only Lee Hyun, his grandma and the men remained. Lee Hyun thought it fortunate his little sister wasn't there the moment they came. But nothing good ever came from those men. He expected it would be the no different from before.

"Lee Hyun. I heard of the good fortune bestowed to your family....."

The blonde haired man spoke.

Lee Hyun shot back sharply.

"So?"

"In the past your father took out a loan, we're here to collect that debt."

"Debt?"

"Yes. And now that you have the money, I believe you're ready pay it back."

Lee Hyun gulped swallowing his saliva. When his parents passed away, Lee Hyun inherited the 100,000,000 won debt.

It would have been fine if he had done the waiver of inheritance, but at that time Lee Hyun was young and did not know about the law. In addition, his grandma, with the grief of losing her child, did not apply the waiver of inheritance in court within 3 months and the legacy was inherited.

Therefore, Lee Hyun became indebted to the loan sharks for 100,000,000 won. He knew how ruthless they were, but now he had a lot of money. There was no need to be afraid.

"I will repay the debt. How much is it?"

"Repay? Your words are a little short. Well, that's fine. We treasure our esteemed customers. The money you have to pay is 3,000,000,000 won."

At the man's words, Lee Hyun's temples throbbed with rage.

"Absurd..... The money my father borrowed was clearly 100,000,000 won."

"Hey, it's been 8 years. As time goes by, interest piles up."

"Such a ridiculous thing... I'll report to the police."

"Report? Knock yourself out. You think the police will take your side?"

"Police are the people's cane."

"Puhahahaha."

The men laughed at Lee Hyun's words. In particular the blonde haired man, hearing that absurdness, he put his hand on his forehead and had a good laugh. The man standing quietly behind spoke. Considering the atmosphere, he seemed like their leader.

"Explain to the kid straight up. Do not cause unnecessary trouble."

"Yes, Hyung-nim. I'm sorry. Well kid, listen carefully. What we are doing does not break any laws. Because we received legitimate interest. To begin with, the interest is 50% of the principal amount per year. Do you want me to calculate? Year 1 it increased from 100,000,000 to 150,000,000, year 2 roughly 220,000,000, year 3 it topped 330,000,000, year 4 close to almost 500,000,000."

At the calculation report, Lee Hyun felt despair. Debt increased 5 fold in just 4 years. 8 years passed, so it might have been 2,500,000,000, but the time that passed was more than exactly 8 years so it was not wrong to say 3,000,000,000.

Lee Hyun while being harassed by the gang members did not know how much debt he was in. Without him knowing, it accumulated to as much as 3,000,000,000.

Bankruptcy!

Others with a 3,000,000,000 debt would file bankruptcy. Even after bankruptcy you would probably owe a few thousand won. Lee Hyun did not even consider bankruptcy. It costs money just to file bankruptcy. The courts and legal counselors. Paying them money and following the necessary steps, you could enter bankruptcy.

Lee Hyun could not even afford to file for bankruptcy. In fact, even if you had the money, you can't seriously believe the vicious loan sharks would leave you alone to file bankruptcy.

"We want 3,000,000,000."

"No, no way."

"No way? Suit yourself. If you don't want to we will come again tomorrow to collect. At that time what you have to pay back will increase a little more, but your call."

The men dressed in black suits exuded confidence. The confidence of free will, the confidence of power.

And also, Lee Hyun knew it was better to repay the debt if he could. In the first place there were no other alternatives, they came knowing he had money. The men laughed with a smirk.

"Poor grandma has been injured and hospitalized, but she sure looks comfortable in the hospital. Much like your little sister in the hallway. Such a beautiful little sister, I bet she could be sold for quite a bit on the island....."

"Don't you dare touch Hayan!"

"Relax, nothing happened, yet. Right now, we're just talking kid. But what if this family of three was admitted to the hospital all at once. It'd be the most touching sight."

Lee Hyun could not stand the veiled threats anymore. It couldn't be helped. It would be enough if the men left. Those unable to repay the borrowed money, in the slums he had seen the fates of those with no money to give them. If there was a sin in the first place, it was borrowing money from them.

Not even able to depend on the law, Lee Hyun had to surrender his bankbook. The men received the bankbook on the spot, and pulled out 90,000,000 won in cash from a bag. With it was the IOU for 100,000,000 won written by Lee Hyun's parents 8 years ago. From the beginning they knew everything and came firmly prepared.

"Thank you. And sorry for your troubles."

As the men exited the hospital room, Lee Hyun yelled.

"Wait a minute!"

"Why kid? What's up?"

"Someday, I will surely make you pay for this."

"What?"

"Because the money has been paid, you guys think this is the end of things. It means later on I will get even with you guys."

The men were about to laugh again. However, at the sight of Lee Hyun's eyes, their laughter died before ever coming out.

A young, wild beast. The miasmic embrace of his eyes sent a chill down their spines.

"I see you still have some spirit in you. We need to teach a fearless kid like you about the world."

The men rolled up their sleeves. But Lee Hyun was not the slightest bit scared, nor did he shrink back.

"Enough. We have already collected the money, don't do anything unnecessary."

"But....."

"Do you really want to make a scene in a hospital?"

"Understood, Hyung-nim."

The men thundered getting out.

"And kid."

The casual leader of the men looked at Lee Hyun and gave him advice.

"I am Han Jinsup of Myongdong. Do you really your boldness will work in this poisonous world? If you think it's unfair, make 3,000,000,000 in 5 years and look for me. Then I will serve you as my Hyung-nim."

The loan sharks departed. Lee Hyun sat down on the ground helplessly. And at the sound of his little sister crying in the hallway, his grandma broke into a sigh.

After being robbed to the tune of 3,000,000,000, he did not have the strength to do anything. He was slammed by extreme emptiness. However, on the third day after being robbed, he stood up. There was hope. So he could not sit and hesitate. A smile casually drifted to Lee Hyun's mouth. Amidst the tears, laughter emerged.

It was but a moment, the touching experience of a large sum of money that seemed to enlighten him just a little about how to live in the world.

'Right. If I earned once, I can earn twice.'

Lee Hyun was busy. 90,000,000 won was not taken away, but it did not mean he could use it all. Because the house contract was already set, 50,000,000 won was set aside.

Able to cancel, but he would have to pay a penalty. He would rather die than pay the penalty.

Ultimately, the amount that could be used was only 40,000,000 won!

All thanks to the real estate slump in the early 21st century.

Using part of the remaining money, Lee Hyun registered in martial arts halls such as aikido, kendo and taekwondo. He placed himself on a rigorous schedule traversing to as many as 6 places a day. As his body broke down at the various gyms, he mastered martial arts.

The instructors there called him Wild Beast. Building his stamina, he swung his sword all day long enough for blood to flow from his hands.

Virtual reality game!

A place where a person moves their body means you can act like in real life. Then learning martial arts and studying about the game system a little more, would it not be helpful?

Of course, those that learned martial arts would not be completely advantageous. But to be stronger even at level 1, it was better to learn martial arts.

Imagine being at least 10% stronger throughout the game, the tremendous effects it would bring. Because of that, Lee Hyun in the morning and daytime learned martial arts, and in the evening studied about virtual reality games. Which game had the most users, and how the game system worked was thoroughly analyzed.

For every profession, city and skill Lee Hyun made analysis tables and pinned them onto the walls of his room. The paper records bombarded Lee Hyun's room.

1 year. Lee Hyun learned martial arts and studied virtual reality games. The time of 1 year wasn't just a preparation period, it was also used to closely observe the development of Royal Road.

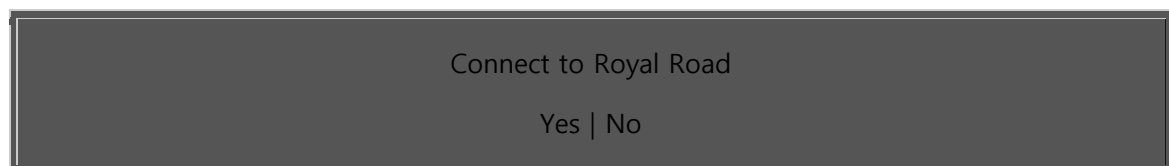
The virtual reality game at the end was as expected, Royal Road and like its name walked the path of the emperor with serenity. Possessing more than 75% of the world's game market share, more than 90% of Korean gamers played this game. It could practically be called a scheduled sequence.

Especially during wars of kings, it came to a point where overwhelmed the viewership of all other networks. The only game in the world where anybody could obtain fame, power and money. Royal Road was the result of an ingenious system interlocking with virtual reality.

"Great. All according to plan."

Lee Hyun's cold eyes stared at the monitor.

That day he purchased a capsule used to connect to Royal Road for 10,000,000 won. It was expensive enough that tears seeped out, but he constantly reminded himself it was a necessary investment. All preparations finished. It was the beginning of the game. He felt like a soldier heading into the battlefield.



When the message came, Lee Hyun shouted without any hesitation.

"Yes!"

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Chapter 2 : Wild Beast Appears

The scan on your iris and vein has determined that you are an unregistered user. Do you want to create a new account?

When Lee Hyun was connected to Royal Road, the first sound that reached his ears was a feminine voice.

He looked around to see who had spoken to him, but there was no one else; a space within the universe. Then he realized that he was in the middle of the activation process of a new account.

"Yes!"

— Select the name of your avatar—

"Weed." Weed, the lowliest of the low in the plant kingdom. To Lee Hyun, it sounded most suitable for him.

— Select your gender from male, female or neutr—

"Male!"

— Royal Road has forty-nine races. You may select your race from the primary twenty-nine—

"Human!"

- You may alter your appearance—

"The way I am."

— Your account has been activated. Your stats and class shall be determined while you are playing Royal Road—

"Pass!"

— Select a city and kingdom you want to start.

"The Citadel of Serabourg, Rosenheim Kingdom!"

— Welcome to Royal—

"Pass!"

Afraid to waste even a second, Lee Hyun skipped the tutorial stage and made quick decisions according to his prearranged plan. Three hundred thousand won monthly bill for the game was a great expense to him.

In Royal Road, there are over a hundred major cities and thousands of towns. A new player begins his adventure in a capital or a major city of comparable size.

Similar to where Weed is starting out.

Flash

With a flash of light, he appeared in the Citadel of Serabourg, Rosenheim.

"This is..."

Weed was swayed by the sight of countless avatars, users and NPCs—Non-Player Characters—alike, that he thought he was lost in the middle of Seoul.

"Where am I? Unbelievable!"

Astonished, Weed couldn't believe his eyes as he looked around. The racket of those haggling and chattering rang in his ears. The view unfolding before his eyes was exactly the same as the real world, with people busy coming and going.

He lowered his eyes to his legs standing on the ground. His senses told him that it felt absolutely solid. Strangers passed him by as he stood still in a daze.

"Look at him. I'm sure he's a newbie."

"It looks like he's never played a virtual reality game before."

While passing by, some users threw fleeting remarks over their shoulders. They stung him enough to pull himself together.

They're right. It's Royal Road here. The world of virtual reality, and my new workplace.

No matter how thoroughly Weed had prepared, his knowledge of virtual reality and his research into the game system came second to the strange experience he was having now.

He had been bewildered, but it was temporary, and he soon calmed down, differences also began to catch his eye.

His senses were consistent with reality, yet people around him were clad in armor or wearing leather vests.

Close to the spot where he had shown up was a bulletin board exhibiting maps and descriptions of Rosenheim Kingdom, and directions for using the basic interface.

It's time that I start.

Weed clenched his fist, and then he started to exercise. He sat down and stood up, and then proceeded with standing high jumps, tumbling, kicking and punching.

He twisted his waist around and carefully tested one joint after another. He wiggled fingers and toes, and jerked his head back and forth.

Even though a tsunami of humiliating comments gushed forth from other users nearby, Weed was determined to overcome it.

"What the heck is he doing now?"

"It looks like he's moving his body. I guess he's still uncomfortable with the virtual reality game."

"Oh, I see. But what's the point of making a show in the middle of a crowded street?"

The sense of humiliation which Weed had been fighting so hard to keep back prevailed over his determination. What a scene he'd been making in front of strangers.

"Dammit!" Weed left in a hurry and headed elsewhere.

A newcomer in Royal Road is confined to the city of origin for a week in real world and four weeks in the game, thanks to the parallax between one place and the other.

A great majority of newcomers were getting down to basics, simple quests, or learn craft skills, such as tailoring, blacksmith and cooking, which are relatively easy to acquire.

The game boast of its unrestricted flexibility, almost to the extent of disorder, and while all the highest ranking positions are still occupied by NPCs instead of users, this reinforces the need for personal contacts.

On the other hand, a considerable number of users work in libraries or stores to make money.

The Central Square brims with merchant wannabes who set up kiosks to buy and sell with fellow users and many new parties in pursuit of adventure are formed on the spot every minute.

After watching them casually, Weed didn't hesitate to head for the Training Hall.

The Training Hall is open to any user as long as he pleases, and most users visit the hall to experiment with newly acquired skills.

It is nearly impossible to find someone who, like Weed, would go straight to the Training Hall as soon as he created a new avatar.

It's not only that newcomers are more interested in finding out what the kingdom and city where they were born look like, but it's also largely because training in the Training Hall is deemed rather ineffective.

The moment the instructor saw Weed walk in the entrance, his eyes glared fiercely.

"Young adventurer, I presume you have arrived at the Versailles continent very recently," the instructor said.

"Yes, Sir" Weed said shortly. He was still upset that he had made a laughing stock of himself on the first day.

"You shall find sword training absolutely necessary when you come to confront monsters. Do you need my guidance? I tell you, take any unattended scarecrow and strike him in any way you want. A wooden sword is placed in front of a scarecrow, and it is all yours."

"Thank you, sir. That's enough. I don't need any more guidance."

"Godspeed"

Weed clutched the wooden sword and walked to a scarecrow standing alone in the most remote corner. Then, he began beating it, once, twice, thrice. His hands were gradually getting accustomed to the weight of the wooden sword and the sense of hitting the scarecrow.

In Royal Road, a new avatar's level is locked for the first four weeks, for he is forbidden to travel beyond the city's gate and to hunt monsters in the field.

It is most common to carry out as many quests as possible, thus building up favorable public service points, earning money and forming your own web of personal contacts.

Nonetheless, Weed silently carried on striking the scarecrow with the wooden sword.

There are about a thousand scarecrows in the Training Hall of the Citadel of Serabourg, and an unlimited supply of wooden swords on the walls, which could come in handy. The Hall is usually frequented by users who crave to test their skills.

At this moment, however, everyone's eyes were fixed on somewhere in particular.

"This guy's definitely got iron guts."

"He's freaking tough."

"Can't believe any sane man's going so far"

Weed was soaked in sweat.

The white shirt and pants issued to him in the beginning had absorbed sweat and stuck fast to his body. He still dealt one blow after another to the scarecrow without a minute's break.

Strength increased by 1 point. (+1 STR)

After six hours of striking the scarecrow, Weed heard good news. He felt as if the muscles in his hand clutching the wooden sword were getting lighter. "Stats window," Weed mumbled while striking the scarecrow.

Character Name	Weed	Alignment	Neutral
Level	1	Profession	None
Title	None		
Reputation	0		
Health	100	Mana	100
Strength	11	Agility	10
Stamina	10		
Wisdom	10	Intellect	10
Luck	0	Leadership	0

Attack	3		
Defense	0		
Magic Resistance			
Fire	0%	Water	0%
Earth	0%	Black Magic	0%

Weed's avatar was so feeble that there was nothing remarkable. Five hours later—

<p> Vitality rises by 1 point. (+1 VIT) </p>
<p> Agility rises by 1 point. (+1 AGI) </p>

The two stats rose almost at the same time.

"Whew."

Weed finally put down the wooden sword and took a short break. Without eating or drinking, he had been hitting the scarecrow for nearly eight straight hours.

He was physically fatigued, and worse, his throat was burning with thirst, his stomach empty and hollow.

"Inventory window"

Given the preset keyword, the semitransparent images of all the belongings in Weed's inventory floated in front of his eyes. Inside his inventory were a canteen and ten pieces of rye bread. That was all.

In Royal Road, you have to get hold of what you need on your own. Other users make money by carrying out easy quests for the four weeks, but Weed could not spare even a minute.

He took out a piece of rye bread and the canteen, and nibbled a mouthful of bread. As he ate food, it appeased his hunger and the satisfaction factor rose.

"I'm supposed to have a meal every five hours. I'd better eat more often if I exercise intensely, but I don't need to raise the satisfaction factor to the full. All I need to do is just stay away from death."

Once Weed finished the meal swiftly, he took the wooden sword in his grip and stood in front of the scarecrow.

"He's at it again."

"He's nuts."

"I think he holds a grudge against it or something."

"I don't think he'll stop until he breaks that scarecrow into pieces."

Was it an illusion that the scarecrow looked like it shivered at that very moment? Weed's wooden sword struck every inch of the scarecrow. The same type of questions arose among all the spectators.

"Why the heck is that guy striking the scarecrow?"

"I don't think it will help at all—if he wants to raise the expertise rating for a skill, it's much better to go out to the field and use it on a rabbit than the scarecrow here."

"Look at what he's doing. He's not using any skill. To me, it looks more like he's beating up the scarecrow on impulse."

"Maybe he's bringing up his stats," a knight in dazzling armor commented, immediately attracted the attention of everyone else on the scene.

"Can you improve your stats by just hitting the scarecrow?" a dark-skinned ranger asked.

"Huh? Ah, yes, that's right," the knight said.

"Then, why don't you just keep hitting a scarecrow instead of sweating hard to raise your level?" the ranger asked again.

The knight named Pluto had a considerably high level, so he has learned a wealth of information from reliable sources. He was also the only man who correctly guessed the motive of Weed's actions.

If an avatar uses up his stamina, his vitality and stamina will develop as a consequence, and if a wizard casts a great many spells, his wisdom and intelligence will rise.

But such an increase is trivial compared to stat bonus points accompanied by a level up.

Half a day of hitting a scarecrow without a rest might yield one or two stats. Considering that the number of stat bonus points as reward for a level up is five, what Weed was doing looked idiotic.

"It really is silly."

A sorceress shook her head when she heard Pluto's explanation. But he thought otherwise.

"It works," Pluto said.

"Excuse me?"

"You can earn only small amount of experience points if you kill a weaker monster than your current level. You know that, right?"

"Of course"

"In other words, the higher your level is, the harder it is to gain a level. But if you improve your strength by undergoing such a drill in the initial phase, you can hunt monsters easier later on. It will take effect throughout the game."

"You know this method, so I guess you went through the same training? No, wouldn't everyone do the same if they knew about it?"

"Not really. Even if people knew, no one would do it. Back to the point, is there anyone who wants to keep hitting that scarecrow for ten hours to improve their strength by one point?"

"..."

"There are limits to how far you can increase your stats by working on a scarecrow that's known as the weakest opponent. In the case of strength, I estimate it's forty or so. Is there anyone who wants to keep hitting the scarecrow for at least a month to raise forty points in strength? I would get sick and tired of it, and give it up in days."

The crowd watching Weed nodded in unison.

You'd rather look for a cool weapon than to strike a scarecrow ceaselessly for a full month in order to bring up your strength by forty points. An item that keeps up strength by forty points is unique, yet far from rare.

"This works only for newbies who can't go beyond the walls. It was once popular to beat a scarecrow like this, but it was quickly abandoned because, when you weigh against it what you can get in the long run, it's way too boring, and painstaking."

Weed overheard the heated discussion that those around him were having. He wished he could have trained somewhere else, but so long as he wasn't allowed to leave the Citadel, he could not avoid attracting unfavorable attention in the Hall.

What makes you call this boring and painstaking? Weed swung the wooden sword at full strength.

If you work hard, your avatar gets stronger step by step. When your avatar evolves, it can defeat stronger monsters and make more money. For Weed, this was the ultimate entertainment in his lifetime.

Weed was inherently inclined to routine physical labor. All this time, the instructor was watching him with awfully gratified eyes.

Three weeks had passed. Weed logged on to Royal Road on a daily basis, except for minimum sleeping hours, to the point of addiction. His physical condition, which he had resolved to build up before he started the game, enabled him to sleep no more than four hours a day. Now that he looked back at the last three weeks, it made him sick to even think of it.

Once he signed into the game, he spent eighty hours on average striking the scarecrow monotonously, which had mentally worn him out. Had it not been for pop-up messages encouraging him, he would have given up.

Strength rises by 1 point. (+1 STR)

Agility rises by 1 point. (+1 AGI)

New stat: Fighting Spirit

New stat: Sustenance

In Royal Road, a new stat is sometimes created besides the original ones.

Fighting Spirit

You can call on superhuman strength temporarily, or bring weaker monsters to their knees with a force in your eyes alone. You are prohibited from distributing stat bonus points to this stat, and it rises spontaneously, depending on the avatar's action, especially if you fight monsters for a long time, or often confront monsters stronger than your current level.

Pop-up messages related to the skill occasionally appeared, too. The only skill Weed had at that point was Sword Mastery.

Level Up: Sword Mastery [3]

Increases Attack Power with a sword (+30% ATK)

Increases Attack Speed with a sword (+9% ATK SPD)

Sustenance

You are likely to use less stamina in action. You are prohibited from distributing stat bonus points to this stat.

Every time a pop-up message appeared, Weed was secretly delighted by the progress he was making. But what was deeply troubling him was a sense of frustration that he had been falling behind in his goals.

For the last three weeks, as he devoted himself to beating down the scarecrows, his strength had increased only by twenty-eight points, agility twenty-five, and vitality twenty-two.

"Unless I pick up my pace, I'll end up wasting more precious time on this scarecrow even after the restriction is lifted. I must finish it before I can leave the Citadel."

Weed's eyes burned with determination.

Rumble

At that moment, Weed's stomach decided it was time to eat. Aside from slow progress with his stats, he was tormented by the fact that he was running out of bread.

He could run to a nearby fountain and fill the canteen with water, but bread was different – he had to pay money for it.

Sniff He smelled an appetizing scent coming from somewhere.

Weed, swinging the wooden sword, paused and caught a glimpse of the instructor, who was taking out his lunchbox for the lunch break.

"Hehe, Honorable Instructor." As Weed wagged his invisible tail, he walked to the instructor.

"Hmm, who is this, none other than Weed-nim? What has brought you here?" the instructor said warmly.

"Wouldn't it be lonely to have lunch alone? I am here to keep you company," Weed said obsequiously.

Growl While his stomach growled, Weed lied with a straight face, but he could not deceive the instructor.

"I take it that you are hungry. Sit beside me! I have brought plenty of food, sufficient to feed two mouths."

"Thank you, sir."

"Enough with your humility! It is my honor to serve a meal to a would-be great adventurer like you, Weed-nim. I assure you that your reputation will someday resound beyond the bounds of the Citadel of Serabourg. When that day comes, please remember me!"

"Yes, Sir. I certainly will."

After flattering the instructor lightly, Weed enjoyed lunch together with him. It was kind of a sad scene, yet he was grateful that with little effort, he could stuff his belly.

He wasn't sucking up to a real man, anyway. What was the big deal about smooth-talking an NPC with artificial intelligence?

Beside the stats that Weed had increased while beating the scarecrow for the last three weeks, he established an affinity with the instructor. This supplementary effect was somewhat admirable.

While Weed was busy devouring lunch, the instructor suddenly asked, "By the way, Weed-nim, what do you think of Sculpture Mastery?"

Sculpture mastery? What the heck is sculpture mastery?

Weed chewed a mouthful of boiled rice and swallowed it before he asked back, "What do you mean by Sculpture Mastery?"

"I am merely curious of your opinion. I wonder what sort of view you have about Sculpture Mastery in general," the instructor said.

At that moment, the speed of Weed's brain racking, despite it being absurd to convert it to a numerical value, multiplied roughly by five.

I've so far figured out that the instructor is a simple-minded and nearsighted guy. He sincerely believes that the sword is invincible, and to him, it's the highest virtue to exercise hard enough to break out in a sweat in the Training Hall. And now he's asking me what I think about Sculpture Mastery?

As soon as Weed collected his thoughts, he frowned.

"Honorable Instructor! I can't believe you even mentioned it. I am a man of the sword. Did you ask for my opinion upon, God forgive me, Sculpture Mastery? I am most disappointed. This is my answer—never, ever, not even once has such a lowly handicraft crossed my noble mind."

Despite Weed's offensive tone, which would have enraged him in other situations, the instructor unexpectedly clapped his hands in delight.

"I knew you would say so!"

"It is out of question. The likes of Sculpture Mastery are nothing but awful mistakes of God which do not deserve a second of our attention. Why do I, a man of the sword, need to ever think of it?"

"You are most agreeable, Weed-nim" Weed sensed that, though it was invisible, his friendship with the instructor moved to a higher degree at that moment.

This is the way to make friends with somebody. You don't need to shed blood with them. You don't need to squander time and money on them. You just join them in speaking ill of something at the first opportunity, and it will invoke their sympathy.

Weed expected the instructor to change the topic of the conversation, but he rubbed the back of his head and stayed on the subject.

"It is rumored that the unknown man who mastered sculptural and once carved the moonlight," the instructor said.

"I doubt it, sir. A rumor is always prone to distortion. How can anyone learned in worthless Sculpture Mastery carve the moonlight? Perhaps it was a pebble in the shape of a moon," Weed said cheerfully.

"You think so, too? But I was told by my predecessor. His honorable name is Mellium, currently a Royal Knight..."

Sculptural was perceived as a fruitless skill, no more than trimming a small block of wood to produce a fine ornament.

Rumor had it that if you elevated the craft beyond a certain stage, you would be capable of making projectile weapons of metal. But it was undoubtedly one of those obsolete skills that nobody bothered learning.

"On that account Weed-nim, this question of Sculpture Mastery intrigues me. It surely is beyond doubt that the craft cannot possibly rival our sword under any circumstances, but would you find out whether the rumor has a grain of truth? I am asking a favor of you because you are a trustworthy man. If you accept my request, I'd be happy to hear it," the instructor said.

Then a pop-up message appeared in front of Weed's eyes.

Ting

A Mystery Sculptor Rumored to Have Visited the Royal Palace

A rumor that a man who had mastered sculptural art did carve the moonlight has been prevalent in the royal court of Rosenheim Kingdom for long. Look into the rumor to determine whether it is true or not!

Difficulty level: E

Quest requirements

Close friendship with instructor reserved only for those who have not acquired Sculpture Mastery.

Acknowledged as reliable by the instructor for a constant passion for Sword Mastery

Weed barely held a whisper of triumph at bay. His instinct told him that this quest was the rarest of the rare.

This was because the quest had to meet very tricky conditions in order to get it started. Close friendship with the instructor—who would have ever thought of that?

Most users in general don't even know the location of the Training Hall, let alone visit it when they acquire a new skill, they don't need to come all that way to practice it on a scarecrow of all things. Moreover, it is a rare occasion that anyone is willing to get stuck in the Hall and thrash the scarecrow over and over to bring up his stats in the crudest way, as Weed had done.

If you dig out enough dirt, you might find a few users like that, but in Weed's case, he had spent almost all of the last three weeks with the scarecrow. Who else could have toughed it out to such an extent?

Speaking of close friendship with the instructor, it is nearly impossible to achieve unless someone like Weed approaches him, fawning to earn a share of his lunch.

Even with all the conditions above met you still have to begin your new adventure at the Citadel of Serabourg in Rosenheim Kingdom against all odds, not to mention that you have to find the right moment to slander Sculpture Mastery along with the instructor.

This is great. I'm about to go broke and starve to death. At difficulty level E, this quest looks like it's easy to finish.

Weed nodded at the instructor.

"I am honored to accept it. Although I do not believe any of the nonsense, I will find out what it was like carving the moonlight."

You accepted the quest.

"I appreciate it. I entrust you with this task. Take this money as a retainer," the instructor said, handing over two silvers. "I give you my advice: visit the sculpture shop first and glean information from there"

A piece of rye bread, literally tasteless yet enough to fill the stomach, costs three coppers. Since a silver coin equals a hundred copper coins, it is safe to say Weed had just received the equivalent of sixty-six pieces of rye bread for the retainer, plus change.

He was certain that once the quest was completed, he could expect more rewards from the instructor.

"Great! I don't need to worry about running out of bread for the time being."

Many years of first-hand experience of habitual famine persuaded him to avoid being malnourished at any cost.

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Chapter 3 : The Instructor's Request

Weed first walked to the fountain and filled his canteen with water, and then he headed for the sculpture shop. It was Weed's first trip down the street, and it was crammed with users and NPCs.

"We need a cleric at level 17 or above"

"Hey, guy! We're going to raid on Cave Lasok. Anyone want to join us?"

Plenty of users were on the street, but none of them gave a passing glance at Weed. He didn't mind it though. Wandering around in a traveler's outfit, deprived of even a breastplate, revealed that he has yet to meet the minimum requirement of four week' game play before he could leave the Citadel.

Among the innumerable stores that operate in the capital of Rosenheim Kingdom, the sculpture shop holds a special position.

Most ordinary adventurers can barely recall where the sculpture shop is located because it was meaningless to them. Only an extremely small number of users who learned the Sculpture Art visit periodically. But the sculpture shop stands right next to the jewelry store on Central Avenue, and is one of the few frequently visited shops by the noblewomen.

Chime

Weed entered the sculpture shop.

"Welcome to—what brings you here, stranger?"

The shopkeeper was receiving a new customer with a gentle smile, until he saw Weed's outfit at that point, he suddenly changed the tone of his voice.

Weed looked around the shop, only to find that there was no other customer except for him. A blacksmith's workshop or a grocery store is always full to the limit of occupancy, but the sculpture shop only entertains a few customers a day, if any.

If comparing daily revenues, however, the sculpture shop does lag behind the blacksmith's workshop. In other words, the sculpture shop sells pretty expensive merchandises.

Weed adjusted his collar and asked politely,

"I have come here to find an answer to the question which troubles me so dearly, sir."

"So you want to ask me a question, stranger?"

"Yes, sir. If you could spare me a second"

"I am busy right now, please leave"

The shopkeeper rejected him right away, sounding very annoyed. As Weed's fame was zero, and they were unacquainted, the shopkeeper had every right to chase him out of the shop.

"Yes, sir. I will see you later"

"Goodbye" said the shopkeeper.

Weed was taking his time to retreat to the doorway. Then, he casually shot a glance at the statues that were on display.

"How grand!"

Weed exclaimed

"The grandeur of this statue fascinates my soul. Do you supply this to the Rosenheim Court?"

The shopkeeper could not help but lend an ear to Weed.

"Which one are you talking about, stranger?"

"This two-headed eagle made of pure gold. I dare not guess which master carved this, but I can sense the excellence of his workmanship. It is dignified beyond dispute. It is so full of life that I almost mistook it for a real eagle, and I am blessed in visiting the place. This store deserves this class of item. They have opened my humble eyes to a heavenly beauty descended to Earth"

Whether or not the shopkeeper realizes, his mouth was forming a horizontal crescent. "Are you interested in sculptural art, traveler?"

"I daresay I am—I am only wishing to feel peace of mind at the sight of outstanding statues, and my soul craves to be even a small part of the magnificent spirit embodied in them"

"Come over and sit down. You may be good company to arouse me from boredom"

"Thank you, sir"

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Only if you're kind enough to offer me cold honeyed water. I will be satisfied with a cup of cold water"

"Sure! Of course I have it"

Weed drank the honeyed water blended by the shopkeeper, which soothed the exhaustion that he had accumulated over the last three weeks.

"Now tell me what has been troubling you so much." The shopkeeper said.

"Yes, sir. But can you please forgive me for asking for a brief tour of these statues on display before everything else? I have business that demands your guidance, yet it is less urgent than comforting my poor soul that wants to have a good look at these masterpieces of art" Weed said.

"You may look at them for as long as you wish. Isn't it the *raison d'être* of fine statues to please those who appreciate their value?" The shopkeeper consented with a content smile.

Weed felt that it had won his goodwill, one scarcely disturbed by visitors and away from public attention. Suppose that you asked to look at various items in a grocery store—the next second you would be kicked out.

Weed relished the statues on display at leisure. But he had his own agenda. "I doubt sculpture mastery will make a pile of money." The most expensive statue that is currently present is worth 30 silvers. The quality statues are made of stones or rare wood, and in spite of the impressive workmanship, the materials themselves were not costly in the first place. They were nothing more than wooden carvings, or engraved stones.

Weed knew that there would be money if he could create a gigantic lion statue or bronze status, but he wasn't fooled by the possibility that was so far off. What kind of nobleman with so much money would order a new statue every year? He needed to reach the top of the ladder in order to do really well as a sculptor. Little competition guaranteed that it wouldn't need too much effort to become the best in the industry.

Still, it was a niche market, too small to count on. The guaranteed way to make a fortune was to target other users as potential consumers. They were always leveling up and demanding better equipment, so on and so forth.

Fire weapons, strong equipment enchanted bracelets and rings were popular among users, but statues were valueless to them except in rare instances.

