<h1>Solo Leveling - Chapter 16</h1>  
  
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<p>"Yes, but..."</p>  
<p>"Ah, my apologies. This way, Hunter. I’ll guide you."</p>  
<p>"Ah... Yes."</p>  
<p>It seemed there was some misunderstanding here, but if he tried to explain it, the conversation would only drag on. So, Jin-Woo decided to follow the guide for now.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo’s gaze swept across his surroundings.</p>  
<p>‘Now that I think about it...’</p>  
<p>The atmosphere around him was unusual.</p>  
<p>The streets were completely empty.</p>  
<p>The only people visible were soldiers and police officers.</p>  
<p>Scattered here and there were the corpses of Magic Beasts, wrecked vehicles, and cracked buildings.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo realized what must have happened.</p>  
<p>‘A Gate must have opened somewhere nearby.’</p>  
<p>In this era, where the Hunter System was well-established, such incidents were rare. But occasionally, Gates that opened in remote areas went unnoticed, leading to delays in containment.</p>  
<p>In such cases, nearby military units would mobilize to buy time until the Hunters arrived.</p>  
<p>Of course, the soldiers’ weapons were useless against Magic Beasts.</p>  
<p>But someone had to make the sacrifice to ensure the civilians’ safe evacuation.</p>  
<p>In crude terms, they were the bullet shields.</p>  
<p>The young men of this country were the ones bearing that burden.</p>  
<p>"Thank you."</p>  
<p>The soldier leading the way bowed to Jin-Woo.</p>  
<p>"Huh?"</p>  
<p>"Thanks to the Hunters’ hard work, we’re safe, aren’t we?"</p>  
<p>"Yes..."</p>  
<p>He wanted to thank the soldier instead.</p>  
<p>Soldiers to Hunters, Hunters to soldiers.</p>  
<p>Those who fought to protect someone or something were grateful to each other.</p>  
<p>\*Static\*</p>  
<p>The soldier’s face brightened as he received a communication.</p>  
<p>"Most of the Magic Beasts in the area have been dealt with. Only one large one remains."</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo nodded.</p>  
<p>He didn’t need the soldier’s explanation to know.</p>  
<p>He could feel the presence of a powerful life force nearby.</p>  
<p>And the auras of several Hunters surrounding it.</p>  
<p>His heightened Senses Stat conveyed information through intuition.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo instinctively knew.</p>  
<p>‘That’s the Boss.’</p>  
<p>Soon, the creature came into view.</p>  
<p>In a nearby clearing, about a dozen Hunters were facing off against a giant made of rock.</p>  
<p>The giant was about the height of a telephone pole.</p>  
<p>It was a Golem-type Magic Beast.</p>  
<p>"Gasp..."</p>  
<p>The soldier let out a nervous breath and took a step back.</p>  
<p>It must’ve been his first time seeing a Magic Beast in person. The moment he saw it, his entire body stiffened.</p>  
<p>Anyone would react the same way.</p>  
<p>Magic Beasts seen on TV or monitors were worlds apart from those encountered in real life.</p>  
<p>In contrast, Jin-Woo calmly assessed the situation.</p>  
<p>"Healers! Focus your heals on the Tanker!"</p>  
<p>"We’re already doing our best!"</p>  
<p>"Why isn’t it going down?"</p>  
<p>"Dealers, what are you doing? There’s no sign of it falling!"</p>  
<p>"Its defense is too high. And there aren’t enough Mage-type Hunters!"</p>  
<p>It seemed the Hunters who had been hastily summoned weren’t particularly high in rank.</p>  
<p>Their defense and attacks were lackluster.</p>  
<p>The Hunters were struggling.</p>  
<p>\*Boom!\*</p>  
<p>As the Golem swung its massive stone fist downward, the knees of the Tanker Hunter buckled momentarily.</p>  
<p>"Cough!"</p>  
<p>Blood gushed from the Tanker’s mouth.</p>  
<p>"Ah, no!"</p>  
<p>"The Tanker’s going to die at this rate!"</p>  
<p>"What do you expect us to do? We’re running out of mana!"</p>  
<p>"Has the High-Ranker support arrived yet?"</p>  
<p>The Hunters seemed to have reached their limit.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo, who had been observing everything, suddenly flashed a sharp look.</p>  
<p>‘At this level... I can do it.’</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo slowly took a few steps back.</p>  
