

Solo Leveling

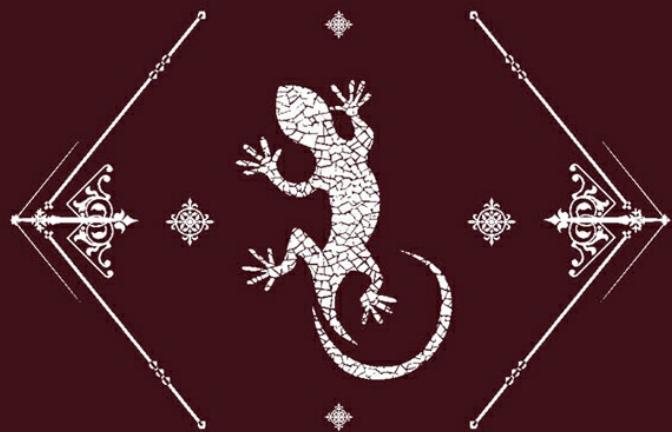
I



Chugong

Solo Leveling





Solo
Leveling

Solo Leveling

I

CHUGONG




YEN
NEW YORK

Copyright

Solo Leveling 1

CHUGONG

Translation by Hye Young Im and J. Torres This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SOLO LEVELING Volume 1

© Chugong 2017 / D&C MEDIA

All rights reserved.

First published in Korea in 2017 by D&C MEDIA Co., Ltd.

English translation © 2021 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com  facebook.com/yenpress  twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com  instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: February 2021

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Chugong, author. | Im, Hye-Young, translator. | Torres, J., 1969– translator.

Title: Solo leveling / Chugong ; translation by Hye Young Im and J. Torres.

Other titles: Na honjaman rebereop. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020047938 | ISBN 9781975319274 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

Classification: LCC PL994.215.G66 N313 2021 | DDC 895.73/5—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020047938>

ISBNs: 978-1-97531927-4 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1928-1 (ebook)

E3-20210914-JV-PC-COR

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[0. Prologue](#)

[1. E-rank Hunter](#)

[2. First Blood](#)

[3. The Final Test](#)

[4. Daily Quest](#)

[5. Boss Round](#)

[6. The Lizards](#)

[7. A Proposal](#)

[8. The Demon's Castle](#)

[9. B-rank Taesik Kang](#)

[10. The Strange Raids](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

0

PROLOGUE

[The daily quest has arrived.]

I heard the clear voice of a young woman.

I swear I wasn't playing some video game. I definitely wasn't dreaming, either. The voice had undoubtedly echoed in my head. A quest notification was floating in midair.

No way..... It can't be the same one again.

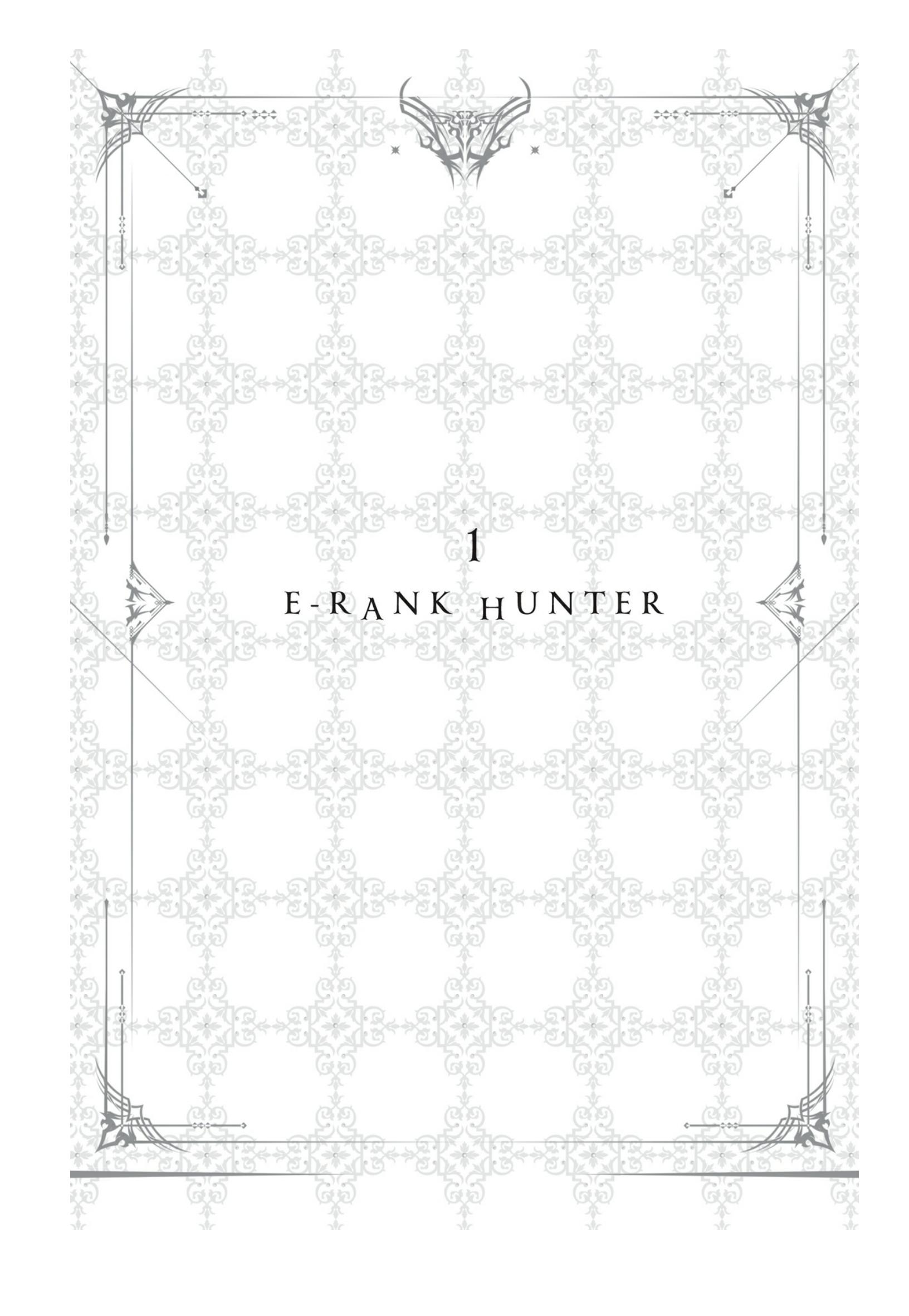
I warily opened the notification while saying a silent prayer.

Ping!

[DAILY QUEST: STRENGTH TRAINING]

Push-ups 100 times: Incomplete (0/100) Sit-ups 100 times:
Incomplete (0/100) Squats 100 times: Incomplete (0/100) Running
10 km: Incomplete (0/10) ☹Warning: Failure to complete the daily
quest will result in an appropriate penalty.

As soon as I saw the screen, I couldn't help but curse: "Dammit... How many times do I have to do this?!"



1

E-RANK HUNTER



1

E-RANK HUNTER

E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung. That title followed him around everywhere.

In terms of ability, Jinwoo was no different from a civilian. He was just a little sturdier and recovered slightly faster than a regular person. Because of this, he was always sporting some kind of injury. He'd even been brought back from the brink of death several times.

Needless to say, Jinwoo didn't enjoy being a hunter. The work was dangerous, people constantly looked down on him, and his pay wasn't all that great, either. If not for the health insurance provided by the Hunter's Association, he would've turned in his license on the spot and lived a normal life.

Unfortunately, as a man in his midtwenties without any employable skills, working as a hunter was the only viable way to pay for his mother's hospital bills, which cost him several hundred thousand won every month.

In other words, he didn't have much of a choice.

That was why Jinwoo had steeled himself and participated in the association's raid that fateful day.

* * *

Most hunters who worked in the same area knew one another well, given that they all gathered every time a gate opened. Those who arrived first exchanged greetings over coffee provided by an association employee.

"Hey, Kim! Over here."

"Oh, Park, it's been a while. I thought you quit?"

"It.....turns out my wife is pregnant with our second child."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, as hunters, we know there's nothing like raids to make some big money."

Embarrassed, Park chuckled along with Kim's loud guffaws before asking a question. "So why hasn't the association been summoning hunters as often? Is there a shortage of gates?"

"Nah, of course not. It's because the guilds are grinding harder than the association these days. Guilds get really fired up when there's big money."

"But this raid should be safe, since the association organized it, right?" Park glanced around furtively as his worry started to build.

The absence of guilds typically meant there wouldn't be a large payoff, and while it wasn't always the case, that usually meant a low-rank gate.

However, there is no such thing as a guarantee. Park wasn't the only one; other hunters were looking around uneasily as well.

"Well..." Kim was taking a sip of his coffee to avoid responding when he spotted a familiar figure in the distance and waved in welcome.

"Hey, *there* he is. Sung! Over here!"

The others also brightened at the sight of the approaching hunter.

"Hello, everyone."

It was Jinwoo Sung. Jinwoo nodded politely at Kim's cheerful greeting as he walked by.

After making sure Jinwoo was out of earshot, Kim turned to Park with a cocky grin. "Jinwoo Sung's here. That means it's safe."

Park's eyes went wide, and he leaned in closer. "Wait. Is Jinwoo Sung that powerful a hunter?"

"Ah, guess you wouldn't know. He started not long after you retired. *Everyone* knows Jinwoo Sung."

"But if he's that strong, why's he working under the association? He'd be better off at some big guild or as a freelancer."

Kim's grin faded, and he gave Park a wry look. "Do you know what his

nickname is?"

"How would I know that? Stop beating around the bush and just tell me."

"The Weakest Hunter of All Mankind."

".....The *weakest*? Not the Ultimate Hunter?"

"C'mon! That's Jongin Choi, the S-rank hunter. Sung's nickname is the *Weakest* Hunter. He's probably the worst hunter in all of Korea."

"What?" Park frowned.

Why had everyone welcomed Jinwoo so excitedly if he was that weak? They'd have to count on him to cover their backs in an emergency. Park couldn't understand the other hunters' reactions.

Kim snickered at Park's blank, confused look and elbowed him in the side.

"Listen, any raid with Jinwoo *has* to be easy. The association never gives him a difficult job. After all, they wouldn't want to be liable for his death!"

Finally, Park visibly relaxed. "R-really?"

Park's wife was worried sick, as it had been a while since his last raid. If he was being honest, he was nervous, too, but Kim's words put him at ease.

Kim continued. "Rumor has it, Sung was hospitalized for a week 'cause he got hurt in an E-rank gate."

"A hunter got hurt in an *E-rank* gate?"

"Apparently! And the association didn't think anyone would, so they hadn't even bothered sending along a healer."

"So he was hospitalized for a week? Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Kim shot Park a warning glance for laughing too loudly.

"Shhh! Sung might hear us."

"Oops. Didn't think about that."

Park snickered to himself while keeping an eye on Jinwoo. Luckily, it seemed Jinwoo was too far away to hear them.

He was wrong.

I can hear everything, old man.

Jinwoo smiled bitterly while pretending not to notice their gazes. These were the times he cursed his sharp hearing.

The raid wasn't yet ready to commence.

Am I too early?

Jinwoo looked around for something to pass the time before finally making a beeline for the coffee.

"May I have a cup?"

"Oh, Hunter Sung..... I'm so sorry. I just ran out."

"....."

The cold winter wind bit the tip of his nose. Jinwoo rubbed it with his finger.

It was just that kind of tragic day where even the coffee let him down.

* * *

"Why do you insist on working as a hunter?"

"I'm sorry." Jinwoo lowered his head.

Joohee Lee, the beauty performing a healing spell on him, made her disapproval clear by sulking.

"I didn't ask you that to hear you apologize. I asked because I'm worried about you. Keep fighting like this, and you'll find yourself in real danger someday."

Jinwoo gazed over Joohee's shoulder at his colleagues locked in combat.

Gates were entrances to dungeons.

This particular dungeon was approximately D rank. Over a dozen hunters were dealing with the magic beasts without breaking a sweat. Unfortunately, it had proven too much for an E-rank hunter like Jinwoo.

Generally, healers brought up the rear and took care of the wounded. Jinwoo was infamous among healers for getting injured in every raid.

Joohee cautiously asked him, "Is there a reason you can't just quit?"

Jinwoo shook his head firmly. He really didn't want others knowing his personal business.

"This is my hobby. I'd probably be bored to death if I didn't do this."

Joohee pouted at this. "Well, indulge in your hobby too much, and your next raid will be in the afterlife."

Caught off guard, Jinwoo burst out laughing.

Joohee's scolding continued. "Ahhh! Don't laugh! You'll open your wound!"

Jinwoo couldn't stop giggling. "Who talks like that these days?"

"Who do you think? That uncle aaaall the way over there, Mr. Kim."

"Oh man, that old geezer..."

As they chatted, Jinwoo's treatment was wrapping up.

Unfortunately, it was already too late for him. The raid seemed like it was almost done.

His face clouded over.

I barely defeated one beast today.

What's more, it had been only an E rank.

Jinwoo fiddled with the E-rank essence stone in his hand. As the lowest-rank item, the essence stone from an E-rank magic beast was worth less than 100,000 won. It was a terribly low reward for risking his life.

They say an essence stone from even a C-rank magic beast could be worth over 10,000,000 won.....

However, because he barely qualified as an E-rank hunter, Jinwoo was no match for a C-rank beast.

Suddenly, someone shouted to the rest of the group.

"Huh? There's *another* entrance here?"

Nearby hunters gathered next to him.

"Whoa, it's true."

"Looks like it's really there!"

Just as the first hunter had claimed, there was indeed a hidden entrance to yet another dungeon.

Hunter Song, whose grizzled hair spoke to his ten years of experience, examined the entrance, fascinated.

"A double dungeon..... I guess they actually exist."

It was hard to see far into the dimly lit cave. Song cast a fire spell, his specialty, and tossed it inside. The flame flew through the cave, illuminating the interior.

The passage seemed endless. Eventually, the flame lost its momentum and fell to the ground, where it sparked for a bit, then fizzled out. Darkness engulfed the cave once again.

"Hmm..... Everyone, gather around, please." Song, the de facto leader of the party, summoned all the hunters to him. With Jinwoo's treatment now finished, he and Joohee also joined them.

Song looked at the group as he addressed them. "As you all well know, a gate will not close until the boss is defeated. Even though we've cleared this area, the gate's still perfectly fine, so my guess is that the boss is in *there*."

Song gestured at the entrance to the hidden dungeon. The others exchanged looks and nodded in agreement with Song's assessment.

There was no other possibility.

Song continued. "Now, protocol dictates that we report this to the association and wait for their decision. But...we'd make a lot less money if some other hunters showed up and stole our kill in the meantime."

Everyone's expressions hardened. Park, who needed a big payday because of his wife's pregnancy, looked particularly displeased by the prospect.

Postnatal care alone is so expensive these days.....

If they were paid less, it would mean risking his life to participate in this raid would've been meaningless.

"That's why I don't want to leave this dungeon without defeating the boss.....
What do you all think?"

Everyone was lost in their thoughts.

"....."

"....."

No one's safety could be guaranteed in such an unusual situation.

On the other hand, this was a very low-rank dungeon. It was likely the level of difficulty of the hidden dungeon wouldn't be *that* high.

"Ahem." Song cleared his throat.

"There are seventeen of us, so let's vote. Once a decision is made, no one can object. Does that sound good?"

Everyone nodded at Song's suggestion.

There wasn't a single objection.

"I'm going in." Song raised his hand. As he did, others also warily raised their hands.

"Me too."

"I vote for going in, too."

Park was the first to raise his hand, and other hunters, including Kim, followed. Naturally, there were also many votes in opposition.

"Let's not go in."

"Wouldn't it be better to wait for the association's decision?"

With the tally for both sides being neck and neck, the voting continued until Jinwoo and Joohee were the only two left.

"I'm sorry....." Joohee bowed her head toward Song apologetically and opted not to go in.

With her vote, it was eight for and eight against. A tie.

When Jinwoo hesitated, Song addressed him point-blank. "How about you, Sung?"

It all came down to him. Jinwoo gripped the E-rank essence stone in his hand tightly and looked to the person at his side.

Joohee shook her head at him. She seemed unsettled by the situation.

Jinwoo also felt uneasy. Normally, he would never expose himself to such risk. He had neither the ability nor the courage for it.

But he also had a sister who was going to college in the near future.

I don't have any savings.....

Jinwoo was twenty-four years old. For his part, he'd given up on higher education because he'd been unable to afford it. He refused to make his sister suffer the same fate.

At the moment, there was nothing but lint in his pockets. Park wasn't the only one who needed a big payday.

Jinwoo's hand shot up. "I'm going in, too."

As he did, a small sigh escaped next to him.

The tunnel stretched on forever. The strongest hunters, including Song, led the way. Song lit their path with the little flame he'd summoned, keeping it cupped in his palm.

Kim walked beside him. "Aren't we going in too deep? We need to start considering the exit time."

"How long have we been walking?"

Kim checked his watch. "It's been about.....about forty minutes."

"Since gates close an hour after the boss is defeated, we still have about twenty minutes."

"We should withdraw if we can't find the boss by then."

"I guess we should."

Song silently nodded and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "It's dark up ahead, so stay behind me, Kim."

Kim stared at the little spark of light before taking out his hunter-issue phone

and turning on the flashlight app. As he did, the road ahead was flooded with light.

“.....” Song glanced between his flame and the light from the phone, then wordlessly started digging through his pockets.

* * *

Jinwoo, who had been wounded badly earlier, and Joohee, who lacked combat skills, brought up the rear of the party.

Jinwoo rubbed the back of his neck. “Ummmm..... I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For making you come with us.”

“I’m fine, so don’t worry about me.”

Jinwoo peeked at Joohee’s expression. She didn’t look fine at all.

Fidgeting a bit, he cautiously tried to talk to her again. “Are you *really* okay?”

Joohee whirled around to face him.

“Of course not! Are you out of your mind? Just a little higher, and the beast would’ve punctured your heart. And what about the wounds on your wrist and thigh? Healing you wasn’t easy, but now you want to go into yet another dungeon? Even though you have absolutely no clue what could be waiting for you?”

She spoke so fast, he could only listen to her rant in a daze. However, everything she said was right. Joohee was one of the rare B-rank healers in the Hunter’s Association, and if it hadn’t been for her outstanding skills, Jinwoo would’ve found it difficult for a while to live even a normal life.

Thinking back on it, I owe Joohee for a lot.

Joohee was a healer, which was rare enough among hunters. On top of that, she was a B rank. Naturally, the association asked her to treat hunters every time a gate appeared, and Jinwoo ended up sitting in front of her during virtually every raid he’d participated in.

—“*That has to hurt. Please bear it for just a little longer.*”

- “You look familiar..... Are you the one from last time?”
- “Did you get injured again?”
- “We seem to see a lot of each other.”
- “You’re Jinwoo, right? Ummm..... Are you okay with this?”
- “Maybe being a hunter isn’t for you.....”
- “.....It’s you again.”
- “Give me your arm, please. No, the other one. This side only needs a bandage. Show me the side with the fracture.”

Now, Jinwoo wasn’t just thankful but also contrite for all the trouble he’d caused her.

“.....”

Joohee softened when she noticed Jinwoo becoming dispirited, feeling guilty about her outburst.

“Are you really sorry?”

“Yes.”

Thinking deeply about something, she glanced at Jinwoo and smiled shyly. “If you’re really sorry.....why don’t you take me out for dinner?”

This was a completely unexpected proposal. Taken aback, he stared at Joohee, her mischievous grin reminding him of a teenager’s.

Well, no, not quite a teenager.....

Joohee was a young woman, barely in her twenties. She’d mentioned that she would be twenty-one next year. Had she been sporting a short bob haircut instead of her current long, straight hair and wearing a school uniform, she could’ve passed for a high school student.

Jinwoo reddened as he imagined her in a schoolgirl’s outfit.

Joohee puffed out her cheeks at his lack of response. “So.....you don’t want to share a meal with me?”

Just then...a sudden commotion arose at the front of the party.

"We're here!"

"It's the boss's lair!"

Jinwoo and Joohee turned toward the hubbub.

Two giant doors blocked their path. The other hunters were milling around in front of it.

"Why are there doors at the back of a cave?"

"Have you ever seen a lair with doors?"

"This is a first....."

"Is this going to be.....dangerous?"

The hunters were muttering among themselves. Their apprehension was clear.

They were risking their lives, so they had to be careful. At the same time, they wouldn't be able to get the job done if they were too cautious.

Song assessed that the latter was the bigger concern. "Who wants to go back empty-handed?"

He put his hand on a door. "If you do, then be my guest. I'm going in, though, even if it's alone."

Song was a C-rank hunter with ten years of experience. If he hadn't been getting on in years, with his level of power, he could've worked for a major guild. The confidence exuding from such a figure put the others more at ease.

"Now that I think about it..."

Some of the hunters recalled certain rumors they'd heard about double dungeons.

"Apparently, double dungeons have amazing treasures."

"I heard that a midsize guild got huge in one fell swoop after they found a double dungeon."

"All the beasts in the same dungeon have a similar power level no matter where they are, so it shouldn't be hard to beat the ones in there....."

What if the rumors of amazing treasure were true and the magic beasts waiting inside were only D or E rank like the ones the party'd dealt with earlier?

Can't let the old geezer take all the treasure.

No way in hell.

Postnatal care for the wife, tuition fees for our elder kid, and the rent's increasing soon, too.....

They were all on the same page.

Jinwoo also strengthened his resolve. *I can't go home with only one E-rank essence stone. I have to get at least a D-rank beast or even just another E-rank one.*

It didn't have to be a magic beast, either.

Or if there's a treasure of some kind.....

It was customary to equally divide treasure or rare items found in a dungeon among all party members. This was different from battling magic beasts, because with magic beasts, they could harvest essence stones from only the ones they defeated themselves.

I might be able to take it easy for a while if things go well.

He gulped.

Joohee caught sight of the determination on Jinwoo's face.

"Is that the expression of someone who says hunting is just a hobby?"

Jinwoo shrugged.

"Who risks their life to make money these days? You only do that as a hobby."

"What.....?" Right as Joohee gave Jinwoo an incredulous look, Song started pushing the doors, and they swung back.

KRRRRRK!

They opened easily, even with a light shove, like he'd triggered some sort of mechanism.

THUD—!

The open doors revealed a spacious interior.

The hunters rushed in.

"We should go, too." Not wanting to fall behind, Jinwoo grabbed Joohee by the wrist and pulled her along.

"Oh.....!" She followed him, her face flushed.

* * *

Torches that lined the walls flared to life as the party entered the lair.

Fwshhh...

They illuminated the entire room.

"What? Who lit the torches?"

"I've never seen a dungeon like this."

"Something's.....different."

They surveyed their surroundings.

The room was reminiscent of an ancient temple. It brought to mind an old, damp sanctuary hidden underground. Moss grew between cracks in the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling.

Some of the hunters shrank back and shivered.

"Why'd I just get the chills?"

"Doesn't it feel like someone's watching us?"

A few of the stronger hunters broke off from their more frightened colleagues to explore deeper inside the room.

"Tsk! Stop talking nonsense."

"Let's finish this and get out of here."

The lair was unbelievably huge. The ceiling curved to make an enormous dome-shaped enclosure. It was as big as several Seoul Olympic Stadiums combined, or possibly even larger than that.

Despite the size, the space also felt confining. The reason why soon became obvious.

“Is.....that.....?”

“N-no way. That can’t be the boss.”

At the far side of the room sat a statue of an unimaginable size on a throne even bigger than it.

That is, it looked like a statue of a god!

“Oh, hell no.”

“Whoa!”

Exclamations could be heard from everyone.

An image of the Statue of Liberty popped into Jinwoo’s head. Would the Statue of Liberty be around the same size if she were seated on the same throne? Even though Lady Liberty was modeled after a female figure and this looked to be modeled after a male, the sheer size of this stone monolith brought the Statue of Liberty to mind.

This one might actually be bigger.....

The hunters swallowed nervously as they stood before the graven image’s feet. They were all fearful of the possibility that this might be the boss.

“.....”

However, the statue didn’t move.

There was a moment of huge relief.

“Phew...” Song also breathed a sigh. “Come on—let’s split up.”

Now much more relaxed, the group scattered and started searching the area.

“I don’t see anything that could be considered a beast.”

“Right?”

“Never mind a beast, I don’t even see a single bug.”

Despite its huge scale, the room had a simple layout. Countless torches hung on the walls, and in front of them, various stone sentries slightly taller than the average human lined the perimeter.

“These are beautiful.”

"They look like art pieces."

Each statue held a different object. Some had weapons while the others had books, musical instruments, and even torches.

"They're like....."

Song finished Kim's sentence. "They're like statues you'd find in a temple."

He then noticed something beneath his feet. "Hmm, is this.....a divination circle?"

There, in the center of the temple, was a divination circle, the likes of which he'd never seen before. Just then...

"Uh, Mr. Song! There's something written here. Could you take a look at this, sir?" One of the hunters had found a unique specimen in a corner of the room.

Song looked up from the divination circle and headed over. The other hunters also gathered around the statue of interest.

This particular sculpture was the only one with wings and holding a slate. Everyone focused on the characters chiseled on the slate itself.

After a close inspection, Song muttered, "It's a runic inscription."

Runes... Such writings didn't exist anywhere on Earth and could be found solely in dungeons, so only hunters awoken with magic powers could understand them.

Song read the first sentence aloud.

"The commandments of the Cartenon Temple."

Jinwoo was nervously listening to Song when someone suddenly grabbed his arm.

He looked behind him to see Joohee standing there, the blood drained from her cheeks. He was shocked at how ashen-faced she looked.

"What's the matter? Are you feeling sick?"

"O.....over there."

He turned to look in the direction she was pointing. It was the giant statue.

Joohee was pointing right at its face. Jinwoo cocked his head in confusion. The statue looked exactly the same as before.

“.....?”

Joohee couldn’t help stuttering. “I-its eyes..... It just looked this way.”

“What?” No matter how many times Jinwoo stared back at the statue, he couldn’t detect any changes.

“Ummm.....you’re probably just seeing things.”

Whether or not she registered his words, Joohee kept her head bowed and gripped his arm tightly, trembling with fear.

Wait.

Suddenly, Jinwoo was also filled with dread.

It was strangely quiet.

Why can’t I hear.....? He realized that, at some point, he could no longer hear the crackling of the torches.

“First.” Song had continued reading the slate throughout all this.

“Thou shall worship God. Second, thou shall praise God. Third, thou shall prove thy faith. Those who fail to obey these commandments shall not be spared.”

Right at that moment...

SLAM!

Everyone startled at the sudden noise.

“Wh-what?”

“What was that sound?”

Jinwoo was the first to realize what had happened. Because he had already been listening intently to his surroundings, he was able to quickly pinpoint where the noise had originated.

“The doors! The doors are closed!”

Everyone spun around at Jinwoo’s cry. The doors they’d left open were now

shut tight.

"Dammit! I can't take this anymore!" The man who'd first voted against exploring the double dungeon strode toward the exit, cursing on his way.

"I'm out of here, so whatever the boss or the treasure is, it's all yours!" He glared at Song as if to issue a formal complaint. He then turned to face the door and forcefully grabbed the knob.

As he did...

Song's eyes widened.

"NO!"

WHOMP.

The man disappeared from the neck up. His headless body toppled to the floor.

THUD.

"Eek!"

"Aaargh!"

The hunters screamed.

The bloody stone statue carrying a mace calmly returned to its post beside the door as if it hadn't just smashed in the man's head.

"I-it just moved!"

"The hell? Does that mean all the figures here can move, too?"

"You expect to fight something like that?"

"I couldn't even see it swinging the mace!"

But Jinwoo knew the reality of the situation. He knew this wasn't the end of the tragedy.

Joohee had just said it.

"I-its eyes..... It just looked this way."

If she's right.....

A chill ran down the length of his spine. His neck was frozen stiff with fear, but he forced himself to look back.

“Oh, shi.....”

The enormous statue was glaring straight down at him.

2

FIRST BLOOD



2

FIRST BLOOD

Just then, the statue's enormous eyes glowed red.

Was it a hunter's "hunch"? No, this was the basic survival instinct of a living creature.

Something was coming.

Something they wouldn't be able to handle!

Jinwoo whipped around to the hunters behind him and screamed with all his might.

"DUCK!"

Almost simultaneously, a red beam shot forth from the giant's eyes. Jinwoo grabbed Joohee and flung them both to the ground.

ZAAAP!

The beam struck right where Jinwoo had been standing.

One-tenth of a second. Maybe even one-hundredth of a second. He'd been that close to death.

Unfortunately, not all the hunters were as lucky as Jinwoo.

"AHHH!"

"AGH!"

The beam vaporized whomever it touched. Their remains were all that was left behind as the beam passed. The screams were not from the dead but rather from those who had witnessed their deaths.

"Wh-what was that?"

"F—!"

"Why's this happening to us.....?"

The hunters were horrified. Out of sixteen people, only eleven had survived. They had never experienced an attack this terrifying before in their lives.

I only made it because he said to duck.

If Sung hadn't shouted.....

The other hunters gazed at Jinwoo and licked their dry lips. He'd saved their lives. They got chills thinking of what would've happened if he hadn't been here with them.

"....."

Jinwoo examined the statue as he lay on the ground. Its eyes were still red, but it had ceased its attack.

Is it.....over? He looked down.

Poor, frightened Joohee was quivering in his arms. This was why she participated in easy raids with the Hunter's Association instead of joining a large guild despite being a very talented B-rank healer. Her breathing was getting heavier and heavier.

He couldn't leave her like that. Jinwoo decided he had to do something and started to stand, but someone grabbed his shoulder and forcefully pushed him down.

"Do not stand up."

Song had made his way over to them at some point. Taken aback, Jinwoo followed Song's orders without question.

Song called out to the other hunters as well. "Everyone, don't move! Stay exactly where you are!"

Song looked around to make sure and then turned back to Jinwoo. "Those who moved were killed. Those who ducked, like you said, survived."

"I see..."

Song raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you warn us because you knew what would happen?”

“No, I just felt something dangerous was coming.....”

Song’s eyes twinkled.

His senses are very sharp. He’s an E rank, eh? If only his abilities were slightly better.....

While Song was feeling sorry for Jinwoo, the younger hunter was checking on Song’s condition. His eyes widened in alarm.

“S-sir..... Your arm!”

“I’m fine. It’s tolerable.”

“But.....” Jinwoo gulped.

Song had pushed Jinwoo down with his right arm, but his left was now missing.

“.....” Song must’ve been in extreme pain, but he said nothing as he looked down at Joohee’s prone figure, then tore a long strip from his shirt and wrapped it around his wound.

“Could you tie the ends together? It’s a little hard to do this with one hand.”

Jinwoo nodded.

They finished up the basic first aid. Instead of a scream of pain or a wounded groan, Song breathed out a long sigh. That one sound exhibited all his years of experience.

“Whew...”

With his emergency treatment done, Song surveyed the area with keen eyes. The situation wasn’t any less grave despite the giant statue’s attack seemingly stalled.

Some time passed as they kept still.

“Hic..... Sob.....”

“Wh-why is this happening to us.....?”

Some hunters began to cry.

“We can’t just stay like this forever!”

They were all slowly growing impatient. Jinwoo agreed with them.

We can’t stay like this forever.

But what could they do?

If Song was right, they would get attacked as soon as they moved. Even if they were lucky and managed to reach the door, there were stone statues on either side acting as guards.

Those statues were the problem. The guard’s movements from before had been so fast that none of them could even see its movement. Would they be able to escape the room before those things attacked? It seemed like an impossible feat.

That meant it was just a matter of time before they were all killed.

Wait..... A matter of time?

Something about that last thought gnawed at Jinwoo. Something that should’ve been impossible had occurred.

Something nobody else had noticed.

We..... We missed something.

The answer had to be here somewhere. Just as the thought occurred to Jinwoo...

“Don’t move!”

Song yelled across the room to Joo, but Joo had run out of patience.

“We don’t know when that bastard will start attacking, but you want to just wait?!”

Joo was a brawler-class hunter. Brawlers fought with hand-to-hand combat, so their physical abilities were much higher than even regular hunters’. Joo’s abilities were actually so outstanding that he was lined up to sign a contract with a well-known guild.

"This can't be the end." Joo kept his low stance as he started focusing his energy into his legs. His goal was the exit. The muscles in his legs swelled and tightened.

"Oh no.....," Song muttered under his breath.

Joo launched himself toward the doors.

Da-da-da-dash!

Jinwoo turned his attention to the statue. As expected, its eyes were following Joo. A second later, the killer beams fired.

ZAAAP! The rays hit Joo squarely on his back.

"Aieeee!" One of the female hunters in the party screamed hysterically. This was followed by a yellow liquid slowly pooling out from where she sat, as if she'd had an accident.

The male hunters were no less petrified.

"Oh my God....."

Wherever the beam had connected, Joo had vanished. All that was left of him were his detached feet.

A squeamish male hunter started puking. "Blaaargh!"

Jinwoo was also stunned. He was right; the statues could easily kill all the hunters here if they wanted to. It'd be as easy for them as squashing a bug.

So then.....why aren't they?

The statues could kill them, but they wouldn't.

Magic beasts attacked hunters as soon as they spotted them, but this was a completely different pattern of behavior. These guys moved only when a certain condition was met. The guards attacked when someone got close to the door, and the giant statue fired its lasers when someone moved. They were like triggers in a video game.

Are there.....rules to this room?

In that instant, one of the puzzle pieces fell into place in his head. He remembered the contents of the slate that Song had read aloud.

The commandments of the Cartenon Temple.

The patterns revealed the rules, and the rules were the commandments. The key to survival here lay within those.

“.....Thou shall worship God.” That was the first commandment.

“Hmm? Did you say something?” Song looked at Jinwoo.

Jinwoo gestured at him to keep quiet instead of answering. He needed more time to think.

If I'm right.....

Jinwoo slowly started to get up.

Song quickly moved to grab him, but Jinwoo shook his head resolutely.

.....That's not the look of someone who's given up.

Song nodded in understanding.

Jinwoo kept his eyes fixed on the statue as he carefully stood. The giant's eyes immediately locked on Jinwoo.

ZAAAP! The beams shot out like he'd expected.

Had he dropped any slower, Jinwoo's entire face would've melted off instead of just a few strands of hair. He lay flat on his back, gulping in air.

“Huff, huff, huff, huff.”

That had been way too close. He'd expected to die as soon as he'd locked eyes with the statue. He had managed to barely escape the attack, but his legs were shaking.

Still.....

It'd been worth the risk.

The statue doesn't attack just any moving object.

As long as they stayed low to the ground, the statue would pay them no heed even if they shifted their positions. However, it would start raining down lasers without mercy once they tried to stand.

It only shoots if we raise our bodies above a certain height.

Jinwoo had risked his life to test this theory. And he'd received validation.

He'd solved the first commandment!

He yelled at the rest of the hunters. "Everyone!"

They turned their attention to him.

Jinwoo looked around and told them, "Face the giant statue and bow to it!"

The hunters all looked bewildered.

"What.....?"

"Bow to the giant?"

Sensing the feeling of contempt was mutual, the hunters began spitting curses at Jinwoo.

"What.....the fuck are you talking about?"

"I mean, how could you even say something like that?"

"Are you insane?"

Kim's face was especially red as he fumed. "You want me to bow to that demonic thing? I guess I was wrong about you! Why, if I could move right now, I'd beat that insolent mouth of yours!"

Jinwoo bit his lower lip. Six of their colleagues had been killed by the statue. It was only natural they'd get heated being told to bow to something like that. He more than understood how they felt.

More importantly...

He didn't have any solid evidence to back up his theory. A hunch. It was nothing but a hunch.

But then...

"I'll do it."

The voice came from behind Jinwoo. Everyone gazed at the speaker.

It was Song, the one they considered their leader.

"Mr. Song.....?"

"You're gonna bow to that damn thing?"

While the others were mystified at his declaration, Song looked Jinwoo in the eye. "You've discovered something, haven't you?"

Jinwoo nodded.

"Another hunch?"

".....Yes. For now."

"Okay."

His earlier hunch had saved the lives of eleven people. There were only ten of them left because Joo had died. If it was Jinwoo's hunch, it might be worth a shot. That was Song's assessment.

The group solemnly watched as Song shifted to his knees.

"Do we really have to do this?"

With this turn of events, Jinwoo urged them. "Please, everyone! We just have to kneel toward the statue. If this works, we might be able to get out of here alive!"

Alive. We can get out of here alive.

A single word can wield enormous power.

Alive?

You mean we can get out of here alive?

All it takes is one bow?

Though they'd been hesitant before, the hunters started kneeling, one by one. It was as if they were bowing to some deity. One, two... The number of those bowing grew. Even Kim, who had kicked up a fuss, eventually followed suit.

Alas, there was no change with the statue. Its eyes continued glowing a fiery red.

Jinwoo's heart sank.

Was I wrong?

That was when he noticed Joohee. She was shivering, curled up tightly with her head buried in her arms, and even Jinwoo had to admit that her posture looked nothing like a bow.

How should I.....?

He took her gently by her wrists. She peeked up at him like a frightened kitten. When Jinwoo quietly nodded, she finally relaxed her arms. He slowly corrected her pose.

Done.

And then there was one. Jinwoo himself was the only one left.

He went on his knees before the statue, placed his hands on the ground in front of him, and slowly lowered his head.

As soon as he did, things began to change.

“H-huh?!” the hunters who noticed it exclaimed.

“The statue! Look at the statue!”

“Its eyes!”

The burning red light in its eyes was dissipating.

“What? Is it finally over?”

At long last, the deadly beams fizzled out.

“““Yeaah!“““ Everyone cheered.

“The beams are off!”

“We’re alive!”

The overly excited hunters sprang to their feet to celebrate. Despite their recklessness, nothing shot out from the statue’s eyes.

Jinwoo, the last to raise his head, let out a sigh of relief.

“Whew...” It was just as he’d suspected.

Then that means.....

The game wasn’t over yet. There were still two more commandments. The

second, "Thou shall praise God." The third, "Thou shall prove thy faith."

Right on cue...

RRRRRUMMMBLE.

The whole room started to quake, accompanied by a grating noise.

Jinwoo grimaced. *I knew it.....*

His premonition was correct. This wasn't the end.

The colossal statue was slowly rising from its throne.

"U-um..."

Hunters who'd been exchanging hugs and crying tears of joy just seconds ago were now frozen in place.

"Wh-what...? It's not over?"

"Th-this can't be happening!"

Everyone was stunned. Their faces reflected their despair.

"Ohhh..... Wh.....?"

The statue finally straightened up to its full height. The imposing figure swept its gaze around the chamber before slowly lumbering toward them.

STOMP!

* * *

STOMP!

The entire room shook with the giant's every step.

STOMP!

It was so tall that its head seemed to almost scrape the impossibly high ceiling.

STOMP!

While the hunters were standing dumbfounded at the statue's immense size, the gap between them and it was steadily shrinking.

"Hey, Sung! Jinwoo!"

"You got any ideas?"

The hunters who'd cursed out Jinwoo earlier now clustered around him.

"Is there a way out of this?"

"Say something!"

Despite being fully grown adults, they all looked like they would burst into tears at any moment. Jinwoo was their only hope now.

He told them about the second commandment as he coaxed Joohee up from the ground. "Thou shall praise God." That's the key."

"Wait, that's...!" Kim wasn't sure what Jinwoo was getting at, but he did recognize the saying. "That thing from the slate?"

"Right. 'Thou shall worship God,' 'thou shall praise God,' and 'thou shall prove thy faith.' We have to fulfill all three commandments." Jinwoo spoke quickly.

The statue was almost on top of them by now.

STOMP!

The statue's enormous shadow engulfed the hunters.

The blood drained from their faces.

"I—I can do it," a timid young hunter volunteered.

"What? What're you gonna do?"

"I was in a church choir. I'm pretty good at singing praises."

Even though Kim tried to stop him, he slowly stepped in front of the behemoth.

The young man steadied his breathing as he looked up at it, then took one last deep breath.

"Lord, let me stand before You." His clear voice echoed throughout the room. "Though unworthy, I crave Your judgment. In my faith in You, I know I find my purpose. In Your eyes, I know I shall be reborn."

The statue came to a stop in front of him.

"Ooooh...!" the group exclaimed quietly.

The statue didn't move an inch, seemingly enchanted by the song. All other background noises faded away. Only the young hunter's beautiful timbre filled the room.

Encouraged, he raised his voice. "Though unworthy, I crave Your judgment."

Among them, Jinwoo was the only one who was filled with cold dread.

No.....this isn't right. He reluctantly kept his thoughts to himself.

This room had its own rules. The young hunter was praising in a way that followed the rules of his own beliefs, Christianity, not the rules of this place. Luckily, the statue wasn't moving, so perhaps the room was acknowledging this as them following the commandment?

Jinwoo wasn't convinced. The only reason he didn't stop the young man was because he couldn't think of any other way to halt the statue.

All of a sudden...

STOMP!

The heavy sound reverberated throughout the chamber.

"Aeeeeeee!" A female hunter shrieked like a banshee.

The statue raised its foot to reveal the pulverized body of the young man.

Others also started to scream.

"Ahhhhh!"

"E-eeeek!"

The statue had been expressionless, but now its face was contorted with anger.

"It's mad!"

"R-r-run!"

The panicked hunters ran for their lives.

"Aeeeeeee!"

Witnessing the young man getting crushed right before her eyes had been the last straw for the female hunter. She'd lost her mind and was unable to move or

do anything but scream.

“Aieeeeeee!”

Shit..... Jinwoo, who had fled from the giant’s path with Joohee held tightly in his arms, turned around to rescue her.

But Song blocked his way.

“Mr. Song...?”

“It’s too late.”

The statue slapped its hand down on her as if it was swatting a fly.

BANG.

“Urgh.....” Jinwoo had to turn away.

It was a horrific scene to look upon.

“There’s no time to lose. Are you going to let this girl die like she did?”

Jinwoo sobered at his words. Song was right.

STOMP!

“Aaargh!”

STOMP!

STOMP!

“Help me!”

The statue wasn’t just walking anymore. It was now running around the enclosure, squashing people beneath its feet. The length of the room shook with every footfall.

STOMP!

STOMP!

Jinwoo gritted his teeth and got a move on. Joohee shut her eyes tightly and hung on to him for dear life.

“Let’s split up!”

“Yessir!”

Jinwoo and Song had come to the mutual conclusion that it would be more dangerous to stick together, so they headed their separate ways. Jinwoo evaded the raging statue and ran straight for the farthest corner, but another hunter with the same idea had gotten there first.

It was Park.

Park had sprinted with all his might. Tears had sprung to his eyes as his family flashed in his mind.

"Sob..."

A son who looked just like him and a wife pregnant with their second child were waiting for him at home. He couldn't die in vain here. Perhaps because of his desperation, he was the fastest of all the hunters to put some distance between himself and the statue.

"Huff, huff..." Park was catching his breath in the corner when his friend Kim urgently cried out.

"Park!"

Park turned toward the familiar voice. "Huh?"

Kim gestured wildly at something behind Park and yelled: "Behind! Right behind you!"

Something sharp glinted behind Park. "Uh.....?"

Shhhk!

Park's body was split in half from head to groin. The halves toppled to the ground in opposite directions.

"Park!"

The stone statue that had bisected Park with a sword returned to its spot as if nothing had happened, just like the stone guard earlier.

Kim was on the verge of tears. "You fuckers.....!"

STOMP!

STOMP!

STOMP!

On one side, the giant statue was trampling people to death, and the stone guards attacked those who were trying to hide from it in corners.

“Aaaaaack!”

“My arm! My arm!”

Fear and confusion filled the room.

“Huff, huff.....”

Jinwoo’s forehead was dripping with sweat. His legs were slowly feeling heavy. His lungs were burning. He had just one thought in his head, though: *Thou shall praise God, thou shall praise God, thou shall praise God...*

The second commandment echoed in his mind. The key to the riddle was in this room. There had to be *something* they could use! However, when the hunters had first entered, they’d searched the whole place and turned up empty-handed.

Those stone statues are the only moving things in here, both then and now.

Wait. Jinwoo was struck with a revelation.

The only moving things are the statues?

Oh.

His eyes widened. “Why didn’t I think of that before?!”

If the stone statues were the only things allowed to move, that meant the statues were also the only things they could use. And the statues moved only when someone got too close.

What if.....?!

Jinwoo was gasping for breath, but he still managed to yell across the room.

“Everyone! Head to a statue with a musical instrument!”

Every hunter heard his voice.

“.....!”

“A musical instrument?”

A glimmer of hope sparked in their eyes. They acted quickly, unlike when they'd been asked to bow to the giant statue.

Of course, if Jinwoo was wrong, they would die as soon as they approached the graven figures, but at that moment, not a single person doubted him.

Song was the first to find a statue that fit the bill.

“.....” He held his breath as he looked up.

As he did, the statue's fingers moved toward its harp.

Struummm... Strum...

It was a beautiful sound.

“It worked!”

“Get to one with an instrument!”

The hunters rushed to the nearest statues. A statue with a bugle trumpeted. Another with a flute joined in, and a statue with a lyre strummed along.

“Huff, huff, huff.” An exhausted Kim collapsed in front of the statue with the lute.

Plink... Plink...

The colossus stopped chasing Kim as soon as the smaller statue strummed its lute.

Still on his knees, Kim started sobbing as his emotions overwhelmed him. “H-hic... Sob...”

The giant whirled around. It scanned the area and locked onto its new prey.

“Crap.” Jinwoo swore after making eye contact with the behemoth. His heart felt like it would explode. His back was already drenched in cold sweat.

Why?! Why isn't this thing working?!

He glared at the stone statue in front of him. Though it held a drum, it gave no sign of moving anytime soon.

STOMP, STOMP, STOMP!

The giant statue was advancing at a terrifying speed. It had just been all the

way on the opposite side of the enclosure, but it was quickly closing the gap.

Jinwoo gulped.

Is it because both Joohee and I are standing here?

He couldn't think of any other explanation. The rest of the stone sentries were playing their instruments without any problems.

No time to think.

Jinwoo put Joohee down and got ready to run.

"Jinwoo....." Joohee clung to his sleeve in fright.

He quietly whispered to her, "If we stick together, we'll both die."

Tears welled in her eyes. The fingers gripping his sleeve trembled, but there was no time to explain the situation to her.

Jinwoo carefully removed Joohee's hand and dashed away from her.

Boom! Ba-doom! Boom!

As he looked back, the stone statue behind Joohee started banging its drum slowly.

Good...

He just had one more thing left to do—safely get to another musician! Jinwoo was the only one not yet protected by a statue with a musical instrument. As expected, all of the behemoth's anger was focused on him. He scrambled to get to the other side of the room while avoiding the statue's house-size feet.

STOMP!

STOMP!

He tripped and even took a tumble but somehow avoided getting stepped on.

"Huff, huff."

Even if Jinwoo was merely an E-rank hunter, his heightened physical abilities saved him in this case.

Just a...little more...!

He kept an eye on the giant's movements while focusing his power into his legs. He sped up. He was only a few steps from a stone statue.

"Not that one!" Song bellowed.

Jinwoo, who'd been focused solely on the colossus, whipped his head to the front in surprise.

"Ah!" Was it not holding an instrument?

What Jinwoo had seen as a musical instrument from afar was actually a shield. The statue struck down with the shield without any hesitation.

"Whoa!" He threw his body to the side.

"Nooooo!" Joohee screamed.

Jinwoo looked up from his roll to see that the giant was right on top of him.
"It's just one thing after another..."

His vision blurred as blood dripped in his eyes from a scrape on his forehead, presumably because of his hasty roll. His field of vision narrowed, and he found he couldn't see far. Jinwoo urgently looked around.

An instrument, instrument.....

No matter how hard he searched, there wasn't a statue with an instrument to be found.

The giant raised its foot over him.

"Argh!" Jinwoo threw his body to the side again and barely escaped.

STOMP!

But he'd reached his limit. He felt faint and found it strangely difficult to maintain his balance.

Please.....

If there was a God, he wanted to pray for mercy.

At that moment, he noticed a statue holding neither a weapon nor a musical instrument.

