

Solo Leveling: Ragnarok [FAN TL] Chapter 181 - Chapter 180

Chapter 181: Chapter 180

Beru told Suho about Sung Il-Hwan's past while they were on the move. Sung Il-Hwan. Suho's grandfather and the father of the Shadow Monarch, Sung Jinwoo. He was once a top-rank hunter who had accepted the power of the Rulers. His exact rank was unknown because it was before a clear hunter ranking system was established. However, Beru said he was definitely S-rank. After all, he was capable of accepting the power of the Rulers into his body.

[And it's highly likely that your grandfather has awakened as a hunter once again, just like before!]

There was no age limit for hunter awakening. A suitable constitution for mana was innate; it was a matter of talent. That's why all the 'former hunters' they had met so far had awakened with the same powers in this era. So Sung Il-Hwan would probably be no exception. However, there was one thing. Regardless of talent, the timing of awakening varied from person to person. Some had a trigger, while others awakened suddenly without any specific reason.

[It's possible he hasn't awakened yet!]

"That's even more worrying."

[Indeed!]

Suho had never heard any major news about his grandfather. 'If Grandpa became a hunter, he would have wanted to be a firefighter again. Or maybe he'd start a guild with a similar purpose.'

Considering Sung Il-Hwan's personality, it was highly likely that he hadn't awakened yet. And that made Suho even more anxious. A perfect target for the Apostles of Itarim, a suitable vessel that didn't have any power to defend himself. He gritted his teeth and sped down the highway, his silver hair fluttering in the strong wind, going even faster than Baek Miho, who had carried him on her back during the Lee Minsung incident. Suho had already summoned Gray, and his Strength stat had increased tremendously compared to back then.

– Wh-what's that?!

– Dangerous!

– Someone call the Association!

Countless drivers were shocked and terrified at the sight of Suho. Some even took out their phones to report him to the police or the hunter Association. But he ignored them all and ran as fast as he could. As a result he arrived in Yangpyeong in the blink of an eye...

Trickle. The sound of flowing river water and a thick fog gently obscured his vision. The Namhan River divided Yangpyeong, Gyeonggi Province, in two. And in the areas near the streams that merged with it, fog like this often formed. Paldang Dam, in particular, currently held a large amount of water and was nearly overflowing, so the fog was even thicker.

'Huh...?'

Suho, running through the thick haze, suddenly felt a strange sensation he couldn't describe. It seemed like his Sense stat, which had increased significantly due to his level-ups, was activated, but it felt a little different than usual.

'What is it?'

Suho narrowed his eyes and expanded his senses, observing the surroundings. But it was strange. He couldn't sense any hostility or presence of magical beasts nearby.

'What could it be?' From the moment he set foot in Yangpyeong, an inexplicable unease kept nagging at his senses.

"Beru."

[Understood.]

They didn't need any more words. Beru immediately twitched his antennae and began to scan the surroundings. Meanwhile, Suho took out his phone and called his grandfather again. He had already tried calling him as well as his grandmother before leaving, but no one answered. However, this wasn't unusual. They were living a leisurely life in the countryside, so they didn't always carry their phones with them.

"...They're still not answering." Suho frowned as he listened to the endless ringing.

[Don't you know their address?]

"Well..." Suho shook his head slightly embarrassed at Beru's question.

"For the past five years, I haven't been in my right mind."

To be honest... anyone would have been the same. Both of his parents suddenly disappeared overnight. How many people could stay sane in that situation?

"...It was overwhelming." Suho smiled bitterly, recalling how he felt back then. Now he knew the whole story, but at the time, he truly felt like the sky was falling. And he realized how weak and insignificant he truly was.

"My parents disappeared, and there was absolutely nothing I, a mere high school student, could do."

What did I do back then? Right, first I reported them missing to the police. I contacted my relatives to let them know the situation. And then I watched from the side as the adults who rushed over had serious discussions with the officials... I sat blankly at home, waiting and waiting for my parents to contact me. I never let go of my phone, even for a second, just in case they suddenly called...

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...That was the best he could do.

"Then my uncle came to me and said this."

– Suho, leave this to the adults and focus on your studies as usual. That's what your parents would truly want.

And Suho had no choice but to follow his words. His uncle, Yoo Jinho, was a well-known conglomerate leader in Korea. If someone like him was doing everything in his power to find his missing parents, there was nothing more a high school student like him could do. So he went back to school.

"...But you know what?" Suho, recalling those unpleasant memories, asked Beru with a somewhat complicated expression.

"What do you think my grandfather was doing despite that tense situation?" He continued without waiting for Beru's response.

"Strangely enough... Grandpa was putting out fires as usual. Even though his own son was missing, he was saving other people."

[Kiek?] Beru's eyes momentarily widened in surprise.

"They're still not answering. This won't do. I need to ask my uncle."

Unable to reach his grandparents, Suho immediately called his uncle. But Yoo Jinho was unavailable due to work. So as a second option, he tried contacting his aunt.

"Oh my, Suho?" Thankfully, she answered her phone.

"Aunt! Could you tell me Grandpa's address?"

"Huh? Why all of a sudden?" Surprise was evident in the voice of Suho's aunt. Sung Jinah coming from the other end of the line. Well, this reaction was natural. As he had just told Beru, his relationship with his grandfather had become a bit distant since that time. Suho forced a bitter smile and chose his words carefully.

"I Just... wanted to see him again, after such a long time..."

"Oh, that's great! I'll send you the address right away! Oh, wait! Why don't you come with me?"

"Huh? No, there's no need to..."

"No, I was planning to visit anyway."

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Suho declined immediately, worried that his aunt might get involved in something dangerous, but she was quite persistent. Her determination to mend the relationship between him and his grandfather was clear.

"How about this? I'll be off work soon, so come straight to Ahjin Hospital."

At those words, Suho paused and his expression hardened. "...Ahjin Hospital?"

His reaction surprised his aunt even more. "Oh my, didn't you call knowing that? I opened a hospital in Yangpyeong."

"...What?"

"You really didn't know?"

"..."

He realized once again how carefree he had been living his life.

* * *

Suho rushed to Ahjin Hospital located in Yangpyeong.

"Suho!" Sung Jinah, wearing a white doctor's coat, greeted him warmly.

"How did you get here so fast after hanging up? Were you nearby?"

His aunt and the younger sister of the Shadow Monarch, Sung Jinwoo, was a doctor. And of all places, she had opened a hospital in Yangpyeong.

'Ahjin Hospital' wasn't a massive facility, but it was famous for its impressive capabilities despite its size.

Looking at the name, Suho asked Sung Jinah,

"Aunt, is this place perhaps...?"

"Yes, you're right. This hospital was built by a foundation sponsored by Ahjin Soft." In other words, it was practically a hospital established by Sung Jinah's husband, Yoo Jinho's, company. Saying this, she gave a bitter smile.

"So there's been a bit of gossip about it."

"What kind of gossip?"

"As you might have seen on your way here, there are many wealthy people living in Yangpyeong. To be precise, it's mostly retired wealthy people."

"Ah." Suho understood. He had seen many on his way here, but there were indeed many luxurious-looking villas scattered around the area. From this perspective, it was easy to see why people would gossip about a large corporation like Ahjin Soft building a medical facility for the rich.

But in reality, the order was reversed. Sung Jinah said, sounding a bit wronged, "I don't know if you're aware, but this area is moderately far and moderately close to Gangnam, making it the perfect location to retire and build a villa. That's why I recommended this place when your grandparents said they wanted to move to the countryside."

As Sung Jinah said, Yangpyeong was generally considered a good place for the capital's residents to retire and enjoy a leisurely life surrounded by wilderness. It offered healing and relaxation in nature, yet it wasn't too far from Seoul, making it convenient for their children to visit.

"There's a saying. Sleep in Yangpyeong, but live in Seoul... But after I helped them settle here, I started to worry. There were hardly any big hospitals around!"

Even when enjoying life in a countryside villa surrounded by nature, the most important thing for the elderly was whether there were medical facilities nearby. Realizing this, Sung Jinah made up her mind. She would build a hospital near her parents.

"So only when I opened a hospital here, people started flocking to this area."

"...So, have you made up with Grandpa?"

"We never fought in the first place."

"That's good. You made the right decision. But our dad, I mean your grandpa, has always been cool-headed. You know, when your dad suddenly ran away from home for two years in middle school?"

"...I heard about it from Grandpa." Sung Jinah's words brought back memories of her grandfather talking about it.

– Your dad has always been good at disappearing suddenly. He'll come back this time too, just like before, so don't worry too much.

– That's not comforting at all...!

That was the start of Suho's strained relationship with his grandfather.

"We're here. It's really close to the hospital, right?"

Before they knew it, the rice paddies cultivated by his grandparents stretched out before them. Suho immediately expanded his senses.

CREATORS' THOUGHTS



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Sung Il-Hwan's house was quite modest compared to the other villas in Yangpyeong. A small field and a greenhouse were surrounding it.

"The house is a bit small, isn't it? I suggested building it bigger, but your grandfather insisted that a larger house would only be harder to clean..."

Suho ignored Sung Jinah's words and focused solely on his senses. His expression was serious.

'...There's no presence.' He swept through the greenhouse and fields surrounding the house. But he couldn't detect any humans other than them.

'Beru.'

Fwoosh! At Suho's thought, a shadow quickly separated from his own and started to scan the surroundings.

"Oh my, are they out again?" Sung Jinah tilted her head, puzzled that no one answered the doorbell no matter how many times she pressed it. But they often went out for farming and other errands, so she wasn't too worried. They were also quite healthy for their age.

"Anyway, I've never seen them stay home quietly. I even opened a hospital, but they've never come in sick. Of course, that's a good thing, but..." Sung Jinah chuckled and entered the door code she had memorized for such occasions.

Beep beep beep. Click!

"Suho, go in first and wait..." But as the front door opened and the interior of the house came into view. They stopped, expressions hardening simultaneously.

"What the...?"

Suddenly, their hearts sank. The empty air. The scattered belongings. The house, always neatly organized whenever they visited, now felt unfamiliar.

"M-Mom?" A chill ran down Sung Jinah's spine, and countless ominous thoughts flashed through her mind.

"Mom! Are you home?!" Her face rapidly paled, and she frantically searched every corner of the house for her parents.

On the other hand, Suho's eyes searched for something else. He knew from the beginning that there was no one inside. So what he needed to find was...

'The phone.'

He took out his phone again and called his grandfather. Then, he heard a phone ringing from a corner of the living room. His grandfather's phone, plugged into the charger, was ringing all alone. Sung Jinah turned pale upon seeing this.

"No, where did Dad go, leaving his phone behind?! Th-then, where's Mom's phone?"

This time, they called Suho's grandmother, Park Kyung-Hye. Fortunately or unfortunately, her phone was nowhere to be found in the house.

"It seems Mom took her phone with her? But how urgently did they leave to make the house look like this?" But the anxiety remained.

[Little Monarch! I checked the garage, and the car is still there!] Beru, who had been checking the surroundings, whispered. At his words, Suho immediately went outside to check the garage.

"H-Hey! Where are you going?!"

Sung Jinah followed Suho and widened her eyes upon seeing the truck neatly parked in the garage.

"Why is the car here? They didn't even take the car?!"

Sung Jinah's expression became even more serious. Sung Il-Hwan's house was surrounded by vast fields, making it difficult to go anywhere without a car.

Suho looked down at his feet with a grim expression and said, "Arsha."

