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\*\*CHAPTER START\*\*  
  
<h1>Solo Leveling - Chapter 36</h1>  
  
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‘It would be nice if he said something right now.’  
  
Jin-Woo’s silence somehow felt cold and distant. Finally, Joo-Hee, who had stopped walking, hesitantly spoke first.  
  
"Uh... I don’t think I’ll be able to hand anything over today, so I’ll return this to you."  
  
Jin-Woo took the Essence Stone that Joo-Hee handed over. It was the same Essence Stone he had entrusted to her in the Underground Temple. Joo-Hee’s fingertips trembled as she handed it over.  
  
‘It’s only been a few days since then… and today, another accident happened right in front of her eyes.’  
  
Joo-Hee was naturally fearful. It was understandable that she felt she wouldn’t be able to hand anything over today.  
  
"But today isn’t the only day, right? You don’t have to return it right now."  
  
Joo-Hee shook her head.  
  
"I’m going back home next week."  
  
It seemed she was planning to quit being a Hunter and return to her hometown. Jin-Woo’s expression turned sympathetic.  
  
"Because of that accident?"  
  
"Not entirely, but..."  
  
As memories of that day resurfaced, Joo-Hee’s expression darkened. Jin-Woo quickly changed the subject.  
  
"Where’s your hometown?"  
  
"Busan. Uh, Jin-Woo."  
  
Suddenly, Joo-Hee’s gaze turned serious.  
  
"Yes?"  
  
Feeling the unusual atmosphere, Jin-Woo wiped the smile off his face and became serious as well. Joo-Hee studied his face intently.  
  
His eyes were full of life. Back in the Underground Temple, when everyone was trembling in despair, only Jin-Woo’s eyes burned with intense determination. Joo-Hee had seen those eyes up close.  
  
‘It felt like he was shouting that he would survive.’  
  
Those eyes, which never lost hope, had saved many lives, including her own, multiple times. It was something no one else could replicate.  
  
\*Thump thump.\*  
  
As memories of that day resurfaced, her heart began to race again.  
  
‘No…’  
  
She had no regrets about quitting the Hunter job, as it didn’t suit her. But the thought of not being able to see Jin-Woo anymore was deeply disappointing.  
  
‘If I ask if we’ll meet again, he’ll probably think I’m weird, right…?’  
  
It was disappointing, but sometimes, there are things you just can’t change. Dwelling on such matters only leads to pain.  
  
Joo-Hee eventually forced a smile and shook her head.  
  
"No, it’s nothing. If you ever come down to Busan, let me know. I’ll treat you to a meal."  
  
"Sure."  
  
As Jin-Woo smiled, Joo-Hee smiled back. With that, Joo-Hee said her goodbyes and turned to leave.  
  
‘...’  
  
For the first time, the walk back home felt unbearably long.  
  
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After seeing Joo-Hee off, Jin-Woo returned home. In the distance, he could see the old apartment complex where he lived on the 9th floor. As he passed the parked cars and was about to enter the building, an elderly voice stopped him.  
  
"Hey, young man from 902."  
  
It was the elderly security guard. Having known him for a long time, Jin-Woo greeted him without hesitation.  
  
"You’re still on duty?"  
  
"I’m on night shift today."  
  
Jin-Woo nodded briefly. Soon, the guard brought out a package from the security office.  
  
"This came for you, young man."  
  
"Ah, thank you."  
  
The sender was the Association. ‘Was it today?’ He remembered that the Hunter phone sent by the Association was supposed to arrive today. Jin-Woo took the phone out of the box.  
  
A shiny new phone.  
  
He recalled hearing on the news that the interest in Hunters had surged so much that even non-Awakeners were scrambling to buy Hunter phones.  
  
‘Well, it’s one thing for people to want to buy it, but what kind of mindset do people have to steal and sell them?’  
  
It’s said that it’s not that the country lacks money, but that there are too many thieves. In any case, whether it’s the Association or the military, wherever people gather, corruption becomes a problem.  
  
When corruption arises, money leaks out, and as support dwindles, the environment deteriorates. Ultimately, the people who should be benefiting end up suffering.  
  
‘But thankfully…’  
  
The new phone he received seemed to be in perfect condition. While waiting for the elevator, he turned on the phone. There were a ton of missed messages.  
  
‘When am I supposed to check all of these?’  
  
However, two numbers stood out the most. Neither was familiar. One had called multiple times, and the other had sent many messages.  
  
‘Who would contact me like this?’  
  
Jin-Woo tilted his head in confusion but decided to check the messages first.  
  
\_Hello, this is from the hospital that day...\_  
  
\_If you’re free this week...\_  
  
\_Did I bother you? I was just hoping to chat...\_  
  
Suddenly, he remembered. It was the nurse who had given him her number at the hospital. ‘Was her name Choi Yoora?’  
  
He couldn’t say she was bothering him, but the moment he replied, he had a strong feeling that things would get complicated.  
  
‘Better to skip this...’  
  
Next was the number that had called multiple times. Jin-Woo pressed the call button.  
  
A lively, upbeat ringing tone played loudly. He had a vague idea of who it might be. The call connected quickly.  
  
"Hello."  
  
Just as expected. Not a single surprise, so a small chuckle escaped him.  
  
"It’s me. From now on, call me on this number."  
  
"Ah! You got your phone! Hyung-nim!"  
  
It was Yoo Jin-Ho. He had written down the number but had never called it before, so it felt unfamiliar. Jin-Ho spoke excitedly.  
  