Is that...?

Jinwoo put his last hope on that figure and half crawled to it. At last, he faced the approaching giant and flopped down. He had no energy left.

"Huff...huff..." He tried to catch his breath as he watched the giant draw closer.

Its scowl seemed to have deepened since Jinwoo had evaded it so many times. The giant stood at attention in front of him. It was as tall as a skyscraper, and Jinwoo felt suffocated with it closing in on him.

"Huff...huff..."

Did it consider Jinwoo a mouse trapped in a corner? The giant did nothing but stare silently down at him.

This is the end.....

Jinwoo expected his inevitable death to come from the eyes focused solely on him. But then...

La, la, laaaaa...

Singing that could only be described as *heavenly* came from behind him. Jinwoo looked over his shoulder.

La, laaa...la, la, laaaaa...

Every time the statue holding a book opened its mouth, beautiful notes spilled forth and echoed throughout the chamber.

La, la, laaa...laaaaaaaa...

The giant's expression was slowly reverting to its default. The severe, scrunched-up face softened and smoothed out again into a blank look. The giant turned around once the song was over. Just like the smaller statues, it headed back to its throne as if nothing had happened.

THUD!

The sound of the colossus sitting down reverberated throughout the temple.

"Huff, huff... Guess I...made it..." Jinwoo gave a small smile.

Joohee bolted toward him. "Jinwoo!" She ran to his side with all her might and knelt down, crying.

"What should I do.....? What should I do.....?" She poured all her magic into a healing spell. But nothing happened.

The scattered hunters gathered around Jinwoo one by one. Their faces all looked grim.

"Oh no..... Jinwoo....."

At this point, Joohee was weeping, completely distraught.

What was wrong with everyone?

Jinwoo let out a gasp. He tried to ask them why they were upset, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. He tried to sit up, propping up his aching torso.

".....?"

From the waist down, he was a bloody mess. He soon realized why he'd felt so off.

"Ohhh....."

His right leg was severed at the knee. Jinwoo sought out the stone statue with a shield. The blood on the edge of its weapon was clearly visible.

The rest of his leg was right below the shield.

Drip...

Drip...

Joohee's nose started bleeding. It was a sign that she'd reached her limit. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to restore a severed limb with B-rank healing magic. It would be like trying to fill a leaking pot with water.

"That's enough, Joohee..... You can stop now....."

"I'll fix you! I'll make you better!"

The others watched them with pitying looks.

Only six remained of the seventeen people who'd come here. Two of the six had sustained severe injuries. Song had lost an arm, and Jinwoo had lost a leg. They'd survived, but none of them could celebrate.

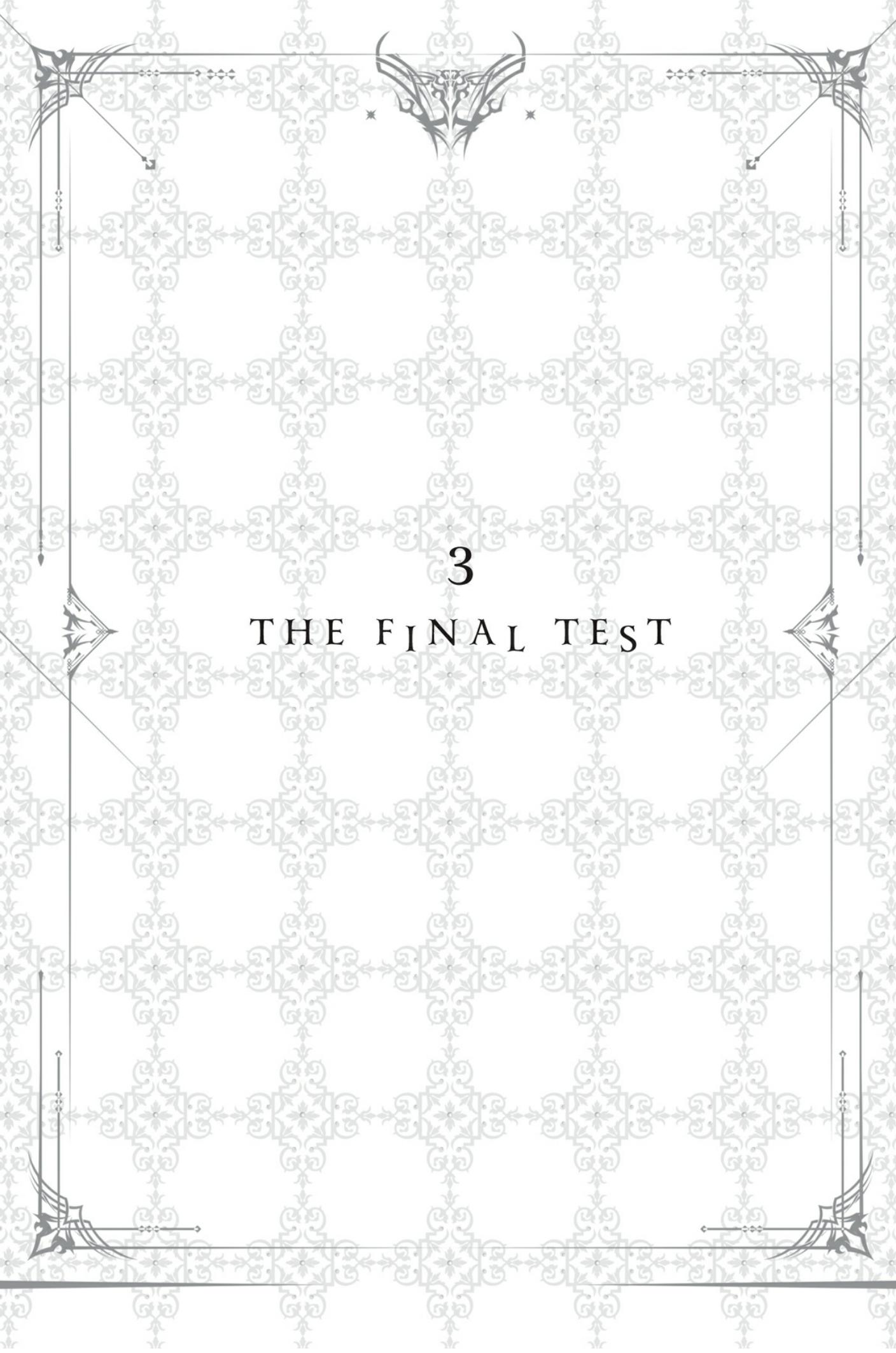
Just then, another noise echoed through the room.

KRRRRRK!

The divination circle at the center of the temple rose up.

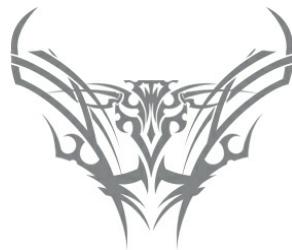
Thou shall prove thy faith.....

Jinwoo had an inkling what this meant.



3

THE FINAL TEST



3

THE FINAL TEST

The divination circle inscribed on the floor in the middle of the temple rose to a height of about two stairs and then ground to a halt.

“An altar.....” Jinwoo was muttering to himself, but the other hunters were listening intently.

Altar?

He definitely just said “altar”.....

The one who'd saved their lives twice earlier wasn't some high-rank, spiritually awakened being but Jinwoo, an E-rank hunter whom they usually looked down on.

If it wasn't for Sung, we would be..... Everyone felt the same way.

Jinwoo's words were their sole lifeline. Without realizing this, Jinwoo had let slip the word *altar*.

Kim caught on quickly. “I see, I see.”

He unsheathed a sword from his waist. It was originally made for dealing with magic beasts but was now absolutely essential for a completely different reason.

“I may not be the smartest, but even I get what's going on here.”

Others shifted uneasily when they saw the sharp blade of the weapon in Kim's grip.

“Hey, Kim! Why'd you draw your weapon?”

“Let's talk it out, okay?”

Now that the highest-rank member of the party, the C-rank Song, was wounded, there was nobody who could rein in Kim, who was regarded as fairly strong among the D-rank hunters.

He pointed at the altar with his sword. “The last commandment is ‘thou shall prove thy faith,’ and an altar appeared in the middle of the room.”

He looked at Jinwoo. “Doesn’t this mean we have to sacrifice someone, Sung?”

Jinwoo nodded. He’d had the same thought. One of the six survivors was to become an offering.

That’s probably what the last commandment means.....

That was the conclusion Jinwoo had reached.

Sensing someone approaching, he looked up and noticed an unnerving look in Kim’s eyes as the older man neared him. A bead of sweat slid down Jinwoo’s face.

“Mr. Kim..... What—?”

“Shut up and stay still!” Kim yelled, pointing his sword at Song, who had crouched beside Jinwoo to inspect his injuries.

“Who dragged us in here? It was Song, right? Then shouldn’t he take responsibility for this damn raid and see it through to the end?”

“Mr. Kim!” Enraged, Jinwoo tried to stand, but he was stopped by Song’s calloused hand.

He looked at Song.

“.....” Song wordlessly shook his head. His eyes were pleading with Jinwoo to keep quiet.

Jinwoo had a lot he wanted to say, but he forced himself to swallow his words.

Song heaved himself to his feet. “Kim is right. I need to take care of this.”

“Looks like we’re talking the same language now, old man.” Kim gestured at the altar with the tip of his sword. “If you understand, let’s get this over with.

More than ten people are already dead because of you."

Kim's close friend, Park, had also lost his life. With his mind clouded by grief and rage, Kim had effectively forgotten that they'd all taken a vote before entering the double dungeon.

Song spoke to Kim. "I'll do this myself, so could you sheathe your weapon?"

Kim immediately refused. "Why should I trust you? Stop talking and keep walking."

Song sighed and started walking toward the altar. Kim followed him, keeping his weapon leveled at Song's back.

Jinwoo bit his lower lip as he watched them.

This isn't Mr. Song's fault.

It had been a course of action agreed on by everyone. Song didn't deserve the blame just because things had gone south.

But.....

Jinwoo didn't have the strength to stop Kim. Kim was one of the strongest D rankers, and Jinwoo was the weakest among E rankers. The difference in their power levels was clear. To make things worse, Jinwoo was also now missing a leg. If he went against Kim, he'd endanger himself as well as Joohee, who was still committed to treating him.

"Dammit." Jinwoo squeezed his eyes shut. He'd never resented his own lack of power more than now.

Song had already reached the altar.

Fwoosh!

A single red flame flared up on its side. Everyone watched nervously for what would come next.

However, nothing happened. The appearance of the flame was all that occurred.

".....?"

When nothing more transpired no matter how long they waited, Kim, who'd

forced Song onto the altar, and the others were bewildered.

Kim looked back at Jinwoo. “Hey, Sung. Were we wrong?”

Jinwoo shook his head. “I’m not sure, either.....”

They’d thought the third commandment would be fulfilled if they sacrificed someone on the altar.

Maybe it’s not about offering a sacrifice?

This wasn’t exactly bad news for them. If this wasn’t about a sacrifice, that meant Song didn’t have to die.

Jinwoo’s face brightened. He tried to stand while sweating profusely from the effort, so two hunters rushed to help him up.

“I’d like to take a look at the altar, so could you help me get up there?”

“Jinwoo, your wound is still.....”

Joohee stood with him. She was deathly pale from using too much of her magic. Thanks to her efforts, she’d managed to keep his bleeding and pain to a minimum.

I need to hurry.

Between Joohee’s condition, Kim’s temper, Song’s injury, and the other hunters’ fear, Jinwoo was running out of time.

He reached the altar with the help of the two hunters.

“Let’s get on.”

The two hunters hesitated momentarily, but they put their faith in Jinwoo and helped him up onto the altar. As they did, three more flames came to life.

Fwoosh!

Fwoosh!

Fwoosh!

Jinwoo’s eyes flashed.

The number of flames and the number of people are the same.

Song, Jinwoo, and two supporting him. Four flames for four people. The flames encircled the circumference of the altar.

Judging by the distance between these fires, the circle just needs two more.

It was looking like their remaining companions would have to join them on the altar in order for anything to happen.

Jinwoo asked Song, "Will other hunters come to rescue us if we wait here?"

Song shook his head. "It's been a week since the gate first opened. Those things will act before any rescuers can get here."

"I guess the association ignored the gate for too long, since it's D rank."

"You know how it is with the association."

A gate would completely open after seven days. The main purpose of raids was to defeat the boss of the dungeon in order to close the gate before a week was up. Failure to do so meant the magic beasts imprisoned within could freely exit to the outside world.

Jinwoo looked behind him. The giant was still sitting on the throne, looking down at them with arrogant eyes.

If that thing gets out.....

The damage it would cause was unimaginable. Of course, if that happened, the people in this chamber would be the first slaughtered by either the colossus or the smaller statues.

The only certainty was that they couldn't afford to wait while doing nothing.

Jinwoo called for Joohee and Kim. "I need you both to come up as well."

Joohee climbed onto the altar first. Kim reluctantly followed suit.

Two more flames lit up, and the circle was complete.

Fwoosh!

The hunters jumped in surprise.

"Huh?"

"What's going on?"

Something was happening, just as Jinwoo had predicted.

It's starting.

Tiny blue flames ignited along the very edge of the altar, forming a circle. There were easily more than thirty of them, tightly arranged.

...Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six. Jinwoo quickly counted a total of thirty-six small blue fires.

Six red flames match the number of people, but thirty-six blue flames... What do they mean?

Just then...

THUD!

Without warning, the doors suddenly swung open. The hunters reflexively twitched.

“Hngh.....!”

Every part of them screamed to run toward the exit, but having witnessed what had happened to the young hunter from the choir, they couldn't bring themselves to take even one step forward. There was no telling how they might be killed by trying to take the initiative.

Everyone looked at Jinwoo for a solution. However, he pressed his lips into a line.

“.....” He didn't have any answers right now. He couldn't tell whether the open doors were a trap or if the third commandment had been fulfilled and they could get out of here.

While everyone's eyes were fixed on Jinwoo, a jarring noise resounded throughout the room.

Creeeeeeak.

Creeeeeeak.

The hunters urgently scanned the area.

“What now?!”

"Th-they're closing in!"

"Those bastards just moved!"

Their breathing quickened. The party had thought the stone statues moved only when someone approached, but they were now several steps closer.

In an instant, Jinwoo assessed the situation.

No, it's not the stone statues! It's the platforms under them that're moving.

The harsh sound that had hurt their ears was most likely from the platforms scratching the floor as they advanced.

".....Did they stop?" Kim wiped the sweat from his forehead.

While everyone was distracted by the statues, Jinwoo looked down to inspect the blue flames. They were extinguishing one by one. Three were already gone.

Creeeeeeak.

Someone yelled, "Wh-what? Where's that coming from?"

Jinwoo glanced up. The noise had come from the direction he was facing. He realized the statues in front of him seemed to be a little closer than the others.

Why is it only the ones in front of me.....?

Was it because he'd stopped paying attention to them?

Jinwoo closed his eyes to confirm. As soon as he did, the noise came again.

Creeeeeeak.

The noise stopped when he opened his eyes. The figures had definitely gotten closer.

"What the fuck?!"

"Wh-what do we have to do?"

Jinwoo yelled, "Don't take your eyes off the statues!"

Come to think of it, the sentries had first started moving when everyone had turned to him.

Those things approach when we're not looking at them.

Jinwoo spotted another blue flame going out. Nothing had happened to his group, though; neither were there any changes in the stone statues.

Maybe.....?

Jinwoo started counting carefully in his head while he kept an eye on the statues.

Like I thought.

One of the little fires went out every minute.

The blue flames are a timer.

The way to fulfill the third commandment was to endure on the altar until all thirty-six blue flames went out. This meant they were safe as long as they kept an eye on the stone statues. It was very likely they would all survive this final round.

Jinwoo looked down to inspect how many of the blue flames remained in order to calculate how long they had to last.

There are thirty left.....

They just had to last thirty minutes!

But that was Jinwoo's fatal mistake. The statues near Jinwoo had approached the altar while he was counting the flames.

Creeeeeeek.

"Hnnngh..... Aaaaargh!"

The hunter standing with his back to Jinwoo shrieked and bolted toward the doors. The constant grating noise coming from behind him had spooked him.

A red flame went out as soon as he jumped off the altar.

"No!" Jinwoo cried.

Defying all expectations, though, the hunter who had run away screaming his head off safely passed through the open doors.

"H-huh? What just happened, Sung? He got out!"

Jinwoo was faced away from the doors, so he hadn't been able to observe

what had happened.

"Did anything change?"

"The.....the doors closed a little."

"Are they still closing?"

"No, no. They closed a fraction when that guy left the altar, and then they stopped."

Jinwoo remembered that one of the red flames had gone out when the hunter left the altar.

Shit!

His heart sank. He'd finally figured out the answer to the question that had been bothering him the whole time he'd been standing on the altar.

How was this a way to prove their faith?

He had his answer. It was the absolute worst test for Jinwoo, since he needed someone else's help just to stay upright due to his leg injury.

* * *

The open doors were actually a trap. It was false hope they could actually see! If everyone on the altar had run to the open doors all at once, the red flames would have been extinguished, and the doors would've immediately slammed shut.

All that would've remained was a festival of blood and screams.

On the other hand, the altar was the promised land. It was an area that guaranteed everyone's safety as long as they stayed in their respective places and did their respective jobs.

It was a choice between visible hope and an invisible promise. The third commandment, to "prove thy faith," was a test to see if they could resist sweet temptations while under the pressure of impending doom.

In their case, there were two variables.

The first was Jinwoo himself. People who would've ordinarily run toward the open doors instead had stopped to listen to what he had to say. Because of this,

they had thankfully avoided the disaster of the doors closing completely.

We got lucky.

There was no other way to put it. It had been possible only because he'd earned people's trust by figuring out the meaning of the first two commandments by himself.

The second variable had arisen rather unexpectedly.

Someone had left the altar. How would people react now that they could see that hope was within their grasp?

It was obvious.

The man who'd been supporting Jinwoo flung him aside to run out of the room. Song rushed to steady Jinwoo with a hand on his back.

Whoosh...

When the man stepped down from the altar, another red flame went out, and the doors closed even more.

Creeeak.

"Hey, hey!"

Kim yelled after the second escapee, but he'd also managed to flee from the room unscathed.

Jinwoo counted the red flames and shouted, "Nobody move! We can't lose any more people!"

Front, back, left, and right. They needed at least four people in order to monitor all sides. Jinwoo, Joohee, Song, and Kim remained. If they lost a single person, there would inevitably be a blind spot.

Kim wiped his forehead again. "Sung, what's going on? Explain it to us."

"We just have to stay here like this until all the blue flames go out!" Jinwoo shared everything he had figured out so far.

Kim nodded and listened intently. After his quick explanation, Jinwoo added one more statement at the end.

"We can get out of here alive."

Each commandment indicated a way to survive the room. The last couldn't be any different.

"All we have to do is stay where we are!" Jinwoo was absolutely sure they could survive without any more injuries if they trusted one another.

Kim, however, had a different perspective. He asked hesitantly, "Um, Sung..... You may be right, but.....the doors might also completely shut when the time is up, right?"

"....." Jinwoo couldn't answer. He'd come to this conclusion after considering all the options, but he couldn't give them any guarantees until everything played out.

But Kim needed certitude. Ensuring his own survival was more urgent than the mere possibility of everyone making it through.

"Sorry, but.....but I can't do this."

"Mr. Kim!"

"Sorry!"

Kim slipped down from the altar. He ignored Jinwoo's calls and sprinted toward the doors. He took one last look at the others once he reached the exit, but he didn't return.

Grrrnd.

Jinwoo gritted his teeth. "Dammit!"

Despite saving their lives, what had been returned to Jinwoo wasn't kindness or gratitude. All that was left was betrayal.

As he'd calculated, it was a problem keeping an eye on the statues without Kim. It had been impossible from the start for two heavily injured people and someone frightened out of her wits to monitor the entire area.

The statues they couldn't keep in their field of vision started moving.

Creeeeeeek.

Creeeeeeek.

The sentinels were tightening their ring around them.

Song, who'd been surveying the situation, told Jinwoo and Joohee, "You two should leave."

He sounded like he had given up.

"Mr. Song.....?"

"Like Kim said, I was the one who brought you all here. If someone has to stay, it should be me."

"But—!"

"You have a few more days to live than I do anyway, so you should go."

Song chuckled. This was Song's small kindness to help them feel better for having to leave without him.

"....." Jinwoo helplessly nodded. Although he felt awful, there was no time to argue about who would remain.

Song intended to ask Joohee to help Jinwoo walk. "Joohee, could you help Sung?"

"Yes, of course."

However, when Joohee made to stand, she collapsed to the ground.

"Ahhh....." She tried her hardest to get up, but soon tears welled in her eyes.

"I..... I can't move my legs."

Jinwoo's and Song's faces grew grim. It was easy to see that Joohee wasn't in good shape. Her lips were blue, and her body kept convulsing minutely. This was the aftereffect of using too much of her magic when she was already mentally and physically exhausted.

It's because she tried to fix my leg.....

Jinwoo was rendered speechless by how sorry he felt.

But there was no time for this.

Creeeeeeeeeak.

The statues were drawing ever closer toward the altar.

Jinwoo shook off Song's hand and flopped down on the floor.

Song's eyes widened. "You.....?"

Jinwoo spoke with determination. "Please take Joohee and get out of here, Mr. Song."

"I told you that I'd stay!"

"Then who's going to help Joohee?"

Jinwoo couldn't even stand on his own, much less get Joohee to the door before time was up.

Of course.....

They could abandon *her* here. But Joohee had saved Jinwoo's life multiple times over the years, and even her current awful state was because she'd tried to treat him with everything she had. He didn't want to abandon someone like her, survive, and carry that guilt for the rest of his life.

"There's no time. Please go."

"....." With a stern expression, Song pulled Joohee up.

Joohee shook her head as tears streamed down her face.

"No..... Jinwoo can leave instead. I can....."

"Remember I promised to take you to dinner?" Jinwoo took out the E-rank essence stone from his pocket and pushed it into Joohee's hands.

"You go get dinner ahead of me. I'll collect my change from you if I make it out of here."

She frowned at him when he smiled at her. "How can you joke at a time like this?!"

He nodded at Song, who in turn lightly struck Joohee on the back of her neck.

Thwack!

Joohee fainted. Song hoisted her prone body onto his shoulder.

".....I'm sorry."

"It was my call anyway."

Song bowed to Jinwoo. With this last gesture of farewell, he quickly leaped off the altar.

Creeeeeeeeeak.

Creeeeeeeeeak.

While they were talking, the stone statues had come within striking distance.

Jinwoo knelt and took a deep breath. "Whewww..."

He noticed the sword that Kim had abandoned next to him. He stretched out his hand and grabbed it.

If I'm going down, I'm taking at least one of them with me.

He looked back in time to see Song escaping safely with Joohee. That was a relief.

Glad I'm the only one dying.....

He didn't consider it some great sacrifice. It was what he thought would be the best choice, all things considered.

He'd have had to live the rest of his life without a leg. Not only would it have been impossible to continue working as a hunter, but he wasn't even sure he could live a normal life. He was a high school graduate with no special skills, so making ends meet wouldn't be easy.

My mother's hospital bills and my sister's tuition.....

He figured it'd be better for his family to claim the life insurance.

Was it 300,000,000 won or 400,000,000 won in insurance money for the family of a hunter who dies in a raid organized by the association?

The money was more than enough compensation for the life of a worthless E-rank hunter.

Creeeeeeeeeak.

Creeeeeeeeeak.

THUD.

The bastards had finally arrived. The first stone statue to reach the altar took

its initial step up. Jinwoo leveled the sword at it as he watched.

“Come at me.”

But the attack came from behind him.

Shuuuk.

A long spear pierced through Jinwoo’s body from behind.

“Gak!” He coughed out blood. Pain shot through his entire body.

“Just a little higher, and the beast would’ve punctured your heart!”

Joohee’s scolding from a few hours earlier echoed in his mind.

“Aaaaaargh!”

His assailant raised the spear until it was vertically positioned. Jinwoo hung in the air, impaled on the tip. He briefly struggled from the pain, but before long, the statue threw him to the ground.

CRASH!

“Ughhh!”

He could hear bones breaking everywhere in his body. The pain caused him to curl into a fetal position.

“Ahhh..... Ahhhh.....”

The stone statues gathered around the trembling Jinwoo. They completely surrounded him. He shuddered as he looked up at them.

I..... I don’t want to die like this...

As the fact that he was about to die finally sank in, tears pricked his eyes. He recalled the faces of his family. He thought of Joohee and Song, the ones who had been concerned for him until the very end.

I don’t want to die.....

This was not the way he wanted to end his short life of twenty-four years.

Stomp.

A stone-faced statue with a sword stepped closer to him. It raised the weapon

high.

Despite the violent tremors racking his body, Jinwoo defiantly held its gaze.

At last, the sword came straight down.

SHHHUKKK.

If I could get one more, just one more chance!

Jinwoo refused to close his eyes. That was when...

Screeeak!

The sword suddenly stopped on its way down as if someone had hit the Pause button on a video.

No, it hadn't stopped. It was moving so slowly that it looked like it had. It was descending at a rate of maybe one millimeter per minute. The blow was slow, but it was definitely still coming down.

Wh-what...?

Jinwoo couldn't hide his confusion. Just then...

Ping!

An electronic chime and a woman's voice he'd never heard before echoed inside his head.

[You have fulfilled all the requirements to complete Secret Quest: Courage of the Weak.]

"Secret quest"? "Fulfilled all the requirements"?

Jinwoo had no idea what was going on.

And where is this voice coming from?

The commentary plowed on despite Jinwoo's confusion.

[You have acquired the qualifications to be a Player. Will you accept?]

"Acquired"? He had to accept something?

Sounds like they're giving me something.....

Having grown up in a poor family, Jinwoo had never refused when offered

something for free. But that was when he was alive; once he died, what use would free things be to him?

.....

As Jinwoo hesitated, the voice in his head repeated itself, as if it was feeling urgent.

[Your time is running out. Your heart will stop in two-hundredths of a second if you choose not to accept. Will you accept?]

Jinwoo wasn't sure if the voice was a hallucination of some kind, but he knew for a fact that he was close to death. Not only was there a sword aimed at his head, but countless other weapons were now also targeting him.

If he was attacked by all those, would there be anything left of his body? He didn't care what happened at this point.

If you're giving it to me, I might as well.....

He didn't even have to say it aloud. All he did was think it, but the voice in his head responded right away.

[Congratulations on becoming a Player.]

Flash—

A bright light engulfed Jinwoo's body as he lost consciousness.

* * *

Jinwoo opened his eyes.

A white ceiling and the distinct smell of disinfectant greeted him. He was lying on a hard mattress. He knew immediately where he was.

The hospital?

His visits to the hospital had decreased significantly since he'd met Joohee, a B-rank healer, but even so, hospitals were as familiar to him as his neighborhood convenience store. There was even a rumor that Jinwoo Sung had a designated room at the hospital affiliated with the Hunter's Association.

He sat up, then put his hand on his chest and felt his heartbeat.

His heart was beating normally.

I'm alive?

Something else also seemed off.

His body felt weirdly light. Usually, whenever he woke up in a hospital, Jinwoo was often dazed and had difficulty moving around.

But it was different this time. He felt refreshed, like after a good night's sleep at home.

What happened.....?

Considering the situation right before he'd lost consciousness, this didn't make any sense.

The sword had been coming down at him. Even if by chance it had missed him, he'd been completely surrounded by some fearsome foes.

An A-rank or even an S-rank strike squad arriving on the scene would've been no match for them.

And I survived?

It was like it had all been a dream.

As luck would have it, there was one surefire way to verify everything.

Jinwoo lifted the blanket covering his body. If it was real, he would be missing a leg, and if it had been a dream.....

“Are you awake?”

Jinwoo jumped and turned toward the deep voice that had addressed him from a corner of the room.

“Apologies if I scared you.”

“We couldn't wait any longer, you see.”

Two men in black suits approached the bed.

Jinwoo blinked at them.

“Who...are you...?” He didn't recognize them at all.

The one with a short military haircut handed Jinwoo a business card. “This is what we do.”

Jinwoo took the card.

Jinchul Woo, Korean Hunter's Association Surveillance Team?

Surveillance was the only team within the Hunter's Association composed solely of strong hunters. Their role was to supervise all the hunters in the association, so it made sense that such an elite corps would have the cream of the crop.

Jinwoo was still confused, though. "But what brings you here?"

Jinchul Woo pulled up a chair next to Jinwoo's bed and sat down. The other suit, who Jinwoo assumed was his subordinate, stood behind him. The threatening presence of these two well-built men so close to Jinwoo was intense.

What they told Jinwoo shocked him.

"I was asleep for *three days*?"

"Do you remember what happened before you passed out?"

"Yes."

"Please tell us everything you remember."

"Before I do..... What about those two? Mr. Song and Joohee, are they safe?"

Jinchul met Jinwoo's earnest gaze and nodded. "Yes. They're completely safe. Both were in severe condition, but they are thankfully alive and well."

"Phew....."

As Jinwoo let out a relieved sigh, Jinchul quietly asked, "Now, could you please tell us what you remember?"

He told them everything that had happened until he'd lost consciousness except for the strange hallucinations he couldn't understand.

"And then you lost consciousness..... Is that correct?"

"Yes, the next time I opened my eyes, I was here."

Jinchul and his subordinate exchanged glances. They seemed a bit troubled that their only potential witness didn't know anything. The truth was, Jinwoo

was the one who most wanted to know what had really happened.

“If I may, how did I get here? Did a big guild get rid of them?”

“The thing is.....”

The troubled Jinchul took his time answering. “Taking survivors’ reports into account, the Surveillance Team brought along members of the White Tiger Guild, but when they arrived at the room, everything...”

The White Tiger Guild was a huge guild that ranked as one of the top five in Korea. Bringing White Tiger on board meant the association had recognized just how dangerous the situation was.

What exactly had happened over there?

Jinwoo gulped. “Everything.....?”

“Everything was gone. There was absolutely no trace of the giant statue or the other stone sentries. There was nothing except you lying there unconscious.”

“Excuse me?” Jinwoo stared at him, incredulous.

“We couldn’t believe it, either. If the survivors’ stories weren’t perfectly consistent or we hadn’t found the remains of the other hunters, we would’ve thought different.”

Jinchul rubbed his chin. This was his sixth year working in the Surveillance Team after awakening as an A-rank hunter. He was confident he had experienced all sorts of adversity and enemies, so this was a first. He’d even sought the advice of guilds as well as associations of other countries, but they’d all been dead ends.

And so...

“Here’s what we think.....,” Jinchul said cautiously. “There was definitely something powerful in that room. And those things were defeated by someone or several someones. That’s what we concluded, since nothing escaped into our world before the gate closed.”

They had to be open to all kinds of possibilities. They had to consider all the scenarios, however unlikely or impossible. The association had contemplated

the situation again and again and had ultimately come up with one theory.

Jinchul watched for Jinwoo's reaction as he continued. "We believe.....that you had a second awakening, Hunter Jinwoo Sung."

A second awakening!

Jinwoo's eyes widened.

It was rare, but a person who had already awakened as a hunter could have a second awakening. This was also known as a "reawakening." Most of the hunters who experienced this process came out much stronger than they'd been previously.

Once a hunter's rank was set, there usually was no way to change it. A hunter's ability was established when they awoke as a hunter.

But reawakened hunters were different. They surpassed their limits, and a C-rank hunter could level up to an A rank, and a B-rank hunter could even level up to an S rank.

Jinchul swallowed nervously.

Jinwoo Sung..... If he reawakened as an S ranker, or maybe even more powerful than that, it would've been possible for him to defeat all those beasts.

The survivors had specifically pointed out that the giant statue had vaporized C-rank hunters using only its eyes. How powerful would an individual have to be to defeat that kind of magic beast while unconscious?

The association had classified this case as top secret and made sure everyone involved kept it absolutely confidential. Those who'd come to visit Jinwoo in the hospital had been given only minimal information about his current state. For the same reason, Jinwoo had been assigned a private room and the best doctors in the hospital.

Jinchul's heart sped up.

To think that we might finally have a national-rank hunter in Korea.....

There were fewer than ten national-rank hunters in the entire world. They were said to hold more power than a nuclear weapon, and if Korea could have one, too...!

Fortunately, it wouldn't be difficult to verify whether he'd had a second awakening. One must strike while the iron is hot, so to speak.

Jinchul gave an order to his subordinate. "Bring it here."

The subordinate took something from a bag in a corner of the room and brought it over.

"Is that.....?"

Jinchul began explaining before Jinwoo could finish asking. "This is a mana meter."

He explained that the device was a smaller, though no less effective, version of the one found at the Hunter's Association Headquarters.

"All you have to do is place your hand on this essence stone."

A fist-size essence stone sat embedded in the middle of a round board. It was an ebony stone that looked like a black hole one could get sucked into. It was the highest-rank essence stone in existence, harvested from an A-rank or higher magic beast. An essence stone in good condition could go for more than 1,000,000,000 won.

Jinchul spoke up in a serious tone when Jinwoo continued to wordlessly stare at the essence stone.

"This is a necessary procedure for our investigation, so your cooperation would be greatly appreciated."

Jinwoo nodded.

If this really was the reawakening he'd often dreamed of, his life would take a complete one-eighty. They were offering to verify it at no cost, so he had no reason to refuse.

He placed his hand on the essence stone, and it started to emit a faint glow. Both Jinchul and his subordinate were sweating in anticipation.

Fshhhh...

The light surrounding the stone faded. Jinchul hurriedly took off his sunglasses and checked the result.

He blinked in disbelief. “That can’t be!”

He double-checked the number, but it remained the same.

What.....?

How could someone with a hunter’s license have only *10* mana? When one took into consideration that E-rank hunters averaged between 70 and 100 mana, Jinwoo’s mana level was closer to a regular civilian’s.

However...

“So is it a reawakening? What’s my new rank looking like?”

Jinwoo’s palms were sweating. The result must have been extraordinary if the two surveillance agents were reacting this way.

Jinchul nodded after comparing Jinwoo’s current result with his previous data.

The result from his initial test was 12. Now, four years later, the result is 10. Even though it went down by 2, that’s within the margin of error.

The mana meter wasn’t broken. Jinwoo’s mana was simply unbelievably low. Frankly, it was a miracle he’d survived until now.

“There must have been a misunderstanding. I apologize.” Jinchul decided staying any longer would be a waste of time and quickly stood up.

“Let’s go.”

“Yessir.”

They quickly packed their bags.

“Uhhh, could you please tell me.....?”

Jinchul turned slightly and merely responded, “Thank you for your cooperation. If you remember anything else, please contact us.”

The two men in black rushed out of the room like they had somewhere else they urgently needed to be. The space felt empty without them.

“.....” Jinwoo rubbed the back of his neck.

Guess I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up.

If he really thought about it, he didn’t feel any different, other than that

strange sense of refreshment. Plus, it would've been impossible to defeat all those things by himself even if he had experienced a second awakening.

Maybe if it was the S-rank hunter Jongin Choi or Gunhee Go, who's considered an S rank among S ranks, they could've taken them on by themselves?

Since he'd never seen either of them fight against magic beasts, his speculation was pointless.

Not much was known about S-rank hunters. They were like gods among men.

Lost in thought, he shifted his gaze up to the ceiling.

Huh?

As soon as he did, he saw letters floating in the air.

[You have unread messages.]

* * *

.....?

Jinwoo tried closing and then opening his eyes again.

[You have unread messages.]

The letters were still floating in midair, unchanged.

Jinwoo shook his head hard to clear it and tried rubbing his eyes, but still nothing changed. He placed his hand on his pounding forehead and craned his neck down.

A few days ago, I was hearing things, and now I'm hallucinating.....

Maybe there really was something wrong with his brain?

There's a thing called post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. It's a disorder prevalent in people who endured severe traumas or major accidents. Hearing things and having hallucinations after losing most of your colleagues and surviving a near-death experience wasn't so strange.

But.....

Some things couldn't be so easily explained. His gaze went to his leg.

My leg is fine.

His leg, which had definitely been severed by a stone statue's shield, was there.

The underground temple of the double dungeon, the voice he'd suddenly heard, his completely healed leg, and now the message floating in front of him... So many unexplainable things were happening at once.

Maybe.....

It was possible all those things weren't separate incidents but were, instead, connected. Having reached a possible conclusion, he felt his headache abate slightly.

Fine.

Jinwoo raised his eyes. He was curious about the contents of those messages now that he was calmer and his head wasn't throbbing quite so much. The messages might contain hints that explained some of the mysterious happenings.

Jinwoo extended his hand to the letters. His fingers passed through them.

It's not touch activated?

It seemed Jinwoo was a little too used to smartphones; he couldn't think of any way to open messages other than via a touch screen.

As he pondered how to check the messages, he recalled what had happened right before he lost consciousness.

“Oh, right.”

The communication between himself and the strange voice had been conversational.

Will it work if I think it in my head, or do I have to say it out loud?

Jinwoo ended up deciding to try speaking every possible command word.

“Check.”

“Message.”

“Check message.”

“Read message.”

“Look.”

“I want to look.”

“Let’s take a look.”

“Show me!”

Just then...

“.....What is it you want to look at so badly?”

Feeling like he was being watched, Jinwoo turned to find his sister, clad in her high school uniform, peeking back at him from behind the half-ajar door.

“Ummmm.....”

Jinwoo didn’t know what to say. He’d been caught begging someone to show him something while staring up at the ceiling. He didn’t really have any explanation for his behavior.

* * *

“You sure you didn’t hit your head?”

Jinwoo shook his head at his sister’s question, posed from a distance. “No.”

Jinah Sung continued regarding him suspiciously, even after his response.

“Are you *really* okay?”

“I said I’m fine.”

She looked him up and down as if to assess his condition before charging toward him like a raging bull. Jinwoo quickly raised his hands to defend himself as she started smacking him.

“I told you to stop getting hurt! Do you know how worried I was?!”

“.....I’m sorry.”

“Other hunters are always fine, so why do you always get hurt?!”

“.....Sorry.”

Jinah’s blows weakened, and she eventually bowed her head and started

crying.

Jinwoo gently stroked his sniffing sister's back. His heart felt heavy.

How could I even think about dying and leaving her behind?

He was glad to be alive.

The giant's eye lasers, the shield that had severed his leg, the spear that had impaled him... Thinking back, there had been more than a few times when he'd felt his life was in danger. It was almost like he'd woken up from a horrific nightmare.

Jinwoo's gaze drifted to the letters hovering in the air.

[You have unread messages.]

It's like I still haven't woken up from that dream.....

There was so much that was unexplainable. But none of that mattered.

The important thing was that Jinwoo was still alive and could see his family again.

"Sniff."

Luckily, his brave sister soon stopped crying, though she continued nagging him for another hour afterward.

"Got that? If you get hurt one more time, I'm going to drop out and get a job and make you quit being a hunter."

Jinah's sharp eyes, which didn't suit her lovely face, were very much like Jinwoo's.

"Okay, okay." He nodded with an expression that indicated he was sick of this lecture.

She made him promise several more times before she was satisfied, then stood to leave.

"Where're you going?"

"School. I only got permission to check on you briefly. I have to go back."

He nodded in understanding. "Your university entrance exam is next year."

Jinah had never once had a private tutor or taken any extra classes after school, but she was always at the top of her grade. Jinwoo was fiercely proud of her.

Jinah's dream was to become a doctor. A few years back, she'd only liked hanging with her friends and playing video games. After their mother fell ill, though, she'd made up her mind to become a doctor and become glued to her desk.

Jinwoo wanted to make sure her dream came true.

Wait a minute..... A video game?

Jinwoo's eyes flashed.

"Okay, I'll see you later."

He quickly called to her before she could leave the room. "Jinah."

"What?"

"When you play a game....."

She grinned. "I don't really play these days. I'll be a senior soon."

"I know, I know—but I have a question."

"Really? About what? Have you starting playing?"

Perhaps because this used to be her area of expertise, Jinah seemed eager to help.

Jinwoo quickly glanced at the words still floating in the air.

"What do you do if you have an unread message that you want to check in a game?"

"Well, first, you'd open your inbox."

"Open your inbox?"

Ping!

As soon as he said "open," the hidden messages were revealed with some kind of alert sound effect.

[You have 2 unread messages.]

[Congratulations on becoming a Player.] (Unread) [Daily Quest: Strength Training has arrived.] (Unread)

Jinwoo's face lit up.

Yes!

Her brother's sudden giddiness made Jinah uneasy.

"What? Which game is it? Should I help you?"

Jinwoo shook his head firmly. "No. I want to try it by myself."

How would his sister react if he told her what he was currently experiencing?

I don't want her to think I'm crazy.

Jinwoo swallowed the words he desperately wished he could say.

* * *

Jinwoo made sure Jinah got in the elevator under the pretense of seeing her off, then hurried back to his hospital room.

Can't make the same mistake again.

Click.

He even locked the door to make sure there would be no witnesses. Preparations complete, Jinwoo sat on the edge of his bed and started reading through the messages.

[Congratulations on becoming a Player.] (Unread)

[Daily Quest: Strength Training has arrived.] (Unread)

He felt like he'd seen the title of the first message somewhere.

Where have I heard that before? It sounds familiar...

Jinwoo decided to start with the first message.

[Congratulations on becoming a Player.] (Unread)

Check.

Ping!

[This system is designed to assist the development of the Player.]

[Failure to comply with the system may result in a penalty.]

[The rewards have been delivered.]

"Ahhh."

He belatedly remembered where he'd heard those words. That had been the last thing the voice had said to him before he'd passed out.

It mentioned a Player or something back then, too.

He hadn't understood what that meant then, and he didn't fully understand it now.

System, development, penalty, rewards... They were just a bunch of vague terms to him.

How the heck is it going to help me develop, and what kinds of rewards are they planning to give me?

Because it was using video game terminology with no good explanation of what it all meant, Jinwoo couldn't help but be confused. He decided to move on and opened the next message.

[Daily Quest: Strength Training has arrived.] (Unread)

Gulp.

Jinwoo involuntarily reacted to the noteworthy subject line. His heart started racing.

Check.

Ping!

[DAILY QUEST: STRENGTH TRAINING]

Push-ups 100 times: Incomplete (0/100)

Sit-ups 100 times: Incomplete (0/100)

Squats 100 times: Incomplete (0/100)

Running 10 km: Incomplete (0/100)

※Warning: Failure to complete the daily quest will result in an

appropriate penalty.

After reading the message, Jinwoo laughed in spite of himself.

“Ha-ha..... Seriously?”

It was a big letdown, to say the least.

Despite having such a grandiose subject line like “Strength Training,” the daily quest message had merely been an endurance training exercise regimen. Jinwoo couldn’t argue that he’d definitely be in slightly better shape if he completed it. Were those the “development” and “rewards” mentioned?

Now that I think about it.....

He’d once read in a book that “those going through an inner conflict should lend an ear to their inner voices.”

Guess I’m just seeing what I want to see.

How badly did he want to get stronger that his mind was conjuring these unbelievable delusions?

He let out a bitter laugh. “.....If I could’ve become a stronger hunter with this kind of thing, why would I have endured all those hardships?”

He shook his head. He thought himself pathetic for trying to search for answers to his doubts in a message that might be a hallucination.

Whatever.

Jinwoo sprawled out on his bed and wordlessly stared at the ceiling.

“.....”

Time flew even though he wasn’t doing anything. He started feeling the weight of the silence filling the hospital room.

He abruptly sat up.

What if.....?

What if something really would happen? Half full of anticipation and half doubtful, Jinwoo’s mind filled with the thought of trying it out.

I have nothing to lose anyway.

If he considered it some light exercise, there was no reason not to do it, right?

He finally made a call. He'd do it. Jinwoo got out of bed and, after a light warm-up, gripped the bed frame and started slowly doing push-ups.

"One, two, three....."

His count increased quickly. ".....Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred."

He finished one hundred push-ups, but to his disappointment, nothing changed. Nothing except that his arms were now a little bit sore.

"What did I just do.....?"

He snorted and straightened up.

[Congratulations on becoming a Player.] (Read)

[Daily Quest: Strength Training has arrived.] (Read)

The status of the messages had changed from unread to read. There were no more unread messages, and he wasn't in the mood to play along with the delusions any longer.

That was enough of that. Jinwoo closed the message screen without hesitation.

"Haaaah..."

He yawned hard and climbed back into bed. Perhaps it was because this was the most active he'd been in a while, but he was getting drowsy. The sky outside the window was being painted in the colors of a sunset.

It's already this late?

The two agents from the Surveillance Team had told him the association was going to foot his hospital bills. Jinwoo planned to use the opportunity to get a full checkup and leave only after receiving a clean bill of health from the doctors.

These were Jinwoo's thoughts as he lay in bed.

The hallucinations and visions should go away in due time...

His eyes gradually slid shut.

Jinwoo fell into a deep sleep.

Ticktock, ticktock.

The clock on the wall diligently moved its hands as Jinwoo slept. They went round and round and round, and eventually, the clock read 11:59:57.

Tick, tick, tick.

Fifty-eight seconds, fifty-nine seconds, sixty seconds.

The hands of the clock stopped at exactly twelve o'clock.

Ping!

[You have not completed the daily quest. You will be transferred to the penalty zone for the allotted time.]

* * *

RRRRRUMBLE!

Jinwoo woke from the strong vibrations rocking his whole body.

"E-earthquake?"

He bolted upright and grabbed on to the end of the bed. The earthquake was so powerful, it was hard to keep his balance.

RRRRRUMBLE...

The tremors grew stronger as time passed. And then...

Fwssshhh...

The metal bed frame he was clinging to suddenly broke. No, it didn't break—it disappeared. Jinwoo hastily inspected what was in his hands. Instead of the metal of the bed frame, all that remained in his fist was sand.

Sand?

Fwssshhh...

The other half of the bed frame crumbled into sand as well.

The earthquake got even stronger.

RRRRRRRRRUMBLE!

“Argh!”

Jinwoo eventually tumbled off the bed. He screamed as he was flung around the hospital room. One by one, all the furniture transformed into sand.

“Ahhhhh!”

Wham.

Jinwoo was thrown in a random direction and ended up buried. He felt something smooth. It turned out to be very fine sand.

Meanwhile, the earthquake stopped.

“Blech! Ugh!”

He lifted his head urgently while spitting sediment out of his mouth.

“.....?”

Before him was an endless landscape of sand.

Jinwoo frowned as he got to his feet, grains trickling off him out of the crevices of his clothes. He regarded his surroundings while brushing off his chest.

All he could see was sand.

“A desert.....?”

It didn’t make sense. He could’ve sworn that, just a few moments ago, he’d been sleeping on a bed in a large hospital located in the middle of Seoul.

But he’d opened his eyes to a horizon of desert?

Jinwoo took a fistful of sand and let it trickle out of his hand. It fell straight down.

No wind at all.

The wind wasn’t all that was missing. Jinwoo also noted that there was no sun, moon, or stars in the sky. The emptiness made it look like the sky was covered in black ink. Despite this, he could view his surroundings without any problem.

"Where the heck am I?"

And then...

Hssssssss...

Suddenly, his footing started giving way, sliding down a slope.

"Wh-whoa!"

Jinwoo scrambled away to avoid getting sucked down. As the hole grew bigger, he barely managed to claw his way to the top, using his hands and feet to scramble up.

"Huff, huff, huff." He stared down at the hole as he sat trying to catch his breath.

Strangely, the bottom of the pit looked like it was bubbling. He got chills just thinking about how he would've slid all the way down if he'd lost his footing even once.

"No....."

Wait.

Jinwoo's eyes narrowed.

"It's not boiling."

When he looked closer, he could tell something huge was squirming under the surface. He instinctively rose to his feet. He had a bad feeling about what would happen next.

Just as he began carefully backing away, the sand in front of him exploded.

Bwoooosh!

It sounded like he was at the bottom of a raging waterfall.

Jinwoo's eyes went wide. "An.....insect?!"

A gigantic centipede was emerging from the epicenter of the detonation.

GRRRAAAHHH!

The monster was as tall as a five-story building.