[Yes, Suho.] Arsha's reply came immediately from the Shadow Dungeon.

"Are there any of your worker bees in Yangpyeong?"

[This is my first visit to Yangpyeong, so there aren't many. But there are many farms nearby, so I can increase their numbers as much as you want.]

"Start right away."

[Yes, understood.]

Buzz! Suddenly, the sound of bees flapping their wings could be heard from all directions.

Arsha first used a doppelganger to check the picture frames hanging in the house. After carefully examining the faces of Suho's grandfather and grandmother, she dispersed her scouts in all directions. The bees in Yangpyeong began to transform into Arsha's worker bees one by one. But Suho couldn't be relieved just yet. Even if it were just his elderly grandparents suddenly becoming unreachable, it was still a serious situation. But what if the Itarim were involved?

"Come out Gray."

Fwoosh!

A small wolf appeared from Suho's shadow.

"...!" Sung Jinah was momentarily startled but quickly calmed down, remembering that her husband had told her about Suho's awakening. In fact, seeing Gray gave her a good idea.

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"Th-that's right! There's the Hunter Association!"

Fortunately, there was a Hunter Association branch not far from here. And it had recently established a cooperative relationship with Ahjin Hospital, the best hospital in Yangpyeong.

"Suho! I know someone at the Association! I'll ask them for help!"

"Gray, find anything you can. And Rakan, are you listening?" Suho decided to use every means at his disposal.

[King of Beasts and the Monarch of Fangs, is watching you.]

He felt Rakan's gaze and looking in the direction of his presence, Suho spoke. "You understand the situation, right? Can you use your ability to smell mana or something to figure out what happened here?"

It would be much more efficient to directly utilize the Dead Monarch than Gray. A dark smile appeared on Rakan's lips as he realized Suho's intention.

[King of Beasts and the Monarch of Fangs, proposes a deal in exchange for his help.]

"What is it this time?"

As expected, the Dead Monarchs never offered help without conditions.

[King of Beasts and the Monarch of Fangs, explains that he needs a sacrifice to exert his influence.]

That was true. Ordinarily, a Dead Monarch couldn't exert any influence on the real world. But there was one way to make it possible: a 'ritual' where sacrifices were offered and prayers were made. Understanding the situation, Suho nodded in agreement. After all, Rakan's previous request was merely to hand over useless items to Gray.

"Alright. What do you want? We don't have much time, so speak quickly."

[King of Beasts and the Monarch of Fangs, grins, saying it won't be a bad deal for you either.] At that moment, Rakan's presence began to grow stronger.

And then.

"Suho! She's at the Association right now!" His head snapped towards Sung Jinah, who was on the phone with a serious expression.

"What? Grandma is...?"

"Yes! An employee personally drove her there!"

[King of Beasts and the Monarch of Fangs, lets out a soft sigh.] Rakan's growing presence suddenly diminished. But Suho's attention was already far from him.

"Why would Grandma go to the Hunter Association? Then what about Grandpa? Is he there too?"

"No... She went there because of that."

"Huh?" At Suho's question, Sung Jinah answered with a tearful voice.

"It's because my dad... your grandpa..." Suho's expression hardened at Sung Jinah's following words, and he shouted.

"Gray!"

Growl! At the stern command, Gray, who had been sniffing around, puffed up his body.

"Get on!"

Suho had Sung Jinah ride on Gray's back and immediately started running towards the Yangpyeong branch of the Hunter Association where his grandmother was.

* * *

Min Dae-Seok, the branch manager of the Hunter Association's Yangpyeong branch, was a man full of complaints.

'They call it a transfer, but it's practically a demotion!'

Like any other country, the Hunter Association had branches all over Korea. And the work of the Association employees varied greatly depending on the characteristics of their jurisdiction. Of course, the most basic tasks were similar. Maintaining public order while Hunter guilds raided dungeons. And constantly searching the area for any abnormalities, as gates could appear anytime, anywhere. But there was one problem here. What if, no matter how hard they searched, dungeons rarely appeared in their jurisdiction? Would the citizens be happy, feeling safe and secure? There were all sorts of people in the world, and sometimes, there were those who loathed such peace and tranquility.

"Why do I have to waste my youth in this countryside?! Why am I stuck here..."

'...Here we go again.'

'Look away. Don't make eye contact, or he'll pick on you like last time.'

Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok frequently threw tantrums due to the lack of work. His subordinates' way of coping was simply to ignore him as best they could. But the biggest problem that made them sigh was that he wasn't complaining because there was actually no work.

– No work, my foot...

– We keep getting complaints.

– It's because he pushes all the minor incidents to the police station, saying they're not our jurisdiction.

The employees, well aware of Branch Manager's usual work style, could only sigh quietly. But then again, it wasn't entirely fair to blame Min Dae-Seok. The Hunter Association had only been around for two years. The distinction between the police's duties and the Association's duties in handling incidents was still blurry. It was a matter of interpretation. But even when dealing with such a superior, someone had to eventually gather their courage.

"E-Excuse me, Branch Manager... Ms. Park Kyung-Hye is waiting outside."

"What? Why is that old lady here again?! Tell her to go to the police station!" Min Dae-Seok, who had been yawning lazily, glared at the news. The employee, expecting this reaction, stammered,

"N-no. We brought her here this time. We investigated, and it seems Sung Il-Hwan is indeed missing..."

"That's all the more reason she should go to the police station!"

"..."

"Sigh. Alright, alright. So, when and where did the old man disappear?" The employee couldn't help but sigh inwardly at Min Dae-Seok's words.

'If we knew that, it wouldn't be a missing person case.'

"If we knew that, it wouldn't be a missing person case."

'...Huh?' The employee was startled by the sudden cold voice, wondering if they had accidentally spoken their thoughts out loud. But thankfully, it wasn't them.

Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!

"...!"

"...?!"

Suddenly, an overwhelming presence pressed down on the air from behind the employee. There stood Suho, radiating a chilling aura that shook the entire Association building.

[Skill: 'Bloodlust' activated.]

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Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok, directly exposed to the terrifying Bloodlust, turned pale and shouted,

"Wh-who, gah...?!" At that moment, his body stiffened and began to float in mid-air. Suho walked towards him with a chilling expression and checked the name tag hanging around his neck. He also found the other 'necklace' he was wearing.

"A branch manager, huh..."

Shiver

Why did that simple phrase send chills down their spines? The sudden and terrifying scene made the Association employees simultaneously draw upon their mana.

'A-a villain!'

"...A villain has invaded!"

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Crack! Shatter!

As if an earthquake had struck, all the surrounding windows and fluorescent lights exploded simultaneously.

Rumble rumble rumble...!

The scene was pure chaos. The overwhelming pressure, threatening to crush the building at any moment, made it difficult for the Hunter Association staff to even breathe properly.

"...Attack!" A few Hunters who managed to withstand the Bloodlust hesitantly drew their weapons and charged at Suho.

But. Thud.

Growl! A giant wolf suddenly appeared, blocking their path and roaring fiercely.

"Grrrr!"

[Gray uses Skill: 'Contempt for the Weak'.]

[Effect: 'Fear' activated.]

[All stats of the targets are reduced by 50% for 1 minute.]

The Hunters were terrified by the appearance of the giant wolf filling the room. And they realized. With this level of force... It was definitely a deliberate attack! A meticulously planned terrorist attack targeting the Association! The shocking reality only added to their confusion.

'No, what kind of crazy villain would attack the Hunter Association?! Even the infamous Hwang Dongsoo wouldn't do something this insane!'

'What do they want?'

'Why?'

'Why?!'

They didn't know. They had absolutely no idea! No one could think rationally in this situation. Only some were able to desperately suppress their rising fear and blindly charge towards the villain.

Bang!

"Cough!" But as soon as they charged, they were struck by the giant wolf's front paw and flung backward. The sight of their colleagues helplessly crashing into the wall completely demoralized the rest of Association's staff.

'We're going to die.' They sensed it. Inescapable death had arrived before them.

"Kaaagh!" At that moment, Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok, who was floating in front of Suho, mustered all his mana in a desperate attempt to resist the overwhelming Bloodlust pressing down on him. He gritted his teeth, his body trembling, and glared.

"You... You think you can get away with this... Uhhh?!"

Suddenly, as Suho reached out his hand, Min Dae-Seok's body flew towards him, seeming to be sucked in. While the deadly grip approached, as if to crush his neck, the Branch Manager finally closed his eyes tightly.

Snap! But what Suho's hand tore off wasn't a part of his throat, but the necklace hanging around it.

"I'll ask you a question." Min Dae-Seok shuddered in fear as the demonic voice pierced his ears. And the fierce gaze was now forever imprinted in his memory.

"You answer." Suho held up the necklace he had taken from him and asked,

"Where did you get this Stardust necklace?"

'A Stardust necklace. Why would a human, the branch manager of the Association, have an item that was highly likely to be related to the Itarim?' All sorts of imaginations ran wild in Suho's mind.

'What was the relationship between the Foreign Religion and the Association? And did Chairman Woo Jinchul, who was once a colleague of his father, know about this?'

But then. At Suho's question, Min Dae-Seok closed his eyes tightly and shouted.

"...I-I bought it!"

"Bought it?" Suho tilted his head. Min Dae-Seok, startled by his terrifying appearance, hurriedly corrected himself.

"I-I'm sorry! Actually, I received it for free!"

"For free?"

"I'm truly sorry! I insisted on paying, but the president forced it into my hands...!"

He went even further, his cowardly gaze shifting to his subordinates scattered around.

"And I wasn't the only one! All the other employees too...!"

"...!"

'That rat! How dare he, a supposed superior, drag his subordinates into this!' Min Dae-Seok's sudden revelation caused his subordinates' expressions to change drastically. They hurriedly covered or tore off the Stardust necklaces they were wearing.

But Suho's face, upon seeing this...

The stoic expression he had maintained until now cracked slightly.

He asked again. "Which president are you talking about?"

"...Huh?" Sensing the strange atmosphere, Min Dae-Seok cautiously gauged Suho's reaction with a servile expression and asked,

"Are you perhaps... from the Merchants Association?"

"..."

"We received the Stardust necklaces as a sponsorship from there..."

"...Phew."

Flinch, Min Dae-Seok trembled even at that small sigh. Then, at Suho's hand downwards motion, his body floated in the air again and was unceremoniously dropped onto a nearby chair.

"...?"

Roll. The chair's wheels turned on their own, and Min Dae-Seok, still in a seated position, returned to his original spot.

"...?"

"...?"

Puzzled expressions appeared on the faces of the Association employees who witnessed this. A suffocating silence. In an atmosphere so tense that they could barely breathe, all eyes instinctively followed the intruder's every move. In the midst of it all, Suho slowly walked towards Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok's desk and plopped down on the chair opposite him. Then, looking at the trembling man, he boldly stated his purpose for coming here.

"Are you the branch manager? I'm here to file a complaint."

"...What?" At that moment, everyone's breath was simultaneously released as if by magic. All the bloodlust that had been pressing down on the area vanished without a trace. But Min Dae-Seok could only wear a bewildered expression.

"A-a complaint...? What do you mean all of a sudden..."

"It seems my grandfather has gone missing. Do you know anything about it?"

"...?" Finally, Min Dae-Seok's frozen mind started to work again. And as he recalled the situation before this crazy villain appeared, he came to an even crazier conclusion.