"Waste of time, waste of money"

Weed's primary purpose for starting this game was to make money, with a capital M. He looked around the display for the last time and passed his verdict on sculpture mastery.

"The skill is worth a dime in a dozen" Weed sat down across from the shopkeeper.

"Now, what are you looking for?" The shopkeeper asked

"I am interested in a past event. I was told that someone had carved the moonlight in the Royal Palace fifty years ago. I would like to know if there's any truth of that event" Weed said.

"Oh that event! It is legendary tale that has been passed down among the sculptors. I also heard it from some trustworthy patrons from the Royal Court"

Weed had thought that carving the moonlight was impossible, another urban legend, but the owner of the sculptor shop also knew the rumor that the instructor at the Training Hall had claimed to have heard.

Quest Complete!

A Mystery Sculptor who is rumored to have visited the Royal Palace.

The rumor that had reached the instructor's ear really took place. A sculptor carved the moonlight, and it was widely, yet secretly, known amongst the Serebourgians, though it remained an enigma how he carved the moonlight.

Reward: Return to the instructor to claim it.

Weed grinned broadly. This was, after all, a simple quest with the lowest difficulty level E. At the same time, unless he had succeeded in making friends with the shopkeeper, it could have turned out tricky.

How that he was done with the quest, the next move was to return to the Training Hall and earn a reward from the instructor. As Weed was looking for the right moment to say his farewells and leave, the shopkeeper, absorbed in thought, finally spoke out.

"I have not heard how he carved the moonlight"

"Did the patrons from the Royal Court not tell you about it?"

"Hmm, they always omitted it in their tale. They refused to tell me about it. They said Queen Evane of Rosenheim, O may her soul rest in peace, was involve in the event. Can you do me a favor and look into this, so that my curiosity shall be gratified?"

The Sculptor's Past

The rumor has it that Queen Evane was involved in the event when the sculptor presented himself in the Royal Palace and carved the moonlight. The shopkeeper of the sculpture shop wondered what link existed between the two of them.

Difficulty Level: E

Warning: If you are found to be investigating the rumor in question, you will be exposed to hostility from Royal Knights.

Weed's clenched fists were shaking in excitement. "This, it's a serial quest"

Even when the difficulty level of a quest is awfully low, the level of rewards shoots up in case of serial quests. The more stages you complete, the more difficult the quest becomes, and so most serial quests are likely to make it highly difficult for Weed at his current level to solve.

The only quests that Weed could complete are the ones that are inside the Citadel, asking around and gathering information from people.

"I am still incompetent. I am afraid I may not be worthy of your request" Weed said.

"I am certain you are up to this task. Your prudence shall lead the way to safety" The shopkeeper replied

"If you say so, I will take it willingly" Weed said.

You have accepted the quest.

"Thank you traveler. A bard with knowledge in ancient tales and street gossip is the one whom you should ask about Queen Evane. Beware! This matter is very sensitive, so you should not cause trouble that might lead to any defamation of the Royal Family"

Keeping down a sudden impulse to hum a tune, Weed headed straight to a pub across the street.

"Good afternoon" Returning the greeting from a waitress, Weed looked around in search of a bard. There were a few conditions to meet. First, he counted the bard users out when he looked for the right man. It was a long shot that any user had ever heard of an event that had happened in the Royal Palace half a century before. Weed would be better off to find a Serabourgian native, possibly an elderly.

Whether he could sing ballads favorably or not, an old bard was reliable when it comes to worldly gossip. Weed stopped by several pubs until he found a bard who lived up to his expectations. It was a middle-aged bard in his forties, experienced with both charm and youth. Clapping both hands, Weed approached the bard.

"Thank you for a fine ballad, sir. Forgive me for interrupting you, but I want to ask you a few questions... Do you know what happened fifty years ago in the Royal Court of Rosenheim?"

The bard's thrust his palm out and Weed could not miss what this gesture implied. He frowned immediately, his mouth twitching with a grave sense of responsibility that he would not waste a penny.

"You sure have a charming voice. I appreciate your talent in writing both the lyrics and the music for that ballad. Also your skills in the instrument were more than impressive..."

"..."

"I bet you broke the hearts of many Serabourgian ladies back when you were a young ray of sunshine at the peak of your career. Of course, I do not doubt that you are still stealing ladies' hearts... For a bard, adventure and romance is everything. I also love romance"

The palm didn't go away, and the bard snapped, "I'm sick and tired of cheap compliments from the likes of you, foreigner. Show me the money, or get lost"

Weed was momentarily lost.

"Do I just give up the quest in the middle? Anyway, the quest doesn't penalize me even if I decide to drop out. But maybe it would give me sweet rewards later, and I would hate to miss out on them"

Weed's hand slipped into his pocket and fished out a coin before he realized his mistake. Two silvers! There were two silver coins in his pocket. That was everything that the instructor had given him as a retaining fee for the previous quest.

The bard seized the silver coin from Weed's palm.

It was a basic mistake that he had forgotten to exchange his money into smaller coins in advance.

"I can't believe I made such a silly mistake!" Weed's body shook in distress and grief.

"Hmph, this is a secret, so you must keep it to yourself" The bard said under his breath "Queen Evan and the sculptor had been on intimate terms since they were children"

"What do you mean by intimate terms...?" Weed asked

"You fool! I know nothing else for intimate terms between a man and a woman—they loved each other"

"Point taken" Weed now realized why poking his nose into the rumor had to remain a secret from the Royal Court.

Given that the former Queen's sacred name was mentioned in that scandalous matter. Royal Knights would be willing to silence anyone at any cost to keep her honor intact.

The bard glanced around the pub and added cautiously "They were born in the same village, and grew up bearing each other dearly in mind. The boy's name was Zahab. The girl was always carrying ornaments carved and given by him when she was a child, with a dream that she would become his wife someday. But Destiny played tricks on them! The girl was chosen to be the Royal Maid and the boy left her. But in the end, there was a promise between them"

"What promise, if I may ask?" Weed asked, now curious.

"Zahab promised to show the girl the most beautiful statue under heaven"

"I guess it was not kept, then. The Queen must have a great number of beautiful, magnificent statues in her place"

"No, he kept it. Many years later, Zahab presented himself as a quest to the Royal Court. It was said that, at the sight of his work, she was most touched, saying it was the most beautiful creature under heaven"

"Then, what statue, for Freya's sake, did he present to Queen Evane? A Queen doesn't easily cherish an ordinary piece"

"True. Pay a visit to a lady's maid who witness the day, and hear the rest of the story. This is as far as I can tell you because I also heard it from someone else"

"Is she still alive?"

"Yes" The bard told Weed the way to the house of the lady's maid.

Weed went to visit her. She had retired, and when he mentioned Queen Evane and the sculptor, she gave him a joyous welcome.

"Her Highness was very virtuous and gracious lady. So do you want to hear about what happened back then?"

"Yes, ma'am"

"You have found the right person to ask. I personally served Her Highness. She first resented Zahab-nim when he visited the palace.

"Why so, if I may ask?"

"It was his promise. When they were young, they made a promise, a promise that Zahab-nim would present Her Highness with the most beautiful statue under heaven. But when he appeared in the palace, he was carrying a sword, not an engraving knife. To the eyes of everyone, he looked like a fine swordsman who was proficient in the sword. You should have seen how heartbroken Her Highness was. It was indescribable! Her Highness so believed in Zahab-nim that even if the world turned upside down, he would be the same eternally, and likewise, the promise between them was divine"

"..."

"On that day, Brent Kingdom, which bordered on Rosenheim, dispatched a band of assassins. They revealed a treacherous ambition to seize our Kingdom, and Freya only knows how shocked I was when assassins stormed in and assaulted Her and His Highness in the garden"

"Those wicked scoundrels!"

"Yes, young traveler, you can say that again. A couple of Royal Knights were trapped, thus incapable of holding them in check—and we were left to face death. At that very moment, Zahab-nim walked into the garden. As you can see, right in the middle of fighting, Her Highness warned him and ordered him to leave. But Zahab-nim only smiled—"

"He smiled in the middle of such a dangerous situation?"

"—and he said he would show her the most beautiful statue that he had ever carved under heaven. To everyone's surprise, the moonlight shattered into pieces at Zahab-nim's sword. Its beauty was really striking. He was singing a song while he carved the moonlight. I cannot remember the lyrics word by word, but the title was A Sculptor's Heart. Listening to the song, Her Highness was overflowing with tears. It was really the most beautiful statue Milady had ever seen. Had Zahab-nim only inscribed his name on a crude plank, but Her Highness would have taken it for the most beautiful sculpture in the world, but I tell you, the sight he was carving with the moonlight was literally heavenly. The assassins scattered at the inconceivable sight, and Zahab-nim kept his promise. Many years since gone, but I still cherish that moving memory."

Then, a mysterious flashback flittered before Weed's eyes

Whittle

A boy is holding a tiny engraving knife in his hands
As the engraving knife slides up and down, a piece of wood is shaping into a form
It seems he is carving a maiden
A little, lovely maiden
Through his craftsmanship, the piece of wood is endowed with life
A girl, blushing up to her ears, is watching him
The boy's hand moving the engraving knife, and his serious look
The girl loves him, everything about him.
Soon the boy hands her the complete statue. It looks so much like the girl.

"For now, all I can do is carve a piece of wood. But someday, I will give you the most beautiful statue in the world"

"Thank you Zahab. I'm looking forward to that day"

The boy and girl make a promise with each other, hand in hand.

As the girl grows up, she blossoms in beauty.
She caught the eyes of the King. She eventually became Queen. But the girl is not happy at all.
Her Highness is still unhappy the day Zahab comes back to see her.
Zahab carried a sword, not the engraving knife.
Talking a walk alone in the garden, Her Highness gives way to fit of passion and clutches a thorny rose. Her palm bleeds with ruby red blood.

"Why did you forget our promise? Your promise was everything to me..."

Her Highness grieved over the broken promise.
That evening, the assassins raid the palace.
Brent Kingdom, a hostile neighbor as always, has sent assassins.
Knights of Rosenheim Kingdom collapse one after another.
She and His Highness are fearful of their imminent and inevitable death.
Zahab clutches his sword, and the moonlight begins to dance.

Quest Complete!

The Sculptor's Past

The promise between the boy and the girl was honored. The bluish moonlight shattered into pieces, which in turn defeated the assassins. Moonlight Sculptor Zahab—His Sculpture mastery has reached the stage of a Master. Presenting the most beautiful statue to his childhood friend.

You have leveled up!

You have leveled up!

To Weed's surprise, two levels went up for a single quest, and that wasn't the end of it. A message window popped up. To his surprise once again, it was a class conversion window.

Class Change!

You can convert to a secret class Moonlight Sculptor. If you accept it, you can learn exclusive skills for the class that are withheld from the primary classes.

Do you want to convert to Moonlight Sculptor?

An infinite number of users are bustling about to discover secret classes in Royal Road, but fewer than one out of a thousand actually discovers one.

Weed answered, "I refuse"

Please confirm your decision. You can convert to a secret class Moonlight Sculptor.

Do you want to convert to Moonlight Sculptor?

"I refuse"

To Weed, being stuck in the corner of a closet and making unwanted statues wasn't considerable. He had to admit that being a sculptor could make quite an amusing class if properly trained. But he needed a financially lucrative class for his personal gain. When Weed came to his senses, the old lady's maid was watching.

"It was a wonderful story. Thank you very much, ma'am"

"You're welcome. It's my pleasure to tell you their story like this. So, young adventurer, I want to give you a small present. Will you please take it?"

Wouldn't it be unkind to reject a present out of goodwill? Weed was not so cruel as to decline anything offered to him. A man should accept any present with gratitude.

"I will gladly take it, ma'am"

The old lady's maid took something bundled up from deep inside a drawer. It resembled an ancient scalpel.

"This engraving knife used to belong to Zahab-nim. He left it to Her Highness, and I happened to keep it now. And this wooden statue is carved by Zahab-nim. Please take these" The lady's maid said.

"I shall long treasure your present" Weed said.

He received two items from her.

You have received Engraving Knife.

You have received Zahab's Legacy.

Weed thought that these items were uncommon as they were left by one of the Masters of Sculptural Art. Even the wooden statue looked classy at a casual glance.

"Please keep Zahab-nim's engraving knife with great care"

"Yes, ma'am"

Weed calculated that this might sell and make good profit.

"The wooden statue will show you where Zahab-nim's resting place is located. I hope his sculpture mastery will not be buried forever"

"I hope so too, ma'am"

"If only I could hear the song of that day again... Everything about sculpture mastery is concealed in that engraving knife"

"Excuse me?"

"In Zahab-nim's engraving knife"

That moment Weed looked at the engraving knife. He had a gut feeling that an irresistible destiny was drawing near.

Follow Zahab's Last Wish

Zahab did not die that day. He left for a faraway continent to test his Sculpture Mastery. Once you graduate in Sculpture Master, you should find Zahab to learn the song A

Sculpture's Heart from him. Then, you should come back here and sing it to this old lady's maid. The tradition runs that Zahab's was last seen heading for the Gray Pass Region.

Difficulty: A

Quest Requirement:

You must complete the quest before the old lady's maid passes away.

Cancellation is not permitted.

Reward:

You can learn Item Identification Skill, Sculpture Mastery, Repair Skill, and Handicraft Skill.

A serial quest with a difficulty level of A, rewarding four skills. Weed couldn't tell if he's lucky or not.

For one thing, he knew that it was extremely difficult to acquire skills unrelated to his own class. Those skills, such as Item Identification and Repair Skill, which he had learned without converting to the sculpture class, could come in handy in numerous ways, but an A level quest was far beyond his ability for a long time, possibly many years.

The average level for Royal Road users is currently a hundred or so. The highest ladder is in the low 300s. The difficulty of a quest that requires a balanced party of power rankers a level 300 to finish is known to be B-level.

That means Weed had just accepted a quest that requires him to be above level 400 to be able to cope with the quest, let alone finish it.

As if it were not bad enough, the Gray Pass region is the most perilous of the perilous areas, inhabited by the most forceful monsters. It is one of the top Ten Forbidden Areas on the continent, where you are absolutely guaranteed to be chopped to pieces the moment you stepped in the area.

"Dammit"

The number of quest that a user can store at a time is only three. Now that one of them was taken by the quest Zahab's Last Wish, Weed was left with only two spaces for new quests.

But in case of serial quest, it is unpredictable what rewards await the user in the end. This serial quest introduced a secret class at the second stage. Even after he refused to convert to the class, he was given four practical skills. Imagine what rewards in the final stage would be like.

Weed wasn't stupid to say no to a good opportunity. Yet, it remained unknown when and how this would work out.

He bid farewell to the old lady's maid, and went back to the sculpture stop.

"O Weed-nim, I appreciate your hard work to bring me results so soon. I am once again assured that it was the right decision to entrust you with this quest" The shopkeeper said.

The shopkeeper paid Weed as a reward for the request.

Weed received 2 silver coins, recovering the silver coin that had been virtually robbed by the bard.

When he returned to the Training Hall, he received another silver coin, along with a word of commendation from the instructor. Therefore, it was a total of 5 silvers that Weed had earned so far.

He also leveled up twice, to level 3. He distributed those earned stat bonus points equally to AGI and STR.

"Why aren't you taking on another quest?" he asked himself.

Weed wrestled with a sudden temptation, but picked up the wooden sword again. A quest that was undisclosed to the public similar to the quest he just undertook, was rare. That was why Weed earned generous rewards for his level.

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Chapter 4 : Dreadful Weed

The civilization of the Versailles Continent dawned approximately one million and eight thousand years ago. Back then, Humans, Elves, Dwarves and Orcs lived together.

Dwarf women with deft hands served as midwives to baby Orcs. Orcs in infancy were christened by elven women, and human women bathed them clean in water. The four races had lived together, each compensating for what the others were missing.

The elf rangers gathered fruit from trees, the dwarf crafters made tools, and human scouts hunted game along with the Orc warriors. As deadly monsters abound in the world, the weak had no choice but to rely on one another to survive.

Orcs, who grew up within two or three years, were fine warriors by nature. Born with unnatural strength and a battle instinct, they sustained the elves and humans.

The Orcs claimed the leadership of the four races both in name and reality as no other race could keep up with the fertility and combat skills of the Orcs.

However, when humans developed agricultural techniques, domesticating plants and animals, they took over the food supply chain, and gradually challenged the supremacy of the Orcs.

The elves, who learned elemental and spirit magic in alliance with Nature, became arrogant and began to distance themselves from the Orcs, who they branded ignorant.

The dwarves advanced metals technology day after day, which gave them a new generation of weaponry to brave the Orcs.

The alliance of the four races was dismantled after a series of numerous hostile disagreements and bouts of jealousy.

The humans built towns, which later banded together to create kingdoms, on rich soil.

The elves moved to the Forest of No Return where the elements and spirits were magnified in effect, extending the domain of their magic widely.

The Orcs dispersed all over the wilderness and virgin soil, hunting the wild and distressing the civilized as they wished, enjoying combat without restraint.

The dwarves stayed holed up in the mountains, mining raw ore and refining their crafts.

Inevitably, human and Orc argued over scarce food, and the elves and the dwarves loathed each other in a struggle to secure preeminence in the Natural world.

This is the history of the Versailles Continent, the forgotten myth of four races.

The rumor about the odd stranger ran like wildfire through the Citadel of Serabourg.

It was about a beast who had been swinging a wooden sword at a scarecrow wordlessly for four consecutive weeks in the Training Hall.

Bluster *Whack*

Weed was swinging the wooden sword in silence. His strikes at the scarecrow showed no mercy. Every time the wooden sword sliced the scarecrow, a heavy sound exploded.

In the earlier days, he was content with barely grazing the scarecrow. As his strength and agility increased steadily, though, the wooden sword had been gathering force.

"Is he really a user?"

"Do you think he's a real man? Slim chance."

"Look at him. I bet he's not."

"Could it be an NPC?"

"Given his sudden appearance..."

"He should be an NPC connected to a quest!"

The eyes of some users began to glow with enthusiasm and a bunch of users offered food and money to win Weed's favor, wondering if he was a quest NPC. Too proud to be treated as a beggar, Weed declined them, but they were persistent.

"Come on, please take this..."

"Want something else? Just tell me. I'll go find it."

"Don't you think a steel sword is definitely better than this wooden sword? I can give you a long sword, and it'll come in handy."

They trailed after Weed in the hope that he might introduce them to a special quest. They didn't know it for certain, though, because Weed repeatedly denied being an NPC, and shooed them away, saying they were disturbing his training. Oddly, this rather strengthened their conviction.

"He's not accepting any gift."

"Who can hit the scarecrow not only one or two days, but for four weeks in a row?"

"And he's a big friend of the instructor...!"

The instructor, who had always looked down upon users as a nuisance, was nice to Weed, going so far as sharing lunch with him every day. To the public, Weed didn't look like a human.

The only way to tell users from NPCs is when they come out with their identity. This was why Weed caused misunderstanding in other users.

Several high level users saw through Weed's intentions to improve strength and other stats. They came near and were nice to him. They approached him on purpose, knowing full well he was a user.

"If you join my clan, we will support you to save your disappointment."

"We will sponsor you until you hit level one hundred. Nothing spared."

Royal Road has a concept of clans or guilds like other online games, but there is a bigger picture.

Emperor!

The objective of every clan with high-level rankers is to enthrone an Emperor in their midst—to found their own empire on the Versailles Continent, and rule over all creation.

With taxes collected monthly, feudal lords and monarchs can build essential facilities such as granaries and blacksmiths' workshops in towns under their supervision, or throw in money to enlist recruits and train them well.

Given a ruler who administers the affairs of state, the economy develops, technology advances. Technological innovation leads to better weaponry produced by blacksmiths, and the size of a city depends on its public security and sanitation.

In laying down national and regional policies and setting up diplomatic ties with other countries, the king on the top of a pyramid-like society exercises greater authority than anyone else.

Kings encourage cities and fortresses to expand in their domain, drawing more immigrants who become subject to their rule. Besides internal affairs, there is war.

If and when someone declares war, the armies called up by ambitious kings engage in battle with each other under the command of generals.

Layman users in the position of subjects demand that their user kings are wise and just. Therefore, the cities where they reside will grow more prosperous, and trade of goods will be more dynamic, which stimulates the users to aspire for success in the game.

Still, Weed declined all the clan offers.

Strength rises by 1 point. (+1 STR)

Agility rises by 1 point. (+1 AGI)

Vitality rises by 1 point. (+1 VIT)

Fame rises by 20 point. (+20 FAME)

Life rises by 100 point. (+100 HP)

The wooden sword had not shown any sign of pausing suddenly stopped in mid-air. Then Weed closed his eyes.

"I've made it."

For four weeks, according to the game's time flow, Weed had improved the stats as much as he could in the Training Hall. To his surprise, he earned a little fame—never hurts to have some fame.

The more fame you have, the cheaper you can buy goods from grocery stores or blacksmith's workshops, and you can get more respect in talking or negotiating with NPCs.

The instructor, who had been watching him pleasantly at a distance, walked up to Weed and said,

"Good job, Weed-nim."

"Thank you, sir."

"I didn't expect you would come so far. Yet you overcame my prejudice. I am very proud of you."

"I'm indebted to your teaching, Honorable Instructor."

"Haha! You're absolutely right." The instructor laughed heartily.

Weed knew from experience how high a simple word could lift up the instructor.

The instructor handed a sword to Weed.

"What's this sword...?"

"It is yours. This sword is awarded to a man who completes the basic training program."

"Basic training..."

A question suddenly occurred to Weed.

He had learned by accident that he could improve stats by swinging a wooden sword at a scarecrow in the Training Hall.

While combing through online game communities, he had read a posting about it in a forum run by a couple of small-size clans.

Therefore, he had focused on bringing up his stats as much as possible in the Training Hall before he began seriously.

Weed had good reason for it, though he conceded that it might sound inefficient to invest four weeks to improve his stats slowly one by one.

As far as other users were concerned, they would rather waste less time to acquire an item that boosted stats so little.

"Still", Weed thought, "it isn't the same as training hard to strengthen the bottom line stats of one's avatar. It makes a difference, a big one"

As good luck would have it, you might pick up a good item during a journey, but your original stats will be the same, regardless of whatever items you are equipped with. Suppose you rise forty points in strength, and imagine what it will be like when you wear a +50 STR necklace.

The stats that Weed had drilled in the Training Hall would help him right up to the last minute of the game play.

Weed pondered the meaning of the instructor's remark and finally asked, "Do you know how many people completed the basic training by now?"

"Sixteen here," the instructor answered immediately.

He added,

"The Continent is vast, Weed-nim. I think there are a total of thirty-eight hundred foreigners who finished the basic training program in all the Training Halls. To the best of my knowledge, nobody has finished the basic training as fast as you did."

Thirty-eight hundred people! Weed's eyes flashed fire.

"They are my potential rivals"

His next question broke a brief moment of silence.

"You said this is basic training. Do you provide a higher level of training program?"

"I don't, but there are other places."

"Where are they?"

"I do not know where they are located. I heard they were open only to those who were destined to find them. You must finish a basic level to be qualified for the next level of training."

"Thank you for the information, Honorable Instructor."

"Don't mention it."

Weed was now done with the Training Hall. When he turned to leave, the instructor called to him.

"Weed-nim, do you have a plan?"

"Excuse me, sir?"

"An expeditionary force is scheduled to depart for the Lair of Litvart a week from now. A colleague of mine is the commander of the force. His name is Midvale. If you do not have a better thing to do for now, why don't you lend your sword to him?"

A Clean-up Operation in the Lair of Litvart

Rosenheim Kingdom has been greatly suffering from the monsters, which have risen in number for the last decade. King Theodarren, righteous and benevolent ruler of Rosenheim, issued a royal decree to order a distinguished knight, Sir Midvale, to explore the Lair of Litvart and root out monsters. Eradicate the monsters in the Lair of Litvart with Sir Midvale and his soldiers.

Difficulty: E

Quest requirement:

Failed if you are killed.

The instructor's proposal was a mission that any other user would rush to accept gladly. The Rosenheim Royal Army abounds in well-organized, hard-trained soldiers. The average level for infantrymen is almost thirty, and a knight's level surpasses 150 generally speaking.

In particular, those knights with their own name among the ranks are revered as Titled Knights. Their levels lie between levels 180-220. This size of force can clear away any lair without complication. The Lair of Litvart is not at all likely to be an exception.

According to Weed's research, the Lair of Litvart was infested by kobolds at levels in the twenties and goblins in the 50s.

All Weed needed to do after he joined the force on the mission was to stay alive, whether he actively look part in a battle or not. It was a golden opportunity that was offered to him out of the instructor's goodwill. But Weed shook his head.

"I am sorry, sir."

You have declined the quest.

"No way. What is troubling you, Weed-nim...?"

"It is nothing. I just don't have a class yet."

"O my Freya... you're right! I acted too rashly. Visit me any time you please. I will let you know if I can recommend a quest that is suitable to you."

The instructor had not only reached level two hundred, but also kept in contact with the soldiers who were trained by him. In other words, he had established his own network in the Royal Army. Still, the instructor's relatively humble position prevented it being tracked by high-ranking officials. Suddenly, the instructor asked in a low voice,

"Weed-nim, have you chosen what class you want to convert to?"

"I am yet to decide. I have to go to the intelligence guild, and see what class they recommend."

The intelligence guild gives counsel to users, depending on their stats and skills.

In the early stage, most users walk a similar path, so the intelligence guild classifies them into two groups—combat classes (melee and supportive) and craft classes, including merchants.

On rare occasions, the guild unveils hidden classes. Very rare, indeed.

"I am telling you this only because you are... a trustworthy man who refused the opportunity to convert to such a trashy class as sculptor. Tell me honestly, Weed-nim—do you regret not having taken up the engraving knife?"

"No way, sir! Sculptor, I won't take it no matter what."

"Humph, I have never told this to anyone else... you are the first man. Come closer."

The instructor's voice dropped to a quiet murmur. He spoke in a whisper close to Weed's ear. Weed got goose bumps when the Orc-like instructor's breath brushed over his face, but he kept his disgust in check.

"You are looking for a fine class. I will show you the way. Have you heard of Rodriguez the Sage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go visit him. Praised as the Star of Wisdom, he is revered as being knowledgeable in all things. He will tell you what profession suits you best, much better than a mere intelligence guild. But..."

"...?"

"The catch is the Counselor is a queer fish. Worse enough, you never know where he will hop next. He's ill-natured, naughty and narrow-minded."

"..."

"You can't see him in person in the usual way. He will not bother listening to you in the first place. But if you give this to him, he will do you a favor, only once."

Item: Queen Evane's Handkerchief

"Thank you, Honorable Instructor."

"Not at all. I feel rather responsible for your decision because I can't deny that many sword warriors fare worse than moonlight sculptors. I pray to Freya that you will get a fine class. Beware of Counselor Rodriguez. He knows no shame, so you should not tell him what you want until he speaks to you."

When Weed made his farewells to the instructor on the way out of the Training Hall, a towering man approached him.

The giant's name was Python, a fearless warrior with a gigantic sword.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Yes."

"Hmm, where are you going?"

"I'll first find a class, and then I'll work hard to raise my level."

"I'm sure you will make it to the top very fast. I haven't seen anyone as steadfast as you in online games! Though I'm proud of how tough I am, you are literally a man of steel."

Python was a warrior at level 288.

He had learned a new skill, so he had come to the Training Hall to experiment with it.

When he arrived at the hall, it was crowded with a flood of users, all of whom had gathered to observe Weed.

Python was also a man of curiosity.

Some people got Weed mixed up with a NPC, but when Python, squeezed by the crowd, overheard that a user could improve stats in the Training Hall, he had started whacking the scarecrow right next to Weed.

The force that was released from Python's massive figure had been shocking.

With a few more users who had participated in the show, Python had unintentionally diverted public attention from Weed.

For the last week, Python was the only user who Weed had spoken to so far.

"Thank you for your compliment."

"Anyway, I'm looking forward to it! The day we run across each other. You won't disappoint me, will you?"

"You'll be disappointed."

"Huh?"

"With your weakness, I'm far tougher than you can imagine."

"Fahahahaha."

Python laughed aloud. As his level was in the high 280s, he ranked among the strongest and was treated with respect everywhere he went. He was intrigued by Weed, who could make cutting remarks to the powerful.

Python's eyes narrowed a little more seriously.

"I'll be really looking forward to it."

"Take care."

Weed said goodbye to him, and headed to the manor of Rodriguez the Sage.

"Rodriguez the Sage, the Star of Wisdom, is omnipotent in knowledge. He will give me guidance as to what class I should get," he told himself.

The manor of Counselor Rodriguez was located in the northern section of the Citadel of Serabourg, and soldiers were on the watch, circling the manor.

As soon as Weed walked close to the gate, two soldiers called out for him to stop.

"Halt! What's your business here, stranger?"

"I am here to visit the Counselor. I have something for him the instructor in the Training Hall entrusted me with."

"It's too bad. I understand you have business to be taken care of, but the Counselor does not expect anyone with such little fame," the soldier answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

"But I have an article the instructor asked me to deliver to the Counselor in person."

"It is none of my business. Do you think you are allowed to visit His Highness just because you have something for him?"

"..."

In short, it requires an impressive reputation, or comparable fame, to pay a visit to Kings or nobles and Weed's fame was only 20, far too low to enter the Counselor's manor.

"I personally know the instructor in the Training Hall very well. He once trained me with his own hands. Still, I can't permit your entry to the manor."

"If you insist on that, am I allowed to stay here as long as I don't enter the manor?"

The guards were perplexed by Weed's question. "Make yourself clear, traveler."

"I'm asking if you mind if I just sit down on the street and wait for the sage to come out?"

"Not at all." The soldier added indifferently, "The Street is open to everyone."

Weed nodded slightly.

"Thank you for your permission,"

"Not at all. But..."

"Beg your pardon?"

"I'm telling you this because you're an acquaintance of the instructor – the Counselor often locks himself in the manor for a week or so. Especially when an unwelcome visitor knocks on the door, he will definitely keep it shut. Are you still willing to wait for him?"

Liu Bei visited Zhuge Liang three times to recruit him, and he turned out to be the cornerstone in founding a new dynasty in south-western China. Reminded of the famous episode, Weed nodded.

"Yup."

Weed squatted across from the manor, anticipating the Counselor would emerge any second. He sometimes chatted with the guards, and quickly learned that the instructor was well respected among the lower ranks.

"A man who had once dreamed of knighthood, he is now fully qualified for one."

Meanwhile, the night deepened and the Sage's manor darkened.

"I'd be a liar if I said I expected to get what I want on the first day. He can't hide inside forever."

Weed found it futile to mount guard over the manor because the Counselor was asleep. He withdrew from there and headed for the gate.

A moonlit night intensifies the brutality of monsters on the Versailles Continent. They get stronger by half, and yield an extra thirty percent of EXPs. This provokes a heightened attention from users to avert the risk of death.

That night marked Weed's first adventure away from the Citadel. On a wide-open field a bunch of users ran after foxes, rabbits and raccoons, a scene created by newbies, whom Weed would soon join.

"So I have something I can use as a weapon...?"

He took out the iron sword given by the instructor, and held it tight.

"Item stat window."

Hard Iron Sword:

Durability: 54/54

Damage: 10-14

Awarded to those who completed the Basic Training Program. This widely-used long sword is better than basic type weapons that are available in a blacksmith's workshop.

Equip:

+10 STR

Requirement:

STR 40+

VIT 35+

The sword given by the instructor was one of the finest available to Weed. He swung it a few times, realized that its balance was ideal, and felt comfortable with it. Weed checked the other weapon.

"Engraving Knife Stat!"

Zahab's Engraving Knife:

Durability: 984/1000

Damage: 40-54

A short tiny engraving knife, specifically built for delicate workmanship. This knife is very sharp.

Equip: Increases your chances of scoring a critical hit.

The engraving knife dealt more damage than the hard iron sword, but Weed chose the latter. For one thing, it was longer, thus reaching farther. With the engraving knife, he felt it tricky to work on the enemy. The hard iron sword was more useful in terms of slaying monsters.

Moreover, the engraving knife didn't wear down easily, thanks to its high durability. This advantage transferred to Weed, who had obtained the repair skill, and the hard steel sword provided more opportunities to sharpen the repair skill because it was comparatively fragile, requiring frequent maintenance.

"Great. I guess I'm ready to go." Weed swung his iron sword about. "Raccoons, foxes, wolves, bring it on. I'll take all of you down."

The moment he went out hunting—

"Excuse me." Someone spoke to Weed, who was walking in silence.

"Are you alone?" Weed turned around. He saw a cute-looking girl right in front of him. She wore a cotton hat and bluish leather armor.

"A girl," he said to himself.

"Yes, It's only me." Weed lowered his tone.

"Do you want to join us for a hunting mission? We've got a mage, a cleric, an archer and a monk."

Weed looked over her shoulder before he answered. There were two girls in robes and a man who he guessed was a ranger. Once he sized them up, he figured out why they had asked a stranger to join their party.