Jinwoo gulped. *Oh, hell no.....*

It was impossibly huge. He'd never heard of a centipede this big, but the size of it wasn't the only thing that shocked him.

"Is that.....the monster's name floating above its head?"

Was he dreaming? He blinked hard, but nothing changed. Red writing still hung above the creature's head.

It was like a monster in a video game.

* * *

[Poison-Toothed Giant Desert Centipede]

The aversion Jinwoo felt to its name rivaled the creature's creepy and grotesque appearance. Jinwoo was especially concerned about the word *poison-toothed*. He noticed two child-size fangs attached to the bottom of its mandible. It was easy to infer what would happen if it bit him.

The centipede's huge teeth and jaws continuously opened and closed as if.....

"Looks like it's licking its chops..."

Right at that moment, he heard a chime in his head again.

Ping!

[PENALTY QUEST: SURVIVAL]

Objective: Survive the required time.

Required time: 4 hours

Remaining time: 04:00:00

This is a joke, right.....?

The centipede rushed straight at him through the sand as soon as the timer changed to 03:59:59, as if it had just been waiting.

Fshfshfshfshfshfsh!

"Wh-what?"

Jinwoo spun around and quickly started running.

There was no time to think. If he wanted to live, he had to run!

That was the only thought in his head.

However, after a few steps, a pillar of sand shot up right in front of him out of nowhere.

Fssshhhh!

“Ugh!”

The force of the eruption knocked him down. He tumbled to the ground but sprang back up and was quickly brushing grains off his face when he saw it.

Not one, not two, but...

Fssshhhhhh!

Fssshhhhhh!

Seven centipedes had emerged and were glaring down at Jinwoo.

Skreeee!

Skreeee!

Jinwoo paled as he stood dwarfed by the screeching monsters.

“Shit.....”

* * *

Exactly four hours later, Jinwoo reappeared in his hospital room.

Whump.

He coughed painfully as he lay on the floor.

“Cough! Cough! Blech! Gak!”

The inside of his mouth felt gritty. His eyes still burned from the sand that had gotten in. He moaned in pain for a while before eventually sprawling out on the floor. He had no energy to even lift a finger.

“Huff.....huff..... What.....was that.....?”

Another message appeared as he was catching his breath.

Ping!

[You have completed the penalty quest.]

Jinwoo scowled.

“Penalty quest”? What had he done to deserve a penalty?

He racked his brain and recalled the daily quest he’d abandoned the day before.

Was that.....?

Thinking back on it, it had warned him that if he didn’t complete the daily quest, there would be an appropriate penalty.

“Huff, huff, so that.....that wasn’t a hallucination?”

It hadn’t been a hallucination. It hadn’t been a dream. He didn’t even have to pinch himself to know that. His lungs had burned when he’d been running around, and the pain when a centipede had scratched his leg was still fresh in his mind.

It was all *real*. He’d actually almost died.

“That’s not fair..... Huff.....huff.....”

The penalty had thrown him into the jaws of death.

Jinwoo was suddenly filled with an ominous feeling. If this really had been a result of the daily quest, this wouldn’t be the last time. Right on cue, there came another notification.

Ping!

He jumped, but thankfully, it wasn’t another quest.

[Your rewards for completing the penalty quest have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

“‘Rewards’.....?”

The word *rewards* caught Jinwoo’s eye. The problem was that he didn’t have the energy to check. The situation just didn’t allow for it.

Forget about rewards..... Let’s get some rest first.....

His vision slowly blurred. Soon, he fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

"Oh dear! What happened here?"

The following morning, the nurse who entered Jinwoo's room was shocked at the sight.

The patient was collapsed on the floor and surrounded by sand. His body and clothes were also covered in it.

She threw the patient's chart on the bed and urgently pressed the Call button.

"Please send some more help!"

Soon, the physician in charge rushed into the room. "What? What happened to Mr. Sung?"

"I'm not sure. He was fine last night, but this is how I found him this morning."

"Well, let's move him to the bed. One, two!"

They hoisted Jinwoo onto the bed. As they did, no one noticed he'd gotten a paper cut from the chart that had been tossed there.

"I'll take a look." The doctor examined Jinwoo thoroughly but found nothing wrong.

"Hmm..... He's just asleep."

He breathed a sigh of relief. The Hunter's Association had requested that Jinwoo receive the best care. He'd been anxious that something might've happened to the young man.

"Let him sleep. He looks exhausted."

The doctor made to leave but then looked around the room and scratched his head.

"By the way, this room.....needs to be cleaned. I'll leave it to you, Nurse Yura."

"Yes, Doctor."

After the doctor left, Nurse Yura Choi pressed a hand to her beating heart. She was glad it hadn't been anything serious.

Though their feelings might not be as strong as those of the patients themselves or their families, no doctor or nurse would ever want to see their charges harmed. Hospitals for hunters tended to have many serious cases. They didn't want any additional injuries befalling those entrusted to their care.

"Phew..."

After calming down, Yura pondered where to start cleaning and, by chance, spotted drops of blood on the floor.

"Oh?"

It dripped from Jinwoo's hand, which happened to be stretched out over the side of the bed. Startled, she rushed to examine his hand and turned it over.

"What.....?"

Though there were clear blood trails, there were no wounds from which they could have originated. Even after she wiped his hand clean, she couldn't see any injuries.

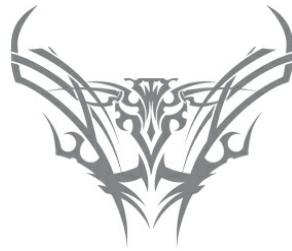
Has his wound already closed.....?

Yura nervously inspected her patient's face.

Jinwoo was still sleeping like a baby.

4

DAILY QUEST



4

DAILY QUEST

Ping!

[The daily quest has arrived.]

Jinwoo's eyes shot open.

The first thing he did after hoisting himself up was check the time. The clock read just past four thirty PM. There were still seven hours and thirty minutes before midnight.

Good.

He opened the inbox.

Ping!

[DAILY QUEST: STRENGTH TRAINING]

Push-ups 100 times: Incomplete (0/100)

Sit-ups 100 times: Incomplete (0/100)

Squats 100 times: Incomplete (0/100)

Running 10 km: Incomplete (0/100)

※Warning: Failure to complete the daily quest will result in an appropriate penalty.

"This again?" That was his reflexive response.

The more he thought about it, though, the more he realized this might be for the best. This was an improvement over an impossible or incomprehensible quest. He'd be physically tired, but as long as he took his time, it could definitely

be accomplished.

Jinwoo hit the floor and started doing push-ups.

“One.”

He didn’t want to be dragged to a strange place to stare death in the face again.

“Two.”

He was fortunate to have survived last night, but there were no guarantees he would do so today.

“Three.”

He looked up to inspect the quest screen and noticed his push-ups being recorded.

Ping!

[You have completed 1 push-up.]

[Push-ups 100 times: Incomplete (7/100)]

Ping!

[You have completed 1 push-up.]

[Push-ups 100 times: Incomplete (8/100)]

Curious, Jinwoo tried lowering himself down only halfway before pushing back up, and as he expected, it didn’t count. He realized why his push-ups hadn’t been recorded yesterday.

If it wasn’t a proper push-up, it wouldn’t be counted.

Oh, come on.....

Jinwoo was dumbfounded but kept going. He still had fifty push-ups left, and he had sit-ups, squats, and running waiting for him.

And like that, three hours passed.

[Push-ups 100 times: Completed (100/100)]

[Sit-ups 100 times: Completed (100/100)]

[Squats 100 times: Completed (100/100)]

[Running 10 km: Incomplete (9/10)]

“Huff, huff, huff, huff.”

Jinwoo was bent over, breathing heavily outside his room after running once around the hospital. He felt as if his heart were about to explode, but he couldn't stop there.

After giving it my all.....

He opened the door with difficulty and took a single step inside.

Ping!

[Total distance run: 10 km.]

[You have completed running 10 km.]

Jinwoo had finally done it.

“Huff..... Huff.....” He dropped to his knees. His breath came out in puffs. His forehead and back were drenched in perspiration.

“Huff..... Huff.....”

A familiar message arrived as he caught his breath.

Ping!

[You have completed Daily Quest: Strength Training.]

[Rewards have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

Jinwoo had been considering going straight to bed like the night before, but he changed his mind. He wanted to check out these so-called “rewards.”

“Check.”

Ping!

[YOU HAVE THE FOLLOWING REWARDS.]

Reward 1. Full Recovery

Reward 2. Ability Points +3

Reward 3. Mystery Box (1)

[Would you like to accept all?]

Why are there so many?

That was his first thought upon seeing the full list. But the more he considered it, while a couple of the rewards sounded useful, there were some he wasn't quite sure about.

First, he was in dire need of reward number one, a full recovery. He felt like he was about to pass out. Since the penalties for failing were real, chances were these rewards for completion also had to be real. Either way, he had nothing to lose.

What were the chances it would throw him into the penalty zone after saying that it'd reward him?

"Accept."

As soon as he did, Jinwoo was enveloped by a pale-blue energy.

Hmm, this feels like.....?

He immediately thought of Joohee. This felt similar to being treated with magic whenever he got hurt. If he had to describe the sensation, it was like a breath of fresh air cleaning out his lungs.

Whooshhh...

He sensed the blue energy fading.

He felt a bit sad about that.

He stood and jumped up and down, then did some stretches and moved his body every which way.

"Whoa!"

Both his racing heart and labored breathing had calmed. He didn't feel tired at all. He had been about to collapse, but he now felt refreshed, as if he had just woken up from a good sleep. The recovery was extremely effective.

This is awesome.

Jinwoo's eyes lit up. He wasn't sure whether it was magic or not, but it left a strong impression.

So then, were those ability points for...?

As he looked back up, Jinwoo noticed a little box on the bed and the stat screen floating in front of him.

That must be the mystery box thing on the bed, but.....

More important was the stat screen. It displayed a brief overview of his own stats.

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 100]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 1]

[Title: None]

[MP: 10]

[Stats]

Strength: 10

Stamina: 10

Agility: 10

Intelligence: 10

Perception: 10

(Available ability points: 3)

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1

His stats were at a similar level to a newly created character in an online game he used to play way back in the day.

Are these my current stats?

He was presently at level 1. All his stats were pretty basic. It wasn't surprising, since he was classified as the weakest even among E-rank hunters.

What got his attention were the skills.

Willpower was his passive skill, and Dash was his active skill. They sounded weirdly familiar.

"Oh, thinking back, yesterday....."

Yesterday, or more precisely earlier that morning, those words had been in some messages he'd received while being chased by centipedes in the penalty zone. They'd arrived about three hours in, when he'd been racing around with everything he had.

[You learned Skill: Dash Lv.1.]

[You learned Skill: Willpower Lv.1.]

At the time, he'd been so focused on running that he didn't have the presence of mind to think about what it meant, but he did now.

Jinwoo verified the details of the skills.

[SKILL: DASH LV.1]

Active skill.

5 mana required.

Running has strengthened your legs. When activated, your speed increases by 30 percent. When in use, your mana will decrease by 1

every minute.

[SKILL: WILLPOWER LV.1]

Passive skill.

No mana required.

You have endless willpower. When your stamina falls below 30 percent, Willpower will activate, and you will receive 50 percent less damage.

Was I able to learn Dash and Willpower because I kept running persistently?

It made sense when he put it like that. It meant that if he kept doing the same action and met a certain condition, he might be able to learn a new skill.

“That’s incredible!”

This was a huge advantage. Hunters could acquire skills only when they were first awakened or by learning them from a rune stone, which could sometimes be obtained from A-rank magic beasts. Rune stones could cost several 100,000,000 won to over several 1,000,000,000 won.

Recently, the most expensive rune stone was auctioned off for 7,000,000,000 won. That stone, which held the skill to fully cure many people at once, was purchased anonymously by an S-rank healer from a foreign country who emptied out all their life savings.

Jinwoo’s heart started racing.

Increased speed and decreased damage. They weren’t comparable to a skill costing several 1,000,000,000 won, but they were still great. And to receive them free of charge...

Jinwoo didn’t have a lot of magic, so it might be difficult to utilize them properly, but he was still excited to have them.

And it says Willpower doesn’t even need mana.....

Mana probably meant magic. Meaning, even if he didn’t have a lot of magic, he could still use Willpower as much as he wanted.

This was huge.

“But.....what does this ‘Unknown’ mean?”

[Skill]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max

Unknown was one of his passive skills. Passive skills should be activated automatically, but there was no other information.

There isn't a single clue.

With so little information to go on, Jinwoo knew there wouldn't be any point in contemplating it further. He decided to focus his attention on something else.

Ability points.....

The three ability points he'd received hadn't been distributed yet.

[Stats]

Strength:	10
Stamina:	10
Agility:	10
Intelligence:	10
Perception:	10

(Available ability points: 3)

I guess I can increase stats by three points?

There were five different attributes on the stat list. They were all low, most likely because he was level 1.

But if all of this was actually real, his decisions would have consequences. If his actual abilities changed according to his choices, how did they expect him to come to any kind of decision?

Jinwoo's expression grew serious.

Strength probably means power.....

He could guess what “strength,” “stamina,” and “agility” meant. They were common enough terms in video game stats.

The problems were “intelligence” and “perception,” and like before, the system wasn’t very user-friendly with its lack of explanations. If he raised his intelligence, would he get smarter? If he raised his perception, would he have keener senses? Whatever intelligence and perception were, they didn’t seem particularly useful to him.

Jinwoo was a combat hunter. What he needed was power, speed, or even stamina.

If I had to pick one of those three, it’d have to be power.

Becoming stronger would be quite convenient. He also wanted to see what changes occurred physically if his stats went up. Ultimately, he invested all his points in what he thought would result in the most obvious change, his strength.

“Three points to strength.”

Ping!

[Stats]

Strength:	13
Stamina:	10
Agility:	10
Intelligence:	10
Perception:	10

(Available ability points: 0)

Is.....that it?

That was it. The only change was the number in the strength stat going from ten to thirteen in the hologram screen before him. He didn’t feel any hidden energy rising up from deep inside him like in an anime or a movie.

"Has anything changed?"

Jinwoo decided to test his strength. He positioned himself next to the bed and tried lifting it. He could feel its weight, but it was easier to lift than he expected. Still, he wasn't sure if this was because he'd gotten stronger or if the bed simply wasn't that heavy.

I should've tried lifting it before I added the points.

It was hard to make a before-and-after comparison now that he'd already used up his points.

If only I had more.....

He was pursing his lips when he suddenly remembered something. "The rewards for the penalty quest!"

The daily quest wasn't the only thing he'd completed today. He'd almost gotten killed, but he'd also completed the penalty quest and seen the notification saying that he'd received rewards.

Jinwoo hurriedly called up his inbox.

[Your rewards for completing the penalty quest have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

"I knew it!" He pumped his fist.

Of course he would!

[YOU HAVE THE FOLLOWING REWARDS.]

Reward 1. Ability Points +3

Reward 2. Mystery Box (1)

[Would you like to accept all?]

Unlike the daily quest rewards, full recovery wasn't an option, but Jinwoo was interested only in the ability points. He was worried there would be a difference in the amount awarded, as it was the reward for a penalty quest, but fortunately, he was given three points this time as well.

Jinwoo excitedly yelled, "Add three points to strength."

Ping!

[Stats]

Strength:	16
Stamina:	10
Agility:	10
Intelligence:	10
Perception:	10

(Available ability points: 0)

His strength stat jumped from thirteen to sixteen.

He positioned himself next to the bed and flexed his arms. He found it easier to lift the bed than before. He had now verified there was an actual difference.

“It really works.....!”

He'd actually gotten stronger. According to the stats, he'd increased his strength by 60 percent, so there was no way he wouldn't feel a difference.

Exhilarated, Jinwoo started lifting various pieces of furniture in his hospital room, making a racket. He was forced to stop after he was chided by the head nurse, who happened to be passing by and poked her head in after hearing all the noise.

“I’m so sorry.....”

Jinwoo breathed a relieved sigh after she left. “Whew...”

But he couldn’t calm down. His heart was racing.

Ba-dump, ba-dump...

It was beating so hard, it almost hurt.

There would be a quest every day with ability points as rewards! As long as the phenomenon didn’t suddenly disappear, he would be able to live a completely different life from before. This was an amazing opportunity.

To add to that, his stat screen also indicated his level.

How can I increase my level?

Jinwoo shook his head.

Nah.....that's probably not possible.

Despite everything, leveling up still seemed too far of a reach. He didn't dare hope that it was possible. Quests and rewards were more than enough for him.

He would increase his attributes with ability points. He'd become stronger today than yesterday and stronger tomorrow than today. He'd strengthen himself more and more every single day.

Me, the weakest among E-rank hunters, the Weakest Hunter of All Mankind, getting stronger?

Never mind S-or A-rank hunters, his C-and D-rank colleagues would laugh if they heard him. They'd probably fall over themselves making fun of him. Jinwoo Sung becoming stronger? Jinwoo Sung, the Weakest Hunter of all Mankind?

But Jinwoo didn't care if people laughed at him. In fact, he was used to being mocked. He was just glad to have this opportunity.

But he did begin to wonder...

Is this how a reawakening goes?

It was rare, but there were cases in which a low-rank hunter became one of the best through reawakening. Did that mean all the hunters who got stronger via reawakening had experienced this phenomenon?

I need to do some research.

Curious, Jinwoo sat down in front of the computer situated in the corner of the room. There were quite a few amenities in these VIP accommodations provided by the association.

Takataka-tak.

His fingers moved quickly over the keyboard. He searched and searched and searched some more. He visited countless websites. This included a site that could be accessed only by those with hunter licenses. He even shelled out to access some promising documents that were locked behind a paywall.

Even so, there was not so much as a single case comparable, much less identical, to his.

It's not the same.....

What he was going through was totally different from a reawakening.

Reawakened hunters seemed to get their new powers in a manner similar to when they first awakened as hunters. No one had experienced anything like Jinwoo, whether it be hearing things at death's door or being able to see their stats like in a video game or increasing their power with points.

Hmm, just in case.....

He made an anonymous post on a hunters-only forum.

[Title: Something strange happened.]

[Contents: I started seeing my stats on a floating screen like in a video game, and I can even upgrade them. Has anyone else experienced this?]

The comments section under the post exploded.

↳Anonymous: LOLOLOLOL Here comes another nutjob.

↳Anonymous: You sure you're not crazy?

↳Anonymous: What a freak.

↳Anonymous: I think you play too many games.....

↳Anonymous: Are you a cartoonist?

↳Anonymous: Get to a hospital fr.

↳Anonymous: I want to hear more details.

↳Anonymous: Stop accepting anyone with a hunter's license and do some spring cleaning on this site.....

The tens of comments were all in a similar vein.

"Haaah." Jinwoo sighed.

He'd wasted a lot of time online with nothing to show for it. All he'd gained

was the ridicule of people on the forum. If he'd gone to all these lengths but turned up empty.....

"I guess I'm the only one."

The one and only, a one-of-a-kind hunter!

It would take time to realize the full potential of this phenomenon and how much help it'd be, but being the only one with this power didn't sound that bad.

He looked around and realized it was already late at night.

"Where did the time go.....?" Jinwoo frowned.

His eyes were tired from staring at the monitor for so long. He massaged his temples for a while and then got up to do some light stretching. He moved his body to-and-fro.

While doing some side stretches, he spotted two boxes that had fallen to the floor.

"Oh."

The mystery boxes. The small boxes were covered in simple wrapping paper and tied with plain ribbons, again reminding him of something from a video game.

I guess they fell when I was making a mess.

He'd forgotten that he'd received the boxes as rewards. Jinwoo picked up the one closest to him and opened it.

".....A bandage?"

When he stared hard at the object that appeared to be a bandage, its information popped up in green letters.

[ITEM: BANDAGE]

Normal bandage. Good for small wounds. May be kept in your inventory.

"It's an actual bandage."

He thought it might have a special power like treasures found in dungeons,

but it seemed like that wasn't the case.

Though I guess I've never heard of bandages appearing in a dungeon.....

He opened the other box, feeling half-disappointed and half-expectant.

Inside was a ballpoint pen. He looked at it from every angle and pressed the top to make the ballpoint appear, but it really was just a regular pen.

[ITEM: BALLPOINT PEN]

An ordinary ballpoint pen. Good for writing memos. May be kept in your inventory.

It looked like mystery boxes generated miscellaneous items at random.

"Hmm....."

It hadn't been a complete loss, however. Although he wasn't in need of a bandage or a pen, thanks to the items, he'd learned of the existence of an inventory.

Information screens for other items in the room didn't appear in green letters, so it was safe to assume this was a feature that pertained to items from mystery boxes.

"Inventory."

At his command, a screen consisting of a graphic with dozens of empty squares materialized in midair.

A level-1 user's inventory should have been empty...but his wasn't. There in the very first space was an item that was all too familiar.

"Is that.....?" Jinwoo took it out.

Ping!

[ITEM: KIM SANGSHIK'S STEEL SWORD]

Attack Power +10

It was Kim's sword that Jinwoo had grabbed in the underground temple. He thought he'd dropped it there.

"Good to see you again, bro." Jinwoo couldn't help smiling.

Maybe because it had survived the near-death experience with him, he was happy to see it again. Also, it was too high-quality to be left in that world.

Didn't Mr. Kim say he paid 3,000,000 won for this?

Hunter-grade weapons look ordinary but aren't. A magic beast can't be hurt unless the weapon is imbued with mana. Because of this, weapons made for battling magic beasts are naturally expensive.

I should use this guy for now.

Jinwoo had fought against magic beasts with his bare hands until now because he couldn't afford a weapon. Even if it was a used sword, he was grateful to have it.

This is mine now.

If Kim saw it in Jinwoo's possession, he'd probably be frothing at the mouth trying to get it back. He was selfish to the point where he'd run away and abandoned the one who'd saved his life.

Jinwoo had both this sword and this new opportunity because he'd risked his life. He had no intention of giving up the weapon that easily.

His eyes narrowed.

He'd learned two things in that underground temple.

First, he needed to get stronger. He'd almost died a number of times simply because he was weak.

But that wasn't the only thing.

He hadn't stopped the young choir man even though he'd known what the result would be, and he hadn't stood up for Song even though he knew Kim had been in the wrong. He'd turned a blind eye even though he'd known what needed to happen in order to survive.

If he didn't want to feel ashamed, he had to become stronger.

And the other lesson—

No good deed goes unpunished.

Jinwoo's good deeds had been met with betrayal. Three of his colleagues had abandoned him even though he'd needed their help just to stand. He'd begged them to come back, but none of them had. They couldn't remember who had saved their lives.

Give-and-take.

From now on, he would never put his own life on the line for someone else out of the kindness of his heart. After all, wasn't one's own life the most important thing?

These were the lessons Jinwoo learned after being on the brink of death.

Be stronger and be tougher.

"I can do this."

He was not one to make the same mistake twice.

* * *

Nurse Yura Choi was sitting at a food cart, having a good time with a friend she hadn't seen in a while.

"Oh, that's right." Yura belatedly recalled the fact that her friend worked for the Hunter's Association. Her current job at a big hospital for hunters was in large part thanks to this friend.

"You know a lot about hunters, right?"

"As much as the next person. Why?"

"Have you heard of a hunter with the ability to heal quickly?"

"Healers are like that. Just one recovery spell and bam!"

"No, no. Not by using magic—I mean unconsciously."

"Unconsciously?"

"Like while they're passed out.....or while they're sleeping."

Her friend shook her head. "Nah, not possible. That's called regeneration, and it's a special ability only certain A-rank and above magic beasts have."

"But not people?"

"Nope. I've never heard of a hunter with that ability."

"R-right....." Had she been seeing things?

Yura was nodding when her friend added, "But.....who knows—it may be possible for an S-rank hunter."

Yura perked up. "S-rank?"

"S-rank hunters are absolute beasts, but there's not a lot of public info about them. What was it again? There was some rumor going around that Yoonho Baek from the White Tiger Guild can *turn into* some kind of monster."

But Jinwoo Sung was an E-rank hunter. Hunters' ranks were public knowledge and on the association's website for anyone to look up if they so desired.

After the incident from this morning, Yura had searched for Jinwoo online out of curiosity.

His rank is too low to have any special abili..... Oh!

A reawakening! She remembered hearing something about a reawakening when she'd passed by his hospital room yesterday or the day before.

Did he reawaken as a high-rank hunter?

Never mind being friends with an S-rank hunter, it wasn't easy for the average person to even meet one. Not only were they rare, they were also incredibly busy. What were the chances she'd have such an outstanding person as her patient?

A hunter who'd just gone from E rank to S rank...

Since people don't know how great he is yet.....

If she could score some points with him now, it might benefit her down the road. Opportunities to befriend an S-rank hunter didn't come easily. Some even tried paying fortunes just to meet S-rank hunters and failed.

Yura's grin grew bigger as she daydreamed.

"Hey, girl. Did something good happen to you? Why're you smiling like that?"

"No, no. It's nothing." Even as Yura shook her head, she found it hard to hide her smile.

* * *

"Wow, check *him* out."

"Did that patient always look so yummy?"

Two young female nurses whispered to each other as they passed Jinwoo in the hallway. He pretended not to hear them and went back to his room.

It had been a week since he'd started doing the daily quests. A lot had begun to change, including his body. Jinwoo stood in front of the mirror placed in the corner of the room.

"Ahem..." Jinwoo looked himself over in the full-length mirror. Even though no one could see him, Jinwoo wasn't used to checking himself out and could only bring himself to peek after hemming and hawing for a few moments.

Like he thought.....he looked different. His body was transforming.

I'm bulking up.

The most obvious change was his muscles. He was leaner, and his muscles were more pronounced. Due to this, his shoulders were wider, and his whole body appeared bigger.

But I don't look too stocky.

He had the right amount of muscle in all the right places. If someone had to describe him in a single word, they might call him *ripped*. Even he had to admit that he looked good, so no wonder the nurses agreed.

I guess it's all because of these quests.

Jinwoo brought up the stat screen.

Ping!

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 100]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 1]

[Title: None]

[MP: 10]

[Stats]

Strength:	31
Stamina:	10
Agility:	10
Intelligence:	10
Perception:	10

(Available ability points: 0)

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1

His strength attribute was already over thirty. He didn't know how effective raising the other stats would be, so he'd concentrated all his ability points into raising his strength for the time being, since that would be the most helpful attribute when fighting magic beasts.

But this couldn't have happened to my body after only a couple of days just by exercising.

There could be only one reason. As his strength increased, his muscles were changing in response for optimum effect. He couldn't think of any other explanation.

He'd been slightly worried about investing his points solely in strength, but

after seeing the results, he'd been very satisfied, and his worries had faded.

Still, I do think I'm attracting too much attention.

The nurses were talking about Jinwoo more and more. Since their job required knowledge of human anatomy, it was inevitable that they would quickly notice the change. Because of his keen hearing, Jinwoo was very aware of this.

Looks like it's time to get out of here.

All this attention wasn't good. He not only felt burdened by it, but he wanted to avoid anyone else finding out about the system. There was no point stirring something up for no reason. He wanted to upgrade his ability level in peace without anyone knowing.

Getting discharged shouldn't be a problem.

Luckily, all the test results had come back normal. He could leave at any time.

Heck, the association and the hospital seemed to be hoping he'd leave soon. They probably didn't want to spend too much money on an E-rank hunter. It was said that the government paid for S-rank hunters' hospital bills as one of their many benefits, but Jinwoo lived in a completely different world from them.

He decided it'd be a good call to leave the hospital soon. He wanted to check on something anyway.

"Where did I put it.....?" He rifled through his pockets and took something out.

It was a shiny gold key. It had a simplistic design and could easily be mistaken for a trinket.

He gazed at it for a long while before shoving it back into his pocket.

* * *

As he was going through discharge paperwork, a young nurse came flying up to him.

"Huff, huff! Are you leaving, Jinwoo?"

"What? Oh, yes."

It was Yura Choi, the nurse in charge of Jinwoo. She looked disappointed that he was leaving.

He didn't understand her reaction. He wondered if he had done something wrong, but nothing came to mind.

She hesitated a little before taking out a notepad. "May I have your number?"

"My number?"

"Yes.....if that's okay with you."

Maybe they were planning to send him more test results? He took the notepad from her, but that's all she had for him.

Yura's face flushed as Jinwoo blinked at her. "Wh-what's wrong?"

"Um..... I don't have a pen."

"Oh. J-just a minute, please." In her haste, she hadn't thought to bring a pen. She looked around, all flustered.

Oh, wait a minute. If it's a pen.....

The next second, he was holding a pen. It had instantly appeared in his hand as soon as he recalled the ballpoint pen in his inventory.

Anything he put in his inventory could be put back in or taken out with a mere thought. The inventory really was a convenient feature.

Once he confirmed that it really was the pen in his hand, he called to Yura.

"I realized I already had a pen."

"Oh, really? Whew, I'm glad." She placed her hand on her chest and gave a sigh of relief.

Jinwoo smiled as he wrote out his phone number.

It was always like this. An opportunity to use items from mystery boxes tended to come up shortly after obtaining them. It rained the day after he received a raincoat, and he'd gotten a glass cup the day before the water cooler ran out of paper cups. Sometimes he'd get worthless things like the bandage,

but most of the items had their uses.

"Here."

Yura happily took the notepad back from Jinwoo. She gave him a bow.

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Oh, um... I'm looking forward to it, too."

With that, Yura rushed off somewhere. He cocked his head as he watched her hurry away.

But.....looking forward to what?

In any case, it was nice to see that she was as polite as she was cute.

With that in mind, Jinwoo left the hospital with a spring in his step, feeling like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

* * *

Jinwoo's first stop was the Hunter's Association Headquarters in Guro-gu, Seoul. Hunter-issue smartphones used specialized technology, so Jinwoo had to put in a request directly with the association.

The employee checked their monitor and then informed him, "It'll take two weeks to get your phone."

"Excuse me? It takes *that* long?" Jinwoo's eyes went wide.

His old phone had been totaled while he was being chased by the gigantic statue. To think it'd take two weeks for a new one...

"If you need a phone right away, you can rent one temporarily for fifty thousand won."

Forget buying, simply renting a phone cost as much as 50,000 won. It was too expensive for him, considering his financial situation.

No one ever calls me anyway.

The association would contact his house directly if they couldn't reach him by phone, so there was no reason to waste money on a rental.

Jinwoo shook his head. "I'll just wait for the new one."

"Understood. We'll send your new phone to your house as soon as it is available."

"Thank you." Jinwoo got up.

He was now finished with his errands. He'd already diligently completed his daily quest, and signing up for a new phone had gone faster than he'd expected.

He fished the gold key from his pocket after exiting the association building.

I guess it's time to figure this out.

The key's info screen popped up in green writing.

[ITEM: DUNGEON KEY]

Acquisition Difficulty: E

Category: Key

A key that will take you to an instance dungeon. It can be used at exit 3 of the Hapjeong subway station.

The key had come from a mystery box he'd received after finishing a daily quest. At first, he'd dismissed it, but when he saw the display indicating the level of difficulty to acquire it, he figured it couldn't be a regular key.

This had been the deciding factor for leaving the hospital.

A key to an instance dungeon.....

Instance or not, a dungeon was a dungeon.

Jinwoo had many painful memories related to dungeons. Once, he'd participated in an E-rank raid and was hurt so badly that he'd ended up hospitalized for a week. At least he'd made it out alive thanks to his colleagues. If he used the key to go to a dungeon, he'd have to do it alone.

After much thought, he came to a decision.

It shouldn't be a problem if I take a quick peek.

He could run away if it came to it. Since he was jogging ten kilometers daily these days, he was confident in his ability to get away, at least.

* * *

Jinwoo was mistaken.

Knock, knock!

“Where did this wall come from.....?”

He knocked on the invisible wall and yelled at passersby, but that was all in vain. People kept going their own busy ways. Sometimes they approached exit three to enter Hapjeong Station, but they vanished from his view once they reached the invisible wall.

It was as if he were in a different dimension.

When Jinwoo tried to force his way out, he received another message.

Ping!

[You cannot leave the dungeon. You must either kill the boss or use a teleportation stone.]

He'd been getting the same message for a while now.

The dungeon's key had disappeared as soon as he stepped through exit three. Realizing something was wrong, he'd turned back only to find the entrance was already blocked. He had been expecting there to be a gate or a secret door somewhere near exit three, but that clearly wasn't the case.

To make matters worse, unlike a typical dungeon, it was impossible to leave of his own accord.

“This isn't a normal dungeon.....”

Jinwoo sighed and turned to get his bearings.

The subway station had transformed into a jungle. Vines covered the walls, and the stench of a rotting corpse hung in the air. He could hear some animal howling in the distance every so often.

“.....”

It wasn't that there was a dungeon near exit three of Hapjeong Station. The station itself was the dungeon.

Jinwoo took the steel sword out of his inventory.

Ping!

[ITEM: KIM SANGSHIK'S STEEL SWORD]

Attack Power +10

The exit was blocked, and he had no way to contact the outside world. His only option was to go forward.

Jinwoo swallowed nervously and slowly descended the stairs. He quietly looked around but sensed nothing amiss. He held his breath as he assessed his surroundings, but he couldn't sense anything.

Still, it would be unwise for him to let his guard down. Even among low-rank magic beasts, many of them had ways of masking their presence. Or rather, it'd probably be more accurate to say that, because their ranks were low, they had to mask their presence in order to pull off surprise attacks.

Past the washrooms and farther in the station were the subway shops. The old, run-down stores reminded Jinwoo of abandoned buildings. Under the dim fluorescent lighting, the abandoned stores and corridors with absolutely no sign of life gave him the creeps.

Zzzt-zzzt...

Some of the lights flickered as if they were about to go out.

As he walked down a corridor with weeds pushing out between the broken floor tiles, Jinwoo felt an uneasy chill.

"....."

Everything was deadly quiet, but he sensed he was being watched.

And then there was the smell. It was the intense stench of a rotting dead animal infested with flies. It was a scent familiar to Jinwoo, since he frequented dungeons.

This smell..... It's an animal type!

Jinwoo couldn't feel its presence anywhere. It was almost like a predator, hiding and lying in wait for its prey.

It's waiting for an opening, huh?

Then Jinwoo had to give it one.

He purposefully turned around, exposing his back, and slowly started walking the way he'd come. Animals attack when an opponent shows their back. Animal-type magic beasts aren't much different.

Jinwoo had taken three steps when...

Crrrshhh!

Something blasted through the display window of a clothing store at the end of the corridor. It landed on the floor and immediately jumped for Jinwoo's neck.

Graaar!

Prepared for the attack, Jinwoo swung his sword around in a wide arc as soon as he heard the noise.

It was like a reflex!

Shhhk!

The sharp blade sliced through the creature's jaw. The monster tumbled to the floor with a squeal.

Kiiin, kiiin!

It was a huge wolf with bright-red fur. Its snout had been severed, and the monster was writhing on the floor in pain.

When Jinwoo inspected it, he noticed its name floated above its head like the centipede in the penalty zone.

[Steel-Fanged Lycan]

Unlike last time, the writing was in white and not red.

No time to waste!

This was his chance—while the wounded monster couldn't get up. Jinwoo leaped into action. He ran at the creature and swung his sword down, lopping off its head.

Gaaackkk!

The lycan gave a howl of pain as it died.

[You have defeated a Steel-Fanged Lycan.]

“Yes!”

But his celebration was cut short.

Two more lycans that had been hiding behind display windows now emerged. Looked like it had friends.

Jinwoo’s eyes went wide.

Grrrrr!

They bared their fangs and raced toward him.

Jinwoo grimaced. In his excitement, he’d struck his sword down with too much force, and it was now embedded deep in the floor. It must’ve gotten caught on something, as Jinwoo couldn’t pull it out.

It’s stuck.

One of the lycans leaped at his face.

“Oh no!”

He ducked. His attacker sailed over his head and smacked its head on the ground, unable to slow its momentum.

Kraak!

The stone floor cracked as its fangs pierced it.

Those teeth aren’t just for show.

There was no time to be impressed, though. The other lycan was running straight at him.

It didn’t look like he’d be able to free the sword in time.

“Dammit!”

Jinwoo gave up on the sword and instead swung his fist at the lycan flying toward him.

Whoooosh!

The sound his fist made as it snapped forward wasn't normal.

THWAK!

The lycan's head exploded with one punch. The headless body skidded out from where it hit the ceiling and then fell to the ground hard.

Whump!

".....?"

Jinwoo stared at his fist, dumbfounded. That level of monstrous strength was completely unexpected.

Having witnessed this, the lycan he'd dodged earlier started backing away with its tail between its legs.

"Huh.....?"

Was this from using all those points on his strength attribute? Even as the headless lycan's leg stopped twitching, Jinwoo still could not pick his own jaw off the floor.

Then came that familiar notification bell.

Ping!

[You have defeated a Steel-Fanged Lycan.]

[You have leveled up!]

* * *

"I leveled up?"

Wondering if he'd misheard something, Jinwoo hurriedly brought up his stat screen.

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 205]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 2]

[Title: None]

[MP: 22]

[Stats]

Strength: 32

Stamina: 11

Agility: 11

Intelligence: 11

Perception: 11

(Available ability points: 0)

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1

His level really had gone up! And it looked like leveling up meant one point was added to each of his stats. That meant rewards from quests weren't the only way to upgrade his abilities. He could increase them by leveling up as well.

I can't believe it!

The impossible had been confirmed to be possible right before his eyes. His heart started racing in excitement.

On top of that, I get more ability points by leveling up.

Completing a quest gave him three ability points. Leveling up gave him five. While he didn't particularly care for not having the option to personally

distribute the points, leveling up seemed to be a better way to increase his stats. Plus, quests were currently limited to one per day, but there was a higher chance that there was no limit for leveling up.

My level increased just by defeating two of these creatures.

This was how it worked in video games. People usually leveled up faster in earlier stages.

Jinwoo was currently level 2. It was safe to assume he was at the bottom.

But he wasn't an ordinary low-level Player—his strength stat was already over thirty. If each level-up raised his stats by one, Jinwoo's strength was equal to that of a level-20 person. What would happen if a user with a level-20 ability decided to go hunting in a level-1 hunting ground?

I'm overpowered.....

The unexpected destructive power of his punch proved his theory.

Even though my strength stat is three times higher than what I started with.....I'm more than three times stronger!

Jinwoo had started with a strength stat of ten. Strength at ten versus strength at thirty... The number had tripled, but the power he'd demonstrated was much more than three times his starting point.

Maybe.....?

Maybe his power was increasing exponentially as his stats went up? That would explain this destructive power.

His movements had gotten faster as well. Before, he wouldn't have been able to dodge the lycan that had come barreling at him so easily, nor would his punch have made that whistling sound.

"Then again, makes sense that my speed would go up when strength increases."

Raising his strength stat developed his muscles, which in turn raised both his power and speed. The battle with the lycans had demonstrated this.

But then what would change if he raised his agility stat? He was dying to find

out, but there was no way of doing so now. To accomplish it, he'd have to increase the stat.

But.....

He felt it was a waste to use the ability points received from quests on agility. Why squander resources there when raising strength increased both his power and speed in one go?

That left only one other way.

I need to level up as quickly as possible.

He had to in order to increase agility. Every journey begins with the first step. He'd see a difference someday as long as he kept compounding it by one.

Jinwoo finally pulled the sword out of the ground.

Should I get going, then?

There was one more lycan left to kill.

“Hmm..... Where'd it go?”

The lycan that had been there not too long ago had disappeared. Jinwoo searched thoroughly nearby but couldn't find a trace of it. It had probably escaped while Jinwoo was distracted by his stat screen. Thinking back, its tail had been down, and it'd been eyeing him for a chance to flee.

“Tsk.”

He pursed his lips in disappointment at the thought of losing a chance at gaining experience points. He was about to move on when it occurred to him.

Do these things not have essence stones?

He abruptly stopped.

Magic beasts found in gates had at least one essence stone in their body, if not several. If you were lucky, you might also get a rune stone from one. Both rune stones, which held hidden skills that hunters could learn, and essence stones, which had a variety of uses, could fetch a high price. It wouldn't be wrong to say that hunters went on raids not just for the basic pay from the association but also to harvest essence stones.

Jinwoo was no different. He was disappointed to find no such items despite his success today.

Just in case, he cut open the dead lycan's stomach, but it was a waste of time. These things were totally different from the magic beasts he knew. He'd been in many dungeons in his time but had never seen a magic beast that resembled a wolf.

Jinwoo shook his hand clean as he stood up.

"Hmm?"

Something shiny in the lycan's mouth caught his attention. He forced its jaw open. One of its teeth was shining.

When Jinwoo extended his hand toward it, a message popped up.

[You have discovered Item: Lycan Fang. Would you like to acquire it?]

"Acquire."

[ITEM: LYCAN FANG]

Acquisition Difficulty: None

Category: Miscellaneous

A lycan's large, sharp fang. It can be placed in the inventory or sold in the shop.

Jinwoo blinked at the fang in his hand.

There's a shop?

This system really wasn't user-friendly! A user had to figure things out on their own as they experienced different scenarios. The worst offender had been the penalty quest, where he'd almost been killed with absolutely no explanation.

He angrily gnashed his teeth at the memory as he summoned the shop.

"Shop."

He sort of expected a store with a large sign that said SHOP run by an NPC to appear out of thin air. All that popped up, though, was a hologram screen with

green writing, similar to the other messages.

There were two words: *Buy* and *Sell*.

“.....”

It was quite a simple setup.

Jinwoo chose to buy. He had no money, but he was curious about the shop's inventory.

Alas, the system was very strict.

[You cannot buy anything at your level.]

He was used to being treated like dirt when it came to establishments that required payment.

“Yeah, yeah.”

He turned his attention to selling.

[Would you like to sell Item: Lycan Fang?]

“Sure.”

His inventory screen appeared with the sound of jingling coins. All the way at the bottom of the inventory, the space labeled *gold* had the number twenty written inside. It had been blank yesterday.

Twenty gold.

It wasn't actual money he could use in real life, and he couldn't buy anything in the shop yet, so he couldn't really grasp how much twenty gold was worth.

I guess it'd be worth as much as something from an E-rank dungeon?

While an instance dungeon wasn't the same as an actual dungeon, it had to be about the same level.

Jinwoo figured it'd be better to be safe than sorry and went to retrieve the other lycan's fang but then face-palmed when he realized something.

“I crushed its head.....”

His shoulders slumped as he changed direction. The lost twenty gold weighed heavily on Jinwoo's mind even if he wasn't sure how much they'd be worth, but

he couldn't justify wasting time looking for a fang that could be anywhere in this darkness.

His disappointment quickly dissipated when he turned around.

Grrraaar.

Grrr.

Grrrr!

Grar!

The lycan he thought had run away had come back with reinforcements! A delighted smile bloomed on Jinwoo's face. There appeared to be at least twenty of them.

"Eureka!"

Was this the right time to use that word? Well, whatever. It was definitely used when expressing happiness.

He gripped his sword tightly. "I'll beat every last one of you to a pulp and leave only your fangs."

The lycans flinched in fear at the murderous glint in the eyes of this man who was hungry for cash. Then Jinwoo leaped toward them.

* * *

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Jinwoo's level shot up quickly, as he'd expected. He'd already reached level 7 after scouring the first floor and exterminating all the lycans. He'd jumped up five levels.

Whiiine!

An odd message popped up after he killed the last lycan, which was trying to run away with its tail between its legs.

Ping!

[You have acquired Title: Wolf Assassin.]

“Title?”

[TITLE: WOLF ASSASSIN]

A title given to those skilled at hunting wolves. When battling an animal-type monster, all abilities will increase by 40 percent.

When he opened his stat screen, his title had changed.

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 766]

[Fatigue: 3]

[Level: 7]

[Title: Wolf Assassin]

[MP: 81]

[Stats]

Strength: 37

Stamina: 16

Agility: 16

Intelligence: 16

Perception: 16

(Available ability points: 0)

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1

An ability boost when fighting against animal-type monsters. It was limited to only a certain type of target, but a 40 percent boost would still be a big help.

Will this apply to animal types in regular dungeons, too?

If that was true, he'd be able to defeat the magic beasts in a raid with just a snap of his fingers.

In any case, Jinwoo had managed to gather quite a haul.

Thirty-four lycan fangs, two dull daggers, a traveler's cloak, and a transportation stone.

He'd discovered that items could occasionally be found in a dead lycan's stomach. Unfortunately, none of them seemed very useful. The dull daggers didn't have much attack power compared to his steel sword, and the traveler's cloak was less a clothing item and more of a miscellaneous item to sell to the shop.

He ended up receiving more than 1,000 gold for selling everything.

[Balance: 1,060 gold]

But I'm not particularly happy about it.....

No matter how much gold he saved, he had nowhere to spend it.

The only thing left was the teleportation stone. Back at exit three, when he'd made a fuss about leaving, he'd received a message that said he could leave once he found a teleportation stone. He could leave here if he wanted.

He had two options now. The stairs leading down to the second underground floor were right in front of him. And he had the teleportation stone in his hand.

Push forward or retreat...?

The old Jinwoo would've chosen to wait until his next opportunity without hesitation. That was how he'd survived so many raids despite his dismal abilities. People said it was a miracle, but it was actually due to smart decision-

making.

However, things were different now. He didn't want to go back. If he gave up now, he felt like he'd never be able to move forward.

"I've done a lifetime's worth of retreating."

Shouldn't he try to clash with what was ahead for once in his life?

He put the teleportation stone back in his pocket. His footsteps as he headed down to the second floor were as light as air.

* * *

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Unlike regular dungeons, monsters respawned in instance dungeons. Those on the first basement floor respawned while Jinwoo wiped out the ones on the second basement floor and vice versa.

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Jinwoo went back and forth between the first and second underground floors, defeating monsters until his level no longer increased.

Since I don't know when I'll get this kind of opportunity again...

At a certain point, he'd even memorized where and how monsters would come out and attack him.

"A monkey falls from the ceiling."

He swiftly avoided the long claws of the monkey-like monster dropping from overhead and stabbed it in the chest.

Eeeek!

"Cats on both the left and right side."

He beheaded the two black leopards that attacked him from either side.

Rrraaagh!

Grah!

[You have defeated a Razor-Clawed Briga.]

[You have defeated a Black-Shadow Razan.]

[You have defeated a Black-Shadow Razan.]

That was the end of the second underground floor. Jinwoo had cleared the floor once more, but it had been a while since his stats had frozen at level 15. It seemed like this was as far as he could progress on these floors.

“Stats.”

[Stats]

Strength: 45

Stamina: 24

Agility: 24

Intelligence: 24

Perception: 24

(Available ability points: 0) By level 15, his stats had increased quite a bit.

His agility was almost at twenty-five. He'd clearly realized the difference between strength and agility once the latter had surpassed twenty.

Agility didn't make Jinwoo faster but rather made it seem like his opponents were moving slower.

It's like everything's in slo-mo.

When a monkey fell from the ceiling or a leopard leaped toward him, they looked slowed down. It felt like he was seeing everything move frame by frame. This made it easy to avoid monsters as well as successfully pull off attacks. As advertised, he'd become more “agile.”

Speed was relative. As his agility stat went up, the gap between his and his opponents' skills widened to the point where, to them, it looked like he was moving at superhuman speeds.

If my strength and agility keep increasing, that combo is going to be

incredible.

That was the conclusion he reached regarding the agility stat.

“So...” Jinwoo turned his head. “...What should I do about that?”

He was looking at the stairs going down to the third underground floor. There was a reason he’d kept to the first and second basement floors even though there was a clear path to the third.

I’ve got chills...

As his perception stat increased, he detected more and more of a foreboding aura coming from the third underground floor.

Something powerful was down there. He didn’t need to see it to know that.

Jinwoo remembered the message he heard at the exit.

—You cannot leave the dungeon. You must either kill the boss or use a teleportation stone.

The big boss...