"Excuse me, are you perhaps... Mr. Sung Il-Hwan's grandson?"

"Yes. I'm Sung Suho, the president of the Woojin Guild."

"Then you're not a villain...?"

"A villain? I'm a villain hunter a officially certified by the Association."

"...What?"

Suho confidently presented his business card along with his villain hunter license.

Woof! The giant wolf's body shrank as if by magic, and it sat down proudly at Suho's feet, its nose held high. Min Dae-Seok's mind was in turmoil as he witnessed the whole scene. Everyone, including the employees sitting around with dumbfounded expressions.

'So, in other words.'

'To sum it up...'

'He caused all this ruckus just to file a complaint?!'

Of course, no one was brave enough to utter such thoughts out loud. But noticing the gazes focused on him, Suho apologized with a serious expression.

"I'm sorry. I tend to get a bit sensitive when it comes to the disappearances of my family."

"Oh, no. It's alright. Anyone would be like that if their loved ones went missing..." Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok's voice trailed off as he waved his hands in a flustered manner. The Association's office was a complete mess. All the windows were shattered, and the fluorescent lights dangled from the ceiling, flickering ominously. It was hard to empathize with Suho's apology when the scene behind him was so disastrous.

'...And he claims he's not a villain after causing all this?'

Realizing that the other party wasn't a villain, Min Dae-Seok felt a surge of anger rising within him. Now that the situation had calmed down, he was suddenly embarrassed by his pathetic display in front of his subordinates.

'Alright. I understand you're a Hunter with great power. But Korea is a country ruled by law! How dare a young whippersnapper like you cause such a scene just because you

are powerful? Do you think you can mess with the Association?!' Min Dae-Seok clenched his fists and glared at Suho.

'President of the Woojin Guild, my foot! I'll make sure you're labeled a villain!' As a branch manager of the Association, he had enough authority to make that happen...!

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But as his eyes met Suho's, Min Dae-Seok's stubborn expression softened in an instant.

"...Ahem. I expect you to compensate for the damaged equipment."

"Of course."

"Thank you."

* * *

When Park Kyung-Hye, and Sung Jinah entered the Association office, the chaotic scene had already been cleaned up. A few fluorescent lights were still broken, but under them, Suho was listening to his grandmother and aunt explaining what had happened.

"Um... first I want to apologize. The reason we rejected Ms. Park Kyung-Hye's complaint for the past few days was because we judged that Mr. Sung Il-Hwan wasn't missing." Min Dae-Seok explained to Suho in a defensive tone. Based on the information his subordinates had gathered...

"We heard that your grandfather, Mr. Sung Il-Hwan, enjoys fishing as a hobby. And he prefers doing it alone, sometimes going for two or three days at a time."

"That's true." Park Kyung-Hye nodded readily. Yangpyeong, where the Namhan River and Bukhan River split, had many secluded fishing spots. Thanks to that, Sung Il-Hwan could easily indulge in his hobby after moving to Yangpyeong.

"...But this time, something felt different."

"What was different?"

"His expression."

"...Ms. Park Kyung-Hye, such abstract observations don't help the investigation at all." Dealing with the elderly was always frustrating. Min Dae-Seok sighed inwardly. But seeing Suho sitting right next to him, he couldn't help but manage his emotions.

"So, what kind of expression did your husband have?"

"My husband... has only had that expression three times in his life."

"When was that?"

"The first time was when our son ran away from home."

Suho stiffened at those words.

"When he was in middle school, he suddenly left a note saying he had something to do and ran away. For two whole years." Park Kyung-Hye said, recalling the past with a bitter expression.

"I was so shocked that I was about to rush to the police station, but my husband stopped me."

Park Kyung-Hye still couldn't understand her husband's lack of panic even though their son was missing. At first, she was angry, then frustrated. What parent could remain calm when their child suddenly runs away? Unlike his wife, Sung Il-Hwan was incredibly composed. But it was hard for Park Kyung-Hye to blame her husband for being cold-hearted because his expression at the time seemed like he was desperately holding back his emotions, on the verge of bursting into tears. In the end, she went to the police station and filed a missing person report. But even then, Sung Il-Hwan didn't make any effort to find his son.

"...He even stopped me from going out and putting up missing person flyers. Saying..."

– Let's trust our son.

...Recalling her husband's expression as he said those words, Park Kyung-Hye continued.

"Eventually, our son returned home safely two years later. And then, as an adult, he disappeared again five years ago. This time, alongside his wife"

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"..."

"And my husband calmed me down with the same expression again. He said we should trust our son this time too." Park Kyung-Hye's words continued.

"When he left a few days ago, he had that same expression again."

Hearing those words Suho was almost certain.

'Beru, maybe Grandpa...'

[Yes. It seems his memories have returned a long time ago.]

CREATORS' THOUGHTS



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When exactly did Sung Il-Hwan regain his memories from the past life? Beru didn't know for sure. But one thing was certain.

[The memories of a Monarch transcend time.]

Suho understood what Beru was trying to say.

'The Cup of Reincarnation'

[The divine tool that turns back time, the Cup of Reincarnation, has no effect on the consciousness of higher beings like Rulers or Monarchs.]

Beru recalled an old memory. A few decades ago. A time when all wars had ended and peace had come to Earth. The moment when Woo Jinchul, who had been living as an ordinary policeman not having any memories from his past life, suddenly regained all of them. In retrospect, the trigger was simple. Reuniting with Sung Jinwoo. That was all. But in reality, it was anything but ordinary. Who was Sung Jinwoo? The Shadow Monarch, the King who ruled over death, who had killed all other Monarchs and brought the entire dimension to its knees. What significance could an event directly involving such a great and noble higher being have on a person's life? Could such an event be dismissed as ordinary?

[...Moreover, Sung Il-Hwan is the father who lived with the Monarch for half his life and even experienced receiving the Ruler's power directly into his body.]

In other words, a son with the power of a Monarch and a father who had the power of a Ruler. The two had lived together under one roof for decades. Yoo Jinho had regained all his memories just by touching the key to the Shadow Dungeon, so what about Sung Il-Hwan?

"...So, you're saying that as long as something triggers him, it wouldn't be strange if his memories returned at any moment." Suho nodded in agreement with Beru's words. In

any case, the conclusion was that his grandfather had disappeared somewhere with his memories from his past life...

'Then where did he go? And for what purpose?' Many questions floated in Suho's mind. But he decided to focus on the most important part for now.

'The Itarim.'

'To what extent were they involved in his grandfather's disappearance? And was he safe?'

'Let's focus on that.'

His grandfather might be in a similar situation to his mother, so finding him as soon as possible was the top priority, no matter what.

Suho asked Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok, who was talking with Park Kyung-Hye and Sung Jinah. "So, who was the last person to see my grandfather?"

Suho's grandmother had rushed here after receiving a call from an Association's employee today. Until then, the Association had been dismissing Sung Il-Hwan's disappearance, but today they finally confirmed that he was indeed missing.

"Um... We're not entirely sure yet." It was a new female employee who had personally brought Park Kyung-Hye here that answered Suho's question.

She glanced at Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok and then spoke. "Someone said they saw Mr. Sung Il-Hwan walking in a direction other than the fishing spot."

"Another place? Where is it?"

"Near the Merchants Association..."

"What?!" At those words, Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok looked visibly flustered and turned to the female employee. Then, he quietly scolded her in a low voice.

"Why is the Merchants Association coming up here? Are you sure about what you're saying? Can you take responsibility for those words?"

"N-no! I just heard that someone saw him walking in that direction! You know, Branch Manager, people don't fish there these days."

"Of course. That place is... ahem." Feeling the gazes of Suho's family, Min Dae-Seok coughed and closed his mouth. But it was too late to take back what had already been said.

"The Merchants Association..."

Shiver. Min Dae-Seok gulped. As he slowly turned his head and saw that Suho's aura was becoming increasingly murderous, just like when he first barged in. He fiddled with the Stardust necklace he had snatched from Min Dae-Seok's neck and asked,

"I think you said you received this necklace from the Merchants Association." His words were becoming shorter again.

'Does he have anger issues or something...?' Min Dae-Seok felt like crying at the volatile atmosphere Suho was once again emitting, looking ready to erupt at any moment.

"Answer."

"Y-yes! The Merchants Association is just a group formed by the merchants in Yangpyeong. It's like any other local association!"

"And...?"

"Actually, there's a separate Yangpyeong Merchants Association! The Merchants Association we're talking about is more like a private group of Hunters active in Yangpyeong! They're the ones making and distributing the Stardust necklaces!" Min Dae-Seok reflexively spilled all the information.

Suho felt a strange sensation at his words.

"Why would Hunters create a Merchants Association instead of a guild? For what reason?"

No one here would be unaware that it was much more profitable to enter a dungeon once than to waste time on such useless endeavors. Of course, there were cases where guilds engaged in business, but that was merely a supplementary activity.

"Th-that's..." Under Suho's cold gaze, Min Dae-Seok fidgeted, not knowing what to do. Then, he noticed the other employees avoiding his gaze and the Stardust necklaces hanging around their necks...

'There's something going on.' Suho intuitively realized.

Crack! The corner of Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok's desk, gripped in Suho's hand, crumbled loudly.

Beru whispered in Suho's ear like a devil. [Should I just kill him? I'll eat his brain and read his memories.]

Did he hear the whisper? Or did Beru's 'sincerity' get through to him? The moment his desk was shattered, Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok flinched and finally spoke.

"I-it's the black market! ...Hic." He blurted out and quickly covered his mouth.

"...The black market?"

1

As Suho's gaze grew even colder, Min Dae-Seok's face turned pale, and he hurriedly started making excuses. "Th-that is... To be clear, I have nothing to do with it. I only heard they were preparing it, so I don't know the details..."

"What is this black market you're talking about?" Sung Jinah, who had been listening to the conversation, asked, and Min Dae-Seok sighed deeply and explained.

"Well... Non-awakened people wouldn't know. It is a direct transaction marketplace used only by Hunters."

"A market?"

"Yes. To be precise, it's a place where transactions or auctions are held for tax evasion."

Tax evasion. Sung Jinah immediately understood. Even Hunters with superhuman abilities feared taxes. Especially for Hunters classified as high-income earners, the tax rate was a whopping 50 percent. Half of the money they earned risking their lives fighting magic beasts was taken away by the government. Of course it was used to rebuild the cities destroyed by dungeon breaks and to help the citizens affected by them. And the organization responsible for managing and supervising the proper use of those taxes was the Hunter Association.

3

"...But the Association is turning a blind eye to a black market used for tax evasion?"

"N-no! It was already going on before I came here, and I opposed it at first...!"

Crumble! At that moment, Min Dae-Seok's desk started being crushed like tofu. Slowly... Very, very slowly disintegrating right in front of him.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

"Gasp..." Witnessing the scene, the branch manager held his breath, feeling like he would soon meet the same fate. And he wasn't the only one feeling that way.

Suho stood up and swept his cold gaze across all the Association employees in the office. Those wearing Stardust necklaces, just like Min Dae-Seok, trembled with pale faces. Chairman Woo Jinchul would deal with the legal issues concerning them later. So Suho asked,

"Where is this Merchants Association?"

* * *

Yangpyeong was vast, almost as big as Jeju Island. However, unlike it, Yangpyeong had many development restrictions, such as water source protection zones and natural conservation areas. It was surrounded by mountains, forests, and valleys, with countless fishing spots. But the terrain was also quite jagged, making it a region where missing persons cases like Sung Il-Hwan's frequently occurred.

