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	A Recipe Thief	

She was raised, born, in Jeollado province. A region well known for its rich history, conflicts, culture and culinary prowess. Born in the city of Gwangju, she lived for that matter, a very normal, regular, everyday life. With very normal days becoming even more normal under very normal conditions. But in other ways, perhaps beyond the surface and the everyday, she was not so normal. Since youth, she had been earmarked, bookmarked, reared for success. Making it to a university in Seoul would be considered truly 'making it' from anybody from this region. Admissions to any schools in Seoul was considered a mighty hurdle cleared by the rare, gifted and hard working. Especially from this province and just anywhere outside of Seoul for that matter. This was always the goal. To make it to the big city. But somehow, she seemed to have been designated or perhaps destined for even greater things. She was one of those extremely rare cases where, teachers, family, peers, advisors all thought making it to a school in Seoul would be falling short of what could be. They all thought she could go for the gold. Make it to the big one. She could be, 'the one' as they sometimes say. Seoul National University(SNU). The esteemed and elite institution. The gateway to bigger and better things in life. The dream. This was the only acceptable future for her.

She had been told from youth that if she did all the right things and managed all conditions correctly, she could definitely go to SNU. Multi-talented, sharp, she displayed every possible indication of somebody who could make it. And so this was her life. Her normal. Her everyday. Absorb, learn, absorb, learn, prepare, prepare, prepare, memorize, absorb, learn. She was a sponge. A blank drive. To be filled with lots of knowledge. Knowing that she may be 'the one.' Knowing that her family, neighborhood, teachers, friends all had their hopes in her. Knowing they thought she was 'the one.' Knowing this, she always felt that extra incentive to constantly push the pedal. Accelerate the engine. Until the car shakes. Everyday, all the time. Non. Stop. And the car, as engineered to do, kept going. This is the education machine that is Korea. Push the pedal regardless if the engine can take it or not. A true grind. A true battle. A true machine, in every possible way. But everybody goes through it. And she was doing so with aplomb. She was had no problems with the machine. She was often, extremely, particularly receptive to this machine. With a talent for information

absorption, it never phased her. She enjoyed it. Knowledge was wonder. A small glimmer of hope, on otherwise very normal days. Knowledge always brought something new. Knowledge brought joy. Brought experiences. Brought imagination. Perhaps dreams. She embraced this idea that she may be 'the one' and that her knowledge absorption was getting her one, two, three steps closer to that place. Study does not equal work. For her, study equaled joy.

Her mother was also somehow, a crucial component to this machine. She, herself, was an educator. A high school teacher. Teaching the equivalent of the American concept of 'home economics', or the ways of the house. In her courses, sewing, gardening, home management, textiles, nutrition would be any of the topics on any given day. Preparing those who were willing, to survive the wars fought in every household. Always prepared. But for this mother, there was one topic that was always of particular interest to her. Cooking. She had always proclaimed herself to be an average cook. Not the best. But even her average, was a level to strive for. When cooking, some describe a certain lever for aptitude and decision making. It is the bone in the spine area that tells you when to add more salt or when to diffuse the salt with other salt-diffusing mechanisms. It is the bone in the spine that tells you what those salt-diffusing mechanisms might be. More water, more vegetables, more rice. Whatever this bone is, wherever this bone may be. She had it. She knew it. And although she thought herself an average cook. It did not take away the joy in this game. The joy in the challenge. The joy in using these senses from the guts. Joy in accessing these neurons from the spine.

Some may call this a sixth, or seventh sense. Listening to this bone in the spine. Just the ability to know when. And more importantly how. So it was a lever to make decisions and also to be creative when needed. Bone in the spine. Such a description could work because it is definitely something you feel. Not something that can be explained or articulated through any logical means. And this, in cooking terms, is worth a billion dollars. Maybe more. Because you are just born with this. It cannot be taught. It is with you when you are in the womb. It is with you when you leave the womb. And she, the mother had this, and concurrently, she, the daughter, had this as well. One billion dollars.