Those users were all 'squishies' wearing clothes and leather armor, limited to long-range attacks, so they needed a missing piece—a tanker who would provide protection for them.

It's not a bad deal. It's my first battle, and it's probably better to start off in a party. Always better safe than sorry, he thought.

Weed readily consented,

"Sounds good to me."

"Thank you."

Weed quickly joined the party.

"Nice to see you. I am Irene, level 7 priestess. I specialize in healing and divine power protection expertise."

"I'm a level 6 mage, name's Romuna. Mainly deal with the element of Fire.

The two girls introduced themselves first, and then it was the man's turn. He studied Weed's face with curiosity before he spoke.

"I'm Pale, level 6 archer. You have balls, man, going solo on night hunting like that."

"Hehe, I'm Surka, level 7 monk."

They told him their names and levels, and now it was Weed's turn.

"Name's Weed. Level 3."

"..."

A quiet shock swept over the others.

Pale plucked up courage and asked,

"And what're you equipped with?"

"All I've got is this sword."

"..."

Down to the last dust in his pocket, Weed only had five silvers. Fine leather armor, other than disposables, cost thirty silvers.

Weed had not bothered with ordinary quests, so he didn't even have enough money to purchase leather armor.

"And your class is...?"

"Undecided,"

Weed answered, shaking his head dubiously. He sensed something wasn't quite right, though he could not pinpoint why.

"Gosh!" Pale finally sucked in a breath. He looked completely lost.

"I guess it's up to you to take your time deciding what the best class is for you... By the way, it looked like you were hunting alone. Is it your first time out here?"

"Yes, I'm new to the virtual reality game."

"I see. Why am I not surprised to hear that?"

At Weed's frank response, Irene and Romuna looked at Surka with scolding eyes. Their looks said that she had picked the wrong guy.

Lv. 3, class: Undecided.

As if that were not bad enough, this shabby-looking kid was a newbie in virtual reality.

Lack of experience usually proves fatal when confronted by a monster in your first battle. You simply lose your calm, lose your reason, and then lose your life, in that order.

They were aware of this because they had been through their share of newbie-hood.

These animals, though tailored for beginners within reach of the Citadel, are still comparatively fierce and mighty. Quite a challenge for a single player.

"Whew... I think we're kind of in trouble."

Pale didn't know what to say and made an evasive smile. Weed decided to talk straight in order to save everyone from discomfort.

"I'll leave the party if you think I'll do more harm than good."

"I'm sorry."

Surka acknowledged her mistake and bowed to Weed apologetically. At the second look, she saw he was wearing basic GIs.

"I thought he was strong 'cause he had an iron sword. Geez, where did he get that sword? It looks awfully good..." She said to herself.

Weed broke away from the part and headed to the field alone. Pale and Surka felt guilty having disowned him.

"What should we do now? Look for a replacement?"

Replacements were everywhere. The only commodity that was long on supply on the Versailles Continent was users, and monsters were short in supply.

"Look, we already shook hands with him."

"If we fight as a team, it'll work out, right?"

"I guess so, but..."

"Let's give it a try."

They caught up with Weed. He was busy staring at a bunch of rabbits and raccoons that were hopping about. He was ignorant of monsters in general, how much damage they could inflict and what pattern they would use to attack.

Pale asked, "Excuse me, if you're still interested, we want you in."

"I have a low level. If you're okay with it, I want to play with you guys," Weed said cautiously.

"Well, we're cool. We are now a team. You don't need to exert yourself on the front, and if you feel like it, you can stay behind us."

Pale suggested Weed take cover instead of taking an active role in hunting. In their eyes, he was no more than a pure newbie.

"Are you sure about it?"

"Yes. You can't collect as much experience as you are actually bringing your party down when you're making less contribution, but your priority at this point is raising your level. Listen, level three to level six makes a lot of difference, even though they're only three levels apart. If you're at level three and add all stat bonus points in strength, you'll get twenty-five. I have forty. Add to it ten bonus points in the course of converting to a class, and the gap between you and me widens drastically."

"..."

Pale omitted this, but additional rewards in accordance with a user's class were more noticeable.

For instance, take an archer wielding a sword and a sword warrior yielding a sword, the sword warrior can inflict twice the damage as an archer wielding a sword. On the other hand, his arrow will make less than half the damage dealt by the archer. It was, to say the least, a disappointment to the others that Weed was freelance.

"Now, stay behind and watch us take down mobs for now, Weed-nim. When you find room to spare, get in, have a go and leave. It will help us if you just confuse mobs, divert their agro elsewhere."

Weed nodded. "I see."

The confusion was settled, and Weed decided to join their party and hunt monsters together. It was a pick-up group designed to handle dull beasts around the Citadel, and his teammates had already been engaged in pick-and-roll without him. The thing is, though, that they had realized it was too risky that only Surka, a monk whose agility in dodging attacks compensated for a low defense level, had tanked on the frontline. That was why they had been searching for a tanker.

"Damn it."

Ahn Hyundo, successor of Bonkuk Kumdo, one of the traditional schools for swordsmanship in Korea, pursed his lips in dissatisfaction. In the dojang, hundreds of teenagers and adults were practicing Kumdo, yelling battle cries, or kihap, in the language of Bonkuk Kumdo.

"Yatzl!"

"Yatzl!"

Ahn Hyundo could hear erupting kihaps and the whistling sounds generated by swords in action.

Once you master swordsmanship, a sound gives you a clue as to which stage a Kumdo practitioner is in.

Ahn Hyundo was ranked the best Kumdo master, recognized worldwide, four-time World Champion of Swordsmanship.

As Ahn Hyundo matured in age, he retreated to his own dojang and dedicated his time and energy to training the next generation of Kumdo practitioners, but his hand and body had never left the sword, even for a second.

"I haven't seen anyone with the guts. I should have trained that kid properly when he was around. He's got something, something that could transcend my talent. Plus he's got the guts and balls..."

Ahn Hyundo used to be satisfied that he had quite a number of competent apprentices. They had enough talent to qualify for a medal in the World Championship of Swordsmanship that was held every five years.

One day, however, the grand master's perception had been turned upside down.

A year ago.

A man of about twenty years of age visited Ahn Hyundo's dojang.

"Hello, I am Lee Hyun. I've come here because they recommended this is the best dojang."

"Son, you handled a sword before?"

"No, sir. That's why I'm here to learn it."

"True. You must learn it. Learn and learn until you have an understanding of the big picture of swordsmanship, then we may talk about who's the best."

Ahn Hyundo believed it was the end of it, and forgot about the kid for a while. Then one morning, he saw Lee Hyun swinging a sword in a shower of sunlight.

Lee Hyun swung the sword for hours. His movement synchronized with his breathing patterns, and his sword emitted a beautiful sound. He had already reached a stage beyond what a beginner could achieve in a few months.

Ahn Hyundo summoned his subordinate instructors and asked them about Lee Hyun, who turned out to be devoted to ceaseless drills.

"Speaking of that apprentice, he's got the bug. I haven't seen anyone who's more obsessed with training than him."

"How obsessed is the kid?"

"Once he picks up a sword, he never lets it go, unless we pull it from his hands."

"You have to pull the sword from his hands to stop him?"

"Yes, master. If we leave him alone, he will swing the sword hard until he's completely out of breath. The first day he joined the dojang, he kept swinging the sword when his palms were shredded with bleeding."

"He went so far..."

"Yes, master. Exactly the same thing occurred on the second day. He trained in sword techniques while bleeding until a callus formed, his grip was firm, and his palms were as hard as a rock. So it's not surprising that he reached this level so fast."

"He's amazing!"

Ahn Hyundo chose Lee Hyun to be his successor without telling him so.

Talent and work. The apprentice had both virtues, and what really captured the master's mind were his eyes. When Ahn Hyundo instructed his would-be successor to a duel, his eyes glowed with something distinctive.

It was the will to fight, which an ordinary man whose instinct had been emasculated by civilization could not muster. This was found in Lee Hyun.

It was still a time of trial for him. Ahn Hyundo believed that it was too early to tell his plans to Lee Hyun, which might jeopardize his progress. Therefore, the master had treated his apprentice

rather indifferently, motivating him with plenty of objectives and watching his progress from a distance.

Then, one day, Lee Hyun stopped checking in at the dojang.

—Back to now.

"Whew."

Ahn Hyundo's sigh deepened.

"I wonder what he's been doing. I should have made him my successor when I could."

Taking cover behind Pale, Weed was watching the battle from a safe place.

"Irene, help me!"

"Roger! Fire ball!" Romuna chimed in.

"Divine power leads us to a triumph, Blessing!"

While Surka the monk was attacking a fox head-on, Romuna, Pale and Irene attacked at the fox from behind.

They adopted this strategy because Surka's level was seven, the highest among them, and the rest were squishes with relatively low life and defense.

The fox moved swiftly from one place to another. It dodged Surka's fist with little damage, and the tail attacks when it suddenly spun around were sometimes critical enough to make her back away.

With little stamina left, Surka often found herself at the risk of immobilization. Then, Irene would give her rapid healing to replenish her life and stamina while the others attacked the fox to take the agro away from her.

They're not bad.

The quartet's teamwork was emphatic.

They neither lusted for cheap items, nor became worked up over small things. It appeared to him that the chemistry among his teammates had built up over time. Perhaps they had teamed up in another on line game before they migrated to Royal Road.

Still, they had to ratchet up the tension while hunting a fox at level five.

Raccoons and rabbits were easy game, which Surka could handle alone. But a fox was tough, to put it mildly.

Weed easily grasped that this party focused on foxes in their hunting spree. He watched the ongoing battle for a while-until he thought he had seen enough of it.

His sharp eyes analyzed the patterns in movement of the foxes and Surka.

It's easier than I thought.

They outnumbered their enemy by four to one. The way a fox moved was slow and predictable as far as he could see. He watched it until he gained enough confidence. Then, he held the iron sword and left the cover.

Surka smiled at Weed who was coming up to her side.

"Watch out, Weed-nim."

"Yup." His response was very short.

The monster on their radar was once again a fox.

"I'm going to attract her attention first Weed-nim, you attack later. Like when it's almost dead."

Surka punched the fox, which jumped on her in a reflex action. Romuna, Pale and Irene rained projectiles, both physical and magical, on to their victim.

When the fox's life dropped to one third, Weed slid in.

He had little experience of battles previously in virtual reality games, but he was acquainted with real sword fights through hundreds of duels. Plus, he had struck the scarecrow tens of thousand times.

The iron sword drew a shiny-white trace in the air in a fraction of second. At the end of the gaudy semi-circle was the fox.

Weed had timed the attack so precisely that the fox could not even try to dodge it.



CRITICAL HIT!

A message window that was visible only to Weed popped up. Critical hit!

That only appeared when the damage was doubled as a result of an effective attack, the outcome of exquisite timing.

Glint

The fox was cut in half, and disappeared in a flash. It dropped two items. A fox pelt and meat.

You can turn meat to steaks by cooking on a bonfire, and fox pelt is one of the most widely used materials for clothes. This kind of production process requires related skills. Newbies rarely learn such skills as cooking and tailoring. It is more often than not that these items are destined to end up on a shelf in the nearest grocery store.

"Great move! You were lucky this time."

Grinning, Surka collected the items.

Pale and Romuna, who had been casting the most powerful spells in case of a counterattack, were delighted by their new teammate's success.

"Weed-nim, we'll distribute items among us when the hunting mission's over."

"Alright."

"Then, I'll go lure another fox. Everyone, get ready."

"Okay. Bring a fox full of items again."

"Shoot. Wish it were up to me," grumbled Surka comically.

She dealt a punch to a fox that was wandering by, and attracted it closer.

"Fireball!"

"Blessing. Healing Hand"

Surka put up a tough fight as the fox was moving swiftly. Pale and Romuna pressured the fox persistently.

Weed's iron sword began to move when the fox had forty percent of life remaining. The sword slid out of the sheath and struck the fox like lightning.

Swish

As luck would have it, the fox didn't drop any item this time, not that items dropped by ordinary foxes were of any great value.

For the third fox, the sword went into action with fifty percent of its life remaining.

A critical hit didn't burst this time, so the fox survived Weed's first strike. It was followed by a sequence attack that flowed like liquid. The slain fox left only one item.

"What?"

"It seems strange."

"We're hunting foxes faster."

"When Weed attacks them, they almost always die."

A few foxes later, his other teammates detected the pattern.

Since Weed had joined the party, the pace at which they were hunting foxes had picked up. As soon as he pulled out his iron sword, foxes were helplessly slaughtered. They disappeared in a gray flash the moment Weed brandished the sword.

"What in the world!"

Pale's mouth dropped open, planning to stay there for some time. For Weed slew foxes so fast, Surka was busy drawing new ones from far away.

Even if Pale didn't bother shooting arrows, the pace of hunting hardly slowed down. This apparently inexplicable situation in the eyes of everyone else in his party was attributed to Weed's stats.

Initially, Weed had been given ten points in strength at the activation of his account, plus forty points that he had obtained from the Training Hall. He had invested stat bonus points acquired by the two level-ups equally in strength and agility. As a result, his strength and agility were both fifty-five, and stamina fifty.

Moreover, Weed enjoyed ten points in strength from the iron sword he was equipped with. To achieve this level of strength solely by raising your level, you need to hit level eleven as you invest fully in strength.

More remarkably, Weed's agility, stamina, willpower and vitality were way beyond his current level. It needs at least eight to nine extra level-ups to improve so much.

Weed, level three, rivaled an average Lv. 30 warrior.

A more surprising fact was that he had advanced sword mastery to level four while striking the scarecrow. It translated into forty percent more damage dealt to the enemy.

Weed's current level in sword mastery was four plus 98 percent. Once it reached level five, the effect on attack power would increase to fifty percent. Last but not least, the iron sword that the instructor had given Weed was a sort of high-powered luxury compared to his level. To sum it up, a fox was no match for Weed.

"That sword must be a unique item."

Pale immediately became suspicious. Otherwise, they could not come up with a proper explanation for Weed's uncommon strength. They were still newbies, so they could not see how Weed knew how to come in at the right moment.

In battles in virtual reality online games, as they are based on real-time movements, a martial art maniac is obviously better positioned than a klutz.

Weed utilized the sword techniques that he had trained for during the whole year, down to trivial-looking footwork, which was invisible to the untrained eye. They simply believed that his sword was superb.

"Great."

Excited, Surka lured foxes one by one.

Weed held the iron sword tight. He was in high spirits because the sword techniques he had examined and learned were proving productive.

"I didn't waste the year. Now!" he cried to himself.

CRITICAL HIT!

Many of Weed's attacks were deemed critical. He predicted where the fox would move, and executed his attack exactly where it went. His yearlong training that demanded sweat and blood was bearing fruit.

"Yatz! Yatz!"

Brisk battle cries came from his mouth. He was immersed in his own fight, keeping eye contact with the foxes and swinging the sword mercilessly.

Irene and Romuna giggled at the comical sight of Weed acting and looking so serious. Suddenly, the fox's paw scratched him on the chest.

"Healing Hand!"

Weed's torso flashed in white. Then, he realized that, even before he received the divine power, the gauge of his life dropped minimally.

"Maybe..."

Weed called out to Surka, who was running to draw another fox,

"Surka-nim"

"Yes, Weed-nim?"

"What's your life?"

"It's 150. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm just curious."

A fox could give a maximum damage of 15. Defenseless, Weed had to absorb the full damage, but his life was over seven hundred.

"Okay, Surka-nim. How about I do the tanking for now?"

"Are you sure it's okay?"

"Yup. So, you keep drawing foxes. Romuna-nim and Irene can't move far away because their stamina runs out quickly. Pale-nim, can you shoot at foxes in the distance to lure them over here?"

In a short time, Weed had assumed the role of leader of the party.

"Of course."

"Then, Pale-nim, please help Surka-nim bring foxes here."

Weed moved wildly. When Surka ran back, taking damage from a fox, he quickly took care of it. Those foxes drawn by Pale's arrows fell immediately by his sword, only to vanish in a gray flash. Weed hit level 4. He decided to invest every stat bonus points in agility.

The higher the agility is, the more easy it is to dodge an enemy attack and more likely you are to hit the enemy. It is directly related to evasion and accuracy.

The iron sword in Weed's possession was marvelous for a novice, providing extra leverage in strength. So he boldly invested 5 points in agility, instead of strengthening his avatar.

The hunting spree continued. Excited by the fast pace, Romuna and Irene could not believe their luck. They had never experienced such fantastic hunting.

"Surka, bring more foxes here."

"Exactly. Just leave everything else to us. You can concentrate entirely on the bait."

"Okay, Unni."

Surka was busy drawing foxes to them. So was Pale.

If Weed had hunted by himself, he would have to roam in search of target monsters and often take a rest to replenish his stamina when it ran out. Instead, his party provided bait and a priest for him, which unarguably quickened the pace of hunting.

It's not like a single play.

Back when Weed played The Continent of Magick, he had always been surrounded by monsters.

Weed used to walk in a dungeon populated by monsters and fight them as he pleased. He had logged on days and nights until he ran out of potions and herbs.

The inventory had been saddled with so many items that it interfered with his movement.

Monsters had surprised him everywhere. Weed had fought on in a circle of monsters.

He had killed so many, and in return, been killed as many times.

Weed felt that a group game was far from the way he used to play. It was more effective, and he was having more fun. Their strategy soon backfired.

"Kyah!"

Surka made a deadly mistake. When she tried to bait a fox, she unintentionally caught a wolf's attention.

While trying to run away, Surka screamed, "Run away, everyone!"

Growl

The wolf was chasing after Surka on four legs. Its monstrous muzzle dripped saliva.

While the rest faltered, Surka was constantly assaulted by the wolf. It was faster than a fox, easily gaining on her. It looked hopeless.

"I'll rescue her. You should all run away. By the power of the Holy Spirit, restore her health. Healing Hand!"

Irene the priestess rejected the impulse to run for her life, and cast the Healing Hand over and over to refill Surka's diminishing life.

"Damn it!"

After a moment's indecision, Pale began shooting arrows at the wolf.

One, two, three shots. As soon as he loaded an arrow on his bow, he shot it. The multiple shots, his signature skill, flew at the wolf, but it hardly flinched.

Now that the wolf had registered the entire party as its enemy, it would eventually attack Irene and Pale after it had finished off Surka.

Then, what would Weed do? He held the iron sword and stepped forward.

Can I make it? Why not! At first sight, the wolf's teeth and claws looked threatening.

Weed had bet that the wolf would throw its heavy weight on him and, rather than clawing, bite him in a crazed fashion.

"You'd better deal with me before anyone else," Weed said, standing in the wolf's way.

Weed didn't expect the wolf to understand what he had said, but as if it knew from instinct that the deadliest enemy had just appeared, it turned its eyes on him.

Growl

The wolf leapt off the ground, straight at Weed.

Weed rolled to one side swiftly, out of the path where the wolf was charging, and swung the sword. Its teeth nearly slit his throat.

That scratch alone slashed 80 points of his life.

"Weed-nim, run away! My mana ran out, so I can't help you with Healing Hand," Irene shouted.

"Shoot. What kind of priestess doesn't know how to manage her mana?" he said to himself.

Since Irene was fully assigned to healing, she should have always reserved a sufficient amount of mana in case of emergency. If not, someone could end up lying dead, or in the worst scenario, the entire party would face annihilation.

Weed had believed Irene must have had something up her sleeve when she volunteered to come to Surka's rescue. To his dismay though, all that she, a priestess by nature, had was heart.

The current predicament didn't give Weed any time to blame her. The wolf was growling at him.

After a few flames from Romuna, no more reinforcing magical power came flying from behind. Apparently, she had run out of mana.

Only Pale was left shooting arrows from a distance. The wolf got bloody, yet Pale's futile attempts only prompted it to intensify its aggression.

"Bring it on, you bitch!" Weed swung the sword and confronted the wolf.

Howl

Yelping, the wolf leapt on him. From that time, Weed's pose and moves changed drastically.

His legs were glued to the ground while his waist and shoulders rocked back and forth. Like a breeze, Weed let the fierce wolf pass by.

"I'll be a fool if I die here."

Weed was capable of predicting the wolf's next move, and a single wound wasn't as much as he had been afraid of.

"I know I can defeat it."

Weed loosened his grip on the sword on purpose.

Wail

The wolf groaned in a cry of pain. Even after Weed had sacrificed a portion of his power in exchange for a higher speed, the physical damage delivered by his sword was substantial.

"Damn it!"

Weed was also wounded every time the wolf clawed at him. His life of 700 fell to 200.

He was already coated in his own blood.

"Sorry, Weed-nim! I can't pin it down. It's moving too fast!"

Pale's low agility made it impossible to make a hit on the wolf, which moved like a streak of lightning.

"I'll fight, too."

Surka came to Weed. She had already been injured when she had been chased by the wolf, her life lower than half.

Stumbling with shaky legs, Weed said, "Now, listen. You guys all should run to safety while I can still cover you."

"But..."

"It's the only chance you have. Now!"

Pale and Surka looked at each other, but their legs showed no sign of fleeing.

Then, Weed murmured bleakly, "You fools! What's the point of sacrificing your life for a stranger?"

Pale felt like crying. For the record, Weed could have escaped death if he had decided to. He could have outrun the wolf to the gate of the Citadel where the guards would protect him from the threat.

Instead, Weed had stepped up, held his sword and his ground, and faced the wolf for his teammates, who he had never seen hours before.

"Weed-nim." Surka's eyes were watering. She, innocent and sensitive, was deeply touched by Weed's heroic act.

Staring at the wolf, Weed said firmly. "If you want to stay here, so be it. I'll do my best to fight the bitch. Still, you must get the heck out of here the moment I get killed."

"Yes."

"Promise me you will."

"Okay."

Surka and Pale walked away, creating a stage, and Weed got down to a bloody fight against the wolf, which still posed a serious threat.

Weed's life descended to 150 and before long, it went down to 70. The iron sword kept on missing the wolf by inches.

The wolf was bleeding so white that it seemed a single hit could knock it down, but Weed had failed to make the final strike so far.

Irene and Romuna realized that Weed's life finally reached the life-risking moment, below ten percent.

Pale's heart raced, and Surka's pounded. They tried to attract aggression from the wolf, but it knew Weed was the one to kill, entirely neglecting minor players.

One more hit from the wolf, and Weed would die.

If Weed died, he would lose some items from his inventory, drop one or more levels and be penalized by having his access to Royal Road denied for the next twenty-four hours, all because Weed decided to sacrifice his life to save a bunch of strangers.

The wolf snickered, sensing it had the upper hand of his archenemy.

Growl

When the wolf leapt to kill Weed with its final strike, his sword, which had missed it repeatedly, finally tore its ribs.

Before Weed's eyes, a cascade of message windows burst open.

You've leveled up!
Level up:
Sword Mastery [5]
+50% STR
+15% Agility
Skill:
You acquired a new skill, Engraving Knife Technique.

So many EXPs were pouring from the wolf that his level escalated to 5. Weed shook his head, half wondering.

"What's the engraving knife technique? Skill window!"

- ◆ Identification (Lv. 1 0%): Enables you to learn the true value of unidentified items. Mana consumption: 30.
- ◆ Sculpture (Lv. 1 0%): Enables you to carve or engrave various types of materials. Artworks of a high artistic value are worth a fortune. Easier to win a girl's heart.
- ◆ Repair (Lv. 1 0%): Enables you to repair weapons and armors. Beyond Lv. 5, you can forge new weapons and gears.
- ♠ Handicraft (Lv. 1 0%): Has extra effects on various types of craft skills, and sword mastery.
- ◆ Sword (Lv. 5 0%): Increases attack power and hit rating for swords.

◆ Engraving Knife Technique (Lv. 1 0%): Enables you to carve the invisible, the intangible.

Mana consumption: 50 per second

The legend tells that Grand Master Zahab accidentally discovered a way of truth when he was practicing the sculptural art—that sculpture is an art of transforming all creations at the sculptor's will. Zahab's secret technique is passed down to his successor.

Weed checked the skill window and shook his head in disbelief.

I need to try this engraving knife technique to figure out what the heck it is. It swallows mana too badly. At my level, I can't sustain it longer than two seconds flat.

The wolf had died, anyway.

Groan

Weed fell down to the ground, his face blank white. Then, Pale, Irene, Romuna and Surka ran to him.

The first words Weed uttered to his teammates were, "Surka, are you alright?"

"Weed-nim..."

Irene and Romuna were on the verge of bursting into tears.

Surka could not hide her tears.

Pale, the only man other than Weed, was at a loss for words, engulfed by a wave of emotion.

If a user's life goes down below ten percent, he will die slowly.

Within a minute, Irene recovered some of her mana, and cast Healing Hand to drag Weed out of death's grip.

"Thank you, Irene-nim"

"It's my pleasure, Weed-nim"

The look between Weed and Irene warmed up; a sign that she was growing fond of him, the same goes for Romuna and Surka. To his surprise, moreover, Pale was addressing him with respect and admiration that the archer had never shown before.

"Let's move on," Weed said when he felt better.

"Are you okay?"

"Yup. Alive and well," Weed said, rolling up his sleeve to expose his muscles.

Surka didn't make the same mistake again. The party under Weed's leadership created a striking record of sixty foxes in the next four hours.

Romuna, Irene, Pale and Surka all leveled up, as well as Weed, who achieved level 6.

Weed invested all the stat bonus points in agility.

"Whew. Good," Romuna said, sweating hard as she felt drained by the excessive consumption of mana.

"We have to leave now. We've got to go to classes in the morning,"

"We should get together and hunt again. You'll be here tomorrow, won't you?" Romuna asked Weed, who nodded slightly.

"Can I add you as a friend in my list?" Surka asked.

Pale and Irene were grinning.

"Yup." Weed added them to his Friends List, and said goodbye.

"These are your share."

Weed received three silvers when they distributed the spoils from hunting. After they left, he went on hunting more foxes.

This was why he hated party plays. When things got hot, people left.

Weed looked for monsters as he had an hour left until sunrise. He overlooked easy prey such as raccoons and foxes, and left the boundary of the Citadel to enter a forest where wolves were reported to lurk in every shadow.

Howl

A pack of wolves emerged. They crouched and came close to Weed who was walking alone, their eyes gleaming in elation.

The system of Royal Road allowed monsters to level up by internal conflicts between them or by killing users, so the wolves coveted lone users. When the wolves looked in Weed's eyes, though, they cowered instinctively.

"Those eyes..."

"This human doesn't consider us his enemy."

"He takes us for EXPs."

"Nice EXPs. Great item drops. It's what he wants from us."

The wolves saw through Weed's intentions. Worse, his will to fight made them recoil in fear.

Yap *Yap* They quickly turned tail to flee.

"How dare you."

The iron sword knew no mercy, and Weed knew no honor. He openly stabbed the backs of the retreating wolves, cornered them with nowhere else to go, and beat each and every of them to a pulp.

"You sons of bitches, come on!"

The moment that the sword slashed the air, another wolf fell into despair. Swift and merciless. Weed's extraordinary sword techniques terrorized the wolves.

So why had he fought bitterly against a single wolf when his teammates were around him?

On the edge of an imminent and unavoidable death, Weed had made the final strike to kill the wolf. In the eyes of his teammates, it was a lucky one. This mystery was kept by Weed.

Weed was done with the wolves as soon as the sun rose in the morning. He left the battlefield and headed for Counselor Rodriguez's manor.

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Chapter 5 : The Girl Who Lost Words

"Damn... it's day again."

Early in the morning, Lee Hyun was already deflated.

The South Korean Parliament, more prudent than His Prudence, had passed an unwanted bill nicknamed Leave No One Behind, which was devised to weed out social outcasts and misfits.

The whole stupidity was founded on a theory that asserted that those who were born and brought up in defective backgrounds created a higher rate of violent crimes and divorces.

According to the law, all Korean citizens who were twenty years old or above with noticeable defects in their background were required to visit a psychiatrist occasionally for a mental exam.

In short, Lee Hyun was eligible for it as he had lost his parents in his childhood, and his adolescence had been haunted by the loan sharks.

Lee Hyun went to the Great Society Rehabilitation Center.

"I feel like I've time traveled back to the sixties. Great Society, how lame." Murmuring complaints, Lee Hyun walked into the rehab. The name suggested romantically decorated interiors. The reception room was filled with the twenty year-olds who came take medical tests under the Socially Inept Law, so he had to waste another hour waiting for his turn to register.

"Hi, I'm Lee Hyun. I'm here to take a mental test under Leave No One Behind."

"I see. Please fill out this form." A nurse in a white gown handed a piece of paper to Lee Hyun.

"What is this?"

"We will create a complete analysis of your mental state based on your answers to this questionnaire. If you fall into the category of the socially inept, you will be ordered to enter the rehab center and receive periodic treatment. In that case, the government will send a monthly check to your family in compensation."

What an inhumane law. The government had done virtually nothing to support the disadvantaged when they were suffering horrifying childhoods, abused by their parents or cast out from school.

Now they had to accept a handicap if they wanted to apply to an undergraduate school when they were out of high school. Worse still, they were not even eligible for government jobs. The War on Terror presented a viable excuse to segregate the have-nots from the haves.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Lee Hyun took the form and filled it out quickly. The pen didn't leave the surface of the paper. Lee Hyun had thought of those questions for many years, so the answers were flowing from his heart.

"I'm done. Can I leave now?"

"Sure. Take this to cover your bus fare."

At least, the government showed a small token of pity. Lee Hyun took the coins and left the asylum. Meanwhile, the questionnaire submitted by him started a row among the psychiatrists in the center.

Cha Eunhee, Ph.D. in psychiatry was laughing her head off as if her neck was broken. The doctor whose attitude earned her the nickname of Ice Queen, was laughing mindlessly in public was a rare sight to nurses.

"Did she finally succeed in communicating with her pet dog?"

"Guess so. Nothing is impossible for the Dr."

Dr. Cha had immigrated to the United States with her parents, both diplomats, when she was young. She had graduated cum laude from Harvard University at the age of twenty, and earned her doctorate before she turned twenty-three.

Combining beauty and culture, yet puffed up with pride, she had never shown this level of humanity before, which became a topic on everyone's lips. In the end, the chief nurse decided to put her head above the parapet.

"Dr. Cha, what's so funny?"

"Check this out."

Laughing so hard she was crying, Dr. Cha gave the chief nurse what she was holding in her hand. It was a single page of a form that someone had filed out under Leave No One Behind. The Seven short questions and equally short answers.

Questionnaire

Name: Lee Hyun

1. What is your name?

Lee Hyun

2. What is your profession?

A great villain who will threaten world peace.

3. What are you doing?

Filling out this questionnaire.

4. What are the three most memorable, or valuable, things that you have done in your life?

Hit maximum level in the Continent of Magick. Played the online game for 204 hours running without eating or sleeping. Sold my account.

5. What do you think of politicians In power?

Why can't we just export them to China and Japan?

6. When did you recognize your social position?

After I watched 'Planet of the Apes'.

7. How would you describe your Identity In a single sentence?

I am Da Dragon.

The nurse looked taken aback when she finished reading the document.

"Don't tell me—is this an excerpt from some graphic novel?"

"No. It looks like one of the subjects filled this out this morning. Can't you see the stamp of confirmation right at the bottom?"

"A typical nutcase"

"You're wrong again. If he were a nutcase, he wouldn't be observing society as sarcastically and precisely as he did in this questionnaire."

Against common sense, Dr. Cha concluded he was mentally normal. From a psychiatrist's perspective, she could almost hear a scream of desperation rising from those answers.

To be able to ridicule society in such a way, this young man named Lee Hyun must have lived a colorless life in a world of cruelty.

"Whew." The chief nurse could not help but sigh.

She had no reason to contradict the doctor's conclusion. Nevertheless, she thought that either Dr. Cha, who had earned a Ph.D. in psychiatry in the United States and been idolized in globally recognized medical periodicals, was above normal, or this Lee Hyun guy was below normal.

'Both of them are simply abnormal. Or they are normal, and I'm the only crazy one in the room. Maybe the hard truth is, the whole world has gone insane', she thought as her head spun.

Dr. Cha picked up the form and got up.

"Society needs different kinds of people. Let it be. You don't need to look deep into it. By the way, I'm going to show this to Seoyoon."

"Patient Jeong Seoyoon?"

"Yes."

"Do you think she will read it?"

"She will. Those who shut their mind are more likely to yearn for attention from outside. I just hope she will laugh this time." Dr. Cha took the questionnaire that Lee Hyun had filled in and headed to the ward. Her destination was a special ward located on the 12th floor.

With the brand-new medical instruments and best doctors, furnished with a private swimming pool and an indoor gym, the room cost nearly twenty million won a day.

"Hi, Seoyoon, I'm here to see you,"

Beaming at her patient, Cha Eunhee entered the ward. A pale-faced girl lifted her head from a book that she was reading. Who, even among supermodels whose looks are their only highlights, would be overshadowed by her beauty—but her face was empty of emotion. Like a French doll, she seemed lifeless.

'God gave her beauty, more than she could live with' Dr. Cha thought.