"I was just about to call you, Hyung-nim! I’ve gathered the raid members, so I’ll come pick you up tomorrow!"  
  
Jin-Ho’s excited voice painted a vivid picture of his face in Jin-Woo’s mind. Jin-Woo smiled too.  
  
"Alright. See you tomorrow."  
  
\*Click.\*  
  
As Jin-Woo hung up, the elevator doors slid open just in time. Finally, the real raid would begin tomorrow. Thinking about it, his heart raced.  
  
‘Let’s level up as fast as possible.’  
  
Leveling up, increasing stats, and becoming stronger than anyone else. Becoming a strong Hunter would mean gaining money, fame, power—everything. Tomorrow would be the first step toward that.  
  
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Eastern United States.  
  
Late at night.  
  
Hwang Dongsu, the main Hunter of the North American top guild ‘Scavenger’ and an S-rank Hunter, had just received shocking news before falling asleep at his home.  
  
"...What do you mean my brother died? Slowly, explain it to me in detail."  
  
His brother’s name was Hwang Dong-Seok. He had recently entered a C-rank Gate and lost his life.  
  
"...You’re saying that all eight members of his raid team died, and only two people survived?"  
  
And those two were a D-rank and an E-rank? Something smelled fishy. The brother he knew wasn’t the type to risk his life for weaker teammates. Especially if those members were just supplementary.  
  
Yet, the D-rank and E-rank Hunters survived, while all the C-rank Hunters, including his brother, died.  
  
‘There’s something here...’  
  
Hwang Dongsu’s eyes sharpened. Though he was now scouted by a famous American guild, his brother was someone who had cared for him more than anyone else back in Korea.  
  
He wasn’t exactly a good person, but he was a good brother. ‘I was planning to bring him here once I settled in a bit more…’ But now, he had met such a tragic end.  
  
Hwang Dongsu bit his lower lip.  
  
"Send me the information of the two survivors by fax. The number is..."  
  
Hwang Dongsu hung up and dialed his manager’s number.  
  
"Mr. Hwang, what’s the matter at this hour?"  
  
"Laura, what would happen if I killed someone in Korea?"  
  
"Are you serious?"  
  
"Yes."  
  
There was a moment of silence before the voice continued.  
  
"...The Hunter Criminal Extradition Treaty hasn’t been signed yet between Korea and the U.S. As a U.S. citizen Hunter, you’d be tried in the U.S., and with government negotiations, the sentence wouldn’t be too severe."  
  
"That’s a relief. Something’s come up, and I need to go to Korea. Can you clear my schedule?"  
  
"But Mr. Hwang, if you go so suddenly, the guild’s operations will be disrupted. Can you tell me what’s going on?"  
  
"It’s a personal matter. Of course, I don’t plan to harm the guild. How long is my schedule booked for?"  
  
"Two months from now."  
  
"Two months... Alright. Clear my schedule after that. It won’t be long. Just two weeks. I’ll go to Korea for two weeks.”  
  
"...Alright. But what should I tell the higher-ups?"  
  
"Tell them I’m attending my brother’s funeral. As a condolence trip."  
  
"OK. I’ll do that. But Mr. Hwang... if there’s anything I can do to help..."  
  
\*Click!\*  
  
Hwang Dongsu hung up. Neither condolences nor advice was something he wanted to hear right now.  
  
\*Whirr!\*  
  
The fax he had requested arrived. Hwang Dongsu picked up the document from the fax machine. Printed on it were the photos, names, and brief profiles of the two Hunters.  
  
"D-rank Hunter Yoo Jin-Ho, E-rank Hunter Sung Jin-Woo."  
  
Hwang Dongsu alternated looking at the two photos, steeling his resolve.  
  
‘If I ask these two, I’ll get my answers.’  
  
And if there’s even the slightest hint of suspicion...  
  
"They’ll regret surviving that place."  
  
Hwang Dongsu’s eyes reddened.  
  
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The next morning.  
  
After receiving the call, Jin-Woo went downstairs and found a large van parked in front of his house.  
  
"…?"  
  
Before he could ask who was blocking his house, the driver’s window rolled down on its own. The face grinning back at him was... Yoo Jin-Ho.  
  
"Hyung-nim, get in!"  
  
Jin-Ho reached out of the window and tapped the side of the van. He had expected Jin-Ho to show up in a Benz, but this was just an ordinary van. Well, it was a bit bigger than usual but still.  
  
"Didn’t you say you were a second-generation chaebol?"  
  
"I thought using my car would be too conspicuous. I bought this one for the raid."  
  
No wonder the car had a shiny finish. ‘It’s brand new.’ Jin-Ho’s sincerity in showing up early in the morning and his caution in using an inconspicuous car showed he was fully prepared. It meant he had high expectations for this raid.  
  
Worried that Jin-Woo might be uncomfortable with the car, Jin-Ho asked, "Is this kind of car inconvenient for you, Hyung-nim?"  
  
"Not at all."  
  
Jin-Woo cut him off and got into the passenger seat. "Let’s go, Hyung-nim."  
  
Excited for the first day of the raid, Jin-Ho hummed a tune as he turned the wheel. After driving for a while, the van stopped at a vacant lot.  
  
\*Screech.\*  
  
"Hyung-nim, we’re here."  
  
At the meeting spot, eight Hunters were waiting.  
  
\*\*CHAPTER END\*\*