And so she grew up in this household. Her mother, as a teacher of 'home economics' would bring her lessons home. To practice them.

To get them better. To rid of all mistakes before the official show were to go on. To get better at teaching in a way.

Almost as a daily ritual. She began, what could best be described as pop quizzes on the cooking process. Pop quizzes she would suddenly throw upon her daughter. The sponge. Who was more often than not, ready.

These pop quizzes always centered on the cooking process. Sometimes, she would ask her daughter to smell the fragrance of something cooking. And purely based on this fragrance, she was quizzed on what materials had gone into this particular dish. And one by one, the daughter would name them. Accurately. Or as close to accurate as one can get. On other days, it was not just the fragrance, sometimes the mother would be cooking something and provide just a small spoon serving with the same question, 'what goes in this dish?' 'What ingredients are in this dish?' And again, after developing a certain sense for this, the daughter too began to nail these questions and more than accurately describe the list of ingredients that went into each dish. With more training, more repetition, the daughter continued to develop. To evolve. And get better. Sometimes magic is not as magical as magic may seem. You just do something a trillion times and you too, yourself, can make magic.

The method of repetition meets education has deep roots in Asia. It is a core part of the education process. And sometimes even serves as the education content itself. Rinse and repeat. Learn while doing. Learn while doing, again and again. Again. And again. And similar to any 'master' and 'apprentice' story, here the daughter, through continuous repetition was gaining a certain kind of mastery. A mastery just by trial, error and later success. And in hindsight, a level of mastery, truly difficult to achieve. For the number of households that conducted such education methods was probably few and far between. She was learning by doing and learning by doing in huge quantities. But she also had a particularly unusual teacher who equally enjoyed these daily pop quizzes. It was a never ending game. And a game, she embraced. Purely again, for the accumulation of knowledge. Knowledge. Equals. Joy.

Perhaps it was in the mother's interest to raise a young woman to succeed in the world. It was in the interest of the mother to raise excellence. And if not through academics, the one subject matter that this mother knew well, was the education of a cook. How to teach

cooking and the essence of cooking. And so from age four to young adulthood, this mother/daughter, master/apprentice relationship had produced a human being of outstanding ability. Perhaps outstanding does not do this mastery justice. The daughter had become truly exceptional. World class. Space class.

Not only could she name every possible ingredient, spice, ratio within any given dish, she could sometimes just do it based on smell. For every part of a dish that goes to your stomach and for every dish it is assumed that your tongue be the indicator or maker or breaker of success, there is something equally important and required from your nose. The nasal cavity sits right above your throat. The olfactory system has millions and millions of receptors that can archive and access thousands upon thousands of different smells. These senses are not the first thought of when thinking of the cooking process. But this nasopharynx, which connects nose to mouth, is perhaps more important than one can imagine. And from an extremely early age, she was developing this like a knight.

She could smell anything and she knew its roots. Its composition. Its physical composition. And the process by which it was constructed. She could walk into a kitchen and know what magic was being constructed there. Without looking at a single thing. Truly, a talent only time can create. And truly a talent, that only time can solve. It was excellent. It was amazing. Her mother knew this. And she, kind of knew, it might be something special. But what does one do when one has 'x-men' type ability? Does one shout it to the world? Or does one keep it and expose it just when that bus full of children is about to crash into an intersection? Or that building is on fire and even the police force knows not what to do? No. Not really.

And so this prodigious talent was left. In silence. With nobody to know. But themselves. Both mother and daughter. They both knew it was something kind of special. But for somebody preparing for college. Somebody in the dragon's den of a Korean high school amidst admissions bedlam and mania. Somebody without an inch of time or place. This ability was just a plus. An addition. Not a part of the ultimate goal. Not a part of the big picture in making it to the big one.

And just like that, she was off and to the races. She was now in Seoul. She lived by herself. And she was very much just a normal student, living a normal student life and just trying to get by. She lived in

a studio unit. Just enough space to study. Just enough space to do a tad bit of cooking. And just enough space to sleep. Not much more.