"...The fog is thick."

[Yangpyeong is a humid area. It's because of the many dams.] Que appeared and started sharing what he knew in response to Suho's mumbling.

[Little Monarch, I understand now.] Beru finally realized what the suspicion he had when he first set foot in Yangpyeong was about.

[It seems the Blue Mist is mixed within this fog.]

"So there is a dungeon hidden in here too?"

[Yes. Perhaps the Association didn't notice it because the Blue Mist hasn't seeped outside the fog.]

Que, a former villain and vice president of the Reaper Guild, recognized the value of this place at a glance. [If I knew about a place like this, I would have wanted to create a black market here too.]

A place where even the existence of a gate could be concealed. It meant that anything could be hidden there.

"Que, do me a favor and hit your head"

[Yes Master.]

Thud.

As expected of a former villain, Que deeply empathized with the criminals' mindset.

"I'm starting to get the picture."

Suho stopped walking. The mana of the gate, faintly felt within the fog, was starting to grow stronger.

"It seems like this entire area is a field-type dungeon."

Esil, walking beside him, also scanned the surroundings with her eyes gleaming. And she finally found something.

"There is a totem of the demon race here."

"Do you know what purpose it serves?"

"It's like a detection system that alerts them when beings other than demons approach."

"Beings other than demons?" Suho smiled faintly at those words.

"Then I just need to become a demon."

Suho took out the Item: 'Crow Mask' from his inventory and concealed his face. As it was something worn by the demons working in the Stardust factory. But of course, this alone wasn't enough to fool the barrier.

"Esil."

"Got it."

[Item: 'Vulcan's Horn' equipped.]

They were in perfect sync now. Esil immediately turned into spirit form and attached Vulcan's Horn to Suho's head. A crow mask and demon horns. Suho's appearance was now undeniably demonic.

[This should be enough...]

Listening to Esil's whisper, Suho confidently passed through the barrier. At that moment, his vision changed, and the black market the branch manager had mentioned unfolded before his eyes.

CREATORS' THOUGHTS



Craftyprogamer

Solo Leveling: Ragnarok [FAN TL] Chapter 185 - Chapter 184

Chapter 185: Chapter 184

A picturesque landscape. That was Suho's first impression of the path leading to the black market. A deep valley in the mountains, shrouded in thick fog. As he followed the winding trail upwards, a massive structure gradually revealed its outline before Suho, and finally its true form emerged.

'A temple.'

There was no other way to describe it. The towering ceiling. The rough yet intricately decorated stone pillars. The massive bronze door standing at its center. The overwhelming sacred atmosphere instinctively made him realize that this place, regardless of who it was for, was a 'temple.'

Flinch. Suddenly, Beru's eyes sharpened, focusing on the front.

[Little Monarch, I sense many presences deep within that building.]

"Humans? Or magical beasts?" At Suho's question, Beru twitched his antennae and answered confidently.

[Humans with mana. Most of them seem to be Hunters.]

"Demons?"

[I sense some demons too, but not many. And there's no one right beyond the door.]

"Just as the branch manager said."

Suho nodded and cautiously walked towards the temple. He raised his head and looked up at the massive, tightly closed entrance. It was a heavy gate that ordinary people would never be able to open. Of course, with Suho's monstrous Strength stat, he could not only open it but also smash it to pieces in one blow.

'But that would defeat the purpose of sneaking in.'

It wasn't a good idea to cause a commotion when he didn't even know if his grandfather was inside this building. Besides, Suho already knew how to open this door.

Click.

He took out the 'Stardust Necklace' he had taken from Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok out of his pocket. And he put it around his neck, reached out, gently pushing the tightly closed gate.

Creak

Surprisingly, the heavy door began to slide open with ease revealing the spacious interior. It was damp with moss growing here and there on the floor, walls, and ceiling. Suho stepped onto the corridor, following the torches hanging on the walls, and let out a hollow laugh.

"It was true. To think the real purpose of the Stardust necklace was a pass to the black market."

Currently, the public believed that the Stardust necklaces were created for commemorative purposes. It was a meaningful and noble cause to 'honor the souls of the victims who died to become Stardust ingredients.' Moreover, most of the proceeds from the Stardust necklaces were actually being used for the Bereaved families, so no one doubted the intentions.

'...But it was all a smokescreen.'

According to Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok, only a small number of Hunters realized the truth. In the first place, the black market hadn't been around for long, so very few people even knew of its existence. But it was only a matter of time.

[Even if you share information about the black market with a few trusted people, they'll still spread it by word of mouth.]

Once more people learned about the black market, Hunters would naturally seek out the Stardust necklaces.

Quay poked his head out, looking intrigued. The more he learned about the black market, the more fascinating it became. [It's like a method you'd see in a multi-level marketing pyramid scheme.]

Ponzi schemes, commonly known as pyramid schemes, often used this method to increase the number of their victims. They started with only a few people and then lured others in, pretending to introduce them to something good. Some of them were even suspiciously religious. However as long as there was no direct harm to him, Suho didn't really care about such things. But what if that religion was the Outer Gods' cult?

'Anyway, one thing is clear.' If this was truly a temple of the Outer Gods, it seemed the Apostles of Itarim had already perfectly adapted to Earth.

After walking along the corridor for a while, a vast dome-shaped space opened up before Suho. It seemed even bigger than several Olympic stadiums combined. However he couldn't help but be surprised by the sight that unfolded within. He had expected a dark and secretive place, befitting a black market, but it was surprisingly bright and lively.

– 200 kilos of magic stones! Negotiable!

– We have all kinds of dungeon ores except for the ones we don't have!

2

– Magical beast carcasses on sale today! Discounted price for the last person!

– Massive sale! The owner has gone crazy!

– Payment with magic stones is also possible for those without cash!

– Hey! Are you new here? What idiot uses a credit card in the black market?!

It felt like he was at an expo. The vast space was filled with countless mats and booths. And numerous merchants occupied each spot, passionately hawking their wares and engaging in transactions. Suho couldn't help but chuckle at the sight.

"...It's like a bazaar."

They said it was a black market created for tax evasion, yet it felt more like a secondhand items exchange. But there was also an unexpected sight.

[Little Monarch, it seems there's even a blacksmith who refines ores and makes weapons here.]

"Indeed. And most of the blacksmiths are demons."

Surprisingly, humans and demons coexisted naturally in this place. While the people who came and went, engaging in bartering, were mostly Hunters, those who had settled here and were making and selling goods were demons wearing crow masks. In other words, they were the organizers. The staff.

'A market where humans and demons coexist. It's truly bizarre.'

1

[Master, I see an auction house and a gambling den over there.]

'Hmm?' Looking in the direction Quay pointed, Suho finally started to see the true nature of the black market.

"Just one more time! Lend me some more money! I'll pay you back when I win!"

Hunters who seemed to have lost all their possessions at the gambling den were desperately begging. When they finally started emitting mana from their bodies, the crow-masked demons guarding the gambling den stepped in and grabbed their shoulders.

"Calm down, members. You can't do this here."

"Don't make us resort to expulsion."

"J-just one more time! Please, just lend me one more time!"

"...Sigh. There's no helping it. If you insist, why don't you participate in a few rounds yourself?"

"Wh-what?"

"Don't worry. I'll make sure you're matched with someone of your level."

The gamblers' eyes wavered at the demons' suggestion. They still couldn't take their eyes off the gambling den, filled with lingering regret. And in the end, they made a decision they shouldn't have.

"You'll really match me with someone of my level, right?"

"Of course. You know, right? The underground arena is all about bare-knuckle fighting, no items allowed. What's there to worry about for a strong person like you?"

"...Th-then, can I get an advance payment?" The moment those words left their mouths, Suho saw it. The demons' grins stretching wide behind their crow masks. They smiled brightly and shook hands with the suckers, or rather, the Hunters.

"Of course. Let's discuss the contract details over there."

Suho silently watched the gamblers following the demons in a line.

'An underground fighting ring. It's literally a contract with the devil.'

[Little Monarch, you understand, right? Gambling is the path to ruin. Huh? Where are you going?]

2

"They said it's an underground fighting ring. It's okay to just watch, right?"

As Suho walked towards the gambling den, the demon guards at the entrance bowed politely and spoke to him.

"You seem new here. Are you visiting from another factory?" Their eyes glanced up at the pair of horns on Suho's head, and a hint of wariness could be felt in their gaze.

[Answer them informally. They're being cautious because of Vulcan's Horn, thinking you're a higher-ranking demon.] Suho nodded briefly at Esil's timely advice and opened his mouth.

"I heard the rumors and dropped by. Any problem with that?"

As he subtly showed the Stardust necklace hanging around his neck, the demon guards quickly stepped back and replied in a rather friendly manner.

"Oh, no problem at all. We always welcome new factories. If you need any guidance, would you like us to assist you?"

'Interesting.' Suho felt like the demons were salespeople eager to land a new client. And they didn't seem to be hiding their intentions at all.

"But... if you don't mind, could you tell us how much Stardust you have?" As they asked, their snake-like gazes scanned Suho, who had come empty-handed.

"As you know, there are many factories that have gone bankrupt these days."

"..." While Suho was choosing his words, Esil whispered in a displeased tone.

[Honestly. How dare these lowly beings speak like that to a demon with horns?]

'Hey, why are you getting angry? I'm not even a real demon.'

It seemed this place operated outside of the demon hierarchy. So when Suho remained silent for a moment, the guards dared to smirk, as if they had expected this.

"Ah, I see. So that's how it is. I knew it from the moment you came empty-handed. These days, many penniless demons come to us, wanting to join our side... Hmm?"

At that moment a bundle of Stardust suddenly appeared in Suho's hand, which had been empty just a moment ago.

"...!" The guards' eyes widened in surprise.

No, it wasn't just one bundle. Two bundles. Three bundles. Four bundles. Suho had been storing all the Stardust he had acquired from raiding the demon factories in his inventory. He took out a bunch and showed it to the demons, a sly smile appearing on his lips.

"Do I need more?"

"Th-that's enough."

"Th-this way, please! We'll guide you to the VIP room!"

"Lead the way."

"Yes!"

The demon guards immediately lowered their stance and guided Suho to the gambling den. He followed them, his eyes gleaming sharply.

'A VIP room... Demons are living quite human-like lives.'

CREATORS' THOUGHTS



Craftyprogamer

Solo Leveling: Ragnarok [FAN TL] Chapter 186 - Chapter 185

Chapter 186: Chapter 185

Suho, guided by the demons, entered the black market's gambling den. As he had heard outside, the gambling here wasn't about playing cards or poker.

"Kaaagh!"

"Die! Die!"

In the vast underground fighting ring, filled with the stench of blood and sweat, two Hunters, stripped of all their equipment, were engaged in a fierce battle. Their eyes filled with venom, their expressions twisted in rage, it was obvious what was happening.

"Hehe. Doesn't it look exciting? They're all humans fighting to pay off their gambling debts."

At the words of the demon guard who was guiding Suho, Esil's cynical voice could be heard. [Tsk. Low-rank demons...]

Now that the nobles, who held absolute authority, were gone, it seemed the low-rank demons scattered around were all eager to imitate them.

'At least the ones in the Demon Realm made demons fight each other. Here, they're making humans fight and just watching.' A cold glint flashed in Suho's eyes for a moment. He was well aware of the Colosseum duels, a cultural practice of the demon nobles. He had even participated as a demon gladiator himself. But somehow, he found

himself in the opposite position this time... A short while later, they arrived at a terrace-like area overlooking the underground fighting ring.