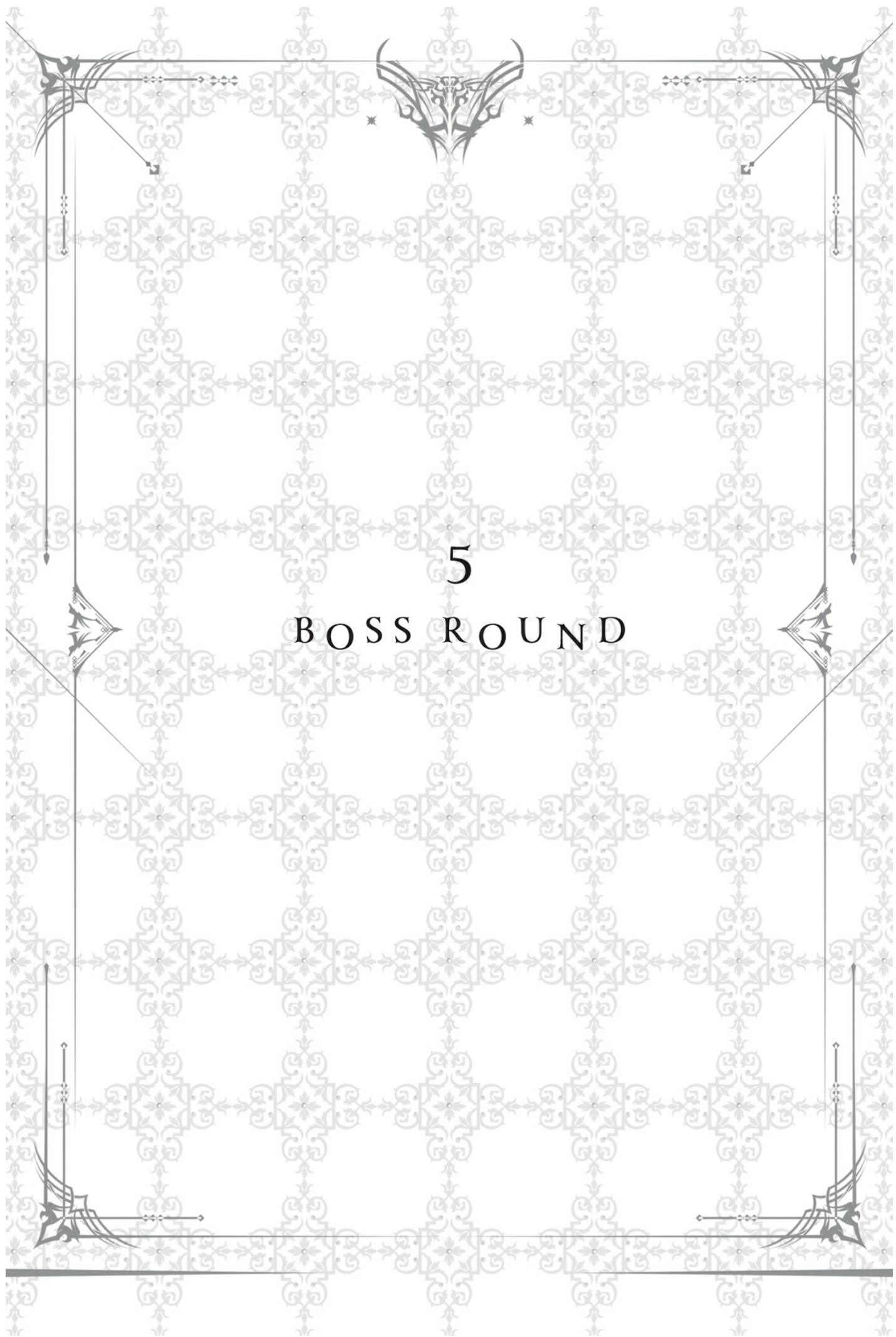
Jinwoo had kept going back and forth between the first and the second floors in order to level up as much as he could in preparation for taking out the boss. Even though he’d done that much preparation, he still felt nervous at the top of the stairs.

Jinwoo lightly slapped his cheeks.

Since I’m already here, I can’t go back without at least seeing its face, can I?

A healthy dose of stress was necessary to keep him on his toes. This was just the right amount.

Jinwoo gripped his sword with both hands and slowly descended the stairs.



5

BOSS ROUND



5

BOSS ROUND

Why did it seem like there were more steps than usual?

Jinwoo licked his dry lips.

It was way darker here than on the first and second floors, but he had no problem seeing.

Maybe because of the perception stat?

He felt like his eyesight was much better than before.

He cautiously went down a bit farther and spotted the subway tracks. Or rather, he could see the space where the tracks were supposed to be. Instead of rails, the area was filled with black water.

What is that?

It didn't look like a subway track..... More like a river or stream.

It happened the moment Jinwoo took a step forward for a closer look. In the blink of an eye, a large log-shaped object burst out of the water.

FFFSSSHHH!

Coming in hot!

What suddenly appeared before him was no log. It was a snake as thick as one.

"Whoa!"

Jinwoo hurriedly swung his sword at its head.

KLAAANG!

Jinwoo looked incredulous. “What the—?”

He was able to knock the charging snake’s head away from him, but his sword shattered. Shocked, he turned back.

Surprised by the counterattack, instead of rushing into its next strike, the snake stayed coiled up at a distance and glared at Jinwoo.

[King of the Swamp, Blue Venom-Fanged Kasaka]

Jinwoo could clearly see its name floating in red letters. This snake was much faster and stronger than any of the ordinary monsters whose names had appeared in white letters.

I can’t believe it broke a sword imbued with mana so easily...

Jinwoo swallowed hard as he eyed the kasaka.

Smooth blue scales covered its entire body. They were so closely embedded that it almost looked like armor. Sword attacks had proven futile on these scales.

Would punching it do anything?

As Jinwoo was trying to come up with a strategy, the kasaka seemed to finish sizing him up and charged once again. Its speed was incredible.

FSHHH!

Jinwoo squinted.

It’s coming!

His eyes had trouble following the kasaka before, but after focusing all his senses on it, he was starting to make out its movements. It was thanks to the agility stat.

As the kasaka lunged at him with its mouth wide open, Jinwoo quickly twisted around and grabbed it in a tight headlock as it passed by.

Kri-krick!

Jinwoo’s strength stat was close to fifty. He applied as much pressure as he could to the snake’s artery. The reptile thrashed and writhed in pain as Jinwoo refused to let up.

Jinwoo gritted his teeth and squeezed harder.

WHAM! WHAM!

Even as the snake smashed Jinwoo into the walls and floor, he clung to it for dear life.

If I hadn't maxed out my level as much as I could...

Once the mind thinks *what if*, it's difficult to stop. So many thoughts raced through Jinwoo's mind.

What if he hadn't leveled up?

What if he hadn't upgraded his strength stat?

This kasaka would've kicked his ass. This place could've been his grave. Not going straight down to the third underground floor had been a smart call. He'd made the right decision.

KRRRAAAKKK!

The sound of the kasaka's skull breaking was unsettling.

[You have defeated King of the Swamp, Blue Venom-Fanged Kasaka.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

As expected of a boss, after defeating the kasaka, Jinwoo went up by two levels.

Jinwoo pumped his fists.

His level had been stuck at 15, but it was now 17. He'd gone from level 1 to level 17 in a single day, which was an absolutely insane amount of growth.

That's all great, but.....

No one tackled a dungeon boss for the experience points. The best part of defeating a boss was the loot!

As he examined the lifeless snake, Jinwoo saw two things shining in its stomach.

Are there two because it was a boss?

He happily extended his hands.

Ping!

[You have discovered Item: Kasaka's Venom Fang. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered Item: Kasaka's Venom Gland. Would you like to acquire it?]

"Acquire all."

A dagger seemingly made from bone and a pouch with some kind of liquid appeared in Jinwoo's hands.

[ITEM: KASAKA'S VENOM FANG]

Acquisition Difficulty: C

Category: Dagger

Attack Power +25

A dagger made from a kasaka's venom fang. It contains kasaka venom and causes paralysis and drain debuffs when used to attack. You may keep it in your inventory or sell it in the shop.

Debuff: Paralysis: Opponent cannot move for a set time.

Debuff: Drain: Opponent's HP will decrease by 1 percent every second for a set time.

Jinwoo nodded in satisfaction.

Looks like it's a dagger made out of a fang, not bone. Based on its info, it seems like a pretty good item.

Next up was the pouch.

[ITEM: KASAKA'S VENOM GLAND]

Acquisition Difficulty: A

Category: Poison

This pouch contains refined kasaka poison. Harvesting this from a kasaka is very rare. Once you drink it, your skin will harden, but your muscles will be permanently damaged from the poison.

Buff: Kasaka's Armor Scales: Decreases physical damage by 20 percent
Debuff: Damaged Muscles: Strength -35

Jinwoo's face showed his conflicting delight and dismay.

Kasaka's Venom Fang was an excellent replacement for his broken steel sword. Not only was its formidable attack power twice as high as the broken sword's, but Jinwoo was especially happy about the paralysis and drain debuffs.

But the venom gland is.....

He had initially been excited when he saw it was an A-rank item in terms of acquisition difficulty, but his excitement was mitigated by a careful reading of the description. The part about decreasing damage by 20 percent seemed like an effect fitting of an A-rank item, but it had a fatal penalty of decreasing the strength stat by thirty-five points. Since Jinwoo had been especially focused on increasing his strength, that caveat cut him deep.

It was like a double-edged sword. Or no, it was more like a white elephant. Maybe it'd be worth using once his strength stat was so high that even losing thirty-five points wouldn't have much of a consequence, but it was impossible for Jinwoo as he was now.

".....Let's just put this away." He grimaced as he stored the dagger and poison in his inventory.

He would've been less disappointed if it had been an A-rank dagger and some C-rank poison. At least he'd have felt okay throwing away the C-rank poison.

As he did, a message popped up.

[As the boss has been defeated, the dungeon will now revert to its original state.]

* * *

Everything went blurry for a few moments before Jinwoo's eyesight reverted back to normal, though he did feel slightly dizzy.

When he looked around, he saw an ordinary subway station. The lights were bright, and the water that had once filled the tracks was gone.

“But why is there no one here?”

Not only were there no people, but there were no subway trains, either. He checked the time to see if transit hours were over.

It was currently ten o'clock. He'd stepped into Hapjeong Station at around lunchtime, so he'd spent over nine hours here.

Time flies.

If his fatigue levels hadn't reset with each level-up, he probably would've passed out a few times from exhaustion by now.

Either way, the subway should still be running...

No matter how long he waited, no train came, so Jinwoo shrugged and decided to leave the station.

He didn't see anybody along the way to the exit. As he trudged up the stairs, though, someone yelled at him.

“Hey!”

He didn't realize how welcome another person's voice would be. He looked up.

It was a soldier with a gun. “Who are you? What were you doing there? Did you not hear the news?”

Jinwoo tensed at the soldier's stern expression. “What happened?”

“What kind of question is that?”

As the soldier approached, he saw the broken sword in Jinwoo's hand. The broken sword wouldn't go back into the inventory, but Jinwoo had been hesitant to abandon it in the dungeon and had brought it back with him.

The soldier's eyes changed at the sight of it. He examined Jinwoo's appearance. Upon closer inspection, he noticed the signs of combat on Jinwoo's clothes.

The soldier's expression softened. “Are you a hunter?”

“Yes, I am.....”

“My apologies for being rude. This way, sir. Please follow me.”

“Um.....okay.” Jinwoo figured things would get too hard to explain if he tried to clear up a possible misunderstanding, so he decided to just go along with the soldier.

He glanced around. *Looks like.....*

Something wasn’t right. The street was totally empty. The only people he could see were soldiers and police officers. He also spotted the carcasses of dead magic beasts, trashed cars, and wrecked buildings.

Jinwoo realized what must have happened.

A gate must’ve opened near here.

While it was rare nowadays, what with the hunter system being so well established, sometimes a gate materialized in an out-of-the-way location and wouldn’t be discovered until it was too late.

Whenever that happened, the nearest army base would respond until hunters could arrive on the scene. Unfortunately, soldiers’ weapons have no effect on magic beasts, but they had to be prepared to make some sacrifices in order to give civilians a chance to escape safely.

To put it bluntly, they were essentially human shields. Someone had to do it, and the burden fell on the shoulders of the young men of the country.

“Thank you.” The soldier leading Jinwoo spoke up.

“Pardon?”

“We’re safe thanks to the hard work of hunters like you.”

“Oh.....”

He’d said “thank you.” Jinwoo wanted to return those words to the soldier. Hunters were thankful to soldiers, and soldiers were thankful to hunters, because both fought to protect someone or something.

Chhrrkkk—

The soldier’s face brightened at the radio message coming in.

"Almost all the beasts have been dealt with, and there's only one big one left."

Jinwoo nodded. He understood the situation even without the soldier's explanation.

He sensed a powerful force in the vicinity. He also sensed the energy of the hunters surrounding it. His increased perception ability let him process information he couldn't see by sensing it.

He had a gut feeling.

It's the boss.

And soon, he spotted it.

About ten or so hunters faced off against a giant made of stone in an empty lot nearby. The giant was about as tall as a utility pole. It was a golem-type magic beast.

"Eek....." The soldier whimpered and stepped back. Apparently, it was his first time seeing a magic beast, as he froze as soon as it came into view. Most people reacted the same way. Seeing a magic beast on TV or on a screen was totally different from seeing one in real life.

Jinwoo, on the other hand, was calmly assessing the whole situation.

"Healers! Please focus on the tanks!"

"We're already doing our best!"

"Why won't it go down?"

"Dealers, what're you doing? Doesn't look like it's gonna fall anytime soon!"

"Its defense is too high! We don't have enough mages!"

It had all happened so suddenly that low-rank hunters had been the first to answer the call. Both their defenses and offenses were minimal. It was looking to be a desperate struggle.

CRASH!

Right as the stone golem slammed its massive fist down, the tank's knees buckled for a moment.

“Argh!” Blood spewed from the hunter’s mouth.

“N-no!”

“The tank will die if this keeps up!”

“What d’you expect me to do?! I’m running out of magic power!”

“Where are all the high-rank hunters?”

The hunters were obviously reaching their limit. Jinwoo was observing this with a keen eye.

I.....can do this.

He slowly took a few steps back.

The golem-type boss had high defense, but its level appeared to be lower than it initially seemed. It likely wasn’t nearly as powerful as the Blue Venom-Fanged Something or Other from the instance dungeon.

I just need to neutralize its defense somehow.

All he needed was one blow so powerful that it would punch straight through its defense.

Once he was far enough, Jinwoo pulled his arm back. The muscles of the arm holding the broken sword quickly began to tighten. Thick veins appeared all the way to the top of his hand. He focused every bit of his power into his right arm.

When it was as tight as a bowstring, he launched it forward at a velocity close to the speed of sound.

“GO!”

* * *

D-rank hunter Hansoo Lee was falling into despair. He couldn’t keep this up any longer. His precious shield was starting to crack.

Healers seemed to be running out of magic power, and it was clear they were having trouble keeping up with everyone’s wounds. At this rate, they’d all die.

It was time to make a choice. The only viable solution he could think of was to sacrifice himself to let the others escape while they waited for higher-rank hunters to arrive.

It's either that or everyone dies.

He broke out in a cold sweat but made a difficult decision.

Hansoo looked back and shouted, "I've got this, so you guys—!"

Just then, something caught his eye. Something shiny was hurtling in their direction.

To be honest, he sensed only that something was flying toward them, but he couldn't actually see it. It was that fast.

KRRRRAKKK!

The golem's head shattered after something struck it.

"Wh-what the...?" Hansoo looked on in disbelief.

The headless golem staggered. The rest of the hunters cheered and launched a final wave of attacks.

"Yes! It's working!"

"It's going down!"

"Just a little more! We got this!"

No one had seen the projectile because they'd been too focused on attacking. No one except Hansoo, who'd been standing right in front of the golem!

Graaaahhh...

The golem finally toppled over.

WHUUUD!

The heavy creature kicked up a cloud of dust as it hit the ground.

"Whoo-hoo!" The hunters roared in celebration.

"We did it!"

"We got 'im!"

Only Hansoo, who'd seen everything, shook his head.

No. Our attacks barely scratched it.

He hurriedly inspected the area around the fallen golem.

"What the heck could've shattered the head of this hunk of stone?"

In his search, Hansoo managed to scrounge up a broken sword. It was a steel blade, but it contained an insignificant amount of mana.

This boss-level golem withstood the attacks of over ten hunters, but somebody took it out by throwing this piece of junk?

He didn't know what to say. Hansoo looked back and forth between the remains of the golem and what was left of the sword before running through the jubilant hunters in the direction from where the sword had come.

"Excuse me!"

There was a single soldier standing there. "Yes? Did you mean me?"

"Yes, you!"

The soldier swallowed nervously as a hunter of considerable mass lumbered toward him. It just went to show how overwhelming the mere presence of a hunter could be to a regular person.

Hansoo showed him the sword. "Did you throw this?"

"Oh, that was..." The soldier blinked in confusion as he turned to look behind him. "...Huh? There was definitely another hunter here a second ago."

There was nobody behind the soldier. Hansoo scratched his head and looked down at the broken weapon fragment as the soldier glanced around in confusion.

The power, that destructive force..... Was a high-rank hunter here?

There was no way to verify this, since whoever it was had disappeared.

* * *

By that time, Jinwoo was heading back home. He'd turned around as soon as he saw the golem stumble.

He'd killed the thing. He knew that for certain.

All profits from killing a magic beast went to whomever killed it. If he wanted to, he could've claimed that he had the rights to the golem.

But the problem is, I'd have to prove it was actually me.

Who'd believe that a gigantic golem had been felled by an E-rank hunter's attack? He didn't have any decisive evidence, either. Neither the broken sword nor the soldier's testimony would've helped much.

That wouldn't even be the end of it. He'd have to reveal how he'd gotten strong enough to defeat the golem.

The more he thought about it, the more cons there were than pros.

He had the extraordinary ability to level up. Jinwoo couldn't justify revealing his secret just to claim a single golem.

Too bad, but I have no choice.

It hadn't been a total loss, however. In fact, he'd gotten something huge.

He'd received a message the moment the golem fell.

[You have leveled up!]

Thanks to the golem, his level had increased once more.

I level up even when I kill a regular magic beast.

This was excellent news. That was enough for him for now.

Jinwoo's apartment was on the ninth floor of an old, shabby building on the outskirts of downtown. He found his key and opened the door.

It was dark inside.

Jinah's really doing her best...

It looked like his sister was still at the library. The food on the table was cold by now. His sister had made it; their mother had been in the hospital for a few years now.

The notepad on the table had a message written in his sister's bubbly handwriting.

—Don't skip dinner. I'll check if you finished everything.

Even though she was busy with her studies, she'd gone out of her way to make him something because he was getting discharged from the hospital.

Jinwoo smiled gently and sat at the table, but he wanted to check something

first before eating.

“Stat screen.”

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 2,220]

[Fatigue: 2]

[Level: 18]

[Title: Wolf Assassin]

[MP: 350]

[Stats]

Strength: 48

Stamina: 27

Agility: 27

Intelligence: 27

Perception: 27

(Available ability points: 0)

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1

It had been a long day. But thanks to this long day, his level was already at 18. His strength stat was already almost at fifty, and his other ability stats were

noticeably higher as well. He'd found out how his agility and perception worked.

On top of that, I got a very useful dagger with a bunch of debuffs and tons of gold, even if I'm not sure how to use them yet.....

He didn't bother counting the strange poison as part of the day's achievements.

All in all, his raid on the instance dungeon had been a big success.

* * *

People who leave home early in the morning are usually careful not wake up their family, and so Jinah locked the door quietly so as not to disturb her brother, who was usually in a deep sleep at this time of the day. But when she turned around...

"Going to school?"

"Huh?"

Jinah's head jerked up, startled by the voice coming from nearby.

Jinwoo was jogging slowly toward her. He was dressed in sweats and running shoes. With the way he had his hood pulled down low, it looked like he'd been out jogging.

Jinah's naturally big eyes got even bigger.

"Wait. You were already up?"

"Been up for a while. Look out for traffic."

"R-right....."

She watched, confused, as her brother went inside the apartment.

Huh. He actually got up before me.

Jinwoo wasn't lazy by any means. Rather, Jinah tended to wake up unusually early for someone her age, so she was often the first in the family to start the day.

Somehow.....

She got the feeling that her brother's back seemed wider than before, but that didn't make sense. The human body wasn't an elastic band that could get bigger or smaller in the span of a few days.

I'm probably just seeing things.

She was shaking her head when Jinwoo suddenly handed her an umbrella.

"What's this for?"

Jinah took the umbrella and stared up at the sky. It was the crack of dawn and consequently still dark outside, but the sky looked pretty clear.

"It doesn't seem like it's gonna rain."

"Take it with you."

"But it's heavy."

"Take it anyway. It's a folding umbrella, so it's not that heavy. Don't be a baby."

Slam.

He closed the door on her.

"What the—? So bossy." Jinah lightly kicked the door to show her disapproval but shoved the umbrella in her bag and headed off.

Wait.....

She mentally calculated where her brother's eye level had just been.

That was weird. It was definitely higher than before.

"Do men get taller even in their twenties?"

Nah, that couldn't be it. She shook her head again and hurried off to school.

Click.

Meanwhile, Jinwoo locked the door and called up his inventory as he walked into the apartment.

"Storage."

Storage, inven, inventory. He'd found out after a few experiments, but the

command word didn't matter as long as the meaning got across.

It was the same when opening his inbox. *Open, access, reveal, etc.* As long as the command word indicated that the inbox should open, it worked.

He stuffed the umbrella he'd acquired from today's mystery box in his digital inventory.

"Another dud."

It had been four days since he'd first entered an instance dungeon. He hoped for another key to an instance dungeon every time he opened a mystery box, but it seemed to be a pretty uncommon item, and he hadn't gotten another yet.

That's that for now.

He went to his bedroom and sat on the edge of his bed. He had a decision to make today.

"Stats."

[Stats]

Strength: 48

Stamina: 27

Agility: 27

Intelligence: 27

Perception: 27

(Available ability points: 12)

He'd been accumulating ability points for the past four days. He hadn't missed one daily quest, and of course, he'd made sure to accept every single reward. He hadn't been distributing the ability points, though.

The problem was...

"...It's too hard."

Indeed, he was finding it too difficult to make a decision.

Strength. A good stat. He'd never regret investing any points there.

Agility. Also a good stat. Agility didn't matter against a weak enemy, but it was crucial for the high-rank ones, since speed was relative.

Then there were stamina and perception. Stamina was obviously better the higher it was, and perception was proving more useful than he'd expected.

Intelligence.

.....Well, there lay the problem. It was the only stat whose function he wasn't sure of. Even though it had increased quite a bit, he didn't feel any smarter than when he'd started. He hadn't gotten any better at memorization or math.

This stat's probably related to magic, but.....

Perhaps he didn't need that one quite yet. That still left four, though—strength, agility, stamina, and perception.

"Still too difficult to choose....."

Eliminating one option hadn't helped at all. He just couldn't be sure.

He knew that strength and agility worked well together. Being able to deal a lot of damage was useless if he couldn't hit a target. And vice versa, being able to hit a target was pointless if he couldn't deal much damage. He could regard strength and agility as a set.

It'd be a good idea to increase agility to the same level as strength.

If he increased agility, stamina wouldn't be as important for now. Agility and stamina weren't very compatible. With his agility up, there was less of a chance he'd get injured, but stamina was only really useful when he was in a position to receive a lot of damage.

I can't not invest in stamina, but.....

It seemed inefficient to increase agility and stamina simultaneously.

With that, he'd finally decided on the order of importance. First was agility, second was perception, and stamina was third. Since he'd already invested heavily in strength, he'd put it on the back burner, and since he was planning to increase agility, it made more sense to raise perception instead of stamina for

now.

With that in mind, Jinwoo first added two points to strength.

Ping!

[Stats]

Strength: 50

Stamina: 27

Agility: 27

Intelligence: 27

Perception: 27

(Available ability points: 10)

He wanted to start off by hitting fifty points for strength. It had been on Jinwoo's mind for a while now.

Next, he spent eight points on agility.

[Stats]

Strength: 50

Stamina: 27

Agility: 35

Intelligence: 27

Perception: 27

(Available ability points: 2)

There was no special meaning to this. He simply wanted to make the stats multiples of five.

I prefer having them as multiples of five over some other random number. It looks cleaner.....

Strength was fifty, and agility was thirty-five. Having them as multiples of five

was an arbitrary decision on Jinwoo's part, but he felt a small sense of satisfaction looking at them.

And the last two points...

Jinwoo invested the rest on perception. With that, he finished distributing his points.

[Stats]

Strength: 50

Stamina: 27

Agility: 35

Intelligence: 27

Perception: 29

(Available ability points: 0) It irked him slightly that he hadn't been able to get perception to an even thirty.

I know I had no choice because I ran out of points, but...

He was content with everything else. He was okay with increasing stamina and intelligence by leveling up.

"So I guess that's it?"

It's hard to be 100 percent satisfied with any one thing. Given that this was the result of much deliberation, though, Jinwoo was pretty happy with the results.

That was when the phone in the living room rang.

Riiing, riiing!

Could it be the association?

The old Jinwoo would've gone as long as he could without answering because he didn't want to get called on a raid, but the new Jinwoo was itching to test his abilities on magic beasts.

He quickly picked up the receiver.

“This is Hunter Jinwoo Sung.”

“Ah, you finally answered.”

The phone call wasn’t from the association. Jinwoo felt somewhat disappointed.

“Kiddo, why’s it so hard to reach you these days?”

The voice coming over the phone was very familiar to Jinwoo. He hadn’t been referred to as a kid since he’d graduated from high school four years ago, but his landlord had known Jinwoo since childhood, so he still called him “kiddo.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I was in the hospital due to an accident.”

“Tsk, tsk. I see, so that’s why. So, uh, kiddo..... I haven’t received the rent for this month yet, but if this month is looking tight, I can push it back a month or two.”

“That’s okay, sir. I’ll transfer the money today.”

“All right, then. Don’t work too hard. I know you’re taking good care of your mom and sister. Money’s important, but make sure to take care of yourself.”

“Yes, thank you for your concern.”

The phone call ended.

Jinwoo took a bank statement out from a drawer. The balance read 800,000 won.

“Haaah...” He couldn’t help but sigh. Once he paid the rent, 500,000 won, the budget for the rest of the month would be 300,000 won.

The rent was only 500,000 won because the apartment building was an older, shabby structure located outside of Seoul, and the gracious landlord hadn’t raised the rent since a few years ago due to the unfortunate situation of Jinwoo’s family. These days, it would be difficult to find a place to rent for only 500,000 won.

It would be even more difficult to live a month with only 300,000 won.

“I need to make some money soon.”

Jinwoo had a clear goal for now. He wasn’t the same guy who, just a few days

ago, had been afraid of and struggled to kill a single E-rank beast.

* * *

How did hunters make money? The best way was by killing a magic beast.

S-or A-rank hunters received sponsorships, shot commercials, and appeared on TV shows, so they raked in tons of cash, but that was a select minority of hunters. They were the elite few.

With the exception of those extremely high-rank hunters, most of them made their money from dungeons. Rank and experience—those were the two factors that determined a hunter's earnings. For Jinwoo Sung, an E-rank hunter in the eyes of the association who had never experienced a dungeon higher than C rank, these were quite harsh guidelines.

Jinwoo grimaced.

Never mind the rules—it would be great if I could somehow join a strike squad.....

He'd called several job postings on the hunters' website, but they'd all been dead ends. No one wanted an E-rank hunter.

Most of those who posted these job openings were freelancers, so they tended to be extremely careful when forming their strike squads, as they'd often have to watch their own backs in fights. They were usually hunters who weren't good enough to join a guild but were too skilled to stay with the Hunter's Association. This made them outsiders.

I've heard that even those hunters make more than 10,000,000 won a month.

It was high-risk, high-return. They made big money in exchange for risking their lives. There was a reason hunters were often the targets of envy.

But it was frustrating for Jinwoo.

Would it be easier to get reevaluated and raise my rank?

He shook his head. No matter how many times he considered it, he concluded it would be a stupid thing to do.

An E-rank hunter becoming a high-rank hunter! It didn't matter if it was a promotion to an A, B, or even C rank. A reawakening was always newsworthy.

People liked to gossip, and hunters were hot topics. When there were five mouths, there were also ten eyes. Meaning the more people talked about him, the more eyes there'd be on him. And since his abilities would keep increasing, it'd be only a matter of time before people found out his secret.

"A hunter who can keep increasing his abilities?"

"He gets stronger as time passes?"

"Which hunter is that?"

"How is that possible?"

"How can I be like him?"

He'd get way too much attention. There had never been a hunter like him. It would be inevitable that some of the people who showed interest would either want to use him or harm him.

And if those people are powerful.....

He felt queasy just thinking about it.

He still wasn't strong enough. Jinwoo didn't want to reveal his secret until he was absolutely sure he could protect himself.

Getting reevaluated wasn't an option.

But I still have to make money somehow.

It wasn't like he could do some ordinary part-time job, since he didn't know when the association might call him. He couldn't pass up an opportunity to make money and gain experience at the same time via a dungeon just because he was too busy trying to make ends meet.

As he pondered what to do, a new job posting caught his eye.

—Urgent!! Hunters of any rank welcome as long as they get here quickly!

Jinwoo's eyes lit up. A hot post that had just been uploaded. He quickly skimmed the details and noted it wasn't far from home.

He gave them a call right away. The other side must've also been in a hurry, as they answered the phone before the first ring completed.

“Hello?”

Jinwoo gave a brief explanation of why he was calling and calmly awaited the other person’s response.

“Okay, so you’re an E rank?”

That wasn’t a bad reaction.

“That’s fine. We just need you to help meet a head count quota. But it’s a C-rank gate, so you might have difficulty hunting. We can divide the spoils among the rest of us and compensate you 2,000,000 won. What do you think? Can you get here right away?”

2,000,000 won for a day’s work!

That was a lot of money for helping to fill a quota. It was a pretty good deal. It was unfortunate he wouldn’t get a share of any other rewards from the dungeon, but he didn’t want to be greedy and potentially miss out on the 2,000,000 won.

Let’s put out the fire first.

This kind of opportunity didn’t come around often. 2,000,000 won was more than enough money to live on for a month.

Jinwoo accepted the offer. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

He was out the door in a second and flagged down a taxi to get to the meeting point.

There were already nine people waiting for him. A person who seemed to be the leader waved to Jinwoo.

“Over here! It’s this way.”

The guy was quite big and had a beard. He wore a friendly smile as he approached Jinwoo.

“Are you Jinwoo Sung?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, good. You found us with no problem. Why don’t we introduce ourselves, since we’ll be working together today?”

The bearded guy quickly introduced the other members. Eight of them, including the leader, were part of the same squad, and the last person had joined the team for the day just like Jinwoo.

Jinwoo scoped out his new squadmates as he greeted them. He had a good sense of what each member's level was due to his increased perception stat.

Five of them seem to have similar ranks, and four of them have lower ranks. So five C rankers and four D rankers or lower.

There were rules to attacking a C-rank gate. There had to be a minimum of ten people in the party, and at least half the hunters needed to be C rank or higher. The association would give the green light once those conditions were met.

They weren't kidding that Jinwoo really was just there to fill the quota.

"Now that introductions are out of the way, let me briefly go over some important points."

The bearded man's name was Dongsuk Hwang, and he'd told Jinwoo he was a C-rank tank. He had the composure of someone who had participated in a raid many times before.

While Dongsuk gave them a comprehensive overview of this mission, someone else approached Jinwoo.

"Um, I guess we're the temps?"

It was a bright young man Dongsuk had brought in to fulfill the head count. He wasn't a noncombat member like Jinwoo, though. He was a D-rank hunter and was expected to join the battle.

He was a twenty-two-year-old named Jinho Yoo.

He tried to greet Jinwoo, who merely nodded and purposefully looked away. Jinho had wanted to strike up a conversation but ended up awkwardly standing there at Jinwoo's clear dismissal, so he rubbed the back of his neck and returned to his original position.

"Bro, that's enough. Let's get moving."

"We're going to kill everything anyway, so we don't need any details."

"Agreed. Our ears'll bleed from all your nagging."

As his squad teased him, Dongsuk clapped his hands and laughed. "Fine, I'll stop here, and we can head in soon."

Everyone started prepping to go inside.

"Oh, could you two please sign this?" Dongsuk handed Jinwoo and Jinho each a piece of paper.

It was a simple contract.

"Please write out your name and sign on the bottom."

Jinwoo would be paid 2,000,000 won immediately but would not hunt or share in rewards. The stipulations were as per their phone conversation.

Rather than that, the very last condition caught Jinwoo's eye.

I recognize that the party is not responsible for accidents that may occur inside the dungeon.....

Unlike a raid hosted by the association, there was no other financial compensation provided for an individual raid. Because of this, insurance companies wouldn't cover them. Hunters had to protect themselves.

It finally sank in that Jinwoo was legitimately part of a strike squad.

As he read over his contract, he sneaked a peek at the details of Jinho's contract. As expected, unlike Jinwoo's contract, Jinho was supposed to get a share of the rewards instead of 2,000,000 won.

Jinwoo turned to Dongsuk before signing the document. "So what do you need me to do?"

"Nothing special. You can just carry the gear and follow us."

"Gear.....?"

Dongsuk pointed at the huge backpack his colleagues were unloading from a pickup truck. "It has our lunches, extra clothes, weapons, first aid kit, etc."

Wait, a first aid kit? That piqued Jinwoo's curiosity.

"Are we going in without a healer?"

"You know how hard it is to have a healer in a strike squad! This is just how we roll." Dongsuk smiled awkwardly.

A strike squad that barely met the association's requirements, a temp who apparently thought a raid was a social gathering, and the lack of healer in a party made of tanks and damage dealers.

The temp's expression hadn't changed even after hearing there was no healer. That proved he was a complete newbie.

Jinwoo swallowed his derisive laugh.

They're full of crap.

Nevertheless, he still signed the contract, not because he desperately needed 2,000,000 won but because he was confident he could protect himself.

"Here you go."

"Mine too!"

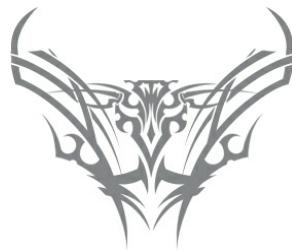
Dongsuk took their signed agreements and, as if the papers had raised his spirits, energetically bellowed at the others.

"Well then, let's go!"



6

THE LIZARDS



6

THE LIZARDS

The squad made its way to where the gate had appeared. It was an abandoned construction site for an apartment building.

“They say the economy isn’t doing so well.....” Dongsuk clicked his tongue in disapproval.

Unfinished apartment buildings stood scattered in the area like huge tombstones. If there was a cemetery for giants, it would’ve looked like this.

“Did you know?” Jinho leaned in closer to Jinwoo and whispered to him. “The president of the company embezzled nine hundred billion won and escaped abroad two months ago, leaving all the employees and investors in a tough spot.”

“.....”

No matter how many hints Jinwoo had given him, Jinho wouldn’t leave him alone. It seemed like Jinho wasn’t able to quite fit in with the eight others, since they were all original members of the squad.

“Dude, you always this quiet?”

He’d started calling Jinwoo “dude” at some point. Jinwoo was growing weary of ignoring him.

“.....Can’t you take a hint?”

“Hee-hee, I’m not very used to taking hints from other people.”

Was this guy an optimist or was he just clueless? Jinwoo raised an eyebrow at Jinho’s bright smile.

But I really.....

Jinwoo tended to get more sensitive whenever he approached a gate. It wasn't something he could control. For other hunters, raids were all about money, but for Jinwoo, it was about survival. It dredged up a ton of painful memories, so he couldn't help but get twitchy.

"Here we are." Dongsuk stopped.

Wow..... The hunters looked impressed.

"Are you sure this is a C-rank gate, bro? Seems a bit big."

"You really think the association would bullshit us? They said the investigators checked it out twice."

The portal floating in midair was reminiscent of a black hole. This was what they called a gate.

A gate's rank was determined by a measure of the magic wavelengths emanating from within. The Hunter's Association notified people of the rank after they evaluated the level. After that, strike squads or guilds would request permission to raid it. A-or B-rank gates were mostly taken by large guilds because they were too dangerous for freelance strike squads. Freelancers usually dealt with low-rank gates, with C rank being the highest they could safely tackle.

Dongsuk stepped in front of the gate and looked back. "All right, everyone, I'll head in first. Please stick close."

One by one, the other hunters followed as the tank led the way.

Just in case.....

Jinwoo started to do some light stretching. Next to him, Jinho produced his weapons. His sword and shield seemed to sparkle. They were obviously very expensive, not the sort of thing a newbie could easily purchase on his own.

He said he's not used to taking hints from others, so maybe his family's rich?

He hadn't struck Jinwoo as that type.

Jinho sensed Jinwoo's stares and puffed out his chest. "You're an E rank, right,

dude? I'll make sure to protect you, so please just stick with me!"

Jinwoo blinked. Who'd protect whom?

".....Well, thanks, I guess."

"We should get going, too."

Putting aside Jinwoo's doubts, the two of them safely passed through the gate.

* * *

It was quiet inside the dungeon.

"....."

It was quiet and dark.

Dongsuk gave his first order. "Gyuhwan, light up."

"Yes!" Gyuhwan Jo, a mage hunter, conjured a sphere of light. The place flooded with radiance.

Dongsuk lowered his shield and cocked his head. "What? Where're all the beasts?"

"Yeah, and why were the lights off?"

Typically, glow stones lodged in the walls of the dungeon lit the way. This time, there were no such stones to be seen anywhere.

Jinho whispered in Jinwoo's ear, "Are there really dungeons without any magic beasts?"

"Shhh." Jinwoo pressed a finger to his lips.

His ear twitched. He could hear countless footsteps in the distance.

Jinwoo spoke. "There *are* magic beasts. They just aren't *here* yet."

Jinho swallowed nervously.

Skrrrt, skrrrt, skrrrt...

Soon, the others were able to hear what Jinwoo was hearing. Dongsuk realized just how serious the situation was.

A dungeon without glow stones.....?

“What moves as a group, lives in the dark, and heads toward the light?”

Oh no. Dongsuk’s and his colleagues’ faces turned grim.

“Bugs!”

“They’re bugs!”

“Why does it have to be fucking bugs?!”

Dongsuk barked, “Everyone, positions! Incoming! Forward!”

A bunch of creatures were rushing straight for them.

“This isn’t an ant colony, is it?”

“Don’t say that kind of shit!”

Among magic beasts, insect types were especially a pain in the neck. They came in swarms, and every single one of them was powerful and hard to kill.

Ants were the worst of them all. Many a hunter had lost their lives by unwittingly stumbling into an ant colony.

SKRRRT, SKRRRT, SKRRRT...

The sound of the bugs’ legs scraping against the ground made their skin crawl. That meant they were close.

Dongsuk raised his shield up to his chin. They still couldn’t see any insects, though. The squad members were causing a commotion behind him.

“What’s going on? I don’t see anything!”

“But they sound close!”

“Dongsuk, do you see anything?!”

Jinwoo yelled, “Up!”

What? Dongsuk instinctively looked up.

SKRRRT, SKRRRT, SKRRRT!

Huge bugs were coming at them from above. Seconds later, and those bastards would’ve dropped right on top of them. With beasts that attacked as a

group like insect types often did, once the hunters' formation broke, that'd be it.

If we hadn't spotted them when we did.....

Dongsuk felt a chill run down his spine. There were different kinds of insects, but fortunately, none of these was an ant.

He called out, "Shoot! Shoot them so they drop! Once they're down, I'll go Aggro!"

Arrows and magic attacks flew at the insects.

Fwsshhhh, fwit!

BOOM!

SKKKRRREEEE—

SKKKRRREEEE—

Once the hunters knocked some of the bugs to the ground, the rest took to the ground themselves, ready to fight.

Tanks were important at this point in the battle. Dongsuk got the magic beasts to focus on him by using his Aggravation skills. The beasts all turned to him at the same time, as if they'd planned a synchronized move.

"Over here, bugs!"

SKKKRRREEEE!

Tens of insects all charged at Dongsuk.

CRASHHH!

CRNNN-CRASH!

KRSH!

His shield blocked all of the insects' attacks. Their powerful jaws and claws couldn't break through the shield. Dongsuk the tank kept the horde back with his steady stance.

"Wait for it...! Wait for it...!" He was priming for just the right moment.

He held steady, waiting for the ideal time for a counterattack even as the

insects relentlessly assaulted him. He was looking for an opening when the bugs were in a position that would allow Aggro to continue working on them even as the damage dealers launched their attacks.

This is it!

This was the start of the real battle. This was the reason people called them hunters!

Dongsuk yelled out a single word.

“Go!”

With that one command, the squad unleashed all their firepower on the bugs.

SKKKRRREEEEEE!

SKRAWWW!

Magic beasts were screeching everywhere.

Jinwoo watched the battle from the back of the party. That had been the agreement. He imagined how *he* would handle the situation while watching the others fight.

This is frustrating.

He had to stop himself several times from joining them. He could see the beasts' weak points. He could also see the hunters making frequent mistakes and missing those weak points. No wonder Jinwoo was frustrated being forced to stay back and watch.

Because of their group chemistry, though, Dongsuk's squad wasn't sustaining much damage. Dongsuk's laid-back attitude before the battle hadn't been all bluster.

“Jinsuk! Eleven o'clock!”

“Bro, they're coming from the right, too!”

“Juntae, Sukmin, Gyuhwan! Take the right!”

“Got it!”

“Chuljin, your wrist is swollen. Fall back for now!”

“This is nothing, bro!”

“Do you think we’re done after this? We don’t know how long this’ll go on, so take it easy. Pace yourself.”

“All right.”

It might’ve been because they’d been a squad for a long while, but the communication among them was excellent. Good communication makes for good teamwork. They were completely different from the disorderly association hunters.

And that one isn’t so bad, either.

Jinwoo’s gaze shifted to Jinho.

When a magic beast bit off a part of his shield, Jinho immediately kicked both it and the beast away and swung his sword. The expensive blade beheaded the magic beast with a dull *clang*. He was doing well for a D-rank newbie.

He’s using good weapons to make up for his lack of skills and experience.

There was a reason hunters went out of their way to obtain expensive weapons.

Jinho made eye contact with Jinwoo and gave him a thumbs-up.

“.....”

He looked almost puppylike, so Jinwoo felt he had no choice but to return the thumbs-up. Satisfied, Jinho turned back around.

SKREEEE!

The fierce battle was drawing to a close. Once the hunters had mostly cleared the field, Dongsuk ordered, “Grab all the essence stones! We’ll divide them by nine.”

“Will do.”

“This is my favorite part.”

“Same.”

After watching his exhilarated squad members, Dongsuk walked over to

Jinwoo.

"Oh boy. We're safe because of you."

"Excuse me?"

"You were the first one to see the bugs coming from above, weren't you? How'd you know they were there?"

"I had a.....hunch," Jinwoo said vaguely. He couldn't exactly say it was due to his high perception stat.

"Oh, really? A hunch..... We got lucky, then. I don't know what would've happened if we hadn't seen them in time. Phew..."

Dongsuk put his hand on his chest and exhaled. Just then...one of the hunters who was searching the bugs waved at Dongsuk.

"You need to see this!"

The squad had gathered together. Dongsuk headed over to them.

"What?"

"These look weird."

The other hunters parted to let Dongsuk get by. He squatted down and studied their surroundings. He didn't see anything strange. There were just dead bugs scattered everywhere.

He raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by 'weird'?"

One of the hunters pointed at the leg of a nearby bug. "That wound doesn't look like it's from us."

"....." Dongsuk frowned. After inspecting it closely, he said, "It looks like..... something bit it?"

"Right? That's not the only one. Look over there, and that other one, too. That one's completely missing a wing. These things were already beaten up before they fought us, huh?"

Dongsuk's face hardened. That's why the battle hadn't been particularly challenging despite the sheer number of them.

"What did these things fight before us.....?"

At that moment, Jinwoo felt like Dongsuk and some of his crew were staring in his direction. When Jinwoo glanced over at them, they all turned away.

Jinwoo's suspicions were confirmed.

I knew it.....

What he'd thought at the beginning had been right.

The squad really had good chemistry because they'd been working together for a long time. Plus, no members had ever been killed in action. But how was that possible without a healer? Everyone, even great hunters, made mistakes because they were only human. Even this squad's formation had almost broken moments ago.

Jinwoo had a rough idea what was going on. He couldn't help giving a small smile.

Maybe.....I can use these guys.

If they did what Jinwoo expected, it might be possible.

Dongsuk stood up with a smile on his face. "Okay, we'll go deeper. If the rest of the dungeon is like this, we should be able to clear it soon."

He'd spoken loudly on purpose. It likely wasn't for his regular squad, since they were already clustered around him.

Meanwhile, Jinho approached Jinwoo with a big grin on his face. "Dude, did you see me? You saw me, right? I destroyed those beasts with a..." He lightly slashed the air.

Jinwoo asked, "Aren't that sword and shield expensive?"

"Hmm? Oh, my father wanted me to have something special for my first raid."

"Then you should be careful, too." Jinwoo patted Jinho on the shoulder before following the other hunters who were moving deeper inside the dungeon.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jinho scratched his head, bewildered, but chased after everyone.

The cave stretched on, but they didn't see any magic beasts. This dungeon had been a straight path so far, so they couldn't have missed anything.

"Is that all? Whatever we saw at the entrance?"

"Nah, no way."

"This is all very strange."

"Still, there should be a boss, right?"

"If there wasn't, the gate wouldn't be open."

The hunters quarreled over why the spacious dungeon was so empty.

"Wait." Dongsuk stopped walking.

There were some little collisions because he'd stopped so suddenly. One hunter bumped his nose into the back of another's head and got all whiny.

"F—Bro! What the heck?"

"Gyuhwan, give me some light."

Gyuhwan moved the sphere of light that was floating above the middle of the group to where Dongsuk was pointing.

"Oh my God....."

"Are those all...?"

The hunters gasped quietly.

Insect wings, legs, bodies, and even heads: The remains of bugs were strewn everywhere. The number of carcasses increased the deeper they went.

At the end of the corridor was a huge chamber.

"It's the boss's lair," someone muttered.

Dongsuk nodded in agreement. "Everyone, ready your weapons."

The hunters immediately armed themselves. Everyone looked tense. They tiptoed their way to the entrance of the room.

Dongsuk led the way, and they all cautiously entered the boss's lair. But the silence didn't last long.

"J-jackpot!" the hunter with a red nose exclaimed. He was the one who'd bumped into someone's back earlier.

It was normally taboo to yell like that in a dungeon. The noise could attract the attention of a beast that could've otherwise been avoided. But no one told him off.

"Whoa..."

"How much do you think that's worth?"

"This is sick!"

Everyone was too preoccupied with excitement.

"Hold on." As Gyuhwan moved the ball of light high in the air, more of the chamber was revealed.

"Those are mana stones!"

"This entire wall is covered in mana stones!"

The hunters' eyes twinkled brighter than the stones were sparkling in the light.

Mana stones were one of the treasures that could be found in dungeons. They had weaker magic than the essence stones harvested from magic beasts but were usually found in large clumps, so hunters could make a lot of money from them.

This time, they'd found an incredible trove. The stones covered an entire section of the rounded wall of the cave.

"At a rough calculation..." A hunter who was good at math counted quickly on his fingers. "If we harvest all of them, it should come out to more than one hundred million won? If we divide it by nine, each of us will get over ten million won!"

""""Whoa..."" Grins spread across all the hunters' faces.

At the back of the group, Jinho elbowed Jinwoo in the side after hearing that. "Dude, give me your contract."

"What for?"

"Trust me and give it here. I know the law like the back of my hand."

Jinwoo shrugged and handed his contract to Jinho. Jinho took it and went over to Dongsuk.

"Excuse me, sir. I have a question for you."

All their gazes swiveled to Jinho.

He showed them the contract. "Sir, this is Jinwoo's contract. As you can see, there is no mention of essence stones other than the ones that come from hunting."

Everyone realized what Jinho was saying.

—It was customary to equally divide treasure or rare items found in a dungeon among all party members. This was different from battling magic beasts, because with magic beasts, they could harvest essence stones from only the ones they defeated themselves.