The normal college experience is filled with trial and error. Especially for those who have been living at home for their entire lives and are suddenly thrust into a space where eating out wreaks small havocs on youth, but also extremely unaffordable as well. Time to buy ingredients. Time to cook. At home. But also, time to make lots of mistakes as would any first time cook. She however and as we know now, was quite different. Cooking was not the issue here. Or an inability to cook was not the issue. Trial and error were words to her. She had already been there. Done that.

For her, her meals, her daily meals, became small gifts to herself. She would prepare them in earnest. And she would continue to play the game. At any and all opportunities. But now without her mother there to initiate the quiz, she would initiated it on her own. She would go to restaurants, friend's places. Eat, smell and experience what was prepared there. And then begin an inner dialogue with herself. 'Okay, this is what goes in this, pretty easy. And then, this is how they prepared this, okay, pretty easy too. And then, to top it off, this is finished with this, pretty easy again.' And to finalize these miniature challenges, she would go home and begin to mimic these processes. Mimic the steps she had vocalized in her head. And prepare these small gifts to herself. These gifts would sometimes be the small joys of her day. The small joys of her week. As there was no limit to these challenges. This was the 1990s. This was Seoul. This was the time of expansion of the palette. Food was beginning to take shape in all forms, all colors, all formats. From all countries and even local cuisine was continuing its evolutions. Food from the west was becoming part of the daily conversation. Food from the south was slowly beginning to become part of life. And so she began to expand her sphere of expertise. Her sphere of influence and influenced. Noodle based recipes from europe. Noodle based recipes from southeast asia. It started to matter very little where anything came from. As long as she could smell, take one long smell and capture some of the textures and the details. She was able to capture the elusive. In an instant.

As is typical with any college experience, she began to date. And one person became a consistent date. And this turned into a relationship. It was as all relationships start, a common course together

and a group assignment had brought these two together. And initially not even the thought of anything romantic had crossed either of their minds. But as these types of relationships go, things just happen. This is life. This is how the unexpected becomes life.

So they began dating and it was as wonderful as any college relationship could be. Study. School. Meet. Date. And as with any relationship typical to college, they would visit each other at their respective simple homes and prepare small meals for each other. Gifts, as mentioned earlier. But it became apparent very early on that this was a lopsided arrangement in terms of gifts. The young man, still adjusting to life on his own, had begin to learn of a wonderful machine called the microwave. How many minutes to set things at. How many seconds to set things. What kind of plastic does not melt. The beautiful sparks of electricity when tin foil meets said machine. The smell of burnt plastic when the minutes and seconds thing doesn't quite work out.

But her gifts. Her gifts were something else. Even when she visited his place and with the most basic of cooking utensils or setups, she was able to make magic. Absolute magic. And he had never tasted such things. Never seen such things. Everyday was just magic. And sometimes, these 'x-men' abilities continued to be noticed at large by this young man in all aspects of life. The nose. That super nose. That super smell ability. Truly. X-men. The normal greeting between each other often consisted of a hug, perhaps a peck on the cheeks. But these seconds, in these mere seconds, these fleeting moments, she would know everything. She would be able to explicitly state what he had eaten that day for lunch or for dinner. 'Vietnamese noodles?' 'Yes, how the?' 'Tiramisu?' 'Yes, but how did you...?' 'Kong biji stew(a tofu/bean based dish with almost no detectable fragrance)?' 'Yes, again'

And this was her magic. And this was their life. And this was his magic to experience everyday.