"This is the VIP room. Humans can't enter this space, so you can watch comfortably. If you want to participate in the games, feel free to call us anytime."

"I will."

Suho sat on the plush sofa and leisurely looked around. A few demons were already in the VIP room, watching the underground fights. They all looked similar, with crow masks concealing their faces and Stardust necklaces around their necks. But from the moment he entered the luxurious lounge, their attention shifted from the underground fights to him.

"Ooh. A new face."

"A new guest?"

"Those horns are truly... magnificent."

Horns. Their interest was solely focused on the Vulcan's Horns protruding from Suho's head. Curious gazes. Servile gazes mixed with fear. And even gazes filled with awe beyond fear. Their complex emotions towards Suho were blatantly evident from behind their crow masks. But no one dared to approach and speak to him first.

[That's a natural reaction.] Esil explained.

[The Vulcan's Horns you have now are completely different from when you were a gladiator.]

Originally, Vulcan was so incompetent that he couldn't produce Bloodstone, the exclusive food of the demon nobles. Therefore, he was the demon who had devoured the most of his own kind, more than any other noble. He was so obsessed with devouring the souls of others that he couldn't control himself even after being reduced to just horns. So, although Suho, a human, couldn't see it, the other demons could. The sinister and greedy aura emanating from Vulcan's Horns, which had feasted on the souls of countless demons.

'...Horrrifying.'

'Just how many of his own kind did he have to devour to emit such a presence?'

'Surely he didn't eat all the demons in his own factory, did he?'

Even though they didn't say it out loud, the thoughts of the demons in the VIP room upon seeing Suho were mostly similar. But then...

"Tsk." Suho suddenly clicked his tongue, snapping them out of their trance.

"The spectacle is down there."

Flinch. The demons, startled by his words, quickly averted their gazes from Suho with embarrassed expressions. But not everyone...

"Oh, I apologize if I offended you. Everyone was just excited. You see, this place is also for making new friends." A demon suddenly approached Suho and spoke to him in a friendly manner. He looked similar to the others, but upon closer inspection, there was one difference.

'He doesn't have a necklace.'

[Could he be the organizer of this place?] Suho and Esil quickly exchanged thoughts.

Meanwhile, the demon who had approached him smiled awkwardly and spoke again. "Haha, you're a man of few words. Then allow me to introduce myself first. I'm Lotto, the one in charge of running this gambling den."

[That's not a demonic name. Either he doesn't have a name, or it's a made-up alias.] Listening to Esil's explanation, Suho pondered for a moment.

'Hmm. What should I do?'

This demon named Lotto was directly asking for his identity. But since the other party was also using an alias, he could just give any random name. That however wouldn't get him anywhere. If he kept avoiding the question, he would only waste time.

"My name is." Finally, Suho opened his mouth.

"Vulcan."

"...!" At that moment, all the demons in the VIP room widened their eyes and stared at Suho in shock.

[S-Suho?] Even Esil called out to him in a clearly flustered voice.

"...It seems you've chosen a rather dangerous alias."

"An alias, you say..." Suho grinned, as if he had just heard something amusing, and looked directly into Lotto's eyes. Whose expression, friendly until now, stiffened.

Suho chuckled and countered with a question. "Why would I need to use an alias?"

"...It's said that there are no demon nobles left in this world."

"That may be true for others."

"Are you saying that you, Vulcan... are...?" Lotto's eyes grew colder as he exchanged brief words with Suho. Similarly, an immense bloodlust from the other demons also focused on him.

But Suho had faced too many powerful opponents to be intimidated by such trivial aura. Instead, he crossed his legs in a more relaxed posture and leaned back on the sofa. Then, he casually raised a hand towards the demon guard standing nearby and called out to the 'real' demon noble inwardly.

'Esil, can you make a Bloodstone?'

[I don't know what you're thinking, but Vulcan... Alright, I understand.] She readily complied with his request, even not fully understanding his intentions. After all, if things went south, they could always smash everything and run or fight their way out.

"...Gasp?!"

Suddenly, following Suho's touch, black blood started to be forcibly extracted from the demon guard's body. Everyone who witnessed this scene couldn't help but stand up in shock. The freshly extracted blood began to gather and solidify into a black Bloodstone on Suho's hand.

"B-Bloodstone?!"

"It's a Bloodstone!"

"Oh my god! Is he a real demon noble?!"

At that moment, Suho unleashed his own bloodlust with perfect timing.

[Skill: 'Bloodlust' activated.]

"...!"

"...!"

As Suho's intimidating aura filled the entire gambling den, beyond just the VIP room, the demons instinctively crouched down or retreated. The Bloodstone that appeared before their eyes and the overwhelming bloodlust that far surpassed their own. The combination of these two made even Lotto, who had confidently approached Suho, turn pale.

"Th-this can't be..."

"Could he be the real Vulcan...?"

"But he looks different..."

"Possessing a human..."

'Hmm. Good reactions.' Suho and Esil conversed inwardly, listening to the hushed murmurs from all around.

[What are you really up to...?]

'What do you mean? I'm just showing off what a real noble is in front of those who are merely playing the noble game.'

[You know, Vulcan couldn't create Bloodstone. They'll know that too.]

'Exactly. That's why it's meaningful.' Suho smiled faintly and withdrew the bloodlust he had emitted. Then, he turned his gaze back to Lotto and asked,

"How about it? Is this convincing enough?" At the question, Lotto erased the bewildered expression from his face and tried to answer Suho's question calmly.

"I'm truly surprised. A real Bloodstone."

His gaze was still fixated on the Bloodstone in Suho's hand. He couldn't believe it even as he saw it. But no matter how he looked at it, it was the 'real thing.' That's why he was even more confused.

"But... as far as I know, Lord Vulcan couldn't create Bloodstone."

"That was true. But once I mastered it, it was no longer that difficult."

"...Not difficult?" Lotto's eyes widened in surprise. At that moment, an immense greed spread across the eyes of all the demons in the room. Suho's words were enough to ignite the demons' desires.

What was the reason the demons developed Stardust in the first place? It was because they wanted to imitate the Bloodstone, the unique power of the nobles. The Bloodstone was the true proof of nobility, a testament to their existence. Only by being able to create Bloodstones could demons efficiently grow their power and become nobles. And furthermore, only by becoming a true noble could they qualify to succeed the deceased King of Demons, the White Flame Monarch Baran. But to be able to create Bloodstone? And that too, by 'Vulcan,' who had been mocked by his fellow nobles for being unable to do so for countless years? At this point, whether Suho was the real Vulcan or not didn't matter to the demons here.

"Did you perhaps awaken the ability to create Bloodstones on your own?"

"Why? Do you want to learn?"

"...!" Lotto's eyes bulged as if they were about to pop out. Now, the demons' expressions changed with every word that came out of Suho's mouth.

Seeing their reactions, Esil muttered in disgust. [You really are...]

But everyone... No, even demons... When someone appears who tells them what they want to hear, they want to believe it.

Lotto stammered and asked Suho, "C-can we learn it?"

[No, no. You can't. Absolutely not. Bloodstones are...]

"It's not impossible to learn."

[You scammer.] Ignoring Esil's words, Suho spoke to Lotto in a serious and sincere voice, maintaining his composure.

1

"But."

'But?'

'But what?'

At first, it was caution. Then shock and fear. Now, the demons were hanging onto his every word... Suho, thoroughly enjoying the demons' excessive attention, leaned back on the sofa leisurely and said,

"Isn't this a gambling den? If we're here to gamble, let's gamble."

"W-wait a minute. Lord Vulcan...!"

"Gambling isn't important right now...!"

Crack! Suho crushed the Bloodstone he was holding with his fingers.

5

'Ah...' The demons stared longingly at it crumbling into dust and scattering from Suho's hand.



Craftyprogamer

Solo Leveling: Ragnarok [FAN TL] Chapter 187 - Chapter 186

Chapter 187: Chapter 186

"..."

"..."

A strange atmosphere hung over the black market's gambling den. The excitement about humans fighting each other and placing bets was gone. The demons in the VIP room, no longer interested in the matches, were solely focused on the sudden appearance of the demon noble, 'Vulcan'.

'Oh my god. Vulcan is alive.'

'A real demon noble...'

'If only I could learn how to make Bloodstone, I could become a demon noble too...'

Countless gazes glanced at 'Vulcan'. The pure desire evident within them. The primal and blatant need to pursue power was akin to hunger for demons. But amidst this tense atmosphere, Suho himself remained relaxed, merely watching the underground fights. He looked like a lion lying in the middle of the jungle, basking in the sun. The dignified appearance of a true demon noble. At least, that's how he appeared to the other demons.

[Are you sure this is okay?]

'What is?'

[I'm asking if it's necessary to take such a risk.] Esil had been worried sick since earlier.

[Don't forget. The reason our family was annihilated was entirely due to the rebellion of the low-rank demons. They might be momentarily swayed by the sight of the Bloodstone, but they could turn on you and attack at any moment.]

'Yeah, that's exactly it. I've been curious about this for a while...' Suho continued to watch the underground fights with a leisurely gaze and asked Esil,

'In the demon world, where the hierarchy based on power is so clear, how could the low-rank demons annihilate your family?'

1

[Well, the numerical disadvantage was overwhelming...]

'Are you sure? Is that really possible?'

[...What are you trying to say?]

Esil was a bit irritated. His words sounded like he was blaming the Radiru family for being so weak that they were devoured by such low-rank demons. But Suho wasn't finished yet.

'I've become quite strong compared to before, right? So I've realized something...'
Suho's gaze swept over the surrounding demons, and they flinched at his glance.

'...No matter how many of these guys attack me, I don't think I'll ever lose.' His eyes turned cold. Like a lion gazing at a flock of hundreds of sheep.

[What are you trying to say? The Itarim...? Are you saying the Itarim were behind the low-rank demons even back then?]

'Doesn't that make more sense than them suddenly devouring the demon nobles?'

Suho was almost certain. It had already happened with the Mad Tyrant, and demons were the perfect race to become slaves of the Itarim. They were souls corrupted by mana, so even the Shadow Authority didn't work on them. From the Itarim's perspective, what better race was there to fight against the Shadow Army?

[...Indeed.] Esil couldn't help but nod at Suho's persuasive words.

'So.' Suho smiled meaningfully and opened his inventory.

'Let's take everything these guys have.'

Thump!

"I'll bet on that human."

Lotto, who received the bundle of Stardust Suho suddenly handed him, was taken aback by its weight.

"Lord Vulcan, are you really going to bet all this on one match?"

"Why? Is there a problem?"

"There's no rule against it, but if the stakes get too high, the other guests need to agree..." At Lotto's words, Suho's gaze swept over the other demons. Even without him saying anything, they all nodded eagerly.

"W-we agree."

"Ahem. Why would we be bothered by such a small wager..."

As expected of demons with a strict hierarchy, they had automatically switched to honorifics the moment they saw Suho making Bloodstone. Lotto could only smile bitterly at the sight.

'This... isn't good.'

After all the nobles disappeared, the demon realm had become a truly egalitarian society. Of course, it was quite different from the democracy humans spoke of. It was a fair world where anyone could devour or be devoured. The weak were preyed upon, and even the strong had their throats bitten and blood sucked if they showed any weakness. It was a complete pandemonium. In this chaotic disorder, demons were scrambling to create a new order by any means necessary. And one of the representative parties was this place, the black market.