That meant these mana stones had to be divided by ten, not nine. The other hunters' eyes narrowed, but Dongsuk walked in front of the group with a smile on his face.

"Of course we'll divvy these up equally. We know that very well. We just have something to take care of first."

He pointed at something up ahead.

Jinho jumped in surprise. He thought Dongsuk was pointing at him. He flinched but then turned around. There, curled in a corner of the room, was a spider as big as a house.

"Oh.....!" Upon seeing the huge beast, Jinho stumbled back with his hand over his mouth.

The sleeping spider didn't move a single muscle. There were mountains of insect carcasses around the beast. The half-eaten insect exoskeletons covered in saliva sort of looked like food waste that had spilled out of an overturned trash bin.

"That has to be the boss."

"Did that thing eat the other bugs in the dungeon?"

"It really gorged itself, didn't it?"

The hunters muttered to one another as they took in the spider.

Dongsuk gathered the squad around him. Jinwoo and Jinho also huddled up.

"As you all well know, the gate closes when the boss is killed, so let's grab the mana stones from the wall *before* we take on the spider."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Dongsuk turned to a bald hunter. "Chuljin, did you bring the tools?"

Chuljin Lee shook his head. "No... Who knew we would find mana stones in a C-rank dungeon? I left all the mining tools in the car."

"Dude... Didn't I tell you to be prepared for any situation?"

"Sorry, sorry. I'm really sorry." Chuljin smiled sheepishly and bowed in apology to Dongsuk, everyone in the squad, and even Jinwoo.

Dongsuk scratched his head. "Oh boy, this is annoying. Can you two please stay here? We'll be back with the tools."

When they tried to leave, Jinho stopped them with a question, puzzled. "You want just Jinwoo and me to stay in the boss's lair?"

Dongsuk smiled reassuringly. "You'll be fine. That thing isn't waking up even though we're talking so loudly, right? I have something I need to tell my squad anyway, and we're thinking of taking a quick smoke break, since we can. We'll be right back."

Inside his head, Jinwoo scoffed at Dongsuk's lengthy explanation.

They're showing their true colors now. But really, all of them trying to leave at once? How dumb do they think we are?

They were probably looking down on them for being a lower rank. Dongsuk acted exactly as Jinwoo had expected, though the situation was a little different from what he'd imagined.

This was Jinwoo's fourth year working as a hunter, and over time, he'd met many different hunters. Among them had been a hunter named Mr. Oh. After

he quit freelancing, he had started helping the association with odd jobs to pass the time.

"Beware the lizards."

That was something Mr. Oh frequently said.

When participating in a raid, there would often be times when hunters ran into danger. It didn't happen every raid, but some unscrupulous hunters would sometimes sacrifice others in such a situation, even though they'd fought together as colleagues up until that point. This could be anywhere from ditching people who weren't part of the original squad or even hunters who were of a lower rank. This was done to buy themselves time to escape. It was like a lizard cutting off its own tail when running away.

Cutting off its own tail.....

Mr. Oh referred to such hunters as "lizards" and this act as "cutting off its own tail."

According to the rules, the minimum number of party members needed in order to attack a C-rank gate was ten. However, Dongsuk's squad had consisted of only eight regular members.

"You know how hard it is to have a healer in a strike squad! This is just how we roll."

As Dongsuk himself had said, they'd raided many C-rank gates in the past.

No wonder they'd never needed to bring in two more permanent members.

What they wanted was a tail they could cut off every time. That was why they'd accepted any hunter, whether they were an E rank or a newbie.

Currently, Dongsuk was planning to ditch Jinwoo and Jinho, though for a different reason than usual.

This is good for me.

Jinwoo had figured out what Dongsuk was up to, but he kept quiet. This was actually what he wanted. It was the first day on the job for Jinho, though, and unlike Jinwoo, he wasn't particularly confident that he could protect himself.

He anxiously said, “No, I mean..... It’d be better if everyone stuck together.”

Jinwoo noticed one of the hunters at the back of the group reaching toward his sword in its sheath. Jinwoo put his hand on Jinho’s shoulder.

“Understood. We’ll keep an eye on the spider.”

The hunter took his hand off his sword.

“Jinwoo.....?”

Jinho looked like he was at a loss, but Jinwoo shook his head at him without saying a word. Even though Jinho was a noisy kid, Jinwoo couldn’t let him die like this. He’d even tried to include Jinwoo in the divvying up of the mana stones, though that meant he himself would get a smaller share.

Dongsuk smiled at the both of them. “We parked the car right out front, so it won’t take too long.”

The eight members of Dongsuk’s squad left the boss’s lair in a hurry. The sound of their footsteps receded quickly.

Jinho rounded on Jinwoo. “Dude, why’d you say that? What if the beast wakes up? Then what?”

He seemed petrified of the spider.

He really sucks at reading between the lines.

Jinwoo tutted in his head. Explaining every little thing would be a pain, too. Instead of responding, he started stretching.

* * *

Dongsuk turned around and looked in the direction of the boss’s lair. The hunters who were following him also stopped in their tracks. They were quite far from the chamber now. The other two wouldn’t be able to hear them from this distance.

Dongsuk wiped the smile from his face and addressed Gyuhwan, gesturing with his chin at the path to the lair.

“Gyuhwan, block the entrance.”

“Should I blow it up?”

"Yeah, but take it easy. We have to go back inside later."

Chuljin spoke up. "Why make things so complicated? Why not just kill those two already?"

Dongsuk glowered at Chuljin. He didn't have to fake a smile for their guests any longer.

That, at least, was convenient for him.

"I-I'm sorry." Chuljin cast his eyes down in fear.

Dongsuk tsked. "What if we woke up the spider? When're you planning to mine and haul away those mana stones?"

"I'm sorry—"

Gyuhwan interrupted. "Speaking of the spider..... It could wake while we dig up the mana stones, no? How do we avoid that?"

The spider had filled its stomach with hard-to-kill insect-type magic beasts. They could sustain a lot of damage if the spider attacked them while they were preoccupied.

"That's why." Dongsuk smirked. "I want to feed those two to the spider."

"Ahhh." Gyuhwan nodded, finally understanding Dongsuk's master plan.

They didn't know when the spider was going to wake up. It could be ten hours, one hour, or one minute from now. So the plan was to rouse and feed the spider in advance. The shock wave from a collapsed entrance would wake even the most lethargic beast.

Dongsuk continued. "We can excavate the stones once the stuffed spider goes back to sleep."

They had a five-day work permit from the association, and they still had four and a half days left. They could afford to wait a while, and even if the spider didn't go back to sleep in time, they could still kill it and harvest as many mana stones as possible before the gate closed. It wouldn't be possible to dig them all up in an hour, but they wouldn't have to share them with Jinwoo and Jinho, so it wouldn't be much of a loss.

Wouldn't that be better than mining the mana stones in a constant state of fear? After all, safety first!

Of course, that's the worst-case scenario.....

If everything went well, they would dig up all the mana stones, kill the spider, and not have to share a single won with the other two. Jinho's expensive weapons would be a bonus.

His sword and shield cost at least a couple hundred thousand.

They had nothing to lose.

Dongsuk smirked. "Block the entrance, and we'll grab a smoke."

"You got it," Gyuhwan responded quickly, summoning a blinding light to the tips of his fingers.

* * *

"....." Jinho's eyes were fixed on the spider. He even breathed carefully.

He had a fearful look on his face when he asked, "That spider, it's not gonna wake up, is it?"

"I don't know." Jinwoo gave a curt reply. He could guess what was going to happen next, but he was a little worried Jinho would faint if he told him the truth.

It just hit me.....

These were the first words Jinho had uttered in the past five minutes. He seemed terrified, considering how chatty he'd been earlier.

Suddenly...

KABOOM!

The entrance to the boss's lair collapsed with an explosive thundering.

"H-huh? Wh-what?" Jinho rushed over to the entrance, but a mound of rubble now had it barricaded. The rocks wouldn't move no matter how hard Jinho pushed on them.

Jinwoo meandered over.

"Hnnngh! Help me, dude!" Jinho was still trying to clear a path.

What was that guy's name? Gyuhwan Jo?

Jinwoo had seen a bright light flashing right before the explosion. That guy was a C-rank mage hunter who controlled light. It was absolutely his work.

Jinwoo placed his hand on the mound of stones.

I can definitely get out of here if I want to.

He could feel the weight of the stones through his arm. They weren't as heavy as he'd thought. When he applied slight pressure with his hand, he could feel them shift.

But he had no intention of leaving.

"Wait!" Jinho seemed to have had an epiphany. His face was flushed red as he turned to Jinwoo.

"Those bastards are trying to kill us! They don't want to share the mana stones, so they're trying to kill us using the spider!"

He catches on quick, doesn't he?

Jinwoo sighed to himself internally but played along. "You're right. We're in trouble."

"Ack!" Jinho's cheeks suddenly turned from red to white. All the blood had drained from his face.

Jinwoo knew why even without asking. There, in Jinho's eyes, was the reflection of the spider.

Jinwoo spun around.

Crrrk, crrrrrk.

Awakened by the explosion, the spider was now raising its massive body. A body the size of a house. Several dozen eyes. A revolting mouth. And long, outstretched legs.

The spider looked even more terrible in motion than when it was asleep.

"Uuugh.....," Jinho groaned. He was frozen stiff in fear.

Meanwhile, Jinwoo kept his eyes on the spider as he called up Kasaka's Venom Fang from his inventory.

It's mine.

This was a good opportunity to test his upgraded abilities. Kasaka's Venom Fang automatically appeared in his right hand.

Whoosh...

It was like the dagger had been in his grip the whole time. Jinwoo tightly clutched the weapon's hilt.

This was why hunters were called hunters! It was time to do some true hunting.

"W-w-wait, dude!" Jinho unexpectedly grabbed Jinwoo's sleeve as he stepped toward the spider. "Wh-wh-what are you doing?"

Jinho's hands were trembling.

Jinwoo pointed over his left shoulder with his thumb. "Going after that thing."

This was why he'd followed Dongsuk's squad in the first place. He wanted an opportunity to kill all the beasts by himself when they cut the tail, so to speak. It was a good chance to gain both experience and essence stones.

I wish this boss hadn't eaten the other bugs.....

He could've picked up more rewards. That was the one letdown.

Since he didn't know anything about Jinwoo, Jinho stared at him in disbelief.

What is this dude talking about?

He remembered hearing that some people went crazy after a traumatic experience. The E-rank hunter in front of him wanted to take down the boss of a C-rank dungeon. If that wasn't crazy, what was?

Jinho asked him, "You're going after it?"

Jinwoo rubbed his forehead, as if troubled. "Then are you gonna kill it?"

Jinwoo turned around before Jinho could even open his mouth. He didn't need to hear the answer. Jinho could barely stand on his quivering legs. Jinwoo

hadn't expected anything from him from the start. Rather, he was glad Jinho didn't try to help.

He'd just get in my way.

Jinwoo approached the spider. The arachnid also seemed to notice them and turned with its eight legs.

It was coming. The spider took its time like it was curious about this prey it had never seen before. It slowly approached, digging its long, thick legs into the ground.

Hwoooo...

Jinwoo felt like he was suffocating as the gigantic body gradually filled his entire field of vision. His heart started beating faster.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

He took a deep breath in an effort to collect himself. He needed to stay calm.

He recalled how he'd felt when he'd stood at the top of the stairs leading to the Blue Venom-Fanged Kasaka in the instance dungeon at Hapjeong Station. He didn't feel as much pressure from this spider as he had the kasaka.

That meant it was definitely doable. He wouldn't have stayed behind anyway if he'd thought it would be impossible to defeat the boss.

Crrrk.

He was close enough to the spider now to be able to see his own reflection in its glassy eyes. Jinwoo squinted.

Its skin looks quite tough..... Will I be able to do enough damage with this dagger?

The knife didn't have the reach of the steel sword. He would need to focus more of his power in order to deliver a deep-enough cut. He changed his grip on the dagger so the blade was pointing down. He thought this would be better for causing damage.

Crrrk.

The spider finally stopped in front of Jinwoo. It then raised two of its legs and

bent them in an L shape.

What's it doing?

Jinwoo didn't dwell on this very long. His eyes shot open.

BOOM!

If he hadn't twisted his body instinctively, the spider's legs would've crushed his chest. The spider lifted its legs from where it had smashed the ground behind Jinwoo and folded them back into itself.

Crrrrrk.

Rocky debris fell from its legs.

Jinwoo peeked behind him. The stone floor of the cavern had noticeable holes in it.

If I get hit by those legs, it won't just be painful.

Jinwoo's eyes narrowed. It was time to focus.

It's coming!

Shhhk!

The spider's legs had moved at the speed of a bullet before, but he could see its movements clearly now.

Left.

He ducked to avoid the left leg.

Right.

He twisted his body to one side to escape the right leg and advanced a step.

Right.

He dodged the leg that had aimed for his head again and took two steps forward.

Left. Right. Right. Left. Right. Right. Right. Left. Left.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The spider's legs kept making holes in the ground with a loud, ear-piercing

sound. One by one, Jinwoo evaded the arachnid's attacks and closed the gap between them little by little.

Jinho couldn't believe his eyes. "Is he even human?"

The spider's attacks were so brutal that, even at a distance, it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. But Jinwoo continued dodging every single strike and got closer to the magic beast. His calm demeanor and clean moves gave Jinho goose bumps.

"That's an E-rank hunter?"

No, that wasn't possible. Had he been in Jinwoo's place, his body would've been torn apart like a rag. He wasn't sure if he could've avoided the attacks even once or twice, but Jinwoo had avoided them flawlessly so far.

For an E-rank hunter to do something that he, a D rank, couldn't do? There could be only one explanation.

He's a false ranker.....!

Jinho's face turned grim.

Some talented hunters had excellent control over their own magic. They could even lower their levels if they wanted to. There were hunters who hid their magic power on purpose in order to receive a lower rank. They were called "false rankers."

And most false rankers had ill intentions.

Some of them are serial killers who target lower-rank hunters in low-rank dungeons.....

Hunters were the only people who could enter dungeons, so they were the perfect place for hunters to commit crimes.

Jinho swallowed hard. All at once, he was more afraid of Jinwoo than the spider.

Why did I want to do this again.....?

He suddenly felt like he was about to cry.

Shhhk! Shhhk! Shhhk!

While Jinho was lost in his thoughts, the spider had continued its assault. Jinwoo had evaded its onslaught and was now confident of his victory. Its head was nearly within his reach. It had been easy to close the distance to the spider because its pattern of movement was simple.

I should aim for its eyes first.

Aiming for the target's weakness was the basic rule of raids. Jinwoo decided to start with its vulnerable eyes.

If I can just stab one with this dagger!

Jinwoo was about to make his move when...he got the sudden impression that the spider's attacks were slowing down.

Shhhk! Shhhk!

Was he just growing accustomed to its quick attacks?

BOOM! BOOM!

No, that wasn't it. While his eyes could be deceived, his ears never lied. The gap between those ear-piercing blasts were growing as the spider slowed.

Jinwoo had always trusted his good hearing. He was struck with an ominous feeling.

He looked closer and noticed the muscles near the spider's mouth twitching.

Why is it starting to move its mouth now...?

He was about to jump up three meters toward the spider's head, but he hesitated. Jinwoo made a split-second decision to change his direction and threw his body to one side instead. Right as he did...

Shwaaaaah!

A murky liquid shot out of the arachnid's mouth.

Jinwoo tumbled to the ground but quickly regained his footing and looked back. The spot where he'd been standing was charred black and smoking.

Frrrshhhhh...

The stones on the ground melted.

He gulped.

If I'd jumped straight up.....

The stones wouldn't have been the only things melting.

The spider rushed at him as if sensing Jinwoo's agitation.

Shhhf, shhhf.

Jinwoo raised his head. It was right in front of him.

Shhhhk!

He leaped to avoid the spider's legs.

BOOM!

The spider renewed its onslaught.

"Crap!"

He got close to the beast a few more times but had to retreat to escape its digestive acid.

It was harder to deal with the spider now that it had two attacks. If Jinwoo got closer to avoid its legs, stomach acid would shoot out. If he backed away because of the acid, the spider would strike with its legs.

"Dammit!"

In frustration, he tried attacking the spider's leg with the dagger. No matter how hard he stabbed, though, he couldn't even make a scratch because of its thick hide.

He bit his lower lip.

This isn't good.

The spider was using only two legs to strike Jinwoo, but Jinwoo was throwing his whole body around to avoid its attacks. It was obvious who would get tired first.

Fatigue.

[Fatigue: 57]

Not surprisingly, his fatigue was increasing rapidly. His speed would decrease if his fatigue level reached seventy, and he wouldn't be able to move properly if it reached ninety because he'd be completely out of breath.

He didn't have much time.

If I can get closer to it faster...

Speed. Speed was his problem.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Wait, speed?

A thought occurred to Jinwoo as he was narrowly dodging the spider's legs.

I have that!

The only skill he could actually use. He'd forgotten about it because he hadn't had much use for it until now.

Dash!

[Skill: Dash has been activated.]

[Your speed has increased by 30 percent. When in use, your mana will decrease by 1 every minute.]

As soon as the message popped up, Jinwoo's body moved faster, like he was on rocket boosters. It was much easier to avoid the spider's legs.

Shhhk! Shhhk! Shhhk!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

He effortlessly danced between the spider's legs coming down like lightning and got right in front of the beast's face. The panicked arachnid hastily spit out some digestive acid.

Shwaaaaah!

But Jinwoo didn't have to rush this time thanks to the speed boost. He easily avoided the acid blast and jumped up to his opponent's head.

Shiiing!

The dagger sliced at the spider's eyes diagonally.

[Debuff: Paralysis has been activated.]

[The debuff has been canceled out by the opponent's high resistance level.]

[Debuff: Drain has been activated.]

[The opponent's HP will decrease by 1 percent every second.]

"Nice!"

The drain debuff of Kasaka's Venom Fang had been successful.

CRAAAAAAHHH! The spider screeched and stumbled.

Jinwoo didn't waste this chance. As soon as he landed on the ground, he leaped up again, using the spider's body to reach its head.

The beast started waving its legs around, but the blind attacks didn't work on Jinwoo.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

All they did was gouge more holes in the ground.

Jinwoo reached the top of the spider's head and started stabbing its multiple eyes.

Shhhk! Shhhk! Shhhk!

CRAAAAAAAAHHHH!

Shhhk! Shhhk!

CRAAAAHHH!

The spider flailed like crazy, but Jinwoo continued to hold on and stab its head.

CREEEE! The spider started to falter. Jinwoo's attacks were working. His hands sped up.

Finally, the arachnid's huge body buckled on one side.

THUUUD!

Jinwoo kept going until he was sure the creature was dead.

Shhhk! Shhhk! Shhhk!

Cree, screeee...

As soon as the spider took its last breath, the messages poured in.

[You have defeated the master of the dungeon.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

“Yes!” Jinwoo flung his blood-soaked arms up in victory.

His level had been raised three times, most likely due to it being a boss.

“Stat screen.”

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 2,600]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 21]

[Title: Wolf Assassin]

[MP: 390]

[Stats]

Strength: 53

Stamina: 30

Agility: 38

Intelligence: 30

Perception: 32

(Available ability points: 0)

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1

He had jumped from level 18 to level 21 in one fell swoop.

But that wasn't all. He'd received yet another message.

Ping!

[You have passed level 20 and can now access the Shop: Buy function.]

I can finally use the gold?

This was good news, but there was no time to check out the shop here.

Rrrumble...

The cave shook a little.

[The master of the dungeon has been defeated. The gate will close in 1 hour.]

[Time remaining: 59:59.]

They had to leave before the gate closed. He could check out the shop later.

Jinwoo was about to slide back down to the ground when something shiny in the middle of the spider's head caught his eye.

An item?

He hadn't received a message about acquiring an item, though, and wasn't able to harvest it automatically by extending a hand. What could it be?

Jinwoo soon figured it out.

Ah, it's an essence stone.

No matter how much of a hurry he was in, he had to take what was his. He

ripped out the essence stone hidden inside the spider's head. It would be worth at least 10,000,000 won, since it was a C-rank essence stone. It was a pretty good trophy for an awesome victory.

Jinwoo jumped down from the boss's head.

Thump.

He landed lightly and turned around this time to see multiple glimmers shining from the spider's stomach.

He was puzzled. He'd heard of some magic beasts having two or three essence stones, but there were too many for it to be that.

What're those?

When he opened the stomach and cut out its intestines with his dagger, the carcasses of half-digested insects fell out. The lights were emitting from these bugs.

"No way!"

Jinwoo searched the bugs one by one. Each had an essence stone. Some were small because the spider had been digesting them, but most of them looked fine. There were more than ten in total.

"This is insane!"

He'd come here to make money to pay a single month's rent, but this would be enough to cover a whole year!

"Boss." He turned around to see Jinho. "Please put them in here."

Jinho stored all of Jinwoo's essence stones carefully in his bag. He then took out a thermos and poured something into the cap.

"Are you thirsty, boss? Please drink this. It's water."

The water was icy enough to cause condensation on the outside of the cap.

Why's this guy being so nice?

Jinwoo was bewildered but took the cap anyway, since he was dehydrated.

Glug-glug.

The water soothed his parched throat.

"How is it, boss?"

At some point, Jinho had also started referring to Jinwoo as "boss."

"Hmm... It's refreshing." Jinwoo returned the cap. "Also, whatever you saw here..."

Before Jinwoo could finish his sentence, Jinho assured him that he had nothing to worry about. "Of course! I'll take this secret to the grave!"

"Well, you don't have to go *that* far."

"Yes, I do. This is my promise to you, boss."

"Um..... Sure. If you're okay with it."

"Don't worry, boss."

It wasn't like people would believe that an E-rank hunter had killed a C-rank boss anyway. It was quite convenient, though, that Jinho was going to keep Jinwoo's secret.

I thought he couldn't take a hint, but he sure picked up on this quickly.

"Do you have anything else you'd like to say, boss?"

".....No."

This feels weird.

Jinwoo thought it was odd that Jinho was being so polite, but he had a theory.

I guess I did technically save his life.

Being polite to the person who had rescued him made sense. If he thought about it that way, he understood where Jinho was coming from.

He was slightly off the mark, however.

RRRUMMMBBBLE.

The dungeon shook again, then stopped. These tremors were a sign that the gate was closing soon. It would get progressively worse, and by the time the door was about to shut, it would feel like an earthquake.

"Let's go."

"Yessir."

Jinwoo headed toward the entrance. As if on cue, a light shone near it, and mounds of stones collapsed.

Baaang!

Dongsuk and his squad ran in. They were dumbfounded to see the dead spider lying behind Jinwoo.

"What, it's really dead?"

"Those two actually killed it?"

"Was the spider just super big but super weak?"

"I mean, how else could an E ranker and a D ranker kill it?"

"Bro, what should we do now?"

Dongsuk scratched his chin as he looked at Jinwoo and Jinho. The gate would soon close, since the boss had been killed. It was too late to dig up the mana stones on the wall. They hadn't gotten their gear ready, and there was less than an hour left.

It was time for a change of plans. Dongsuk loudly called to Jinho.

"Jinho Yoo!"

Jinho flinched and took a step back. His face showed how nervous he was.

Dongsuk smirked. "We did some research on you because your weapons looked real nice, and it turns out your dad's quite famous, isn't he? Myunghan Yoo of Yoojin Construction."

"S-so?"

"We'll give you a chance because we've got something we'd like to say to your dear old dad, but we'll all be in trouble if what happened here gets out. You'll need to become our accomplice if you want to live."

"Your accomplice?"

Dongsuk motioned at Jinwoo with his chin. His discomfiting gaze made

Jinwoo's brow twitch for a second.

"Kill Jinwoo Sung."

"What?" Jinho was appalled.

Dongsuk laughed as if Jinho's expression was the funniest thing he'd ever seen.

Originally, Dongsuk had intended to kill both Jinho and Jinwoo. While waiting outside, though, he'd done some research on his phone and discovered Jinho's father was the owner of a prominent domestic construction company. That had given him an idea.

What if we film him killing Jinwoo Sung and blackmail Myunghan Yoo?

Myunghan Yoo's projected net worth was at least 10,000,000,000,000 won. If they played their cards right, they could make several times more money than what the mana stones were worth.

"That's the only way you can walk out of here alive! Kill Jinwoo Sung with your own hands, and we'll spare you. If not, we'll kill you both."

Dongsuk's eyes turned vicious. "What're you waiting for? What happens in a dungeon stays in a dungeon anyway. Don't tell me you, a D rank, are afraid of some E ranker?"

Jinho looked to his side.

Jinwoo replied with a shrug. That meant Jinho could do whatever he wanted to do.

Jinho drew his sword, a determined look on his face.

Guess he finally made a decision.

Dongsuk began smiling. However, the choice Jinho had made wasn't the one he'd been expecting.

Jinho stood by Jinwoo's side, sword in hand.

"Whoa, you wanna team up with *him* to fight *us*?" Dongsuk muttered to himself.

The balls on this rich brat! Just because he'd gotten lucky and defeated one C-

rank boss!

Gyuhwan whispered to him, “What should we do?”

Dongsuk lowered his voice so Jinwoo and Jinho couldn’t hear him. “Get rid of Jinwoo Sung first. We need to hold on to the ATM. We’ve already suffered too many losses today.”

“Gotcha.” Blinding light started gathering in Gyuhwan’s hand.

Jinwoo narrowed his eyes.

They really want to do this.

This was the first time Jinwoo was facing off against another hunter. Nevertheless, he didn’t have even the tiniest intention of going easy on anyone threatening his life. Just then...

Ping!

The familiar notification bell sounded.

[An urgent quest has arrived.]

Urgent quest?

Jinwoo looked up.

The quest screen automatically came up on display before he could tell it to open. That had never happened before.

[URGENT QUEST: DEFEAT THE ENEMIES!]

There are people present who want to kill the Player. Defeat them all and ensure your safety. If you do not complete this quest, you will receive an appropriate penalty.

Number of enemies to defeat: 8

Number of enemies defeated: 0

Jinwoo’s eyes widened.

The goal of this quest is to kill Dongsuk’s entire crew?

Then, out of nowhere, there was a brilliant flash before his eyes. Gyuhwan

had shot an arrow of light at Jinwoo.

Blam!

The blast threw Jinwoo against the wall.

Wham!

Part of the cavern collapsed on top of Jinwoo.

Krrrrm.

“Boss!” Jinho made to run to Jinwoo’s side, but Dongsuk called out to him.

“Jinho Yoo!”

Jinho stopped in his tracks, startled.

“He’s already dead, so don’t worry about him and get over here.” Dongsuk motioned to him with his finger.

Jinho looked back at Jinwoo. As Dongsuk had said, Jinwoo was lying motionless under the rubble.

“Y-you..... You murderers.....!” Tears welled up in his eyes.

Dongsuk and his squad snickered at Jinho’s accusation—because it was true. They’d lost track of how many people had died by their hands in dungeons.

While Jinho confronted the jeering squad, Jinwoo, buried under the debris, couldn’t believe what he was seeing from under the rubble. Through the gaps between the broken rock, he watched the text of the quest changing.

[URGENT QUEST: DEFEAT THE ENEMIES!]

There are people present who want to kill &*@##. Defeat them all and ensure your safety. If you do not complete this quest, #\$\$%^%@\$#%#^!**\$%^\$.

Number of enemies to defeat: 8

Number of enemies defeated: 0

A few of the words glitched out and then smoothly re-formed.

[URGENT QUEST: DEFEAT THE ENEMIES!]

There are people present who want to kill the Player. Defeat them all and ensure your safety. If you do not complete this quest, your heart will stop.

Number of enemies to defeat: 8

Number of enemies defeated: 0

It was a clear threat. He would die if he didn't complete the task that had been set for him.

So I have to kill them if I don't want to die?

The content was shocking, but Jinwoo wasn't fazed for long. That feeling quickly changed to relief. He couldn't believe it, but it was true.

One worry had been plaguing Jinwoo ever since he'd started receiving messages and seeing his ability stats.

—What if this weird phenomenon suddenly ends?

Because this had all started arbitrarily, it could end just as suddenly, couldn't it? This uneasy feeling constantly plagued him.

However, things had become clearer with this urgent quest. This was neither coincidence nor benevolence. Had it been benevolent, the quest would have been to escape this dangerous situation, and it wouldn't have threatened him with a death penalty.

The system had its own objective. It was not to "make Jinwoo Sung stronger" but rather that it "needed a strong Jinwoo Sung."

When necessary, I'll even need to kill other hunters without any reservations.....

He gleaned the system's intentions from this quest. Jinwoo felt relieved again.

Thank goodness.

It wasn't arbitrary. Its purpose was clear.

He'd wanted to get stronger every time he'd experienced a crisis. He'd wanted to escape the unstable lifestyle that made him feel like he was

constantly hanging on the edge of a cliff. That fateful day, an opportunity had presented itself the moment he'd been in the most peril. The system's objective and Jinwoo's were completely aligned.

The system will use me, and I'll use the system.

That was all he needed. This phenomenon wouldn't suddenly disappear as long as its objective remained.

Jinwoo rose from the rubble.

[HP: 1,360/2,600]

As expected of a C-rank hunter's magic. His HP was down by almost half after just one attack.

Jinwoo couldn't afford to hold back anymore. His eyes were filled with malice. He stepped toward Dongsuk.

"Huh?" Dongsuk and his squad belatedly spotted Jinwoo from where they were swarming around the frightened Jinho.

"What the—? He's alive?"

"Gyuhwan, you're losing your touch!"

"What a joke; he's an E ranker."

Dongsuk scratched his chin again. "Gyuhwan, you shouldn't have held back."

Gyuhwan's face reddened. "I..... I guess you're right."

Dongsuk wasn't right. Gyuhwan definitely hadn't held back. He'd used up a third of his magic power, so how was Jinwoo still standing? Did he miss? No, it wouldn't have been that loud if he had. Gyuhwan had a ton of questions, but he didn't get a chance to ask because Jinwoo spoke first.

"Since you like to play with people's lives..."

The eyes of the squad members were fixed on him. He stopped right in front of them. Jinho was startled, but the other hunters didn't really react. Some of them sneered at him.

Jinwoo continued talking in a monotone. "...I'm guessing you're prepared to deal with the consequences?"

"Ha!" Dongsuk scoffed at him.

"What did this bastard say?"

"I'll take care of him." A hunter with narrow eyes sidled up and slung his arm around Jinwoo's neck. "Dude, it seems like you don't know what's going on here."

His expression gradually shifted as he flexed his arm.

.....*What the hell? Why can't I move him?*

He was attempting to put Jinwoo in a headlock, but try as hard as he might, he couldn't pull down Jinwoo's head. Wasn't this guy just an E rank? Sweat formed on the narrow-eyed man's forehead.

Why is he so strong.....?

Suddenly...

Shhhk.

...Juntae's head fell to the ground.

Whud.

"J-Juntae!" Dongsuk's lackeys recoiled.

"Wh-what?"

"How did that bastard get a dagger?!"

"Where did it come from?!"

The strike squad retreated a few steps as they drew their weapons. Kasaka's Venom Fang had appeared in Jinwoo's hand. Blood dripped from the edge of the dagger.

Ping!

[Number of enemies to defeat: 7]

[Number of enemies defeated: 1]

Seven left to go.

Jinwoo eyed each squad member like a predator sizing up its prey.

Dongsuk gulped. He was surprised by the dagger suddenly appearing in Jinwoo's hand, but he was even more shocked by Juntae's death.

How could an E-rank hunter kill a D ranker in one hit?

He didn't know what kind of trick Jinwoo had pulled, but the kid gloves were off. They needed to be careful, though.

Dongsuk exchanged glances with the man next to him.

Gyuhwan, give him one more hit.

Gyuhwan nodded subtly. He wouldn't fail this time! Light began emitting from the fingers of the determined hunter.

Before he could shoot his arrows of light, though, Jinwoo appeared before him.

"H-huh?" Gyuhwan's jaw dropped.

Jinwoo glared at him.

Take down the mage hunter with the strong firepower but weak HP.

He'd finished calculating everything in his head. He stabbed Gyuhwan in the neck.

Shhhk.

"Ackkk!" Gyuhwan clutched at the hole in his throat and fell to the ground.

Thud.

"Kill him!"

"Gaaahhh!"

The order prompted all the hunters to jump at Jinwoo at once.

Jinwoo focused his senses and homed in on his enemies' movements. All sound faded away, and time slowed down. He was making full use of his level-thirty-eight agility attribute. He either blocked or avoided countless strikes from swords, spears, and arrows in close proximity.

The hunters' eyes widened in shock.

H-how can an E ranker move like this?

He's too fast!

I can't hit him!

Their faces went pale.

Speed is relative. In their eyes, Jinwoo was a blur.

Jinwoo wove around the hunters, striking their weak spots one by one.

[Debuff: Paralysis has been activated.]

[Debuff: Drain has been activated.]

[Debuff: Paralysis has been activated.]

* * *

The special effects of the Kasaka's Venom Fang dagger threw the hunters into chaos.

"I can't m-move my body! Ackkk!"

"Magic? Is this magic?"

"You son of a bitch!"

[Debuff: Paralysis has been activated.]

[Debuff: Drain has been activated.]

[Debuff: Paralysis has been activated.]

"Argh!"

"Wh-who the fuck are you?!"

"Waaaahhh!"

There was nonstop screaming from every direction. The five hunters who surrounded Jinwoo hit the ground in no time.

Thud.

Thud.

Ping!

[Number of enemies to defeat: 1]

[Number of enemies defeated: 7]

Jinwoo turned to look at the last hunter standing. It was the huge, bearded Dongsuk.

Dongsuk threw his shield to the ground with a defiant look on his face. He let out a roar.

“Graaaaah!” He pushed off and rushed at Jinwoo.

Tok, tok, tok, tok!

The hunter weighed the situation as he ran. He was a tank and a high C ranker. Jinwoo was probably a damage dealer. Even though Jinwoo seemed pretty fast, he probably didn’t have the power to penetrate Dongsuk’s Reinforcement skill.

There’s no way he can get off a critical hit with just a dagger!

When they collided, Jinwoo Sung would be the one to go down! As the gap between them narrowed, Dongsuk angled his body so his shoulder would strike Jinwoo first.

“Reinforcement!”

Right then, his vision suddenly spun, and he found himself looking at the dungeon’s ceiling.

Thud!

His head rattled, and his neck and back hit the ground hard. He tried to get up, but his body refused to listen. Despite straining as hard as he could, Dongsuk could only lie there.

“Koff!” Blood flew out of his mouth.

Did he..... Did he throw me?

Had he, Dongsuk Hwang, lost to this boy? Had he really lost to him in a battle of physical strength? “How could an E ranker.....?”

There had to have been a mistake. Jinwoo had defeated five C-rank and three D-rank hunters in a blink of an eye. There was no way this guy was an E rank.

Jinwoo stood over Dongsuk. The seasoned hunter was having trouble

controlling his own body. The victor was clear. Had they been sparring or brawling for sport, it would've ended there, but Jinwoo had no intention of letting him go.

"W-wait." Dongsuk raised his hand. "P-please spare my life! I can give you m-money. As much as you want. Please have mercy..."

"Three times," Jinwoo told him coldly. "You tried to kill me three times, and you have the nerve to ask me to spare your life?"

The first time had been when he'd blocked the entrance of the boss's lair. The second was when he'd ordered Jinho to kill him. And the third was when he'd ordered Gyuhwan to shoot him. Each instance had been Dongsuk ordering Jinwoo's murder. And that wasn't counting this battle.

Tit for tat.

After Jinwoo had survived the underground temple, he'd resolved to give as good as he got, for better or worse.

An eye for an eye. There was no room for compromise.

Dongsuk started frothing at the mouth in rage when he realized begging wouldn't work. "Do—do you think you can get away with this?! Do you have any idea who my younger brother—?!"

Crack!

He couldn't continue, because his neck was broken. "Hkkkkk..."

Dongsuk's eyes rolled back.

Ping!

[Number of enemies to defeat: 0]

[Number of enemies defeated: 8]

The quest was finally over.

"Whew..." Jinwoo withdrew his hands from Dongsuk's head and gave a heavy sigh loaded with many different emotions.

He gazed at his hands. Even if it had been a one-sided fight, he'd just killed eight people, yet his hands weren't shaking at all.

Is this normal?

Jinwoo placed his hand on his chest and felt his heart.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Ba-dump.

His heart was beating normally, like nothing had happened.

Maybe.....

For the first time, he considered the possibility that being able to see the system might not have been the only change in him since he'd returned from the underground temple. He didn't dwell on it for long, though, as his thoughts were interrupted by the familiar notification sound.

Ping!

[You have completed Urgent Quest: Defeat the Enemies!]

[Rewards have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

* * *

As he'd sort of been expecting, there were rewards. Jinwoo didn't hesitate.

Check.

Ping!

[YOU HAVE THE FOLLOWING REWARDS.]

Reward 1. Full Recovery

Reward 2. Ability Points +10

Reward 3. Skill: Murderous Intent

Ten ability points plus a skill?

Jinwoo's eyes went wide at the sight of these fantastic rewards. Ability points were always good, but what really got his attention was the new skill.

If I didn't use the Dash skill when I was fighting the spider.....

He'd been able to kill that boss only because of Dash. Skills could completely change the outcome of a battle. There was a reason why rune stones, from

which hunters could learn skills, were incredibly expensive.

Jinwoo chose to check Skill: Murderous Intent right away.

Check reward three.

Ping!

[SKILL: MURDEROUS INTENT LV.1]

Active skill.

100 mana required.

Emits strong pressure on the chosen target to put them in an extreme panic for 1 minute. You may select several targets at once.

Debuff: Panic: All abilities decrease by 50 percent.

It was rare for a skill to be able to decrease all of an opponent's abilities even temporarily. Just like other debuffs, the effect most likely wouldn't work on someone with high resistance, but Jinwoo would be able to easily overwhelm most enemies when it was activated. Furthermore, since it could affect several people at once, this opened up infinite possibilities as to how it could be employed.

This is pretty cool.

The rewards were as massive as the penalty would've been.

Wait..... These rewards aren't that great if I think about it.

The penalty had put his life on the line. Was this all he was getting?

Jinwoo looked around. He frowned at the horrible scene. He'd witnessed many a death during his time as a hunter, but he still couldn't get used to seeing dead bodies.

This was the result that the quest had demanded. He felt that the rewards weren't good enough for a mission that required so many deaths, though Jinwoo supposed he couldn't have avoided the fight with Dongsuk's crew, even if it hadn't been for the quest.

It's true, there's no end to human greed.....

He shook his head.

The cave trembled again.

RUUUMMMBLE—

The tremors were even worse than before. It was time to leave the dungeon. Before he did, though, he needed to take care of a couple of loose ends, starting with Jinho.

Jinwoo's eyes moved toward him. Jinwoo felt sorry when the startled newbie hunter quickly looked down to avoid his gaze.

What should I do with him?

Jinwoo had no intention of harming Jinho. There was no need or reason to. Still, it would be troublesome for Jinwoo if other people found out about what had happened here.

I should at least make sure he keeps quiet—

His thoughts were cut short when Jinho dropped to his knees and quickly bowed his head. "Please spare my life, boss!"

"....."

Jinwoo had a hunch that dealing with Jinho would be easier than he thought.

7

A PROPOSAL



7

A PROPOSAL

Jinho was trembling. His face was extremely pale. It was the natural reaction to witnessing eight people getting killed in a flash before his very eyes.

One of the most effective tools used to control people is fear. So Jinwoo decided to apply a little of that in this situation.

“Why should I spare you?”

Eeeek! It was like he could physically hear Jinho’s heart drop.

Was that too much?

He didn’t regret his approach for long.

“If y-you need money, I’ll tell my fath—”

“Is that how you see me?” Jinwoo scowled at him.

He’d been poor all his life, but he would never stoop so low as to hold someone hostage for money. If he did, he’d be no different than Dongsuk.

“I’m s-so sorry.”

Jinwoo would’ve smacked Jinho on the back of the head if the newbie hunter didn’t appear frightened out of his mind. Jinho looked like he’d have a heart attack if that happened, so Jinwoo did his best to restrain himself.

Jinho swallowed nervously as he took in Jinwoo’s hard expression.

Dongsuk also offered him money..... Has he thrown away his materialistic desires and chosen the path of blood and slaughter?

Jinho’s mental image of Jinwoo was becoming more distorted. But it was too soon to draw any conclusions.

But then why did he pack all those essence stones?

Jinwoo had searched every inch of the spider's stomach for essence stones earlier. Essence stones were highly concentrated energy sources and raw materials for making magic tools and other such things, but to hunters, essence stones equaled money.

The gears turned quickly in Jinho's head.

That's it!

Those essence stones were blood money. He'd had no problem searching the spider's stomach because the essence stones were the rightfully earned fee for the blood on his hands. He was a zealot who showed no mercy to his enemies but had no interest in rewards he didn't earn.

I tried to buy his mercy with money, so of course he's mad.

Jinwoo didn't want his father's money—he wanted a "rightfully earned fee" for sparing him. Jinwoo still seemed to be in a bad mood when Jinho peeked up at his expression.

Jinho quickly told him, "Boss, I'll give you all the profit from this dungeon if you spare my life."

"Hmm?"

As predicted, this piqued Jinwoo's interest.

"Please consider it, boss. Don't you think people would be suspicious if you were the sole survivor out of ten and hogged all the rewards?"

Jinho was certain that Jinwoo was a false ranker. Worse, he was convinced Jinwoo was a very high-rank false ranker who enjoyed killing! Therefore, he assumed that Jinwoo had to care about what other people thought of him.

"So?"

"But if both you and I leave here alive, all the essence stones from this dungeon are mine according to the contract. No one would suspect you of killing all the members of the strike squad because you had no claim to the stones."

Of course, there was no way people would be suspicious of Jinho, either. He was the son of the president of a large construction company. The profit from selling the essence stones would be peanuts to him.

"The money is yours to take, boss. You killed Dongsuk's squad and saved me from them, so it's *rightfully* yours, no?"

Jinho put special emphasis on the word *rightfully*.

He's not wrong.....

What Jinho was suggesting was the safest way for Jinwoo to obtain the essence stones. No one else had a claim to them. As greedy as Dongsuk had been, he couldn't bring them to hell with him. Only one person had a right to the essence stones now.

But Jinho was willing to give them to Jinwoo.

He refused to force Jinho to give up the stones, but.....

I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Besides, if it wasn't for Jinwoo, Jinho would've been killed or taken hostage. With that taken into consideration, it made sense to say they were rightfully his.

As Jinwoo's expression softened, Jinho concluded that he'd guessed correctly.

I knew he wouldn't say no to the essence stones as an exchange for the blood of Dongsuk and his men on his hands.

Jinwoo and Jinho meant completely different things by "rightfully," but neither realized that.

"Fine."

Jinho perked up at Jinwoo's agreement. He was starting to respect Jinwoo a little more, because he was sticking with his convictions.

But Jinwoo's face turned expressionless yet again. "But how can I trust you?"

He asked this question because he remembered the real reason he was doing this. He wasn't using fear to get paid 2,000,000 won. He was doing it to avoid any trouble later.

"How can I betray you? You saved my life a few times!"

"You could break your promise and tell people what happened here, no?"

Even if Jinho did, it wouldn't be a big deal for Jinwoo. Killing Dongsuk's squad had been in self-defense. All eight of them had been fully armed, and they'd attacked Jinwoo first with a powerful magic spell. The law had changed since the advent of hunters, so Jinwoo would be acquitted for sure.

Still, he wanted this incident to go away quietly without any trouble. To do that, he needed Jinho's full cooperation. Even though his method for securing that cooperation was problematic, it was definitely effective.

"Well?" Jinwoo stared hard at Jinho as if demanding an answer.

The novice hunter was determined. "I'd never do such a cowardly thing. Especially to someone who saved my life."

Wait.....

The look in Jinho's eyes was familiar. It was the same as when he'd refused to be an accomplice to Dongsuk and his men.

This guy..... He's telling the truth.

Give-and-take. Jinho had chosen Jinwoo in a life-and-death situation. He'd trusted Jinwoo and gone against eight other hunters. So Jinwoo decided to trust Jinho this once.

Of course, not right away..... He'd give him a bit of a wake-up call first.

Jinwoo picked up the shield that Dongsuk had thrown on the ground.

"My back still hurts from getting stabbed by Dongsuk."

He inspected the shield before throwing it at the wall with his full strength.

BAMMM!

More than half of it lodged in the wall. Jinho broke into a cold sweat and swallowed hard.

"My little bro won't disappoint me, will he?"

"Of course not, boss."

Right then, the dungeon shook hard again.

RRRRRUMBLE.

They were out of time. Jinwoo never had any intention of harming Jinho, so he thought that was enough.

He ordered, “Pack up all the essence stones. We’re leaving the dungeon.”

“Thank you, boss!” Jinho stood up and gave a deep, ninety-degree bow. A smile returned to his face.

Jinwoo searched Dongsuk’s pockets while Jinho retrieved his bag.

Can’t forget my payment.

His fee for the day was 2,000,000 won. He didn’t want to leave even one cent.

There were a few dozen 50,000 won bills in Dongsuk’s wallet. He counted a total of forty-five bills. It was a little over 2,000,000 won.

Dongsuk had promised he would pay Jinwoo right after the raid, and it looked like he’d had the money ready. After all, sometimes there was no need to cut the tail.

“Thanks for the money.” Jinwoo said a last farewell that wasn’t heard by anyone and went on ahead.

Jinho belatedly returned, clutching the bag of essence stones.

“Boss?”

All he saw were the corpses of the hunters killed by Jinwoo.

“Eek!” A pale-faced Jinho ran to catch up to Jinwoo, hoping not to lose him.

* * *

A member of the Surveillance Team of the Hunter’s Association arrived at the scene.

The procedure was simple whenever hunters died in a raid. Deaths were reported, hunters were questioned, and that was it.

The investigator this time was a strict-looking middle-aged woman. “Your names, please.”

“Jinwoo Sung.”

“I’m Jinho Yoo.”

An investigation was no more than a formality, since hunters died so often. It was just for records’ sake.

Unless, of course, there was something suspicious.

“.....So all the C-rank hunters were killed, but a D ranker and an E ranker survived; have I got that right?”

The investigator adjusted her glasses as she interviewed them. Her eyes narrowed.

Normally, the victim is the weakest in the group.....

She was carefully looking them over when she spotted something, and she let out a squeal.

“Oh my!” Her eyes twinkled as she approached. “Isn’t this Kalion, the newest sword from Maya Inc.? Oh wow, and this is a Royal-series shield made by the craftsman Gredos, right?”

Jinho’s face lit up. “You know your weapons!”

“Oh, I don’t know them *that* well. I just keep up with what’s new. Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

The sword cost 700,000,000 won. The shield cost 500,000,000 won. These weapons were made with an exorbitantly expensive essence stone along with other valuable elements. They were powerful tools that could make a D-rank hunter more powerful than a C ranker.

A theory automatically formed in her mind as to what had happened in the dungeon.

With these weapons.....

Defeating the magic beasts would be possible even if all the C-rank hunters were killed.

And that E ranker was probably able to save himself because he hid somewhere.

It was the complete opposite of the truth, but that was the conclusion she’d

drawn. It was highly unlikely that anyone who could purchase pricey weapons like this would betray his colleagues for a few essence stones. And the E-rank hunter couldn't have done anything to harm multiple C-rank hunters, so the deaths of Dongsuk and the seven other hunters had to have been accidents.

"Okay." The investigator looked satisfied and put away her notebook. "With this, the case is closed, and you're free to go. It must have been a tiring day, so thank you for cooperating with the investigation."

"Thank you." Jinwoo spoke for the both of them.

The investigator left the scene as quickly as she'd arrived.

"Good work, boss." Jinho bowed deeply again. His impeccably good manners remained even outside the gate. It looked like he was really scared of Jinwoo.

Jinwoo tutted internally.

"You too."

"No, I didn't do anything. You did all the work. Here are the essence stones, boss." Jinho politely handed the bag over to Jinwoo.

The bag was filled with essence stones. An essence stone from a C-rank dungeon could be worth up to 10,000,000 won. Even a small one could cost several million.