Like her, he had a somewhat remarkable past. Not equally remarkable. But he too, had something that might separate him from the rest. Separate him from the normal everyday college student. It was not an 'x-men' like super power or ability. And it was something he could never actually share with her. Perhaps never. Perhaps much later in their relationship. Depending on how much trust could be cemented. Simply put, he came from money. Not exactly 'chaebol(mega

conglomerate corporations in Korea)' money. But it was serious money. 'Mad' money as they say. But he could never openly share this. Never share even a hint of his background. To her, he was about as normal as one could get. Humble studio apartment. Humble clothes. Humble dining habits. But 'mad' money, as they say, has roots. Every beyond wealthy person has a story. And to get to that story. To get to that place, to get to that 'mad' money, is not the journey of the common man. It is a path of domination, ethical dilemmas, use, abuse, manipulation, strategic strategy and anything in between that can secure that extra dollar. There is an expression, 'an honest dollar earned' that may exist in some realities to a certain extent. But in the world of 'mad' money, the honest dollar is purely a concept only. There is no such thing as a truly honest dollar.

'Mad' money can be accumulated in a lifetime. But not an easy task. It often has deeper roots. Generations. Generations of doing 'mad' things in order to become 'mad' money. And in this long line, this generational story of money, his father thought himself to be the last generation living in a mad world. His one earnest hope was for his son to be the first generation to truly live the 'honest dollar' life. He thought his son could grow up and just 'not know' about their past. Not know about how they got to where they were. And not know how 'mad' their money really was.

His father, and his father before that and his father before that were all what can best be described as 'jopok' or Korean mafia. With a historically simple 'business' model, the previous generations lived and survived from what could best be described as a kind of collection service model. Enforcing debts, payments, repayments and other transactions to be completed. A pretty staid and stable model that often interacts with both underworld and overworld. It was a steady business that was profitable, consistent. Steady. A means to survive and a means to provide for the next generation.

But it was in all actuality and perhaps could best be described as a business sitting on the periphery of a legitimate business. As with any kind of collections or debts based industry, they would deal with a fair share of riff raff. From all walks of life. And this was the norm. This was how it had always been, as far back as their business went. But his father, in an effort to try to diverge from this history, wanted something

else. Something that dealt less with riff raff. Perhaps something that no longer needed to exist behind closed doors. Something with less secrets. A business model that his son, perhaps could be proud of. A business model his son, perhaps, could tell people of. For to this day, their surface level business or their pen name so to say, was that they worked in 'consulting.' A very nice term to describe a little bit of everything and in this instance, not be too far from the truth. They were consultants. But consultants that sometimes did the necessary or even the unnecessary to get things done.

It was not entirely a vicious cycle, or the vicious cycles one might expect in a situation like this. It could be stopped, it could have easily been walked away from. But it was so steady. It was so straightforward. And it was so consistent, it was hard to walk away. Sometimes, those kind of jobs get you. A job that is hard to leave for all the reasons that just make sense. And yet his father had this desire. He wanted his son to live as normal as possible. So he began exploring even more peripheral industries that might be exit material. A means to transition out. Smoothly.

In recent years, his father began to work with those in the hospitality industry, with a particularly larger percentage of those in and around the concept of dining. The restaurant industry itself was a hodgepodge of all sorts of people. From those who received expensive educations from exclusive international institutions to those who failed at everything else and found solace in a meritocracy that only evaluated you on how good you fried your chicken. There were all kinds of people with all kinds of complications that his father proceeded to solve for them. This was one of many kinds of clients. But a particular clientele he had become more interested in as time went on.

And this, his father thought, might be the key. Only an industry like the hospitality industry, could welcome a semi-gangster family like his and not think much of it. Only this kind of industry, could allow his son, to suddenly go legit. Go clean, or go regular as they say. So for years he had been researching this industry. Meeting people. Lots of friends of friends of friends. There were and remain small ways to make a penny. And he was slowly uncovering each of them, one by one. Some clean, some legit, some just as illegitimate as his past life.

He, the son, knew his father was doing work with many different industries. Some perhaps illegitimate. But he also knew, that his father

was, and always had been making some legitimate money as well. But as a college student, the details were often sparse. The amounts, the depths to which their business was running was never quite clear. But he knew sometimes, it was on the peripheries of what a legitimate business practice might be in real life. It was foggy. But he knew that money was not a pressing concern on a daily basis for them. And he knew, that his father, always meant well. Always.