<p>The Golem Boss seemed to have high defense, but its actual rank appeared lower than it looked.</p>  
<p>From the aura he felt, it was weaker than the Boss ‘Blue Fangs’ from the Instant Dungeon.</p>  
<p>‘So, if I can neutralize its defense...’</p>  
<p>What was needed now was one powerful strike to pierce through that monstrous rock.</p>  
<p>Once he was at a suitable distance, Jin-Woo took a throwing stance.</p>  
<p>The muscles in his arm holding the broken sword began to expand rapidly.</p>  
<p>Veins bulged all the way to the back of his hand.</p>  
<p>All his strength was focused on his right arm.</p>  
<p>A moment later, his arm, taut like a bowstring, shot forward at near-sonic speed.</p>  
<p>"Go!"</p>  
<p>\*\*\*</p>  
<p>D-Rank Hunter Lee Han-Soo felt his vision darken.</p>  
<p>He couldn’t go on any longer.</p>  
<p>Even his prized shield was starting to crack.</p>  
<p>The Healers’ mana seemed to be running dry, as the amount of healing they could provide was visibly decreasing.</p>  
<p>If this continued, everyone would die.</p>  
<p>It was time to make a choice.</p>  
<p>If he could buy time while the Hunters escaped, the High-Rank Hunters could deal with the Golem later. That was the only plan.</p>  
<p>‘Either that, or we all die here.’</p>  
<p>Cold sweat dripped down Lee Han-Soo’s forehead.</p>  
<p>He finally made up his mind.</p>  
<p>As he turned around, he shouted.</p>  
<p>"I’ll handle this! Everyone, get out of here!"</p>  
<p>At that moment, Lee Han-Soo saw it.</p>  
<p>Something ‘flashing’ toward him from a distance.</p>  
<p>It was more of a feeling than actually seeing anything. His eyes couldn’t keep up with its speed.</p>  
<p>It was that fast.</p>  
<p>\*Boom!\*</p>  
<p>The Golem’s head exploded from whatever had hit it.</p>  
<p>"Wha... What was that?"</p>  
<p>Lee Han-Soo’s eyes widened.</p>  
<p>The headless Golem began to stagger.</p>  
<p>Then, the Hunters cheered.</p>  
<p>They immediately pressed the attack.</p>  
<p>"It worked! The attacks are landing now!"</p>  
<p>"It’s falling!"</p>  
<p>"Just a bit more! We’re almost there!"</p>  
<p>Everyone was so focused on attacking that no one noticed what had flown in from afar.</p>  
<p>Only Lee Han-Soo, who had been right in front of the Golem!</p>  
<p>Crrrreeeeaaak-</p>  
<p>Finally, the Golem toppled backward.</p>  
<p>\*Thud!\*</p>  
<p>As the heavy creature fell, clouds of dust billowed up.</p>  
<p>Cheering erupted among the Hunters.</p>  
<p>"We did it!"</p>  
<p>"We took it down!"</p>  
<p>Only Lee Han-Soo, who had witnessed everything, shook his head.</p>  
<p>‘No. Our attacks didn’t do anything.’</p>  
<p>Lee Han-Soo quickly searched the area around the fallen Golem.</p>  
<p>"What could’ve destroyed the head of this rock monster?"</p>  
<p>As he rummaged around, he found the shattered remains of a broken sword.</p>  
<p>It was a mediocre steel sword, with a faint trace of mana.</p>  
<p>‘You’re telling me someone tossed this and took down a Boss-level Golem that even ten Hunters couldn’t scratch?’</p>  
<p>For a moment, he was at a loss for words.</p>  
<p>After silently alternating between the Golem’s corpse and the sword fragments, Lee Han-Soo ran toward where the sword had come from, pushing past the celebrating Hunters.</p>  
<p>"Hey!"</p>  
<p>A soldier was standing there.</p>  
<p>"Huh? Are you talking to me?"</p>  
<p>"Yes, you!"</p>  
<p>As the burly Hunter stomped closer, the soldier gulped nervously, his face tense.</p>  
<p>The intimidation Hunters exuded toward ordinary people was no joke.</p>  
<p>Lee Han-Soo showed him the sword and asked,</p>  
<p>"Did you throw this?"</p>  
<p>"Ah, this is here..."</p>  
<p>The soldier turned around, then widened his eyes in surprise.</p>  
<p>"Huh? There was a Hunter here just a moment ago..."</p>  
<p>There was no one there.</p>  
<p>As the soldier looked around in confusion, Lee Han-Soo scratched his head and stared at the sword fragments.</p>  
<p>‘That power, that destructive force... Was it a High-Rank Hunter who came by?’</p>  
<p>But the perpetrator had disappeared, leaving it a mystery.</p>  
<p>\*\*\*</p>  
<p>At that moment, Jin-Woo was heading home.</p>  
<p>He turned around as soon as he saw the Golem stagger.</p>  
<p>He had taken down the Golem.</p>  
<p>He knew it well.</p>  
<p>By default, the profits from a slain Magic Beast belonged to the one who defeated it.</p>  