For the girl was so beautiful, she was overly-loved by her protective father. The taboo blurring the line between father and daughter had never been broken, but her mother was paranoid, suspicious of her husband.

Her mother had been jealous of her own daughter, resulting in relentless abuse in the early years, and then came the tragedy on the fateful day. Since then, the girl had lost the power of words.

Back when she was young, Seoyoon had been an angel trapped in an earthly body. Dr. Cha, who used to be a close friend of hers, always felt sorry that she was deprived of her fair share of love and innocence.

"Take a look at this. I'm not allowed to remove any document from my office, but I wanted to show it to you." Dr. Cha gave the girl the form submitted by Lee Hyun.

Seoyoon's lightless eyes glided over the paper. Dr. Cha hoped she would burst into laughter.

Do you know that, if you laugh this time, against all odds, it will be your first time in five years? Dr. Cha thought.

But the still face shattered the doctor's hopes. The girl looked over the questionnaire and just returned it to her. The doctor felt heartbroken as she remembered how bright Seoyoon had once been.

"Alright... Do you need anything else?" Dr. Cha asked.

Seoyoon gently shook her head.

"Then, feel free to call me anytime you need something."

Dr. Cha slipped out of the room in silence.

"Did she laugh?" the nurse asked; she wasn't permitted to enter the room.

Dr. Cha smiled bitterly. "It didn't work again," the nurse said.

"No. I can't find a way to open her mind," Dr. Cha said. "I must rehabilitate her to maintain the president's faith in me—no, on behalf of Seoyoon..."

Countless of psychologists, psychiatrists and shamans had been hired to tackle Seoyoon's condition, to no avail. None of them could melt her frozen heart. Now, nearly everyone gave up any hope for the girl.

The nurse was also tearful. She was sad that such a cute girl neither talked nor laughed, stuck alone in her own closed shell.

"Isn't there any therapy or medicine to help her?" the nurse asked.

"A psychiatric remedy won't work as long as the patient refuses to open her mind and accept reality," Dr. Cha said.

"Then, she's going to live like that for the rest of her life... "

"We must do something to get her back. She just needs a cue, something that will lead her to face reality."

"But it's already been five years. Her consciousness might have gotten stuck by now—long gone."

"It is our job to let that happen. No matter what, I will bring her back." Dr. Cha's resolution was fierce.

She had majored in psychiatry and voluntarily come to this hospital in order to save Seoyoon.

"I already started a new treatment a year ago."

"I've never heard of it."

"Of course not. It's because I had to keep it secret. It's Royal Road. She's spending her days and nights in the game, except for medication and counseling,"

"Then—"

"Exactly. Let her start over in the fictional world. Take her out of the shell, and she will move on step by step where she can interact with others. I hope she will regain her lost faith in people, and feel emotions that she had never felt before, at least in virtual reality."

Back home, Lee Hyun visited the item transaction site before he logged into Royal Road.

Though Lee Hyun had dealt only one item there so far his status was triple diamond. The account in the Continent of Magick was valued at over three billion won.

It alone elevated him to VIP prestige.

[Buy] Iron Sword +20 STR for 400,000 won

[Buy] Rings 4 warriors. Offer.

[Buy] Blue Boots for Ranger Class. 300,000 won – negotiable.

[Buy] Earrings for Mages. Royal Road Kelly book value plus extra

A list of items in demand was thousands or pages long. A keyword yielded millions of search results, but few of them actually reached a deal.

As plenty of users were eager to get hold of cool items, demand was high. The supply could not keep up with it.

The system favored sellers, and when one of them posted his item, the auction was wrapped up in minutes.

[Sell] Mace of Red Spirit 105/105 Durability w/ 96-105dmg +15 STR [100,000 won+@]

[Sell] Shine's Blessing Ring: Rare / Heals 3 MP per sec for 5 min [From 3,000,000 won]

[Sell] Messiah Earring: Mag def. up. Fire magic +8% exp. [4,000,000 won]

[Sell] Blacksmith's Hammer of Thomas: 15% ? for success rate in forging weaponry.
Enables you to produce upgraded weapons at 5,000,000 won

Items in the top 10% of the auction boasted outrageous prices.

They were followed by lesser items beneath, which still amounted to at least a hundred thousand won.

This bull market signaled that items were in short supply.

If Weed had not been fortunate enough to obtain the iron sword in the beginning, he would have repeated commonplace quests here and there to collect a few coppers each time, and rushed to a blacksmith's workshop to buy a crude sword before he headed to the field.

Otherwise, he would have to punch monsters, relying on the stats that he had accumulated by striking the scarecrow.

In that case, his attack power would have been halved without the effects of sword mastery. Compared to weapons and gear that were highly configured, craft items for blacksmith and tailoring were inexpensive. Items relevant to the sculptor class were not even available.

Royal Road had opened only fifteen months before. The users were still immersed in leveling up and adventure. Lee Hyun had not seen any other craftsmen.

Seventy percent of the continent was still uncharted, that is why many dungeons are still unexplored, and many quests unsolved. With an infinite opportunity presented before their eyes, only a few users dreamed of becoming craftsmen.

Rosenheim Kingdom was a relatively new world that had been discovered only six months before (according to real world time). The expedition party who first spotted the kingdom had earned tremendous monetary gains.

Rosenheim was far away from the center of the continent, but uncharted territories and unearthed dungeons were scattered everywhere, and strong monsters abounded. This was the primary reason why Lee Hyun chose Rosenheim to start his adventure.

"Did I start too late? No, I still have a chance to catch up," he told himself.

Lee Hyun shook his head. While the competitors were leveling up and having adventure, Lee Hyun had worked out and collected information instead for one whole year to prepare. He didn't want to sell his account anymore.

The procedure of an online game's account transaction was trickier in a virtual reality game where an iris scan was taken to verify the player's identity. Plus, Lee Hyun had to stay in the business rather than making a quick buck.

Royal Road had to support his family financially at least in the next five years.

"At this rate, Royal Road will give my family something to live off of for the next five, no, ten years. Then, I can afford to send Hayan to college. Stability comes first. I'm a high school dropout, but Hayan deserves a better life—" he said to himself.

Ring

The phone suddenly started ringing.

Lee Hyun looked around and realized that Grandma and Hayan were out of the house, so he picked up the phone reluctantly.

"Hello. Who's speaking?"

"Lee Hyun, is that you? You still sound rough on the phone, man. It's me, Sanghoon."

"Oh, it's you. Sanghoon"

Lee Hyun had not heard this voice for a long time. Since I dropped out of high school, he thought bitterly.

"Hey, what's up?" Lee Hyun asked.

"We have an alumni reunion tonight—"

"I don't give a shit about it. Isn't it supposed be attended by the graduates only? It's not even funny if a dropout like me shows up in the reunion."

"But—"

"No buts. You know why I quit school. I don't want anything to do with the school now. That's it."

"..."

"Do me a favor, Sanghoon. Don't ever call me again."

Slam

Lee Hyun dropped the phone and sighed deeply. It was a phone call that he didn't want in the least.

If only he had been given an MIB-type memory eraser, then, without question, he would have erased the whole three years of high school—the worst memory and time in his life.

Back then, Lee Hyun had been beaten and threatened by the loan sharks. He had to sneak in to school. He had gone to school at dawn and left at midnight as if he were playing hide and seek.

For a couple of days, Lee Hyun had dodged the loan sharks, but they were smarter than he thought. They had hired street racketeers to pressurize the teachers.

Lee Hyun had been even told by his homeroom teacher to pay back his debt, right in front of his classmates.

The teacher had knelt before the lost student, pleading amid tears that he didn't want to get involved in that madness.

"It was the last straw. I quit school the next day," he said to himself.

Lee Hyun was a little curious what his friends were like in college. But showing his face in the reunion would only revive shameful moments.

'The inescapable truth is, the only thing left for me to do is to play the virtual reality game.' Lee Hyun finished lunch and slipped into the game again.

Weed never skipped his daily routine of settling down in front of Rodriguez's manor from dawn to sunset. Who else would be able to cope with boring days such as this?

"What do you think about going hunting in the West Valley? Hippies have a high level, but if we team up together, they're piece of cake."

"I heard you joined an escort quest for the caravans bound for Eline Village?"

"The price of troll blood has soared lately by almost triple the usual amount. I'm afraid a big war's coming."

Plenty of conversations snuck into Weed's ears.

Horses whinnied, carriages wheeled by.

Sitting by the main avenue, Weed could catch lots of information. He learned what was going on in the world. Without this type of fun, he would have given up already.

When Weed struck the scarecrow, he was at least enjoying a sense of becoming more powerful. It was self-torturing that he had to sit still under the harsh sunlight.

'Didn't Buddha face a wall for several days, meditating?' he asked himself.

He was going through a similar experience, resolved to see Rodriguez.

For the last two days, Weed had met Pale and Irene to go hunting together. They were not as strong as he, so they earned EXPs more slowly.

Still, they could hunt monsters as they pleased, day and night. Thanks to their flexible schedule, they caught up with Weed's level.

Thirty percent bonus on EXPs at night is technically canceled out by the fact that monsters are stronger by half than during daytime. More often than not, daytime hunting is more efficient for low-level users.

Plus, Weed was penalized by being undecided class-wise, so that he could not learn any skills. He would lag behind in skill levels if he converted to a class at a higher level than an average user. Last but not least, it tested his patience that he was wasting valuable time waiting in the middle of a street.

'What can I do now? Sculpture mastery... sculptures...' Weed looked around. He found a piece of wood that seemed to have been thrown off from a carriage's wheel.

Picking up the piece of wood, Weed activated the sculpture skill "Carve this."

Slide

As Weed's hand was moving, the wood was cut here and there.

"What the! — "

When the skill finished carving, Weed sighed. The once square piece of wood was whittled to a small circular piece.

"I'd better do it myself."

Weed picked up another piece of wood and began cutting it with the engraving knife. With his past experience of toiling in a textile factory focused his hands, and craft was like a second nature to him.

The engraving knife was so sharp that with just a touch, it carved through the wood. After a few attempts at trial and error, he finally carved the wooden piece into a short sword.

You gained expertise rating in Sculpture Mastery.

You gained expertise rating in Handicraft skill.

Two pop-up message windows appeared in cascade.

Weed learned something—that he didn't need to rely on the sculpture skill to carve an object, and that when he used the skill, he had to recognize exactly what shape he was working on.

I'd better practice sculpture more often.

Bored, Weed gathered several pieces of wood and started carving them.

'It's fun in its own way.'

It suddenly struck Weed that when he was in grade school, his art teachers had praised him for being good at making things. What Weed carved usually turned out useless, but a few of them looked acceptable even to his eyes.

He spent five hours carving wooden pieces. It seemed odd that a man should sit down cutting wood with an engraving knife, but he felt it was better than killing time in vain.

Level up: Sculpture Mastery [2]

Enables to produce more complicated works.

Decreases the rate at which you fail the skill.

Weed's handicraft skill and sculpture mastery leveled up quickly because their comparatively low level needed a small amount of EXPs to reach the higher level.

"Wow." Weed was awed.

As his level in sculpture mastery rose, various windows appeared while he was carving a piece of wood.

Visual tips were given, such as where to cut in a circle or what patterns were available. Weed could choose one of the tips, which was automatically processed. Even if he made an error, the sculpture mastery supplemented it to refine the final product.

Now he was making quality statues. Weed carved a fox that he had hunted the other night, and a wolf statue was easier than he had thought. He placed completed animated statues beside him.

Weed's skill level was currently two, but Zahab's Engraving Knife doubled it to four.

The knife was unique item that any sculptor would die for willingly. The problem is no one cares.

The sculptor class is near extinction. Even if there are some sculptor-wannabes left, their levels are mediocre, so it is hopeless to expect a good price for Zahab's Engraving Knife.

When Weed finished the pieces of artwork—

New Start: Art

"Art?"

Art

A gift in comprehending and practicing beauty, art renders meals and products elegant in an aesthetic and practical sense.

Improves when you see, hear, smell, taste or touch beautiful things, or create artworks.

"..."

Weed fell silent. Calculating the infinite potential promised by the art stat. Then, he made a quick decision.

"Delete the art stat!"

Stat cannot be deleted.

"Darn it!"

A user cannot create stats infinitely. The maximum number of stat slots is fifteen.

Weed found it intolerable that one of the slots was wasted on the art. Still, though he planned to fill them only with absolutely necessary ones.

'Can't help it!'

For Weed could not care less about the art stat. He swore that he would never distribute any stat bonus points to it.

He was relieved to know that the stat would increase automatically, but he was skeptical about how it would work.

Weed kept on carving wooden pieces. He was more interested in side effects than sculpture mastery itself, though.

"Sculpture mastery is good for nothing. But handicraft skill is worth effort in many areas. It will increase the attack power of swords, and archery relies on the hands. I can work on sensitive crafts, too."

Handicraft skill is a necessity to influence everything everywhere.

You gained expertise rating in Handicraft skill.
Level up: Handicraft Skill [3]
Enables you to learn cooking and tailoring skills.
Increases attack power with melee and long range weapons. (+3% ATK)
Increases attack power with fists. (+5% ATK)

Weed's handicraft skill level hit three as sculptural art helped him obtain EXPs faster.

It really pays off.

Weed was satisfied with a swift increase in his handicraft skill level. It was partly because the artworks that he had produced were, in fact, at level four thanks to Zahab's Engraving Knife, but sculpture mastery was the main factor.

Cooking and tailoring skills, for example, affect the handicraft skill greatly, yet they cannot rival sculpture mastery in delicacy and adeptness.

Simply put, sculpture mastery is essential to improve handicraft skill. Needless to say, nobody would bother learning sculpture mastery in order to improve the handicraft skill.

"Shit, I will never learn tailoring. I hate it!"

Weed considered it positive to master the basic cooking skills so that he could enjoy delicious food with online recipes.

Not to mention that buying ingredients directly from a grocery store and cooking them with his hands was cheaper than ordering a meat in a fine restaurant.

Also, Weed could preserve stamina better by use of hand-made meals when he went out on a hunting mission for one or more weeks without returning to civilization. Instant food could not restore the stamina stat to full.

Besides, Weed was so haunted by the memory of toiling strenuously in a textile factory that he was resolved to refrain from learning the tailoring skill.

"I hate tailoring more than anything else. I'll never, ever touch the damned thing," he told himself.

Absorbed in working on statues, Weed didn't realize that he was shadowed by black figures until his ears caught strange conversations.

"Wow, it's lovely."

"It looks like they're real."

"I've never seen such lively artwork before."

Weed looked up in the direction of the shadows. There was a group of people viewing his statues with admiration.

A tiny, cute girl pointed her finger at the rabbit-like statue.

"Hi, ajussi, is it on sale?"

Weed would have gently corrected her that he was only a teenager, but the way a single woman in her thirties would react to an 'old lady' label.

But...

"Yes. What can I do for you, young lady?" Weed said, smiling politely, for he smelt money.

"I want that one. How much is it?"

Handing over the rabbit statue, Weed gave it a passing thought.

"It's..." Weed was pressured to call for a fair price.

Dump those statues at a profit now, or they would sit there forever, ending up in a trash bin. He showed two fingers.

"I'll take so much," Weed said.

"Two silvers? It's cheaper than I thought." The girl paid two silver coins and picked up the statue.

"This rabbit's really cute. I'll keep it as souvenir."

Stupefied, Weed stared at her back as she left pleasantly. Two fingers meant two copper coins. Only two coppers. But the girl paid one hundred times his call.

"Hey, I want to buy one."

"Same here. I'll take the two foxes over there."

Weed's statues sold well.

Small ones were priced at two silvers, large ones three. Fox and rabbit statues that he had hunted in the field around the Citadel were more popular than sword- or shield-shaped ones.

The animals looked cute, and customers preferred them in memory of their newbie-hood.

A Lv. 100 user could easily make a couple of gold a day. To them, two silvers were a bargain.

The stock of statues quickly sold out.

"Can you please make us a fox-shaped statue? A fox with nine tails. Can you do that?"

Weed contemplated it and nodded.

The request wasn't as hard as it sounded. The standard form of a fox plus nine tails. Why not?

"Yes, sir. But you have to pay extra for a customized version."

"How much is it?"

"Five silvers would do it."

When the word 'five' came out of his mouth, Weed regretted that he might have gone overboard, but the buyers were quick to respond.

"Great. I want it. Then, you should make it look very beautiful. Please?"

In the Citadel, there is a sculpture shop, but it specializes in life-size statues, sometimes adorned with gold and gems, that are not affordable for most users. Since no one else was interested in sculpture mastery, those statues that Weed carved had a collectible value.

"Wow, it's cool."

Those who bought statues were excited, adoring their recent purchases.

"Can I get your name? So when I want to buy another one, I'll look for you."

"Weed – Sculptor Weed. If you ever want to have a statue to your liking, please feel free to contact me."

"Thank you. See you later."

Before sunset, rumors of the sculptor spread to the other ends of the Citadel and people came over to visit Weed.

"There he is."

"I want you to make some statues for us."

Weed had earned four silvers from overnight hunting the other night, but one or two statues made more money now. It took only ten minutes to carve a statue. As materials cost almost nothing, it was a very lucrative trade.

The next day, Weed stopped by a carpenter's shop and bought wood in bulk. He began to mass produce statues.

As the handicraft skill and sculpture mastery upgraded, more beautiful and delicate pieces were churned out.

Needless to say, blessed by his high skill, they sold at a higher price and a quicker pace.

Successful masterpieces, one or two in every thousand, were even put up for auction.

His opinion of sculpture mastery changed slightly in the process – a part time job to secure a satisfactory amount of pocket money.

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Chapter 6 : Over a Barbecue

Rodriguez was afflicted by a serious disturbance.

Gripe

It was the sixth day. Weed was still sitting down right across from the manor. Rodriguez in his seclusion had been aware of the presence of the intruder from the first day. Rodriguez bet that Weed was busy selling his statues to customers.

'I need to figure out this man and what he wants from me.'

In spite of his extreme laziness, on the sixth day Rodriguez finally gave in to his curiosity and moved his butt.

"Greetings, stranger. I am Rodriguez. What have you been waiting here to give me?"

"Wow! The Counselor's out!"

"It's really him!"

"Rodriguez, the Star of Wisdom!"

The crowd in the line waiting to buy Weed's statues was astounded.

Sages have something in common—they want to be left alone. Especially so when a stranger claims that he has brought something to be dealt with urgently. Rodriguez finally showed up outside the gate.

Weed fished a handkerchief inscribed with a blue bird from his pocket and presented it to the counselor.

"This is why I bothered waiting for the last six days, Counselor."

Rodriguez's eyes immediately were filled with tears.

"Aye, this is Queen Evane's handkerchief... There are too many eyes and ears here. Why don't you come in, traveler?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, guys! I'm closed for today!"

Beaming triumphantly, Weed folded his stall and stood up.

"No way!"

"Let me see, too!"

The crowd cried in protest, some of them even expressing grievance at being left out of the historical moment, but neither Weed nor Rodriguez could care less. Rodriguez then led his guest into the manor.

"Now it's quiet. Anyone who brings this handkerchief is privileged to tell me one thing."

"Yes, I know, sir."

Counselor Rodriguez! He had publicly declared that a man who brought Queen Evane's belonging be granted an audience. Weed had presented her handkerchief.

"Speak, traveler. I'm all ears for anything you say,"

Rodriguez's sincere tone portrayed the Sage's duty when dealing with a fellow man's distress. But the counselor was only pretending.

While Queen Evane's handkerchief was invaluable to Rodriguez, he didn't have the slightest intention to help Weed. Didn't that contradict his promise? Not really.

Rodriguez urged Weed to speak, and added that he would listen to anything from him. All that the counselor was obliged to do was learn what Weed was concerned about, in order to satisfy his intellectual desire and curiosity, that is all. He never considered actually presenting a solution to whatever problem Weed had.

A number of users had been cheated by Counselor Rodriguez in a similar manner. He had always played along with them, and evaded giving the answers that they had desperately sought.

Aside from his glorious title of The Star of Wisdom, the counselor was widely slandered as Dead End of Quests. Weed didn't fall for such a childish, naive trick. To begin with, he didn't trust Rodriguez.

A man is a very weak being. This was what Weed had felt earnestly throughout a year's preparation ahead of Royal Road—a weakening will and a comfort-seeking body. Weed never trusted himself, so why should he trust Rodriguez who he had not seen before?

"Does it make any difference if I tell you my problem?"

"What do you mean by any difference, traveler?"

"Will you help me when you hear me speak, Counselor?"

"That's..."

"Then, I refuse to say anything. Why bother? It will only get my tongue tired."

Rodriguez knitted his brows. He pretended that his integrity was soiled by Weed's paranoia.

"Aye, Weed-nim. Speak to me now! You may take the liberty of telling me anything you have in your mind. You brought me Queen Evane's handkerchief, and it is your right to speak your mind," Rodriguez said in his coaxing tone.

They were the words that Weed had been waiting for. 'I will get him to talk.'

Unfortunately for the Counselor, Weed was shrewder than the bunch who Rodriguez had dealt with before. He demanded the final seal of confirmation. "Counselor, will you tell me what I want to know if I ask you?"

"..."

"I shall remain silent until you promise in your own words."

"Eh... listen to me, Weed-nim."

"It seems Queen Evane's handkerchief is a priceless object, Counselor. In particular, to my eyes, it means something greater to you. Shall I take it back?"

"Keep it and leave now!"

"Sure. Godspeed, sir."

When Weed actually took the handkerchief and turned around, Rodriguez held two hands up in the air like a white flag.

"Wait! I hereby promise you in person that I will give you guidance when I hear your request. I have already promised to answer anyone who brings Queen Evane's belongings. So as long as it is within my capability, I am obliged to do so."

"Will you make a man's oath?"

"Of course... But you must do me a favor in return. Someday."

Weed considered Rodriguez's counter proposal, and nodded.

"Deal"

The counselor smirked. "What is it that troubles you, Weed-nim? A trifling question could not compel you to stay out there for the last six days." Rodriguez had his own agenda, though, behind his question, which spoke of his curiosity.

'Who cares about you? How dare you humiliate me into striking a deal with such a lowly creature as you! Answer you? I will, I will. But my answer shall be the trickiest one, terribly bent and crooked enough for you to pay the price.'

Rodriguez was confident in exacting revenge once he learned Weed's request.

If Weed wanted to find someone, he would be told about a nephew of a cousin of a mother-in-law of a friend of a wife of the one in question, who he would have to trace back on his own. If Weed wanted to find a place, he would be told of a faraway land with a similar name.

Snicker

Whether he was suspicious of Rodriguez's wily trick or not, Weed finally spoke his mind.

"I don't know what class I should select."

"Class? Now I see you don't even have one yet."

"No, Counselor."

Rodriguez laughed lightly. That was far more trivial than what he had predicted.

He had in mind that Weed would ask for the whereabouts of a secret dungeon, or Rosenheim's future policies.

A good dungeon yields a fortune to its discoverer, and a policy is valuable if you know how to take advantage of it.

Suppose you learn in advance that the royal court is planning to develop southern provinces next year, you can secure the commercial rights in the provinces preemptively and extract an enormous profit out of them.

A personal recommendation on what class to choose was indeed a piece of cake for Rodriguez.

"I can't believe such a light question has troubled your soul so profoundly. You didn't need to consult me in the first place. I advise you to visit an employment agency. Six days are wasted, Weed-nim."

"I was advised that the Counselor was the one who could make the best judgment."

"Good. I will recommend a perfect class for you! Show me your stats."

"Yes, sir."

Weed displayed the stat window for the first time since he had worked hard to improve his stats in the Training Hall.

"Stat window!"

Character Name	Weed	Alignment	Neutral	
Level	13	Profession	None	
Title	None			
Reputation	0			
Health		960	Mana	100
Strength		55	Agility	105

Vitality	50		
Wisdom	10	Intellect	10
Stamina	89	Fighting Spirit	67
Luck	0	Leadership	0
Art	23		
Attack	19		
Defense	5		
Magic Resistance			
Fire	0%	Water	0%
Earth	0%	Black Magic	0%

Weed had played day and night, and the outcome was level thirteen. He could take care of a wolf in no time now.

"My Freya!"

Rodriguez was stunned.

"Level thirteen, and life of nine hundred and sixty? For your level, you have exceeded fifty in strength and vitality, and a hundred in agility! Training Hall. I can tell you drilled in the Training Hall. Your willpower is undoubtedly admirable."

Rodriguez lived up to his reputation as the Star of Wisdom that he guessed right based solely on Weed's attributes. But his surprise didn't end there.

"You have level four in sculpture mastery, and level six in craftsmanship skill! It is incredible, simply unbelievable! What journey have you taken, I beg to hear."

Weed told Rodriguez what had happened. One event after another, Rodriguez could not close his mouth in incredulity.

"You have taken most unusual quests thanks to your friendship with the instructor. And—what? Did you succeed Zahab's will? But you have discarded the opportunity to become a Moonlight Sculptor?"

Wide-eyed, Rodriguez was taken aback. It should be noted that he had hardly flinched at the news of a neighboring kingdom suddenly invading Rosenheim without a preliminary declaration of war.

'Zahab. Who was he?'

He was one of the absolute powers hidden behind the scenes in the Continent.

Rodriguez had met Zahab a few times through Queen Evane's influence, and come to admire his sculptural art and sword technique—revering the sculptor's respectable personality and talents. Rodriguez had made friends with him. It had taken place fifty years before, the companionship between a pair of callow youths. The Counselor had even counseled His Highness to hold Zahab in the court at any cost.

"Hmph, you rejected such a fine class. What sort of class do you want to have, then?"

"Anything lucrative suits me."

Rodriguez fell into silence.

'Perhaps this chap is the One. The one I have been waiting for. The Will of the Great Emperor might dwell in him'— a mysterious class whose glorious traditions can be traced back to the Ancient Age.

Geihar von Arpen, the legendary emperor who had conquered the entire continent—his blood flowed in the sage.

'He still needs to prove his worth through tribulations. Can he pass the ultimate test? Anyway, it is he who will be tested, not I,' the sage said to himself.

Rodriguez said in a serious tone,

"Weed-nim."

"Yes, sir."

"I have a quest for you, though you must prove more patient than a caterpillar, more willing to survive than a cockroach, and more stubborn than a leech—or you will definitely fail. Are you qualified for this quest?"

"..."

"What's with that look?"

"I don't like the way you describe it. But I can tell you proudly that I am ready to do anything."

"Your confidence touches my heart. You look as if you can even chew maggots to the last drop of juice."

"..."

"Do as I say and the quest will give you a class. I warn you, however, that it will try your life. You are free to leave my advice on the table if you are afraid."

Weed finally felt some suspicion towards Rodriguez' scheme.

"Fine. I'm in."

"Have you ever heard of the Lair of Litvart?"

"Yes. sir."

The Lair of Litvart was coincidentally the destination of the quest that the instructor had mentioned to Weed. Or it's not a coincidence? You'll never know.

"Then, I am spared the inconvenience of elaborating on the details. Under your own steam, destroy the cloud of evilness that creeps in that lair. Once the evil is vanquished, you shall be granted the class that is destined for you."

Ting

Search and Destroy Operation in the Lair of Litvart [II]

There are a hundred monsters inhabiting the Lair of Litvart. Kill each and every one of them at least once, and prove yourself worthy of the honorable class. The completion of this quest will open a right path for your destiny.

Difficulty level: Unknown

Quest Requirement: None

Weed read the instructions over and over, down to the fine print. 'This ancient so-and-so is definitely plotting something.'

Otherwise, Rodriguez would not have given Weed a quest related to the Lair of Litvart—an underground dungeon of five floors, the lair had been thoroughly explored, most of which was disclosed to the public domain.

Many users were hunting monsters down there day and night. Monsters between Lv. 20 and Lv. 50 frequented the lair, while Weed was still level thirteen.

But the additional stats that he had improved in the Training Hall strengthened him so that he was as strong as an ordinary Lv. 40 warrior. Taking passive skills such as sword mastery and craftsmanship skill into account, Weed was confident that he could take down Lv. 50 monsters.

Destroying monsters in the Lair of Litvart was tough for Weed, yet far from impossible.

'Something is behind this, something. But I can trust that the sage is not lying to me. No matter what he is hiding from me, if I finish this quest, I'll certainly get a class.'

The scent of a trap in this quest was unmistakable.

'It's not about hunting regular monsters in the lair. Then what?' Weed's eyes flashed sharply.

"Tell me, Weed-nim. Will you take it or leave it? For your information, I can't come up with a better alternative. I will not force you. The decision is yours."

After a brief moment of mental juggling, Weed nodded.

"With respect, I gladly accept your advice, Counselor."

You have accepted the quest.

"Good. Come back here when you have beaten all the monsters in the lair. On the rare chance that you finish the quest. I have something to give you. It is certain, however, that you will absolutely fail."

Rodriguez laughed trenchantly.

Weed headed straight to the Training Hall. 'I must get there in time.'

Weed's footsteps moved fast because it was still before lunch break. When he entered the Hall, the instructor was about to stick a spoon in his lunchbox.

"Good afternoon, Honorable Instructor."

"You surprised me, Weed-nim! I missed you so much."

"I missed you, too. That's why I am here."

"Come over here and sit down. Help yourself before we get down to business."

"Thank you, sir."

With a good timing, Weed took care of lunch. The lunchbox was enormous, exactly proportional to the instructor's triple-X body size.

Subtracting Weed's portion from the lunchbox was like taking a cup of water from the ocean.

"By the way, Instructor, speaking of the quest you mentioned the other day—"

"Oh, that one."

"Yes, I'd like to join it."

"Haha. I knew it was coming, so I asked them to leave a place for you. I'm glad that you want the quest."

The instructor generously granted Weed's favor.

You have accepted the quest.

A Clean-up Operation in the Lair of Litvart

Rosenheim Kingdom has been greatly suffering from the monsters, which have risen in number for the last decade.

King Theodarren, righteous and benevolent ruler of Rosenheim, issued a royal decree to order a distinguished knight, Sir Midvale, to explore the Lair of Litvart and root out monsters. Eradicate the monsters in the Lair of Litvart with Sir Midvale and his soldiers.

Difficulty level: E

Quest requirement: Failed if you are killed.

"You have a day left until the troops leave tomorrow. Why don't you come and stay over at my place?"

"Apologies, Instructor. I should run errands for the mission."

"Too bad. I wanted to invite you to dinner."

"Dinner?"

"Yes. My wife said this morning she was going to cook pork barbecue."

Weed's mouth watered at the thought of pork barbecue. Savory and spicy barbecue! This temptation was irresistible.

"To be honest with you, I always wanted to visit your place."

"Haha, I knew it, too."

"Hehe."

Weed was never ashamed that he was living an obsequious or subservient life.

But... He—he was just sick and tired of rye bread. Royal Road reproduces every aspect of reality, even taste, to the extent that sushi made of fish that was caught minutes ago actually tastes fresh, and outdated food hardens and rots. Rye bread is no exception.

For the last two months, Weed had eaten only rye bread and his tongue was flavored with rye. The sight of rye bread made him feel like puking. A pork barbecue would be especially refreshing. Plus, it was a free meal—priceless.

"Then, I will come back in the evening, Instructor."

"Sure, Weed-nim. See you later."

Weed had accepted another quest in the Training Hall.

'Now all three slots in the quest window are filled up.'

The top quest was about Zahab's will, which was out of sight for now, whereas the other two quests were a combination set.

'Now, the problem is that Rodriguez's quest isn't what it appears to be... but it doesn't matter.' Weed braced himself to face the challenge.

In the worst scenario, he would die, so what? He didn't want to die meaninglessly, but some difficulties were always expected.

'Now I need to get ready, First, I go shopping for the trip to the Lair of Litvart.'

Weed walked downtown. Pedestrians in chic costumes passed by, while having vibrant conversations. A bunch of users set up kiosks on the street and sold things.

Weed went to the blacksmith's workshop, and bought a bow and many quivers of arrows.

Bow of Theo Grande:

Durability: 50/ 50

Attack: 5-6

Multiple shot speed: 4

A short bow that is strung with an Orc's muscle, crudely built, it has low accuracy but substantial attack power convenient for novices in archery.

The bow cost 1 gold and 20 silvers, but Weed would never pay the full price for anything. By presenting a butterfly-shaped statue to the cashier lady, he surrendered no more than one gold.

He had discovered accidentally that he could win ladies' hearts with sculpture gifts.

'Sculpture mastery. It's only useful on trifling occasions.'

Weed also bought a stock of rye bread, though he was sick and tired of it, bread is at least better than starvation, and when a fight breaks out, it reduces the rate at which the health factor declines. When the health factor falls below 30%, a user slows down, and loses a chunk of life temporarily.

His backpack was filled with quivers, herbs and bread. As soon as Weed was happy everything was present and correct, he went back to the instructor.

"I am done, Instructor."

"Oh, I see. Let's go to my place now. I have a guest waiting."

"Guest? Did you invite someone else to dinner, Instructor?"

"Didn't I mention her?"

The instructor looked somewhat confused, and then quickly regained his composure.

"She's a nice girl. I am sure you will like her."