He thought it a good time to introduce the magician to his father. They had been dating now for almost two years. And his father had said, perhaps out of curiosity and perhaps out of custom, to bring her over for dinner. Sometimes Korean households say this as gesture and sometimes the meaning and intent behind such invitations is questionable. But here, it seemed legitimate and the father was genuinely a bit intrigued. For he had mentioned the magic a few times. 'Dad, I've met this girl and well, things are going good. But, did I tell you before, she has this uncanny ability to cook?' His father had mentioned in passing, several new clients/pursuits within the dining/hospitality arena, so it was sometimes a simple point of a conversation. A woman, who he was romantically involved with, was on occasion, making magical things in the kitchen.

It was to be a casual meeting, nothing too far out of the norm. There was a restaurant, in their neighborhood, Yeonhuidong, in the northwest of Seoul called Subin. Known as a 'hanjeongsik' restaurant, a type of dining that involves a wide variety of dishes, both side dishes and main dishes. This particular restaurant was extremely popular because of the pure number of dishes. Lots. Just lots. And this space, in particular, was a favorite spot for older folks. Who do love them variety and quantity. But it also is a rather pleasant place to have a dinner that kind of makes everybody happy. Yes, one of those places. And it got off to a pretty pleasant start. Not actually very nervous, he was quite happy to introduce her to his father. Perhaps both young, perhaps a bit naive. The meeting this day, never formed the kind of levels of tension that take place at one of those meetings that take place prior to marriage conversations. This was, a lovely woman, who he was dating. And so from the get go, all was relaxed, all was pleasant. Small talk, is something Korean culture is quite proficient at. Weather. The outside temperature. Undergraduate majors. Siblings. Age. Lots of things to generally assess each other and break the ice.

The conversation would at one point or another lead to the magic. He had been talking about this cooking and her nose for quite some time and just out of curiosity, and also, perhaps the fact he knew very little else about her, this subject came up rather early in the conversation. “I have heard more than few times that you are quite gifted with a strong culinary sense?” “Yes, I do enjoy cooking quite a bit.” “My son says, you have some kind of ‘x-men’ type abilities? Like, you can pick up things with your nose and translate that to cooking and stuff?” “Hehe, yes, well, sometimes I do that too. But nothing special, just for fun I would say ...”

Subin, the restaurant, is known for their tremendous amounts of ‘bahnchan (small side dishes on small plates that typically accompany one main course at a Korean table).’ Whether it was fate or destiny, this proved to be kind of a perfect grounds for continuing a lively culinary discussion. And whether it was fate or destiny, this also proved to be the perfect place for an impromptu pop quiz of sorts. As dishes kept rolling out, he began to ask her, what types of ingredients went into a certain dish. And one by one, she nailed all of them. To a microscopic detail. Spices, oils, percentages, ingredient/sauce ratios, you name it, she named it. And the conversation began to get livelier the more he inquired. He started to ask about preparation methods next and how would one get this kind of impact, or this kind of flavor. And again, you name it, she named it. With machine-like precision, she explained how to get what with what. And as with these types of conversations, the wheels in the head start to turn. Or you can hear them turning. The wheels of the brain, begin to chug forward. And everyone can hear this engine.

He was captivated. Enamored. Not out of any particular love for his son, or for his new found love interest at that. It was something else. Something that speaks to the innermost parts of the psyche and soul. Dollar signs. His pupils began to morph into dollar signs. This was it. He was witnessing it. He was seeing, live and direct, the way. In this short span of dinner and casual conversation, he saw his escape. He saw the Raquel Welch poster from Shawshank Redemption. A way out. A way to go legit. A way to join society. But in a way that nobody could ever know. Or grasp. It was her.

