# 9docx

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9

\*\*CHAPTER START\*\*  
  
<h1>Solo Leveling - Chapter 9</h1>  
  
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<p>"Did you hit your head really hard?"</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo shook his head vigorously at his sister’s question, who was standing a bit far away.</p>  
<p>"No."</p>  
<p>Despite his answer, the look in his sister, Sung Jin-Ah’s eyes, remained uneasy.</p>  
<p>"Are you really okay?"</p>  
<p>"I told you, I’m fine."</p>  
<p>Jin-Ah, who had been silently scanning Jin-Woo’s condition, soon stomped over to him.</p>  
<p>She then started hitting him firmly, as he instinctively took a defensive stance.</p>  
<p>"Stop getting hurt! Do you know how worried I was?"</p>  
<p>"...I’m sorry."</p>  
<p>"Why is it always you who gets hurt when everyone else is fine?"</p>  
<p>"...Sorry."</p>  
<p>The strength in Jin-Ah’s hands gradually faded as she continued to hit him.</p>  
<p>Soon, she hung her head low and tears began to fall.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo gently patted his sobbing sister’s back. For some reason, his nose tingled.</p>  
<p>‘I almost left this kid behind.’</p>  
<p>It was a relief that he had returned alive.</p>  
<p>Looking back now, there had been more than a few close calls.</p>  
<p>It felt like he had just woken up from a terrible nightmare.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo’s gaze shifted slightly toward the message floating in the air.</p>  
<p>[You have unread messages.]</p>  
<p>‘It doesn’t feel like I’ve completely escaped that dream yet...’</p>  
<p>Everything was so incomprehensible.</p>  
<p>But what could he do?</p>  
<p>The important thing was that he was alive and could see his family again, right?</p>  
<p>"Sniff."</p>  
<p>Fortunately, his strong-willed sister’s tears stopped quickly.</p>  
<p>However, her nagging continued for another hour.</p>  
<p>"Got it? If you get hurt one more time, I’ll quit studying and start working to stop you from being a Hunter."</p>  
<p>Jin-Ah’s sharp gaze, which didn’t match her pretty face, was strikingly similar to Jin-Woo’s.</p>  
<p>"Okay, okay."</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo nodded his head with a look of exasperation.</p>  
<p>Only after making him promise several times did Jin-Ah finally seem to calm down and stood up.</p>  
<p>"Where are you going?"</p>  
<p>"School. I only got permission to leave for a bit to check on you. I have to go back now."</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo nodded.</p>  
<p>"Right, the College Scholastic Ability Test is next year."</p>  
<p>Even though he had never sent her to a single tutoring session or academy, she was always in the top ten of her school. She was a proud sister.</p>  
<p>Jin-Ah’s dream was to become a doctor.</p>  
<p>A few years ago, she was just a kid who loved playing and games, but after their mother fell ill, she decided to become a doctor and never left her desk.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo wanted to make sure her dream came true.</p>  
<p>But wait... games?</p>  
<p>Suddenly, Jin-Woo’s eyes sparkled.</p>  
<p>"I’m going."</p>  
<p>As Jin-Ah was about to leave the hospital room, Jin-Woo quickly called her back.</p>  
<p>"Jin-Ah."</p>  
<p>"What?"</p>  
<p>"When you play games..."</p>  
<p>Jin-Ah chuckled.</p>  
<p>"I haven’t been playing games lately. I’m a senior in high school now."</p>  
<p>"I know. I know, but I wanted to ask you something."</p>  
<p>"Really? What are you curious about? Are you playing games now?"</p>  
<p>Perhaps because it was her former area of expertise, Jin-Ah showed strong interest.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo glanced at the letters still floating in the air and asked,</p>  
<p>"When there’s an unread message in a game, how do you check it?"</p>  
<p>"First, you have to open the message box."</p>  
<p>"You ‘open’ the message box?"</p>  
<p>\*Ding!\*</p>  
<p>As soon as Jin-Woo said the word "open," a chime sounded, and the hidden messages revealed themselves.</p>  
<p>[You have two unread messages.]</p>  
<p>Welcome to becoming a [Player]. (Unconfirmed)</p>  
<p>[Daily Quest: Preparation to Become Stronger] has arrived. (Unconfirmed)</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo’s face lit up.</p>  
<p>‘Got it!’</p>  
<p>Seeing her brother’s sudden bright expression, Jin-Ah felt a pang of unease and asked,</p>  
<p>"What is it? What game is it? Do you need my help?"</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo shook his head firmly.</p>  
<p>"No. I’ll try it on my own."</p>  