'...But a demon noble, thought to be extinct, suddenly appears?'

Just when a new order was about to be established, the old order was making a comeback. And there was nothing they could do. They had already witnessed him creating Bloodstone right before their eyes. And he had hinted at the possibility of teaching everyone here how to make it..

'Psychologically and realistically, it has become an absolutely unbalanced relationship.' In this situation, a fair gamble couldn't take place. And the wariness Lotto felt soon became reality.

"...Ahem. Then I'll also bet on the human that Lord Vulcan chose."

"I also think that human looks stronger."

"Then me too..."

The demons rushed to the same side as Suho. No one dared to bet against him. As a result, the wager was canceled. Lotto sighed, rubbing his throbbing forehead.

"Guests, we can't start the match if everyone bets on the same side."

But his words fell on deaf ears.

"I am certain that human will win, so what can we do?"

"Exactly."

"Besides, we can't doubt the discerning eye of a demon noble like Lord Vulcan."

"..." Lotto gritted his teeth inwardly, watching the demons shrug their shoulders shamelessly as if there was no problem.

But then.

"Tsk. How boring." Suho, who had been leisurely observing from behind, suddenly clicked his tongue. Then, with a faint smile on his lips, he muttered softly.

"Hmm. Maybe this will make things more interesting."

Then a shocking declaration suddenly burst from his mouth. "I'll teach the Bloodstone creation method to the one who wins the most Stardust from me here."

"...?!"

At that moment, the demons' eyes, stiff with shock, were filled with astonishment. And then, an overwhelming desire began to boil within them.

"A-are you serious?!"

"No, of course, we don't doubt your words, Lord Vulcan, but...!"

"Wait a minute! Guests! Please calm down...!" Lotto struggled to cool down the heated atmosphere but it was already too late. Even he couldn't help but feel greedy. The offer Vulcan had made was incredibly tempting.

"Now this is getting interesting." Suho, pleased with the heated atmosphere, opened his inventory.

Thump, thump, thump!

"...!"

"...?!"

Suho piled up pouches of Stardust on the table and said with a meaningful smile. "Let the games begin..."

* * *

And so, the biggest gamble of the demons' lives began. What was needed to win here? Incredible luck? A massive wager? Or perhaps, a keen eye?

'No.'

In fact, they were confident they could beat Vulcan. This underground fighting ring. This wasn't just a place to watch humans fight and place bets. They were merely the VIPs here. The real customers, or rather, the suckers, were the human guests.

Roar!

The audience seats surrounding the VIP room below. Hunters who used the black market gathered there, predicting the outcomes and placing their bets. The odds were essentially 50/50. Win or lose, one of the two would definitely win. It was a simple bet. But those were just the superficial chances. What was a gambling den, after all? It was a place that trapped people in the illusion that they could win money, the illusion that they had narrowly lost. That was the mechanism of a gambling den.

'The outcome of the matches can be easily manipulated.'

The moment he heard Vulcan's shocking declaration, Lotto had to struggle to suppress the blatant smirk that was about to appear on his face. And he secretly gave instructions to the attendants in the underground fighting ring.

'Use the Mad Blooded Poison.'

Nod.

Looking at the demon attendants nodding, Lotto smiled meaningfully, hiding it from Vulcan. This was the reason why he had gone through the trouble of digging under the gambling den to create the underground fighting ring. The distance between the VIP room and the arena was considerable, so it was easy to deceive the demons' eyes and manipulate the fighters.

'Even a demon noble can't detect the Mad Blooded Poison from this distance.'

Lotto instructed the attendants to subtly manipulate the matches without being too obvious, then approached Vulcan with a friendly smile and sat beside him. Suho looked at him with an amused expression.

"Are you planning to participate in the gambling yourself?"

"Yes. It's rare, but honestly, what demon wouldn't be tempted when Bloodstone is at stake? Ah, don't worry too much. Even though I'm the manager here, the human participants in the underground fighting ring change every time."

"So you're saying there's no way to rig the matches."

"That's right."

At Suho's words, Lotto grinned and added his own wager to the table. He tried to remain calm, but his eyes were already burning with ambition.

"I will obtain the Bloodstone creation method."

"Well, I like your honesty." On the other hand, Suho chuckled and glanced back at the underground fighting ring, muttering,

"Yes, this will be another amusement."

Just then.

[The Queen of Insects and the Monarch of Plagues, smells the Mad Blooded Poison and licks her lips.]

'They're using the Mad Blooded Poison, as expected.' Suho smirked inwardly at Queresha's timely message.

'Detoxify it.'

[Debuff: 'Mad Blooded Poison' detoxified.]

The side effects were removed from the Hunter who had been poisoned by the demon attendants.

'Beru.'

[You called?]

'Let's use it too.'

[Kehehe.] At Suho's words, Beru's eyes gleamed maliciously, and he stealthily descended to the underground fighting ring.

He hid in the shadow of the Hunter Suho had bet on. And coincidentally this Hunter who had lost all his money earlier had the Beast Transformation skill.

[Beru uses Skill: 'Harsh Command'.]

[Skill: 'Harsh Command' increases the target's stats by 50%.]

[Skill: 'Harsh Command' inflicts the Curse of Madness on the target as a side effect.]

"...Grrr."

The hunter's eyes gradually became clouded with insanity.

CREATORS' THOUGHTS



Craftyprogamer

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No one could stop him. The Queen of Insects and the Monarch of Plagues Querehsha's blessing was with Suho.

[Que uses Debuff: 'Paralyzing Poison'.]

[Que uses Debuff: 'Sleep Poison'.]

[Que...]

As Suho got into seriously manipulating the matches, the outcomes in the underground fighting ring became extremely biased.

1

"Wh-what?!"

"Why is that human suddenly limping?!"

"Hmm. Looks like he sprained his ankle or something. Humans are so weak."

"No! Why did that human's eyes suddenly glaze over in the middle of the fight?!"

"Hmm. Must have had a rough night's sleep. Humans are so weak."

"...?"

"...?"

"Hmm. Another victory for me, I suppose."

Slide

Suho, with a shameless, or rather, a dignified expression, pulled all the winnings on the table towards himself. Watching the Stardust pouches piling up in front of him...

"Th-this can't be..."

The demons who lost the bets couldn't help but wear dumbfounded expressions. In this atmosphere, Suho calmly assessed the situation and conversed with Esil.

[...Surprisingly, they don't make them fight to the death like in the Colosseum. They even have healers prepared.]

'Of course. If someone died here, rumors would spread about Hunters disappearing in Yangpyeong. The black market wouldn't want that.'

[Then what's their real purpose? If they're not using the corpses of dead Hunters as ingredients for Stardust...]

'That's what I'm trying to find out.'

No matter how you looked at it, the demons here were all lower-rank, far weaker than Suho. The only reason he didn't kill them outright and chose this troublesome method was...

'Because I can't extract their souls even if I kill them.'

He couldn't interrogate their shadows after killing them, like he did with Que or Harmakan. So he had to create an atmosphere where they would willingly spill information while still alive. And there was one more thing. While the attention of the demons in the black market was focused on the gambling den, Beru was diligently searching for Sung Il-Hwan.

And occasionally...

Crunch!

"Huh? Where did the magic stones that were here go?"

"A th-thief...?!"

He would steal magic stones displayed on the stalls, avoiding people's eyes.

'It seems like we're getting a reaction.'

As Suho had said, Lotto, who had been observing the situation, was biting his lip with a complicated expression.

'How could this be...'

He couldn't help but be flustered. Originally, the Hunters participating in the underground fighting ring were all unequipped and matched against opponents of similar rank and physique. That's why the fights were so intense, and the outcome could be overturned with a moment's carelessness or a slight dip in condition. But wasn't it a bit too... coincidental, that condition?

'How come every opponent Vulcan predicts to lose ends up being in bad shape?'

Was this the true discerning eye of a demon noble?

'No.'

It was a bit, no, very suspicious.

"Well then, place your bets first, this time as well."

"..."

"..."

That's right. Vulcan had never once chosen his hunter first. He always waited until all the demons had placed their bets on both sides before placing his own, always as the very last. And he only placed bets on the underdog, where the payout was higher. It was as if he already knew the outcome of the match. How shameless... As a result, Suho now had three times more Stardust pouches piled up in front of him than when he first entered.

Lotto gritted his teeth. 'He's definitely up to something... But what's his intention?'

Vulcan had been obviously manipulating things from the start. If he were going to cheat, he should at least mix in some losses to not seem suspicious, but he was winning in every single match so blatantly! However the problem was that they had no grounds to complain. They were the ones who started the manipulation in the first place. Even though they were using Mad Blooded Poison and the organizers were deliberately rigging the matches, the winner was always the hunter Vulcan chose.

'Moreover, the humans poisoned with Mad Blooded Poison are somehow detoxified. I've never heard of Vulcan having such an ability.'

Alright. At this point, he had no choice but to admit it. The demon noble could have torn them apart and devoured them anytime he wanted, without resorting to such tricks. That's why his intentions were even more suspicious.

'Could it be... that he came here knowing everything?'

Lotto's eyes narrowed as he observed him. There was a rumor widely known in the demon world. According to it Vulcan was originally an insignificant creature who couldn't even speak. Then, by chance, he ate a leaf from the World Tree and suddenly grew into a region's ruler. But now, the half-baked demon noble, thought to be killed in the war, suddenly reappeared, able to create Bloodstone and even speak?

'...It's not just his language ability. His intelligence itself has increased.' The brilliant scheming ability needed to arrive here out of the blue and instantly manipulate the atmosphere of the gambling den to his will.

'Could it be that Vulcan is still evolving?'

'Did he barely survive the war thanks to the World Tree's blessing?'

'If it's the World Tree that gave birth to the Rulers, it's certainly possible...'

Countless thoughts floated in his mind. And in the end, Lotto decided to back down.

"Sigh... Alright, Lord Vulcan."

"...Hmm?" Suho, who had been excitedly raking in the Stardust, turned his head towards him at the sudden words.

"You're saying we should reveal our hand first if we desire Bloodstone..."

"..." Suho just stared at him silently.

Lotto looked at the mountain of Stardust piled up in front of him and gave a bitter smile. "If that was your intention, you could have just said so from the beginning. There was no need for such mischievous tricks."

"..."

"Star Piece. Did you come here from the beginning because you wanted it?"

'Star Piece?'

[Star Piece?]

A question mark popped up in Suho's mind, but he didn't show it. Then, Lotto suddenly ripped his shirt open and revealed the blue gem implanted in the center of his chest.

"That's right. As you guessed, Lord Vulcan, the stuff we actually trade are Star Pieces like this one. They are on a completely different level from that incomplete Stardust."

[So what is this Star Piece?]

'I don't know but I doubt they'd be so arrogant if it was just solidified Stardust.'

Suho replied to Esil while maintaining an indifferent expression. Finally, some useful information was starting to come out. Now, this was the real deal.

He spoke in a nonchalant voice. "Star Piece, hmm... Is it just a substitute for Bloodstone?"

"Hehe. Do you think so? Judging by your words it seems you're curious after all. Perhaps wondering how good the Star Piece's performance is."

Lotto stroked the gem implanted in his chest with an extremely smug expression.

"If you came here impressed by those Stardust necklaces we spread among humans, you're going to be very surprised. Those things are just byproducts discarded during the Star Piece refinement process. Well, they have their own uses too but..."