In Korea there is this concept of ‘arbeit’ or as they say with a Korean intonation, ‘ahlbah,’ which is basically an adoption of the

German word for ‘work or working or employment.’ In Korea, it kind of means the same. But perhaps less so much work, work. More like side jobs. A means of working on the side, doing slightly menial things for around minimum wage, give or take. And it is an extremely common thing to propose doing some ‘arbeit’ to young college students as all college kids need some side money. And that was how it started. ‘Arbeit.’ He had asked if she would be interested in doing some ‘arbeit’ at a small restaurant that he was connected to. She had agreed thinking it might be fun to finally utilize this ability she had been ninja-like developing for years but never had an outlet to do so. But the details of this job were sparse at best. When she showed up for the first day, she was kind of shocked to see that the restaurant was not exactly a restaurant. Actually, there were no tables, no chairs. No customers at that. The first day of work was in the kitchen of an old ‘villa’ a small type of residential unit in Korea. Nothing fancy. Nothing new. There were older women here in the kitchen and the only thing she could truly discern was that they were cooking up a storm.

What was this place? In a villa at that? She had eventually put two and two together and it became apparent that this was a kind of research laboratory of sorts. A place where cooking tests go on before they go to restaurant level. Although these types of things probably do exist in all sorts of fashion and manners, this particular one was a bit more on the lo-fi side. Or actually, very lo-fi. It was a strange collection of members, all good cooks, all ages, from all over Seoul. And here, in this slightly ramshackle villa, their one job was to create recipes, or more so, perhaps to match existing recipes. They made things, tested them, tasted each other’s tests, made more tests, and tested yet again. Then there was an older woman who would come by once a day and kind of test the best of the best.

When she first went in, very little explanation went into this job. At all. The existing team there had no idea what to do with her and she herself had no idea what she should be doing. She was a unique case. Which happens sometimes. Random people may show up and can become part of the process. So it began, as all ‘arbeit’ do, with menial tasks. Lots of cutting, prepping food. Laborious. But easy stuff. And she was good. Fast, efficient and the food always passed the aesthetic test. And so this went on for a few weeks. And she did not question anything. She could definitely feel that perhaps this was something

on the shady end of things. Something fishy. Something smelling of suspicious activities. But nothing of alarm. And everybody there was, by all palpable factors, good people who were passionate about cooking and with a very clear goal in mind. To match food and when food was well matched, there was great joy, elation and celebration. High fives all around.

And everyday this was the way it went. All different kinds of dishes came in and the challenge was how to replicate this. How to match this. Or better yet, how to one-up these dishes. Make them better, if at all possible. And this being the challenge. This being the game, the whole team was easily engaged. Human nature loves the puzzle. Loves finding the end of the maze. Scoring goals. Shooting buckets. Everyday new game. Everyday new challenge. Everyday new success. Or not. It was a simple and sometimes not so simple puzzle to crack. And this team loved it. They got paid. To solve puzzles. High fives all around.

But the lab itself was a kind of bubble. Isolated. There was no understanding of how these dishes came in, nor was there any questioning of what happened to these newly created dishes afterwards. There was no before. There was no after. There was only a middle. And obviously, being of high intelligence, she knew again, something perhaps was not right here. Perhaps something bordering the shades of shade could be happening here. But she was quick to forget these things. She was fine with this situation. She was using her skills. It was a lively, almost joyous environment. And just being here added a new dimension to her life outside of the libraries, the tests, the scores, the books, the papers.

And so time marched on. And when time marches, that is usually a good indication that good things are happening. When you forget about the time, this means you are engrossed in what you are doing. Captivated. In that moment. And she was there. In that moment, often here. It was that kind of place.

And she was firmly part of the team. An everyday member. No hazing here. But as happens when one sees somebody repetitively and over time, there becomes a gradual acceptance of that person. A comfort level that only repetition can create. And she had passed. With flying colors. And as often happens when one becomes part of a 'team,' opportunities sometimes arise in all sorts of manners. Especially when a team of people is trying to solve puzzles. She eventually became part

of the brainstorming faction. Guessing how things were done. While cutting and prepping sometimes they would have her taste a spoon and ask, what she thought went in there. And one by one, she would give infinitely detailed responses to their surprise. To their absolute delight. These abilities of hers, dormant like dinosaur bones. No, not dormant, unused. Unused like the newly formed wings of a. No. Not even that. These super abilities of hers, not properly given their stage, were slowly given small gigs every night. Standup night. Five minutes. She would come on the stage and destroy for five minutes at a time. To their delight.