<p>If he wanted, he could claim ownership of the Golem.</p>  
<p>‘But the problem is proving that I was the one who took it down.’</p>  
<p>Who would believe that a massive Golem was defeated by an E-Rank Hunter?</p>  
<p>Without any solid evidence.</p>  
<p>A broken steel sword fragment and a soldier who was standing nearby weren’t likely to help much.</p>  
<p>Moreover, that wasn’t the end of it.</p>  
<p>He’d also have to explain how his stats had increased enough to take down a Golem.</p>  
<p>No matter how he looked at it, the risks outweighed the benefits.</p>  
<p>His unique Leveling Up ability.</p>  
<p>He couldn’t recklessly reveal an ability unprecedented in history just for the sake of a Golem’s corpse.</p>  
<p>‘It’s a shame, but there’s no other choice.’</p>  
<p>That said, he hadn’t come away empty-handed.</p>  
<p>In fact, he’d gained something unexpectedly valuable.</p>  
<p>The message he’d heard the moment the Golem fell.</p>  
<p>[Your level has increased!]</p>  
<p>Thanks to defeating the Golem, he’d gained another level.</p>  
<p>‘Defeating Magic Beasts also increases my level.’</p>  
<p>That was good to know.</p>  
<p>For now, that was enough.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo’s home was a shabby, old apartment on the 9th floor of a building near the city hospital.</p>  
<p>He found his keys, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.</p>  
<p>It was dark inside.</p>  
<p>‘Jin-Ah’s working hard.’</p>  
<p>His younger sister must still be at the study room.</p>  
<p>On the dining table were cold rice and soup.</p>  
<p>Since their mother had been hospitalized for years, it was his sister’s cooking.</p>  
<p>Next to it was a memo with cute handwriting.</p>  
<p>-Don’t skip meals. I’ll check if you ate everything.</p>  
<p>She must’ve made dinner despite being busy, knowing he’d be discharged today.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo chuckled softly and sat down at the table.</p>  
<p>But there was something he wanted to check before eating.</p>  
<p>"Status Window."</p>  
<p>Name: Sung Jin-Woo</p>  
<p>Level: 18</p>  
<p>Job: None</p>  
<p>Title: Wolf Slayer</p>  
<p>HP: 2220</p>  
<p>MP: 350</p>  
<p>Fatigue: 2</p>  
<p>[Stats]</p>  
<p>Strength: 48 Stamina: 27 Agility: 27 Intelligence: 27 Senses: 27</p>  
<p>(Available Stat Points: 0)</p>  
<p>[Skills]</p>  
<p>Passive Skills: (Unknown) Lv.MAX, Endurance Lv.1</p>  
<p>Active Skills: Dash Lv.1</p>  
<p>The day had felt long.</p>  
<p>Thanks to that long day, he’d already reached Level 18.</p>  
<p>His Strength was nearing 50, and his other stats had noticeably increased. He’d also learned the roles of Agility and Senses.</p>  
<p>‘Plus, I’ve got a decent dagger with good options, and even the gold I earned today...’</p>  
<p>Excluding the awkward potions.</p>  
<p>The Instant Dungeon raid had been a great success.</p>  
<p>9. The Lizards</p>  
<p>People who leave home at dawn always move cautiously.</p>  
<p>So as not to wake their families.</p>  
<p>So, when Jin-Ah left for school early in the morning, she quietly locked the door and turned around, careful not to wake her brother, who was sound asleep.</p>  
<p>But then.</p>  
<p>"Off to school?"</p>  
<p>"Huh?"</p>  
<p>Startled by the voice nearby, Jin-Ah looked up.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo was jogging toward her.</p>  
<p>He was wearing a tracksuit and sneakers.</p>  
<p>With his hood pulled low, he looked like he’d just come back from a run.</p>  
<p>Jin-Ah’s already large eyes widened even more.</p>  
<p>"What? You were already up?"</p>  
<p>"I’ve been up for a while. Be careful on your way to school."</p>  
<p>"Uh... Okay."</p>  
<p>As she watched her brother head back home, Jin-Ah tilted her head in confusion.</p>  
<p>‘What’s going on? He’s up earlier than me.’</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo wasn’t exactly lazy, but Jin-Ah was unusually diligent for her age, so she was usually the one to start the day first.</p>  
<p>‘Now that I think about it...’</p>  
<p>Her brother’s back seemed a bit broader than before.</p>  
<p>Nah, that couldn’t be.</p>  
<p>People’s bodies weren’t like rubber bands, stretching and shrinking in just a few days.</p>  
<p>‘It must be my imagination.’</p>  
  
\*\*CHAPTER END\*\*