Jinwoo roughly counted the essence stones with his eyes and tried to contain his excitement.

How much is all this worth.....?

He did his best not to laugh out loud.

Suddenly, drops of water fell inside the bag.

Plip.

Plip.

Jinwoo looked up. The sky had gradually gotten cloudier all afternoon, and it now started raining.

.....Good thing I made Jinah take an umbrella.

A small smile came across Jinwoo's face at the thought of his sister.

* * *

Later that night, Jinwoo summoned his stat screen as soon as he got home.

"Stats!"

[Stats]

Strength:	53
Stamina:	30
Agility:	38
Intelligence:	30
Perception:	32

(Available ability points: 10) He had ten points that he'd received as a reward from the urgent quest. He was itching to use them. They were equivalent to the rewards for three daily quests plus one more point, or for leveling up twice.

First agility. Then perception.

He invested seven points in agility and the rest in perception.

[Stats]

Strength:	53
Stamina:	30
Agility:	45
Intelligence:	30
Perception:	35

(Available ability points: 0)

"Excellent."

Overall, his abilities had increased significantly. Agility was almost equal to strength, and perception was at thirty-five points now. He was thinking of

investing points in stamina once strength and agility were at a similar level. He wanted to balance all his stats except intelligence, which he still didn't know how to use.

"Should I check out today's achievements?"

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 2,600]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 21]

[Title: Wolf Assassin]

[MP: 390]

[Stats]

Strength: 53

Stamina: 30

Agility: 45

Intelligence: 30

Perception: 35

(Available ability points: 0)

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1, Murderous Intent Lv.1

His eyes zoomed in on his level, which had risen three times, and then on the newly acquired Murderous Intent skill. His stats were also in great shape, thanks to the ten points he'd just distributed.

All these things were remarkable accomplishments, but that wasn't the end.

The daily fee alone was 2,000,000 won.

And he had a bag filled to the brim with essence stones. Jinwoo counted them.

Eleven essence stones from the spider and thirty-eight essence stones from Dongsuk's team.

Forty-nine in total! Even if each stone was worth only 5,000,000 won, he'd still have over 200,000,000 won.

"I can't believe I made two hundred million won from just one raid..."

It was a lot of money because he'd taken the shares of ten people all for himself. He'd unexpectedly gotten to have his cake and eat it, too.

All I need to do is sell these.

Selling essence stones wasn't hard. They were snatched up as soon as they hit the market because there were so many buyers.

The problem was how he wanted to go about it. It was more common to sell to another hunter in a private transaction, but sometimes a guild or a company bought stones as well. Jinwoo was leaning toward a specialty store instead of doing private or online sales, since it was a big haul.

Can't I just sell these in the shop?

It would be convenient if the shop in the system bought essence stones at a fair price. Jinwoo shoved the bag in a corner as he pondered.

He suddenly remembered something else he'd accomplished.

I can purchase something from there now, can't I?

He summoned the shop right away. It wasn't much, but he still had all the gold he'd collected from the instance dungeon at Hapjeong Station.

"Purchase."

Ping!

Endless items for purchase showed up with the familiar chime. From cheap potions and miscellaneous accessories to expensive protective gear and fancy weapons, countless items were being sold for gold in the shop.

It was a given, but the better the item, the more expensive it was. The most expensive cost 10,000,000,000 gold.

“Wow...ten billion gold.” Jinwoo had only 112,000 gold. It was way too little to buy anything good, but he wasn’t in any rush.

There was plenty of time.

So I can buy this stuff if I save up enough gold, right?

Jinwoo started humming as he continued checking out the expensive items. Now he had another reason to raid instance dungeons.

He couldn’t wait for the Mystery Box reward after tomorrow’s daily quest.

* * *

It had been three days since Jinwoo returned from the C-rank gate.

Jinah came home early because it was Saturday. She kicked her shoes off as she sniffed the air at a familiar scent.

“What, you ordered fried chicken?”

“I asked for it to be delivered for when you usually come home.”

“Wow!”

Jinwoo waved Jinah over from his seat at the table, and she beelined toward him.

“What’s up? Did something good happen to my stingy brother?”

“Hey, put your bag down first. No need to rush.”

“Whatever. It’s not heavy at all!”

Hadn’t she complained a few days ago about a mere folding umbrella being too heavy for her? Jinwoo raised an eyebrow at her but couldn’t stop smiling.

Did something good happen?

Of course. His bank account balance had gone from 800,000 won to 180,300,000 won. He'd gotten 180,000,000 won after selling the essence stones and had already paid the landlord 500,000 won for the rent.

180,000,000 won! Jinwoo had made 180,000,000 won from a single raid. He'd been working as a hunter for four years, but he finally felt like he was a real one, since, these days, people equated hunters with big money.

He vividly recalled the face of the employee from the essence stone shop.

"D-did you get all these by yourself?"

"Somehow I did."

"Oh my..... That's incredible."

Forty-nine C-rank essence stones. They were evaluated at a little over 300,000,000 won initially. Who knew the tax was so high!

"Tax is forty percent?"

"Yes, the tax is forty percent for individuals and ten percent when a guild sells them."

"Why does the guild pay less tax?"

"Because, unlike squads, guilds have to respond to calls for mobilization."

When Jinwoo thought back to the double dungeon, he remembered hearing that the Surveillance Team and White Tiger Guild had arrived at the scene together. As much as guilds got special treatment, they had to cooperate with the Hunter's Association and the government.

He thought about it a little bit.

Should I hang on to these essence stones and sell them after joining a guild?

But he soon gave up on that idea. By the time he joined a guild, he'd be working on A-or B-rank gates. Essence stones from those would be incomparably more valuable than the ones from a C-rank gate.

Currently, he needed every cent he could get.

And I can't sign a contract with any random guild just to pay less taxes.

“Understood. I’d like to exchange these, please.”

The remaining amount was 180,000,000 won.

The fried chicken and beer were indeed for celebrating, just as Jinah had asked.

“Thanks for the food!”

Jinwoo flicked Jinah’s forehead with his finger when she tried to sneak a can of beer.

Tak!

“Ouch!”

“This is yours.” He passed Jinah a soda.

“Geez..... I was just joking.....”

While Jinah rubbed her red forehead, Jinwoo cracked open a beer and took a swig. As soon as he did...

Ping!

Jinwoo tensed at the chime.

Why the sudden message?

[A harmful substance has been detected.]

[Buff: Detoxing has been activated.]

[3, 2, 1..... Detoxing is complete.]

Detoxing a harmful substance? Is the system talking about alcohol?

Jinwoo finished the rest of the can and opened another one right away.

Gulp, gulp.

[A harmful substance has been detected.]

[Buff: Detoxing has been activated.]

[3, 2, 1..... Detoxing is complete.]

He received the same message.

He'd finished two cans of beer in the blink of an eye, but he didn't feel drunk at all. The effect or buff or whatever it was called worked really well.

What is this?

Jinwoo cocked his head. He'd never met a hunter who could've placed the buff on him before. Most hunters with that kind of special ability worked in a guild. He'd never encounter any as a member of the association.

In any case, if someone put the buff on me secretly, the system would've told me.

So there were two possibilities. He'd gotten the buff either when he'd been unconscious or way before the system had been activated. He personally thought it was more likely to be the latter.

"What's wrong? Heartburn? You should've been more careful." Jinah became worried at his serious expression.

"I just remembered something urgent. You keep eating."

He went to his room. He thought back, combing over every single memory in case he'd missed anything.

Oh.

Something suddenly occurred to him.

Every quest so far had rewards. Even a penalty quest had them. But there's one quest I haven't checked the rewards for.

Jinwoo quickly opened the inbox.

He'd brushed this off because he'd known nothing about the system, rewards, and so on, but he'd definitely received a message about completing the requirements at the time.

His heart started racing. He found the message at the very bottom of his inbox.

[Congratulations on becoming a Player.] (Read)

Jinwoo's voice shook.

"Check."

Ping!

[This system is designed to assist the development of the Player.]

[Failure to comply with the system may result in a penalty.]

[The rewards have been delivered.]

Just as he surmised. There was a mention of rewards.

When he'd heard the voice in the dungeon for the first time, it had said that.

[You have fulfilled all the requirements to complete Secret Quest: Courage of the Weak.]

The secret quest had also been one of the quests. But he'd never checked the reward. He'd thought he was hearing things back then.

[Failure to comply.....may result in a penalty.]

[The rewards have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

Yes.

Ping!

[SECRET QUEST: COURAGE OF THE WEAK COMPLETION REWARDS.]

The Great Spell Caster Kandiaru's Blessing.

The Great Spell Caster Kandiaru was amazed by your courage and gifted you with this special blessing. With Kandiaru's blessing, you may enjoy a strong and healthy life.

“May the challenger’s days be filled with light.”

—Temporary Buff: Spirit of Rehabilitation: All injuries will be healed.

—Long-lasting Buff: Health and Longevity: You are immunized against all diseases, poisons, and any other debuffs. Your healing ability increases exponentially when you are asleep.

It all added up now.

So my severed leg.....

The leg he'd lost was normal again because of the secret quest reward. He also couldn't get drunk because of it.

Wait, I'm immune to all poisons?

Jinwoo's eyes went wide.

Then maybe that thing, too.....?

Jinwoo rushed to retrieve an item from his inventory.

[ITEM: KASAKA'S VENOM GLAND]

Acquisition Difficulty: A

Category: Poison

This pouch contains refined kasaka poison. Harvesting this from a kasaka is very rare. Once you drink it, your skin will harden, but your muscles will be permanently damaged from the poison.

Buff: Kasaka's Armor Scales: Decreases physical damage by 20

percent Debuff: Damaged Muscles: Strength -35

If strength is damaged by the poison, won't the detoxing buff counter it?

There was only one way to find out. Jinwoo squeezed his eyes shut and drank the elixir in the pouch.

Gulp, gulp.

Sticky liquid trickled down his throat. It tasted gross and gamy, but he drank it all.

The more bitter the taste, the better the medicine.....

Once he swallowed all the poison, a message appeared.

[A harmful substance has been detected.]

[Buff: Detoxing has been activated.]

[3, 2, 1..... Detoxing is complete.]

[Debuff: Damaged Muscles has been negated.]

“Yes!” He pumped his fist.

He summoned the stat screen to make sure.

Stats.

[Stats]

Strength: 53

Stamina: 30

Agility: 53

Intelligence: 30

Perception: 36

(Available ability points: 0)

Physical damage reduced by: 20 percent As expected, his muscular strength hadn't decreased. His stat was still at fifty-three, and he now had the ability to reduce his damage. Even though it was limited to only physical damage, 20 percent was a significant amount.

“Nice!”

As he celebrated the new stats, Jinah's voice came from the living room.

“Do you know a guy named Jinwoo Yoo? There's some guy named Jinwoo Yoo asking for you.”

“His name probably isn't Jinwoo Yoo.....”

Jinwoo went to the living room and grabbed the phone from his sister.

“This is Jinwoo.”

“Boss, it's me, Jinho Yoo.”

He'd figured. The voice on the phone was familiar.

“.....How'd you get my number?”

“I know someone from the association. You didn't answer your cell, so I had no choice but to call your home number.”

“What for?”

“Oh! Sorry, boss, but this isn’t something I can tell you over the phone..... Can I talk to you in person?”

Jinwoo cocked his head.

Does he really want to see me again after what happened?

“I’d really appreciate it, boss.”

Jinho was quite a unique one for sure.

* * *

Because Jinho was so persistent, Jinwoo decided to give him an hour. They promised to meet in a popular café franchise across the street from Jinwoo’s apartment building.

[Caffe Binne]

Because it was right after lunch, there were a lot of people inside the café despite it being a weekday.

“Boss, over here!” Jinho brightly greeted Jinwoo.

Jinwoo had increased his perception to the max before coming in, but he hadn’t detected any other hunters. Jinho wasn’t here for revenge, at least, not that he remembered doing anything to cause the newbie hunter to harbor any bitter feelings toward him in any case.

He sat across from Jinho. “I didn’t think I was going to see you again.”

Jinho’s unfinished ice cream sat on the table. He stood up and asked Jinwoo, “Did you order anything? Do you want some coffee?”

“No thanks. I’m fine.”

Jinho sat down looking disappointed.

Jinwoo spoke first. “So what did you wa—?” He was interrupted.

“He really did it! That’s insane!”

Jinwoo looked to the side. Three large, rough-looking jocks sat with three girls one table over, causing a racket.

Jinwoo tried to focus on Jinho. “What did you want to ta—?”

“Jerk! When did I do that? You’re exaggerating ’cause the girls are here!”

“.....Talk—”

“You did! Yo, you want me to show them the pictures? Should I show them the evidence, huh?”

Both the boys’ voices and the girls’ laughter were invasive.

“.....” It was getting hard to have a conversation because of them, so Jinwoo had no choice but to quietly walk over to their table.

The boys focused on Jinwoo.

“Could you please lower your voices? There are other customers here, too.”

One of the boys rubbed his neck and bobbed his head up and down. “Oh, yeah. We’ll be quiet. Soooo sorry.”

The girls giggled at his antics.

“.....” Jinwoo looked at them in silence for a moment before moving to leave.

But something hit the back of his head as soon as he turned around. A crumpled-up paper napkin fell to the floor.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hee-hee-hee.”

“Hey, don’t do that!”

The boys roared in laughter, and the girls pretended to chide them.

Jinho’s face froze as he watched the exchange. “B-boss.....”

Jinwoo picked up an unused spoon beside Jinho’s ice cream and walked over to the counter.

“Look, look. He’s gonna tell on us.”

“Mommy, they’re so loud! Please stop them. Ha-ha-ha!”

They continued making fun of Jinwoo.

He approached an anxious female employee.

“How much is this spoon?”

“I’m sorry, sir. We don’t sell the spoons at our store.”

“It can’t be more than ten thousand won, right?”

“Pardon? Oh, uh, probably not.....”

Jinwoo placed a 10,000 won bill on the counter and turned around.

“Sir? Um, sir?”

Jinwoo ignored the employee and went straight to the table of jocks. The boys stood up, sensing from Jinwoo’s expression that something serious was about to go down.

“What’s up? Huh?”

Everyone in the café was focused on them.

Jinwoo showed them the spoon he was holding.

.....?

.....?

As the boys stared at it, perplexed, Jinwoo began crushing the spoon. The utensil lost its shape in his hand.

The blood started draining from their faces.

Tak.

What was rolling on the table was no longer a spoon. It was a crushed ball of steel.

“Whoa!” They swallowed nervously.

That’s not normal!

H-he’s a hunter...

They exchanged glances, and then the boy who had thrown the napkin at Jinwoo bowed first.

“I’m so sorry.”

The other boys bowed as well.

“I’m sorry.”

“We made a mistake. I am so sorry.”

The now-pale-faced boys bowed several more times in apology and then ran out of the café with the girls.

Whoa! The other customers were thankful because they’d also been inconvenienced by the loud teenagers.

Jinwoo sat down again. Jinho gazed up at him with respect in his eyes.

“You’re so cool!”

“Forget that.” Jinwoo went back to the topic at hand. “Why did you want to see me?”

“So..... I thought about it a lot. I thought about it again and again. I really need to tell you something, boss.”

Jinwoo raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“Actually.....” Jinho blushed, and he looked shy but eventually summoned up the courage.

“Actually, I’m going to form a strike squad.....”

Jinwoo answered without hesitation. “No thanks.”

Jinho looked dumbfounded. “Boss, you’re saying no already?”

“I don’t need to hear any more.” He was firm.

It wasn’t like Jinwoo didn’t like Jinho. He might be a little strange, but he seemed pleasant and loyal. He was different from the stereotype of the superrich seen in the media.

But Jinwoo had no intention of humoring the little master playing hunter.

“If you don’t have anything else to say, I’m gone.”

“B-boss!” Jinho hurriedly grabbed at Jinwoo when he made to stand up.

“Boss, just twenty times! No, please go with me *nineteen* more times!”

“Where? Dungeons?”

"Yes! I'll make sure to compensate you well." Jinho sounded desperate.

Jinwoo cocked his head.

There are two main reasons for being a hunter—money and a sense of duty. Jinho wasn't doing it for either of those reasons. Maybe he thought being a hunter was like an extreme sport with a little more danger?

That's the image Jinwoo had of Jinho. It was surprising to him that Jinho wanted to form a strike squad even after what had happened in that dungeon not too long ago.

Well, I guess it takes all types.

It wasn't far-fetched to assume there was at least one spoiled, rich kid who had a fetish for danger. Yet Jinho's eyes were too determined to dismiss him as such.

Or does he have something else in mind?

Jinwoo was more interested in what he meant by "nineteen times" than "compensation." The gears in his mind began turning.

Wait..... If the last raid was his first, and he's asking me to do nineteen more.....

No way. Was he...? Jinwoo quickly arrived at an answer.

His expression was incredulous. "Are you planning to get a *guild master's license*?"

"Yes!"

Good thing he hadn't ordered coffee. If he'd been drinking, he would've done a spit take.

"*You want to be a guild master?*"

"The thing is... It's a little complicated." Jinho flushed even redder than he had earlier. "Please at least hear me out, boss."

"....." In the end, Jinwoo's curiosity won him over, and he sat down again. "All right, I'll hear you out."

Besides, Jinwoo had given him an hour, and it wasn't done yet. He should at

least listen to his story.

Jinho quickly sat back down across from Jinwoo.

"Like you said, I want to get a guild master's license."

It wasn't difficult for someone to acquire a guild master's license. A hunter just had to participate in at least twenty raids. After that, they could get a license once they passed a simple written test.

Of course, no one would want to join a guild created by an untalented guild master, and the guild wouldn't last if it didn't maintain the minimum number of members.

Jinho continued. "Truth is, and it hasn't been announced to the public yet, but my father plans to form a guild."

"Yoojin Construction is starting a guild?"

"Yes."

Yoojin Construction was one of the top construction companies in Korea. It had grown rapidly by expanding to other areas, and Jinwoo had heard that it had recently made a fortune venturing into hunter-related businesses.

Now they want to maintain their own guild?

Jinho elaborated excitedly because Jinwoo was showing interest. "My father wants to form a large guild by signing up strong hunters and continuing hunter-related businesses under the it."

If a company wanted to conduct hunter-related business, cooperation with guilds was absolutely essential. The strength of large guilds was necessary in order to collect treasures from A-or B-rank gates, such as essence stones, remnants of magic beasts, and mana stones.

"So he wants to create a self-sufficient company."

"That's exactly it, boss!"

It wouldn't be a problem for Yoojin Construction to form its own guild, since it had the funding. The problem lay in who would be in charge.

"My father wants to run the guild like a company by hiring an S-rank hunter as

the guild master and appointing my older brother as the vice master, but.....”

Jinwoo caught on to what Jinho was saying.

A guild structured that way would be volatile. The guild master has the highest authority in a guild. Even if the guild master was an employee hired by the vice master, it would be possible for the guild master to take control if a conflict ever arose.

Therefore, there was only one way this could work. Hire a guild master who would never betray the employer. For example, a brother or a son.

For Chairman Myunghan Yoo, it was a son—Jinho Yoo.

“My older brother has made a name for himself, so it’ll be difficult for me to be appointed the guild master. The company earned a lot of money from my brother’s idea to expand into hunter-related businesses.”

Jinho’s brother was already a successful thirty-one-year-old businessman.

On the other hand, even though he had awakened as a D-rank hunter, Jinho was still just a twenty-two-year-old university student.

The chairman wanted his eldest son to run the guild. Although Jinho’s brother couldn’t be the guild master because he wasn’t a hunter, he understood the business well and had already proven himself.

The chairman was clearly willing to take the risk.

“And you want to persuade your father to make you the guild master?”

“Yes, that’s right, boss.”

Jinwoo understood why Jinho was trying so hard to include him in his plan. If he hired a high-rank hunter and got the guild master’s license, it would look like he’d just bought his credentials. But if he got the license while working with a purported low-rank hunter like Jinwoo?

He could potentially change his father’s mind. His father would recognize that Jinho could lead the hunters.

That was Jinho’s scheme.

Once he became the guild master, all he’d have to do was scout an S-rank

hunter as the vice master and bring other talented hunters to the guild. Others would feel safe and join the guild as long as either the guild master or the vice master was powerful.

To accomplish this, Jinho needed to complete twenty raids.

"Please help me, boss! You're the only one I can count on!" He bowed his head.

If it hadn't been for Jinwoo, he could've died on his first raid. First by the spider, second by Dongsuk, twice in total.

He needed an ally he could trust.

I can trust him.

Jinwoo was a true man who was strong enough to kill his enemies without batting an eye, but he was also fair and didn't carelessly harm weaker people or reap any rewards he hadn't earned.

He was the ideal hunter for Jinho's plans.

But Jinwoo didn't need Jinho. So Jinwoo had to ask, "What's in it for me?"

Jinho lifted his head with a hopeful expression as he took out a large envelope. Inside was a blueprint of a building.

He handed it to Jinwoo. "This is the building we're constructing as the guild's offices. It's expected to have a market value upward of thirty trillion won."

There was always a possibility that magic beasts could escape from dungeons even with the association managing the gates, so real estate near a branch of the association or a guild was always hot because there was nothing more important than lives.

Even having a small guild nearby meant that safety would be ensured for the people in the area. And if there was a large guild nearby?

Say no more.

"If I become the guild master, I'll only use the building for a year until the guild is settled in and then transfer the deed to you. Of course, I'll have it notarized so no one can say anything later."

A 30,000,000,000,000 won building for nineteen C-rank raids.....

Jinwoo grinned. "Are you saying it's a win for you as long as you can be the guild master?"

"That's correct, boss."

With his first raid, Jinho had learned that anything could happen in a dungeon. If he hired an incompetent hunter, he could lose his life. If he hired a famous hunter, his father wouldn't trust him.

But Jinwoo was different. He was an E-rank hunter who had managed to defeat a C-rank boss and several C-rank hunters without any injury to himself.

Boss has to be at least a B rank..... Possibly even higher.

Nineteen C-rank raids would be no problem if Jinwoo was on his side. If he could become the guild master, it would be totally worth 30,000,000,000,000 won.

All he needed was a yes from Jinwoo.

Will he refuse even this proposal?

Jinho peeked at Jinwoo's expression nervously. What would his answer be?

Jinwoo was lost in thought.

30,000,000,000,000 won. That was an incredible amount of money. Considering how the first prize in the lottery was 1,500,000,000 won, you would have to win twenty times in a row to receive that much money.

To top it off, the value of the building would keep going up. This incredible scenario would have a typical hunter signing the contract immediately.

But Jinwoo was far from typical. He was the only one of his kind. He was the sole hunter capable of upgrading his abilities. He could reach S rank or even higher if he continued undertaking quests and leveling up.

If I become S rank or higher, 30,000,000,000,000 won would be nothing.

An S-rank hunter could fetch a contract worth mid-to-high twelve figures. Even celebrities and star athletes couldn't match the signing bonuses S-rank hunters received. This was an era where a nation's power was measured by

how many high-rank hunters were in the country. The recognition of S-rank hunters was beyond imagination.

So Jinwoo's current priority was leveling up, not making money. It was easier to level up on his own.

It's better to have fewer variables.

If he hunted with other people, he'd get less experience, and besides, it was harder to do anything when he was being watched. Jinwoo'd had to threaten Jinho so the newbie hunter wouldn't be a problem later on, even though he hadn't wanted to.

Scheduling would be a challenge, too. All in all, the cons outweighed the reward.

I can make money anytime.

Although he felt a little disappointed, he was about to refuse the proposal when...

Wait.

Jinwoo thought of an idea that would let him kill two birds with one stone.

If I do it this way.....

Jinwoo looked up at Jinho, who was extremely tense. He spoke carefully.

"I have one condition."

Jinho's face lit up.

"Anything you want, boss!"

Would he still be smiling after hearing what Jinwoo had to say? Jinwoo had to stop himself from grinning.

"Only you and I go in."

"Pardon?" Jinho was caught off guard. "B-boss, sorry, but..... Did I hear that right? You're saying you and I will clear C-rank dungeons alone?"

"Exactly."

Jinho's face turned ashen.

Jinwoo had killed the spider boss by himself, so Jinho could leave the bosses to him. He had trouble breathing, though, when he imagined it being only the two of them near the entrance of the gate when the bugs had swarmed at them.

“.....”

Jinho was at a loss for words. Jinwoo’s face made it clear that he’d expected this reaction.

Still, this is the best way.

He could kill two birds with one stone. It was very difficult joining a strike squad as an E-rank hunter. Jinwoo had painfully realized that on the first day he’d decided to make money. He would have to either give up freelancing or form his own strike squad. But thankfully, Jinho said he would assemble a team himself.

Wasn’t this an opportunity?

“B-but, boss! In order to raid a C-rank dungeon, you have to have a minimum of ten mem—”

“A line will form if you’re paying people just to reach a head count.”

They’d need to borrow a tactic from Dongsuk’s playbook. Hunters who didn’t want to risk their lives fighting but needed to make money would apply for the job with a fire in their eyes.

Jinho looked like he’d be sick from thinking about it. “You’re not saying..... we’d have to kill everything from beasts to the boss by ourselves?”

To be precise, Jinwoo would be doing all the work, but...

“That’s exactly it.”

This way, Jinwoo didn’t have to lose out on any experience, and he also wouldn’t have to watch out for other people, since he and Jinho would be the only ones there.

Then maybe my level will explode.

Having an amazing building when all the raids were over would be the cherry

on top.

Now he just had to persuade Jinho. Jinwoo figured, correctly, that the young man would be trepidatious.

"B-but wouldn't that be too dangerous, boss?"

"You have to look at both sides of the coin."

"What?"

Jinwoo waved at him to come closer, so Jinho leaned in.

"If we're the only two hunting, then *nobody* will get hurt as long as *neither* of us gets hurt, right?"

"R-right."

"You just tagged along for the first raid, so there was nothing you could do about the accident. But think about successfully finishing nineteen raids safely without anyone getting hurt."

Jinho's eyes widened.

That's right.....! If they could pull that off, it would be a lot easier to persuade his father. After "D-rank hunter" on his résumé, he could then add "strike squad leader who led nineteen raids in a row without any accidents." He would be more than qualified to be a guild master. It would be the best PR he could have.

Jinwoo wore a self-satisfied smile as he witnessed Jinho's expressions.

This guy..... He's hooked.

Jinho was the desperate one out of the two, after all. Even without him, Jinwoo could use the association or rewards from mystery boxes to raid dungeons. Meanwhile, despite being a little scared, Jinho had a lot to gain if Jinwoo's plan was successful.

He recalled Jinwoo's combat abilities and figured they were more than good enough to dismiss any insecurities he had.

He finally made the call.

"Let's do this, boss. I'll recruit the members."

"Good." Jinwoo nodded.

They understood each other's needs.

Jinho was still nervous in Jinwoo's presence, but he was now able to display a big smile.

Boss has my back.

He wasn't worried about future raids anymore. Jinwoo was a trustworthy comrade, and with him by Jinho's side, it'd be easier to form the strike squad. Based on the conditions Jinwoo proposed, people would be lining up around the block to join the squad.

I'm one step closer to becoming a guild master.

Jinwoo also smiled.

I can wipe out C-rank dungeons by myself and level up quickly.

They both left the café with looks of satisfaction on their faces.

* * *

Jinwoo ran home after sending Jinho off, as he didn't know when the association would call him. It had been more than ten days since he'd been discharged from the hospital, so it wouldn't be strange for a gate to open nearby at any time.

Normally, the association summoned hunters two to three times a month to clear gates in their area. The reason he'd given Jinho only an hour was because he was expecting a phone call from the association at any moment.

I don't even care if it's an E-rank dungeon.....

He wanted to defeat some beasts so he could level up faster.

Who knew not having a cell phone could be so inconvenient? At least he'd receive a new one in a few days.

He opened the door and went inside.

.....

The apartment was quiet. It was a weekday, so his sister was at school.

As soon as he confirmed no one was home, he opened the daily quest screen.

Gotta get today's rewards.

He had already finished the daily quest before meeting Jinho, but he'd put off accepting the rewards because there'd been too many people around. He didn't want people to see the blue light wrapping around his body or gift boxes popping up on the street.

Ping!

[Push-ups 100 times: Completed (100/100)]

[Sit-ups 100 times: Completed (100/100)]

[Squats 100 times: Completed (100/100)]

[Running 10 km: Completed (11/10)]

[You have completed Daily Quest: Strength Training.]

[Rewards have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

"Ye—No, no."

Jinwoo was about to accept the rewards out of habit, but he stopped abruptly when he noticed something.

His eyes focused on the running counter.

[Running 10 km: Completed (11/10)]

His first reaction had just been to think, *Oh, I did an extra kilometer.* But something about it felt strange.

Why did it record the amount even after I reached the goal?

Jinwoo narrowed his eyes. Was it just a coincidence?

He got on his stomach and started doing continuous push-ups. His eyes were fixed on the screen, though.

Ping!

[You have completed 1 push-up.]

[Push-ups 100 times: Completed (111/100)]

Ping!

[You have completed 1 push-up.]

[Push-ups 100 times: Completed (112/100)]

That's what I figured.....

It wasn't just running where the counter kept increasing. The push-up counter was noting the extras as well. Suddenly, Jinwoo wondered how high the numbers could go.

Veins were popping out on his arms by now. He couldn't even feel his weight because of his increased strength ability. His body felt as light as a feather.

The count went from a hundred-something to two hundred in a flash.

Ping!

[You have completed 1 push-up.]

[Push-ups 100 times: Completed (200/100)]

Ping!

[You have completed 1 push-up.]

[Push-ups 100 times: Completed (200/100)]

The count stopped at two hundred. It didn't go up any higher even though he tried a few more times.

Two hundred was the limit for sit-ups and squats as well.

[Push-ups 100 times: Completed (200/100)]

[Sit-ups 100 times: Completed (200/100)]

[Squats 100 times: Completed (200/100)]

[Running 10 km: Completed (11/10)]

No more and no less but exactly two hundred. The count wouldn't go up infinitely, nor would it stop at one hundred.

Something was going on. He had a hunch. Would there be different results

waiting for him if he hit all the counter limits?

Let's find out.

Jinwoo was out the door in a flash. He quickly finished running nine more kilometers, and when he returned to his apartment building, he received a message.

Ping!

[You have completed Hidden Quest: Strength Training.]

[Rewards have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

The title of the quest hadn't changed, but the type had.

His hunch had been correct.

He swallowed nervously.

.....*Check.*

Ping!

[YOU HAVE THE FOLLOWING REWARDS.]

Reward 1. Full Recovery

Reward 2. All abilities +3

Reward 3.

1) Blessed Mystery Box (Option)

2) Cursed Mystery Box (Option)

[Would you like to accept all?]

Three points for all abilities!

Jinwoo could only stare.

The rewards were very high, which was fitting for the completion of a hidden quest. Adding three points to every stat was the same as leveling up three times. In fact, it was even better to have the abilities increase while the level

didn't. After all, it would be easier to level up with increased abilities.

At the same time, Jinwoo was slightly disappointed. He had kind of been expecting to be able to change all the daily quests to hidden quests from now on, but...

If the rewards are this impressive.....

There was a high possibility that this would be a onetime event. And if this hidden quest wasn't going to come around again, he had to be even more cautious about reward three.

Reward 3.

- 1) Blessed Mystery Box (Option)
- 2) Cursed Mystery Box (Option)

It was his first time seeing an optional reward. If he chose one, he'd most likely lose the other.

If I choose one, will I never get to see the other one again?

Going by the names, the choice was obvious. But that could be a trick.

"Accept reward three."

Ping!

[You must choose between two mystery boxes.]

[BLESSED MYSTERY BOX]

It will supply an item the Player wants.

[CURSED MYSTERY BOX]

It will supply an item the Player needs.

The explanations were simple. It made it even harder to choose. He would've chosen the blessed mystery box had there been no explanation, but now he would feel a little unsatisfied no matter which one he chose.

What I want or what I need.....

Both sounded tempting.

But there has to be a trick.

“An item the Player wants” was probably something he wanted based on his current needs. But “an item the Player needs” probably wasn’t like that. He could end up with something he needed but wouldn’t necessarily want.

Like if he needed a weapon, a bomb popped out that eradicated the whole area, including him.

That’s probably why it’s called the cursed mystery box.

He’d go with the less risky one. If he had to choose between something where he didn’t know the outcome, it’d be better to choose the option where he wouldn’t regret whatever happened.

After thinking through it logically, Jinwoo came to a decision.

“Blessed Mystery Box.”

A small box appeared at his feet. He picked it up.

Could it be.....?!

His heart started racing. The size of the box was familiar to him.

He ripped into it.

I was right!

His eyes widened.

Inside the box was a gold key. It was a key to an instance dungeon, which he’d been desperately hoping for.

Soon the information about the key popped up.

Ping!

[ITEM: THE DEMON CASTLE’S KEY]

Acquisition Difficulty: S

Category: Key

A key to enter Dungeon: The Demon’s Castle. It can be used at

Daesung Tower at Songpa-gu.

“S rank?” Jinwoo’s voice squeaked.

There was no guarantee that the acquisition difficulty reflected the level of difficulty to clear the dungeon. But Jinwoo didn’t think they were unrelated, either.

The instance dungeon he’d accessed with the E-rank key had been as easy as an E-rank dungeon. What if the dungeon’s level really was S rank?

It was impossible to know if even a team of S-rank hunters could clear it. They’d have about a fifty-fifty chance.

The difficulty of gates increased exponentially with gates that were B rank or higher, and only a few S-rank gates had ever opened around the world.

And one of them opened on Jeju Island.

Humans could no longer live on Jeju Island after that incident, so it had become no-man’s-land.

Jinwoo stared at the key.

Is this what I want?

The good thing was that it said he could “enter” the gate with this key, unlike the other key that had said it would “take” him to the dungeon.

That meant he could retreat at any time. Even if the key disappeared, he had a teleportation stone in his inventory. He didn’t have to worry about being stuck in a place with invisible walls. He could decide whether to attack the dungeon after checking it out using his increased perception ability.

If this really is what I’ve been wanting, I’ll progress to new heights after this.

Jinwoo made up his mind.

He wanted to see with his own eyes if this key truly was what he wanted.



8

THE DEMON'S CASTLE



8

THE DEMON'S CASTLE

Jinwoo stood outside Daesung Tower. It was a giant building with more than one hundred floors that looked like it was going to poke the sky. *Skyscraper* was a very apt name for it. Jinwoo felt dizzy just looking up at it.

Since it was night, not many people were walking by. The empty streets had a creepy vibe to them.

Still, just in case.....

Jinwoo looked around and then pulled his hood forward. A person disappearing and reappearing without the presence of a gate was sure to cause a disturbance. Plus, it wasn't a bad idea to be cautious, since there were surveillance cameras everywhere.

In fact, someone was actually watching Jinwoo at that very moment.

Who the hell is that?

A person circling the building with their hood up at this time of night was definitely suspicious. The security guard watching Jinwoo from inside the building stood up to confront him.

As the guard headed for the door, he suddenly stopped, and his eyes bulged out.

"Wh-what?" Shocked, he ran out of the building.

The man who'd been walking in his direction had disappeared in the blink of an eye. There wasn't a trace of him. The security guard searched everywhere but couldn't find a single other living creature, not even an ant.

He turned around and shook his head. "Huh. How strange....."

He was about to head back inside the building, but seeing something out of the corner of his eye, he turned his head.

"A-aaaaack!" The horrified security guard fell to the floor.

"Wh-what is that?!"

His face grew pale as he screamed.

A single human hand floated in midair in front of him before vanishing.

Jinwoo withdrew his hand.

It's connected to the outside.

This place wasn't blocked by the barrier like the last time. The key hadn't disappeared and was still in his pocket. That meant he could leave anytime he wanted.

I have a way out of here.....

He was more cautious than usual in case the acquisition difficulty of the key indicated the level of the dungeon.

He took off his hood and looked back.

"....."

What he saw almost made him groan aloud. When Jinwoo walked a few steps toward where Daesung Tower should have been, the world in front of him changed completely.

Could this be called a dungeon? He was in a totally different world now.

Where once had stood Daesung Tower was now an incredibly huge spire.

It looks more like a medieval tower than a castle.

The tower that stretched out endlessly toward the sky was covered in blackish-red fire. But it wasn't *on* fire; it looked more like the flames were part of the structure.

"A towering tower of fire."

That would be a more apt name than the Demon's Castle.

Jinwoo started walking toward it.

FWOOSHHH!

As he got closer, the sound of the flickering flames grew louder.

Can I go inside?

Even if he could, there was a problem. If this dungeon was based on the layout of Daesung Tower just as the last dungeon had been based on the layout of the subway station, he would have to clear one hundred levels to complete it.

He couldn't begin to guess how long that would take.

Huh?

Jinwoo stopped. He sensed a powerful presence near the door. He examined the area carefully and spotted a black animal as big as a cow curled up and sleeping in a corner near the door.

He quietly summoned Kasaka's Venom Fang.

Ping!

[ITEM: KASAKA'S VENOM FANG]

Acquisition Difficulty: C

Category: Dagger

Attack Power +25

A dagger made from a kasaka's venom fang. It contains kasaka venom and causes paralysis and drain debuffs when used to attack. You may keep it in your inventory or sell it in the shop.

Debuff: Paralysis: Opponent cannot move for a set time.

Debuff: Drain: Opponent's HP will decrease by 1 percent every second for a set time.

Its attack power wasn't very high, but the debuffs had proven invaluable in actual battles.

It'd be great if I could easily defeat it with paralysis.

Jinwoo slowly tiptoed as quietly as he could toward the creature.

He couldn't evade the monster's sense of smell, though. It sniffed the air and got to its feet.

Tsk.

Jinwoo clicked his tongue.

The creature's three heads swiveled toward Jinwoo.

[Hell's Gatekeeper Cerberus]

A huge dog with three heads. Jinwoo noted that the creature's name was written in red letters. It was proof the monster's level was high.

Is this monster the same level as the centipedes from the penalty zone, since its name is in red?

He'd been preoccupied with running away from the centipedes back then. He'd only been level 1.

But I'm different now.

He'd leveled up quickly in a short period of time.

The monster was definitely strong, but he didn't feel intimidated. His keen senses told him that he could take it.

He hadn't increased his perception stat for nothing. He'd continuously invested points in it so he'd be able to determine whether he should fight enemies or run away.

GRRRROWL!

Cerberus started threatening its perceived antagonist by gnashing its teeth.

Jinwoo sneaked a peek at the monster's tail. It was long like a whip and had a fiery tip.

Jinwoo's eyes gleamed.

Teeth and a tail. This one has at least two attack patterns.

He swallowed nervously.

The approaching Cerberus stopped short and seemed to examine Jinwoo.

Is it.....looking for my weak spot?

As Jinwoo was wondering about it...Cerberus rushed at him.

RRRRFFF!

Jinwoo looked rattled.

It's fast!

Cerberus jumped at Jinwoo, but he escaped the dog's sharp teeth by quickly sliding under it. Cerberus turned as soon as it landed, and its three mouths went after him.

ROWRRR! ROWRRR!

Its sharp teeth gleamed in its mouths.

Ping!

[The buff for Title: Wolf Assassin has now been activated.]

[TITLE: WOLF ASSASSIN]

A title given to those skilled at hunting wolves. When battling an animal-type monster, all abilities will increase by 40 percent.

Jinwoo felt his body get lighter.

Great!

He kept retreating while swinging the dagger as Cerberus attempted to knock him down.

Shwp, shwp, shwiip, shwp!

Clang! C-clang! Clang!

The sound of the dagger and teeth striking echoed loudly. The dagger was moving so fast, it was hard to see, but Jinwoo could barely block Cerberus's attacks.

Even with the buff, this is all I can do!

The monster was a lot more agile than Jinwoo had expected.

He used the Murderous Intent skill in the hopes of turning the tide.

[Skill: Murderous Intent has been activated.]

[The debuff has been canceled out by the opponent's high resistance level.]

Jinwoo was startled.

It didn't work?

Cerberus's long tail cracked down like a whip.

Chaaaaak!

Jinwoo escaped the attack by ducking instinctively, but this meant his feet had stopped moving.

Cerberus took advantage of this opening. One of its heads bit down on Jinwoo's left shoulder.

"Aaargh!"

He stuck the dagger between the creature's eyes with all his might.

Shhhk!

[Debuff: Paralysis has been activated.]

[The debuff has been canceled out by the opponent's high resistance level.]

[Debuff: Drain has been activated.]

[The debuff has been canceled out by the opponent's high resistance level.]

Yip! Cerberus yelped as it released Jinwoo.

Luckily, he was able to escape before the other heads joined in, minimizing the damage. However, his left shoulder was all torn up. Cerberus's bite was incredibly strong. Jinwoo tried to flex his left arm but couldn't move it.

He grimaced. He'd dealt a bit of damage to his opponent, but the damage he'd sustained was much worse by comparison.

If Paralysis and Drain had worked, things would be different.....

Jinwoo gritted his teeth as he glared at Cerberus.

At that moment...

Huh?

Cerberus's eyes started glowing red.

Grrrrr.

Jinwoo felt a sudden chill.

What is this?

[Hell's Gatekeeper Cerberus has used Skill: Rage.]

[It will be in a state of rage for 3 minutes.]

[All of Cerberus's abilities will be increased by 2 times.]

[Cerberus will not feel pain.]

Jinwoo cried out, "What?!"

A monster could use a skill?!

Cerberus came charging at Jinwoo.

Shit!

Cerberus was in front of him before he could react. Jinwoo hastily swung the dagger but could only graze its head.

All three of its mouths went after him simultaneously.

Chomp!

"Ahhh!"

Jinwoo gritted his teeth as Cerberus bit down on his neck, side, and thigh all at once. It dashed and slammed Jinwoo against the castle's door.

Wham!

Jinwoo's HP dropped almost to nothing in an instant.

"Argh!"

[HP: 411/3,602]

Ping!

[Skill: Willpower has been activated, as your HP is below 30 percent.]

[Your damage will decrease by 50 percent.]

Luckily, Jinwoo avoided an instakill due to the decrease of physical damage and the passive Willpower skill.

“Gkkk.....”

He endured the pain coursing through his body because he knew he had only one chance.

If he lost focus, it'd be over.

.....Hundred seventy-eight, hundred seventy-nine, hundred eighty!

Jinwoo had been waiting for the three minutes of Cerberus's skill to expire. He finally played his last card.

Accept reward one!

He accepted reward one, which he'd saved instead of accepting right after the daily quest.

[Reward 1. Full Recovery applied.]

Shwoooo!

His body was engulfed in blue light, and his HP recovered.

[HP: 3,602/3,602]

His wounded shoulder immediately healed.

It's now or never!

Jinwoo's eyes flashed.

No matter how agile his opponent was, it wouldn't be able to avoid attacks at this distance.

Jinwoo wrapped his left arm around Cerberus's neck and stabbed Kasaka's Venom Fang straight into the middle of its throat.

Shhhk! Shhhk! Shhhk!

Its rage state appeared to have expired, and it started struggling to escape

Jinwoo's hold.

Yiiiip! Yip-yip! Yip! Yip!

But Jinwoo held it in a death grip. He tightened his hold the more Cerberus struggled. He stabbed the neck countless times.

Shhhk, shhhk, shhhk!

Yiiiip, yip! Hnn! Hnnnnnn!

In a last-ditch effort, Cerberus bit Jinwoo, but the victor had already been decided.

Shhhk! Shhhk!

Yiiiip! Yip!

Kasaka's Venom Fang cut into Cerberus's neck and sliced down to its chest.

Shhhk! Shhhk! Shhhk!

Cerberus stopped flailing as much.

Hnnnn.....

Finally, its head dropped to the side.

Ping!

[You have defeated Hell's Gatekeeper Cerberus.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Jinwoo's level went up by four all at once. The battle had been that difficult.

Jinwoo let go of Cerberus's neck only after seeing its body go limp. The creature's lifeless form dropped to the ground.

Whump.

Jinwoo put his hands on his knees.

"Phew." He exhaled a big sigh of relief.

A monster that could use a skill. If he hadn't had his secret weapon, there was no doubt he would've been killed.

He got chills just thinking about it.

Oh, right..... Items.

Would they be worth all the effort Jinwoo had gone through?

After catching his breath, Jinwoo extended his hand to Cerberus.

Ping!

[You have discovered Item: Warden's Collar. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered Item: Castle Door Key. Would you like to acquire it?]

[You have discovered Item: Cerberus's Fangs. Would you like to acquire it?]

Acquire all.

The steel collar that was around Cerberus's neck, a gray key, and three fangs appeared on the ground.

[ITEM: WARDEN'S COLLAR]

Acquisition Difficulty: A

Category: Collar

Agility +20, Perception +20

[ITEM: CASTLE DOOR KEY]

Acquisition Difficulty: A

Category: Key

This key unlocks the door to the Demon's Castle. You can acquire this only when you kill the gatekeeper.

[ITEM: CERBERUS'S FANGS]

Acquisition Difficulty: None

Category: Miscellaneous

“Ooooh.” Jinwoo’s eyes lit up.

The collar will increase the stats of agility and perception by twenty points?

The collar was an amazing item. The acquisition difficulty was A rank. That was the highest level among all the items he’d acquired thus far.

Well, killing the dog wasn’t easy, so.....

There was no way it would be a low acquisition difficulty.

But Jinwoo hesitated to put on the collar. It was a dog collar consisting of a metal band with spikes on it.

“Hmm.....” He closed his eyes and debated whether to wear it, before deciding he should at least try it on. As he held it up to his neck to put it on, a message popped up.

Ping!

[Would you like to put on Item: Warden’s Collar?]

After pondering it some more, Jinwoo responded rather unenthusiastically.
“.....Sure.”

The choker slowly vanished.

[You have put on Item: Warden’s Collar.]

“Huh?”

Jinwoo quickly called up the stat screen.

[Stats]

Strength: 60

Stamina: 39

Agility: 80

Intelligence: 37

Perception: 67

(Available ability points: 0) Physical damage reduced by: 20 percent “Whoa!”

Agility and perception had actually gone up by twenty points. The boost had been applied immediately.

It looked like the item wasn't visible when it was worn. Jinwoo was relieved he didn't have to walk around with a dog collar around his neck.

Next, the fangs.

Jinwoo pulled up the shop.

Cerberus's fangs, which were miscellaneous items, sold for 15,000 gold each. He had three fangs, so he'd made 45,000 gold.

[Balance: 562,362 gold]

Why is this miscellaneous item worth so much?

It was a good way to estimate the difficulty level of the dungeon. This meant that the level of the Demon's Castle was just that high.

However, that wasn't particularly bad news for him. He'd made four times more money from killing one monster here versus the instance dungeon at Hapjeong Station, where he'd grinded all day. If he kept saving gold at this rate, it wouldn't be long before he could purchase some of the more expensive items in the shop.

If I can clear this dungeon.....

Jinwoo looked up at the flaming tower.

FWWWOOOOM!

The top part was covered in fog. He wouldn't know what was inside until he actually went in.

He shook his head.

Not yet.

He'd barely defeated the gatekeeper using a quest reward coupled with the buff from his title. He couldn't even guess what dangers awaited him behind the door. He would withdraw for today.

Still, one thing was for sure. As the description said, the Castle Door Key was definitely what he wanted. It truly was a blessed mystery box.

Leveling up, items, and gold. This place provided everything he could hope for. When the time was right, he would acquire them all. But that time wasn't today.

He was a little disappointed, but he put the gray key into his inventory.

I'll be back.

He'd be back soon, for sure.

Jinwoo walked away with a smile on his face.

* * *

A few days passed quietly.

Jinho called Jinwoo once a day to report his progress. He'd called exactly three times since their last meeting.

"Boss! It's me, Jinho."

"Get to the point."

"Yessir."

It looked like Jinho had been able to recruit people with no problem. He kept asking Jinwoo to wait just a little longer because the squad was almost ready.

I guess he's worried I might ditch him.

But Jinwoo couldn't just wait around and do nothing, so he visited the hunters' website today as well. He kept searching for strike squads, but none wanted an E-rank hunter. He'd gotten lucky on that first day.

