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\*\*CHAPTER START\*\*  
  
<h1>Solo Leveling - Chapter 23</h1>  
  
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Jin-Woo scanned Hwang Dong-Seok’s group like a predator eyeing its prey. Hwang Dong-Seok gulped hard. The sudden appearance of the dagger in Jin-Woo’s hand was shocking, but the death of Park Jun-Tae was even more devastating.  
  
‘How did an E-rank Hunter take out a D-rank Hunter in one move?’   
Whatever trick he had used, it was clear that underestimating him would be a grave mistake. Caution was necessary.  
  
Hwang Dong-Seok glanced to the side.   
‘Gyu-Hwan, hit him one more time.’   
Jo Gyu-Hwan gave a slight nod.   
‘This time, I won’t mess up!’   
As he internally steeled himself, light began to gather at his fingertips. However, before the arrow of light could leave his hand, Jin-Woo appeared right in front of him.   
“Huh?”   
Jo Gyu-Hwan’s jaw dropped.   
Jin-Woo’s eyes gleamed.   
‘Mage-type Hunters have strong firepower but weak stamina.’   
His mind had already calculated everything. The dagger plunged into Jo Gyu-Hwan’s neck.   
\*Thud!\*   
“Ghk!”   
Jo Gyu-Hwan clutched his pierced neck and collapsed.   
\*Thump.\*  
  
“Kill him!”   
“Aaaaaah!”   
As if that was the signal, the Hunters around them all charged at Jin-Woo. Jin-Woo heightened his senses and calmly focused on their movements. The sounds around him faded, and time seemed to slow down. The effects of his Agility Stat, which had risen to 38 points, began to manifest. He blocked or dodged the swords, spears, and arrows coming at him from all sides with precision.   
  
The Hunters’ eyes widened.   
‘H-how is an E-rank moving like this?’   
‘He’s too fast!’   
‘I can’t land a hit on him!’   
Their faces turned pale.   
  
Speed is relative. To them, Jin-Woo’s movements felt unnaturally fast. He weaved through the Hunters, slashing their vital points one by one.   
[‘Effect: Paralysis’ activated.]   
[‘Effect: Bleeding’ activated.]   
[‘Effect: Paralysis’ activated.]   
The special effects of the dagger ‘Kasaka’s Venom Fang’ triggered one after another, throwing the Hunters into chaos.   
  
“M-my body won’t move! Argh!”   
“Magic? Is this magic?”   
“You bastard!”   
[‘Effect: Bleeding’ activated.]   
[‘Effect: Paralysis’ activated.]   
[‘Effect: Paralysis’ activated.]   
“Ghk!”   
“W-what the hell is this guy?”   
“Aaaaaaah!”   
Screams erupted incessantly from all directions. The five Hunters who had surrounded Jin-Woo fell in an instant.   
\*Thud. Thud.\*   
  
\*Ding.\*   
[Number of enemies to eliminate: 1]   
[Number of enemies eliminated: 7]   
Jin-Woo turned his gaze to the last remaining enemy. The burly, bearded Hwang Dong-Seok.   
  
Hwang Dong-Seok, with a grim expression, threw his shield to the ground and let out a roar.   
“Uwooooooh!”   
He charged forward, his footsteps shaking the ground.   
\*Boom, boom, boom, boom!\*   
As he ran, he thought to himself:   
‘I’m a Tanker, one of the top C-rank Hunters. He’s probably a Dealer. Sure, he’s agile, but he doesn’t have the power to break through my ‘Reinforcement’ skill.’   
‘A mere dagger won’t be enough to deal a fatal blow to me!’   
‘The moment we clash, Sung Jin-Woo will be the one shattered!’   
  
The distance closed in an instant, and Hwang Dong-Seok lowered his shoulder.   
“Reinforcement!”   
But then, his vision spun, and the next thing he saw was the dungeon’s ceiling.   
\*Thud!\*   
His head shook violently, and a strong impact traveled through his neck and back. He tried to get up, but his body wouldn’t obey. Struggling, Hwang Dong-Seok collapsed back onto the ground.   
“Gkkk!”   
Blood spurted from his mouth.   
‘Did he… throw me?’   
‘I lost in a contest of strength?’   
‘To an E-rank?’   
“H-how…?”   
  
