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18

\*\*CHAPTER START\*\*  
  
<h1>Solo Leveling - Chapter 18</h1>  
  
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Jin-Woo finished his preparations in just one minute and immediately hailed a taxi to head to the meeting point.  
  
Nine people were already there, waiting for him.  
  
A man who appeared to be the leader waved his hand.  
  
"Over here! This way."  
  
He was a burly man with a thick beard.  
  
He approached with a friendly smile.  
  
"Mr. Sung Jin-Woo, right?"  
  
"Yes."  
  
"Ah, I’m glad you made it. Well, since we’re all here, let’s introduce ourselves before we start."  
  
The bearded man briefly introduced the team members.  
  
Eight of them, including himself, were regular members who usually worked together, and one was a recruit like Jin-Woo, brought in to fill the numbers.  
  
Jin-Woo exchanged greetings with the team members, observing their demeanors.  
  
Thanks to his heightened sensory stats, he could roughly gauge their abilities.  
  
'Five of them seem to be around my rank. Four seem below that. So, five C-ranks and four D-ranks or below.'  
  
There were rules for raiding C-rank Gates.  
  
The minimum requirement was 10 members, with at least half being C-rank Hunters or higher.  
  
Only then would the Association grant permission.  
  
The suggestion that they just needed him to fill the numbers didn’t seem entirely unfounded.  
  
"Well, now that we’ve all introduced ourselves, let me quickly explain the key points."  
  
The bearded man, who introduced himself as Hwang Dong-Seok, a C-rank Tanker, seemed experienced and remained calm throughout.  
  
He neatly explained the details of the raid to everyone when someone approached.  
  
"Hey, looks like we’re both just fill-ins."  
  
It was a bright-faced young man, the other recruit brought in by Hwang Dong-Seok to fill the numbers.  
  
However, unlike Jin-Woo, he wasn’t a non-combat member. He was a D-rank Hunter who would participate in the battle directly.  
  
His name was Yoo Jin-Ho, 22 years old.  
  
Jin-Woo gave a light nod in response to Jin-Ho’s greeting and turned his gaze away.  
  
Jin-Ho, who had intended to continue the conversation, awkwardly scratched the back of his head and returned to his seat.  
  
"Bro, let’s wrap this up and head in."  
  
"Anyway, we’re the ones who’ll be doing the hunting. Why bother with all the explanations?"  
  
"Yeah, it’s making my ears hurt."  
  
As the complaints from the regular members continued, Hwang Dong-Seok laughed and clapped his hands.  
  
"Alright, let’s end the explanations here and head in now."  
  
Everyone began preparing to enter the Gate.  
  
"Oh, before that, here’s something for the two of you."  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok handed a sheet of paper each to Jin-Woo and Yoo Jin-Ho.  
  
It was a simple contract.  
  
"Just write your name at the end and sign it."  
  
The conditions were the same as discussed over the phone: no involvement in the hunt and exclusion from the loot distribution, but immediate payment of 2 million won upon completion.  
  
However, one particular clause caught Jin-Woo’s eye.  
  
'You agree not to hold anyone responsible for any accidents that may occur within the dungeon...'  
  
Unlike raids organized by the Association, private raids offered no compensation if something went wrong.  
  
That’s why Hunters couldn’t even get insurance.  
  
You were responsible for your own life.  
  
Only now did it truly sink in that he was about to join a raid party.  
  
As he checked the terms, Jin-Woo glanced at Yoo Jin-Ho’s contract.  
  
Unlike his, Yoo Jin-Ho’s contract included a share of the loot instead of the 2 million won.  
  
Just before signing, Jin-Woo asked Hwang Dong-Seok a question.  
  
"So, what exactly am I supposed to do?"  
  
"Nothing much. Just follow us around and carry some of the luggage."  
  
"Luggage?"  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok pointed at the large backpacks his teammates were unloading from a van.  
  
"It’s got lunch, spare clothes, equipment, a first-aid kit, and other stuff like that."  
  
Wait, a first-aid kit for entering a dungeon?  
  
Jin-Woo expressed his confusion.  
  
"Don’t tell me you’re going in without a healer?"  
  