Strange though it sounded, Weed casually put the matter to one side and relaxed.

The instructor held Weed's hand and walked to his place. His hand was as hairy as a gorilla's.

Weed wrinkled his forehead. "You may as well let go of my hand, Instructor."

"Surely not. I'm afraid you could lose me."

"Excuse me?"

Weed finally arrived at the instructor's house.

He had no doubt that when he opened the door, he would see the world's happiest family with a burning furnace that filled the living room with warm air.

Weed had already been told that the instructor had married a female barbarian, a true love overcoming the barrier of race, but they had not borne any offspring yet.

When the door opened, however, Weed was startled at a girl sitting by the dinner table.

'Incredible.'

For a moment, the girl's beauty took Weed's breath away. The scene that confronted him was idyllic. But he soon came down to earth.

Since the girl was invited to the instructor's place, Weed had assumed that she was another NPC. She was a user, though, just like him.

By the look of her expensive-looking sword and armor, he could tell she was a high-level user.

That alone was not what shocked Weed.

The girl's name was blinking in red.

A user can hide his true identity, sometimes pretending to be an NPC as long as he wants it that way, but a murderer who has PKed one or more users is promptly denied the right to privacy.

A red name and a bloody diamond on the forehead—the sign of a murderer. It is the sign of one who has killed a fellow user.

"My, my. Take it easy, Weed-nim. Now you understand why I was holding your hand tight."

Weed tried to run away, but his desperate attempt failed because the instructor was holding his hand.

"Instructor."

"Huh?"

"I didn't know you were so eager to get rid of me."

"So now you know."

The instructor smiled treacherously, and Weed relaxed a little. He acknowledged that if the instructor wanted him dead, this man would have rather dirtied his own hands than go to someone else for it.

"Please be seated, let me introduce you to each other. This is Weed. His level is low, but he passed the basic training program perfectly."

Weed bowed to the girl slightly but she ignored him, hardly tilting her head, "This is Seoyoon. She also passed it recently. She visits my place once a month to have dinner with us."

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

Weed greeted Seoyoon politely, but blank-faced, she didn't even bother moving her eyes in his direction. It was a plain show of unfeigned unconcern.

'You don't want to hang out with lowly newbies or what? If I didn't have to be in the same room, I wouldn't want to associate with you either.'

At that very moment, the instructor excused himself and dragged Weed into a corner.

"I am sorry. I apologize for her rudeness."

"No, it's fine, sir."

"She's basically a good girl. She just doesn't know how to speak. She is the closest thing I have to a baby sister. It seems she is distrustful of people. I invited her because I believed she could open her mind to you. Whew."

"It's okay, I don't mind at all."

Nevertheless, Weed had no reason to extend his hand to this Seoyoon girl. He found it pointless to get to know a murderer, not even an NPC.

"By the way, do you mind if I give a hand to Mrs. Lancer?"

"Are you good at cooking?"

"Not at all. Still, a hand is a hand in the kitchen. She can teach me how to cook."

"Do as you please."

As a barbarian by nature, the instructor's wife was a giant. Following her orders, Weed diligently sliced pork sirloin and dipped it in sauce. As he was working hard in the kitchen, Seoyoon rolled up her sleeves and entered the kitchen. She felt ashamed to be sitting idle alone at the table.

She came up to Weed, stood to one side and watched him chopping the meat. She stepped in to help, but she didn't know what to do first. Weed directed her to a mountain of dishes.

"Clean these dishes, please."

Weed expected that Seoyoon would turn him down, but to his surprise, she took the dishes and squatted on the floor rinsing them. They earned credit from the hostess for their hard work.

"You are doing well."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"You have gifted hands. Do you want to learn cooking skills?"

This proposal was exactly what Weed had been waiting to hear. Or why would he ever bother soaking his hands?

"Of course, ma'am. Thank you so much for your kindness."

You have learned Cooking Skill

As if something had occurred to her as she watched Weed, Seoyoon also asked the instructor's wife to teach her how to cook.

Cooking Skills—they are simple skills that you can learn anywhere, by paying a membership fee to a chef's guild or by serving an apprenticeship in a restaurant. No doubt it pays off well.

Pork barbecue on a large tray was finally served to the table. It was roasted yellow, steaming deliciously, the scent mingled with reality in the virtual reality. Weed promptly picked up a knife and a fork.

Glare

Suddenly, the instructor took it upon himself to caution Weed.

"You are a guest, Weed-nim. Do not eat too much."

What kind of host would criticize an invited guest at the dinner table?

He was no longer the manly instructor in the Training Hall. In his place was a vicious Orc exposing his greed for food on the table. An Orc at level two hundred, that was.

But Weed wasn't the type who easily succumbed to blackmail in the face of such food.

"I beg to differ, Instructor."

"You are not agreeing with me?"

Weed felt suddenly pressurized, which was more than he could bear. He felt dazed, and his hand holding the knife was shaky.

'Damn it.' Weed swallowed and glanced sideways.

He had a look at Seoyoon to see how that fragile-looking girl was coping with it. This was the world of a fantasy RPG game. Level rules. She appeared unaffected.

'This girl has at least two hundred. And the barbarian wife, too', Weed thought.

The instructor's wife, one of the barbarians who venerated the laws of nature, especially the survival of the fittest, ignored the plight of weaklings.

Since a barbarian was physically superior to other races, it was only Weed who was threatened by the instructor's murderous intimidation shooting from his eyes. Nobody sided with him.

But this was Weed. Was he not the person who could turn enemies to friends, and friends to apostles?

"Honorable Instructor, let me speak."

Fighting off the trembling in his body, Weed just about managed to open his mouth.

"What! If you have anything at all to say, drop the knife and fork first, then we can chat pleasantly until the end of time."

"Your beautiful wife displayed such exceptional cooking sense and skill in this meal. I am already intoxicated with the smell, and it fills my head with what it will taste like. Once I eat this, the memory shall be treasured forever."

The instructor burst into his trademark laughter.

"She is a great cook. I am proud of her."

"Absolutely. She is your wife, after all. The barbecue looks gorgeous."

"Honey."

Mrs. Lancer poked at her husband.

She was apparently flattered by Weed's sweet compliment.

"True, where else can you get a chance to lay your hands on such a delicious meal? Help yourself, Weed-nim."

As the saying goes, a wife is the pride of the husband.

The instructor proved he was a sucker when it came to his wife. Anyway, the meal was great. Not only the pork barbecue but also side dishes that the hostess had cooked using recipe from the Northern Province delighted Weed's tongue.

"Yum, yum. It's so good, ma'am. You're the best. I am envious of Mr. Lancer that he can eat your delicious meals every day."

"True, true," the instructor said, grinning approvingly.

Weed loosened his belt and eased himself. The instructor laughed heartily, and Seoyoon dutifully finished her plate in silence like a French doll made of ice.

Weed rested for the night in the house, and left for the gale of the Citadel early next morning.

Sir Midvale and his army of thirty foot-soldiers who were dispatched to conquer the Lair of Litvart were encamped near the gate.

"Greetings. Are you Weed-nim?" a knight asked.

"Yes, sir," Weed said.

A little investigation prior to the quest never hurt. From what Weed had gathered from the streets, Sir Midvale belonged to the Red Order, the key unit of Rosenheim Army, where he had carried out high profile missions. He was recently promoted, as the rumor went, to a Royal Knight. He was a pride of the kingdom, revered as the epitome of chivalry.

"Our destination is far away. It takes three hours on horseback," Sir Midvale said.

"..."

All the other foot-soldiers, except for Weed, were riding on brown horses. He was carrying the backpack, and it never crossed his mind that he needed a horse.

It would not have made any difference if he had been told otherwise, anyway. A horse was a high-priced commodity that cost at least 100 gold.

"Docke asked me for a favor. So I will lend you a horse for the time being," Sir Midvale said.

"Thank you, sir," Weed said.

"Vance, bring the horse."

A soldier brought a sad-looking colt. It was dragged forcefully by its reins, resisting with its two rear legs. Showing two golden teeth and panting, the colt looked like a rascal.

'If I ride on that horse, my luck is as good as dead for the next seven years', Weed thought.

"Till the mission is finished, this colt will be temporarily assigned to you," Sir Midvale said.

Ting

Name	Arse	Type	Neutral
Level	3	Species	Horse
Title	Stallion		
Reputation	-300		
Health	30	Mana	0

Assigned to the punitive force bound to the Lair of Litvart. This quick-witted colt often tries to outfox the owner. It hates water and refuses to gallop in rain. It needs extra care, or it may die of sickness.

P.S.: Beware, it farts very often.

" ... "

The stat window for the colt was frustratingly colorful. Weed had once heard that thoroughbreds were difficult, but he found it outrageous that this fragile colt was worse.

"It won't be for long, but let's get along, anyway."

Weed lifted his hand to pat the colt, but it bit his hand immediately.

"How dare you!"

When Weed glared at it, the colt turned around and lowered its rear legs.

"Good boy," Weed said soothingly.

The moment he climbed on the colt's back, sneezing at a funny smell rising from the not-so-good-looking bottom –the colt suddenly dropped its head forward, then kicked backward with its two rear legs.

"Ouch!"

Weed was thrown by the action and landed on the ground miserably. That single attack took seventy points off his life. Obviously, the colt had tried to kill him with that action.

"You damn Arse!"

Snort

Between Weed and the colt a bond was formed. They stared at each other as if they wanted to break the other's neck.

"I will never let you get on my back, you stupid human," the colt seemed to say.

"I'll beat you to death someday," Weed's expression said.

An unheard-of face-off between man and beast was taking place.

On the point of ugly disaster, Sir Midvale said,

"If you are ready, let's depart now."

Sir Midvale and his troops began to march eastward. Weed hopped on the colt's back quietly and rode on.

Seoyoon also stayed in the instructor's cabin. She could not reject his wife's persistent suggestion to stay over.

She ran across Weed several times in the morning. When she opened the door of the guest room, he happened to pass by it.

But they missed eye contact, pretending not to notice the presence of the other, and excused themselves without greeting.

When Weed left the house, Seoyoon followed him out because she was too embarrassed to be left behind by herself.

With dead eyes, she stared at an empty space where he had been standing minutes before.

"Where should I go now?" she asked herself.

"Anywhere I want to go..." she replied.

There was no such place. At the same time, she was free to go anywhere.

'As long as I can get away from this painful memory.'

Seoyoon began to walk toward the South Gate. Not that she wanted to go there.

She only wanted to go to the wasteland, a land yet to be fully explored, somewhere rampant with monsters.

She had started her journey near the center of the continent, moving to the Western Frontier in search of stronger monsters to fight.

"I want to see monsters."

"I can lose myself while I'm fighting them."

"I don't need to think about anything."

"Even the irrevocable truth that I was never loved in my life."

"Stop, Seoyoon. Stay strong."

Even though Seoyoon spoke to no one, it was far from the truth that her mind, too, ceased to function.

Below the frozen surface, water was swirling faster as she asked questions of herself, and answered them. However, on the surface, her face was empty of any sign of expression, as though carved from ice.

A repeated conversation. Said this, heard that. Echoes within her mind.

Seoyoon felt less hungry when she fought amid a pack of monsters. She sought bloody battles in a dungeon full of monsters.

Ever yearning for deadlier monsters, she feared no death. She never let the blood flow from battle dry out.

A berserker who showed herself worthy of a life soaked in madness and massacre—that was her, always finding peace on a battlefield.

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Chapter 7 : Maestro of Battles

The Lair of Litvart was at the entrance of Grave Mountains, a three hours trip on horseback from the Citadel.

The colt Weed was riding on occasionally diverted off course, and even chewed on grass leisurely. He had to cajole it to stay on course.

In front of the lair, a soldier who would look after the horses was waiting for them.

"Johnson, take good care of the horses."

"Yes, sir."

The punitive force led by Sir Midvale left their horses to the soldier, and entered the lair. Weed was finally relieved of the colt.

"Ready for battle!"

"Set in battle formation!"

The punitive force shielded themselves with steel bucklers and armed themselves with spears and swords. Compared to them, Weed's equipment was pathetic. An iron sword and a bow.

Sir Midvale in chain mail approached.

"Is that all you have, Weed-nim?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are poorly armed to fight on the front line. Stay behind and support the troops."

"Yes, sir."

The troops held the bucklers forward and marched on the lair. Weed followed them from behind.

Making a little headway, they spotted five kobolds that were camping around a bonfire, cooking something. Surprised by the sudden appearance of the troops, the kobolds sprang to their feet.

"Grakht!"

"Enemy! Human attack!"

The kobolds are Lv. 20 midget-like monsters, below four feet in height, armed with coarse wooden shields and bronze swords.

"Kill, kill!"

"Drive evil human away! They wreck shelter! Rise, brave kobold warriors!"

When the kobolds rushed out, the soldiers got tense. New recruits, fresh out of boot camps, had not engaged in a battle before. Weed looked toward Sir Midvale, but the knight watched his men with indifferent eyes as if any casualty was acceptable.

'Isn't a knight supposed to care if his soldiers die or not? Perhaps he wants them to have firsthand combat experience on their own' Weed thought.

The soldiers quickly formed a linear formation and charged against the wave of kobolds. A couple of kobolds flung stones with slingshots, but the projectiles barely troubled the troops.

Outnumbering the enemy and better equipped, the soldiers gained supremacy over the kobolds with few casualties. Every time a kobold fell, a small piece of metal dropped on the ground.

"Buren, Becker, gather the spoils."

The two soldiers whose names were called out by Sir Midvale began gathering the metal pieces. They were copper or poorly smelt iron of little value, yet sufficient for farming tools.

One of the reasons why the kingdom operated such a punitive force, other than to train new recruits and restore security to the outskirts was to collect war booty, a creative injection to the budget.

"I need to move in at some point..." Weed said to himself.

On the next battle, he took out the Bow of Theo Grande and aimed at a kobold's neck.

'Hold your breath, steady your hands and aim at the target.'

Swish

Weed's high agility and handicraft skill guided his arrows precisely to the targeted kobolds.



You have leveled up.

When Weed slew three kobolds, a level-up message window popped up. Those kobolds at a level higher than twenty gave enormous EXPs to Weed who was only at level thirteen.

Every kobold shot by his arrow immediately fell because he picked those who were nearly drained of life.

Cleverly, Weed sniped at easy game from behind while the soldiers were risking their lives in the front line.

It was a selfish and secure tactic. An arsonist torching a house is more of a saint than the neighbor plundering jewelry and china from the burning house, isn't he?

What Weed was doing was very wicked, taking full advantage of brothers-in-arms bleeding and sweating hard to fight the monsters. A good man could not create such exploitation.

On the other hand, Weed was concerned that this tactic could backfire once the soldiers began to notice it and criticize him. Imagine how duped they would feel if a kobold short of a final strike dropped dead because of an arrow from out of nowhere.

Weed only shot kobolds who were running away in a desperate attempt to survive, or when a soldier was helplessly surrounded by two or three kobolds.

You have leveled up.

Each time a kobold was taken down, Weed smiled gleefully. While the other soldiers were fighting hard in the battles, all he needed to do was to shoot arrows blindly from a safe place. What else was easier than that?

His level was skyrocketing as fast as the stock price of Google. Weed's scheme to buy the bow right before the quest paid off.

On the way deeper into the lair, they found a wide, open place. Sir Midvale and his men circled around it, slaying kobolds as they were detected, and then returned to the place.

"Take a rest and prepare lunch," Sir Midvale ordered.

"Yes, sir." Buren and Becker rustled to take out large pots and light a fire.

As the youngest in the party, they were made to do chores. Weed walked to them and picked up a knife.

"I'll help you,"

Weed said, smiling sheepishly.

"Oh, no need,"

Becker said.

"Well, I like to cook. I am still an amateur, but wouldn't it be nice if I serve you brave warriors who are devoting your swords and shields for Rosenheim?"

"It is very kind of you, Weed-nim."

Weed spontaneously won favor among the soldiers. A man who volunteers to do manual labor on a journey is always highly welcomed. For one thing, Becker and Buren's attitude toward Weed changed. They couldn't help but like he who picks up the knife and slices beef.

Of course, he had his own agenda, and it had nothing to do with universal benevolence or whatever. Improve his Cooking skill.

Weed sliced and threw beef in the pot, added vegetables and flavors to make a stew. The ingredients that were needed to serve 32 men were quite a lot. Weed was aware that cooking plenty of food was the short cut to improve his cooking skill as fast as possible.

Level Up: Cooking Skill [2]

Enhances the taste of meals.

Increases speed of recovery of stamina when served.

Increase life when served. (+5% LIFE)

Level Up: Handicraft Skill [7]

Enhances your craft skills in every field

Two message windows emerged almost together. Weed's cooking skill rose while the Handicraft skill that had needed a few experience points for a level up ascended to seven. Two birds with one stone, indeed.

Weed tasted a spoonful of the stew—the privilege of being a chef.

"Excellent."

Comparing this stew to cheap rye bread that said in any grocery store was an insult. It wasn't as good as the pork barbecue that he had eaten the other day, but satisfying for his first attempt at catering thanks to his high handicraft skill that compensated the low Cooking skill.

"Everyone! Lunch is ready! Please help yourself."

The soldiers who felt hungry because of the relentless battles were served a bowl of stew each, which they ate greedily.

"Oh, it's delicious."

"I can't believe a meal could taste so good outdoors."

"Somehow, I think he's a better cook than my wife."

They all gave the thumbs up to Weed. Their reaction told him that they wanted him to keep on cooking for them.

He filled empty bowls with beef stew continuously when asked, and in doing so, his stomach, too.

The soldiers emptied the pot, and when the lunch break was over, Sir Midvale came over to Weed. He asked cordially,

"Weed-nim, would you care to keep serving my men?"

Apparently, even a brave knight valued good cooking. Though, it was more likely that as a revered noble, he was too accustomed to fine meals that he could accept nothing less.

"Yes, sir. I will take care of meals."

And so, Weed was named the official chef for the punitive force.

He found no reason to decline Sir Midvale's request, as he could upgrade the cooking skill by preparing thirty-two servings of stew three times a day. Furthermore, he wasn't confined to the field of cooking.

"Weapons and armors, I can fix them! Bring me anything damaged or destroyed if you have them."

"Really?"

"Can you really repair my sword?"

"My buckler's half damaged, low in durability..."

"Just show me what you've got. Repair!"

Weed used the repair skill to repair weapons and gear that some soldiers brought to him. It would cost a fortune to have a blacksmith repair damaged equipment back in town. If they were left with low durability, they could suddenly break in the middle of a battle.

"Thank you, Weed-nim!"

Weed was hailed by the troops. He could upgrade his handicraft and repair skills, and earned trust from soldiers as a bonus.

Sir Midvale, who had been skeptical of his friend's recommendation to bring Weed along on the mission, was now more than satisfied with his role.

"You're the man, Weed-nim!"

"Not at all, sir."

Weed blended in with the rest of the troops.

Who knows what inconveniences they would have to suffer without him. They would have had to return to a nearby village from time to time when they needed to have broken or edge-nicked weapons fixed, and the meals would have revolted their stomachs.

Rarely obtained magical items would have needed identification scrolls, which cost several gold coins for each. Instead, Weed could identify them right on the spot with his identification skill.

For the soldiers, it would be torture to go back to the tasteless gruel that Buren and Becker used to claim was beef stew, especially after they enjoyed Weed's version.

"We're not cooks in the first place!" Buren and Becker cried in unison.

In this way, the soldiers and Weed formed an unimaginable relationship.

Swish

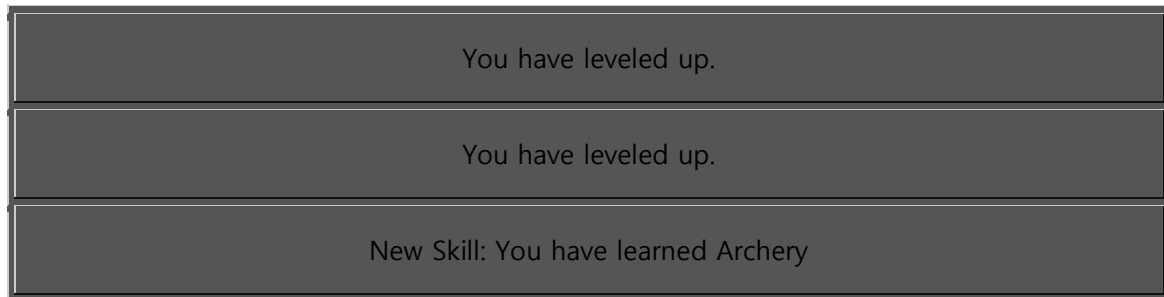
Whenever an arrow flew from Weed, a kobold turned grey.

The kobolds are considered relatively weaker monsters. They know how to use tools, but the class of their tools is crude, as though made by children. They basically rely on numbers in battle.

"Kiyoyo!" A platoon of nine kobolds charged at once.

'Come on! My precious EXP points!'

A big grin forming on his face, Weed greeted the kobolds with silent cheers. He shot arrows arbitrarily, collecting easy EXPs. Defense was taken care of by the soldiers, anyway. All he needed to do was shoot as many arrows as possible.

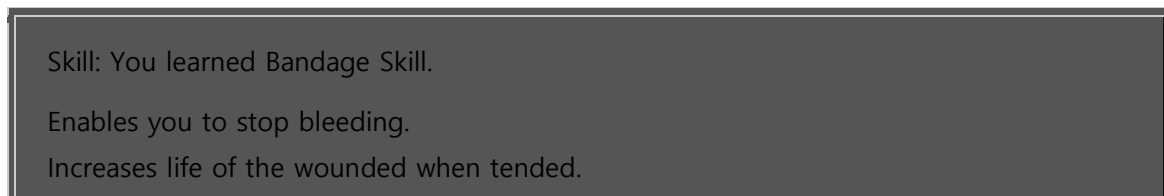


This was level-up madness.

Weed had also learned archery, a skill that was commonly exclusive to the archer class. It was hardly surprising, considering that he had done nothing but shoot arrows as he never swung a sword, even once, in the battles.

Nevertheless, the soldiers were not jealous of him in the least. After the battles, Weed was the busiest one there. He cooked meals, repaired weapons and gear and tended the wounded.

Sir Midvale had a few healing potions for emergencies, but the soldiers in the punitive force could not afford such costly medicines. Weed rubbed herbs and rolled gauze on wounds with his handicraft skill.



The maximum number of skills that a user can learn when his class is undecided is ten.

Weed's bandage skill, affected by the high handicraft skill, had impressive effects. As he was busy caring for thirty patients every day, the skill upgraded fiercely.

The troops roamed on the first and second floor, slaying kobolds, for a week.

Users were occasionally spotted watching Weed with envious eyes as he was privileged to join a NPC punitive force and hunt monsters alongside them.

The week of slaughtering kobolds upgraded his level to twenty-six. The repair skill hit level three, and the cooking skill, now level four, earned him a special option to increase 50 HP for those who were served with his meals until the satisfaction factor went down.

Still, he had a headache.

"Quest Information Window."

Search and Destroy Operation in the Lair of the Litvart [II]

There are a hundred monsters inhabiting the Lair of Litvart. Kill each and every one of them at least once, and prove yourself worthy of the honorable class. The completion of this quest will open a right path for your destiny.

Difficulty Level: Unknown

Quest Requirement: None

Number of Monsters Left: 100

Regarding the quest that Counselor Rodriguez had, the number of monster that needed to be kill has not decreased at all though Weed had already knocked down hundreds of kobolds.

After a week of warming up on the kobolds, the troops headed to the third floor of the lair—the goblins' territory.

While hunting kobolds had been originally intended to give the new recruits firsthand combat experience, confronting goblins posed a grave threat to their life.

The level of the kobolds was in the twenties. The kobold rascals are level twenty-three, and the relatively stronger kobold warriors twenty-eight, but untitled kobolds were at level twenty.

On the other hand, the goblins are level fifty or above. Their weapons and gear surpass what kobolds are equipped with in attack power and defense. The combat strength of the goblins is five to six times that of the kobolds.

"Watch out now. When you find yourself in danger, retreat immediately."

"Yes, Commander!"

The solders could not hide their excitement and tension. Their levels ranged from twenty-three to twenty-five from hunting kobolds, but their confidence ebbed at the thought of facing an unknown enemy whose level was generally twice theirs. The only relief was that goblins gathered in lesser numbers than kobolds.

"Whew."

Weed let out an exasperated breath. His stomach curdled at the thought that if the troops fought goblins at that moment, they would surely suffer inevitable casualties.

'One third? Or perhaps more? I hope we won't get annihilated.'

Had Weed been in charge of the troops, he would have taken time to have his men build more experience and level up higher before he led them to the threshold of the goblins, not to mention that he would have taught them how to fight goblins efficiently.

But the command of the punitive force primarily belonged to Sir Midvale. Weed was left with two options. Either he followed them as before, only to sit back and watch them die helplessly, or he give up the quest and hunt more kobolds on his own until he leveled up enough to deal with the goblins. The second option, which would penalize him tremendously, was out of the question.

In fact, the reason Weed was so concerned about the welfare of the soldiers was more of a practical need that he didn't want to see them die in vain when he worked so hard to build a friendship with them.

"They are coming. Get ready!—" Even before Sir Midvale finished his words, a few goblins dashed out of a cave.

"Kigggg!"

"Human, human!"

"They die!"

There were five goblins. The total number of soldiers outnumbered them 6:1. Weed planned to shoot an arrow at the goblins to take the initiative and to seek another chance afterward—undoubtedly, a goblin yielded a tremendous amount of EXPs, and he was dying to get one.

However, the soldiers were frozen. They stood motionless as if nailed to the ground where they were standing. And fighting spirit radiated from the goblins! The soldiers cowered at the sight of an enemy who was level fifty. Their swords dropped downward, the bucklers trembled unmistakably.

'Idiots...' Weed clicked his tongue.

The goblins were not easy to defeat even if the soldiers stood up to fight fearlessly, and now they were already frozen before the battle began. This would lead to a calamity.

Weed shot a glance at Sir Midvale, who was standing beside him. Obviously, the knight wasn't in the mood to motivate his men.

'The weak deserve to die.'

The code of chivalry developed in Rosenheim kingdom was cold-blooded. Weed stepped forward. He flung his bow on his back and held the iron sword.

'I have faith in friendship I've worked so hard to build,' he said to himself.

Then, he did something that was unimaginable to the other soldiers who remembered what he had done in the previous battles. Weed shouted a war cry and charged toward the goblins!

"Yatz!"

Sniggers

Weed's sword was deflected so easily, instilling a sense of futility in him.

He could make up for a gap between his level and the goblins' with his inflated stats, but the shorter reach of his sword was critical. The sword wasn't effective on the goblins that were armed with longer spears.

'I'm not wearing any defensive gear. If they hit me, I'm dead.'

The goblins blocked Weed's sword, and almost at the same time, they thrust their spears toward him. He crouched to dodge them. It needed a combination of his amazing reflexes and quick wits to save his life.

He had no intention of fighting the goblins seriously, so his subsequent attacks were half-hearted.

"Die, human!"

"Your sword sucks!"

With five spears, the goblins attacked at random places that were directed by raw instinct.

As long as Weed didn't get close within the reach of his sword, he was free of the risk of being skewered by their spears.

Still, he pretended to be in peril, dodging the spears by inches. To the eyes of the soldiers, the scene looked like a hopeless struggle of the weak.

Even though it had been long since Weed's level transcended theirs, their view of his role was fixed on a handy man working manual labor, such as repairs, cooking and first aid. That Weed was fighting the goblins! The eyes of the soldiers began to flicker with confidence.

After a couple more exchanges, Weed retreated a few steps and roared in a thunder-like voice,

"Look at them! These goblins are weaker than they appear! Look at us! We outnumber them! You are not alone; we have each other! Our comrades shoulder to shoulder are watching our backs!"

"Hoo-hah!" The soldiers regained their morale at once.

"It's a shame on us if we hide behind Weed's back like mice!"

"Get up—fight!" They charged directly at the goblins.

Weed quickly sensed a forthcoming melee and pulled himself from the battle.

"These bastards are only using spears. If we fight within the reach of spears, it will only cause us more damage. Use your shields. Hold yours bucklers up, marched forward, narrow the gap in between, and prevent them from thrusting their spears freely."

"Aye!"

"I will follow your command!"

Weed gave timely advice in a cordial manner.

Since friendship between them hit maximum, his command was directly taken on board by the soldiers.

They pushed back the goblins by force. Two thirds of them held their bucklers at the front, the rest grabbed the swords.

As the first two lines charged behind the bucklers, the spears that were thrust by the goblins bounced off, astonishing the brainless enemy. Once the gap was narrowed, the sword line began to swing their swords.

Charisma has risen by 3 points (+3 CHR)

For Weed, who had been resting idly, had his charisma increased by three points. The charisma stat acts over NPC troops, and makes it easier to tame pets or hire mercenaries.

As the soldiers who were motivated by Weed's speech got into action, his leadership was recognized.

Slash

The goblins, in spite of their much higher level, could not defeat the troops, who outnumbered them six-fold.

Their coordinated offense turned one goblin after another into a gray flash.

These Roman legion tactics would have been ineffective when it comes to a battle between armies of equal number of soldiers, but an army of thirty soldiers with bucklers on, charging from four directions, devastated the goblins, which were armed with long spears.

Occasional arrows shot by Weed after he sheltered behind the troops distracted the goblins further.

Five goblins! 'One of them is mine!'

Weed observed the battle scene, and when a goblin was near death, he shot an arrow precisely at the goblin's neck.

You have leveled up.

Since Weed reached level twenty-six, kobolds had not yielded as much EXPs as before. It was still a lot whichever way you looked at it, but too low for Weed.

A goblin belonged to a different dimension than a kobold. When Weed had killed the goblin, it alone filled thirty-seven percent that remained for the next level, at twenty-seven, and took extra ten percent for change.

'At level fifty, goblins give much better EXP than kobolds.'

Weed was tempted to kiss the goblin's ass. Only God knows what he would have done if the soldiers were not around him. It would be difficult to find a hunting ground better than this.

"We won!"

The soldiers exclaimed in triumph, throwing swords in the air. They were bolstered in confidence that they had successfully defeated the first goblins.

"Goblins are no match for us."

"No, we won easily because we followed Weed's command."

"He has the gift of a leader."

"He's excellent in measuring the enemy's strength."

"Under his command, our chances of survival will be high."

When the battle was over, the soldiers complimented Weed, patting his back.

The goddess of fortune was smiling on him! Weed, however, drifted his gaze to Sir Midvale cautiously.

If the knight was offended that his command was violated by a mere foreigner, he had every right to execute Weed without trial, though Weed assured himself that his friendship with the knight would prevent the worst in that case.

Sir Midvale looked at the corpse of a goblin, deep in thought for a moment, and then said to Weed,

"You are a good soldier, Weed-nim. I can see great talent in you. How about taking the path of royal guard?"

"A royal guard?"

"You will become an officer in the honorable army of Rosenheim kingdom. Your starting position will be a denarion."

Ting

You have received a job offer!

If you accept it, you will take a military position of Denarion in the Rosenheim army. You will command ten foot soldiers. You are entitled to receive regular training, and a monthly income of fifty silvers. Will you accept this job offer?

Upon the completion of the regular training, a few basic sword techniques and a quantity of military equipment such as swords and shields are given. Certainly, they are not the sharpest tools in town—an iron sword, or similar, and heavy armor with only defense options.

Weed shook his head because, according to his blueprint, it was too early to settle down in a specific career.

"I am honored you have such a high opinion of me, sir. But I cannot take it. A royal guard is undoubtedly what I aspire to be, but I want to devote myself to wandering freely to help the poor and the weak, and destroy evil monsters for the time being. A wanderer's blood flows in me, Sir Midvale."

"Well, so be it. If you ever change your mind, let me know. For now, take command of my men."

"Can I really do that?"

"It is my duty, but it seems my men follow you, and learn a lot from you. I will watch from behind how far your leadership can lead them."

Sir Midvale transferred the command of the punitive force to Weed.

For now, the soldiers were obliged to obey him at least in this lair. Of course, he did not expect loyalty that could compel them to jump into a pit of flames from a single word.

Weed's charisma was too low, so he counted on his friendship with the soldiers. Still, he was thrilled at his new assignment.

'Sweet! I'll make the best out of this situation,' he said to himself.

Weed swiftly packed the bow, took out the sword and held it up. It was a demonstration of his newly-acquired position. It would have been less impressive to hold the bow, reminding his troops of his past behavior in battles that could not strike them as honorable.

"Listen, soldiers! My name is Weed, and as of now, I take over the command of you. I ask you to follow my orders dutifully."

"Yes, Commander!"

"My foremost objective is to defeat the lair without any casualties. Do your best, and not a single drop of blood will shed in vain."

"Yes, Commander!"

Since Weed took over the command from Sir Midvale, the attitude of his troops toward him had changed drastically.

"Buren, Becker."

"Yes, Commander!"

"You are scouts now. Stay ahead of the army, and look out for enemy in the areas. Even when we are engaged in battle, you must look out for any approaching enemy."