Something was clearly wrong.   
Five C-rank and three D-rank Hunters had been taken down in an instant. This guy was definitely not E-rank level.   
  
Jin-Woo stood beside Hwang Dong-Seok, who could barely move. The fight was already over. If this had been a sport or a spar, it would’ve ended here. But Jin-Woo had no intention of stopping.   
“W-wait.”   
Hwang Dong-Seok raised his hand.   
“S-spare me! I’ll give you money. As much as you want. Just spare my life…”   
“Three times.”   
Jin-Woo spoke coldly.   
“You’ve tried to kill me three times. Isn’t it shameless to beg for your life now?”   
  
Blocking the boss room entrance—that was the first time.   
Using Yoo Jin-Ho—that was the second time.   
And Jo Gyu-Hwan’s magic—that was the third time.   
Hwang Dong-Seok had tried to kill Jin-Woo three times. Even excluding the current fight.   
  
Give and take.   
When Jin-Woo returned from the Underground Temple, he had resolved to repay what he had received. Whether it was good or bad.   
Malice would be repaid with malice.   
There was no compromise.   
  
Realizing that begging for his life wouldn’t work, Hwang Dong-Seok’s eyes widened, and foam formed at the corners of his mouth.   
“Y-you think you’ll get away with this?! Do you know who my brother is?”   
\*Crack!\*   
Hwang Dong-Seok’s neck snapped, cutting off his words.   
“Gkkk.”   
The whites of his eyes showed.   
  
\*Ding.\*   
[Number of enemies to eliminate: 0]   
[Number of enemies eliminated: 8]   
Finally, the quest was complete.   
  
“Phew—”   
Jin-Woo let out a long sigh, filled with mixed emotions, and removed his hand from Hwang Dong-Seok’s head.   
Suddenly, his gaze shifted to his own hand.   
Even after a life-and-death battle with eight people, his hand wasn’t trembling at all.   
‘Is this… okay?’   
  
He placed his hand over his chest and quietly felt his heartbeat.   
\*Thud, thud, thud.\*   
His heart was calm, beating as usual.   
‘Maybe…’   
For the first time, he wondered if the changes after returning from the Underground Temple weren’t just about the System becoming visible.   
  
But his thoughts were interrupted by a familiar electronic sound.   
\*Ding.\*   
[‘Emergency Quest: Eliminate the Enemies’ has been completed.]   
[Completion rewards have arrived.]   
[Would you like to check the rewards?] (Y/N)   
He had anticipated it, but the rewards had indeed come. Without hesitation, Jin-Woo chose to confirm.   
‘Check.’   
  
\*Ding.\*   
[The following rewards are prepared.]   
Reward 1: Status Recovery   
Reward 2: Stat Points +10   
Reward 3: Skill: ‘Killing Intent’   
‘10 points and a skill? That’s incredible.’   
Jin-Woo’s eyes widened at the generous rewards. While the stat points were impressive, the new skill particularly caught his attention.   
  
‘If I hadn’t had the ‘Dash’ skill when fighting the spider…’   
He had defeated the boss thanks to ‘Dash.’ The importance of skills in combat was undeniable. It was no wonder that Rune Stones, which allowed the learning of skills, were so exorbitantly priced.   
Jin-Woo immediately checked the skill.   
‘Confirm Reward 3.’   
  
\*Ding.\*   
[Skill: Killing Intent :Lv1]   
Active Skill.   
Mana Consumption: 100.   
Instills intense fear in the designated target(s) for 1 minute. Can target multiple enemies.   
Effect ‘Fear’: All stats -50%.   
Although temporary, it was a rare skill that could reduce all of an enemy’s stats. While it might not work on enemies with high resistance, once it took effect, it would allow him to subdue any opponent with ease. Moreover, it could target multiple enemies, making its potential applications limitless.   
  
‘This is good.’   
The penalties had been severe, but the rewards were equally significant.   
‘Wait… isn’t that to be expected? My life was on the line.’   
But that wasn’t all.   
  
Jin-Woo looked around. The gruesome scene made him frown deeply. Though he had witnessed many Hunters’ deaths firsthand, seeing corpses never became easier to get used to. This was the result the quest had desired.   
For a quest that had so many lives at stake, the rewards felt somewhat lacking.   
But even if it hadn’t been a quest, the fight with Hwang Dong-Seok’s group would have been unavoidable.   
‘Human greed knows no bounds…’   
Jin-Woo shook his head.   
  