"You know how it is. It’s not easy to get a healer for a private raid. We’ve always done it this way."  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok awkwardly laughed.  
  
A barely sufficient number of members, a recruit who seemed to treat the raid like a blind date, and a raid party consisting of only tanks and dealers without a healer.  
  
The recruit next to him didn’t even flinch upon hearing there was no healer.  
  
A clear sign of a complete beginner.  
  
Jin-Woo stifled a laugh internally.  
  
'What a mess.'  
  
Yet, the reason he signed the contract wasn’t because he was greedy for the 2 million won. It was because he was now confident he could protect himself.  
  
"Here you go."  
  
"Me too!"  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok checked their signatures and, in good spirits, shouted loudly.  
  
"Alright, let’s go!"  
  
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The group headed to the location where the Gate had formed.  
  
It was an apartment construction site that had been abandoned mid-project.  
  
"The economy’s been bad lately..."  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok clicked his tongue.  
  
The half-finished apartments stood like giant tombstones, eerily scattered across the site.  
  
It felt like a graveyard for giants.  
  
"You know what?"  
  
Yoo Jin-Ho, who had come up beside Jin-Woo, lowered his voice as he spoke.  
  
"The employees and investors here are all fighting for their lives, but the CEO fled overseas with 900 billion won two months ago."  
  
"..."  
  
Jin-Woo had already given him several hints, but Yoo Jin-Ho seemed reluctant to leave Jin-Woo’s side.  
  
It seemed he was having trouble fitting in with the other eight members, who had been a team long before.  
  
"Bro, are you always this quiet?"  
  
Somehow, his address for Jin-Woo had changed to “bro.”  
  
Now, ignoring him felt tiresome.  
  
"...Are you really this clueless?"  
  
"I’ve never had to worry about catching hints. Hehe."  
  
Either he was naturally cheerful or just plain thoughtless.  
  
Jin-Woo scratched the side of his head as he looked at Yoo Jin-Ho’s bright smile.  
  
'But still...'  
  
It was true that he became unusually sensitive whenever he approached a Gate.  
  
There was no helping it.  
  
For other Hunters, it might just be a way to make money, but for Jin-Woo, every raid was a struggle for survival.  
  
With so many painful memories, it was only natural to be on edge.  
  
"We’re here."  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok stopped walking.  
  
Oh-  
  
The Hunters gasped.  
  
"Bro Hwang, are you sure this is a C-rank Gate? It’s a bit big, isn’t it?"  
  
"Do you think the Association would lie about it? Investigators came twice."  
  
A black hole-like void floating in the air. That’s what they called a Gate.  
  
The rank was determined by the mana wave level inside, which the Association would measure and announce beforehand.  
  
Then, individuals or guilds who wanted to raid it could apply following the proper procedures.  
  
A-rank and B-rank Gates were usually reserved for large guilds.  
  
They were too dangerous for individuals to tackle.  
  
Private raid parties mostly handled Gates of lower ranks.  
  
So, a C-rank Gate was the highest difficulty that unaffiliated Hunters could attempt.  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok stood in front of the Gate and turned around.  
  
"I’ll go in first. Everyone, follow closely."  
  
As the Tanker, he led the way, and the Hunters began entering the Gate one by one.  
  
'Just in case...'  
  
Jin-Woo lightly stretched his body in preparation.  
  
Beside him, Yoo Jin-Ho was taking out his equipment one by one.  
  
The sword and shield that came out of his equipment bag gleamed brightly.  
  
At a glance, they were high-end gear.  
  
Not something a beginner Hunter could afford on his own.  
  
'He said he’s never had to worry about catching hints. Must be from a wealthy family.'  
  
Jin-Woo looked at him with mild surprise.  
  
Perhaps sensing Jin-Woo’s gaze, Yoo Jin-Ho confidently stepped forward.  
  
"Bro, you said you’re E-rank, right? I’ll protect you. Stick close to me."  
  
Jin-Woo scratched the back of his head.  
  
Who was protecting whom?  
  
"...Thanks, I guess."  
  
"Let’s head in."  
  
Regardless of Jin-Woo’s feelings, the two of them safely entered the Gate.  
  