"Yes, Commander!"

Weed marched his troops with the two scouts leading them. Soon, Buren ran back to him, panting.

"Commander."

"Speak."

"Buren reporting, sir! Seven goblins at twelve o'clock. Two female goblins and five goblin raiders."

Goblin raiders were, according to Weed's private database, Lv. 58 monsters.

"You did a good job, Buren. Everyone, halt!"

Weed ordered his troops to stay put in an open clearing, and set up a few traps. Then, he went alone to the location where the goblins had been spotted.

As Buren reported, the seven goblins were resting there. Weed took out his bow and shot at the farthest goblin. Before the arrow hit the target, he turned and ran away.

Swish

"Kyah, human!" The goblins looked around, spotted Weed and chased after him in a rush.

Weed knew that, if he was surrounded by the seven goblins, he would not stand any chance. He just prayed his feet would not fail.

Thump As Weed heard the goblins gaining on him from behind, he shivered.

Holding spears, the goblins were running with heavy strides.

'God, they even sent a chill down my spine. This is what you call an awesome game. No, the coolest job for me,' he said to himself.

Although in a dangerous spot, Weed's thoughts were still positive. He was alone, but he would be safe once he reached the place his troops were hiding. Weed ran like his tail was on fire, and arrived at the clearing.

"Commander!"

Buren and Becker were the first faces he saw.

"Get ready for the battle. Goblins are incoming!"

While Weed's call was echoing through the space, the seven goblins sprang out of the cave. In only a moment, their fate would be decided.

"Kugh?"

The goblins that were stupid and witless were mesmerized at the sudden appearance of the soldiers from the rocks they had been taking cover behind. Then they threw burning torches at the goblins.

"These bastards are trapped!"

"Push forward!"

"They have spears. Be careful of their spears! Anyone who is injured must step down, be it severe or not."

Had Weed foreseen that he would be in charge of the troops, he would have bought more snares and traps. The best idea he could come up with when there were no other tools was to throw torches at the goblins.

Nonetheless, the soldiers were fighting very well. The thirty troops were a big machine driving the goblins into individual segments and destroying them one after the other. They were strengthened by an incalculable variable called morale.

Whether it comes to monsters or NPCs, morale is always a decisive factor in battles. The soldiers believed in their newly appointed leader, Weed. On the other hand, confused by the torches thrown at them, the goblins realized that they had walked into a trap, surrounded by many humans, so they lost their will to fight back.

"Cheating humans attack us!"

"Kieeekk! Run for life!"

"Who do you think will let you get away alive?"

While the soldiers pushed relentlessly towards their enemy, Weed's eyes flashed.

"Surround them. Block the entrance of the cave!"

"Yes, Commander!"

"Let the wounded retreat and give first aid. The other soldiers with full life—focus on defense. Those who are healed should remain in the waiting position. You will get ready to join the battle when I give you an order."

Under Weed's command, the soldiers immobilized the goblins steadily, two of whom were felled by his arrows.

As he had put his life at risk, he justified that he deserved at least two goblins to make ends meet.

The high-level goblins held on for a considerable period in spite of low morale, but when Weed divided his troops into three groups, and ordered them to take turns exhausting the enemy, the monsters ended up as gray flashes.

The goblins left nine silvers, a steel shield and a bronze spear.

When Buren and Becker picked them up as ordered, Weed interfered.

"Everyone, listen! I am proud of your valor. I will divide spoils in a different manner than before."

"...?"

"I will reward the man most who fights goblins most bravely. On one condition—he should not be severely injured enough to be disabled for the next battle. My priority is to bring you safely back to your loving families."

"Yes, Commander!"

At Weed's speech, the eyes of his troops filled with admiration.

Charisma has risen by 2 point. (+2 CHR)

Weed would have swallowed all the items if he could, but he kept himself in checked. If his friendship with the soldiers dropped, his low charisma could not save him from the possibility of a mutiny, or even a hanging.

Sir Midvale's presence further weighed on him to bury his unreasonable greed. Leading his troops, Weed systematically cleaned out the goblins on the third floor.

One day, however, Sir Midvale said with a grimace,

"Weed-nim, the pace of the mission is slow. I advise you to pick up the pace."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I borrowed these soldiers from other regiments. I am not allowed to keep them indefinitely. They must finish the quest within a month, and return to their original regiments."

Weed had never heard of the deadline. It seemed that only the soldiers were bound to it. Still, he didn't hasten the pace.

Against six or more goblins, he always drew them to the nearest open space by shooting one or two arrows where his troops overwhelmed them. In case of fewer than six goblins, he led them straight to fight with the enemy.

Weed avoided a battle unless the soldiers were fully healed to the last man, and he still made stews and repaired damaged weapons and gear to maintain their condition at their best.

When the punitive force succeeded in conquering the third floor of the lair, Weed hit level thirty-seven, and his men thirty-four. There it came. Time for the true hunting

"Charge!"

"Keep the formation! Charge!"

At Weed's command, the soldiers moved like people who had gone berserk, surrendered to madness. To them, the goblins were as nothing.

"Yatz! Yatz!"

"Death on you! You ugly monsters!"

"You cheese-eating dirty frogs. I'll clean you off the earth."

The soldiers pushed on with their bucklers ahead. They were as foul-mouthed as ever because Weed had taught them four-letter words from Rodriguez's dictionary.

They sometimes roared menacingly, and charged under apparently impossible circumstances. Their swords became more dynamic, penetrating openings of the goblins that were armed with spears.

Weed still maintained the same formation for his troops to ultimately rely on their comrades, but they were more reckless and faster. They had slain goblins repeatedly, leaving thousands of corpses behind them.

Adopting Weed's tactics aggressively, his troops crushed the goblin defense with thoroughly coordinated attacks.

Now it took just the blink of an eye to destroy a platoon of six goblins as an army of thirty veteran soldiers rushed on fiercely and devastated the enemy.

"Battle is won. Let me distribute items based on individual prowess. Hosram and Dale."

"Yahoo!"

"Any soldier who needs a repair or a rest?"

"No, Commander!"

"None!"

"Then, let's move on. Scout, report!"

Buren and Becker, in turn, scouted and reported the location and number of the nearest goblins.

"Becker reporting, Commander! Eight goblins have been located a hundred yard away at nine o'clock. One goblin alchemist, six goblin warriors, and one plain goblin."

"Advance!"

The soldiers ran at a comfortable pace, neither fast nor slow. Galloping, they were recovering from battle fatigue and preparing for the upcoming battle.

"Hu... humans!"

"Enemy, kill them all!"

The goblins began to put up resistance, but it was almost meaningless.

The soldiers, now veterans in combat experience, already dominated the goblins in morale—and Weed's arrow was a death sentence.

His level in archery rose fast as he was actively engaged in battle, and his arrows were no longer aimed only at dying goblins.

Weed now shot arrows in order to take the initiative, and when goblins were grouping to break through his men's encircling net, he hindered their movement with warning shots. The main target was, though, any goblin that threatened the life of one of his troops.

Imagine that when a goblin's spear is flying at you, your leader's arrow bores a hole in its head, then you will feel saved and thus more loyal to him, won't you? The same logic went for a number of soldiers whose life was saved by Weed at the last second.

His troops hunted goblins in the most efficient and time-saving way. They conquered the fourth floor faster than the third one, and even kept the same pace on the fifth one where they encountered a score of goblins in each battle.

As the soldiers were mature in combat skills, giving them the status of veteran at a high level, they were capable of one-to-one combat with goblins.

Nevertheless, Weed stuck to the old tactics of focusing on defense and outnumbering goblins. Some of his men got cocky and suggested to him that they drop it and, instead, fight goblins fairly on a level playing field.

Weed stood his ground, though.

"Do not consider that filthy goblins deserve fair play! Have you ever heard of a knight asking for a duel with monsters? If there were one, he would be stupid to defend his honor against monsters. We are fighting them in order to restore peace and protect the people of Rosenheim. Keep in mind that if you hesitate to put an end to a goblin because you are trying to be ethical, your comrades will pay the consequences!"

Weed's charisma controlled his army of thirty men.

One who fought a goblin alone was denied his share of recognition. He was later excused from the next battle. He was at first excited to stay out of danger, but soon realized that he had to sit back and watch his comrades leveling up.

This example taught everyone a lesson, so the troops went as far as stabbing goblins in the back if it became available. They were brainwashed beyond doubt by Weed's tongue. Infantry Combat Tactics 101.

For less than a month, Weed led the punitive force to sweep over the Lair of Litvart. As a week was still left, they went back down to the third floor, and on the way back to the bottom, rooted out regenerated goblins.

Once a battle began, the soldiers spread in wings, formed an encircling formation and slew their foe within a few breaths. As soon as the battle was over, they advanced to the next one.

Blitz

Not one soldier died.

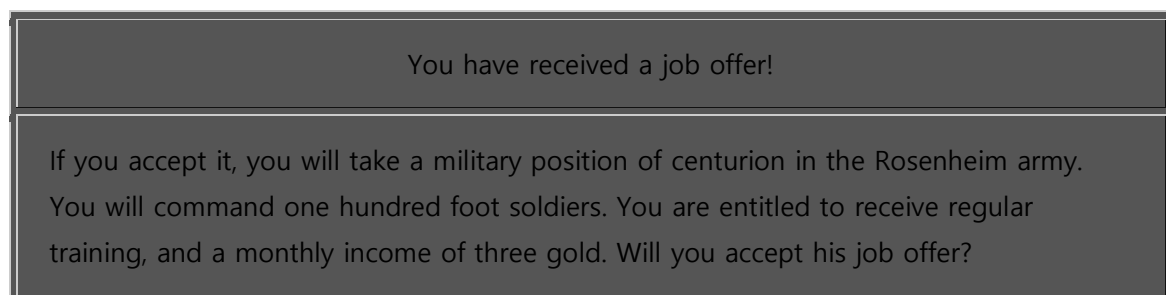
They finished the Search and Destroy Operation of The Lair of the Litvart quest with the overall levels of the troops reaching fifty-seven, Weed's sixty-two. Considering that the average level of denarions in the Rosenheim Army was forty, what Weed had accomplished was terrific.

"Good job, Weed-nim. You have done a great service to us."

Sir Midvale didn't hide the fact that he marveled at Weed.

"If we had five more men of your courage and leadership, then Rosenheim kingdom wouldn't ever be harassed by monsters. By the right of a royal knight, I hereby wish to appoint you centurion. Would you accept my proposal, Weed-nim?"

Ting



An officer in command of a hundred troops, a centurion is deemed to be a sub-knight who is qualified to embark on an annual trial of promotion to knighthood in the Red Order. If it were other users, they would have accepted it willingly, but Weed wasn't swayed.

"I'm glad to hear that, Sir Midvale, but this is more than I can accept."

"Freya forbids it! Tell me if you want additional benefits, Weed-nim. I believe we can find common ground."

"Your offer is... beyond my dearest wish. But all I want is peace and prosperity in Rosenheim Kingdom. As my heart leads me to travel to many places and help those in need, it seems too early to settle down. If you have another mission to destroy monsters after the autumn harvests, or if Rosenheim is invaded, I will be the first one to run to you and offer my service to command courageous soldiers in the Rosenheim army."

"Your spirits are well understood, Weed-nim. The door to the Royal Army will be always open to you."

Sir Midvale withdrew his proposal with a content look.

"Now that we have finished the quest, I am leading them back to the Citadel. Will you join us?"

"I have something to be done here, sir."

"May I inquire as to its nature?" Sir Midvale looked curious.

For the last four weeks, Weed had made thirty-two servings of stew three times a day. His experienced cooking skill delivered great food on time, and Sir Midvale was one of the beneficiaries who had fallen in love with it, forming a solid friendship with him.

"I must take care of a quest for the sake of Counselor Rodriguez."

Weed had assumed that the annihilation of the goblins would meet the quest's requirement, but it was a serious miscalculation on his part.

The numbers of monsters that he was supposed to destroy was still a hundred without any sign of decrease. Anyway, the number of goblins in the lair was hundreds on each floor, at a conservative estimate.

Rodriguez's quest was to sweep away all the 'monsters' in the Lair of Litvart, and the kobolds and goblins were not possibly the target because they greatly outnumbered a hundred.

"I see, Weed-nim. A quest by the Counselor... I understand. I was looking forward to returning to the Citadel with you, but it seems destiny directs us to part our ways here. Instead, I will lend you Arse."

"Arse? Whose ass?"

"Have you already forgotten the name of the horse you rode here the other day?"

"Don't tell me..."

Weed's head suddenly felt thick and heavy. The colt that had kicked him with two rear legs and bit his hand! Now he remembered the colt's name was Arse.

What a shameful name for a would-be stallion.

"The trip to the Citadel will cost you valuable time without a horse. Arse is at your service."

"Thank you, but no thank you, sir. I don't need any horse."

"I am only returning your favor, Weed-nim. Please take it. Return it to the Royal Stable when you finish your quest."

"..."

Sir Midvale turned as soon as he delivered what he wanted to say. His attitude implied that there was nothing else to hear, case closed. The knight meant well for Weed's sake, but he wanted none of it. How in the world could he stand such a wild colt?

Weed absolutely hated this pain in the butt, but he had to accept it, or he would make the royal knight lose face once again.

"Commander, we will miss you."

"We are all going home alive, thanks to you!"

"Please visit my place when you come to the Citadel."

"I run an inn in the central avenue. You are always welcome."

"My family owns a restaurant. My wife will serve you a delicious meal, though it's not as good as yours!"

The soldiers came up to Weed and said farewell.

As high-level veterans, they would probably be promoted upon their return, at least, to denarions while one or two soldiers who score the best could look for a better position.

Weed shook the hand of every soldier who used to be his subordinate. His hand was warm, and its grip held on for a few seconds.

"Do you really have to leave?"

"I want to stay here with you, Commander, but I'm a proud soldier of Rosenheim Army. I must return to my regiment."

"Commander, I will miss you!"

Weed's eyes shone darkly with reluctance. What troubles he had gone through to train those soldiers! He was the first to have credit for transforming once new recruits at level twenty into veterans in combat skills. Now Weed felt as though he were being robbed of them by the kingdom.

"Everyone, safe trip!" Weed said.

"Godspeed, Commander."

"Commander, you must stop by in my place later!"

After reluctant farewells with his former troops, Weed was left alone.

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Chapter 8 : The Fated Profession

As was his routine, Rodriguez was taking an afternoon walk. He enjoyed checking on his neighbors and deepening their misery.

"How are you, Hans?"

"Fine, Counselor."

"What is the best fruit today?"

"This one. Please have some. Fresh strawberry, sire."

"Thank you."

Rodriguez's steps were light. For one thing, he wasn't pestering others who fell under his gaze that afternoon. He was elated by the recent publication of the latest book he had penned.

When he returned home, his manservant in care of the manor was waiting at the entrance to greet him. He spoke without reservation to the manservant whose dedication to his family lasted for decades.

"How was your walk, milord?"

"Excellent. Very excellent. These days are free of worries and trifles."

"I'm glad to hear that, milord. By the way, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"What is it, William?"

"This is about the young lord who carved statues on the other side of the street, milord."

"Oh, that kid!"

"Did he find what he was seeking?"

Rodriguez laughed.

"It'd never be that easy."

"Then..."

"No chance! He can't find the place, and even if he finds it, against all odds..."

"..."

"Serves him right even if he gets the class!" Rodriguez burst into insane laughter.

The first thing that Weed did when he was alone was double-check his armor and inventory.

"Twenty-four gold and thirty silvers..."

Instead of receiving his share of the spoils that his men had collected from the slain kobolds and goblins, which were mostly crude weapons, equipment and pieces of metal, Weed had asked for hard money.

"The revenue's not too bad, and..."

For the last month, Weed had advanced his skills by far. His cooking mastery hit level six, the repair skill four. The repair skill is so useful that some users are encouraged to pick it up, but the cooking skill is almost extinct, except for professional cooks.

Weed's bandage skill, now level four, empowered him to tend a minor injury by rolling gauze twice. But the most progressive one among his stats was his level.

He felt like laughing.

Sniff

To Weed's dismay, however, Arse whinnied unpleasantly. He had no choice but to take care of the colt by courtesy of Sir Midvale. The colt was good for nothing for now, but Weed was obliged to return it safely to the Royal Stable.

'The Lair of Litvart. No other lair of the same name has been discovered so far. This is the place.' The Counselor's trick.

Assured that there was something behind it, Weed did his best to analyze the quest's objective from different angles.

'It must be hidden somewhere in the lair, somewhere no one has found yet – a secret chamber.' Weed began working through from the first floor up to the fifth one.

For the adventuring classes, such as rangers and explorers, which are endowed with a multitude of observation-related stats and skills, it is easier to discover a concealed entrance.

But Weed could only stick to elementary means such as relying on his naked eyes and touching every suspicious area with his hands in order to look for the 'secret chamber'.

There were at least twenty users on each floor in the Lair of Litvart. Hunting monsters, they commented about Weed, who was acting weird.

"What's that guy doing?"

"Seems he's looking for some entrance. Why else would he caress the stone wall so dearly?"

"Puhaha, what an idiot. The lair doesn't have any secret passage."

"This is the first lair found when Rosenheim was discovered months ago. Thousands of adventurers stormed here. He's taking a gamble."

"Typical creep."

They openly laughed at Weed, because they had been jealous of him who was surfing on an easy wave in the lair with thirty NPC troops, it was no surprise that he was the center of jealousy and envy.

"Just in case..."

"Watch out. Don't let him notice we're behind him."

Several users followed Weed quietly, envisioning that he might have overheard valuable information from the NPC soldiers during the mission. Or better, he might be carrying out a special quest. In that case, they even considered forcing Weed to share the quest.

To their eyes, this lone freak was a low-level archer, lacking in melee combat skills; worked on household chores for the troops and sponged off them like a parasite.

After a week had passed without event, however, the troublemakers were exasperated by tracking Weed in vain; he was obsessed with exploring the lair, so they left.

"Nutcase."

"Damn, I'm freaking mad. I just wasted days."

Even after they left him alone, Weed continued. 'There's gotta be something.'

Many explorers had already finished mapping out the entire region, and concluded that there was nothing left. This was exactly what Weed was told, too. In fact, he had done occasional research while hunting down the kobolds and goblins, but failed to make any meaningful discovery. Still, Weed was convinced that he would stumble on something someday.

'Famous adventurers from all over the Continent searched this place. So what? You are wrong; I am right.'

The Lair of Litvart was a vast place. Wandering casually in the forlorn hope of uncovering a hidden place was a hope as far as the distance between the Earth and Andromeda.

Even though the adventurers were better in observation skills, attitude could make difference.

Weed patiently touched the wall, looking for a clue.

Sniff

Arse watched Weed in contempt.

He had brought the horse in the lair because there was no one else who could look after it, but he was stressed by the disobedient beast.

'I need to teach him a lesson first.'

Weed led Arse to a shelter of goblins on purpose—a goblin warrior and three goblin raiders. As soon as they saw Weed, they charged at him.

He stepped forward as if to protect the colt in front, and fought against the goblins, screaming "My god! I don't want to die!"

The goblin warrior's spear sailed toward Weed but only grazed him, drawing little blood from the flesh.

"If... if I am killed now, what will ever happen to my dearest Arse..."

The goblins kept on pounding on Weed.

"No! I shall stand here to protect Arse! Bring it on, you abominable monsters! You must pass over my dead body before you lay any of your filthy fingers on him!"

Weed played a brave knight protecting his weak people at risk of death.

When he glanced back, however, he saw the colt yawning and playing with a pebble on the ground. Also, this beast was ready to bolt in the direction of the Lair's exit the moment the master fell dead.

"Damn you!"

Weed was embarrassed by the turn of events. Why make a fool of himself to win over a mere colt?

Slash

Weed slew the pestering goblins with a single brandish of his sword.

He was tempted to behead the beast altogether, but losing Sir Midvale's trust was too big a risk.

Sniff

Arse gave Weed a contemptuous look as if to ask why he had bled needlessly when he could finish them so easily.

'Whew. I was a fool to act like that. Patience, patience.'

Weed went back to the exploration of the lair.

Three days later, on the tenth day of his private exploration to be precise, he found a cavity in a dark corner on the fourth floor where goblin raiders were regenerated. It was located ten yards deeper than the regenerating point. Even the most cautious ranger would have overlooked it. Below a large rock projecting outward, the cavity was shadowed, away from human eyes.

'Is there anyone there?'

Looking around, Weed made sure that there was nobody else sneaking up on him. Those who had trailed him for a week were long gone, but excessive caution never hurt.

If this cavity turned out to be what Weed had been looking for, he would be the first man to discover it, and he didn't want to share the credit with anyone else.

For the first explorer who discovers an unknown area, the rewards are immense. He earns fame, plus double EXPs and a higher rate of item provision for a whole week after the discovery. Weed crept into the cavity carefully. The gap was narrow enough to be mistaken for a crevasse between rocks, and the interior widened little by little on each step. He soon reached a passage where he could move comfortably. A humid, foul smell pricked his nose.

Tense, he got ready for a battle. He didn't have any clue as to what was coming next, so he held the iron sword in the right hand, and herb and bandages in the left one.

'Bring it on.'

Weed walked slowly deeper into the cave.

Along the cave were several forks. He picked the left one and entered it, only to find a gigantic worm at a dead end.

"What the heck... what monster is this? I've never seen this sort of worm—"

Before Weed could finish his words, the surroundings underwent a sudden change.

What he thought to be the blackish ground was, in truth, a floor of little bugs the size of pinkies.

Squirm

Like Moses breaking apart the Red Sea, the bugs scattered and then came back to attack Weed, crawling menacingly.

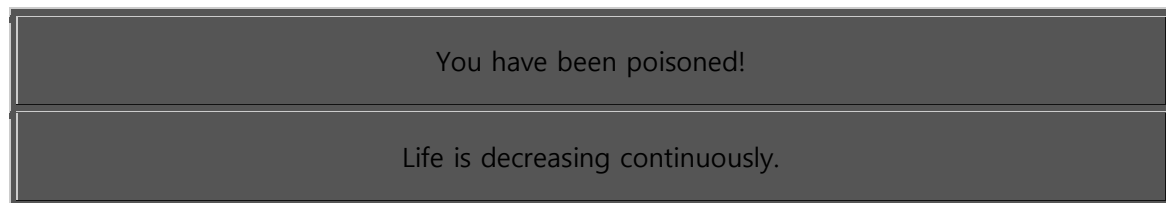
"What the!— How dare you!" Weed swung the iron sword like a windmill.

Covered in disturbingly creaky shells, the little bugs were almost harmless in low attack power, but the queen-like worm bore offspring faster than he was exterminating them. He really missed his men in the punitive force.

"I'd end this mess way earlier if I only had them here."

Suddenly, the queen exhaled light green smoke fumes. Like a drop of black ink dispersed in transparent water, the fumes slowly spread in the cramped space, eventually reaching where Weed was standing, too.

The moment he inhaled them—



Startled, Weed checked his life gauge.

Gasp

His life was decreasing by one point per second.

"Damn... I don't have any antidote! If it keeps going..."

In desperation, Weed ignored the little bugs, ran to the queen and struck it with the iron sword. The queen worm's hard shell cracked, and yellow fluid oozed out.

"If I'm going to die, I'm taking you with me!"

Weed neglected the bugs that were crawling up and biting him. Whether they bit him or minutes passed by, he was dying anyway.

Torn between two choices, it was better to kill the queen and get the heck out of there. As if they sensed that their mother was dying, the little bugs crowded Weed aggressively, but his iron sword was persistent. The shell of the queen worm was so hard that, though the outer shell was partly cracked, she was alive and well. Meanwhile, Weed's head was swimming dizzily.

'I'm gonna die here. If only I had a combat skill...—...skill? Why didn't I think of that!'

The skill that Weed had never been given a chance to use! He had a combat skill that sucked so much mana from him that he could not sustain it longer than a second. Whether it worked or not, the situation was hopeless enough.

"Engraving Knife Technique!" Weed's iron sword blazed white. It temporarily overpowered the enemy's defense.

Crack

Finally, the gigantic worm's shell shattered into pieces.

You have leveled up.

Weed skipped the message window and yelled,

"Quest Information Window!"

Search and Destroy Operation in the Lair of the Litvart [II]

There are a hundred monsters inhabiting the Lair of Litvart. Kill each and every one of them at least once, and prove yourself worthy of the honorable class. The completion of this quest will open a right path for your destiny.

Difficulty Level: Unknown

Quest Requirement: None

Number of Monsters Left: 99

Though he was poisoned and dying, Weed smirked.

"I did it!"

Weed finally found the answer for the class change. It was these worms in the cave. He had to kill the queens, not those little bugs.

"I need to cure myself of the poison first..."

Chased by the little bugs, Weed left the cave in a hurry. When he saw they could not cross over the boundary of the cave, he began to walk slowly toward the ground level with the colt.

When a user is poisoned, his face darkens.

Weed avoided contact with other users to conceal that he was poisoned, and recharged his life a little by rubbing herbs on his body and stuffing himself with pre-cooked meals.

If he tried, he would surely find a party that had a priest. But he would rather die than ask for help. Was Weed too proud to bargain for his life?

Nonsense!

There were no poisoning monsters in the Lair of Litvart. Neither kobolds nor goblins had any knowledge of poisonous substances, let alone used them.

A savior would want to know where Weed was poisoned, and by whom—with suspicious eyes. He would rather die once than share with others the whereabouts of the secret chamber that he had found after a long time of tribulation. Once he arrived at the exit above the ground, he got on the colt.

"Village. To the nearest village. Quick, or I'll pass out."

Sniff

The beast did not even move a leg. As if taking joy in the misfortune of others, Arse pretended to be deaf and scratched the soil. It gnawed on grass in protest.

"If you're going to be like that, then..."

The last grain of Weed's patience finally ran out.

"You're leaving me without any other options."

Weed took out the engraving knife.

Arse looked terrified at the sight of a sharp object, but calmed down as if it knew Weed was only bluffing.

Instead of slashing at Arse, Weed cut his own forearm with the knife. Did he lose his sanity enough to get self-destructive when his life was already in jeopardy because of the poison gas?

"Hoho."

Weed grinned treacherously, though his vision was already blurry as a result of anemia. Then, he clutched the colt's jaws open and forced it to drink his blood.

"Look, now that you sipped my blood, you're poisoned, too. Take me to a village, or we are both dead. I will resurrect soon, but you'll never come to life again, got it?"

The colt finally galloped to the village, though its speed wasn't any faster than before. Upon arriving at the village, Weed cast a cure spell on the brink of death. He purchased herbs and antidotes worth twenty gold. Though his pockets were empty, he had no remorse.

Weed quickly returned to the Lair of Litvart, and only after he was certain that nobody was watching him from the perimeter, entered the cave where the worms dwelled.

He even brought Arse in there. He feared that other users might steal it, and while the idea to get rid of it by someone else's hands was more than tempting, he didn't want to know what would happen if he failed to return the colt to the Royal Stable as his priority.

"Always stay behind me."

Arse swayed its tail resignedly.

Weed began to slay only queen worms. The little bugs gave EXPs their size, and the way that they crawled out at him from everywhere made it costly to attack each of them.

As no sword master could catch raindrops falling from the sky, Weed ignored the bugs that covered the entire floor in a murky color.

"Engraving Knife Technique!"

The mysterious sword technique from Zahab.

It crushed the enemy's shell with powers that directly disintegrated the nature of an object, regardless of resistance and defense. Sometimes, Weed encountered bigger queen worms and needed two or three strikes, between which he rested to refill mana.

He was poisoned and insurgency by the little bugs. With life decreasing, Weed always barely escaped; death had never been so close.

The more he slew queens in the cave, the more blankly dismayed he felt. Who would believe this was a quest for class change? Most users choose their primary class long before they hit level ten. On the other hand, Weed was level sixty-two, and this cave was still a life-and-death challenge to him. He only wondered what kind of class required so much hassle.

The Number of Monsters Left: 1

At the end of seven days of vicious battle, Weed had only one more to kill. The queen of queens! She was five times bigger than the other queen worms.

When Weed entered her throne room without precaution, he was accorded a cordial reception with thick, green fumes of poison gas that the queen had retained for him.

He would have let it hit him under other circumstances, but he jumped back under a vague hunch.

Melt

Little bugs that were touched by the fumes rotted in seconds and melted.

"Awful poison." Weed's heart skipped two beats.

The only way to stay away from the poison gas was using the bow from a distance. But his arrows could not penetrate the hardy shell of the queen worm. He had to approach within reach of her poison gas.

The queen worm knew Weed's dilemma, and with a mouthful of poison gas, waited for him to get close so she could shower it on him.

Like a rattlesnake waiting coiled for a chance, the queen worm and Weed faced each other, motionless.

'She can shoot thick fumes only once. If I can dodge the first one, the second one will be much lighter. The initial shot is decisive.'

Weed's eyes glittered when he saw a treasure has stashed behind the queen worm.

'I will never, ever give up here. If only I had someone who I could sacrifice to the poison gas... Right, I think I've found the answer.'

His eyes narrowed to slits. At the end of his gaze lay dumb-eyed Arse.

Punt

Weed kicked the colt's ass right away. Arse plunged forward instinctively, and the queen worm reflexively puffed out the poison gas toward it.

'Sorry, Arse. Destiny's got you. Life isn't fair, and this is the end of our relationship.'

Weed could not afford the luxury of watching the fate of the poor beast.

As soon as he made sure that the poison gas stocked in the queen worm's mouth was fully launched, he rushed to her.

"Engraving Knife Technique! Double dance!"

Weed swung the sword wildly until his mana ran out.

With the iron sword in the right hand, and the engraving knife in the left, he tore the shell off the queen worm.

Left without any worthwhile combat skills, this was the best option for Weed. The queen worm struggled, but her gigantic size got in the way as he was too close to her.

Moan

She finally closed her eyes shut. Then, a key dropped from her body.

"This is it."

Weed picked up the key, inserted it in the keyhole of the treasure box and turned it clockwise. He found in the box a few volumes of books and a parchment scroll.

The Successor to the Legendary Emperor

I am Geihar Von Arpen, the first emperor of the Continent, who put an end to timeless divisions.

My final years have been far from fulfilling.

No one has recognized my distress, my superiority!

Why does no one understand my profession?

Why does everyone look down upon my profession in disrespect?

Enslaved to prejudices, the talented have refused to understand my goodwill and succeed me in my trade.

Even with my children, this is true.

That imbecilic and senseless bunch!

They do not deserve to be my successor.

I entrust my secret trade to you.

The Emperor Geihar was the first and only man who had ruled over a unified empire in the history of the Versailles Continent.

After his death, the empire was divided once again, thus shaping the present map, but his achievements were recorded as legendary.

Weed was thrilled.

"There were idiots back then, too. They should have known better. It's an excellent opportunity...

Who is the Emperor Geihar? He's none other than the first man to conquer the entire continent with his own powers, and this is his class! It must be damn good, but they judged it superficially."

Ting

Hidden Class!
If you accept it, you can use exclusive skills related to the nature of the class. Do you want to convert now?

Weed yelled without hesitation, "Of course!" That moment, his avatar was enveloped in light

Character Name	Weed	Alignment	Neutral	
Level	68	Profession	Legendary Moonlight Sculptor	
Title	None			
Fame	250			
Health		3460	Mana	340
Strength		235 +20	Agility	200 +20
Vitality		89 +20		
Wisdom		16 + 20	Intellect	10 + 20
Stamina		89 + 20	Fighting Spirit	67 + 20
Luck		5 + 20	Leadership	68 + 20
Art		29 + 100		
Attack		170		
Defense		30		
Magic Resistance				

Fire	0%	Water	0%
Earth	0%	Black Magic	0%

- + All stats are added 20 points.
- + Art stat is added extra 80 points.
- + In moonlit night, all stats increase by 30% in addition.
- + Enables you to equip certain items specialized for the class.
- + Enables you to learn all craft skills to the stage of a master.
- + Grants extra options to items that are produced or refined.
- + Increases Attack Power for the Engraving Knife technique.
- + Decreases Mana Consumption for the Engraving Knife technique.
- + Enables you to learn secret skills based on your level in Sculpture Mastery.
- + Increases Fame by creating a statue of extraordinary image or artistic value.

Weed finally got the class that he had been fighting for, but when he saw the name of his new class, he almost collapsed in mortification.

"Damn it!" 'Moonlight Sculptor!'

After all his blood and sweat, it went back to Moonlight Sculptor.

It was actually 'Legendary' Moonlight Sculptor with a flattering prefix, but Weed didn't give a damn about it. The cursed, hungry profession, Moonlight Sculptor!

"Why me...?"

Clear tears gushed out of Weed's eyes.

He smelt what was left of the poison gas that the queen worm had breathed out in her last struggle at the moment of death, but it wasn't what prompted the floodgates in his eyes to break down.

He had no choice but to accept the God-forbidden class of Moonlight Sculptor.

"I should've chosen a common warrior class."