Then, the cave began to shake again.   
\*Rumble—\*   
The tremors were much stronger than before. It was time to leave the dungeon.   
But a little cleanup was needed first.   
  
Starting with Yoo Jin-Ho.   
Jin-Woo’s gaze turned to Yoo Jin-Ho, who was frozen in fear.   
‘What should I do about him…’   
Of course, Jin-Woo had no intention of harming Yoo Jin-Ho. There was no need or reason to. But if what had happened here leaked out, it could cause unnecessary trouble.   
‘I should at least get him to keep his mouth shut.’   
  
Just as he reached that conclusion, Yoo Jin-Ho rushed over, knelt, and bowed his head.   
“Hyung-nim, spare me!”   
“...”   
Jin-Woo got the sense that this would go smoother than expected.   
  
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Yoo Jin-Ho was trembling. His face was pale. After witnessing eight people die in an instant, it was understandable. Fear was one of the most powerful tools for controlling people. So, Jin-Woo decided to use the situation to his advantage.   
  
“Why should I do that?”   
“Hik!”   
It almost seemed like Yoo Jin-Ho’s heart sank.   
‘Too harsh?’ Jin-Woo briefly felt a pang of guilt.   
  
“M-money, if you need money, I can talk to my father—”   
“What do you take me for?”   
Jin-Woo’s face darkened. He had lived his life without stooping so low as to take innocent lives as hostages for money. That would make him no better than Hwang Dong-Seok.   
  
“S-sorry.”   
If Yoo Jin-Ho hadn’t been so frightened, he might have tried to strike Jin-Woo from behind. But right now, it seemed like the kid might just collapse from a heart attack, so Jin-Woo held back.   
  
Seeing Jin-Woo’s stern expression, Yoo Jin-Ho gulped.   
‘Come to think of it, earlier when Hwang Dong-Seok offered money… Could it be that Hyung-nim has forsaken material desires and only walks the path of blood and slaughter?’   
In Yoo Jin-Ho’s mind, Jin-Woo’s image was becoming more and more distorted in an unusual direction.   
  
But it was too early to jump to conclusions.   
‘If that’s the case, then why did Hyung-nim collect the Essence Stones earlier?’   
Just moments ago, Jin-Woo had meticulously searched the spider’s stomach for Essence Stones. While Essence Stones were a high-level energy source and material for crafting magical tools, for Hunters, the word ‘Essence Stones’ was essentially synonymous with money.   
  
Yoo Jin-Ho’s mind raced.   
‘Ah, I see!’   
It was the price of blood. Because it was a rightful reward for shedding blood, Hyung-nim didn’t hesitate to go through the trouble of collecting them.   
A blood-soaked ascetic who shows no mercy to those who cross him but has no interest in gains earned without effort.   
‘No wonder Hyung-nim got angry when I tried to buy his mercy with money.’   
  
What he needed now wasn’t ‘Father’s money,’ but the ‘rightful gain’ Hyung-nim would receive by sparing his life.   
Glancing up cautiously, he saw that Jin-Woo’s expression was still stern. Yoo Jin-Ho quickly continued.   
“Hyung-nim, if you spare me, I’ll give you all the profits from this dungeon.”   
“Hm?”   
Jin-Woo showed interest.   
“Think about it, Hyung-nim. Out of a team of ten, nine are dead. If you take all the profits, wouldn’t everyone find it suspicious?”   
To Yoo Jin-Ho, Jin-Woo was undeniably an illegal registrant. And not just any illegal registrant—a high-ranking one who enjoyed killing!   
Naturally, he’d be wary of others’ scrutiny.   
  
“So?”   
“On the other hand, if both of us make it out alive, the Essence Stones from this dungeon will all be mine according to the contract. Even if the team members are dead, since you have no stake, no one would suspect you.”   
Of course, there was no chance Yoo Jin-Ho would be suspected either. After all, he was the son of a chairman of a leading domestic company. The profits from selling the Essence Stones would be mere pocket change for him.   
“It’s the money you rightfully deserve, Hyung-nim. You killed Hwang Dong-Seok’s group and saved me. Isn’t that fair compensation?”   
  
\*\*CHAPTER END\*\*