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The inside of the dungeon was quiet.  
  
"..."  
  
It was dark and silent.  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok gave the first order.  
  
"Gyu-Hwan, light it up."  
  
"Got it."  
  
Jo Gyu-Hwan, a Mage-type Hunter, conjured a ball of light in the air.  
  
The area brightened.  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok lowered his shield and tilted his head in confusion.  
  
"What’s going on? Why are there no magic beasts here?"  
  
"Right. The lights are off too."  
  
Usually, dungeons had luminous stones embedded in the walls to illuminate the area.  
  
But in this dungeon, there were no such stones in sight. Yoo Jin-Ho whispered to Jin-Woo.  
  
"Bro, are there dungeons without magic beasts?"  
  
"Shh."  
  
Jin-Woo gestured for him to be quiet.  
  
Jin-Woo’s ears twitched.  
  
Countless footsteps could be heard in the distance.  
  
Jin-Woo spoke.  
  
"They’re not missing. They just haven’t arrived yet."  
  
Yoo Jin-Ho gulped.  
  
Thud thud thud-  
  
Soon, the others could hear the sound Jin-Woo had noticed.  
  
Only then did Hwang Dong-Seok sense something was wrong.  
  
A dungeon without luminous stones...?  
  
"What moves in swarms, lives in the dark, and rushes toward light?"  
  
Oh no!  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok and his teammates’ expressions darkened simultaneously.  
  
"Insects!"  
  
"It’s bugs!"  
  
"Damn it, why does it have to be bugs!"  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok shouted.  
  
"Everyone, get into position! They’re coming! Straight ahead!"  
  
From the other end of the passageway, a swarm of something was rushing toward them.  
  
"Please tell me this isn’t an ant nest."  
  
"Don’t jinx it."  
  
Among the various types of magic beasts, insect-types were particularly troublesome.  
  
They were hard to kill, always moved in swarms, and each individual wasn’t weak either.  
  
And the worst of them all were the ants.  
  
Many Hunters had lost their lives by mistakenly stepping into ant nests.  
  
Thud thud thud thud thud-  
  
The sound of insect legs scraping against the ground grew louder.  
  
They were close.  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok raised his shield to his chin.  
  
But the bugs were nowhere to be seen.  
  
His teammates started talking behind him.  
  
"What’s going on? Why can’t we see them?"  
  
"The sound’s close, though?"  
  
"Bro Dong-Seok, can you see anything up front?"  
  
Jin-Woo shouted.  
  
"Above!"  
  
'What?'  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok reflexively looked up.  
  
Thud thud thud thud-  
  
Giant bugs were rushing toward them from above.  
  
If they had noticed even a second later, the bugs would have fallen right on top of them.  
  
When fighting magic beasts that moved in swarms like insects, losing formation meant certain death.  
  
'If we had noticed even a second later...'  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok felt a chill run down his spine.  
  
The only silver lining was that, among the many types of bugs, there wasn’t a single ant in sight.  
  
He raised his voice.  
  
"Shoot! Shoot them down! If they land, I’ll take the aggro!"  
  
Arrows and spells flew toward the bugs.  
  
Whoosh, thud!  
  
Boom!  
  
Squeak-  
  
Squeak-  
  
A few of the bugs fell from the Hunters’ attacks, and the remaining ones all descended to the ground, ready to fight the Hunters.  
  
Now, the Tanker’s role was crucial. Hwang Dong-Seok used a Provocation Skill to draw the magic beasts’ attention.  
  
As if on cue, the magic beasts all turned to look at Hwang Dong-Seok.  
  
"Over here, you bugs!"  
  
Squeak squeak squeak!  
  
Dozens of magic beasts charged at Hwang Dong-Seok.  
  
Clang clang!  
  
Clang clang clang!  
  
Clang!  
  
His shield blocked all of the bugs’ attacks.  
  
Even their strong jaws and claws couldn’t tear through the shield.  
  
As the Tanker, Hwang Dong-Seok held the front line steadily.  
  
"Wait, wait, wait!"  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok was timing his next move.  
  
\*\*CHAPTER END\*\*