'Their own uses? Does that mean it has other functions besides being a black market pass?' Despite maintaining a relaxed demeanor, Suho's mind was racing.

"Well, of course, we initially started the research simply to imitate Bloodstone. But we got curious about what kind of synergy could occur when the divine power of the outer universe is infused into demon blood."

The divine power of the outer universe. That referred to the Blue Mist emanating from the gates. It was mana sent by the Itarim to dissolve the dimensional walls. In other words, it was the power of the Outer Gods.

"Well, that's good." Suho leaned back leisurely again and gestured towards the piles of Stardust on the table with his chin.

"Then I'll bet all of this. And you, from now on, will bet that precious Star Piece of yours."

"Haha. That would be a bit difficult. No matter how much Stardust you have, it can't compare to the value of a Star Piece. They're on a different trading scale altogether."

[Trade?!] Esil's voice, filled with sudden anger, reached Suho's ears. If this was the mindset of a noble... He decided to imitate her reactions.

"...Trade. That's an interesting word." He smirked.

[Skill: 'Bloodlust' activated.]

Whoosh!

"...Ugh?!" Lotto couldn't help but step back, his face pale, at the overwhelming bloodlust emanating from Suho's entire body. The others also flinched and hurriedly lowered their heads. One demon even instinctively prostrated himself on the floor, bowing to Suho.

"...Even in this world, some things never change."

Suho slowly stood up. And with an indifferent expression, he slowly approached Lotto.

"Nobles don't make deals. They only give orders."

1

"..."

Tremble. Lotto couldn't move an inch, overwhelmed by the bloodlust, even as Suho's hand tapped the Star Piece implanted in his chest. It felt like he would rip it out of his body with his brutal hands at any moment to devour it. But Suho didn't do that. If he killed this guy, there would be no way to obtain more information. He withdrew his hand and said,

"The reason I'm indulging in this game you created is merely for amusement. If I were hungry..."

Growl. At the sound that suddenly echoed from Suho's stomach, all the demons in the gambling den couldn't help but flinch.

'Oh no!'

'Vulcan is hungry!'

'He's going to eat us...!'

The greedy demon Vulcan's appetite was a terrifying concept for the low-rank demons.

'Hmm, come to think of it, I skipped a meal today because I was busy. I didn't intend for this to happen.' Suho, deeply immersed in his Vulcan method acting, felt a bit embarrassed. But since things had turned out this way.

4

Lick. He needlessly licked his lips.

1

"...!" At that moment, Lotto, forgetting all about being the manager of the gambling den, had to fight his survival instincts, urging him to flee.

'N-no! If Vulcan intended to eat me, I'd be dead already! There must be something this demon wants by coming here...'

Gulp.

'There must be...'

Vulcan swallowed again.

'Is there...?'

The avaricious demon Vulcan was known to put anything he desired in his mouth first.

"A-alright!" Lotto finally closed his eyes tightly and shouted. He clutched the Star Piece embedded in his chest as if it were his lifeline.

"Then how about a duel between gladiators possessing the Star Pieces? That would surely be a good amusement for you!"

"A gladiator duel?"

Suho's bloodlust subsided momentarily at those words.

"Yes. We have Hunters implanted with Star Pieces for experimental purposes! You can choose one of them and have a gladiator..."

"You implanted Star Pieces into humans?!"

"...!" At that moment, Suho's hand, filled with rage, grabbed Lotto by the throat. Who screamed in surprise, as if struck by lightning.

"It-it was just for research purposes, I swear! The Outer Gods agreed too!"

He stopped.

'Found you, you bastards.' Suho's eyes flashed.



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"...The Outer Gods." Suho's expression turned cold as he heard Lotto's exclamation. His mind was racing with all sorts of thoughts, but he had to remain calm for now.

"Interesting."

Thud! Suho released his grip, and Lotto's body crumpled to the floor.

"Gasp!" He frantically checked that his neck was still attached and looked at Vulcan with a servile expression.

Suho looked down at him with a haughty gaze and thought. 'The demons here naturally assumed that 'Vulcan' knew everything. What should I do in this situation...?'

'Hmmm. I'll keep my words to a minimum and just repeat what these guys say like a parrot.'

"The Outer Gods... agreed?"

"Y-yes! They said we could gain many followers on Earth by cooperating with them!"

"Gain followers... And this is the best you could do?"

Suho's gaze swept across the chaotic gambling den. Lotto, the manager of this place, replied with a slightly offended expression.

"This isn't 'the best'! There are black markets in other places too! Even now, we're spreading Stardust worldwide through various methods in cooperation with the Outer Gods..."

"Cooperation." Suho smirked and provoked him.

"It looks like you've just become their slaves."

"...That's not true!"

'Was this the trigger?'

Lotto, forgetting that he had just been begging for his life, shouted as if having a seizure. "We were the ones who first developed Stardust, and we were the ones who succeeded in creating Star Pieces! They're the ones being used by us demons!"

"Do you truly believe that?"

"Y-yes."

"Hmm."

Finally, a satisfied expression appeared on Suho's face. He looked at Lotto with an approving gaze, and his feelings were genuine. How could he not be impressed?

'Thanks to this guy, I've learned a lot.'

[Yo, you're killin' it, my dude!]

6

'Where did you learn that saying?'

[The internet.]

1

Esil's voice was filled with genuine admiration. At this rate, one might even believe that Suho was a real demon noble, not a human.

[Be honest. Are you actually Vulcan?]

'Shut up. This is where it gets important.'

Suho brushed off Esil's words and used the Ruler's Authority to lift Lotto back to his feet. Who, realizing that he had just defied a demon noble, turned pale.

"If that's what you truly believe..."

Suho commanded him solemnly.

"Guide me right now."

"...!"

"I'll meet the Outer Gods myself." At those words, Lotto closed his eyes tightly, as if expecting what was to come. But at the same time, a meticulous calculation was running through his mind.

'...No, this might actually be a good thing. Those guys were getting out of control anyway. Vulcan must have come here looking for us, knowing everything from the start.'

He finally answered.

"I'll guide you right away. To the temple of the Outer Gods."

"No need."

...!

"Because we've come ourselves." At that moment, a group of people emitting an immense aura entered the gambling den.

* * *

[Hunter Association - Yangpyeong Branch]

"...Is that true?"

Team Leader Han Jaehyuk, who had rushed over after receiving Suho's call, was shocked to hear about what had happened here.

Bzzzzzzzz.

Countless bees were flying around the Yangpyeong branch, surrounding it. Among them, an avatar of Arsha, a woman with an alluring smile, gently poked one of her subordinates with a fingertip and nodded at Team Leader Han Jaehyuk's question.

[Yes, it's all true. Isn't that right, everyone?]

Gulp.

As Arsha turned around, the Yangpyeong branch employees gathered there shuddered simultaneously.

Buzzzzzt!

The bees swarmed around them like piranhas. Each radiating an ominous mana, threatening to sting them with their venomous stingers at any moment if Arsha so much as twitched a finger.

'Wh-what kind of skill is this...?'

'Where did this woman suddenly come from...?'

Because of Arsha's skill, used when Suho left, the Yangpyeong branch employees had been confined to their offices, unable to move. Until the Association's Surveillance Department, dispatched to arrest them, arrived. This was because he suspected that some of them might be colluding with the black market.

[Oh my, Branch Manager? I asked you a question. You should answer it...]

"Y-yes! It's all true! Everything is true!" Min Dae-Seok nodded repeatedly with a pale face at Arsha's gentle urging.

Team Leader Han Jaehyuk sighed and said in a weary tone, watching the scene.
"...Arrest them all."

"Yes!"

At his command, the Hunters from the Surveillance Department detained all the Yangpyeong branch employees.

'How could this happen?'

Team Leader Han Jaehyuk, after hearing the whole story, was dumbfounded. The Association harboring a black market.

'To think our organization is in such a mess. It hasn't even been that long since the Chairman left...'

In truth, it wasn't uncommon for any institution with a large number of employees to become corrupt from within. But the Hunter Association was only two years old. It was absurd for something like this to happen so soon. It was almost suspicious, as if someone had deliberately infiltrated them.

"To think... The Stardust necklace was created as a pass to the black market."

He sighed glancing down, then grabbed the string hanging around his neck, intending to rip it off. What started as a small tribute to the victims of Stardust, also became quite openly embraced within the Hunter Association. It wasn't an official event or anything, but it was literally a case of 'everyone started wearing one without anyone prompting them.'

...But.

What was this feeling?

"..."

Suddenly, the hand, which was about to remove the Stardust necklace, stopped and a thought came to his mind.

'...Well, I paid for it, so should I just keep wearing it?'

'I might need it later to sneak into the black market.'

[Hmm. What's wrong, Team Leader? It seems you suddenly don't want to throw that necklace away.]

"...!"

Flinch. Startled by the alluring voice that whispered in his ear, Han Jaehyuk widened his eyes and raised his head. Arsha, her face uncomfortably close, was looking at him with a mysterious smile. She whispered as if she had read his mind.

[Have you ever thought about this? If it's just for commemoration, why do people bother wearing it around their necks when they could just buy it and keep it at home?] As she spoke, Arsha gently caressed the Stardust necklace Han Jaehyuk was wearing with her delicate hand.

Snap!

She forcibly ripped it off, and a momentary look of regret flashed across Team Leader's eyes.

[It seems you're quite attached to it?]

"...Gasp?!" Team Leader Han Jaehyuk, finally snapping out of his daze, widened his eyes in shock. Arsha playfully wrinkled her nose and dangled the necklace in front of his eyes.

[Stay sharp. This necklace bewitches ordinary humans with low resistance.]

Team Leader Han Jaehyuk remained dazed even while conversing with her. A chill ran down his spine. The emotion he had felt for a brief moment was too strange.

'...I wanted to take it back. I didn't want to lose the necklace.'

[Well, don't worry too much. According to what Suho found out, the effects of the Stardust necklace disappear quickly when it's far from the body.]

The one here was Arsha's avatar. The real Queen Bee was inside the shadow dungeon, whose owner was still pretending to be Vulcan in the black market. Thanks to that, she could relay the information Suho had discovered directly to Team Leader Han Jaehyuk.

[It seems the Stardust necklace is a byproduct created during the Star Piece manufacturing process. But even though its effects are weak, when it falls into the hands of ordinary humans, they strangely want to keep it close and develop a vague sense of faith. The Outer Gods, 'Itarim', are literally Gods after all. That's why humans who come into direct contact with their power develop faith in that unknown deity.

"...Wait. Outer Gods?" Suddenly, a certain memory flashed through Han Jaehyuk's mind.

"Outer Gods...? I'm sure I've heard that somewhere..."

[The Outer Gods' Cult?]

Arsha's eyes also lit up at his words.

[You've heard of the Outer Gods' religion, Team Leader?]

"Outer God? Outer God's Cult? Ah, the Outer Gods' Cult!"

Han Jaehyuk's eyes widened, and he looked around. Where was he again?! The Yangpyeong branch of the Association! And he looked at Branch Manager Min Dae-Seok, who had been arrested by the Surveillance Department.

"C-come to think of it!"

Min Dae-Seok had been suddenly transferred here a few months ago. It was because the previous branch manager, who had been in charge of the Yangpyeong branch, suddenly quit the Association due to personal reasons. And that former branch manager was an A-rank Hunter personally chosen by Chairman Woo Jinchul to lead the Yangpyeong branch, a senior whom Team Leader Han Jaehyuk greatly respected.