Weed, who had just laughed at the fools who refused to comprehend the Emperor Geihar's profession, now blamed the emperor for duping him into converting to Moonlight Sculptor. He wasn't at all convinced.

'Why is life so hard on me?'

Weed was weeping in self-pity.

He had spent a week sitting down in the middle of the street to stimulate Rodriguez's curiosity, and more than seven weeks in the Lair of Litvart to find this cavity and crush the disgusting worms. All the effort wasted on converting to Moonlight Sculptor!

Weed wanted to cry his heart out.

Yet he had improved his handicraft skills and sculpture mastery, and earned massive revenue during his sit-in in front of Rodriguez's manor; he had leveled up at a frightening pace in the lair – conveniently, all of this escaped him now.

Only the cold reality, now a Moonlight Sculptor, grieved him. He just wanted to scream that it was so unfair.

"It's not as bad as it looks."

After a long moment of crisis, though, Weed's eyes regained some light in realizing what he had missed amid a flood of misery.

He had thought that he hit the bottom, but as he calmed down, he was seeing the other side.

Warriors, rangers and priests are the top three classes, which means that they have been tried and proven better than the other classes.

For the warrior and ranger class, they are given 50% bonus in attack power when they are armed with a weapon of choice according to their sub-classes. The priest class can learn and cast holy spells that no other class but the paladin class can tap into.

This was why Weed could deal less damage with a sword than his counterpart sword warriors, and the attack power of his arrows could not rival that of a full-time ranger.

Therefore, a hidden class, whose secrets they have to figure out on their own through trial and error, heavily relies on the way they are brought up. If they are properly developed with a focus on the class's merits and characteristics, it comes off well. If not, it will turn out mediocre, no better than a common class.

Weed hastily turned his attention back to the scroll. There were more paragraphs that he had yet to read.

I love beautiful statues. The statues that are carved with the magnificent spirit of Kvasir have never forsaken me. As long as I love and trust them, they are loyal to me.

Who will believe this? That this lowly Sculpture Mastery is the cornerstone of my quest from a humble farmer in a country town to the man who united the Continent.

Listen, my successor who walks in the path of sculpture.

A very difficult path awaits you. The path that a hundred out of a hundred men shall give up and a nation of men will not fare any better.

However, my successor, I encourage you to stay the course in the face of the toughest challenges. Hardship brings a value of its own, and toughness produces a result of its own too.

The Grand Master of Sculpture!

You must learn the secrets of Sculpture Mastery which I failed to learn. It shall remain the wish of every man who has learned the sculptural art.

I hereby entrust you gifts of value.

The Emperor Geihar, the conqueror of the earth, the sea and the sky through Sculpture Mastery.

Weed finished reading the scroll and checked the other items—three tablets and a book.

The effects of the tablets were not recorded anywhere but he knew what skill to use in this situation.

"Identify!"

You failed to identify the item.

You failed to identify the item.

You failed to identify the item.

A Tablet of the Emperor

This tablet is made of a variety of rare herbs by an ancient emperor, to clear the mind when it is taken.

Effect:

Increases Mana (+200 Mana)

After a series of failed attempts, Weed finally recognized the treasure items.

They were rare—no, more valuable than simply rare—items that increased the amount of mana permanently by two hundred points.

The tablets smelt of an indescribably comforting fragrance. Weed estimated the price for a single tablet to be no less than ten thousand gold.

Since the tablets increased the maximum amount of mana, instead of recovering mana temporarily like mana potions in the market, they were worth such an eye-popping price.

"Thank you so much. I admire your generosity, your Imperial Majesty."

Weed put down the tablets and picked up the book.

"Does it contain great skills? It should! I don't think more bad fortune will strike me again after I suffered these setbacks. No, I'm not that unlucky."

This time again, Weed succeeded in figuring out the content of the book when he almost gave up after scores of message windows of failure.

The Book of Secret Sword Techniques from the Imperial Family of Arpens

The Emperor Geihar Von Arpen recorded the Flawless Sword Techniques on behalf of the Imperial Family's perpetuity and prosperity.

The book is composed of five movements and one footstep.

All members of the Imperial Family were, by origin, knights. The skill is initially restricted to the Knight class, but the Emperor Geihar Von Arpen considered his successor in Sculpture Mastery, so he refined the skill for a Sculptor to learn a weakened version of the skill.

Surprised, Weed almost dropped the book.

"This, this color is—"

The Book of Secret Sword Techniques was flashing in gold when it was identified.

It meant that the book was a rare skill book! Moreover, it was an A-grade sword technique book.

"You're so generous, Your Imperial Majesty. Thank you for giving me an A-grade sword technique book,"

Weed said.

A little disappointing truth was that the skill book wasn't a unique or S-grade one.

Still, it was questionable that Weed, now a sculptor, could learn such a high level of sword techniques even if he had found one.

S-grade sword techniques in general have a requirement for certain classes, mostly sword warriors or knights.

As Weed didn't have much of a decent combat skill, this book was like raindrops in a drought.

The days of basic sword skill and archery! They would be now gone, only a distant memory.

Weed put a hand on the book and shouted, "Learn!"

Skill: You have learned the Imperial Formless Sword Technique.

The sword technique book, now done with, glowed white and burned to ashes.

"Imperial Formless Sword Technique Window!"

Imperial Formless Sword Technique

This skill is tailored for Sculptors by Emperor Geihar Von Arpen. As the level in Sculpture Mastery rises, the Attack Power of the skill increases by 1%.

It is composed of five movements, one breathing technique and one footstep.

"Fufufu"

The corners of Weed's mouth rose.

This is great!

The Arpenian Empire used to rule over the entire Continent. It collapsed to become barely a name only, but the sword technique that had once been exclusive within the Imperial Family was undoubtedly worth money.

But Weed was cast into despair when he read the descriptions of each movement in the skill info window.

"What in the world!"

He let out a cry.

The first movement, which consumed the least amount of mana of the five, required three hundred mana points.

Because his maximum mana was too low for now, the secret sword technique was far beyond his reach, even after he swallowed the Tablets of the Emperor.

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Chapter 9 : The City of Heaven

A pub. A place that was usually filled with hearty laughter and clamorous noises had been silent for the last few days all because of a single man, Volk.

He had a scarily massive body, but what was scarier was his face.

Considering that someone whose countenance could make an Orc's heart skip a beat had been drinking gloomily all day long, it was hardly surprising that the pub was drowned in silence.

Volk made a face while drinking.

'I want to propose to her. I need something special for her, if there is anything.'

Volk wanted to propose to a lady. His heart-breaking anguish wasn't visible to others.

'A gift for her. Right, I heard of a sculptor in the Citadel of Serabourg. I will ask him to make one for me. If he makes something that pleases my heart, I will give him the most precious thing I have in return.'

Volk left the pub, stumbling.

"Whew, this is still full of users here."

Back in the capital of Rosenheim kingdom after seven weeks, Weed felt a headache coming on at the sight of an incalculable number of avatars.

It was a dizzy scene in which buyers and sellers were actively trading with one another, and new adventurers were looking for partners to join their adventure.

"Quick, Arse! Let's go to your home."

Weed led the colt to the Royal Stable. It followed him obediently.

The beast had just survived the poison gas from the queen worm, as luck would have it.

As if it knew by instinct that it had missed imminent death more times than it deserved, the colt was willing to stay out of Weed's way; the sooner it got home, the better.

There was a shabby stable outside the Royal Palace. As soon as the chief horse trainer laid eyes on the colt, he grimaced.

"The good times are gone, now that this mouth-firing Arse is back. Heard of you from Lord Midvale. Are you returning this beast that shames his father, Weed-nim?" Lighthearted now, Weed left the colt in an empty lot.

"You've had a good journey. I know this beast spells nothing but trouble."

"I am fine. It's over now."

"Lord Midvale left a message. He wants you to visit him if you are still interested in the centurion job. He says it's yours anytime."

"Tell him I appreciate it."

The chief horse trainer was polite to Weed who was virtually a stranger to him.

Assured once again that a man's status depended on who his contacts were, and what he had done in his name, Weed left the Royal Stable and went to the Training Hall.

There, he met the instructor.

"Hmm. So that's what happened to you..."

The instructor was very sorry that Weed was forced to convert to the Legendary Moonlight Sculptor class.

"It is my fault."

Weed kept it short. He just dropped his head with a grim face.

"No. How can anyone in his right mind blame this on you? The counselor stepped over the line. Still, hang on to hope,"

The instructor said, patting Weed's shoulder.

"Yes, Instructor. You're the one I can always rely on..." Weed said.

"Haha. Absolutely. Anyway, you have come back from a great journey and you finished my quest."

The instructor rewarded him with three gold and fifty points of public service to Rosenheim for the completion of The Clean-up Operation in the Lair of Litvart quest.

As public service is largely accumulated, it gives a user the upper hand in trades in the country in question, and he is qualified for government positions as well.

However, the instructor's attitude changed slightly. He no longer considered Weed one of his kind as a colleague on the same path in swordsmanship.

It implied that the friendship between them, which Weed had worked so hard to build up, was crumbling a little.

After visiting the instructor, Weed stopped by at Rodriguez's manor as his last visit. As always, the counselor was confined in his study.

"Haha. You really finished the quest," Rodriguez said. "I was wondering how you fared because you had not appeared on my doorstep for a long time."

"Yes, Counselor."

"Hmm... Anyway, as destiny directs it, I have an object for you."

Rodriguez handed Weed a wooden statue that fitted in his palm. It was shaped like an imperial knight.

"What is this?" Weed asked.

"It is the legacy of Geihar von Arpen the Magnificent. My family used to serve the Imperial Family of the Arpenian Empire. The blood, and the obligation accompanying it, has flowed in my family. I am the one to take the task for this generation. Now that I hand it to you, I am finally liberated from the reins," Rodriguez said.

"But what is this statue for?" Weed had already received a wooden statue of a different shape when he carried out Zahab's Moonlight Sculptor quest.

"I do not know the secret of this wooden statue, either," Rodriguez said. "The myth has it that there have been five masters in sculptural art on the Continent. Of course, it is only an ancient myth, for they came and went like the wind. They are known to leave their own crafts in their legacies, so I surmise that this statue is probably one of them. According to the myth, if you succeeded in collecting all five of the statues, and solve the puzzle arising from them, the ultimate secret of sculptural art will appear."

Still doubtful, Weed identified the wooden statue. Due to his low level in that skill, he succeeded in finding out the identity of the statue only after a couple of failed attempts.

Wooden Statue:

Durability: 1/1

This statue contains the Emperor Geihar Von Arpen's skills.

Equips: Enables you to acquire a unique skill to give the breath of life to any statue.

Requirement: Expert stage in Sculpture Mastery

When Weed identified the wooden statue left by Zahab, he also found an engraving knife technique whose prerequisite was five or above skill level in sword mastery.

"A great secret is hidden in sculpture mastery," Weed said.

"You are now on the path in sculptural art, and I wish you the best in making Grand Master in sculpture mastery. The world has never seen a Grand Master, but if there is ever one, he will be able to handle the fate of the Continent easily," Rodriguez said. "It is true that I introduced you to this path out of malicious intent, but it is also a true tale I have told you."

Weed no longer resented Rodriguez. The past was the past, and a sudden interest in the craft hit him.

'The one who creates his own path.'

Furthermore, Weed was told that if he ever made it, the days of riches and power would wait for him.

Rodriguez thought he had paid off old scores with Weed. At the sight of his sorry state after he wandered hungry and cold for seven weeks, the grudge was already gone in the counselor's mind.

"I have another question, Counselor. Do cooks or blacksmiths have their own hidden path to becoming Grand Master?" Weed asked.

"I guess so. God is generous," Rodriguez said. "Remember –not everyone on the path in the cooking skill sees and grabs the opportunity."

"Then..."

"There must be other Chosen Ones! They will see to it their own way. It is up to them if they have it or not."

When Weed had heard all he wanted to hear, he left the manor.

Darius heard his heart pounding. He had never expected to go this far when he had solved a series of trivial-looking quests.

The best luck, he called it.

There were two men at the center of a power game in Rosenheim Kingdom—Duke Kanus and Count Albrook. Of the two, Duke Kanus, in charge of the military affairs, was more powerful.

The man in question was now lowering a snowy white sword toward him now.

"Darius-nim, I hereby bestow temporary knighthood of Rosenheim upon you in recognition of your dedicated service to the Royal Court. I order you to form a punitive force by the power of a knight and rescue the villagers at the frontier from their misery."

"At your service, milord. You can count on me," Darius said.

"Sir Darius, I entrust this task to you," Duke Kanus said.

Darius felt a slight touch of the blade on both shoulders in turn, then on the head.

It might have been a dreadful sensation in times of war, but he was in the middle of an ordination ceremony of knighthood in the Royal Palace of Rosenheim. Moreover, the holder of the sword was Duke Kanus.

Rather than fearful, it was such a memorable moment for Darius that he almost let out a cry of excitement. Darius had to fight this spontaneous temptation to exclaim and roll over on the tapestry in spite of the solemn atmosphere. Suppressing a smirk, his face wrinkled into a grin.

'Now I'm the commander of a punitive force' Darius counted himself very, very lucky.

'I've got to do something'

Weed made a serious face.

The nature of the sculptor class that he happened to stumble on was as follows:

As Weed's main weapon was a sword, it was useful to compare him to a sword warrior.

The moment the class is decided, a sword warrior wins a 50% bonus on sword mastery. Of course, Weed could close the gap with his useful handicraft skill as compensation.

Thanks to the initially heightened stats, even a knight at the same level was no match for him. In the case of relatively lower levels, he was confident that he would win a duel against two sword warriors at the same level, supported by the engraving knife technique and the Imperial Formless Sword Technique.

The Imperial Formless Sword Technique—Weed was surprised by its dominant power when he tried it.

This technique was something close to a cheat key, doubling the speed of reflex and the power of destruction, and even tripling the recovery of mana. No wonder the Emperor Geihar selected it to leave to his successor.

However, the warriors and knights also have sword skills and breathing patterns of their own. When they master a breathing pattern suitable to their own class, it has a great effect on them, even when the grade of sword techniques that they know is lower than Weed's Imperial Formless Sword Technique.

It is the special right enjoyed by the knights and warriors, the two standard classes specialized in combat skills.

In other words, no matter whether Weed raised his handicraft skill and other stats zealously, and acquired more cheat-key-like skills, he would one day be caught up by his counterparts. Even now, Weed was only slightly ahead of them unless he used underhanded tactics.

Obviously, he would have been much weaker than an ordinary sword warrior without timely investment in the handicraft skill as well as the Imperial Formless Sword Technique, and additional stats that he had earned from the Training Hall.

'But the sculptor class has a greater potential than appears. If not, the Emperor Geihar could not have conquered the Continent, and it would be hard to explain Zahab's strength,' he said to himself.

The Citadel of Serabourg, the capital of Rosenheim Kingdom.

In front of the Central Fountain where the thriving downtown was located, a line of avatars was watching various statues on display. Weed had opened a second stall to work on his skill level in sculpture mastery.

"Hello. How much is this?" a girl asked.

"Five silvers," Weed said.

"Oh my, it's too expensive. Can you please make a little discount for me? Please? I'll buy two pieces."

The cute girl beamed at Weed, trying to persuade him, but he was merciless. Especially when it came to money, he treated men and women alike.

"With due respect, young lady, a discount is like an insult to my artworks. Do you think I discounted my passion in art, and my devotion to the work in particular, when I carved this statue? An artwork has to bear a fair price that reflects its true value, which will grow within your mind as time passes,"

Weed said.

The girl was moved. It was silly that she tried to bargain for artwork that held the sculptor's heart. Seized with remorse, she took shiny silver coins out of her pocket.

"I'm so sorry. Here are ten silvers," the girl said.

"Thank you, young lady."

Weed grinned demurely, handing over two statues. It was a winner's smile, proud of himself that he had sold the statues as they were originally priced.

As a sculptor with the bold description 'Legendary Moonlight,' which he had resisted but converted to in the end, he carved beautiful statues even by the standard of Pratique Des Arts, Peinture, Sculpture, Gravure.

His current skill level in sculpture mastery was four. Since Weed converted to Moonlight Sculptor, the effects of his sculpture mastery had been doubled, not to mention that he owned one of the top items that amounted to a cheat key, Zahab's Engraving Knife.

Weed's lineup was yet limited to small-size statues made of plain materials by his immature expertise in sculpture mastery. Their simplicity and low price rather appealed to a broader spectrum of customers.

Some of his fans even lined up to pick up the artworks that he was working on there and then.

Foxes and rabbits, which cost less than ten coppers for materials, were the most popular items in his stall that sold at a lightning speed, though they were priced at five silvers.

Weed believed that his enterprise was an honest business. He wasn't coercing anyone to buy his statues. What could he do about people flocking to get hold of them for the stated price?

Weed moved the engraving knife faster. He was raising his expertise rating in sculpture mastery while he was making money.

Like sculpture mastery, cooking, repair and other craft skills are upgraded from the basic stage to intermediate when they reach the skill level of ten, which falls back to one after the upgrade.

For cooking skill, this upgrade creates solid options of enhancing life and mana benefits for hand-made meals. For the repair skill, the intermediate stage introduces a new tech tree for producing and refining weapons and gear.

That isn't the end of it.

When the skill level reaches ten once again, thus passing the intermediate stage, the expert stage descends on a new full-fledged master, who has proven worthy of himself by completing all the necessary steps.

A master in any field of skills, combat or craft, is recognized and respected based solely on the merits of his expertise in the skill, but overall craft skills, such as sculptural art and cooking skill, are very limited in prospect.

Weed's priority at this point was upgrading his basic handicraft skill to the intermediate stage.

The skill level had increase to nine while he was dedicated to repairing damage equipment and serving meals to the troops in the Lair of Litvart. One more level and the handicraft skill would be promoted to the intermediate stage.

The Intermediate handicraft skill enhances sword mastery and archery by increasing overall attack power by 30%.

The skill is mandatory for a sculptor whose attack power is substandard at best, penalized by the character of his class.

'The handicraft skill is quite handy.'

As the handicraft skill rises, all the craft skills become more efficient. The expert handicraft skill can lift guild restrictions for a user into a wider field of craft skills, such as blacksmith work and alchemy.

The Legendary Moonlight Sculptor class already gave a free pass to all the craft skills related to other professions, but Weed was aware that a higher handicraft skill would make it easier and faster to acquire and develop them.

Perhaps the crafters gradually intersect with one another to the point where they converge on the same path to supremacy of a Grand Master.

Actually, it is an understatement that the crafters would become extinct without the existence of the handicraft skill. They cannot catch up with combat specialists unless they beef up their pathetic combat abilities.

'Now I've finished a hundred statues!'

Even though Weed was carving statues relentlessly, his skill level in sculpture mastery was stuck at level 4 at 98%. In contrary to the fast-growing handicraft skill, the growth of his sculpture mastery was slowing down.

'I hope it'll level up after fifty more statues.'

That moment, female customers suddenly parted in alarm, and through a corridor between them appeared a tall man with terrorizing looks who was walking toward Weed.

The man seemed so full of a deadly aura that even Weed felt his spine freeze.

'What have I done wrong to turn that thug against me?' Weed asked himself under the breath.

The man looked around with slit eyes.

Scream

"He saw me!" the girls shrieked.

The man walked toward Weed slowly, and then bowed down miserably like a bedraggled mouse.

"I'd like to ask you for a favor," the man said.

"Shoot" –Wrong choice of a word.

"I'm here to buy a statue. But I couldn't find anything I wanted," the man said kneeling down before Weed. "Can you make a statue the way I order? No, I beg you, please. You should make a statue for me, so I can propose to the lady."

Weed tried to get the man to his feet and hear him out. The man's name was Volk.

Volk had fallen in love with a woman. The primary motive for starting the online game was to protect her by her side. For the sake of this person, who was a priestess, he had selected the paladin knight class for his avatar.

During a year of numerous missions and battles, she had not died once owing to his devotion and sacrifice. He had also enjoyed his second life that was accompanied by blessing and healing from her. The bond between them had deepened as months went by, and he was so happy every time he saw her.

Now was the time for him to propose a marriage to her.

"I want to give her something she'd never forget. Not a flower that withers someday. I want you to carve the flowers that shall never wither—to engrave my heart in them! Please!"

Volk stayed on his knees.

His face was intimidating, but his heart wasn't.

How many men would kneel down before a stranger for the sake of such an unconditional love cherished in the heart?

Sighing deeply, Weed looked around. Many women looked touched. Even he, blinded by money, could sense Volk's grief.

'I love her. I love her, but why doesn't she see it in me?'

'I want to speak my heart.'

'I tried to say in my heart a thousand times, "I LOVE YOU!'

'But why can't I say the same words to her?'

As a man, Weed's sympathies were with Volk. Weed held the paladin's hand and helped him rise to his feet.

"For such a favor..." Weed said politely, "You don't need to kneel down, Volk-nim. In your own right, you can ask for it on your feet. I am weak to that kind of request. I'll gladly accept your order."

Volk shed tears.

"Thank you so much, Weed-nim."

"Not at all. So, what kind of flowers do you want?"

"Please make seven sunflowers. It will embody my heart, which has followed her, the sunshine of my life, for seven years."

"I see. Can you wait a moment?"

Weed studied the wood stock beside him and chose the best quality timber—Elvenwood.

It was a very thick, hard wood that was known to grow only in a warmer climate in the south. It was still in one piece, the size of a rock, which was yet to be chopped to smaller blocks conforming to statues.

'I must do my best to deliver it this time.'

Weed could carve a fox or rabbit with his eyes closed now, but flowers seemed like a challenge.

'If I carve each flower separately, it will be a simple matter, but how can I put them together later? Seven sunflowers and a hundred roses as my private gift for this couple. I'd better carve a bouquet of all the flowers at once.'

Weed pictured the overall shape of the final work, and began to smooth the Elvenwood very slowly.

Volk and other girls had no idea what Weed was up to. They could not understand why he chose such a large piece of wood to carve only seven sunflowers. In any case, as the Elvenwood was being trimmed off, a shape was surfacing little by little.

The first flowers were relatively large sunflowers, soon followed by roses encircling them.

As Weed's magic hands danced, a beautiful bouquet revealed itself from top to bottom.

"Wow!"

"It's amazing."

Customers in waiting soon turned into spectators in awe, watching the sculptural art unfolded by Weed.

Each time the engraving knife snapped, each time the wood was trimmed, the audience throbbed with anxiety because a small mistake could snap the fragile trunk of a flower.

"Oh, my god! Let him finish it."

This was the wish of not only Weed and Volk, but also everyone else present.

Right in front of them, Weed concentrated on the flowers fervently.

As the engraving knife moved, the wood was being shaped, revealing the blossoms, trunks and leaves.

'Failure isn't allowed here' Weed's eyes gleamed.

He would have been forgiven for any failure if he had been alone, but now he was onstage surrounded by a thick circle of spectators. If he made a mistake before the prospective customers, his skyrocketing reputation would immediately crash.

He knew better than anyone else that his popularity was growing, large attributed to the fact that there was no other sculptor in the near vicinity, and he had to avoid it shrinking at any cost.

A fan's fantasy is equal to money!

Weed sublimated his excessive obsession into artistic production, and finally succeeded in making the bouquet.

Level Up: Sculpture Mastery [5]

Enhances beauty and complexity of statues.

Decreases the rate at which you fail to produce statues.

Upgrade: Handicraft Skill [Basic to Intermediate]

Increases attack power with weapons and fists. (+30% ATK)

Enhances every field of craft skill and Sword Mastery.

Art has risen by 5 point (+5 Art)

Fame has risen by 1 point. (+1 Fame)

Caution: The sale of a failed work may cancel it.

Once Weed finished the wooden bouquet, the two skills leveled altogether.

Because his sculpture mastery had been stuck at the expertise rating of 98% with the skill level of four, the first level up message wasn't surprising, but though the expertise rating for the handicraft skill had remained six percent left lower than the next level, it was filled at once, promoted to the intermediate stage.

As luck would have it, the Art stat, which had been bothering him constantly because its progress was nowhere to be seen, increased by five points.

"This is unbelievable."

"Skill window!"

Weed checked the window quickly, and realized that his skill level in sculpture mastery not only hit, but also accumulated an expertise rating of 17% above the line. Even the handicraft skill scored 5% after it converted to intermediate one.

'Aren't I lucky?' Weed was excited by his fortune, but soon understood why it had taken place. Sculptural art isn't a conveyor belt.

The expertise rating in sculpture mastery does not advance by mass production of similar statues as if they were made by a cookie cutter.

Only when a sculptor is dedicated to create an original work of high artistic value that has never been tried before, will sculpture mastery gain an enormous expertise rating. It reminded Weed of the first fox and rabbit statues that had improved his expertise rating in sculpture mastery greatly in the initial phase.

Tried and failed, his skill level had risen visibly fast. When he no longer tried a new shape and style by force of habit though, and repeatedly churned out monotonous products, his progress in sculpture mastery had slowed down almost to a stop.

'I thought leveling was supposed to slow down as the level was higher, but that wasn't it. I was taking the wrong path.'

While Weed was immersed in his own thoughts, Volk and other women were fascinated by the bouquet. A bouquet made of wood. The sunflowers and roses radiated softness and warmth, bearing life like real ones.

"It's finished, Volk-nim."

Weed handed the bouquet over to Volk.

The sunflowers and roses were beaming on the paladin. To his eyes, it was magic.

"Oh, dear God. I can't—can't believe..." More tears dropped from the eyes of Volk. "Is this really made of wood? Sculpture mastery does magic..."

"Yup, Volk-nim. You just saw me carve this, didn't you?"

"It's simply unbelievable," Volk said amid tears.

The other spectators were also dazzled by Weed's finished work. He could not have made the bouquet without Zahab's engraving knife, and especially at the critical moment, his sculpture mastery and handicraft skill had been combined to bring out more fantastic effects on the work.

"I did make this bouquet with my heart. Now you go for her with your heart," Weed said.

He encouraged Volk in a fine manner. He was inspired that he had learned a new secret of sculpture mastery while making the bouquet.

"Thank you, thank you so much," Volk said, sincerely grateful to Weed, putting his hand in the pocket to take out the payment for the bouquet.

Uplifted, Weed said,

"It's three gold."

Considering the amount of effort that he had put in, the statue deserved to be worth more than three gold, but he was content with it. Suddenly, Volk had a confused look, and began to turn over his pockets.

"Where... where are they gone?" Volk cried. His hand that had been combing through in his pocket didn't hold anything in it.

It was Weed, though, who was panicked at that very moment.

'Is he trying to pull a trick on me?'

Weed already knew what was coming—more specifically, what Volk would say next second.

'He will claim he's lost money somewhere else.'

"I-I am so sorry, Weed-nim. I lost money somewhere else," Volk said.

'Cause you can't say you didn't have any gold in the first place.'

Volk didn't wait for Weed to answer, and cried, "I think my pocket was picked. Damn squirrel!"

'There you go. But you can't bluff your way out with this number of people witnessing your every move. If he's an expert in this line of business, he should know better than thinking he can rip me off and walk out alive.'

"Do you mind if I give you something of an equal value to make up for money?"

Volk followed the steps that Weed had already seen through, a typical trick for the penniless to try, but he underestimated Weed, whom spread a terrible aura.

'Who do you think you are to rip me off, jackass?' Weed thought.

Then, Volk was forced to put his hand again in his pocket.

"What a relief. I found two gold and ninety silvers left. Can you please discount ten silvers?" Volk asked.

"Why don't you just give me something worth ten silvers? What do you have?"

Weed's sharp eyes ran over Volk's outfit. He observed the weapons, his gear and ornaments.

Tens of thousands of identified items in Royal Road were registered in alphabetic order in a corner of his brain. He wanted to immediately identify a new item upon acquiring it, estimate the market price for it, and rejoice twice, even thrice, right on the spot.

But his eyes failed to catch anything valuable from Volk who was poorly attired. The paladin took out a book from his clothes and handed it to Weed.

"How about allowing for ten silvers with this book?"

Weed quickly scanned the book.

The Forgotten City on the Versailles Continent #4

In the sky above the Southern Province of Rosenheim Kingdom is a metropolis made mysterious by fairy tales and legend, which is recorded to be populated by a race that is distinctly non-human. To describe them best, the right word would be the Aves.

Strong warriors themselves, the race detested monsters, driving the lowly irritants out of the Southern Province, so they were nowhere to be seen. However, the race has now vanished, and even the path to the City of Heaven, as it is known, is now lost.

Now the presence of the city comes to be questionable, but the townspeople in the Southern Province still believe in the city and her courageous avian residents as the elders instill this tale in the minds of the next generation.

According to an unreliable source, it needs a Mysterious Seed to climb up to the City of Heaven.

Weed felt deceived. Who would believe such nonsense as the City of Heaven?

Granted that a city was actually floating somewhere in the air, violating every law of physics, the city would be seen from the earth. Consequently, that book claiming the presence of the City of Heaven would be hearsay.

If that wasn't ridiculous enough, the last passage about climbing up a plant to the city was outrageous, if not lousy. The thing had about zero credibility.

As if he sensed that Weed was skeptical of the content of the book he had given him, Volk defended himself in a hurry,

"You may not believe this, but it's a hard-won book..."

"..."

"I wish I could give you something better, but coincidentally, this book is the most valuable item in my possession,"

Volk said, showing what he had in his backpack—a rabbit's fur, a snake's scale and a small piece of a broken sword.

Weed could repair the sword, but it was a sloppy thing with +2 ATK that even a kobold would throw away. Perhaps he could negotiate for it for two coppers in the blacksmith's workshop.

"I am so sorry, Weed-nim."

Weed sighed deeply.

'Okay, it's fine. I learned the secret of sculpture mastery, anyway. I couldn't have figured it out if I had printed out the same junk forever. I will forgive him for cheating ten silvers. No big deal.'

When Weed mentioned cost three gold, he had already considered it negotiable. His call was mainly intended to shock Volk into playing by his book.

The prices of most statues, which were not fixed by any normal standard, were largely determined by the way a customer made a bargain with a sculptor.

Two gold and ninety silvers, plus a silly book, wasn't a bad deal at all, the level up of his sculpture mastery and other skills included. But God only knew what Weed would have committed to in the case of two gold and eighty silvers.

"I think this book is worth ten silvers. I wish you good luck with your proposal to her, Volk-nim. And the lady you fall in love with..."

"Excuse me?" Volk said.

"She will live a wonderful life with you,"

Weed said sarcastically. With such a penny-pinching husband, she would never be broke for the rest of her life, for one thing.

"Thank you, Weed-nim." After shaking hands with Weed, Volk walked away slowly. Weed watched him leaving.

Suddenly, on Volk's outfit, appeared shiny Mithril armor. His trousers were covered by a pair of Mithril gaiters. Even his boots turned into Mithril—that was a twist that left Weed reeling.

'He's wearing a life cotton ring, a rare item that doubles maximum life! A priceless treasure! As far as I know, those earrings resist the element of lightning. I heard it's only listed in the catalogue, and no one actually had them. You bastard, you're loaded – it's not fair you just ripped off a poor sculptor.'

The items Volk was equipped with were valuable beyond Weed's wildest imagination. Some of them were even worth thousands of gold.

Finished with the bouquet after hours of hard work, Weed stretched out his arms and yawned.

Suddenly, the spectators began to shove yellow gold at Weed and shouted—

"Make me exactly the same bouquet, please!"

"I just bought two foxes, but can I return them and change my order to the bouquet?"

"Please!"

Upon leaving the Citadel of Serabourg, Volk made a cheesy smile.

Full of humorous heart that betrayed his scary countenance, Volk had sincerely desired to reward Weed, who had created the bouquet with his heart.

The book of the City of Heaven!—truthfully, Volk had spent two months to get hold of it. According to the book, it is a mysterious place that even he had not put his foot on.

One of the reasons he had come to Rosenheim was to visit the city. But the proposal to the lady who had stolen his heart outweighed anything else.

Volk had given Weed the book in return of the bouquet, but it felt like nothing.

'Don't just throw it away. Keep it. It will show you the way if you look for it, and you'll get there someday.'

Holding the bouquet dearly, Volk headed for Brent Kingdom, where the dear lady was.

A wooden bouquet!

It was a perfect gift at times such as when a boy asks a girl out, so as the rumor about Volk the paladin, his fair lady and the wooden bouquet spread, Weed's outdoor sculpture shop was quickly becoming a landmark.

Most users had seen statues as keepsake lying on the fireplace or stuck in the dark corner, only to be dusted from time to time, but Volk's event transformed the way they viewed statues.

That day, Weed declared, "I apologize, but I shall not make the same shape of statues anymore!"

He came to this conclusion, born of his personal gains, to speed up leveling in his sculpture mastery and Handicraft skill. Yet the public was misled.

"He's a real artist!"

"He is so cool. He said he's not making the same statue twice."

"In that case, the value of his statues will rise."

The customers to Weed's vendor used to buy one or two rabbit- or fox-shaped statues as souvenir at a cheap price, but now they ordered original designs for the gifts.