<p>What would his sister’s reaction be if he told her what he was going through?</p>  
<p>‘I don’t want to hear her call me crazy.’</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo swallowed the words he wanted to say.</p>  
<p>---</p>  
<p>After pretending to see his sister off and confirming she had entered the elevator, Jin-Woo quickly returned to his hospital room.</p>  
<p>‘I can’t make the same mistake again.’</p>  
<p>\*Click.\*</p>  
<p>He even locked the door to prevent anyone from witnessing what was about to happen.</p>  
<p>After completing all preparations, Jin-Woo sat on the edge of the bed and began reading the titles of the messages floating before him.</p>  
<p>Welcome to becoming a [Player]. (Unconfirmed)</p>  
<p>[Daily Quest: Preparation to Become Stronger] has arrived. (Unconfirmed)</p>  
<p>The title of the first message felt familiar.</p>  
<p>‘Where have I heard this before? It definitely feels familiar.’</p>  
<p>First, the first message.</p>  
<p>Welcome to becoming a [Player]. (Unconfirmed)</p>  
<p>‘Confirm.’</p>  
<p>\*Ding.\*</p>  
<p>[This system supports the growth of the ‘Player.’]</p>  
<p>[Failure to comply with the system’s instructions may result in penalties.]</p>  
<p>[Reward distribution has been completed.]</p>  
<p>"Ah."</p>  
<p>He remembered belatedly.</p>  
<p>It was the last thing he had heard before losing his memory.</p>  
<p>‘Back then, they were talking about becoming a Player or something.’</p>  
<p>But just like back then, he still didn’t fully understand what it meant.</p>  
<p>System, growth, penalties, rewards.</p>  
<p>It was a series of words with unclear meanings.</p>  
<p>‘What exactly are they trying to grow, and what rewards are they giving?’</p>  
<p>Words that you’d only see in a game were listed without any explanation, making it hard to understand.</p>  
<p>Deciding to skip over the confusing parts for now, he calmly opened the next message.</p>  
<p>[Daily Quest: Preparation to Become Stronger] has arrived. (Unconfirmed)</p>  
<p>\*Gulp.\*</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo unconsciously swallowed at the meaningful message title.</p>  
<p>His heart began to race.</p>  
<p>‘Confirm.’</p>  
<p>\*Ding.\*</p>  
<p>[Daily Quest: Preparation to Become Stronger]</p>  
<p>Push-ups: 100 reps - Incomplete (0/100)</p>  
<p>Sit-ups: 100 reps - Incomplete (0/100)</p>  
<p>Squats: 100 reps - Incomplete (0/100)</p>  
<p>Running: 10km - Incomplete (0/10)</p>  
<p>※Warning: Failure to complete the daily quest will result in corresponding penalties.</p>  
<p>After reading the message, Jin-Woo let out an involuntary chuckle.</p>  
<p>"Haha... this is something."</p>  
<p>It was almost laughable.</p>  
<p>A daily quest, and one with the grandiose title of ‘Preparation to Become Stronger,’ turned out to be a set of physical exercises.</p>  
<p>Sure, following the quest might make his body a bit stronger.</p>  
<p>Was this what the system meant by growth and rewards?</p>  
<p>‘Now that I think about it...’</p>  
<p>He remembered reading a book once that said, ‘People with inner problems should listen to their inner voice.’</p>  
<p>‘In the end, you see what you want to see.’</p>  
<p>How desperate must he have been to become stronger for such delusions to appear before his eyes?</p>  
<p>It was funny, but also bittersweet.</p>  
<p>"If I could get stronger with something like this, who would go through all that hardship..."</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo shook his head.</p>  
<p>He felt pathetic for trying to find answers to his questions in what might just be delusions.</p>  
<p>‘Ah, whatever.’</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo lay down flat on the bed.</p>  
<p>And silently stared at the ceiling.</p>  
<p>"..."</p>  
<p>Time passed quickly even though he had nothing to do.</p>  
<p>Just as the weight of the silence in the room began to feel heavy,</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo suddenly sat up.</p>  
<p>‘But still...’</p>  
<p>What if something actually changed?</p>  
<p>A mix of hope and doubt filled him, and the thought of ‘Why not give it a try?’ suddenly crossed his mind.</p>  
<p>‘I have nothing to lose anyway.’</p>  
<p>It’s not like there’s any reason not to just treat it as a light workout, right?</p>  
<p>He made up his mind.</p>  
<p>Let’s do it.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo got off the bed, finished a short stretch, and then, holding onto the edge of the bed, slowly began doing push-ups.</p>  
<p>"1, 2, 3..."</p>  
<p>The numbers started at one and quickly climbed upward.</p>  
<p>"...97, 98, 99, 100."</p>  