These gifts of hers, began to garner more attention. Her responsibilities began to evolve. Began to expand. She went from prep work, to brainstorming, to theory, to practical application and execution. And even 'x-men' abilities, these challenges were not a walk in the park. They were challenges. But she ate them up. Ate them all up. This team. These cooks were no slouch. These cooks were extremely good at what they were doing. What she had with natural ability could not be matched by something only years could teach. Wisdom and experience. And these experiences, this collective wisdom was all new to her. Tacit knowledge. What she had in intuition and ninja-like training was entirely missing the years of tacit experience they had. So it was a time of great learning. Learning while also making money. Two good things she could not argue with. It was good.

As with all 'chosen ones,' she began to get 'it.' She began to figure things out. Theory began to link with her hands. The knowledge began to melt with her gut instincts. And the evolution began. A mutation. Where human moves beyond human. These abilities started to fuse and take hold. She, like 'Neo' was slowly becoming the 'one.' Whether she knew it or not.

He, the father, would come in and check on the lab occasionally. It was never clear his role but he seemed to be passionate about what was happening here. But not readily involved. Not part of the day to day. And he would openly and often ask how she was doing. But, strangely, she would never see her boyfriend here. Although they discussed what she was doing there, he never came and when asked about it, he would always say the most vague things. Things that always seemed to be shifting the conversation to the next subject. Always giving her the feeling that perhaps this was a sensitive subject. Perhaps an issue she

should not push or pursue. And it furthered the feeling that perhaps, despite her happiness, all may not be what it seems. Or all may not be, what she seems.

As her senses, her ability, her thinking were all fusing, she somehow did become 'the one.' She slowly became the go to in this place. A force. The force. Even the eldest cook would always do a double check with her. Purely because she was always right. Always. In baseball, a .333 batting percentage is considered excellent. One third of the time, if you get a hit, that is considered successful. But here, in this laboratory, she was hitting an incomprehensible .990. A spirit walking amongst mere mortals. Extreme, uncanny accuracy.

And the legend began to grow. He, the father, would begin to visit in more frequency and sometimes bring others as well. Older gentlemen who were very kind to her and inquisitive. And they would all come and do a quick test. It seemed just for entertainment. Just to see if this was the real deal. Ask her what would make a particular dish taste better and as she rattled off a million responses, you could see it in their faces. They were not listening to the answer but more so, just reveling in the fact that such a spirit could exist. That such talent could exist. That such a fancy, soul searching answer could exist.

She was 'the one.' She was 'Neo.' The one component that could take a marginal operation to world-class levels.

The dishes that she started with were all local dishes. Mostly of Korean origins, traditional food or even slightly contemporary twists were almost all they were doing. But with her the challenges began to become more diverse, more international, more expansive. European dishes, southern American dishes, southeast Asian dishes. They started to come in from everywhere. And she was able to match them, all the time. Every time. Uncanny.

And things kept changing. They moved from this humble Villa to a beautiful all concrete building in Hannamdong. The kind you know they hired an architect for. Because it looked like nothing else. Anywhere. And the kitchen. Jeez. The kitchen became one of those super kitchens you sometimes see on TV. Big tables, big fans, big everything. And it was a dream. They brought in staff. To keep this machine going. And all she had to do what she was doing. And people would support her.

The money was good. Very good. What went from minimum wage was now stratospheric in feel. A monthly stipend that pretty much no college kid in Korea had ever seen. Uncanny. 'Mad' money. For her, no degree. Not even a graduate of school. This was something else. What could she complain of? She was treated like royalty. Given everything she ever needed and never was asked a thing. Other than to do, what she did best.