The number of finished products fell below two digits because a single work cost him a couple of hours, but they were more popular than cookie cutters—three gold per each statue.

Given that the business didn't require much of production costs, it was lucrative business.

In addition, Weed's skill level in sculpture mastery and Handicraft skill soared in a short period.

In only three days, his skill level in sculpture mastery hit eight, way up from five and his intermediate Handicraft skill rose to level four.

When Weed was short of new orders, he cooked and sold food.

"Rabbit meat or fox meat! If you bring me any meat, I will cook it for you. It can't be preserved for a long time, so you should eat it within a day!"

Weed's cooking skill granted a bonus of life and vitality to meals he cooked. It was a poor man's steroid. Those who found it hard to deal with meat that they had picked up while they were hunting wild animals near the Citadel rushed to Weed.

"Here."

"Do you really cook?"

"Yes. Trust me. All you have to pay for is flavors and sauces. The thing is, just bring me any kind of meat anytime you want," Weed said.

Food made with sculptural art—meals served by Weed were artistic works. More users than you would think learn how to cook because it is useful when they camp out in the field. But how many amateur cooks can apply the art stat when they are cooking?

Except for professional cooks, not so many users invest time and energy in the cooking skill, and appetizing meals are even rarer among the pros.

Selling quality food at a low price, Weed's stall was a megahit. Users packed it in hope of a bonus of life and vitality.

Someone whispered to Weed, who had spent a week carving statues and cooking food for sale:

- Weed-nim, can you hear me?

It was Pale the archer, who had become acquainted with Weed during late nights hunting foxes and wolves.

- Hi. Long time no see.

- Great, you are in. Where have you been? I sent you a whisper almost every day, but it was always blocked.

- I had work to do.

The secret cave in the Lair of Litvart—inside it, whispering was automatically blocked. Pale didn't pry into Weed.

- I see. Do you have time now?

Weed looked around. His statues were still popular, but it was strictly production-on-demand, so the sales had passed their peak. What people wanted for a gift was similar. In that sense, his declaration to make only original statues boomeranged on him.

- Yup.

- Then, why don't you join the punitive force quest to Village Baran with us? We decided to take the quest together, and I tried to contact you to ask if you wanted it, too.

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Chapter 10 : Weed's Role in the Punitive Force

The punitive force bound for Village Baran!

Located on the borderline of human civilization, Rosenheim Kingdom was surrounded by monsters.

The kingdom fortified the walls and organized militias in frontier towns, but the annual feasts by goblins and Orcs that raided to pillage autumn harvests were still rampant, which gave the royal court a headache.

The mission of the punitive force assigned to Darius was a group quest to take over Village Baran that had fallen into the hands of the lizardmen. Those who joined the punitive force shared the same quest, and they, composed of three hundred users, would come to drive the lizardmen out of the village.

This topic had been rattling around the Citadel of Serabourg for the last few days. Even users from other kingdoms were pouring into the Citadel to join the quest, making it even more crowded.

A member who took part in the quest was given EXPs, not to mention fame, in recognition of his service to Rosenheim Kingdom. Everyone was talking about it, yet it had escaped Weed as he was busy carving statues at his street stall.

Weed agreed to meet his former teammates first. They were waiting downtown.

"Nice to see you again, Weed-nim."

"Wow, long time no see!"

Surka and Irene welcomed Weed. Their outfits had changed greatly in his absence.

Surka wore a fine tunic, and Irene a snow-white clerical vestment. For Romuna the mage, it was a standard black robe.

They were surprised that Weed had still not changed his outfit.

"Weed-nim, where have you been?"

"It's a long story..."

Before Weed could answer fully, Surka cut in and said,

"I understand. You haven't signed in for weeks, right?"

"..."

"Oh, are you going to join the punitive force quest? Please come with us, Weed-nim!"

Romuna slipped her arm into Weed's as if they were a couple.

Pale the ranger was watching them with a wounded look that sent a chill down Weed's spine. He already sensed that Pale was secretly courting Romuna.

Slipping his hostage arm away from Romuna's firm grip, Weed asked,

"What's your level now?"

"I'm level forty-eight. I died five or six times in battles, so I'm the lowest among us,"

Surka said sheepishly.

"I'm fifty-one," Irene said.

"Same here," Romuna said.

"I'm level fifty-three," Pale said still disturbed by the scene.

Weed learned that his teammates were all friends in reality, so they had always hunted monsters together, thus leveling up at an identical pace. Still, it was evident that they had been on serious hunting sprees because they had leveled up faster than other typical users.

They confided to Weed that they had withdrawn from college temporarily. Though they didn't tell him more, he guessed that they had since played Royal Road almost non-stop, without sleep, caged in their dark rooms like isolated, socially reclusive individuals.

Pale soon established that Weed would come along with them to join the punitive force quest.

"They posted that the level requirement was thirty and above. This quest gives a premium on earned experience. You can also win some fame."

The punitive force was scheduled to encounter numerous types of monsters. The main target was the lizardmen that occupied Baran Village, but chances were that they would face relatively less dangerous goblins.

"The mission is a little risky, but we can call for help from NPCs if there's an emergency. I'm now sick and tired of spiders and bandits." Pale made an appalled face.

While Weed was away, his teammates had hunted monsters in a nearby dungeon. It was the spider dungeon, where red spiders and poisonous arachnids were lurking behind every stalactite. Poison was taken care of by Irene, but Pale had been traumatized by being fastened to a sticky spider net, struggling pathetically against saliva-dripping giant spiders.

Weed nodded, understanding exactly what Pale had been through. He had had a tough time of his own crushing gigantic worms. "It wouldn't be so bad to take part in the punitive force."

"We welcome you, Weed-nim. By the way..."

"Yes?"

"Did you find the class?"

As far as the class was concerned, Weed had been undecided when he had been teamed with them in hunting sprees. They even had a private gamble on when he would get one.

"I got a class, but—"

"What class is it? Tell us."

Irene, usually reserved, approached Weed with twinkling eyes. As a priestess in charge of healing and buffs that supported the other teammates, she was supposed to know every teammate's class.

There are so many divisions for the warrior class alone, not to mention other branches of the combative classes that specialize in different weapons and styles of combat. Tanker types are heavy on defense and vitality, and deals damage types on attack power and strength.

In the case of Surka and Pale, they belonged to supportive classes with higher agility, but less strength and vitality compared to other melee fighters.

Furthermore, Paladins, nicknamed holy knights, can use divine power, including Healing Hand, for self-healing, thanks to their exclusive stat of faith.

Weed scratched his head. "I'm a sculptor."

"Wow, cool! You chose an artist class." Surka laughed brightly, but the rest looked less than delighted. The prejudice that associated a sculptor with weakness was deeply engraved in their subconscious.

In fact, the sculptor class is one of the craft classes that had nothing to do with combat skills, so it is deprived of any effects on strength and vitality.

Still, they embraced Weed as one of their own from the bottom of their hearts. They were not heartless enough to turn their backs on their former brother-in-arms just because he had converted to one of the least desirable classes.

"We were on our way to Sir Darius to join the punitive force. Come with us," Pale said.

"But, you see, I'm a sculptor," Weed said.

"Don't worry. We can make up for what you're missing. We should hurry before someone else fills the empty slot. The size of the punitive force is limited to three hundred users and two hundred NPC soldier participants in the order of arrival," Pale said.

"Let's go, Weed-nim," Romuna said.

"If you think you aren't qualified for a spot 'cause you're a sculptor, we will help you out. Please?" Surka said.

Now that Weed had disclosed his class, he was left without an excuse to say no.

The women felt so maternal toward Weed that they could not abandon him, even though they thought he was weak, and Pale almost begged him to join the punitive force quest to repay what he had done for them before.

Persuaded by their persistence, Weed headed for where Darius's troops were stationed.

Duke Kanus held a regular meeting for the knights. All the knights who were within the Citadel, without exception, had been called to attend it. In the meeting, they discussed how to drive monsters out of Rosenheim, a conscription plan and other urgent military issues.

"You have done an excellent job, Lord Midvale, and the soldiers whom you were assigned are trained competently. I'm impressed that their levels all exceed fifty," Duke Kanus said.

"That was not my doing, your Excellency," Sir Midvale said.

"Huh? I personally entrusted this task to you. Tell me what happened," Duke Kanus said.

"If you insist, Your Excellency," Sir Midvale said. Lord Midvale then reported in detail the events that had taken place in the Lair of Litvart.

"Hmm... I see." Duke Kanus said as he rubbed his well-groomed mustache.

Other knights also looked taken aback that a foreigner, other than a Versailles native, had done the job so well. The NPCs recognize themselves as locals born on the Versailles Continent, and that users are freedmen sent by Gaea the Holy Seer. They had emotions, spoke and acted like real people, thanks to programmed artificial intelligence.

"A fine man, indeed. Lord Midvale, why didn't you recruit him to the Rosenheim Army?" Duke Kanus asked.

"I asked him to be a military officer twice, but he said he wanted to retain his liberty and slay monsters at his own will," Sir Midvale said.

"A freedman, he is," Duke Kanus said, impressed.

"Yes, Your Excellency. Though he does not belong to our Kingdom, it seems to me that he is a man who shall devote time again to Rosenheim," Sir Midvale said.

"If you say so, we'll see his sword by our side again someday," Duke Kanus said and dropped the subject about the Lair of Litvart and moved on to the next one.

On the way to Darius, Weed stopped by a grocery store.

"Weed-nim, why do we stop here?"

"You'll see."

The grocery store was crowded with lots of customers. They were mostly delivery boys from restaurants in the Citadel.

A boy, clad in what resembled a messenger's attire, yelled,

"I want fresh breasts!"

"Puhaha, you are at the wrong place, young tiger. A brothel is at the next corner down the street. Hope you've got a photo ID," the shopkeeper said.

"Shoot. I want chicken breasts!"

The boy grimaced. But the shopkeeper, oily as a snake's tongue, was only smiling.

"Only chicken breasts? Don't you need eggs, too?"

"Oops, I forgot... I need eggs, too."

"Stay put. I'll give you eggs when hens lay them."

"How about chickens?"

"When the eggs hatch, sir."

Irene giggled at the exchange between the shopkeeper and the delivery boy.

"Funny kid."

"I guess he got a job in a restaurant 'cause he can't leave the Citadel for the first four weeks."

"Bad choice. Why did he decide to work at a restaurant where there's nothing much to learn?"

In Pale's eyes, it wasn't wise to make a career in a restaurant.

Newbies are advised to take quests that pay well or, in the case of spell-casting wannabes, to read and learn many things in a library. This is so they can buy more advanced weapons and gear, hunt monsters more easily and level up faster in the long run.

Weed disagreed with Pale's opinion, though. "If you work in a restaurant, you can learn the cooking skill. It pays off," Weed said.

"I know, but what's the point of learning a useless skill like cooking? If you buy rye bread that is processed by the food preservation spell, it will last for a month," Pale said.

"He's right. Why do we need to learn how to cook when we can raise the satisfaction factor easily?"

Surka asked.

To Weed, Pale and Surka sounded stupid to the point of childishness. They underestimated the cooking skill just as much as they had looked down upon sculpture mastery, not knowing that what impact great meals could have on the stats.

'These people don't know what a poor life is like,' he said to himself.

Weed's eyes darkened. Those who actually have been through times of financial hardship don't underestimate the significance of the cooking skill. Imagine you are forced to eat only rye bread when you hunt monsters in the field.

If you are a low-level newbie, running out of money, you will stand it because you have no alternative. But once your level reaches a point where you can afford to buy more delicious food, your tongue will automatically reject the rye bread.

In truth, even Pale didn't always put rye bread where his mouth was. When it comes to the bottom line, people are the same. They have the same list of desires, and when they fulfill it, it grows longer by itself. In particular, the basic needs of housing, clothing and food are inseparable from life.

Moreover, the cooking skill works in real life. As the cooking skill matures, it gives you a list of available recipes based on the types of ingredients that you have now. You can try a new recipe in the virtual game, and it will stick in your head after you log out. If you master the cooking skill at least to the expert stage, you will never need to worry about getting a job because any restaurant will hire you with arms wide open.

Virtual reality. It means that reality is exactly realized as it is in an imaginary world. In other words, what is learned in the virtual game also works in reality. Royal Road is such a detailed and realistic game.

Of course, the majority of users who don't bother learning craft skills as widely as Weed will never comprehend what it is really about until they experience it with their own hands.

'I wonder if they will ever want to try it, anyway.'

Weed anticipated that the value of the cooking skill would get higher as users leveled up in their hundreds.

For meals that Weed prepared with the basic cooking skill, they had a temporary bonus effect on life, so what would it be like when a master presented his cuisine?

'I'm sure even a happily married couple would kill each other to taste a crumb of it.'

Not only the taste of food, but also the supplementary bonus would be spectacular.

Hard, flavorless rye bread worth three copper vs. French cuisine that tastes like heaven and increases various stats! The contest is over before it begins.

Weed imagined that meals prepared by a top chef would claim a stack of gold.

He thought that the value of statues would remain superficial, but that the cooking skill, as long as it was an integral part of life, would never diminish in its influence on daily life.

The rankers would long for the best food that they could find, and the value of a professional cook would hit the ceiling.

'Well, some people might have foreseen this before. Cooks are amongst the most zealous professionals in guarding their secrets. They must be formulating their own recipes and improving their cooking skill.'

Weed turned to his teammates with a serious face and said, "I can't deny you are looking down on the craft skills as a whole. The combat skills are important. But I think that the craft skills could end up being the most necessary skills in the future. All the craft skills have something in common, and they help an avatar's combat ability as well. I suggest you learn the cooking skill. It's essential to your daily life."

"..."

"I'm sorry," Surka said in a small voice.

"I forgot you were a sculptor, and I was thoughtless to speak ill of the crafters. I am really sorry," Pale said.

Surka, Pale and Irene were red with embarrassment.

They thought that Weed was angry because they had belittled the cooking skill, one of the craft skills, right to his face.

'That wasn't what I meant. You got me wrong.' Weed shook his head.

No matter how hard he showed it to them, they would not see it until they felt the need to see it.

The grocery store had an amiable atmosphere as it largely entertained regular customers.

Weed thrust through them and walked to the register.

"Hello," Weed said.

"Hello. I just heard you. You have the right idea about the cooking skill!" the shopkeeper said.

"Thank you."

"Your face looks familiar to me..."

"Yup. I came here for grocery shopping a few days ago."

When Weed improved his sculpture mastery and cooking skill at the same time, he had visited only this store to buy foodstuff in bulk—for a simple reason: the low price.

The easiest way to maximize profits is always to minimize costs by buying a large amount of materials at a time at a discount. Weed had always used the store for his purchases, yet it was the first time that he had ever spoken to the shopkeeper.

"Alright. Thank you for visiting my store. By the way, are you taking the path of a cook now?"

"No. My primary class is not a cook, but I know the value of the cooking skill."

"Nice. So what can I do for you?" The shopkeeper's eyes shone brightly, sizing up Weed.

He had already gathered from the conversation with the delivery boy that the shopkeeper was a user.

"Spices and sauces," Weed said.

"Hmm, we have many different kinds of spices,"
the shopkeeper said.

"There are salt, sugar and pepper, and I can show you extraordinary local specialties, such as spices from the land of the Elves, and bottles of sap squeezed out of some plants in the north."

On the vast continent, plenty of items with distinctive tastes are harvested by local farmers and traded through caravans.

"I don't need extraordinary spices. Only basic ones."

"Great. Only fools who want to impress others look for something special. How about the quality?"

"Of course, I want the best."

"How much?"

Weed counted how much money he had in his pockets. He had not sold various types of ore yet, except for the silver he had collected from the queen worms.

He was saving them for future use, when he improved his repair skill enough to enable him to reduce the ores.

"I have twenty-seven gold now. I want to buy as much," Weed said.

"Okay. I'll give you some extra," the shopkeeper said.

When Weed's teammates overheard the conversation between him and the shopkeeper, they sensed a mutual understanding and respect flowing in between as if the old drinking buddies had been reunited.

In fact, the shopkeeper was a user who had already taken the path of the cooking skill. When he saw Weed, he realized that a strong rival in the latest wave had showed up.

Weed also recognized the shopkeeper as a forerunner in the field of cooking, so they hardly needed a word. Eye contact alone told them enough.

He packed the spices and sauces he had bought from the grocery store in the backpacks.

Once he was satisfied that he was fully prepared for a new journey, he headed for the camp of Darius' punitive force with his teammates.

The punitive force bound to Baran Village was already the talk of the town, so there were many users who were eager to join the quest.

Darius sat down on a tiny chair, as he interviewed applicants for the quest, "Next, please."

"Hello, I am Cochran. Level 68 archer. I'm good at Multiple Shot, and my weapon is Lasante's Bow."

"Passed."

The next in line was Weed's party with Pale in the foreground, who walked to Darius anxiously.

Pale spoke as the representative of his party. "We are all in the same party. Level fifties. A priestess, a battle mage in the fire element, a ranger, a monk, and..."

Pale stammered before he introduced Weed because he was afraid that when it was mentioned that Weed was a sculptor, Darius would be upset and reject them altogether.

"Hmm, you have a balanced party. Great. And he is..." Darius spotted Weed and asked Pale, "Is he part of your party, too?"

"Yes."

"Five total. It fits exactly the empty slots left in my army."

"Then..."

"Will you join the quest to take back Baran Village?"

Darius asked, and a message window emerged in front of Weed's eyes.

Punitive Force to Baran Village

Beyond the border of Rosenheim Kingdom was a wilderness of monsters. Walls were built, and troops were dispatched in order to keep out the monsters that annually invaded the motherland, but there was an opening. Through the opening, a wave of monsters surged in and occupied Baran Village

With Rosenheim soldiers, save Baran Village from calamity, and destroy the monsters.

Difficulty Level: D

Deadline: Within 30 days

Pale said with a big grin,

"Sure."

"I want to join it, too."

"Same here."

"Thank you for your invitation to the quest."

"Yup."

Weed was the last one to accept the quest.

You have accepted the quest.

"Okay. Let's move now."

Darius sprang to his feet and cried,

"Everyone in the punitive force quest, please come over here! We have enough people, so we're leaving now!"

There was no ceremony for punitive force bound for Baran Village. Only a handful of people who were friends of some troops waved goodbye.

Three hundred users, colorfully attired, marched out of the South Gate and toward the Southern Province—the destination was Baran Village. They intended to take back the village that had been lost to the lizardmen.

"Hehe. I haven't been this far away from the Citadel before. It's like we're on a field trip!" Romuna said.

"I think I should have brought lunchboxes," Irene said.

The two girls were chitchatting pleasantly.

Fresh air and a sunny day! It was a perfect day for a field trip. Lions and wolves, terrified by the size of the troops, were cleared of the path, ensuring the safety of the trip.

While Weed's teammates were walking lightly, enjoying idle talk, Weed was checking out the other troops, the way they dressed and what they were equipped with.

'The average level of users in the force is between forty and sixty. I heard that Darius' level was a hundred and forty-something.'

Darius had five teammates; three sword warriors, a thief, and a plain warrior.

'I'd better assume that they have almost the same levels.'

Weed concluded that Darius had packed his battalion with anyone who ran up to accept the quest, just to meet the requirement of three hundred users involved.

This suspicion had arisen in Weed when Pale applied for this quest, and Darius was very lax in accepting his party. In the case of Weed, Darius had not even bothered asking his class and level.

'I guess he wants to get this punitive force quest done as soon as possible. A lot of rewards are at stake.'

A sense of alarm was creeping into Weed's mind. He had done his own research on Darius, the leader of this punitive force, right after Pale whispered to him to bring up this quest.

Darius had a bad reputation. It was an established fact that he would do anything if it advanced his own interest.

"Everyone, listen," Weed said in a low voice.

"Huh?" Surka said.

"When we arrive at Baran Village, we should not trust anyone easily," Weed said.

"What do you mean by that?" Romuna asked.

"I'm saying we're on our own now," Weed said.

Pale looked around as though awakened by Weed's words. Then, he agreed with Weed, "I see your point, Weed-nim."

"What is it? I don't get it," Surka said.

Weed frowned at her.

"Do we know any other member in the punitive force?"

"No," Surka said.

"Are you trying to say if a good item is dropped, someone else might kill us to take it?" Irene asked.

The question she raised quickly froze everyone in her party. Surka and Romuna even looked scared.

"That's not what I implied. Of course, it could happen. But I don't think there will be anyone who is bold enough to overstretch his limit in front of many witnesses in the punitive force. If he earns the murderer's sign by killing us, he'll become a public enemy right in the middle of thousands of

people, and they will kill him in revenge. Also, Darius will not let it happen, because it could endanger his authority."

"What is disturbing you, then?" Romuna asked.

"We have no one else to count on. That's our problem," Weed said.

Weed led his teammates a little away from the marching troops to avoid eavesdropping, and added, "Despite our low levels, we will fight a great number of monsters."

"Exactly! Isn't it why they assembled three hundred users for the quest, and borrowed another two hundred soldiers from Rosenheim Army? When we finish it, we will gain a lot of experience and fame," Surka said.

"Here comes a question. How will you fight when a battle starts?" Weed asked. "Yes, we have a lot of people, but we are just a bunch of strangers who don't know anything about one another. We don't know what skills a ranger over there has. We don't know if a mage-like man next to him is really a mage or just an imposter in disguise. Imagine if the lizardmen take us by surprise, how will you react to them? How can we stay together and fight back?"

"But what's wrong with that? The raids are supposed to be like this, aren't they?" Irene asked.

When Irene raised another question, Pale shook his head. "Most raid quests are about killing a certain number of monsters or clearing some area on a limited scale. I haven't heard much about large-size battles against an army of monsters on an open field like this quest. We have three hundred users and two hundred soldiers here, but when a battle begins, we will get stuck to our own teammates and break up into segments," Pale said.

"That means..."

"Irene-nim, numbers always lie. Three hundred users and two hundred soldiers don't guarantee that the party will be as strong as the sum of their strength. If we overwhelm the monsters, it will be fine. But if we encounter an unexpected turn of events, we will crumble like a house of cards. We should be careful," Weed said.

Darius had been too impatient and too obsessed with creating a swift victory.

Since there were plenty of users who were eager to join the quest, he could have accepted high-level users to lower the risk of going astray in an emergency—though Weed's party could not have joined in that case.

However, Darius was determined to have all public service points, so he had rejected any user at level above a hundred. Instead, he had loaded the slots with low-level ones.

He had also ordered the Rosenheim soldiers to stay behind and follow the main body at a little distance.

'I bet he was worried that the soldiers might pick up some EXPs and fame that would belong to them.'

If Weed had been the leader of the troops for the quest, he would have done exactly the opposite. He would have left out three hundred users, and instead, made good use of the Rosenheim soldiers.

If he had commanded the NPCs to destroy the band of lizardmen, his public reputation and charisma would have gone up.

You can gain fame or EXPs in a number of different ways, but the charisma stat needs this sort of opportunity to rise quickly.

Weed once again reminded his teammates to watch out.

The troops stopped from time to time to take a rest and a meal. The users in the punitive force chewed on dried food they had brought, or set light meals. The Rosenheim soldiers kept to a timetable of three meals every day.

"How will we prepare meals?" Surka asked.

Pale and Surka shot a casual glance at Weed as they were talking about the upcoming mealtime. They knew, from the conversation that had taken place in the grocery store the other day that Weed was good at cooking.

Weed stepped up to display his cooking skill. "I will serve you meals. Pale-nim, can you go hunt rabbit or deer? At least two of each," Weed said.

"Okay," Pale said.

Pale took his bow, and before long, came back with three rabbits and two deer. As a ranger specializing in the bow, he could now fire an arrow at a rabbit without missing.

"Now I will prepare a delicious meal for you," Weed said.

Weed set a bonfire, peeled the skins of the rabbits and deer, stuck skewers through them, and placed them right above the fire. Rotating them little by little, he salted and peppered them all over.

"Heeyah, it looks great," Surka said.

"Can we eat now?" Irene asked.

Surka and Irene were slavering over the smell of the broiled meats—the temptation was irresistible.

Weed had already captivated the tongues and stomachs of Sir Midvale and his troops in the Lair of Litvart. They had eaten his beef stew like a pack of hungry wolves, and even scratched what little was left on the bottom of the pots.

Compared to those days, his intermediate handicraft skill now deepened the taste of his food, and the art stat was applied to make the rabbit meat look more appetizing.

Even the skewers poking through the deer's mouth to its backside to keep it above the fire looked gorgeous.

"Please, help yourself" Weed said when he was certain that he'd taken enough time to torture his teammates with the sight of the food.

As the saying goes, hunger is the best seasoning.

Munch

As soon as Weed gave his teammates the go-ahead, they rushed to the barbecues and began tearing flesh from bones and tossing it into their mouths.

"Oh my, it is soooo good!" Surka cried.

"You're the best, Weed-nim," Romuna said, giving a thumbs-up with a greased hand. Her mouth was coated with yellow grease.

Apparently succumbing to gluttony of the seven sins, Irene the priestess was eating a rabbit whole, and Pale was busy grazing at a deer's rear leg. They were even licking the bones.

"Thank you, Weed-nim."

Gratified by the splendid food, they complimented Weed again and again.

"Not at all."

Weed looked around, and found many other users had surrounded the little grill party without him noticing.

"Looks so good."

"Really..."

"I'm envious that she's enjoying the meat so much!"

Among the members in the punitive force, the bystanders' appetite was stimulated even more by the sight of Irene and Romuna, who were having the time of their life.

"Do you mind if I have some of your meat?" a man asked.

Weed freely distributed his food to others. "Help yourself. But you should bring some meat next time."

"Oh, thank you so much." They received Weed's food gratefully. But it ran out before more than a few had tasted it.

Weed began to work harder at the next mealtime because many users rushed to him with meat and asked him to cook it for them. In fact, some of them knew how to cook. They had been forced to prepare meals when they ran out of the dried food they had during a hunting mission. To put it bluntly, however, eighty percent of the troops were male.

They hated mundane kitchen chores, such as peeling potatoes and dicing onions. The same goes for the female users.

Even those who learned the cooking skill preferred gathering meat and giving it to Weed to cooking it themselves.

"I feel sorry for you. I really owe ya," a man said on the second day of the journey.

"Not at all. You don't need to say that. I am doing this for fun," Weed said.

"But..."

"Are you really uncomfortable with it? Then, how about this? Let's make a deal. If you want to pay back what you feel indebted to me for, you can pay for the meal. For spices and sauces, you know," Weed said.

"I like that, works out. I'll feel better that way."

A great side job!

Weed began to collect a little fee for cooking. Of course, it was much larger than the real costs of sauces and spices, but nobody complained about it because they felt it was acceptable, nevertheless.

When the troops stopped by a town on the trip to Baran Village, Weed purchased a quantity of foodstuffs in a local grocery store.

He needed to update his recipes to improve his cooking skill at a faster pace. Plus, new types of menu that had never been tried before were always received favorably by his customers.

With the foodstuffs he had bought from the grocery store, he was busy working on them on the march and cooking them in mealtime.

Zahab's Engraving Knife, besides its original use, it was perfect for peeling potatoes.

'Well, carving statues and peeling potatoes are kind of the same.'

Meals prepared by Weed basically increased a diner's life by five percent, and as his handicraft skill was in the intermediates stage, it gave off additional options.

Simply put, the intermediate handicraft skill supplements original effects by thirty percent for the sword mastery, and fifty percent for the cooking skill.

Therefore, the final effect on life was an increase of seven point five percent. It might sound trivial, but this difference could save a life in the middle of a chaotic battle where blind strikes were always lurking from behind.

Familiar faces approached Weed, who was immersed in cooking. They were wearing uniforms of the Rosenheim Army.

"Commander!"

Only a handful of NPCs would address Weed by the title. He stopped slicing the meat, lifted his head and saw faces he had seen before.

"You are..." Weed said.

"Salute! Greetings to the Commander!"

They were Becker, Hosram and Dale, the brothers-in-arms who had fought alongside Weed in the Lair of Litvart.

"How are you?" Weed asked.

"We are all promoted to denarion, Commander," Becker said.

When the soldiers who had been thoroughly trained by Weed were promoted to denarion, they could not return to their original regiments. So, the military authorities had assigned them with raw recruits and a new mission.

"I guess they told you to join the punitive force bound to Baran Village," Weed said.

"Yes, Commander," Dale said. "Once the mission is complete, we will be stationed in the village to secure the surrounding area."

A number of Weed's former subordinates, including Buran, were taken under Sir Midvale's wings, but the rest, now denarion, were currently serving in the punitive force.

It was Becker's canine nose, that had smelled Weed's cooking and tracked it down to find the former commander.

"Hehe," Hosram said.

"I miss your cooking, Commander," Becker said.

"I'm sorry that we are not going to serve you again, but why not show us that old comradeship never dies?"

The former subordinates said as they held empty stomachs.

"How does he know Rosenheim soldiers?"

"They're not foot soldiers. They look like denarions."

"They just called him Commander."

Surka and Pale could not hide their surprise. A denarion was a rather weighty position, and the levels of those denarions were seemingly higher than theirs.

"Okay. Here"

Weed dished out what he was cooking to his former subordinates without reservation. Needless to say, all the supplies rationed to their platoons started to be smuggled to Weed from that moment on.

It took precisely ten days on foot for the troops to arrive at Baran Village.

Weed had intended to improve his cooking skill on the trip. To achieve the intermediate stage of the cooking skill, it required not only proficiency in the skill but also a humongous amount of physical labor.

Back in the days of the Lair of Litvart Weed had served thirty-two men three times a day, ninety-six servings on daily basis, and it totaled three thousand bowls of beef stew.

Then, he had set up an outdoor restaurant to prepare and sell meals in the Citadel. Now that he was feeding hundreds of mouths on the march, it was estimated that he had at least served ten thousand meals.

Provided that a man eats three times a day, it takes ninety servings for a month, around a thousand and eighty servings for the entire year.

Weed had done what amounted to ten years' worth for a single man to accomplish the intermediate stage of the cooking skill, so if you still don't get the picture, you're seriously lost.

Cooking as a hobby isn't comparable to preparing thousands of meals in order to gain an expertise rating for the cooking skill.

Though sculptural art was best to improve the handicraft skill, Weed was afraid to attract unwanted attention by carving statues on the march.

Cooking could pass more easily, making money and winning gratitude, if not respect, from others.

The troops were finally within the sight of Baran Village.

"We are almost there."

"What kind of monsters do you think will be there? I can't wait to fight them."

Exchanging small talk complacently, Irene and Surka were walking down the path, while Weed, now finished cooking, and looked up at the sky.

There was nothing but white clouds were sailing in a blue sky.

'I knew it. The City of Heaven was nothing but a myth. I was distracted by a stupid myth. Baran Village—the book said it was the last place with any connection to the City of Heaven. That's why I joined this quest, but I was wrong.' A faint gleam of hope was being dispelled.

When the troops marched near Baran Village, Darius cried, "Halt!"

Darius signaled to the entire complement to stop immediately. When Weed in the rear ranks walked to the front, he saw an old man in shabby clothes and dozens of children staggering toward the troops.

"What is your business?" Darius asked; he didn't even get down from horseback—Darius and his minions were the only users on horseback.

"Greetings, Your Respectable Commander. We are the survivors of Baran Village," the old man said. "I am Ghandilva, the elder of the village. I recently sent Jackson to break the sad news of my village's calamity to His Highness and ask for help. I hope you are the ones to lift us from misery."

"Yes," Darius said.

Ghandilva was an elder of Baran Village, and the terrified children who were following him had escaped from the village with him when it was raided by the lizardmen.

"We will take back Baran Village very soon," Darius said to Ghandilva. "So take comfort and wait a little longer for the good news."

"I am glad to hear that, your respected commander. By the way, I have a personal request..." Ghandilva said.

"What is it?"

"Please rescue my people who were captured by the despicable creatures. It is the last wish of this humble old man,"

Ghandilva pleaded amid tears.

Darius' eyes glinted.

"Is this a quest?"

"Yes, it is the quest from my village, your respected commander," Ghandilva said.

"What rewards can you give me?" Darius asked directly.

As a high-level user, Darius didn't rush into any quest presented to him. There were too many quests around, and a lot of them only wasted time.

Ghandilva made a downcast face. "We don't have anything of value to give you, sir. All I can give is this..." Ghandilva showed a plain-looking seed.

"I thought so. What rewards would I expect from an old man who lost his village to a band of lowly lizardmen? No treasures, no items," Darius said.

Darius snickered coldly. He thought the old man had come to him to stir up trouble before he got down to driving the lizardmen out of the village.

"Then I will take over the village fast, and if we have free hands available after the battle, I will personally see to it that some troops will be sent to rescue the captives," Darius said. "We cannot seriously expect that the hostages taken by the lizardmen are still alive by now. Don't test my patience, old man."

Darius trotted away from Ghandilva ruthlessly.

Some users in the punitive force called their leader names under their breath, but no one dared rise up to help the elder. Ghandilva was cast into despair. Then, someone grasped his wrinkled hands.

It was Weed.