<p>He decided to go all the way to 100, but contrary to his expectations, nothing changed.</p>  
<p>Except for his arms feeling a bit numb.</p>  
<p>"What did I even do..."</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo chuckled and stood up immediately.</p>  
<p>Welcome to becoming a [Player]. (Confirmed)</p>  
<p>[Daily Quest: Preparation to Become Stronger] has arrived. (Confirmed)</p>  
<p>The previously unconfirmed messages had now been marked as confirmed.</p>  
<p>No more notifications about unread messages appeared, and he no longer felt like indulging in these delusions.</p>  
<p>This was enough.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo closed the message window without hesitation.</p>  
<p>"Yawn-."</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo stretched and climbed back onto the bed.</p>  
<p>Perhaps because he had moved his body for the first time in a while, he began to feel sleepy.</p>  
<p>Outside the window, the sky was already dyed with the colors of sunset.</p>  
<p>‘Has it already gotten this late?’</p>  
<p>Earlier, the Surveillance Division staff had mentioned that the Hunter Association would cover all his hospital expenses.</p>  
<p>Since he was already hospitalized, he might as well get a thorough check-up and leave only after getting a clean bill of health.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo thought this as he lay down.</p>  
<p>‘Anyway, these hallucinations or auditory illusions will probably disappear over time...’</p>  
<p>His eyelids grew heavy.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo fell into a deep sleep.</p>  
<p>\*Tick, tick, tick.\*</p>  
<p>While Jin-Woo slept, the clock on the wall diligently moved its hands.</p>  
<p>Round and round, the hands eventually pointed to 11:59:57 PM.</p>  
<p>\*Tick, tick, tick.\*</p>  
<p>58 seconds, 59 seconds, 60 seconds.</p>  
<p>The clock’s hands stopped precisely at 12:00:00 AM.</p>  
<p>\*Ding.\*</p>  
<p>[You have failed to complete the daily quest. You will be moved to the ‘Penalty Zone’ for the designated time.]</p>  
<p>---</p>  
<p>\*Rumbleeeeeee!\*</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo woke up to a violent shaking that rattled his entire body.</p>  
<p>"E-Earthquake?"</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo, who had bolted upright, grabbed the edge of the bed.</p>  
<p>The earthquake was so intense that it was hard to keep his balance.</p>  
<p>\*Rumbleeeee!\*</p>  
<p>The shaking only grew stronger as time passed.</p>  
<p>Then.</p>  
<p>\*Crunch.\*</p>  
<p>The bed’s railing, which he had been gripping tightly, broke.</p>  
<p>No, it didn’t break—it disappeared.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo quickly checked his hand.</p>  
<p>The railing was gone, and only sand remained.</p>  
<p>‘Sand?’</p>  
<p>\*Crunch.\*</p>  
<p>The other railing also turned into sand.</p>  
<p>The earthquake grew even more intense.</p>  
<p>\*Rumbleeeeeee!\*</p>  
<p>"Ahhh!"</p>  
<p>Finally, the bed rolled over, and Jin-Woo fell to the floor.</p>  
<p>He bounced around the room, screaming in panic.</p>  
<p>Meanwhile, the objects in the room began turning into sand one by one.</p>  
<p>"Aaaaaah!"</p>  
<p>\*Thud.\*</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo was thrown somewhere and buried.</p>  
<p>He felt a soft texture at his fingertips.</p>  
<p>It was fine-grained sand.</p>  
<p>The earthquake had stopped.</p>  
<p>"Ptoo, ptoo!"</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo spat out the sand that had gotten into his mouth and quickly raised his head.</p>  
<p>"...?"</p>  
<p>An endless expanse of sandy land stretched out before him.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo frowned and stood up.</p>  
<p>The sand that had gotten into his clothes slipped out and fell to the ground.</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo brushed the sand off his chest and looked around.</p>  
<p>His entire field of vision was filled with nothing but sand.</p>  
<p>"Desert...?"</p>  
<p>It was unbelievable.</p>  
<p>Just moments ago, he had been sleeping in a large hospital in the heart of Seoul.</p>  
<p>But now, he was in the middle of a vast desert?</p>  
<p>Jin-Woo grabbed a handful of sand and let it fall.</p>  
<p>The sand fell straight down.</p>  
<p>‘There’s no wind at all.’</p>  
<p>It wasn’t just the wind.</p>  
<p>When he looked up, there was no sun, moon, or stars in the sky.</p>  
<p>Just an empty sky, as if filled with black ink.</p>  
<p>Yet, strangely, he had no trouble seeing his surroundings.</p>  
<p>"Where on earth am I?"</p>  
  
\*\*CHAPTER END\*\*