And life was good. Very good.

But someday, sitting at the back of her mind was always the slight thought that this could not be real. This could not last. This was not real life as people knew it. Was it her ability? Was it this ninja that her mother had raised? All of this could contribute to such a lifestyle for sure. But she again, was always wondering, was this operation on the periphery of what a normal business should be doing? How could such money be coming in? And so fast? Although everything was fancy now, again, there was no beginning and end. There was always just a middle. She never saw what happened to these dishes. Or these recipes. She never knew where these existing dishes came from. But if one thought about it even for just a little bit, one could guess quite easily what this process might be. These dishes, upgraded, or matched, were probably going off and becoming bigger and better things to people who mattered. And so perhaps that was it. There was no need to really see the end. Or the end of this process. This process was bringing in money and making people happy. And she herself was happy as well.

See no evil. Hear no evil.

And as time went on, things just continued to grow. To unfathomable levels. In ways, probably unimaginable to anybody. To, you, myself, to her. Growth. Jack and the beanstalk type growth. Just. Nuts. Growth meant now business trips. First economy class. Then business. And now, first class. She would have men in sunglasses pick her up from airports. With signs holding her name. Just like the movies. She would then be escorted to some of the finest dining institutions around the world. She was now staying at some of the finest hotels in the world.

And all the while, she would go and just do what she did best. Eat amazing things. Smell amazing things. Experience amazing things. Process these things. Think about these things. And then, letting her

instincts, her intuition and her mind do what they did best. Putting this pieces together in her head. Like puzzles. One challenging puzzle after another. Storing this data in her head, she would then fly back to her palace in Hannamdong and begin to take apart these amazing things she saw, experienced and tasted. And make them again. And again. And pass this on down the line. To whatever it was that came next.

As with many things in life, the longer you are at a place, the more things you shouldn't see, you end up seeing. And all the while, her palace in Hannamdong was almost like a small incubator unit. A hatching grounds for tests and explorations. But it seemed to be not only just an incubator. It was also a way to shield her from the truth. Shield her from what she was doing. And it did do just that. But her abilities, her 'Neo-ness', soon began to keep her from being hidden. Everybody wanted to meet her. Everybody wanted to experience greatness. To see the greatness. Because how often do you see greatness in our lifetimes? Sometimes never.

And so she began to eventually meet all kinds of 'higher-ups.' CEOs from this company or that company. Vice presidents from this place or this place. All within this network on the periphery of this business. She could tell they were affluent. But not in the way one might think. Not corporate money. But another kind of money. She could tell, at their core they were normal people. But that in this lifetime, they had suddenly come into wealth. Nouveau riche, as the expression goes. Suddenly part of the elite. Suddenly part of a new notch of society. Suddenly there. And she knew this. She could feel it in their appearance. Their mannerisms. The subtle things you can pick up that go beyond language. Rich. Suddenly. Within this generation.

And she would always meet them. These newly rich. She would meet them in more quantity. More frequency as this success continued. She would meet them. Hear their questions. Entertain their questions and see their response. She could feel their joy. They knew who she was. They also knew, she was of the same background. A person just like them. A person once poor. And now, a person of something. A person with something. But they were fine with this. They knew what gifts she brought. They knew her gift. And she was fine with this as well. She was fine with this life. She was fine with this fairy tale. She lived a life, unlike any human being she could think of. She was for once in her life, a princess. And she was with people who cared for her in every way. Every possible way, as a princess should be cared for.

And life was good.
For these people.
For herself.
For her colleagues.
For her.
Very good.

But there were some days.
Somedays.
Days where she could not help but think.
That perhaps, for better or worse, somehow, it might have been her that had created all of this.
Or, somehow, it might have something to do with her.
Could she have been a part of this?
Could this be her?

She would often question things.
Question this whole situation.
So many questions.

But then again.
Life was good.
And she was fine with this.

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