Dongsuk's ulterior motive aside, he'd enabled Jinwoo to join a strike squad for the first time.

Because of what he did, I was able to make money, level up, and obtain a new skill.

Should Jinwoo be thankful to him? Jinwoo snickered.

At this point, he didn't care if he came across more lizard-esque scam hunters. He couldn't find a freelance job, the association wasn't calling him, and there were no more instance dungeon keys.

All he was doing now was passing the time.

Grrrrumble.

Is it already time to eat?

Jinwoo stopped his online search and went to the kitchen to fill his empty stomach.

Pwwwp.

The fridge was empty.

.....

He'd been so preoccupied with everything that had happened in the past few days that he'd forgotten to go grocery shopping. He should probably get that done today.

He yawned as he closed the fridge door.

One of the very few good things about his apartment building was that it was near a large supermarket.

Jinwoo left home in comfortable clothes. It was a ten-minute walk. He soon arrived at the store.

As he entered, he scanned the whole place. It wasn't as busy as he'd expected, though that was most likely due to the lack of sales at the time.

He grabbed a basket and slowly went around the store. Jinwoo had gotten used to doing household chores, including grocery shopping, after he became the head of the family when his mother was hospitalized.

There's not much worth buying today.

He stared at some items on display and debated what to make for dinner.

"Sung! How're you doing?"

Jinwoo turned toward the friendly voice.

Who could that be?

He'd detected a hunter in the vicinity thanks to his high perception stat, but he hadn't paid any attention to it because lots of people, including hunters,

shopped there.

He didn't expect said hunter to talk to him. Moreover, he didn't expect said hunter to know him.

"Mr. Song?" Jinwoo was delighted to see him.

Mr. Song, Chiyul Song, looked at Jinwoo, half-surprised and half-welcoming.

"I heard a rumor that you were fine, but I still can't believe I'm looking at you right now." Chiyul seemed thrilled to see him, too.

The way he looked at Jinwoo made him feel bashful, and Jinwoo rubbed the back of his neck.

"I should've visited you earlier, but those jerks from the association wouldn't say a word, so I had no idea what was going on. No idea what they were thinking. Did you know Miss Joohee is dying to hear from you, too?"

"She is?"

"Yes, she came on a raid last week hoping to see you, even though she said she planned to quit being a hunter."

"Last week.....?"

According to Chiyul, the raid organized by the association had happened the same day Jinwoo joined Dongsuk's squad.

No wonder there hasn't been a peep from the association in the past few days.

It wasn't that they hadn't called—he just hadn't been there to receive it. In that instant, one of his questions was finally answered.

Chiyul continued staring at Jinwoo incredulously.

Has Sung always been this tall? Especially now, after losing that leg.....

His eyes moved down. And then they grew large.

"Your leg.....?"

Jinwoo remained composed. "My leg was fine when I woke up. I'm not sure how that happened."

Chiyul nodded in understanding.

Since the first gate had appeared a decade ago, many inexplicable things had happened. The awakened beings known as hunters were one of them.

It was said that an S-rank healer could restore a patient with a shattered body as long as they were still breathing. Perhaps a high-rank healer had treated Jinwoo while he was unconscious? If so, reattaching Jinwoo's severed leg didn't seem so impossible.

"A young man like you shouldn't be disabled. I'm glad. I'm really glad."

Chiyul seemed as relieved as if it were his own leg.

That's when Jinwoo noticed something about Chiyul's left arm. The end of his shirtsleeve was flopping around as if empty.

Chiyul laughed as he touched his left shoulder. "Don't worry about me. Injuries happen to hunters during raids. I was lucky enough that I hadn't had one until now."

He spoke as if it wasn't a big deal, but other people clearly didn't see it that way.

"Oh no, look....."

"I feel so bad for him..... It was probably a magic beast, right?"

Middle-aged women and students whispered to one another as they passed by and spotted Chiyul's empty sleeve. A middle-aged man even stared directly at Chiyul as if studying something fascinating.

"Should we go somewhere else?" asked Jinwoo.

There were too many people in the meat section.

Chiyul nodded, as he was uncomfortable with the way people were staring. He still had more to say to Jinwoo.

"That sounds good."

They walked toward a less crowded area. Chiyul felt something was off as they walked.

Sung's footsteps sound.....

Jinwoo's footsteps seemed too light. Chiyul walked right beside Jinwoo, but it

was hard to feel his presence. Why was that?

It was strange, but he felt like he wouldn't even be able to lay a finger on Jinwoo if they fought each other right now, even though he was C rank and Jinwoo was E rank.

What am I thinking.....?

Chiyul shook his head. That wasn't important. He wanted to tell Jinwoo something. No, he *needed* to tell him something.

Chiyul stopped in a quiet spot. Jinwoo stopped as well.

Chiyul turned toward Jinwoo and, before Jinwoo could stop him, bowed in gratitude.

"Thank you so much, Sung."

It was sobering to see a man around his father's age bow to him in that manner. Even though Jinwoo tried to get him to lift his head, Chiyul continued talking with his head downcast.

"Eleven people died because of me, but at least six survived thanks to you. I bear the biggest responsibility for that day, so I'm thanking you on behalf of everyone."

Each word Chiyul spoke was genuine. Jinwoo could feel the sincerity of his sentiments. He also felt a little awkward, but he didn't mind that. He sort of felt proud.

But Jinwoo couldn't allow an elder to stand before him like this for long.

"Mr. Song, it's okay; please raise your head."

As Jinwoo moved to raise Chiyul's head, the phone in Chiyul's jacket rang. He excused himself and took his phone out of an inside pocket.

"Hello?" His face became serious as he listened to the other party. "I understand. I'll be right there."

With that, he ended the call.

"It looks like I have to go now."

He made it sound like a personal matter, but Jinwoo had heard the contents

of the conversation due to his keen hearing being boosted by his perception stat.

The call had been from the Hunter's Association asking for Chiyul's help with a nearby gate that needed attention. Chiyul kept this to himself so Jinwoo wouldn't follow him. He didn't want Jinwoo getting hurt again, since he'd been discharged from the hospital only recently.

Jinwoo asked him directly. "Was that the association?"

Chiyul hesitated before answering. "Did you.....hear everything?"

The association summons all the hunters nearby when they host a raid. If Chiyul had gotten the call, they must have called Jinwoo's house as well.

Jinwoo had been waiting for this call to battle.

"I'm coming, too."

"You....."

Chiyul started to see Jinwoo in a different light.

* * *

They arrived at the meeting place. Police had blocked off the vicinity because the gate had materialized close to a residential area and major road. There were barely any spectators.

Gates handled by the association tended to have first appeared a few days ago, so they were often volatile situations. Besides, nobody would be able to see any actual fights no matter how close they got to the gate anyway.

Occasionally, the police would have to chase away some mischievous kids.

Clack.

The taxi door closed. Jinwoo and Chiyul, who had exited said taxi, were stopped by the police while heading to where the other hunters were gathered.

"May I see your ID, please?"

Chiyul took out his wallet and presented his license. "Chiyul Song, C rank. This is my colleague Jinwoo Sung."

The police compared Chiyul to his photograph, returned his license, then let

them through.

"Thank you, sir."

"Please keep up the good work."

Chiyul lightly greeted the policemen before he continued on his way. Jinwoo followed him.

An employee of the association was waiting for them in front of the gate. It was a young lady with round glasses. She spotted them and headed toward them.

"Hunter Chiyul Song! Huh? And Hunter Jinwoo Sung? How did you know about this raid? You didn't answer your phone."

Chiyul responded for Jinwoo. "He was with me when you called."

"Oh, really? I thought Hunter Sung was avoiding my call again!" she said jokingly.

Jinwoo used to actually do that in the past. There'd been times when he would turn off his phone after sustaining heavy injuries because he was too scared to go back into another dungeon. However, regulations stated that if he ignored the association's call three times, he could be kicked out, so he'd drag himself back there eventually.

He smiled bitterly as he remembered the past.

"Oh, other hunters are already here. Please go ahead and mingle."

She pointed to where hunters were gathered. She'd said "hunters," but there were only two others there. Since that big incident, attendance had been low.

On the way here, Chiyul had explained to Jinwoo that on top of many hunters getting killed, several had also decided to retire after sustaining injuries.

And one of them was Joohee.

Jinwoo looked around, but he didn't see Joohee. As he and Chiyul approached, the other two hunters avoided making eye contact as if they were embarrassed.

Jinwoo's eyes narrowed.

They should be, to be honest.

The two were Kim Sangshik, who'd hightailed it out of the dungeon to save himself, and the hunter who'd tossed Jinwoo aside to escape the room. They were clearly uncomfortable having to face Jinwoo.

"Uhhh, Sung....." Kim tried belatedly to say hello to Jinwoo after an uncomfortable silence, but he turned away after being met with Jinwoo's cold stare.

"....."

He kept his mouth shut tight and, after observing the group, quietly left his place. He cocked his head in confusion as he peeked at Jinwoo from a distance.

Is that really the same Jinwoo Sung? His eyes look like some kind of beast, I tell you.

It gave him chills, and he got goose bumps on his arms as well.

Jinwoo reined in his murderous glare. Fortunately, Kim was more perceptive than Jinho. After making eye contact with Jinwoo once, he'd decided to keep his distance. Jinwoo hoped that he'd continue doing that.

"Sung." Chiyul stood beside Jinwoo, smiling as he spotted something. "There she is."

Jinwoo turned his head in the direction Chiyul was looking. Even before he'd completely turned around...

"Jinwoo!"

...something soft collided with him.

"Joohee?"

As Jinwoo stood flustered, she looked him over, fighting back tears. "Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere? Oh, your leg! How did your leg...?"

Her eyes grew wide as she looked back and forth between Jinwoo's face and leg. Chiyul had been just as surprised as she was, but her reaction was more overt.

"Right. My leg. That's, uh..." Jinwoo was about to make up a story when...

“Ooooh, that’s hot! Sooo hot!”

Both Jinwoo and Joohee looked toward the voice.

Some man was catcalling at them from a distance. He wore a blue prisoner’s outfit.

Are they shooting a movie nearby?

As Jinwoo looked on curiously, a man in a suit emerged from the passenger side of a van. He chided the one in the prisoner’s outfit.

“Shut up.”

The prisoner looked away, acting like he hadn’t done anything wrong, but when the man in the suit turned back to the van, he took the opportunity to wink at Joohee.

Jinwoo frowned.

Soon, two more people came out of the van. Both of them were male as well. Strangely, all of them wore the same prisoner’s uniform and had on handcuffs. The man in the suit led the three men in the prisoner’s outfits toward the association employee.

She greeted him happily. “You’re finally here.”

“My apologies. There was traffic.”

The man in the suit started signing the paperwork she handed him. While he was doing that, she addressed all the hunters.

“These probational prisoners will join you in today’s raid.”

The hunters were stunned.

Kim stepped forward. “Probational prisoners? Are you telling us to do a raid with criminals?”

Hunters convicted of a crime have a choice. They can fully serve their prison term or they can decrease their jail time by cooperating with the association. Most of them chose to shorten their sentences, and those were called “probational prisoners.”

The employee of the association kept bowing in apology. “I’m sorry. I’m really

sorry, but this area is very low on hunters. The association has already said there isn't much choice currently. But you needn't worry, since a member of the Surveillance Team will also go with you."

Kim eyed the man in the suit suspiciously. "A member of the Surveillance Team, too?"

"Yes. The probational prisoners are all C rank, and the hunter from the Surveillance Team is B rank, so you needn't worry."

Kim nodded.

There was a theory that ten C-rank hunters would be needed to defeat one B-rank hunter. There was no reason to refuse a B-rank hunter who would both help them *and* keep an eye on the prisoners.

A B-rank hunter and three C-rank hunters.....

Jinwoo felt like something was off as he looked at the hunter from the Surveillance Team and the probational prisoners.

Something isn't right.

He sensed hostility from them.

Was this a result of his perception stat? Or was he worrying too much about nothing? In any case, an inexplicable uneasiness came over Jinwoo.

He whispered to Joohee. "You shouldn't come on this raid."

She looked up at him. "What about you?"

He responded to her question with his own. "And if I go?"

"Then I'm going, too."

Her expression made it clear she would follow him no matter what.

I know it's because she's worried about me, but.....

Jinwoo knew from experience how stubborn Joohee could be when she had that particular expression.

I guess it'll be okay as long as I stick with her.

He'd defeated Dongsuk's squad, which had five C-rank hunters, all by himself.

Jinwoo nodded. "Okay, then."

The Surveillance Team member stood in front of the hunters after finishing up the paperwork.

"As I believe you've already been told, I'm Taesik Kang from the Surveillance Team. I'll keep a close eye on the prisoners, so please do not worry about them."

Taesik waved the prisoners over. They trudged to him and put their hands out. He swiftly unlocked their handcuffs with practiced fluidity.

"Damn, that was uncomfortable."

"We're not slaves. How can they drag us around like this?"

The freed prisoners complained while rubbing their wrists. Taesik ignored them and turned to the hunters.

"Who is going to lead the way?"

Chiyul, who had always been the de facto leader, raised his hand halfway.

Taesik nodded. "Understood."

Chiyul entered the gate first, and the others followed him one by one.

"Shall we go?" Jinwoo also went in with Joohee.

She gingerly held on to his sleeve, perhaps because she was still traumatized from the last incident.

* * *

The majority of magic beasts in this dungeon were goblins. Goblins were classified as the weakest among humanoid magic beasts. The level of the dungeon wasn't high.

Keeeeek!

Kek!

Jinwoo had always found it easy to deal with these creepy little creatures, even before the system.

He fought them cautiously.

Skreeek!

Keeek!

Chiyul and Joohee were awestruck by the way Jinwoo was fighting better than they'd ever expected.

"Wow."

Even though Jinwoo was trying to hold back most of his combat power, there was still a clear difference.

Joohee approached him. "Have you been working out?"

"Uh..... I've been running every day."

"Running?" She looked doubtful, but at least he wasn't lying.

More importantly..... My experience isn't going up at all.

Skreeek!

[Experience will not increase because the enemy's level is too low.]

Kaaaak!

[Experience will not increase because the enemy's level is too low.]

Jinwoo looked disappointed. The message about the goblins' level being too low kept repeating over and over.

What's the point.....?

On top of that, the essence stones from the goblins were of the lowest quality.

Jinwoo looked around. The C-rank prisoners seemed hyped up because of their temporary freedom and were tearing apart the little beasts with their weapons.

Keeeeek!

Skreeek! Keeek!

It was hard to tell which of them were the beasts and which were the humans.

Looks like I don't need to work that hard.

He couldn't increase his experience here; neither could he make much money.

At the same time, he had another thought.

If it's gonna be like this all the time, isn't it better to leave the association?

Most of the work from the association was attacking D-or E-rank gates. If he couldn't level up with D-or E-rank raids, though, there was no reason for him to participate.

And I'll have enough to pay for my mother's hospital bills from now on.

He could leave the association at any time.

This was why it was good to have money. Jinwoo had more options open to him.

The party had ventured farther inside the dungeon while he was lost in thought.

“Huh?”

“Hmm.....”

Now there were three different forks in the path before them.

Taesik offered his suggestion to Chiyul. “How about we split up here, since the level of the dungeon is lower than we thought?”

“Let’s do that,” Chiyul agreed.

Jinwoo closed his eyes and focused on his other senses.

Which way is the boss?

Jinwoo was hoping the boss, at least, would give him some experience.

Soon, he started sensing the life force of every living thing in the dungeon.

He opened his eyes and spoke to Chiyul. “Mr. Song, let’s go to the left one.”

“Sure.”

Jinwoo, Chiyul, and Joohee took the left path, Taesik and the prisoners took

the right, and the last two hunters took the middle.

Jinwoo's heart was racing with excitement.

The boss is at the end of this tunnel.

He couldn't say it was particularly strong, but the energy coming from the end of the corridor was unique and different from that of the other goblins.

He wanted to get to the boss as soon as possible, but goblins sprang out at them every few steps.

Keeeek, keek.

Skreeeeek, keek.

Keeeek.

There were about ten this time. One with a wooden club, another one with a wooden sword, and yet another with a long wooden stick with a sharp stone point attached to the end. They'd done their best to arm themselves, but..... they didn't feel threatening at all.

Aren't these bastards sick of attacking us?

Jinwoo made a face. He considered goblins to be pesky, as they attacked in groups but weren't worth very much.

"There are ten of them...!"

"What should we do? Should we regroup with the others and come back?"

On the other hand, Chiyul and Joohee took them much more seriously.

"They're only goblins, so we should at least try to fight them ourselves first."

"Okay."

Flames flickered on the tips of Chiyul's fingers, and Joohee was readying her healing magic.

Jinwoo scratched the back of his head.

Now that I think about it, I don't feel nervous at all, even though I'm in a dungeon.

Was it because he was much stronger than before? It was slowly starting to

sink in how different it felt.

Chiyul turned to Jinwoo. “Sung, are you ready?”

“Yessir.”

Jinwoo kept pace with his teammates and steadily eliminated the goblins. In this way, they were focused on tackling the dungeon when...

...a steady stream of shrieking came from out of nowhere.

“Aaarrgggh!”

“Aaaaack!”

It wasn’t the goblins. They were definitely human screams.

Jinwoo, Chiyul, and Joohee stared at one another. It was quiet for a moment, but then the awful wailing started up again.

“Aghhh!”

Chiyul’s face hardened. “Let’s go.”

The three of them sped toward the source of the commotion. Jinwoo could’ve run faster and gone on ahead, but he paced himself for the safety of the other two.

How long had they been running?

Joohee spotted someone. “Over there.....!”

It was Taesik Kang from the Surveillance Team, and he was kneeling, covered in blood.

He called out to them. “Be careful! Those bastards might still be here somewhere!”

After spitting out the words with his last remaining strength, Taesik sank down as if he was in a great deal of pain.

“Uuuugh.”

Joohee couldn’t just stand by and watch. “I’ll heal you!”

She figured that, even if there were enemies nearby, she was a B-rank healer. She was pretty quick at tending to others. She thought it’d be better to treat

Taesik before the enemies struck again.

“Please hang on.” Joohee stopped in front of him and stretched out her arms. Dim lights began emanating from her hands.

That was when Taesik sprang up and reached for her neck, his hand charged with magic.

Swwwp.

Someone grabbed his wrist right before his hand could touch Joohee’s neck.

Tmp.

“Ah.....!” Startled, Joohee jerked back and landed on the ground.

Whump.

Taesik had a look of surprise on his face.

Who blocked my attack at this distance?

It wasn’t difficult for a high-rank hunter to get rid of his lower-rank comrades. His only issue was the B-rank female hunter who was the same level as he was. Luckily, she was a noncombat hunter. She wouldn’t be able to protect herself if he hit her with a surprise attack.

But.....his strike had been blocked. His effort to act the part of a responsible hunter had been in vain.

Taesik’s eyes scanned up the arm holding on to his wrist. His eyes stopped at Jinwoo’s face.

There was malice in those eyes.

Taesik scowled. “How dare you, you low-rank trash!”

Shwip!

Taesik’s other fist flew for Jinwoo’s face. But Jinwoo easily avoided it by turning his head.

What?!

Taesik put in all his strength and wrenched his wrist out of Jinwoo’s grasp.

“Huh?”

This surprised Jinwoo. As expected of the strength of a high-rank hunter.

With both hands now free, Taesik attempted to pummel Jinwoo, but he moved as fast as Taesik did, blocking all his attacks.

Pa-pa-pak!

The two of them continued their assault on each other. They were very evenly matched.

Chiyul took the opportunity to get Joohee away from them.

“M-Mr. Song...” Joohee was speechless from shock.

But Chiyul was even more shocked than she was.

How is this possible.....?

It was a fight at an unbelievable speed, too fast for the naked eye to follow. It might've been expected from the B-rank hunter, but Jinwoo was no longer the person Chiyul once knew. He was going head-to-head with a B ranker.

I'm Crank, but I can hardly follow their moves!

His hunch had been right. Jinwoo wasn't that same E ranker who'd been weak but had good hunches.

After exchanging hundreds of blows in a short amount of time, the two fighters separated to catch their breath.

Jinwoo glared at Taesik. “The blood on your clothes.....that's not yours, is it?”

Taesik shook out his wrists as he replied, “That's right. This is the blood of those bastards. But forget that; I had no idea I'd encounter a hunter like you in a place like this.”

He was truly amazed by Jinwoo. He hadn't heard of a high-rank hunter working with the bottom-tier trash in the association.

This isn't good.

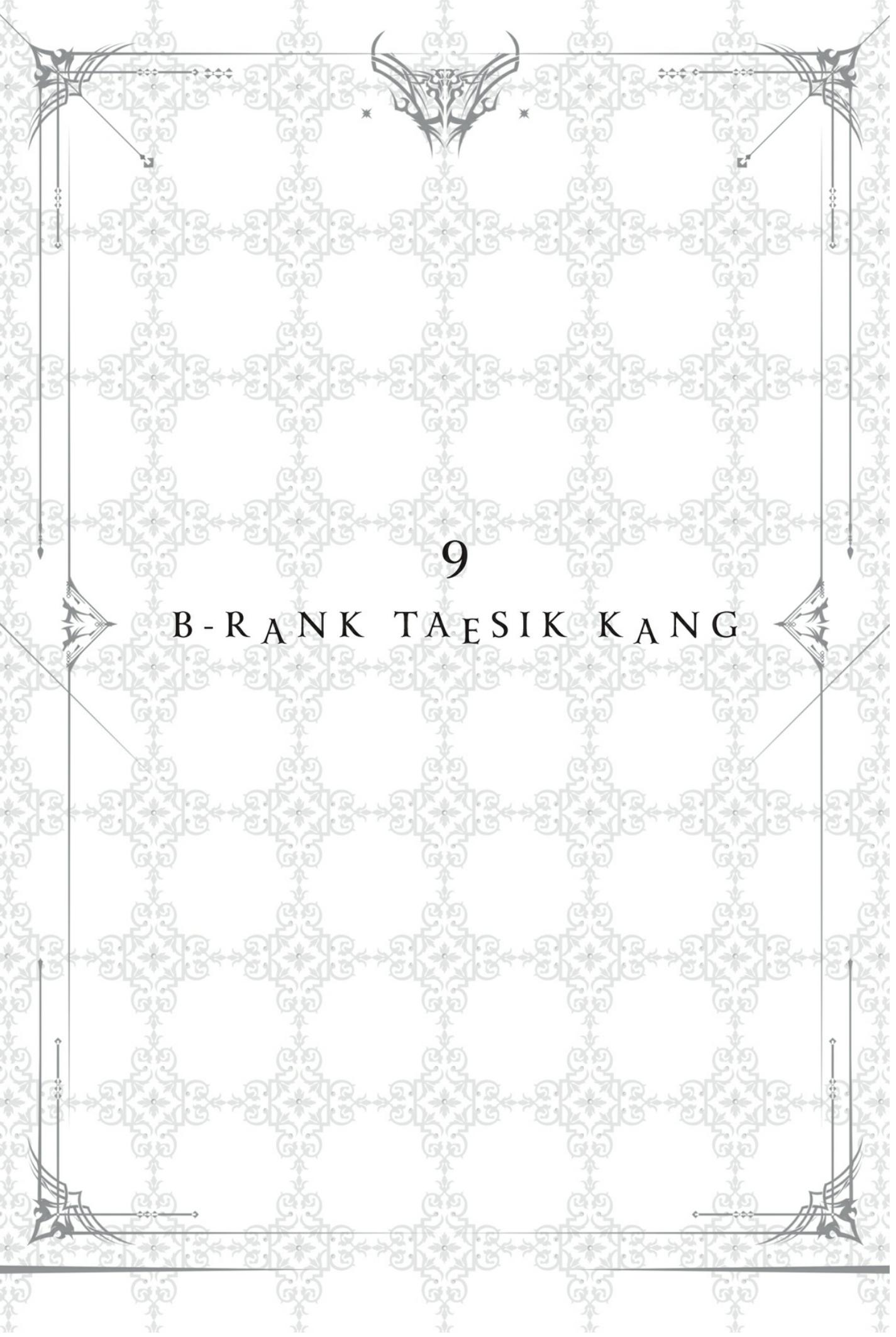
Taesik had thought today would be the perfect time to enact his plan. He hadn't anticipated such an unexpected complication.

His curiosity got the best of him.

"Who are you? What's your rank?"

Jinwoo summoned Kasaka's Venom Fang and gripped it tightly as he replied.

"Jinwoo Sung. E rank."



9

B - R A N K T A E S I K K A N G



9

B-RANK TAESIK KANG

Taesik felt like he'd been hit over the head.

He'd never been bested in speed before by other B rankers, but this bastard, whose moves were as fast as his, dared to introduce himself as an E-rank hunter.

How dare he make fun of me!

He ground his teeth.

No, wait a minute.....

Something about that bothered him.

There's no reason for a high-rank hunter to be here.

This was obviously work for the bottom-tier hunters in the association. Their main job was to take care of gates the guilds or strike squads passed on because there wasn't much money to be made. Their incomes were lousy compared to other hunters, and it was hard to gain recognition from their colleagues.

He probably was an E ranker like he'd said. The only thing was, his skills were way above that of an E rank.

And there's no way a false ranker would work for the association.

Taesik could come to only one conclusion.

.....A second awakening.

He remembered that upper management had been fussing about some hunter who might've had a second awakening near here not too long ago.

They definitely said the hunter was with the association.....

He wished he remembered the name. If his reawakening was recent, it was possible he was postponing his reapplication and helping out the association in the meantime.

Who knew he'd end up facing this man today? Taesik had carefully checked the list of hunters attending today's raid, but he'd missed Jinwoo.

How unlucky can I get?

He had only one thought on his mind.

I better add an additional fee after all this.....

He licked his lips as he thought back to when this had all started.

* * *

A few days earlier, in a café near the Hunter's Association Headquarters, Taesik got straight to business as soon as he sat down.

"Why did you want to meet with me?"

The middle-aged man opposite him looked gaunt.

Didn't he say he was the president of some company?

Taesik had never met this older man before, but the guy had kept calling and begging to meet with him, so Taesik had decided to spare a little of his time.

The man mumbled as if he was talking to himself.

"I've heard that what happens in the dungeon stays in the dungeon."

Taesik could barely make out what he was saying. "What are you talking about?"

"These are all my savings." The man handed Taesik his bank statement without preamble.

Taesik looked back and forth at the man and the document, then checked the balance. It indicated there was 2,000,000,000 won in the account.

"Why're you giving *me* this.....?"

The man avoided his eyes when Taesik regarded him suspiciously.

"The bastard who violated my daughter is among the prisoners you are in

charge of. My daughter hung herself, and my wife is still in the hospital from the shock."

The older fellow continued while fighting back tears. "That son of a bitch will be free in a few years without any further consequences..... How can I sleep at night knowing that?"

When the man looked up again, his face was full of sorrow and anger.

"I believe you already understand what I'm requesting of you at this point." The man bowed his head again. "I beg you, sir!"

The two sat in silence.

Taesik was in deep thought as he leaned back against his chair. After a long pause, he finally opened his mouth.

"Do you know why I decided to become part of the association's Surveillance Team?"

"Sorry?" The man looked up.

Taesik continued his explanation. "A B-rank hunter is classified as a high-rank hunter, so I sometimes get scouted by a large guild. But do you know *why* I keep working for the Surveillance Team for a smaller income?"

"I..... I don't know."

Taesik grinned.

"I enjoy fighting *humans* much more than magic beasts."

For that reason, the Surveillance Team was the perfect place for Taesik. He was legally allowed to beat up hunters. And sometimes when that happened, there'd be instances where he accidentally killed them.

Accidentally.....

He repressed his smile. "Stamping out bugs is the easy part. But in dungeons, there are also other hunters along with those bugs. Now, I see them as insects as well, but do others see them that way?"

The man looked disappointed, because Taesik sounded like he was about to reject him. He felt like his world was crashing down around him.

But Taesik spoke again with a smirk on his face, as if he was laughing at his would-be benefactor.

"This money plus an extra one billion to get rid of the other hunters. Can you do that?"

* * *

He'd need more than 3,000,000,000 won to face off against a reawakened hunter—now that his life was at risk.

The self-proclaimed E-rank hunter was watching him with keen eyes. He looked like he would attack instantly if he saw a single opening.

Taesik swallowed hard.

He's a challenging opponent.

Still, he was confident he could win. Even before he'd awakened as a hunter, Taesik rarely lost in a head-to-head battle. He could win, but it wouldn't be an easy fight. He needed to alter his plan a bit.

Just then, the E-rank hunter posed a question. "Why.....did you kill those prisoners?"

"Those bastards raped a girl, and her father asked me to. I didn't kill any humans... Those bastards were animals who had to be put down. I merely disposed of some wild dogs that hurt people."

The E-rank hunter was listening to him. It might be possible to talk him down. Taesik decided to try to persuade Jinwoo.

"Regardless of how things have turned out, I don't want to kill you guys. Can you just forget what happened today? Promise me that, and I won't lay a finger on you."

Of course, Taesik had no intention of leaving any survivors. When he thought about it, he could get injured if he fought Jinwoo head-on, so he considered getting rid of them one by one later when he had the chance.

However, the E-rank hunter snorted. "You should've said all that before you attacked us! Now you want us to pretend like nothing's happened *after* your attacks failed?"

He wasn't wrong.

Taesik also snickered at the absurdity of the situation.

So this is how it goes down in the end, huh?

Then he'd have to give it all he had. Taesik's eyes turned feral. His sharp gaze scanned his opponent from top to bottom. His forehead twitched.

Where did he get that dagger?

The E-rank hunter had acquired a dagger at some point.

Well..... I guess it doesn't matter?

It wasn't important where he'd gotten the weapon but rather what kind of weapon it was.

Taesik finished his quick analysis. With his speed and choice of a dagger, this guy was a damage dealer who preferred to get as close to his opponents as he could. His specialty was probably assassination.

Coincidentally, that was exactly what Taesik was. But the other had reawakened only recently. He could easily overwhelm him with his experience. The rookie probably couldn't even use his skill properly.

"I'll teach you a thing or two." Taesik laughed at the E-rank hunter while producing a knife from his waist. "Can you do *this*?"

Taesik vanished with the Stealth skill.

The E-rank hunter looked around, clearly taken aback. His panic was obvious.

Of course he'd be like that.

The Stealth skill didn't just make someone invisible. The body, any sound, and even scent: It all disappeared at once! That was the beauty of Stealth.

Among assassin-class hunters, only a select few could use this skill. No matter the hunter's rank, one had to be lucky enough to receive Stealth when they were first awakened.

Time to end this now!

In a flash, Taesik was at the E-rank hunter's back. The man was completely

exposed.

It's over.

He'd thought this was going to be a tougher fight, but it was too easy. Had his opponent been prepared for the Stealth skill, it wouldn't have ended this quickly. The difference in their experience was key in determining who won or lost here.

Die!

Taesik thrust his knife toward the E-rank hunter's ribs. But then!

Klank!

Two weapons collided and sent sparks flying.

The Stealth skill expired, and Taesik's eyes went wide.

"What? How?"

The E-rank hunter had blocked his knife perfectly. The surprised Taesik looked up at the E ranker's expression. His face was blank, but his mouth opened.

"Finally, it's here."

"Wh-what.....?"

Taesik was suddenly frightened by the cryptic words and actions of the E-rank hunter in front of him.

* * *

Ping!

[URGENT QUEST: DEFEAT THE ENEMIES!]

There are people present who want to kill the Player. Defeat them all and ensure your safety. If you do not complete this quest, you will receive an appropriate penalty.

Number of enemies to defeat: 1

Number of enemies defeated: 0

Jinwoo was relieved after checking the quest contents.

It wasn't for nothing.

He'd thought he might trigger an urgent quest if he let Taesik attack him first like Dongsuk's squad had, so he'd put this theory to the test and gotten the result he'd expected.

The message had come up as soon as Taesik resolved to kill Jinwoo. He'd lured Taesik in by displaying weakness and acting like he was panicking.

Of course, I didn't know he was going to use the Stealth skill, though.....

Truthfully, Jinwoo had been caught off guard when Taesik disappeared before his very eyes, as Stealth was rare. Nevertheless, he was able to detect Taesik's movements when he'd calmed down and focused.

That was the power of a high perception stat. Jinwoo had initially invested points into perception in order to classify enemies as beatable or unbeatable, but it had proven useful in this application as well.

I was lucky.

Because of this, Taesik looked like he'd just seen a ghost.

"No! How?"

Once Jinwoo got rid of him, he'd be able to reap the rewards of the urgent quest.

Since I have to fight him anyway, gotta milk it for all it's worth.

It was his turn to make a move now. It was time to attack.

The two weapons were crossed in a stalemate. They were both equal in strength.

Jinwoo's eyes flashed.

Why don't we try something different?

Jinwoo quickly moved to step on Taesik's foot.

Crunch!

"Argh!" Taesik had been focused solely on his dagger, so the sudden sharp pain in his foot startled him, and he instinctively retreated.

Jinwoo saw his chance.

Dash!

[Skill: Dash has been activated.]

[Your speed has increased by 30 percent. When in use, your mana will decrease by 1 every minute.]

Jinwoo immediately charged at Taesik. Taesik watched in disbelief.

He's become even faster?

He was unable to process how Jinwoo was even quicker than before. In a flash, Jinwoo was close enough to stab his thigh with Kasaka's Venom Fang.

"Ahhh!"

Since Taesik was focused on guarding his upper body, Jinwoo went for an opening.

[Debuff: Paralysis has been activated.]

[The debuff has been canceled out by the opponent's high resistance level.]

[Debuff: Drain has been activated.]

[The opponent's HP will decrease by 1 percent every second.]

Yes!

Kasaka's Venom Fang's debuff worked. Unfortunately, it wasn't paralysis, but it would still be much easier to defeat Taesik now.

But Taesik was a high-rank hunter! His resistance shouldn't be underestimated.

He leaped at Jinwoo, dagger in hand.

Fwik, fwik.

Jinwoo aimed for Taesik's vulnerable spots while narrowly avoiding his dagger. Despite his injured thigh, the more experienced Taesik calmly blocked Jinwoo's attacks.

Klink, clang!

Both Jinwoo and Taesik were drenched in sweat.

Our speed is equal!

Our speed is the same!

Both hunters were impressed by the other's agility as they continued to battle. They exchanged killer blows that could decide the match with a single strike.

Shhhk, shhhk, shhhiiik, shhhk, shhhk, shhhk, shhhk, shhhk!

The fight was so intense that those watching felt like they were the ones being attacked.

I need to tip the balance here.

Jinwoo focused energy on his eyes.

[Skill: Murderous Intent has been activated.]

Taesik trembled when he met Jinwoo's eyes.

What the...?

[Debuff: Panic has been activated.]

[All of the opponent's abilities will decrease by 50 percent for 1 minute.]

Got him!

Jinwoo was confident he had won.

Taesik's pupils dilated.

What's happening to my body?

As soon as he locked eyes with Jinwoo, his movements started feeling heavy, as if he were moving underwater. The speed he was so proud of started decreasing.

Shhhiiik! Shhhk!

Taesik took more damage.

N-no way!

Taesik's mind was a jumbled mess.

This was definitely the effect of a debuff, but he'd never heard of an assassin-class hunter who could use debuff magic.

Is he not an assassin?

No, but then how to explain his speed?

But his thoughts were abruptly cut short. The confusion turned to panic. Jinwoo was charging straight for him.

Taesik aimed for Jinwoo's eyes.

Shhhk!

Jinwoo pulled back his head quickly, but Taesik's knife scratched his cheek. Still, Jinwoo had come to terms with taking damage. He'd calculated the risk of charging in to unleash a final, fatal blow.

Taesik grimaced.

Ah, shit.

Jinwoo got up close and stabbed Taesik's chest with Kasaka's Venom Fang.

Shuuuk.

"Gak!" Taesik's eyes bulged out.

At that moment, both of them knew that the winner and loser had been decided.

Taesik's mouth filled with blood that had bubbled out from inside his chest. He sneered with blood in his mouth.

He'd run into a reawakened hunter in a D-rank dungeon on today of all days.

Seriously, what shitty luck.

The knife dropped from his hand. Panting, Taesik leaned his head toward Jinwoo and whispered something.

"....." Jinwoo listened quietly before eventually removing the dagger from Taesik's chest.

Taesik fell lifeless to the ground like a shirt falling off a hanger.

Whump.

Ping!

[You have completed Urgent Quest: Defeat the Enemies!]

Despite the message, Jinwoo wasn't particularly happy. He deplored killing anyone other than monsters, especially people, even if the opponent had started the fight.

[Rewards have been delivered.]

[Would you like to check your rewards?] (Y/N)

At least the rewards ensured that he wasn't totally losing out.

Jinwoo tried to look on the bright side as he checked the rewards.

Ping!

[YOU HAVE THE FOLLOWING REWARDS.]

Reward 1. Ability Points +5

What?

Jinwoo looked bewildered. The reward was noticeably lower than when he'd defeated Dongsuk's squad.

The level of difficulty was much higher today, too.

Was the number of enemies more important than their skill levels? Or was there another requirement Jinwoo didn't know about?

He cocked his head in confusion.

Suddenly, an object on the floor caught his eye. Something shiny and about the size of a coin was emanating light from Taesik's body.

Jinwoo's eyes went wide.

Is that.....?

He couldn't believe it, but it was the same light that emanated from dead monsters. The shiny things he found in magic beasts were essence stones, and now the same illumination was coming from Taesik's corpse.

What could it be?

Jinwoo tried to remain calm as he reached toward Taesik's heart.

Ping!

It hadn't been some hallucination.

[You have discovered Rune Stone: Stealth. Would you like to acquire it?]

Rune stone? An actual rune stone.....!

His heart started racing.

The skill Taesik had used had transformed into a rune stone that was embedded in his body. Stealth was a very valuable skill that only a handful of hunters possessed. If this was the same kind of rune stone he'd heard so much about.....

Acquire.

A small stone with runic writing on it appeared in Jinwoo's hand.

[RUNE STONE: STEALTH]

You may obtain the skill by crushing the stone.

Obtain the skill by crushing the stone. It really was a rune stone. Jinwoo would be able to use the Stealth skill once he shattered it. He'd never heard of a rune stone with the Stealth skill ever being found where a hunter could learn it. For that reason, it was impossible to figure out the monetary value of this particular rune stone.

At that moment, he heard two voices.

"Sung, you okay?"

"Jinwoo!"

Jinwoo hid the rune stone in his pocket and turned around.

Chiyul and Joohee were staring at Jinwoo in disbelief. The E-rank hunter who'd previously had a hard time in a D-rank dungeon had defeated Taesik Kang, a B-rank hunter.

As a noncombat hunter, Joohee might not have fully grasped the scale of this feat, but as a C ranker, Chiyul very well knew just how impossible a task this

was.

Jinwoo examined himself. "Yeah, I'm all right."

He looked fine at first glance, and he didn't feel any pain. However, blood trickled from under his chin when he turned his head. He inadvertently touched his cheek to find that the cut he'd received earlier was bleeding.

"Oh."

"I'll fix that." A blue light appeared on the end of Joohee's hand, and the cut was gone.

An E-rank hunter defeated a B-rank hunter without more than a scratch. Because they'd known the old Jinwoo, this shocked Chiyul and Joohee more than the fact that someone had just tried to kill them.

"How did you.....?" Chiyul couldn't finish his sentence.

Jinwoo knew what Chiyul and Joohee wanted to say, so he spoke first.

"I'm sorry. I'll explain everything when the time is right, but for now, please don't ask."

His voice sounded serious, so Joohee nodded.

Chiyul soon did the same. "You must have a good reason. Understood."

Jinwoo's gaze shifted toward where the boss was. His plans to kill it hadn't changed despite how messy things had gotten. He wanted to slay the boss by himself if possible. Not to mention, there was something he could do only if the other two weren't around.

Jinwoo looked at Chiyul. "It'll be hard to continue the raid after what happened. You two should go out and contact the association. I'll stay behind and search for survivors."

Chiyul knew instinctively what Jinwoo was up to.

Jinwoo is going to close the gate.

Chiyul thought that would be the best way to prevent any further complications.

"I think that's a good idea. Miss Joohee, we should go."

Joohee hesitated but eventually ran toward Jinwoo. “You haven’t forgotten that you promised to take me out for dinner, right?”

Jinwoo smiled. “I haven’t. I still need to get my change back from you.”

“Then keep your promise. I’ll wait for you outside.”

Relieved, Joohee finally stepped away as Jinwoo nodded. She looked back at him several times until she was completely out of the dungeon.

Jinwoo let loose a sigh of relief when even their shadows had made their exit.

“Whew...”

He’d wanted to keep his secret for as long as possible, but they’d found out. He couldn’t deny it now that there were witnesses.

I don’t want to threaten Joohee or Mr. Song.

He could claim self-defense for attacking the B-rank hunter with no issues. He had two witnesses, after all.

The problem was explaining how an E-rank hunter had defeated a B ranker.

I guess a reawakening would be the best explanation.

Jinwoo decided to go with that. He’d tell the association that he was a reawakened hunter and get reevaluated. There was no reason to reveal anything about the system or leveling up, since no one would believe him anyway.

He had mixed feelings about getting reevaluated.

I didn’t want to get reevaluated until after I got even stronger.....

But not everything goes according to plan. There was nothing he could do.

I wonder what my current rank is...

Would he be a high B rank, since his close fight with Taesik had ended in victory? He was quite confident he’d gotten stronger, but the B-to S-rank hunters were quite powerful.

Well, I’ll worry about that after I get out of here.

It was time to defeat the boss. There were only E-rank goblins in a D-rank

dungeon. That meant it was highly likely that most of the magic power detected here had come from the boss. If the boss's level was that high, Jinwoo could probably get enough experience to level up.

But first.....

He had something he needed to check on.

Jinwoo maxed out his senses and inspected every energy signature inside the dungeon.

"Found him."

Jinwoo headed in a certain direction.

He came across the bodies of Kim and the others along the way. This was the power of a high-rank hunter on display. They could kill several low-rank hunters in the blink of an eye if they wanted to. Jinwoo's face hardened as he walked past the corpses.

And soon...

"Mmmf, mmmf, mmmmmf!"

He found a prisoner struggling nearby. His hands and feet were bound and his mouth gagged. He looked just as Taesik had described him before he died.

"I tied up the rapist not too far from here. I was going to kill him last because the victim's father asked me to make it as slow and painful as possible."

Taesik had died right after saying that.

The prisoner struggled harder when he saw Jinwoo. It seemed like he was asking him to hurry and untie him.

"Mmmf, mmmf, mmm!"

Upon closer inspection, it was the creep who had harassed Joohee earlier.

The prisoner breathed hard and opened his eyes wide as Jinwoo took the gag out of his mouth.

"Huff, huff, huff! That crazy bastard Taesik Kang! He killed everyone; I swear he did! Where? Where is he? You have blood on your clothes. Did he try to get you, too?"

Instead of responding, Jinwoo looked up and straight ahead. The boss was in that direction.

The prisoner spoke more urgently. “Get me out of this first. We need to run away before Taesik comes back. Fuck, I can’t break this rope ‘cause it’s got magic! Do you have any tools? Why aren’t you talking? Can you hear me?”

Forgetting his predicament, the prisoner was getting angry at the bottom-tier hunter who kept ignoring him.

Jinwoo, expressionless, finally opened his mouth.

“The boss is right over there.”

“What?” The prisoner was confused.

“It seems stronger than other D-rank bosses, so I’m wondering what its patterns of attack are.”

The prisoner couldn’t stand it any longer and raged at Jinwoo. “What the hell are you on about? For fuck’s sake!”

Jinwoo calmly continued with what he wanted to say.

“Let me ask you something. Do you remember the girl you raped?”

“What? Who’re you talking about? Are you related to a victim?”

Jinwoo’s eyebrow twitched.

The prisoner asked Jinwoo who he was talking about instead of answering yes or no. This indicated that there were more than one or two victims.

A hunter can be a monster if they want to because they have the power. This piece of trash had used his power to violate women.

Jinwoo’s resolve hardened. He spoke coldly while looking down at the prisoner.

“I’ve heard enough.”

“What? Mmmf, mmm!”

Jinwoo gagged him before the man could say anything else. He gripped one of the prisoner’s ankles and started leisurely walking toward the boss’s lair.

“Mmmf! Mmmf! MMMF!”

The convict screamed bloody murder as he was dragged. His eyeballs bulged. His struggles had no effect on Jinwoo, who kept at it until they arrived at the lair.

“Mmmf! Mmmf!”

A group of hobgoblins, which were known for liking the entrails of living humans, was milling around the room.

“Mmmf! Mmmf! Mmmf!”

The prisoner realized what Jinwoo was planning. He shook his head and screamed after seeing the group of hobgoblins. His pants became stained with a yellow liquid.

“Hwwwooo.” Jinwoo drew a deep breath and then threw the convict toward the group of hobgoblins.

“Mmmmmfff!”

Keekeekeeee!

Keekee!

Keekeeee!

After smelling the fresh meat, all the hobgoblins pounced on their prey and started ripping at the leather clothes covering his midsection.

“Mmmmmmmf!” The eyes of the struggling prisoner turned red as the veins in them popped. “Mmmf...mmm...”

The hobgoblins kept feasting even after he lost consciousness. How did it feel to be eaten alive by those grotesque monsters?

With a scowl on his face, Jinwoo searched for the boss.

There it is.

A huge hobgoblin that was most likely the boss was sitting arrogantly in one corner. With all its minions preoccupied with the bait, it was an opportune time to engage.

Dash!

In a flash, Jinwoo zipped past the lackeys and appeared in front of the boss.

Keek!

Startled, the boss hobgoblin tried to get up quickly, but its head tumbled to the ground before it could lift its body.

Whud.

It rolled away slowly.

Ping!

[You have defeated the master of the dungeon.]

[You have leveled up!]

Oh, right.

He belatedly remembered the rune stone after severing the boss's head.

I could've learned and used the Stealth skill to approach it instead of using that guy as bait.

Jinwoo clicked his tongue as he surveyed the prisoner's remnants, which he could no longer tell was a human body. But he felt no remorse.

Ah well.....

The operation had been a success.

After losing their master, the hobgoblins didn't know what to do with themselves, which made it easier to deal with them.

Keekee!

Keekeeee!

Keekeeeee!

The beasts ran away from Jinwoo, but he made quick work of them.

Keekee!

After he killed the last one, he received the message that was always welcome.

[You have leveled up!]

It went up again?

This surprise brightened Jinwoo's mood.

He cleaned the blood from Kasaka's Venom Fang and collected all the essence stones from the hobgoblins' cadavers. After putting the dagger and the essence stones in his inventory, he called up the stat screen.

Ping!

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]

[Job: None]

[HP: 5,114]

[Fatigue: 0]

[Level: 27]

[Title: Wolf Assassin]

[MP: 548]

[Stats]

Strength: 72

Stamina: 43

Agility: 82

Intelligence: 39

Perception: 69

(Available ability points: 5)

Physical damage reduced by: 20 percent

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1, Murderous Intent Lv.1

[Item Equipped]

Warden's Collar (A)

Jinwoo was already close to level 30. He hadn't expected much after dealing with the goblins near the dungeon entrance, but he'd leveled up twice, once from killing the boss hobgoblin and the other from slaughtering the rest of the hobgoblins. Fortunately for him, the strongest ones had been in the boss's lair.

Although I can't call that luck, can I?

He'd known which of the three paths to take as well as the difficulty level of the boss's lair. If low-level hunters had entered the boss's lair overconfident after easily defeating the goblins, that wouldn't have ended well.

Unlike goblins, hobgoblins weren't as easy to deal with.

Hunters sometimes run into hobgoblins in a dungeon where goblins are, but.....

It was rare to see so many hobgoblins in one group.

Dungeons were unpredictable that way. Situations that appeared fortunate for one person could be desperate for someone else. The only shield that could truly protect hunters in any dangerous situation was strength.

That was why Jinwoo wanted to be strong. Surviving a dungeon was one thing, but what if there was a dungeon break near the hospital where his mother was? What if he happened to run into a magic beast while on a walk and was attacked?