[...Why did the former branch manager quit?] At Arsha's question he gritted his teeth, recalling the memory of that time.

"I only heard rumors, but that person suddenly got involved in a cult and disappeared..."

[Hmm?]

An A-rank Hunter getting involved in a cult? It sounded absurd, but if the Outer Gods' Cult targeted them, nothing was impossible.

"He was such a kind person. But suddenly..."

* * *

Outer Gods' Cult.

Suho scanned the people who had entered the gambling den with cold eyes. People clad in priestly robes. Each of them had a blue Star Piece embedded in their forehead. The middle-aged man at the center of their formation stepped forward and looked at him with an infinitely benevolent smile.

"Welcome. Are you the demon noble, Vulcan?"

"And who are you?"

"I am a priest who serves the great Outer Gods. In the mortal world, I went by the name 'Kim Chul'."

7

[Kieeek?] At that moment, Beru, who had returned from exploring the surroundings, shouted with a bright smile.

[Iron! You're back!]

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Chapter 190: Chapter 189

It's pointless to explain how Chairman Woo Jinchul has acted since the Cataclysm. He was a figure known by all Koreans. But at the same time, he was also a person who evoked strong opinions, both positive and negative. In retrospect, his choices were always right, but the process always seemed reckless and daring. This inevitably led to resentment from many behind the scenes. Among them, there was one aspect that Hunter guilds, in particular, were especially unhappy about... It was the problem with 'talent recruitment.'

– What? He was snatched away by the Chairman again?!

– Yes. As soon as he awakened, the Association somehow found out and offered him a position.

– No way! This person didn't even go for a mana test yet?! How did the Association even know he awakened?!

– Exactly. Sigh. Just how good is the Association's information network...

Indeed. Truly remarkable information gathering capabilities. Chairman Woo Jinchul had an uncanny ability to find promising potential hunters before anyone else and somehow bring them into the Association. From the perspective of the Guilds eager to recruit talent and expand their power, his actions were enough to make them detest him. Especially when he recruited S-rank Hunter Choi Jong-In, countless guildmasters all sighed with deep regret...

"...'Senior Kim Chul' was also one of the talents personally recruited by the Chairman."

Team Leader Han Jaehyuk was recalling the past as he talked with Arsha. The conversation between Kim Chul, who had just awakened as an A-rank Tanker, and Woo Jinchul was a famous anecdote.

– What kind of Hunter do you want to be?

At Woo Jinchul's question, Kim Chul responded with a question of his own.

– Chairman, do you know what my motto is?

– What is it?

–To live a good life.

Kim Chul stated the motto he lived by since his teenage years and smiled brightly at Woo Jinchul. Although he was now middle-aged, his smile retained the innocence of a teenage boy. Witnessing the pure sense of justice in his eyes, the chairman smiled contentedly and asked again.

– Does that mean you want to be a good Hunter?

– Yes. Since I've become a Hunter, I want to fight with pride to protect the world.

– That's a truly admirable mindset. Come to the Association. I'll entrust you with an important mission.

– I look forward to working with you.

Just like that, Kim Chul firmly shook hands with Woo Jinchul and joined the Hunter Association without hesitation.

"But after joining the Association, Senior Kim Chul was deeply disappointed." Team Leader Han Jaehyuk muttered with a bitter expression.

It was inevitable that he would be disappointed. Kim Chul had joined the Association with the aspiration of becoming a great Hunter who protects the world.

"The task the Chairman entrusted to him was protecting this very place, the Yangpyeong branch."

[Ah.] Arsha nodded in understanding.

Yangpyeong was too peaceful a town for a Hunter with ambitions to protect the world. Moreover, since many wealthy people lived there, malicious commenters even went as far as to say that the Yangpyeong branch manager was a dog guarding the rich.

"...In the end, Senior Kim Chul left the Association on his own. Many believed that the rumors about him joining a cult were just excuses or nonsense."

[...]

Arsha relayed everything Team Leader Han Jaehyuk had said to Suho. Who, receiving her words in real-time, was a bit surprised inwardly.

'Chairman Woo Jinchul personally chose him to lead the Yangpyeong branch?'

According to Beru, Kim Chul was once a Shadow Soldier named 'Iron'. But as Earth returned to the time before his death, he was revived and started a new life. Just like Hwang Dongsoo, who was once the Shadow Soldier 'Greed' and now lived as an S-rank villain. But to think that Kim Chul became a Hunter in the Association and was the branch manager of the Yangpyeong branch where his grandparents lived? Could that be a coincidence?

'No, absolutely not.'

Suho immediately grasped the situation.

'It was for my father.'

Chairman Woo Jinchul remembered everything about his past life related to his father. That meant...

'He was protecting Yangpyeong through the Association, in case my grandparents were in danger while my father was away! By assigning the Yangpyeong branch to someone trustworthy!'

Perhaps, in Chairman Woo Jinchul's mind, there was no one more trustworthy than Kim Chul, who was once his father's Shadow Soldier.

'But to think... Kim Chul would become a priest serving the Itarim in such an unexpected place.'

It seemed that even the great Woo Jinchul couldn't have foreseen such a variable.

"...You're a priest of the Outer Gods' Cult?"

"That's correct."

"If you're Kim Chul, you would have been the branch manager of the Yangpyeong branch?"

At Suho's pointed question, Kim Chul nodded with a benevolent smile.

"Hahaha. It seems there's nothing Lord Vulcan doesn't know. That's right. I was once part of the Hunter Association."

"Then why are you here now?"

"Haha, that's quite hurtful. You're not suspecting me just because I was briefly with the Association, are you? Or are you doubting the power of this Star Piece?" Kim Chul smiled benevolently and raised his large hand to caress the Star Piece embedded in his forehead. An auspicious blue aura emanated from it, and a glint of madness flashed in his eyes, lips curling into a grin.

"Our Outer Gods' Cult bestows the baptism of the Star Piece, or rather, the 'Outer God Stone,' only upon those who have proven their faith. So you need not doubt. I simply believe that the Outer Gods' Cult is more dedicated to the world's well-being than the Association..."

[Kill him now. There's no need to listen to such nonsense any longer.] Beru whispered like a demon beside Suho.

1

[Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill.]

[You must strike down that corrupted soldier, Iron, and bring him back to the Shadow Army!]

3

"...Haha. Lord Vulcan, please calm down for a moment. As you know, there's no reason for us to be at odds."

Perhaps due to the aura Beru was emitting, Kim Chul dabbed the beads of sweat forming on his forehead with a handkerchief. Suho discreetly stepped on Beru to suppress him, then looked at Kim Chul and spoke solemnly.

"I have a question, Priest of the Outer Gods'."

No matter how much he was pretending to be Vulcan, he had to ask this one question out of genuine curiosity.

"Haha. Even a demon noble has things they don't know. Yes, feel free to ask anything..."

"Are there any side effects to implanting a Star Piece into a human? Maybe losing hair, like you?"

2

"..." At that moment, Kim Chul's benevolent smile, which he had maintained until now, faltered for the first time. He lowered his gaze slightly and replied.

"...This is just ordinary hair loss."

"I see. Come to think of it, the other humans beside you still have their hair. Then are there no other side effects to the Star Piece?" Suho nodded as if it were nothing and changed the subject.

A slight wrinkle appeared on Kim Chul's forehead where the Star Piece was embedded, and he forced a smile, clenching his teeth.

"Of course not. How could there be any side effects? The Star Piece is a grace bestowed upon lowly humans like us by the Gods."

Fwoosh! Along with his words, the stone on his forehead emitted streaks of blue aura.

"Huuuh."

Kim Chul inhaled the aura deeply, his expression filled with ecstasy.

"Hehe. Do you feel it? If Stardust merely amplified the power one possesses, the Outer God Stone elevates the owner's power to a whole new dimension. In other words... it allows one to be reborn as a higher being!" At the same time, Kim Chul's Star Piece shimmered with a blue light, and his aura grew stronger. It was undeniable that it far surpassed the mana limit of Kim Chul, who was known as an A-rank Hunter.

[Unbelievable. He's absorbing the divine power of the Outer God and emitting an aura close to S-rank.]

'It's similar to the principle of me summoning Gray into my body.' Suho instantly understood the principle of the Star Piece.

Misinterpreting his expression, Kim Chul opened his arms wide towards Suho with an infinitely benevolent smile and a glint of madness in his eyes, laughing brightly.

"So, how about joining us, Lord Vulcan? Worshiping and praising the Outer Gods is the mission and destiny of all mortals."

"If it is a mission of mortals. What's in it for me?"

Suho chuckled and subtly hinted, and Kim Chul's eyes gleamed with a meaningful expression.

"You already know, don't you? The real reason why you, a demon noble, sought us out! You want to become the King of Demons using the Outer God Stone, right?"

"...You're quick-witted."

"Hahaha. I've observed many demons over the years. Low-rank demons may aspire to become demon nobles, but the greedy Vulcan's goal must be the Demon King!"

[I-it is?!]

'Why are you acting like this too?' Ignoring Esil's surprised voice, Suho swept his cold gaze around.

'First of all, Grandpa isn't among them.'

After confirming the faces of the Outer Gods' Cult members one by one, Suho asked Kim Chul, who was excitedly preaching on his own.

"Are you all the Outer Gods' Cult members here?"

"Of course not. The other believers are all praying in the chapel."

"Guide me."

"Haha, showing interest in the chapel right away! As expected, my prediction was correct. Let's go to the chapel together and accept the Outer God Stone."

Kim Chul didn't doubt Suho in the slightest. Vulcan was known as the 'Demon of Greed' because he was the greediest among all demons. With the other demon nobles gone, what he desired most must be the throne of the Demon King.

[So when are you planning to kill them?]

'Wait... When they're all gathered, so no one can escape...'

Listening to Beru's whispers, urging him to ambush and kill 'iron', Suho followed the Cult members out of the gambling den and towards the chapel. Soon, a massive door

appeared before him. As Kim Chul placed his palm on the giant door, his Star Piece glowed, and the heavy door opened automatically.

Creeeaak!

Then, a vast dome-shaped room came into his view. Inside, he saw Outer Gods' Cult members prostrating themselves and chanting prayers like madmen. But this incredibly spacious room felt cramped for one reason.

'That's...?' Suho's eyes lit up.

At the farthest end of the chapel. Something gigantic beyond comprehension was sitting on a chair as large as itself. A statue of a god, unimaginably massive.

4

"Welcome, Vulcan. This is the chapel of our Outer Gods' Cult."

As soon as Kim Chul finished speaking. The heads of the members praying in the chapel all lifted at once, staring at Suho. Then, they all smiled brightly, revealing their teeth, with the same expression. And their mouths continued to chant prayers without pause.

1

"Thou shall worship God. Thou shall worship God. Thou shall worship God. Thou shall worship God."

"Thou shall praise God. Thou shall praise God. Thou shall praise God. Thou shall praise God."

"Thou shall prove thy faith. Thou shall prove thy faith. Thou shall prove thy faith. Thou shall prove thy faith..."

4

And then.

Boom!

The chapel door closed behind Suho with a loud bang. From the doorway, Kim Chul, smiling brighter than anyone else, uttered the last verse of the prayer.

"Those who fail to obey these commandments shall not be spared."

1

CREATORS' THOUGHTS



Craftyprogamer