And magic beasts weren't the only problem. Hunters could be just as dangerous. Organizations meant to regulate hunters could only do so much.

Jinwoo had to have the strength to protect himself.

There is a limit to how strong hunters can be.

But there was no limit for Jinwoo. Theoretically, he could keep getting stronger as long as he kept leveling up and obtaining items. Jinwoo had even found a new way to get stronger today. Rune stones!

He took the stone out of his pocket. The information about it appeared in a hologram as it did with other items.

[RUNE STONE: STEALTH]

You may obtain the skill by crushing the stone.

To ordinary people, it looked like a little pebble with weird writing on it, but hunters of all levels would kill to get their hands on one. A high-rank hunter could use it for themselves, and a low-rank hunter could sell it for an exorbitant price to a high-rank hunter.

A rune stone with a rare skill like Stealth could yield a huge payday. It would easily fetch a minimum of several 1,000,000,000 won in an official auction and even more on the black market.

There was one simple reason it was worth more on the black market. There would be no official record of who bought it or for how much. Possessing a special skill no one knew about was equivalent to having a powerful secret weapon.

Like Taesik had hidden his Stealth skill...

Jinwoo would've basically been offering Taesik his back if his perception stat hadn't been so high. Jinwoo got chills just thinking about it.

Selling is out of the question. I can make money anytime.

Jinwoo shouldn't be tempted by the possibility of getting rich quick. Right now, the important thing was getting stronger.

Of course, it went without saying how important a rare and useful skill like Stealth was.

"I can't believe this pebble is worth the same as a few houses—or no, a few buildings."

Jinwoo did something he'd never dreamed in the past that he'd do. The rune

stone was easy to crush when he channeled some power into his grip.

Krrrk.

The red light emanating from the cracks of the broken rune stone began surrounding him. It felt like he was receiving recovery magic. The only difference was that the color of the light was red instead of blue.

Whatever the case, it didn't feel bad in any way. As the red glow swirled around him and then entered his lungs through his nose, it felt like there was an energy he couldn't describe filling him.

He heard the usual notification chime.

Ping!

[You learned Skill: Stealth.]

[You may now use Skill: Stealth.]

Nice!

Jinwoo had successfully obtained the skill. He had been nervous because it was the first time he'd be acquiring a skill via a rune stone, but it went faster and easier than he'd expected.

Can I start using the Stealth skill?

His heart was beating faster from the achievement of learning a rare skill.

Didn't people say it was better to experience something rather than just read about it?

Jinwoo activated the skill immediately.

Stealth.

As soon as he thought the word, his body gradually disappeared. He became invisible from head to toe. He felt weird because he couldn't see his hand when he held it up in front of his face.

What happens if I do this?

He called up his dagger. Jinwoo felt something in his grip. Strangely, he couldn't see it, but he felt its shape and weight.

That's what I figured.....

Stealth applied to Kasaka's Venom Fang like it had with Taesik's knife. There was nothing special about the knife itself.

What else can the Stealth skill be applied to?

He picked up a stone from the ground, and it became invisible right away.

Can I do this, too?

He placed his hand on the shoulder of a dead hobgoblin, but nothing happened. It looked like there was a limit to the application of the skill. It definitely worked on the clothes he was wearing and things he could hold in his hands. Just then...

[Skill: Stealth was deactivated due to a lack of mana.]

"What?"

Stealth suddenly stopped working.

It was only a few seconds, but it drained all my mana?

Taken aback, Jinwoo quickly checked the information for the skill, as he'd only been experimenting with it by moving his body around.

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.1, Murderous Intent Lv.1, Stealth Lv.1

He wanted more information about the Stealth skill. More text appeared before his eyes.

Ping!

[SKILL: STEALTH LV.1]

Active skill.

200 mana required.

For a time, the user will be invisible, and their presence cannot be detected. Stealth consumes 10 mana per second while in use.

Activation takes 200 mana and then 10 mana for every second?

“Ahhh.....”

No wonder his mana had depleted so quickly.

[MP: 7/548]

His gauge looked pathetic with only 7 mana left.

It really emptied it out.

The maximum mana Jinwoo could currently possess was around 550. Each use of the Stealth skill would last about thirty-five seconds. If he used mana for another skill, he wouldn't be able to use Stealth for the full thirty-five seconds.

If I think about it, Taesik also only used the Stealth skill for a few seconds.

Now Jinwoo understood why. Taesik hadn't had enough magic power to use it for any longer. If this was the case for a high-rank hunter like Taesik, it would be pointless for a low-rank hunter to even learn the skill.

“Mana's the problem.”

He'd invested ability points on every stat except intelligence, but his mana had never increased. That meant he'd have to increase his intelligence stat in order to increase his mana levels.....

Should I start increasing intelligence, then?

However, it felt like a waste to use ability points on noncombat stats just because he wanted to use a skill a little longer.

Intelligence is too ineffective compared to other stats.

Strength, stamina, agility, and perception. He'd experienced firsthand how efficient all these were. He got noticeably stronger as the stats went up.

But he couldn't tell if anything changed when his intelligence stat increased.

Even though it's already four times as much as the base stat when I was level 1...

The only change seemed to be that his mana reserves rose. That was it. It didn't feel like it was worth actively investing points into.

Seems like a waste...

Other stats manifested in his actual flesh and blood. He concluded that he should keep leveling up until he had enough mana. He'd spend his ability points on better stats.

Speaking of ability points.....

He still had five from the urgent quest. He debated using them for intelligence but eventually distributed three points to strength and two points to stamina.

[Stats]

Strength: 75

Stamina: 45

Agility: 82

Intelligence: 39

Perception: 69

(Available ability points: 0)

Physical Damage Decrease: 20 percent *It definitely looks cleaner when these numbers are multiples of five.*

Jinwoo was smiling in satisfaction when...

RRRUMBLE.

The quakes were getting stronger, and he couldn't ignore them anymore.

Has it been an hour already?

There was no time to lose. Jinwoo closed the stat screen. He'd purposefully waited until the gate was about to close, but he'd be stuck inside the dungeon forever if he waited any longer.

He took one last look around the boss's lair before exiting.

I already grabbed the essence stones.....

He hadn't forgotten anything. Once he confirmed this, Jinwoo quickly made his way to the entrance.

RRRRRUMBLE.

The dungeon was shaking even harder than earlier, as if warning him that it was about to close.

* * *

His timing was impeccable. Members of the Surveillance Team had just arrived.

When they saw Jinwoo strolling out of the gate, their eyes widened.

“S-sir! Are there any other survivors?”

“No.”

“Oof...” Their faces looked somber.

Nine people had gone in, but only three had come out alive. This was a disaster. They had to be in a difficult position as employees of the association with multiple incidents happening in this area.

They wanted to search for more survivors, but that was a no-go because the gate had already closed. Jinwoo had purposefully waited inside until the gate was almost shut for this very reason.

I couldn't let them find out there were survivors.

The only evidence was the testimony of the three who had made it out alive.

The employee who'd already been on the scene sounded torn as she spoke. “The Surveillance Team received a phone confession from the president of Geumgang Industries just now.”

Chiyul took one step forward. “The president of Geumgang Industries?”

“His daughter was the victim of one of the prisoners, and he hired Taesik Kang to murder the offender.”

“Ah.....”

When the president of Geumgang Industries had heard that Taesik had succeeded in killing the offender, he'd simply confessed to everything.

The truth is I killed that prisoner, though.....

The police had tracked down the president, and the association had come here.

Jinwoo, who'd been quiet until now, asked a question. "Then there's no problem, is there?"

The employee looked like Jinwoo had put her on the spot. "Yes, that's right."

There was clear evidence of Taesik's crime, and the three hunters had fought against him to live. This wasn't a problem, as Jinwoo said.

However, one thing was bothering the employee.

"Who killed Taesik Kang, a B-rank hunter?"

The Surveillance Team members hadn't heard the full story yet, as they'd just arrived.

Well, the headquarters of the association is quite a distance from here, but they did arrive just before the gate closed.

They'd rushed to the scene as soon as they'd received notice. The Surveillance Team members all showed signs of fatigue on their faces.

Before he confessed, Jinwoo thought about Jinho.

It's too bad, but I guess I won't be able to help him with any raids.

If Jinwoo went with the story that he had reawakened and got his rank reevaluated, he wouldn't be able to help Jinho. Jinho needed a low-rank hunter with incredibly good skills. All his plans would go down the drain once Jinwoo's rank went up.

But then why was he feeling this way? Rather than feel guilty, he wanted to laugh when he pictured Jinho's sulking expression.

It was too bad he'd lose that building he was supposed to get as compensation.

Well, can't do much about that.

Jinwoo was going to open his mouth and confess when...

"I did it." Jinwoo's head turned in the direction of the voice.

Joohee was there, staring at Chiyul in surprise.

“Mr. Song.....?”

Chiyul took a step toward the employee before Jinwoo could ask what he was doing.

“I’m the one who killed Taesik Kang.”

The employee had a look of disbelief on her face. “You really defeated Hunter Taesik Kang, Hunter Chiyul Song?”

Her reaction was understandable because not only was Chiyul a C-rank hunter, but he was also missing his left arm. Meanwhile, Taesik had been a B-rank hunter, which was classified as a high rank.

A high-rank hunter’s power was beyond imagination. It was commonly known that the difference between a B rank and a C rank wasn’t even comparable to the gap between C and D.

Chiyul chuckled. “Don’t you see who was with me?”

“Oh!”

Everyone’s eyes turned to Joohee, who flushed and looked down.

Joohee was a B-rank hunter. They hadn’t considered her because she wasn’t a combat hunter, but she was the same B rank as Taesik.

There was no reason a C-rank hunter wouldn’t be able to defeat a B ranker with the support of another B ranker.

The Surveillance Team members nodded in understanding.

Jinwoo quietly drew closer to Chiyul while the others were distracted.

“Why did you lie to them?”

Chiyul also lowered his voice. “I thought you were hiding your abilities for a reason. Was I being too nosy?”

Of course he hadn’t been. Thanks to Chiyul, Jinwoo was avoiding a lot of trouble. This was why years of experience shouldn’t be dismissed.

“Never, sir.”

"Considering how much you've helped me, I'm glad to be of help to you."

One of the Surveillance Team members approached them. "Mr. Song, please come with us. We need your help with the report, if that's okay with you."

"Right."

It was only Jinwoo and Joohee at the scene after Chiyul and the Surveillance Team left.

The sun had already set a while ago.

Joohee felt awkward because Jinwoo seemed quite different from before. After hesitating for a bit, she carefully approached him.

"Would you like to go for a walk?"

Does she want to talk about dinner?

He was hungry after all that physical activity. Jinwoo gladly accepted.

"Sure."

They walked quietly under the streetlights. Without getting ahead of each other, they simply strolled side by side as if they'd practiced this.

"....."

Joohee kept her eyes on her shoes. Any time she raised her head, her gaze was automatically drawn to Jinwoo. She tried not to be self-conscious about it, but she couldn't help it.

She'd felt comfortable around Jinwoo before, but now he gave off a powerful energy. It made it difficult for her to talk to him.

What happened to him.....?

Not only had he been able to defeat the B-rank hunter, but he'd changed completely. Joohee had no intention of prying because it was clear Jinwoo wanted to keep things secret, but she couldn't help thinking about how much he had changed.

I wish he'd start the conversation at times like this.

She felt for a second that Jinwoo's silence came across as almost heartless.

Eventually, she stopped walking and started talking. “Ummm..... Actually, I don’t think I’ll be able to eat anything today, so I’ll return this to you.”

Jinwoo took the essence stone she was offering him. It was the same one Jinwoo had given her in the underground temple. Joohee’s hand was shaking as she passed him the essence stone.

That incident wasn’t all that long ago..... And she witnessed yet another one today.

Joohee was a person full of fear. Jinwoo understood why she wouldn’t want to go to dinner right now.

“Well, today isn’t the only day. You don’t have to return this to me now.”

Joohee shook her head. “I’m going back to my hometown next week.”

It looked as though she was moving away on top of quitting her work as a hunter.

Jinwoo would be sorry to see her go.

“Is it because of the incident?”

“That’s not the only reason, but.....” Joohee’s face darkened as she recalled that day.

Jinwoo quickly changed the subject. “So where’s home anyway?”

“Busan. So...Jinwoo.” Her expression turned serious.

“Yes?” Jinwoo removed the smile from his face when he sensed the change in Joohee’s mood.

She gazed at him.

His two eyes showed a strong will to live. Only his had been on fire, full of strength, when everyone else had been trembling in despair inside the underground temple. She’d seen them close up.

He has the eyes of a survivor.

Those two eyes that never lost sight of hope had saved several people, including herself. No one else could’ve done that.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

Her heart started racing as she remembered that day.

No.....

Joohee had no regrets about quitting. This job wasn't right for her. But she was sad that she wouldn't be able to see Jinwoo regularly.

Would he think I'm weird if I asked to see him again?

There were things she had to let go of. It would hurt her if she dwelled on them.

Joohee smiled brightly and shook her head. "It's nothing. If you happen to be in Busan, please give me a call. I'll treat you to some good sashimi."

"Sounds good."

As Jinwoo smiled at her, she returned his grin. Without telling him what she really wanted to say, she said good-bye and turned away.

.....

The road home had never felt so long.

* * *

Jinwoo headed to his apartment after saying good-bye to Joohee. He could see the old apartment building in the distance. His place was on the ninth floor.

He passed some parked cars and was about to head in, but an old man's voice stopped him.

"Young man, unit 902." It was the security guard.

Since Jinwoo had known him for a long time, he struck up a friendly conversation.

"Haven't you gone home yet, sir?"

"I'm on night duty today."

Jinwoo nodded in understanding.

The guard brought out a package from his office. "This has your name on it, boy."

"Oh, thank you."

It was from the Hunter's Association.

Was that today?

Was today the day the phone from the association was supposed to arrive?

Jinwoo took a phone out from the box. It was shiny and new.

He remembered seeing on the news that more and more people were becoming a little too interested in hunters and trying to get their hands on the hunter-exclusive phones.

Never mind the people trying to buy them—what kind of scumbag sneaks around selling black-market phones?

He'd heard someone say once that it wasn't that the country was poor, it was just that there were too many thieves. Whether it was the Hunter's Association or the military, there was corruption anywhere with enough people. When an organization was corrupt and money was wasted, there would be less support for those who needed it, and with less support, the situation would worsen. Eventually, the people who needed benefits the most would be the ones hit the hardest.

That's why I was worried, but.....

It didn't look like there were any problems with the delivery.

Jinwoo had nothing to do while waiting for the elevator, so he turned on the phone. He had a ton of notifications.

When am I going to have time to check all these?

Two numbers in particular caught his eye. Neither looked familiar. One had called him many times, and the other had texted a lot.

I don't know anyone who would try this hard to reach me.

Jinwoo cocked his head and checked the texts first.

_Hello. I'm the one from the hospital.....

_If you have time this week.....

_Am I bugging you too much? I just wanted to talk.....

He wondered who this person was at first but eventually realized it must be the young nurse to whom he'd given his number.

What was her name, Yura Choi?

He couldn't say that she was "bugging" him per se, but he had a strong feeling that things would get annoying if he texted her back.

Let's just move on for now.....

Should he check who'd called him so many times? Jinwoo pressed the Call button. The latest pop song blared from the phone speakers. He could guess who it was.

The call connected quickly.

"Hello?"

Jinwoo was right. He chuckled a little bit at how predictable this guy was.

"It's me. You can call this number from now on."

"Oh, you finally got your cell, boss!"

It was Jinho. Jinwoo had written down Jinho's number, but he hadn't recognized it because he never called first.

Jinho sounded excited.

"I was about to call you, boss. I have all the squad members now, so I'll pick you up tomorrow!"

Jinwoo could picture his bright face just from hearing his voice. He grinned.

"Great. See you tomorrow."

Bip.

The elevator arrived at the first floor, and its door opened right as he hung up the phone.

Ding!

Finally, there'd be a raid tomorrow. Jinwoo's heart raced at the thought.

I need to level up as quickly as possible.

He needed to raise his level, increase his abilities, and become stronger than everyone else.

Money, honor, and power. He could have it all if he became a strong hunter. And tomorrow would be the first step in that direction.

* * *

It was late at night on the East Coast of the United States of America.

The main S-rank hunter Dongsoo Hwang of the Scavenger Guild, arguably the strongest guild in North America, was about to go to bed when he heard the shocking news.

“.....How did my big brother die? Give me all the details slowly.”

His brother's name was Dongsuk Hwang. He was told that his brother had been killed in a C-rank gate.

“.....His eight squad members were killed, and the other two survived?”

And those two survivors were D and E rank? Something wasn't right.

The brother he knew wouldn't risk his life for his squad members. Besides, those two had been temps.

No further explanation was needed. Only D-and E-rank hunters survived, but all the C-rank hunters, including his brother, had been killed.

There must be something.....

Dongsoo's eyes grew sharp.

Even though he and his brother had been separated after he was scouted by a famous guild in the US, his brother had always taken care of him when he was in Korea. He couldn't say he had been a good man, but he had been a good brother.

I was going to bring him here when I'd established myself more, but.....

Somebody had murdered him.

He bit his bottom lip. “Fax me the info about the two survivors. The number is.....”

He hung up and immediately called his manager. She answered quickly.

"Mr. Hwang, it's quite late. Is something wrong?"

"Laura, what happens if I kill someone in South Korea?"

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

There was a brief pause before she spoke again.

".....There's no extradition treaty between South Korea and the US for hunter-related crimes. You'd be tried here, since you have US citizenship. We should be able to negotiate a deal with the government to reduce your sentence."

"That's good. Something's come up, so I have to go to Korea. Could you please clear my schedule?"

"But if you leave so abruptly, the guild work will grind to a halt, Mr. Hwang. Could you please tell me what's happened?"

"It's personal. Of course, I don't want to cause any trouble for the guild. How far has my schedule been booked?"

"You have a full schedule for the next two months."

"Two months..... Fine. Please keep my schedule afterward free. I'm not asking for a lot of time. Two weeks exactly. I'll visit Korea for two weeks."

".....Understood. But what should I tell upper management?"

"Tell them it's a bereavement trip for my brother's funeral."

"Yessir. I'll do that. Mr. Hwang..... If there's anything I can help wi—"

Click.

He hung up the phone. He wasn't in the mood to hear words of comfort or advice.

Vmmmm.

The fax he'd requested was coming in. He took the printouts from the machine. Pictures of the two hunters, their names, and short profiles were in the document.

"D-rank hunter Jinho Yoo and E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung."

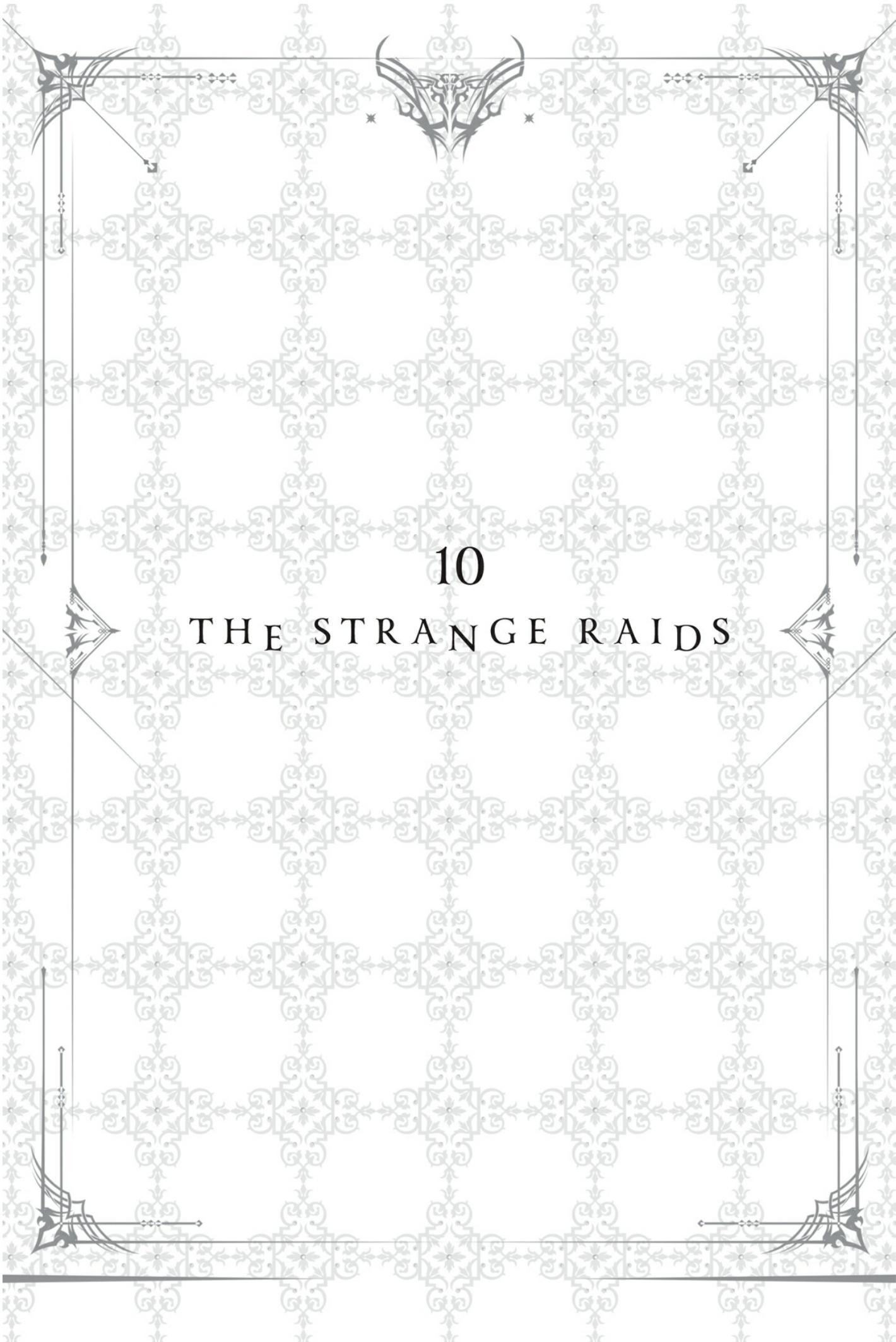
He hardened his resolve as he looked between the two pictures.

I can probably get some answers from these two.

And if he found anything suspicious.....

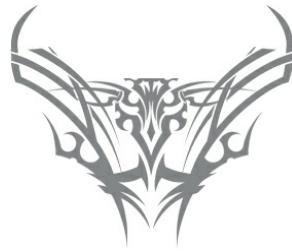
"They'll regret coming out of that dungeon alive."

Dongsoo saw red.



10

THE STRANGE RAID S



10

THE STRANGE RAIDS

The following morning, after Jinho called him down, Jinwoo found a big van idling in front of his apartment building.

“.....?”

Jinwoo was about to ask the driver not to block the entrance when the window on the driver's side slid down.

It revealed a face with a big grin..... It was Jinho Yoo.

“Please hop in, boss!” Jinho stuck his hand out the window and tapped the side of the van.

When Jinho had said he would pick Jinwoo up yesterday, Jinwoo had thought he'd be driving a sports car or something fancy..... But this was an ordinary van, even if it was slightly too big to be ordinary.

“Isn't your family superrich?”

“It would be too noticeable if I used my car. I bought this for raids.”

No wonder the van's exterior was extra shiny.

He bought a brand-new vehicle.

Jinho was on time picking Jinwoo up early in the morning, and he was driving a new car that wasn't too conspicuous. He was fully prepared. It seemed his expectations were just that high.

As Jinwoo checked out the new van, Jinho misread him and began to worry.
“Do you not like this kind of car, boss?”

“No, it's good.”

Jinwoo got in the front passenger seat.

“Here we go, boss.”

Jinho looked excited for their first day. He hummed as he gripped the steering wheel. They drove for a while before finally stopping in an empty lot.

Screeek.

“Here we are, boss.”

Eight other hunters were waiting for them at the meeting place.

The gate behind them looked a little too small to be a C-rank.

Tak.

Tak.

The other hunters gathered around Jinwoo and Jinho as they got out of the van and closed the doors.

You would be hard-pressed to find a normal person in the whole bunch. Many of them appeared as if they could barely walk. One person looked like a hospital patient. Another came across as an alcoholic. There was a teenage girl, which was unacceptable by association or guild standards. She seemed like a high school student.

“Is it okay to work with minors?”

“I consulted an adviser, and there shouldn’t be a problem, legally speaking. No one hires minors because of potential issues if there’s an incident.”

Jinwoo nodded.

That should be fine, then.

Only Jinwoo himself and Jinho would be entering the gates anyway, so there would be absolutely no chance of any mishaps. These people were here solely to meet a quota.

Ten party members were needed in order to attack a C-rank gate. For that reason, Jinho had recruited these eight hunters. Naturally, these individuals knew their purpose for being here very well. They were hunters who were licensed but couldn’t work for various reasons and were having a difficult time

making a living. The majority of the applicants had been in that same boat.

Jinho stepped forward. “I’m Jinho Yoo, the leader of this raid, and this is Hunter Jinwoo Sung, who will go inside the dungeon with me. All you have to do is wait for us near the gate.”

One of the hunters cautiously raised their hand. “Ummmm..... Will we really get paid three million won for doing that?”

There was no need to hunt or even go inside the dungeon, and yet they’d get paid 3,000,000 won per raid. It sounded too good a deal for simply putting their names on the record saying that they’d attended. It made the hunters feel uneasy, and they were wary of being involved in some kind of scam. It wasn’t like Jinho was Robin Hood giving money to the poor.

“The terms haven’t changed.” Jinho put authority in his voice. His eyes were serious. “But you can’t reveal anything you see or hear here. As per the contract, if you break our nondisclosure agreement, the penalty is ten times what you were paid.”

The hunters murmured to one another.

What would those two be doing in the dungeon that required those terms? The other eight were curious but couldn’t ask.

That was part of the confidentiality agreement.

—You may not inquire about events that occur in the dungeon.

Jinwoo didn’t want people to know his strength, so for the sake of his plan to become a guild master, Jinho had made sure the squad members would keep their mouths shut.

.....

The hunters murmured among themselves instead of asking Jinwoo and Jinho questions.

“But can those two even clear C-rank dungeons by themselves?”

“They don’t look like strong hunters.”

“If they have the abilities to clear a C-rank gate on their own, wouldn’t it be

better for them to join a guild and raid higher-level dungeons?"

"That's right."

Even though they all had their doubts about Jinwoo and Jinho, no one mentioned wanting to withdraw from the squad. Of course not. The deal was too good.

Jinwoo himself had once been lured in by 2,000,000 won. The reason they were paying 1,000,000 won more than Dongsuk had been willing to pay was due to the confidentiality agreement.

The introduction had taken quite a while. Jinwoo checked the time and then nudged Jinho.

"We should get going."

"Yessir."

Jinho clapped a couple of times to draw everyone's attention.

"Well, that should be enough of an explanation. I can't force anyone to stay. So does anyone want to quit?"

"....."

"....."

Of course, no one raised their hand.

It was now time to enter the gate.

"Oh, boss, hang on a sec." Jinho hurried back to the van as if he'd forgotten something.

He equipped himself and then waddled back.

"What.....are those?"

"This is a full set of tempered armor by a master craftsman guild in Italy. If we're going into those dungeons by ourselves, I had to at least prepare *something*."

Jinwoo rubbed his forehead. "....."

He felt uncomfortable just looking at the pieces of steel covering Jinho's body

from head to toe.

“What’s wrong, boss?”

Jinwoo couldn’t take it any longer, so he drew the sword holstered at Jinho’s waist and dropped it on the ground.

“H-huh?” Jinho tried to pick it up but lost his balance and fell to the ground.

Krrssshhhh.

Jinwoo tried to push his irritation down as deep as he could. “Take that off before I say something I’ll regret.”

“.....Yessir.”

But when Jinho tried to get up...

“Boss.....”

“What now?”

“Could you help me up?”

Jinwoo sighed deeply at Jinho’s outstretched hands.

“Is this okay, boss?”

“That’s fine.”

They eventually agreed that Jinho could keep the helmet. Jinho leaped through the gate with a self-satisfied look on his face. Jinwoo plodded along after him.

Once they were inside, the other hunters gathered near the entrance one by one.

One of them vocalized their concern. “They didn’t seem all that strong to me.....”

Another agreed as they watched the gate. “I know.”

The first two obsolete party members having opened the floor, the remainder started freely speaking their minds.

“What’s gonna happen if those two suddenly die in the dungeon?”

“At least we got the advance, so.....”

“That’s true...”

“Wait, what did those two say their names were?”

“Let’s see.”

A man with a cast on his leg took out his phone and did a search.

“Jinho Yoo, Jinwoo Sung.....”

Another hunter helped support him, though it could be because he looked wobbly or maybe because the other was impatient and wanted to look over his shoulder at the search results.

“What? The squad leader is D rank?”

Everyone was shocked by that, but the next search result was even more shocking.

“And the other guy is E rank?”

“Isn’t a C-rank dungeon dangerous for an E-rank hunter to even enter?”

“A D ranker and an E ranker raiding C-rank dungeons?”

“Is that even possible?”

“Plus, the squad leader doesn’t have any record of previous raids.”

“Are those young people.....?”

This was basically a suicide mission. The association had a reason for enforcing a rule that required a minimum of ten people to attack a C-rank gate.

“Tsk, tsk.” A gray-haired man took out a cigarette. “The blind courage of youth kills the youth.”

The smoke from his cigarette rose into the air.

“.....”

“.....”

The hunters grew quiet. They felt uncomfortable because it seemed like they’d helped someone die. No one wanted to see anyone, even a stranger,

perish before their very eyes or, to be exact, inside the gate before their very eyes.

But that wasn't all, was it? They also regretted the fact that there would be no more money. Even though they'd received their compensation in advance, they could've made a lot more if they were able to attend eighteen more raids as per the contract. It was too bad, but the possibility of those two coming back was extremely low.

"Shouldn't..... Shouldn't we report this, at least?"

"You're right. And what if some of the blame falls on our heads?"

Right at that moment...

Vvvmmmm.

Jinwoo and Jinho exited the gate.

"Huff, huff, huff." Jinho was gasping for breath. They looked tired and were emitting steam.

"Ohhh."

"They escaped safely, at least!"

"That's a relief."

The hunters gladly welcomed back Jinwoo and Jinho. They assumed the two had run into problems at the entrance and barely managed to get away, given how briefly they were gone. But they were wrong.

The hunters' expressions began changing, when they heard someone shout, "Th-the gate is closing!"

What?

Everyone turned around to look.

"Oh my God!"

"Look!"

"D-did they kill the boss?"

As a gate was wont to do after the boss was killed, this gate was beginning to

disappear.

The eight hunters appeared stunned, but Jinwoo paid no heed to how they stared at him and spoke quietly.

“Where’s the next one?”

“It’s about an hour from here, boss.”

“Let’s go.”

Jinwoo and Jinho started walking toward the van. Dumbfounded, the other hunters watched them go.

Jinho realized his contractees weren’t following and turned around. “Let’s hurry up, everyone! No time to waste—we’ve got two more gates to go.”

The hunters’ jaws hit the ground.

Poff.

Guwon Yoon, the gray-haired man, didn’t even realize the cigarette had fallen out of his gaping mouth.

Those two are going for another raid after wiping out a C-rank dungeon by themselves?

Guwon wasn’t alone in this sentiment. The others were all thinking the same thing.

Are they even human?

* * *

Day one.

GRAAAHHH.

A bunch of zombies came after Jinwoo and Jinho.

“Boss, they’re coming!”

“Got it.”

Jinwoo maneuvered through the zombie horde with ease. Zombies’ heads hit the ground wherever he passed. The enemy count dropped quickly, and soon there was only one left.

Shhhk.

Gaaak!

The usual chime rang the instant Jinwoo stabbed the last zombie in the chest.

Ping!

[You have leveled up!]

Jinho had stayed back but was now applauding excitedly.

“Boss, that was amazing!”

“Essence stones.”

“Oh, yes.” Jinho took out a bag and started collecting all the essence stones.

Suddenly... More notification alarms went off following the level-up notification.

Ping!

[You learned Skill: Advanced Dagger Wielding Lv.1.]

Ping!

[You learned Skill: Fatal Strike Lv.1.]

Ping!

[The level of Skill: Dash has increased!]

Jinwoo’s face brightened.

I have new skills?

It had been a while.

Jinwoo gladly called up the skill info screen.

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1, Advanced Dagger Wielding Lv.1

Active skill: Dash Lv.2, Murderous Intent Lv.1, Stealth Lv.1, Fatal Strike Lv.1

He’d used the Dash skill often enough that it had upgraded to level 2.

And there were two new skills called Advanced Dagger Wielding and Fatal Strike as new passive and active skills, respectively.

[SKILL: DASH LV.2]

Active skill.

5 mana required.

When activated, your speed increases by 40 percent. When in use, your mana will decrease by 1 every minute.

The speed's been upgraded.

It had increased from 30 percent to 40 percent—and 10 percent could make a huge difference, since Jinwoo used this skill often.

[SKILL: ADVANCED DAGGER WIELDING LV.1]

Passive skill.

0 mana required.

For daggers only.

Your skill with a dagger has increased due to wielding it for a long time.

Damage increased by 33 percent when equipping a dagger.

More damage when wielding a dagger! Since he'd been using one as his main weapon up until now, he'd received a skill specifically for it.

Now using other weapons won't be as effective.

In other words, using a dagger was just that effective when attacking. This was a great advantage because he didn't have any intentions of changing weapons for a while. He'd grown to like Kasaka's Venom Fang, since he'd gotten quite used to it.

And the last one...

Jinwoo scanned it with interest.

[SKILL: FATAL STRIKE LV.1]

Active skill.

70 mana required.

For daggers only.

You've learned how to attack more efficiently. You can locate an opponent's weak points and deal fatal damage.

This was also a dagger-only skill.

A way to attack efficiently.....

Now that he thought about it, he'd felt a similar feeling cleaning up that last zombie as he'd felt when he delivered the final blow to Taesik.

It was thrilling, so to speak. He could tell instinctively that the fight was over as soon as he stabbed them with the dagger.

I guess that was stabbing a fatal spot.

He couldn't believe that something he'd just so happened to succeed in doing had become a skill, and he could now use it whenever he wanted!

Jinwoo's heart was racing. He didn't have many ways to attack other than swinging a dagger, so learning the skill Fatal Strike was like rain during a drought.

Yes!

He'd leveled up and learned some new skills.

This was the best start ever.

* * *

Day two.

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Jinwoo's hunting speed had become much faster with the new attack skill.

[You have leveled up!]

It was one shot, one kill!

Jinho's eyes got bigger as he witnessed magic beasts fall left and right after being struck with Fatal Strike.

Was he hiding that skill until now?

What were the limits of the boss's skills?

Jinho was amazed, but at the same time, he was curious about Jinwoo's actual rank.

Since he defeated C-rank hunters easily, he has to be at least a B rank.....

Jinho couldn't imagine dealing with the fallout if he asked Jinwoo directly, so the only thing he could really do was watch Jinwoo with his mouth open.

But there was a problem with hunting so quickly.

[You cannot use the skill because you do not have enough mana.]

[You cannot use the skill because you do not have enough mana.]

Jinwoo frowned.

Again?

To give himself more mana, he took out the mana potion he'd purchased from the shop.

"What's that, boss?" Jinho was curious about the potion.

It wasn't the first time he'd witnessed Jinwoo doing something amazing, but he couldn't help asking about the blue elixir he'd seen Jinwoo drink sometimes.

"This?"

Jinwoo stalled by reading info about the mana potion.

[ITEM: MANA POTION]

Acquisition Difficulty: E

Category: Consumable

Liquid that recovers mana. Recovers 500 mana when you drink it. You may keep it in the inventory, but it cannot be transferred to

another person.

The description said he couldn't give it to another person.

What would happen if I shared this with someone else?

Jinwoo's curiosity was piqued.

He handed the potion over to Jinho, but the mana potion disappeared from Jinho's hand as quietly as it had appeared.

"I-is this magic, boss?"

That's why I can't transfer it.

Jinwoo had discovered something new. A nontransferable item would disappear if someone else touched it.

Then what happens if they don't touch it?

Jinwoo called up the shop and bought another potion, but it wasn't the mana potion he usually bought. This red liquid was a healing potion.

The potion quietly appeared in Jinwoo's hand when he finalized the purchase.

"B-boss, that's amazing. The liquid changed to red!"

Jinho seemed to think it was some kind of party trick that the mana potion had disappeared and the healing potion had reappeared in its place.

Jinwoo had changed potions for a simple reason.

I want to find out if they'll work on other people.

Jinwoo had Jinho lower his body. "Open your mouth. And look up."

"L-like this, boss?"

"Perfect. Stay still just like that."

Jinwoo tilted the bottle with the potion in it. Soon, the red liquid poured down Jinho's throat.

Shhhwwwsh.

Jinho's eyes widened. "Huh? What *is* this, boss? I suddenly have so much energy!"

Jinho had been tired from having to carry a heavy bag for a long time, but the color returned to his face in an instant.

Jinwoo was satisfied with the results.

It works if I transfer the potion like this.

This was good to know. If there were wounded hunters, he could treat them like this even without a healer.

This could help Jinwoo a lot in the future.

"If you get tired, let me know. There's more where that came from."

Jinwoo wasn't doing this just to be nice. If the butler slowed down because of fatigue, the hunter would slow down as well, which would inconvenience Jinwoo personally.

That was Jinwoo's ultimate motive, but Jinho interpreted the act very differently.

"B-boss....."

"Let's go."

Jinho was moved, and with tears in his eyes, he followed behind Jinwoo, who had proven to him that he had his back and was not only powerful but a class act.

* * *

Day three.

"Oh, please take this, boss." Jinho dug through his bag of weapons and pulled out a bank statement for Jinwoo.

"What's this?"

"It's the money from selling the essence stones from the last two days."

Jinwoo wasn't particularly thrilled that Jinho hadn't done this earlier instead of now, when they were in a dungeon infested with magic beasts. But that feeling didn't last long.

Jinwoo stared at the number.

600,000,000 won?

That was the huge number written on the statement.

"You're giving me *all* the money from selling the essence stones?"

Jinho nodded. "Yessir. I'm not doing raids because I need the money. Plus, you're the one who killed all the magic beasts anyway. How could I shamelessly ask you to share the rewards?"

Jinho's eyes sparkled like a child waiting to be praised.

Wow..... Look at this kid.

Jinwoo felt Jinho's attitude toward him changing since they'd started working together. Before, it had felt like Jinho was forcing himself to do whatever Jinwoo asked when they'd first met. But now, Jinho was acting more like a young colleague, one who followed around a senior he admired.

He's got some cute sides to him.

Jinwoo tried to hold back a grin. "Can I really take it all?"

"Do you think I, Jinho Yoo, am the kind of guy who'd say something I don't mean, boss?"

Jinwoo waved the statement in the air and laughed. "Okay, okay. Thank you for this."

"Thank you, boss!" Jinho gave a deep, ninety-degree bow. It was hard to tell who'd given money to whom.

Meanwhile, outside the dungeon... The squad members had gotten the hang of waiting around. They sat in small groups and enjoyed doing whatever they wanted as soon as Jinho Yoo, the leader, and Jinwoo Sung, the sidekick (?), entered the dungeon.

The largest group usually played the popular card game Go-Stop. This time, five people sat in that circle.

"What number is this raid?"

"Let's see..... Three the day before yesterday, two yesterday, and this is the second one today. So this is number seven."

“Are those two going to be okay raiding dungeons at this pace? Usually, you’d take a week off after attacking a single dungeon.”

“Nah, no need to worry about them. They don’t even break a sweat. It’s an additional three million won in our bank accounts every time. Good for us. By the way, it’s your turn—show your card.”

“Oh, okay.”

Despite their crazy schedule with no breaks, Jinwoo and Jinho never looked tired. The other hunters didn’t know that this was due to the power of potions. Thanks to the potions, they’d already cleared over one-third of the nineteen raids they needed.

Soon, the gate’s black membrane rippled, and Jinwoo and Jinho jumped out.

“Ah, the leader’s back.”

“Let’s get going.”

The hunters started tidying the areas they’d used.

“Please pack that up.”

“And please wake anyone who’s sleeping. Make sure you don’t leave anything behind.”

The hunters moved in an orderly fashion. Even those who’d just woken bolted up and started getting ready to leave.

“Let’s move out!”

Everyone was gradually getting used to these weird raids.

* * *

At an office of the White Tiger Guild located nearby, it was early in the morning, but the department manager of the second administration team, Manager Sangmin An, was already furious.

“Assistant Manager Hyun! The training of the new members begins tomorrow, and you still haven’t booked a gate yet?”

Assistant Manager Kichul Hyun lowered his head. “I’m s-sorry, sir. There’s a strike squad that always closes the bid whenever a C-rank gate appears nearby,

even before we do anything!"

"What? Then you can pay them extra and take it. It's not like we don't have the money or the manpower. What's the problem?"

"I was going to do that, but....."

"Hey! How dare you talk back like you did well!"

The entire second administration team fell completely silent at Sangmin's roar. It had been a while since he'd been this mad.

What was the White Tiger Guild? It was one of the top five guilds in Korea. Its employees were the cream of the crop.

Kichul was an excellent employee who hadn't made any major mistakes since he'd joined the guild. Yet he couldn't book a single gate for the purpose of training new members?!

That was a major mistake.

The first administration team managed the schedule for the hunters in the guild, and the second administration team that Sangmin was in charge of recruited new members and trained them.

"P-please look at this, Manager An!" Kichul presented his laptop as he fought back tears.

"Seriously?"

Sangmin was about to scream some more, but his jaw dropped at the numbers on the screen. "Two hundred and fifty million won? There are idiots who'd pay two hundred and fifty million won for a permit to raid a C-rank gate?"

He was rendered speechless.

The maximum profit from a C-rank gate ran about 200,000,000 won. Paying any more than that would be a significant loss.

"Originally, the price was about seventy million won, but they paid two hundred and fifty million for the attack permit when I tried to buy it for a hundred million won."

Sangmin now understood why Kichul had felt so wronged when he'd blown up at his subordinate.

Who the fuck are these bastards?

Taka, tak, taka, tak.

Sangmin typed quickly, and the search results soon came up. As Kichul had said, a specific strike squad kept buying up all the C-rank gate permits for ridiculous amounts of money at an outrageous speed.

"The crazy bastards....."

This was the territory of the White Tiger Guild. Sangmin initially considered the possibility of another guild messing with them.

No, there's no way.....

No other guild would pick a fight like this with White Tiger. Even the other guilds in the top five knew how risky it would be to challenge the White Tiger Guild and how easily they could be crushed.

It can't be another guild...

Then who would it be and why? Sangmin swallowed nervously and then checked the information about the strike squad members.

The leader's name was Jinho Yoo.

"Never heard of him."

Sangmin's job was to recruit new members. Because of this, he knew every single freelance hunter's name, even if they had only the slightest bit of notoriety.

But the name Jinho Yoo was new to him.

Putting him aside for now...

He slowly scrolled down the list of members to see if he recognized any of them. There was only one name that sounded familiar.

Jinwoo Sung? Jinwoo Sung? I've heard that name before.....

After some thought, he recalled the incident with the double dungeon that

had happened about two months earlier. The White Tiger Guild had helped the association out at the time.

"Kichul, do you remember that double dungeon our men helped out with a couple of months ago?"

"Of course I do. Didn't they say there were no beasts but that there was one survivor?"

"What was the survivor's name?"

Kichul had a good head on his shoulders. He wasn't remarkably smarter than average, but he had a superb memory. He didn't need to do a search. He responded immediately.

"Jinwoo Sung, E-rank hunter."

I knew it!

Sangmin's suspicions had been proven correct. He knew instinctively that something was up. His gut had never been wrong before about this kind of thing.

He shouted at everyone. "Stop what you're doing and scrape together any and all information you can on Jinho Yoo the D-rank hunter and Jinwoo Sung the E-rank hunter! Right now!"

Excellent employees exceed expectations in a pinch. Elites are called elites for a reason. Therefore, the information came pouring in.

In truth, there was nothing particularly special about Jinho Yoo. He was quite ordinary except for the fact that he was the second son of Myunghan Yoo, the chairman of Yoojin Construction.

But Jinwoo Sung was different.

"There were three incidents, including the double dungeon, that he came out of unharmed."

Kichul confirmed this. "Yes, even though he is just an E-rank hunter."

Jinwoo and Jinho had initially met at Jinho's first raid. And only those two had survived.

The two of them had then formed a strike squad and were clearing dungeons at a terrifying speed of two to three dungeons per day.

“Something is fishy here.....”

“What are they doing?”

“Well..... Wait. Rumor has it that Chairman Myunghan Yoo has been reaching out to S-rank hunters lately.”

“Yes, there is that rumor.”

“And Jinho Yoo is his son.....”

Chairman Yoo was trying to form a guild. It was the most well-known secret in the industry. If that was true, Jinho’s odd activities were probably related to that.

“Wait.....!”

A picture was forming in Sangmin’s head.

It makes sense now!

Kichul gulped as his manager’s eyes changed.

Sangmin was confident. “That bastard..... He’s a reawakened hunter!”

“A reawakened hunter?” Kichul looked like a deer caught in headlights.

Sangmin was completely sure. “That’s right.”

An E-rank hunter wasn’t so different from an ordinary person. If there was a big incident, it wouldn’t be far-fetched to say they’d just get killed. But Jinwoo had escaped safely from incidents where more than half the hunters had been killed each time.

Of course, he might’ve been lucky, but...

But that third incident? The one involving Taesik Kang from the Surveillance Team was a little different.

According to the record, a C-rank mage hunter had defeated him with the help of a B-rank healer.

That’s absurd. A Surveillance Team member’s main job is to fight other

hunters.

Unless Taesik Kang was stupid, he probably would have tried to kill the B-rank healer first, since they were a high rank but had no combat skills.

But a C-rank mage hunter stopped Taesik by himself?

A mage hunter was weak against combat hunters, especially assassin-class hunters. Unless Taesik had been caught off guard and completely ignored the B-rank healer..... But he couldn't imagine a hunter with a three-year career on the Surveillance Team making that kind of mistake.

Someone else who was there with this C-rank Chiyul Song stopped Taesik.

Sangmin didn't have any evidence, but he was absolutely certain about his suspicion.

Jinwoo Sung had experienced a second awakening and become a high-rank hunter. Jinho Yoo happened to find out about Jinwoo's abilities in a raid, so he was testing Jinwoo out for the guild his father was planning.

Everything fit together with that theory.

This is big news.

Not a lot of people probably knew about Jinwoo's true value as a reawakened hunter besides Jinho.

Those who knew Chairman Yoo knew he wouldn't accept any random hunter. Furthermore, this was a matter of choosing the founding members. This was an excellent opportunity to poach talent from him.

If this guy took down Taesik, a B-rank hunter, he is, at minimum, a B-rank hunter!

The first thing Sangmin had to do was scout Jinwoo before he joined another guild, especially Chairman Yoo's. The competition would be fierce when Jinwoo got his reevaluation.

It didn't matter even if Jinwoo wasn't as strong as Sangmin assumed. There were only a few reawakened hunters, and media from all over the world liked to pay attention to them. No amount of money would be able to buy this kind of PR. It was an opportunity they couldn't pass up.

If the hunter already signed a contract with him, there's nothing we can do, but.....

That was unlikely. That he was still being tested in C-rank dungeons was evidence enough that it was doubtful. There was a high chance nothing was set in stone yet. That meant the White Tiger Guild still had a shot.

There's no time to waste.

Sangmin grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and put it on.

"Kichul, let's go."

He didn't forget to take his right-hand man. Since Kichul was the only one who could succeed his position in the future, Sangmin was especially tough on him.

Kichul blinked in surprise. "Excuse me? Where are we going, Manager An?"

"Where? To recruit a new member."

"You're going recruiting yourself?"

"Why? Is there a problem?" Sangmin replied coolly before striding out of the room.

He was followed by a bewildered Kichul.

How strange.....

This was Sangmin's first time recruiting a new member personally since he'd become the department manager two years ago.

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink