Solo Leveling

VI

Chugong

Solo Leveling

VI

CHUGONG

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Solo Leveling VI

CHUGONG

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

SOLO LEVELING Volume 6

© Chugong 2017 / D&C MEDIA

All rights reserved.

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

English translation © 2022 by Yen Press, LLC

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

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

Yen On

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

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

First Yen On Edition: December 2022

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Won Young Seo, Kurt Hassler Designed by Yen

Press Design: Wendy Chan Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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

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

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

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

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

Identifiers: LCCN 2020047938 | ISBN 9781975319274 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319298 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319311 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319335 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319359 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319373 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

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

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

ISBNs: 978-1-97531937-3 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1938-0 (ebook)

E3-20221105-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

1. The Retreat of Millions and the Counterattack of One

2. The King of Giants

3. A Miracle

4. Heading to America

5. The Furious Lion

6. The Level of a Beast

7. What Happens in the International Guild Conference…

8. Night of the Hunters

9. The Frost Monarch

10. Complicated Thoughts

Yen Newsletter

1

The Retreat of Millions and the Counterattack of One

1

THE RETREAT OF MILLIONS AND THE COUNTERATTACK OF ONE

“It’s Hunter Jinwoo Sung.”

President Go’s words were heard by hunters all over the world. Some watched him on the news, some heard through their peers, and others saw the clips making the rounds on video-sharing platforms.

Their reactions were one and the same.

“Going to Japan right now?”

“What in the world is he thinking?”

Everyone was aware that the Japanese government would give an unimaginably large reward to whomever could put out the raging fire in their homeland. Yet the rest of the global community refused to involve their highest-rank hunters in the unprecedented crisis—a result of the devastating body count left in the wake of S-rank beast Kamish, which led to hunter communities closing themselves off to one another.

Not that they had permission to go anyway…but who would dare to even if commanded?

“He’s out of his mind.”

The American S-rank hunters gathering in the most luxurious hotel in Maryland also caught wind of President Go’s announcement. Most of them had had their powers augmented by Mrs. Sellner, so it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say they were one of the most powerful groups in the world. This gave them license to laugh at the story of the reckless hunter from a tiny country in Asia.

“The dude probably reawakened recently and is overestimating his power.”

“Does he really think fighting insects is the same as fighting giants?”

“I’m telling you, overconfident hunters inevitably end up dead. It’s ironic that killing those ants will lead to his own demise.”

They’d watched Jinwoo’s brilliant performance on Jeju Island, and there was no denying his strength. But giants were a totally different beast. Jinwoo’s ability to summon so many minions was the perfect counter to the army of ants. But a single giant-type magic beast was powerful enough to be the boss of an A-rank dungeon. No matter how strong Jinwoo was, would he be able to handle the giants on his own?

Moreover, there were the unpredictable, almost animalistic movements of the boss giant that had squashed Yuri Orlov. How could a single hunter defeat something so quick and agile despite its mass?

The hunters started making wagers for fun.

“I’ll bet my yacht on him getting killed on the first day.”

“I’ll bet my house he’ll last two.”

“Okay, then—”

“You really think that’ll be the case?”

National-level hunter Thomas Andre, who had been quietly eating his meal in a corner, set his cutlery down on the table.

Many powerful hunters had emerged following the subjugation of Kamish, but none of them exceeded those who had survived the greatest crisis in history.

Everyone clammed up as Thomas smirked.

“I’ll bet the Scavenger Guild headquarters that he survives.” His eyes scanned the betting hunters from behind a pair of sunglasses before he took his leave of the dining hall.

“……”

“……”

An uncomfortable silence fell on the room behind him.

One of the hunters frowned and broke the silence. “That guy sure knows how to kill the mood.”

“Are you surprised? He’s always like this. Never mind him.”

“Yeah. I don’t care how strong that Korean hunter is; there’s no way he can stop a bunch of S-rank giants on his own.”

A hunter who had been quietly listening from the side spoke up. “Hang on—I heard he’s taking one more person with him.”

His colleagues nodded. They knew it. Even the craziest man wouldn’t head into hell by himself.

“Which idiotic S rank agreed to tag along?”

“It’s not an S rank.”

The three hunters exchanged looks. He was bringing in a hunter lower than S rank to deal with S-rank giants?!

“Probably an A-rank healer?”

“No, a D-rank tank named Jinho Yoo.”

Rendered speechless, the trio’s mouths snapped shut. Jinwoo Sung…really had lost every single marble, huh? They say crazy understands crazy. That would certainly explain why Thomas Andre was cheering Jinwoo on.

* * *

Incheon International Airport.

“Um, excuse us. Please make way!”

Jinho proudly walked through the crowd of people, waving away the swarm of curious bystanders. He wore humongous sunglasses and carried two bags filled with equipment. His look of determination rivaled that of an actor getting ready to shoot the climax of a movie.

“We’re coming through!”

Jinwoo wordlessly followed the path Jinho had cleared.

Ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak!

Lights flashed as the reporters continuously snapped photos to capture every second of Jinwoo's appearance. While Jinho was visibly excited, Jinwoo appeared calm and collected.

Once Japan caught wind of Jinwoo's plan, they'd sent a private jet for him, and naturally, he was allowed to bypass airport customs and security protocols.

Some familiar faces saw him off: President Gunhee Go and Manager Jinchul Woo of the Hunter's Association. The three men exchanged nods as they huddled together. Thanks to their keen senses, they didn't need to raise their voices amid the noise of the airport.

President Go looked wistful. "I must admit, I'd still like to dissuade you."

Jinwoo was the strongest hunter in Korean history, so President Go was wary of letting him run off willy-nilly. Not to jinx things, but what if something happened in Korea while Jinwoo was away?

But Jinwoo stood firm. "I'm sorry, but I want to go."

This was a golden opportunity for him to both level up and increase his shadow army by getting rid of the giants. To that end, he had requested Japan give him all the rights to the magic beasts, a condition the government eagerly accepted.

President Go chuckled. "Is it because of the magic beasts?"

Jinwoo grinned. "Yes. I want to fight magic beasts."

"In that case, there's no helping it."

Jinwoo grasped President Go's outstretched hand as they exchanged heartfelt good-byes.

"All I ask is you come back safe and sound."

Ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak!

Their handshake was memorialized by hundreds of cameras.

* * *

The news of Jinwoo's impending arrival was a light in the darkness for the

survivors in Japan. The few remaining TV stations kept broadcasting footage of him, and the public clung to hope as they watched him on their TV screens. Despite having shown minimal interest in the Korean-Japanese collaboration during the incident at Jeju, they'd found it thrilling to see the S-rank ants being swept away.

At the same time, their desperation grew as the giants' advance to the south accelerated.

"They said Hunter Jinwoo Sung has arrived in Japan!" exclaimed a boy listening to the radio, and the expressions of those around him brightened.

But things were still looking grim for those stuck in places where the giants had knocked out the electricity and gas. They had no idea that help was on its way, so they awaited the arrival of a rescue team.

"The Japan Self-Defense Forces are here!"

Two soldiers from JSDF with ghostly pale faces entered the small nursing home run by an elderly couple. The owners sighed in relief at the welcome sight.

But the situation was graver than they could imagine.

The soldiers shook their heads. "We don't have room for all the patients. We can take a maximum of three or four."

The wife protested, "That can't be……! We have more than ten patients with mobility issues!"

Her husband nodded, but the young JSDF soldiers were anxious to leave.

"There's no time to worry about those already at death's door! The giants are headed this way!" spat one of the soldiers, drenched in sweat.

All the residents in the surrounding area had already been evacuated, so it was only a matter of time before the giants detected the scent of humans and zeroed in.

The elderly doctor stared down at the ground for a moment before finally raising his head, his voice firm. "I cannot abandon my patients. My wife and I promised we would stay by their side to the end."

The two young men glared at him, but left with no other choice, they picked up their communicator and spoke loudly to make sure the couple could hear every word.

"……The civilians here have refused to evacuate. We will retreat without them."

The soldiers then ran out the door, and the couple soon heard the ignition of a car's engine. They patted each other on the back and let out long sighs.

Suddenly, one of the soldiers rushed back inside, armed with a rifle.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" The elders clutched each other's hands.

The soldier bellowed, "If you stay here, those giants will tear you to pieces! Better a quick death than a gruesome one!"

He pointed the gun at the doctor and his wife in turn as they flinched away from him.

"This is your last chance. Will you come with us, or will you die by my hand?" The young man steadied his aim.

The couple hesitated. The soldier's intentions were clear. He was hell-bent on evacuating them, even if he had to resort to this. But he was also asking them to turn their backs on their credo of helping those in need, so it was an impossible choice.

"……"

"……"

The moment stretched on for an eternity. A bead of sweat dripped from the young man's forehead, seeped through his eyebrow, and fell into his eyes, blurring his vision. He furrowed his brow when…

Guuuurgle…

The soldier's stomach announced his hunger, but his glare never wavered.

"Excuse me, dearie."

The startled soldier whipped his gun toward the sickbeds. "Y-yes?"

In a dark corner of the nursing home room, an old woman propped up in one

of the beds held out a tray toward him. On it was a rice ball.

The old woman smiled. “If you’re hungry, eat this. I don’t have much of an appetite.”

“……” At last, the JSDF soldier lowered his gun.

“Here, don’t be shy.”

The young man’s hand trembled as he picked up the rice ball. He recalled the reason he’d decided to don a soldier’s uniform in the first place: to protect innocent civilians just like the good people here. Yet he had been about to knowingly abandon these people to the magic beasts.

Ashamed of his own powerlessness, he began to cry. He then picked up his communicator and sent his partner away.

Shocked, the elderly doctor grabbed his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“I’ll stay with you.” The young man slung his rifle over his shoulder. “I’m a soldier. I can’t run away knowing there are civilians remaining.”

He forcefully swallowed the rice ball in one gulp and bowed to the old woman. “Thank you for the food. It was delicious.”

Just then…

Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!

The soldier resolutely rushed out of the nursing home. A giant was approaching incredibly quickly on all fours like an animal.

Is that……?

As he readied his rifle, something caught his eye. Dangling from the giant’s mouth was his partner.

“Ahhhhhh!” The soldier saw red and fired at the approaching threat.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Unfortunately, regular weapons were useless against magic beasts, so the giant barreled straight at him, unaffected by the shower of bullets.

Click, click!

Tears welled in his eyes as he realized the rifle had run out of ammunition.

Oh God……

The giant tossed the human in its mouth into the air and gobbled it up before leaping at the young soldier.

Out of nowhere, a humongous naga slammed into its side, sending the giant tumbling. But the beast sprang back on all fours at a speed that should've been impossible for something its size.

"Grrrrr!" The giant pressed itself into the ground and bared its teeth at the naga.

It was Jima, former boss of the naga nest dungeon and newly recruited shadow soldier. Jima held out his right hand and tightly grasped the black spear that had materialized up from a shadow. He brandished the weapon in front of him, making it clear he wouldn't let anyone pass.

"H-huh……?" The JSDF soldier couldn't tell if he was dreaming or not. He'd been so sure he was going to be eaten alive, but now another monster was protecting him! Emotions surged through him as he stared at the naga's imposing back.

"What is going on……?"

Could they get out of this alive? Could he, the elderly couple, and the nursing home patients possibly survive this giant attack? Tears stung his eyes as the tension dissipated from his body.

"Here." Someone tried to hand him a colorful handkerchief.

The young soldier looked over at a man who appeared younger than himself, gesturing with his chin toward the handkerchief and then nodding. The younger man hadn't spoken Japanese, but the message was clear enough.

Is he Korean?

The soldier wiped his tears with the proffered handkerchief. "Um… Who are you? How did you get here?"

The Korean man shook his head and gave a thumbs-up. "Good."

“Pardon?”

“Very good.”

“Th-thank you……” As the soldier thanked the younger newcomer—for what exactly, he wasn’t sure—he noticed another man who appeared to be his unexpected acquaintance’s colleague, covered in blood. The Japanese soldier knew little about hunters, but even he could tell this new arrival was strong.

“It’s too risky.” Jinwoo had already finished scoping out the nursing home. He pointed over his shoulder and told his companion, “I need to take this elsewhere. This is too close.”

Having already witnessed Jinwoo fight giants several times, Jinho knew exactly what he was getting at. “I’ll wait for you here, boss.”

“Got it.”

Jinwoo spotted the frightened young soldier and walked by, gently patted him on the shoulder as a sign that the kid had done well. The average person didn’t have the balls to face a large magic beast on their own with only a rifle. Having raided many dungeons as a mere E rank, he knew how much courage it took.

As the JSDF soldier gazed at Jinwoo’s back, he couldn’t help but softly let out, “Oh.”

The weight and warmth of the hand on his shoulder… It felt like his touch had washed away the sheer terror from before and filled him with a huge sense of relief.

It was at that moment he remembered the story of the two Korean men who were supposedly running around Japan killing the giants. One was the hunter who was said to have killed S-rank magic beasts almost single-handedly in the past. His name was—

Jinwoo Sung…… Hunter Jinwoo Sung……!

There was no doubt. It had to be him.

Ba-dump!

The soldier’s heart raced at the realization that he had met a living legend. He hurriedly turned to the other Korean man. “Is that really him? The S-rank

Korean hunter?”

Jinho nodded again. “Good.”

Jinwoo approached the two entangled beasts with a frown.

“Gaaakkk!” The giant was biting down hard on Jima’s shoulder.

Although the naga had the added distraction of protecting the humans behind him, he was a former boss of an A-rank dungeon, and his strength far surpassed the average shadow soldier. That the giant was able to overwhelm him, despite not being the boss, demonstrated just how much of a threat the giants were.

Jinwoo scowled at the sight of his soldier getting thrashed, and he bent at the knees, focusing power into his legs.

Krik, krak!

The asphalt beneath his feet buckled.

Boom!

Jinwoo shot up toward the giant’s face. But his target spotted his split-second approach.

Jinwoo had an epiphany.

They really are of a different caliber.

Jinwoo’s fist slammed into the giant’s forehead.

Bash!

He didn’t expect his punch to do much damage as he watched the giant pull its head back to minimize the impact. A towering frame and swift movements—no wonder regular hunters felt helpless against them.

But Jinwoo wasn’t some run-of-the-mill hunter. He summoned a Demon Monarch’s Dagger in midair and held out his empty hand toward the giant’s face.

Ruler’s Authority!

An invisible hand seemed to forcefully pull the magic beast’s face forward, quickly closing the gap.

“Rrruh?” The giant panicked, not having expected its opponent to counter while airborne like this, and struggled to break free. But it was all in vain.

Once in front of his target, Jinwoo activated a skill. “Mutilation!”

Shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk, shhk!

Jinwoo slashed at the giant’s face so quickly, he left afterimages.

“Graaaaaahhh!”

Thud!

The creature covered its face with both hands as it fell to the ground, blinded and writhing in intense pain. Jinwoo landed softly, assuming his job was done.

It’s over.

But upon sensing Jinwoo’s approach, the giant flinched and bolted away.

Can giants feel other beings’ energies as well?

The more he dealt with them, the more he felt these giants were interesting creatures. He considered them colossal weapons of war.

His prey was getting farther and farther away, but Jinwoo wasn’t about to let it escape.

Flash!

Jinwoo streaked toward it like lightning. The giant ran for its life on all fours, terrified of the murderous aura giving chase, but the distance between it and the hunter shrank. Belatedly realizing it couldn’t lose him, it hastily screeched to a halt and turned to tackle Jinwoo straight on, but…

……?

The human’s presence had disappeared—

……!

—only to reappear right behind it. Though blind, the giant reflexively turned to look back, making things easier for Jinwoo. The hunter had leaped straight into the air and now drove in his weapon at full force.

Shiiing!

The Demon Monarch's Dagger contained so much magic power from the Black Heart that it split the giant's head in half.

Shunk!

"Guhhh……" The creature couldn't even get out one last scream before it toppled backward like a felled tree.

Whud!

That was giant number three. Jinwoo stuck the landing and let out a sigh of victory. "Whew……"

"Boss!" Jinho dashed over from where he'd been waiting and thrust a thermos lid containing refreshing, cold tea at Jinwoo, who beamed and accepted it.

"Thanks." He gulped it down.

Huh?

Jinwoo turned as he felt something approaching from behind and spotted Jima, the naga's shoulders slumped in defeat.

You fought well. Good job.

Following this encouragement, he recalled Jima. As always, the naga melted into a shadow and was absorbed into Jinwoo's own.

Jinho had a question for him. "Boss?"

Jinwoo returned the thermos lid. "Hmm?"

"You sent your other minions in different directions, so is there some special reason you kept the nagas with you?"

It was evident Jinwoo could kill a giant on his own, so it wasn't like he needed the nagas. However, he kept letting them have a go at the giants first before stepping in once they were overwhelmed. Jinho was curious what Jinwoo was up to.

The reason was simple.

Because I want them to grind.

Since the nagas were new recruits, they were rather low-level compared to his other soldiers. Jinwoo had been hoping to level them up by pitting them against the giants, but these had proven to be tougher opponents than he'd expected. However, even though it was a bit of a hassle, this was the best way for the nagas to gain experience.

I guess I can't tell Jinho the truth, huh?

Jinwoo grinned. "It's because I still feel a little awkward with them. This is my way of getting closer."

"Oh." Jinho nodded in understanding.

It was so easy to fool him.

Jinho mulled it over and then enthusiastically replied, "You're thoughtful to your minions. That's so you, boss!"

……

It was also easy to feel bad about fooling him.

"Excuse me……"

Jinwoo turned to see the soldier who had bravely stood up to the giant walking toward them while glancing at the giant's corpse. Over the man's shoulder, Jinwoo could see the elderly couple who ran the nursing home. Though he hadn't had a conversation with them yet, he could guess what they wanted to say, and that was good enough for him. There was no time to receive their gratitude while other giants were out there rampaging.

Jinwoo peered at the defeated giant. Here lay the biggest reason he had come to Japan.

"Stop! Stop!" Jinho rushed to block their paths.

Jinho seemed to catch on to things faster than when they'd first met. Thanks to him, Jinwoo could extract shadows without any distractions.

Jinwoo gave Jinho a smile of approval and turned back to the corpse in front of him. He stretched out his hand and murmured, "Arise."

⁎ ⁎ ⁎

“Viewers…… You won’t believe what I am seeing now!”

Takakakakaka!

The reporter in the helicopter couldn’t help but let out incredulous gasps at the scene unfolding below. The camera panned down to share the sight with the viewers.

Several hundred ant magic beasts were marching in an orderly fashion. Leading them was a monstrous ant with wings—Beru. He suddenly looked skyward.

“SKRAHHHH!”

The reporter clapped his hands over his ears at the shrill roar.

The rest of the ants came to a halt. Three giants stood before them. They looked like a group of mice facing a bunch of elephants, yet Beru charged right at them with claws extended into blades.

“Skraaah!”

With the army of ants covering every inch of ground in a swarm of black, the ferocious attack ended instantly.

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” the reporter yelled as the ants started gnawing on the bodies of the giants’ corpses.

Crunch!

Krak!

On Beru’s orders, the ants left enough of the carcasses behind so more shadow soldiers could be created. If anyone got too greedy, Beru didn’t hesitate to send them flying with a swift kick.

The reporter exclaimed, “They’re eating the giants! The insects are eating the giants!”

The sight of the horrific, human-eating giants now being consumed by the ants was cathartic to the Japanese people. There was only one problem.

“Oh!”

Both the reporter and cameraman shrank back as Beru flew up to the

helicopter, grabbed the camera focused on him, and crushed it without hesitation.

Snap!

“Yikes!” The reporter and the cameraman clung to each other, trembling.

“……” Beru wordlessly looked at each of them in turn, then returned to the ground.

“Phew……”

“Haaah……”

The two men noisily exhaled. Despite the winged ant’s tendency to destroy ten-million-won cameras, they kept following him around because viewers were clamoring for footage of his troops. So the cameraman took out the extra equipment he’d brought along for this very reason, and the reporter, who had grown used to Beru’s antics, continued his assignment without missing a beat.

“……This has been Kitamura reporting live.”

＊ ＊ ＊

“Eeeeeek!” A young girl, probably around twelve years old or so, ran for her life, screaming with tears in her eyes. “A-aaah!”

A giant was chasing her with a creepy smile. But how far could she run on her little legs? The distance between them quickly vanished.

The giant bared its teeth and laughed as if enjoying this meaningless game of tag. It extended its arm, which looked significantly longer than those of other giants.

Just before it could roughly grab the fragile little girl, though, a streak of blue lightning glanced off the giant’s wrist, singeing its skin.

Zzzt!

“Graaaaaah!” The giant reared up and grabbed its wrist, bellowing in pain.

There stood Igris, brandishing a blue sword. He turned to the trembling girl, whose legs had given out, face as white as a sheet. Igris picked her up and quickly retreated from the area.

The giant spotted the enemy who had attacked it now running away with its food, and its eyes reddened in outrage.

“Grrrr……”

It was enough to make any average person wet themselves in terror. However, someone dared to block the giant’s path.

It was the elite knight Iron, clad in upgraded armor. He thrust his shield into the ground, puffed up his chest, and let out a mighty cry.

GROAAAAAAAAAR!

[Iron is using Skill: Epic Taunt.]

[The opponent has entered a state of aggro.]

The giant that had been aiming for Igris instantly turned toward Iron. The knight pounded his chest a couple of times and then picked up his shield, which was as big as his whole body, issuing a clear challenge.

“Raaahhh!” The furious giant swung at Iron at full strength.

Ka-pow!

But Iron didn’t budge—ranking him up had put him on a whole other level.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

After withstanding dozens of attacks, Iron let out a bellow. “WHOOO!”

At his signal, the shadow soldiers and ice bears who had served Jinwoo the longest launched a coordinated pincer attack. Tank, the leader of the ice bear army, shook his head in anticipation of his first battle in a while and roared. “Graaahhh!”

It reverberated through the ground for quite a distance.

A reporter who had been watching everything with bated breath whooped at the camera. “Viewers, are you seeing this? The minions, Hunter Sung’s minions, are attacking the giant!”

Was this really happening? This particular reporter hadn’t trusted Yuri Orlov, so he hadn’t expected much from Jinwoo Sung, either. But both Jinwoo himself and his minions were currently scattered all over the nation and in the process

of purging the giants.

Maybe—just maybe—Jinwoo might actually be able to save Japan. The reporter choked up at the thought.

“O-over there!” The cameraman pointed toward the giant.

The reporter quickly turned his teary gaze in that direction. He blurted, “How could this be……?!”

The giant was already teetering as lightning from Igris’s sword struck it again and again. It was such a beautiful sight that everyone witnessing it was rendered speechless.

＊ ＊ ＊

The Hunter’s Association of Japan headquarters were located at the center of Tokyo, which could be considered the heart of the country. At least, it used to be before the giants had come pouring out of the gate.

After his life had been saved by the sacrifices of various hunters and military soldiers during the S-rank-gate dungeon break in Shinjuku, President Shigeo Matsumoto had moved the association headquarters to Osaka. While it wasn’t the southernmost city, President Matsumoto had decided that all hope would be lost for Japan if they weren’t able to defend Osaka and its 2.26 million civilians. It was their last line of defense—their Maginot Line, so to speak.

Upon hearing that the giants had reached the nearby city of Nagoya, Matsumoto had fallen into despair. Japan was at death’s door. Plus, it was futile to plead to the international community for help after the schemes of the Hunter’s Association of Japan had been brought to light by President Gunhee Go of Korea.

Following President Go’s press conference, the Japanese government, which had temporarily moved to Kyoto, had urgently summoned President Matsumoto. He knelt before the politicians demanding he be held accountable.

“I am responsible for everything. However, someone must also fix the current situation. Please postpone your verdict until then.”

The prime minister stood with his back to Matsumoto. After a long pause, he consented to the terms.

President Matsumoto was undoubtedly to blame for this crisis, but like he'd said, somebody had to resolve the dungeon break. His punishment could come later. He could still be made an example of after the fire was put out.

When Jinwoo arrived in Japan, an impassioned President Matsumoto was the first to greet him. Though his own fate had been decided, he couldn't let his country suffer a similar one.

Goose bumps erupted all over his body as soon as he set eyes on Jinwoo.

No way……

Jinwoo was strong. Having met so many powerful people during his tenure as president of the association, he could tell immediately. And although he'd been in the presence of countless strong hunters, very few had made the hair on the back of his neck stand up like this—in fact, this was a first.

Had he met Jinwoo prior to the Jeju Island raid, he would've canceled the plan to betray the Korean hunters. Ryuji Goto's assessment of him had been correct: The man before him had a threatening presence.

However, his opponents were giant-type magic beasts that had escaped from the S-rank gate. There was no way Jinwoo was strong enough to deal with them on his own.

He pleaded, "Please focus on defending Osaka." He needed Jinwoo to buy him some time for the association to negotiate with the United States or Russia. However, the hunter's reply shattered his plans.

"No thank you." Jinwoo rejected the request.

President Matsumoto and the other representatives fell into a panic. Had Jinwoo changed his mind after coming all this way?

President Matsumoto cautiously asked, "Th-then what are you planning to do?"

In lieu of an answer, Jinwoo divided his minions into three groups and mobilized them in different directions before heading off on his own course.

The sheer number of minions was mind-blowing, but President Matsumoto swallowed hard for another reason.

Is he really planning to confront giants by himself?

Was Jinwoo going to attempt something all the other hunters in the world had claimed was impossible? President Matsumoto was left with questions but no answers. All he could do was leave the fate of the country to providence and wait.

President Matsumoto returned to the Hunter's Association headquarters to assess the current situation. His question was answered sooner than he expected.

"The city of Nagoya has been retaken!"

"What?!" The president sprang up from his chair.

Barely any time had passed, so how could Hunter Sung already have defeated one of the giants? And the reports kept pouring in.

"A giant's corpse has been discovered in the city of Nakatsugawa."

"The city of Shizuoka has been recovered."

"Takayama and Nagano as well……"

Jinwoo and his minions were advancing toward Tokyo at an astounding rate. Chills ran up President Matsumoto's spine as the Korean hunter turned the impossible into reality. He could not calm his pounding heart until finally…

"Kofu…… Hunter Sung has arrived in the city of Kofu!"

President Matsumoto plopped down in his chair at the news that Jinwoo and his minions had reached Kofu, a city a mere 130 kilometers from Tokyo.

"Sir!"

"President Matsumoto!"

He couldn't find the strength to stand on his shaking legs. Hunter Sung really had been planning to kill the giants by himself.

A thought occurred to him.

Hunter Sung is doing…what I had planned to do to Korea!

President Matsumoto's plan had been to put the Korean hunters out of

commission and use the Japanese hunters to take control. But the tables had turned. The Japanese hunters were in disarray, and the Korean hunter Jinwoo was single-handedly dominating Japan. One man was accomplishing what President Matsumoto, the Hunter's Association of Japan, their top-rank hunters, and even the Japanese government had jointly failed to pull off.

"……"

The president snapped out of his daze to relay an order to his worried employees. "Please leave the room. I would like to be by myself for a while."

Alone in the empty room, he hung his head. He had never before experienced this feeling of profound loss that now overwhelmed him. President Matsumoto had been utterly, completely defeated.

However, his mind settled after some brief reflection, and his heart filled with endless gratitude. Quietly, he shed a few tears.

That day, Jinwoo and his minions headed east from Osaka, defeating all the giants they encountered, and finally arrived in Tokyo.

* * *

Thud!

Two dead giants fell to the ground.

[You have leveled up!]

Jinwoo pumped his fist. He couldn't remember the last time he had leveled up this easily. He clenched his fists.

He was heading in a straight line from Osaka to Tokyo, the origin of the dungeon break, and so far, he'd killed thirteen giants and leveled up six times. Since one giant was equal to a boss of any other dungeon, Jinwoo received a huge amount of experience points from every kill. Not to mention, his soldiers were busy killing giants as well, which also contributed to his total.

He couldn't help but pump his fist with each notification. And speaking of…

[You have leveled up!]

There it is!

Jinwoo welcomed the message, which was accompanied by a familiar voice in his head.

My king, we have dispatched yet another enemy.

It was Beru, whose army of ants was advancing the fastest among the three divisions. Considering Beru was his strongest soldier and the ants made up most of Jinwoo's minions, that was to be expected. Beru tended to report each takedown.

Jinwoo praised their accomplishments.

Nice. Excellent job.

Thank you, my king.

Jinwoo then checked the other two divisions through Sensory Sharing. Although not as good as the ant army led by Beru, the high orc army led by Fang and the elite army led by Igris were proceeding smoothly. Jinwoo was proud of his soldiers leveling up so rapidly.

"Boss, should we set up camp here for the night?"

Jinwoo opened his eyes to see Jinho pulling out a tent. Jinwoo looked up and saw that the sun was already setting. He wasn't physically tired thanks to recovery potions and the effects of leveling up, but the mental fatigue was beginning to take a toll.

I need some rest.

He nodded. This would be their campsite for tonight. The two men worked together to quickly pitch the tent and prepare dinner.

It was autumn, and a chilly wind was blowing. As he warmed up the meal provided by the Hunter's Association of Japan on the fire, Jinwoo mused that winter couldn't be too far off.

Winter… He could see Tokyo from here. If he described a civilization's rise and fall according to seasons, Tokyo appeared to be in the middle of its winter. For some reason, the devastated city looked familiar.

Where have I seen this before?

Jinwoo searched through his memories.

The Demon's Castle.

Tokyo looked just like the wasted cities within the Demon's Castle dungeon. The only difference was that Tokyo wasn't on fire.

Jinwoo's expression grew dark.

Could this be……?

Every single floor of the Demon's Castle had shown cities in ruin. Had the architect of the system been implying something?

Jinwoo snorted.

Well, whatever.

The architect was already dead in some dungeon. Jinwoo hadn't had any contact with it since, so there was absolutely no way it had survived.

If this was a sign of things to come……

He'd just have to stop it. The sole reason he'd amassed power was because he didn't want to be outmatched by anyone. He had leveled up, acquired skills, and leveled up again to finally arrive at this point.

Ba-dump!

The Black Heart leaped as if responding to his thoughts. Jinwoo placed a hand on his chest and smiled faintly as he felt his hearts beat.

A doctor at the hospital had told him that there was nothing strange about him.

"Nothing abnormal here. You're perfectly healthy, Hunter Sung."

Jinwoo had gotten a full checkup the night before he left Korea. Although the doctor had scanned Jinwoo's chest twice, he hadn't spotted anything out of the ordinary. The Black Heart wasn't any kind of physical change. Even though Jinwoo could feel it beating, it didn't actually exist.

That sounds crazy.

Jinwoo laughed in spite of himself. He was relieved to hear that he was

anatomically the same as everyone else. But then where was this heartbeat coming from?

A gentle breeze blew toward them from downtown Tokyo, carrying an immeasurably scary and almost sticky mana.

“Boss……” Jinho looked uncomfortable. The mana was so powerful, even Jinho with his low perception had picked up on it.

Jinwoo silently nodded. The wind had obviously originated from the giant guarding the gate in Shinjuku. Compared to the energy exuded by the other giants Jinwoo had dealt with so far, this felt completely different and sent goose bumps up his arms.

But Jinwoo had to laugh. The Black Heart pounded in his chest as if in response to the giant’s mana. Once he defeated this enemy, how many levels would he advance? And what kind of shadow soldier would it be?

Jinwoo couldn’t wait.

* * *

Igris’s elite and ice bear armies were the first to arrive in Tokyo, followed by Fang’s high orc army. Igris spotted their approach and greeted them with a nod. Fang grinned under the hood of his robe and nodded in return. Soon after…

Stomp, stomp, stomp!

The sound of marching preceded the large group of shadow soldiers emerging through the light fog. It was Beru’s army of ants. They had taken the longest route and killed the most giants and so were the last to arrive in Tokyo.

Igris greeted Beru, who led the ants.

“……” Beru, however, walked past Igris and approached Jinwoo from behind, respectfully dropping down on one knee.

“Oh, the gang’s all here.” Jinwoo tore his gaze from the giant in the distance. “You did well, everyone.”

As he welcomed his shadow soldiers, those who could followed Beru’s example and knelt on one knee. The ice bears weren’t built to move like that, so they lowered their bodies and touched their noses to the ground.

There stood all the humanoid, bear, ant, high orc, naga, and other types of shadow soldiers Jinwoo had collected until now. They numbered close to a thousand.

“Everyone, on your feet.” The soldiers stood with a gesture of Jinwoo’s hand.

It was quite an amazing sight. Jinho was blown away as he took it in.

Good thing they’re the boss’s minions. If they were actual magic beasts……

He couldn’t help but tremble at the thought of this assemblage of powerful magic beasts loose in the world. He was glad they were his allies—a word befitting Jinwoo more than anyone he knew.

However, there was an even more awe-inspiring sight behind him. Jinho swallowed hard as he nervously looked over his shoulder.

There stood a giant, the likes of which was completely different from the ones he had seen up to now. The magic beast’s head was so far from the ground, it could be mistaken for a skyscraper.

“Whoa…” Jinho couldn’t help but gasp. There was a huge difference between seeing it in a video versus in real life. His mouth hung open in shock.

Jinwoo patted the top of Jinho’s head with a laugh. “Careful, your jaw’s about to fall off.”

“B-boss…” Jinho snapped out of it and scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

Jinwoo inspected the giant.

How could such a thing exist?

It was an impossibly big creature. Jinwoo felt an urge to flee as quickly as possible because of the terrifying energy emanating from it. He was getting an ominous feeling about this. There were usually two ways to shake this kind of foreboding: run away and hide from the source or eliminate it.

His choice had been made from the moment he’d left Korea—no, from the moment he’d reawakened.

Ba-dump, ba-dump!

He briefly closed his eyes and enjoyed the sound of his heartbeat, then addressed Jinho.

“Stay far.”

“Roger that.” Jinho resolutely nodded and hurried away, past the ranks of the shadow soldiers.

Okay, then……

Jinwoo waited until Jinho was far enough before summoning the newest members of his family.

“Come forth.”

Though not as big as the boss giant, the shadows soldiers that emerged were still hulking figures. Jinwoo named them No. 1 through 13 in order of extraction. With them comprising the front line, his army seemed all the more infallible.

That should do it.

His preparations complete, Jinwoo raised his hand high toward the sky, and the shadow soldiers prepared to attack.

“My soldiers.”

His minions were either clad in black armor or covered in black smoke. Jinwoo looked at each in turn, then faced the giant in the distance. It gazed down at him indifferently, as if disinterested in anyone not within swatting distance.

I definitely don’t like this.

Jinwoo didn’t appreciate being looked down upon. A feral grin spread across his face, and he pointed his hand toward the giant.

“Advance!”

Beru flung his head back and screeched. “SKRAAAAAAAH!”

The army charged forward as one.

RRRRRUMBLE!

The ground shook with the sound of rolling thunder, and dust flew into the air. Finally, Jinwoo’s soldiers entered the giant’s domain.

As soon as they did, the space around them changed.

“What the—?!” Jinwoo couldn’t help but yell.

The giant vanished for a split second, and upon its reappearance, half of Jinwoo’s soldiers had been eliminated.

Sliding?

The giant had slid across the space with his legs outstretched in an incredibly destructive move. He had halved the single mass of soldiers. But they wouldn’t let the giant off that easily.

The enlarged Fang got right in its face before the dust had settled.

Hwoop!

Fang inhaled deeply and spat out a pillar of fire.

Fwooooooom!

This would’ve melted any magic beasts vulnerable to flame, but the giant managed to block the fiery blast with the palm of his hand. Jinwoo could feel Fang’s shock.

The giant grabbed a soldier by the ankle. Ordinarily the size of a building, the minion looked like a child in the giant’s grip. It threw the soldier at Fang before he could attack again, sending the two crashing hard into each other.

……

Jinwoo’s eyes narrowed as Fang vanished in a puff of black smoke. The thousand-versus-one battle between Jinwoo’s army and the giant had officially begun, but it was more aptly described as a one-sided display of violence.

“Kiiieee!”

“Arghhhh!”

The soldiers were getting pummeled by the giant. With each move of its fists, palms, elbows, knees, heels, and feet, it wiped out dozens of soldiers.

Bam!

Bam!

Bam!

The giant moved faster than the most agile hunter ever could.

“Skrah!” Upon seeing the giant crushing ants underfoot, Beru started dashing toward it, only to be stopped by Jinwoo.

“Not yet.”

Beru took a step back. He and Igris flanked Jinwoo, awaiting his command, but it was obvious that both were itching to join the fray.

It’s not time yet.

Jinwoo pursed his lips. Despite the enormous boost from the Black Heart, his mana was rapidly consumed as his soldiers continuously regenerated.

However, Jinwoo stood fast and calmly observed the giant. His plan was to try and figure out his opponent’s weakness, using his immortal army as bait.

Wham!

The giant crushed shadow soldiers under its knee and pounded the ground with its fist.

Boom!

The streets shook like an earthquake, dissipating countless soldiers into black smoke. With the giant’s perfect defense and vicious attacks, the battle was like something straight out of a nightmare.

But it wasn’t a complete loss. In the middle of the desolate metropolis, Jinwoo’s eyes glinted as he concentrated.

I knew it……!

The giant’s hard skin was encased by a thin, armor-like layer of mana that deflected any damage, so the giant was recklessly attacking without even trying to protect itself. However, there had been one instance where it acted in self-defense. When Fang had used Fire Dragon’s Breath, the giant had shielded its face with its hands. What if that wasn’t a reflex……?

“Kaisel!” Jinwoo summoned the flying dragon.

Kaisel burst out of Jinwoo’s shadow and spread his large wings.

Fwap!

“Kreeee!”

Jinwoo got on Kaisel’s back. “Beru! Igris!”

Beru extended his own wings, and Igris got on behind Jinwoo. With both passengers on board, Kaisel flapped his wings.

Kreeee!

They rose into the air.

Let’s go!

The four of them shot straight toward the giant’s head.

The giant’s eyes shifted to one side. Even though the beast was occupied with battling a thousand shadow soldiers, it spotted Kaisel and Beru heading for it at top speed.

Jinwoo nodded to himself. He was now certain it had the same ability he did to seemingly slow down time. That was how the boss giant was able to move much faster than the others of its kind.

The giant began turning toward them.

Get out of the way!

Jinwoo and Igris leaped off Kaisel’s back just as the giant’s fist struck.

Pow!

Jinwoo’s eye twitched as Kaisel disintegrated. It wasn’t fun watching his soldiers being destroyed, but the silver lining was that his target was now within reach.

Igris attacked first. He swung the Demon Monarch’s Sword downward in midair.

Zzzzt!

Blue lightning streaked from the blade toward the giant’s forehead. The beast tilted its head back to avoid the blast.

Again!

The magic beast dodged a second lightning strike to its face. Certain that the giant's weakness was its face, Jinwoo drew himself toward it using Ruler's Authority. Beru followed close behind.

Demon Monarch's Daggers.

Jinwoo tightly gripped the weapons that appeared in both hands, and Beru extended his claws. Together, they launched a joint attack. The ground soldiers finished regenerating and went after the giant's ankles.

Ka-blam!

Boom!

Flames shot out of the hands of the mage soldiers and exploded on contact with their target. Lightning struck, pillars of fire scorched, soldiers bit and clawed at its body.

Jinho intently watched the unbelievable battle unfold, not missing a beat.

"……" He was rendered speechless.

This was no longer a fight between a hunter and a magic beast. It was a battle of monster versus monster. A magic beast as tall as a skyscraper versus a hunter commanding a thousand minions—it was hard to decide which was more monstrous.

Oh man……

Jinho felt it was a waste that he was the only one around to witness the clash between these two titans. He tried to calm himself while keeping his attention glued to Jinwoo.

Just then, Jinwoo's dagger stabbed the giant in the eye.

Shhk!

The giant reeled, flailing its head in pain, but Jinwoo wouldn't let go.

It's working.

He held on tightly to the dagger lodged in the giant's eye and activated a skill.

Mutilation!

Shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk!

His other dagger shredded the giant's eyeball. The magic beast's torso writhed violently, but Jinwoo hung on. The hunter looked over his shoulder as he dangled from the giant's eye.

Beru!

As you wish, sire!

On command, Beru flew straight into the opening his master had created. With Jinwoo on the outside and Beru on the inside, the two began tearing the giant's face apart.

The giant opened its mouth wide in a silent scream. Ants began attacking its immobile feet.

Whump!

The giant dropped to its knees as one of the tendons on its ankles was severed.

Thud!

The ground shook at the sudden dispersion of weight. Despite it all, Jinwoo and Beru continued their attack.

"Mutilation!"

Shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk!

Mutilation!

Shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk!

Mutilation!

Shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk-shhk!

The giant struggled in agony, but to no avail, and eventually, it stopped resisting. Its body slowly began tilting to one side until…

Kaboom!

The giant's body crashed to the ground.

A familiar electronic chime sounded.

Ping!

[You have defeated an enemy.]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

Jinwoo raised his fist in victory.

Yes!

He gently landed on the ground and let out a sigh of relief but then stopped dead in his tracks as he noticed something odd.

Huh……?

2

THE KING OF GIANTS

2

THE KING OF GIANTS

Wait a minute. Jinwoo hurriedly brought the notification window up again. He had no time to celebrate the quadruple level-ups as he zeroed in on the first message. He was stunned.

[You have defeated an enemy.]

That wasn't the boss?!

Jinwoo's surprised stare shifted to the giant with dull, lifeless eyes. Its strength and imposing aura had been completely different from the other giants and had shocked even Jinwoo. There was no way it hadn't been the boss of the dungeon, but here the system was, claiming it was a regular old magic beast.

"Boooss!" Jinho excitedly called out to him as he ran toward Jinwoo. But Jinwoo urgently signaled for him to freeze.

"Ah!" Whether he was listening to Jinwoo or something had spooked him, Jinho froze in his tracks.

Jinwoo's expression turned grave. He hadn't received the customary notification that he'd defeated the master of the dungeon, which meant the raid wasn't over.

And that wasn't the only weird thing. There was no sign of the black smoke coming from the giant's corpse that indicated shadow extraction was possible. Right on cue, he heard a chime.

Ping!

[You cannot extract a shadow.]

What's going on?

As Jinwoo pondered the many unexpected turns of events, he heard the sound of cracking bones. The giant's jaw was moving. Its mouth opened, and Jinwoo caught a glimpse of a humanoid figure.

……!

He immediately dropped into a battle stance, light glinting off the sharp blades of the two daggers he'd summoned.

However, the voice that emerged from the giant's mouth sounded familiar.

"My king…… It is but your simple servant." Beru emerged, as courteous to Jinwoo as ever.

"……Oh, it was just you." Jinwoo relaxed.

Beru's presence had been indistinguishable from the giant's, masked by the magic beast's tremendous levels of mana. Jinwoo sent the daggers back to inventory after confirming Beru's identity.

The ant king was drenched in the giant's guts and blood. It was clear how much effort he'd exerted hacking away at the giant's innards. Jinwoo smiled and opened his mouth to praise Beru but paused and wrinkled his nose.

What the heck is that smell……?

The disgusting stench grew worse as Beru drew closer. Beru was also able to smell the fluids and wore the same expression of disgust. The ant stopped right in front of Jinwoo and bowed.

"Okay, then……" Jinwoo was about to pat Beru on the shoulder for a job well done but changed his mind upon spotting an unidentified yellow liquid. "Good job, Beru."

"……Thank you, my liege." Beru sounded uncharacteristically curt.

In any case, this was not the time to be concerned about the yellow mystery goo. If this behemoth wasn't the master of the dungeon, then where would he find it?

Vmmmmm……

The air around them started to subtly vibrate.

……!

Jinwoo's defenses were up again. A split second later, Beru sensed it, too, and immediately moved to shield his master.

"Skraaah!"

A sudden gale storm hit them.

Ugh!

Jinwoo gritted his teeth.

Wind forceful enough to uproot trees blew through them in a blink of an eye, then calmed. Thinking the danger had passed, Beru moved from his spot in front of Jinwoo. The hunter scanned his surroundings, then gasped as he realized what had happened.

No way!

That was no whirlwind. It was the giant releasing its copious stores of mana. The resulting blast had swept away everything in their vicinity.

What happened to Jinho?

Jinwoo spun around to where Jinho had been standing and was relieved to find him safe in Igris's arms.

Whew……

Jinwoo inspected the direction in which the magic power had headed.

……

Every iota of mana formerly housed within the dead giant had been sucked into the gate, as if the gate had swallowed it up. The black membrane that used to seal off the gate had been shattered long ago during the dungeon break, so they could clearly see the world inside.

Vmmmm……

The vibrations in the air let out a low hum. Despite the countless things Jinwoo had experienced, he had never seen anything like this before.

There's something in there.

His perception stat was picking up something. Jinwoo peered into the depths. Whatever was in there made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He simultaneously felt goose bumps forming and chills up his spine.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

Jinwoo's heartbeat accelerated, as if resonating with the vibrations.

"Boss……" Step by cautious step, Jinho approached Jinwoo and peered at the gate.

Given the danger, Jinwoo looked at Jinho and emphasized, "Wait here for me."

"Yes, boss." Jinho obediently nodded. As much as he wanted to tag along, he had a feeling he would only be a burden.

Satisfied with Jinho's answer, Jinwoo stepped through the gate with his shadow soldiers.

Whoa, this is……

High-rank dungeons tended to be large, but none had ever come close to this.

……This is huge!

He was convinced that the word *huge* existed purely to describe this place. He had to swallow his gasp as he walked through the endlessly high and wide passage.

He proceeded without making a single noise. This had been his modus operandi ever since he had been a low-rank hunter, incapable of doing much to guard himself against magic beasts, but the habit persisted even after he'd distinguished himself as an S-rank hunter. An abundance of caution was never a bad thing.

Jinwoo's eyes glittered in the dark. He kept his guard up as he advanced farther into the dungeon. Jinwoo's soldiers, having fully recovered from the fierce battle, quietly followed.

How long had they been walking? Jinwoo stopped, and Beru, who was right

behind him, gestured to the rest of the army. As a creature made to live in colonies, Beru was good at commanding large groups. The entire shadow army came to a halt.

Beru leaned in to say something. “My king……”

“Shhh.” Jinwoo held up his index finger. “Do you hear that?”

Beru focused his ears and then nodded. “……I do.”

Beru could hear it, too. Laughter, faint enough that only someone of Beru’s caliber could perceive it, came from the end of the dungeon where the boss was supposed to be. The masculine-sounding laugh continued in the distance, as if whoever it was was sincerely happy about something.

Jinwoo was puzzled. Despite the darkness, the opponent should have detected Jinwoo’s approach as well as the numbers of the shadow army at this distance.

Yet it’s laughing it up?

Of course, Jinwoo also measured up his opponent. The ominous energy making it harder to breathe was even stronger than that of the boss giant.

However, Jinwoo himself was no slouch. He unleashed his full mana.

Wooooom……

Waves of magic rippled around Jinwoo, emanating incredible power strong enough to eliminate the shadow soldiers in his vicinity if he’d so elected.

Ha-ha-ha!

The opponent continued to laugh. Jinwoo found himself grinning as well.

What an intriguing fellow.

He kept smiling as he entered the boss’s lair, the wide-open space where the enormous giant had been housed. Jinwoo headed toward the source of the laughter without hesitation. The shadow soldiers marched behind him.

Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp!

The army of minions cloaked in black smoke and moving in perfect order should’ve been enough to intimidate the enemy. However…

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

That wasn’t the case for the man draped in chains from the neck down. He wasn’t just bound by the black chains tethered to the wall of the dungeon. Some of them pierced the man’s body. One had to wonder what heinous crime this wretched soul had committed to be punished so horribly.

Jinwoo frowned, but the fellow beamed at him as if greeting a dear friend.

“It’s completely, utterly ridiculous! All of you detestable Rulers, feast your eyes on the one who found me first!”

Jinwoo stopped at a distance as the prisoner continued his rant.

“The chains…… Please unlock these chains. I know the Rulers’ plan. We must quickly inform the other Monarchs—”

The man suddenly stopped, and the joy in his eyes faded.

“……”

The man and Jinwoo carefully scrutinized each other. It was then that Jinwoo realized his face was the same as that of the last, humongous giant.

He……isn’t human.

The man’s magic energy felt different from a human’s. He also fluently spoke the language of magic beasts. But why was a magic beast chained up inside the dungeon? Many types of bosses had been found in gates over the last ten years but never one imprisoned like this.

At least the mysterious man had given him a potential hint with the word *Rulers*.

“……”

“……”

There was a short pause before the prisoner spoke again. “You’re……not the one I know.”

Jinwoo didn’t know who he’d been mistaken for, but he wasn’t going to deny anything. He had never seen this guy’s face before today, either.

“Did the Rulers or whoever do this to you?” Jinwoo asked.

“I am being used as the foundation stone for the real war.”

This was a first for Jinwoo. He had repeatedly tried to probe intelligent magic beasts, but none had been able to explain their origins. However, the magic beast now before him had revealed the purpose of his existence. He was the cornerstone upon which the real war was going to be built. Whether he was telling the truth or not, this could serve as a clue.

“Who are these Rulers?”

“The longtime enemies of the Monarchs.”

Monarchs……

Jinwoo remembered something the angel statue had mentioned when cornered, something about the other Monarchs not sitting by and letting things happen. Wherever the other Monarchs were, Jinwoo had a feeling one was currently in front of him.

“So those Rulers chained you up like this because……?”

“Yes,” the man replied sorrowfully. “I am one of the Monarchs.”

He continued desperately. “It’s likely both the Monarchs and Rulers are after you. You don’t have enough power to deal with both sides as you are. You’ll need more influence.”

Jinwoo had a hard time keeping up with him, but one word caught his attention.

“Influence?”

The man nodded. “Release me, and I shall help you.”

Jinwoo couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Who was helping whom now? A magic beast wanted to help a human?

Jinwoo was so taken aback, he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Why should I believe you?”

The man was resolute. “I will make you believe me.”

He chanted a spell, his lips moving like a recording sped up a hundred times. As he did, the dormant magic power within the lair began swirling around him,

and Jinwoo instantly summoned his daggers in reply. Had there been any hostility behind the magic, Jinwoo would've stuck a dagger straight in the man's forehead, but he remained patient. The amount of mana the prisoner was manipulating was extremely small compared to what either he or Jinwoo wielded, and the hunter sensed no hostility.

……

Jinwoo waited, prepared to use Dagger Barrage if necessary. The tension in the air pricked his skin like a needle.

Finally, the man finished chanting in the strange language, and a chime signaled an incoming notification.

[Regia, the King of Giants and Monarch of the Beginning, has activated the Oath of Sincerity (Negotiation).]

[Once the Oath of Sincerity (Negotiation) is accepted, both the caster and the recipient cannot lie.]

[Would you like to accept the Oath of Sincerity (Negotiation)?] (Y/N)

Jinwoo's eyes were drawn to the man's title.

The King of Giants……

Jinwoo recalled all the giants he had felled. That also explained why the one guarding the gate had worn the same face.

The man wordlessly awaited Jinwoo's decision.

What should I do?

Jinwoo stared at the blinking Yes and No buttons as he debated. Considering he had received a message from the system about it, this would affect him for sure. But it was clear which of them would be at a greater disadvantage.

It's definitely his loss.

Jinwoo had the upper hand. As coldhearted as it sounded, he could always just kill the guy if he asked a question Jinwoo couldn't answer. Besides, it was his idea to begin with, and Jinwoo wasn't a newbie who would feel guilty killing a magic beast.

Yes.

Ping!

The system signaled with another chime that the deal was done.

[The Oath of Sincerity (Negotiation) has been activated.]

[The caster and the recipient cannot lie to each other until both parties mutually agree to cancel the oath.]

As soon as Jinwoo accepted, the King of Giants reiterated what he had said earlier. “Release me, and I shall help you.”

“Mmph…… Mmph……!” Jinwoo was bewildered. It was as if his throat had been sealed.

The King of Giants burst into laughter. “Yes, that is the Oath of Sincerity.”

“……”

He really had been affected. Jinwoo had been testing it by trying to say, *I trust you completely. I’ll unchain you right away*.

The Oath of Sincerity, huh…?

His heart raced after experiencing it firsthand. He couldn’t trust the Monarch completely yet, since there was still the method of withholding information. Rather, Jinwoo was more cautious than before the oath had been struck.

“Why can you talk freely but not other magic beasts?”

“Magic beasts?”

“Creatures that emerge from gates.”

“Oh, you mean denizens of chaos!” The King of Giants laughed derisively. “Let me ask you in return. Why do you think the denizens of chaos and the Monarchs who rule them are one and the same?”

He wore a solemn expression befitting a king. “The denizens of chaos exiting from these gates are all defeated troops. They were captured by the armies of the Rulers and broken after living in captivity for an eternity. But I am a king. I am different from them. I have been patiently waiting to escape the Rulers’ grasp.”

The king laughed wistfully. “And so here we are.”

“……” Jinwoo tried to take in the information as objectively as possible.

If he truly is on a different tier from other magic beasts……

Jinwoo might finally get some answers for once. He swallowed hard at the thought. There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but first, there was one thing Jinwoo needed to confirm.

“By any chance, the Rulers’ armies—do they have wings and wear silver armor……?”

“Indeed. Those are the Rulers’ soldiers.”

It was as Jinwoo suspected. He felt like a puzzle piece had been slotted into the right spot. He began to suspect that the footage the angel statue had shown him was an actual memory and not something manufactured. What in the world was going on?

Jinwoo asked, “Why do these Rulers keep sending creatures to us?”

In other words, he wanted to know why gates existed. With that knowledge, he might be able to keep them from spawning to begin with, so that was his biggest concern.

“I’ve already told you, haven’t I?” The Monarch declared, “They are preparing for a war.”

“A war?”

“They’re trying to transform this world into a battlefield and challenge the Monarchs once more.”

“I don’t understand…… What does that have to do with sending monsters to Earth?”

True, it did turn the world into something far worse than a war zone. Jinwoo recalled the gruesome incident at Jinah’s school. But that involved humans, not nonhuman entities.

“Why, it’s to bring mana into your world!”

Jinwoo felt like someone had smacked him on the back of the head.

Everybody, both hunters and civilians alike, believed that if magic beasts were curses from the gates, then magic powers were blessings. Magic and essence stones had become excellent sources of energy, so to hear it was actually a precursor to a war?

The King of Giants continued. “The Rulers determined that the best way to bring mana into a world in which it hadn’t existed before would be to spill the blood of those who had it. What better way than to sacrifice their captives?”

Needless to say, the world had become denser and denser with mana over the years. This was not a natural phenomenon but, rather, the fruit hanging from the trees planted in the soil watered with the blood of magic beasts.

“Mana makes the world stronger. The Rulers’ plan was to fortify your world in order to stop it from getting destroyed.”

“And this so-called war……?”

“A rematch between the Monarchs and the Rulers that will turn the world you know into a living hell.”

A battle between the Rulers’ armies and the creatures that magic beasts used to be, just as Jinwoo had witnessed in the memory. If the king was to be believed, then it really would be hell on Earth.

The king’s face darkened. “There isn’t much time.”

“……?”

“Once it is discovered that the one who found me is you, both the Monarchs and the Rulers will mobilize. It’s possible their envoys are already on the move.”

“You keep making it sound like they’re after me…… Why is that?”

“You really don’t know anything.” The king sounded like he pitied Jinwoo. “The power you possess isn’t actually yours.”

Jinwoo nodded in agreement. The abilities of the Shadow Monarch had been given to him by the system, so he had no grounds to protest that.

“But the fact you now wield it is evidence that the original owner betrayed the other Monarchs.”

That tracked with what the angel statue had said. It had most likely been a denizen of chaos that served the Monarchs.

As Jinwoo ran through more questions in his head, the King of Giants spoke up. “You’ve become the enemy of both the Monarchs and the Rulers. But I alone swear that I will stand by your side and fight for you. So will you help me?”

The King of Giants was convinced that would be enough to persuade Jinwoo.

However, the hunter had another suggestion. “If that’s the case, it would be better if you were one of my shadow soldiers.”

The King of Giants shuddered, caught off guard. For a split second, he saw Shadow Monarch in the human. He wasn’t wrong; it would be better for Jinwoo to have a loyal subordinate instead of a stranger for an ally. The king was impressed that Jinwoo had thought of that.

“The Monarchs and Rulers have astral bodies. Once an astral body dies, it vanishes and cannot be made into a shadow. So I cannot become one of your soldiers.”

Jinwoo nodded.

I see.

That was why the king hadn’t even considered the possibility of being turned into a shadow soldier. The Oath of Sincerity guaranteed he was speaking the truth.

After some thought, Jinwoo finally looked up.

“Do you feel you have enough reason to help me?” asked the king.

Jinwoo stared at him. The King of Giants appeared confident he would be released from his chains. Jinwoo wasn’t someone who wanted to see others suffer. Nor did he have a reason to decline his offer to be an ally. However…

Why did he feel so uneasy?

I’m……I’m missing something.

Jinwoo had to figure it out. He broke into a cold sweat.

The king pleaded to him once again. “Please unchain me.”

Jinwoo let out a deep sigh. No matter how much he debated, he couldn’t think of a single reason to refuse the king’s favor. Maybe he was overthinking things.

Am I being paranoid……?

Jinwoo approached the captive king with a Demon Monarch’s Dagger in hand. They exchanged nods, and with one strike, the mana-infused dagger effortlessly severed one of the chains.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

His heart was having a fit. Jinwoo had already made up his mind, so why the apprehension?

Clank!

He cut a second chain. The King of Giants remained stoic as his shackles fell one by one.

The third chain.

Clunk!

Jinwoo leaned in to cut the chain rooted in the king’s back.

Ba-dump!

His heart sank…but why? What had he missed? Thoughts raced through his mind like a raging river crashing onto rocks.

Jinwoo stopped working on the chains and looked at the king. “You said you’d be on my side, right?”

“Of course. If you help me, I’ll help you. This is a legal and binding agreement between Monarchs.”

Jinwoo had heard this response several times already. But there was one other thing he wanted to confirm.

“In that case, are you on the side of humans?”

“……” The king was silent.

The Oath of Sincerity prevented the King of Giants from responding.

Jinwoo looked at the back of the king's neck—and the black essence stone stuck there, cold and shiny. For as long as the essence stone was a part of him, the king would have to obey the Rulers just like any other magic beasts, including their order to kill humans.

Murderous intent flowed from the king as he aimed for Jinwoo's temple with his freed right hand. But the chains kept Jinwoo just out of reach. Jinwoo in turn ducked and plunged his dagger into the king's chest.

Shunk!

Despite being draped in chains, Jinwoo's dagger went in deep.

"Gah!" The King of Giants coughed out blood.

But that wouldn't be good enough. It was too dangerous to let him live; this magic beast might become another curse to the planet. With that final decision, Jinwoo repeatedly stabbed the king in the chest while avoiding his attacks.

Shunk, shunk, shunk, shunk!

The king finally stopped moving after the sixth strike. It was over. Jinwoo retrieved his dagger.

The King of Giants looked him straight in the eyes and smiled. "It's too bad, but it seems this is the end."

"……" Jinwoo took a step back and shook the blood from his dagger.

The king continued. "As the conflict between the citizens of your world and the denizens of chaos grows more intense, it will become more and more of a battlefield."

Cough!

The king coughed up blood again and smiled one last time. "May…all that you wish to protect burn to ashes—"

"That won't happen."

Jinwoo cut off the king's sentence as well as his head.

Shhhhk!

[You have defeated the master of the dungeon.]

With his last breath, the King of Giants released a tidal wave of magic power out into the human realm.

The transformation of the world had begun.

* * *

A few days prior to the king's death, a helicopter belonging to the Hunter Command Center landed on the grounds of a luxurious mansion.

Takakakaka!

The owner of the mansion had been enjoying a late lunch, but he stopped cutting his steak.

"No one told me we were expecting visitors."

"I'll go see who it is, sir." His manservant bowed and hurried away.

Upon spotting the two people who emerged from the helicopter, the owner frowned.

"……Well, that's troubling."

The housekeeper clearing the dishes raised an eyebrow at his words.

The dignified gentleman sitting at the table was Christopher "Chris" Reed, one of the five greatest hunters in the world. He was a man better known as the "National-Level Hunter" than by his actual name. Who could possibly trouble him?

His manservant rushed back into the room.

"Mr. Reed—!"

"I know." Chris cut him off and quietly rose to welcome the middle-aged man who next entered the room.

"Long time no see, Mr. Connor. And……" Chris's gaze turned to the lady standing behind the assistant director. "Mrs. Sellner."

It was already unusual for Michael Connor, the assistant director of the Hunter Command Center, to pay him a surprise visit, but things had to be dire for Mrs. Sellner to accompany him.

The assistant director rubbed his chin as he anxiously looked around. “I have something important to talk to you about. Could you please have everyone else leave the room?”

Chris’s hunch had been spot-on. Had the assistant director come alone, Chris would’ve punished him for disrupting his pleasant morning and made him wait a few hours before seeing him. However, he could not be rude to Mrs. Sellner.

After a pregnant pause as Chris took a swig of wine, he gestured for his manservant to approach and murmured, “Make sure no one comes near this room until they leave.”

“Yes, sir.” The manservant nodded and sent everyone, including the housekeeper, out of the room. He was the last to leave, bowing again and quietly closing the door at Chris’s nod. Only Chris, Michael, and Mrs. Sellner remained in the spacious chamber.

The master of the house scanned the two uninvited guests and smirked. Here, the second-in-command of the top organization in America was the lowest person present. Chris was a national-level hunter, and Mrs. Sellner and her augmenting abilities were priceless.

Oh my, where are my manners?

Christopher couldn’t let these honored guests stand. He quickly pulled out two chairs. “Please have a seat.”

Michael and Mrs. Sellner sat next to each other, and Chris took a seat across from them.

“So……” The National-Level Hunter looked back and forth between them with a smile. “What brings you two out here?”

Mrs. Sellner glanced at the assistant director, who nodded. Before she could speak, though, Chris raised his hand.

“Let me just say……” His expression made his displeasure clear. “If you’ve come here because of the S-rank gate on the East Coast, I’m not interested.”

His tone made it clear there was no room for argument.

“As you both know, the US government has granted me national-level status.

Therefore, I have the right to reject any of their requests, and I've already informed them of my decision not to participate in the raid."

A national-level hunter wasn't just an ordinary citizen of a country. They were living nations unto themselves and treated as such, which meant civic duty wasn't in their vocabulary.

Of course, they would cooperate when the occasion called for it, but since all the S-rank hunters in the country were teaming up for this raid, Chris didn't feel the need to lend a hand this time. He had no intention of changing his mind even if the assistant director had brought Mrs. Sellner here to entice him.

But Mrs. Sellner wasn't concerned with the gate, either. "That's not why I'm here, Chris. There's a more serious issue."

Japan was on the brink of extinction because of an S-rank gate, but there was a problem more urgent than an S-rank gate appearing on US soil?

Chris leaned in. "What is this so-called issue?"

She hesitated, then spoke with difficulty. "Chris…… Someone is going to kill you in the near future."

The room fell silent. No wonder the assistant director couldn't stop fidgeting and dabbing the sweat from his brow.

"Mrs. Sellner." Chris spoke in a low voice. "I haven't forgotten the favor you did for me."

Thanks to her ability, he had become much more powerful, surpassing a limit he never thought he could exceed. But that didn't mean she could look down on him.

"Exactly who would be murdering whom?"

Who would dare harm a national-level hunter? Cats don't pick fights with lions. Only another lion could kill a lion, but Chris was confident that a lion like him could beat other lions regardless.

This was another reason why he didn't want to participate in the raid. Why would a lion join a bunch of cats? Only a second-class lion like Thomas Andre would bother with such trivialities.

Although she could see the anger rising in Chris, Mrs. Sellner continued her explanation. “I had a dream about you not too long ago.”

“A dream?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

Chris was dumbfounded.

“In the dream, you were surrounded by some men, and—”

“Mrs. Sellner!” Chris couldn’t stand it anymore. “Did you really come all the way here to bother me with nonsense?!”

“It’s not nonsense. I’m a—”

“I’m aware of what kind of work you did before you awakened.”

Some individuals believed that Mrs. Sellner’s unique power came from her being a psychic, but in Chris’s opinion, her previous employment was no excuse for this drivel.

His face contorted. “I’m a national-level hunter. No one can kill me.”

“But in the dream—”

“That damn dream.” Chris sighed deeply and nodded. “Fine. Let’s assume I believe what you’re saying and there are enemies out there who can kill me. Now what? Who should I ask for help if this is all true?”

Should he call the police or ask the Hunter Command Center for protection against an enemy who could potentially eliminate a national-level hunter? Ridiculous.

Chris sneered. “Ultimately, there’s nothing I can do, is there?”

“……” After some thought, Mrs. Sellner replied. “There may be one person who can help you.”

“And who would that be?”

“Hunter Jinwoo Sung. He may be able to protect you.”

Jinwoo Sung? Chris had been ready to reject any suggestions, but the familiar name gave him pause. Where had he heard it before? It had been recently.

Is it that……?

Chris frowned. “Do you mean that Asian hunter who went to handle the dungeon break in Japan?”

“Yes, that’s Hunter Jinwoo Sung.”

Mrs. Sellner had seen the nearly unlimited power dormant within Hunter Sung, a power that might even surpass that of the national-level hunters. She was sharing all this with Chris because she was sincerely worried about him, but the proud hunter took it as an insult.

Bam!

He inadvertently slammed his fist down on the table, causing it to sink into the floor.

“Leave, Sellner! Now!” He sprang to his feet and jabbed his finger at the door.

“W-w-wait. I need to tell—” Michael tried to assuage Chris’s fury but balked. “W-we should go……”

Michael escorted out a reluctant Mrs. Sellner.

The waiting manservant ran in after seeing the broken table. “What happened, Mr. Reed?”

“……Nothing.” The master of the house shook his head.

Things would’ve ended very differently had the other party not been Mrs. Sellner, the woman to whom he owed a huge debt. He took a deep breath to calm himself.

Me, ask some no-name Asian hunter for help?

How dare she look down on Christopher Reed?

Chris turned to address his startled manservant, who quickly regained his composure. “Is there something you need, sir?”

“That hunter……Jinwoo Sung. When did they say he’s going to start the raid?”

The news about Japan had made headlines all over the world, including in the US. Jinwoo’s name had become as synonymous with the dungeon break in Japan as the giants running rampant.

The manservant looked at his watch and calculated the time difference. “I believe he is set to arrive in Japan in an hour.”

“An hour……”

Chris consoled himself with the thought that he at least had something to amuse himself with as he glared at the helicopter carrying Michael and Mrs. Sellner away.

* * *

[You have defeated the master of the dungeon.]

Whud.

The King of Giants lost his head. Jinwoo jumped back to avoid the blood gushing from his neck.

Ping!

Jinwoo assumed it was the usual notification from the system, but the contents turned out to be rather unusual.

[You have defeated one of the Nine Monarchs, Regia, Monarch of the Beginning.]

[Your experience points are being calculated.]

[This may take a moment given the large amount of experience points received.]

What?

This had never happened before, but there was no need to worry.

Ping! Ping! Ping! Ping!

The electronic chime rang nonstop as a slew of system notifications appeared.

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

……

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

……!

Jinwoo's eyes shot open at the grand total of eight messages.

Stat window!

[Level: 122]

Whoa!

Jinwoo gasped at his new level. He had reached level 100 after defeating the ants, but it had taken the longest time for him to level up again afterward, probably due to the difference in strength between him and the magic beasts. He had barely reached level 103 after receiving permission by some of the guilds to clear a few high-rank dungeons. But thanks to the giants and their kind, he now surpassed level 120.

Awesome.

Jinwoo nodded. Killing the king had been the correct decision. It was no coincidence that his level had gone up by eight. Despite being restrained by special chains, the Monarch still had enough mana to steal the hunter's breath away.

Jinwoo shuddered to think of such a creature loose in the world. Good thing he'd realized the beast's true colors before then.

The king's corpse suddenly cracked like dry earth, turned to sand, and disintegrated into dust. Jinwoo recalled his explanation.

"Once an astral body dies, it vanishes and cannot be made into a shadow. So I cannot become one of your soldiers."

Jinwoo had witnessed the death of an astral body for the first time. The king had been telling the truth. No black smoke or message regarding shadow extraction emerged from the sand. Jinwoo dug out the black essence stone and dusted it off.

It sucks that I can't make a new shadow soldier……but at least I get to take

this.

His face was reflected in the clear, mirrorlike surface of the essence stone. As he stared at it, the powerful energy stored inside made his fingers tingle.

So the Rulers are the ones who keep sending these here……

Curiously, whenever he had heard the word *Rulers*, a certain scene of four angels descending from the heavens would play in his head. Even though it wasn't real, the sight of them still gave him chills, and it felt like his heart dropped into his stomach.

Maybe those guys were the Rulers.

Jinwoo wouldn't be able to stand against those creatures if they turned up now. He clenched the essence stone in his hand.

I need to get even stronger.

In that sense, Jinwoo was lucky enough to have acquired the power of the Shadow Monarch. He had unimaginable power and the potential to gain more.

He wondered what would've happened if he'd been deemed unworthy due to a lack of points during the job change quest?

Jinwoo quietly spoke to the status window open before him. "Hey…… Say something already."

There was no response.

"……"

Having a conversation with the system was definitely on his bucket list.

Jinwoo stood, and his foot hit something as he turned.

Clink.

Huh?

He looked down to see the chains that had bound the King of Giants.

Hmm…… These might come in handy.

Jinwoo carefully grabbed hold of a chain still connected to the wall. Sure enough, he could feel his power being siphoned away.

Ooh.

The chain was absorbing his mana. One might have been escapable, but even a mighty being would have had difficulty escaping with several of these wrapped around them.

Jinwoo grinned as he watched his mana decrease little by little on the stat window.

Don't mind if I do.

He gleefully summoned a Demon Monarch's Dagger and cut the chains one by one but then realized he couldn't detect any drainage from the severed chains.

"What?"

The same thing was happening to all of them.

What's going on?

Jinwoo looked at the wall, then grabbed a chain connected to it again, confirming that it was siphoning mana as intended. He had an idea what was happening.

……So it's like that, huh?

The chains themselves weren't the artifact. The draining effect came from the power of the dungeon, which meant that the chains were nothing more than scrap metal once removed.

No use bringing these, then.

Jinwoo dropped them on the ground.

He was a little disappointed, but even without the chains, he'd achieved a lot. During this raid, he'd recruited giants for his shadow army, and his level had gone up to 122. It was everything he'd hoped for and more.

Jinwoo ditched the chains and turned around with a smile. Beru bowed, then pointed toward the exit. At his signal, the army before Jinwoo parted and cleared a wide path.

Jinwoo patted the now-clean Beru on the shoulder and headed toward the exit. Touched by this gesture, Beru followed his king, and behind him marched

the one thousand soldiers who had contributed so much to the fight, in perfect unison.

Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp!

The soldiers' heavy footsteps echoed through the dungeon. Jinwoo smiled as he spotted the sunlight streaming in from the exit. It signaled the end of the long battle against the giants.

* * *

A deafening silence had settled in the operation room of the Hunter's Association of Japan. All those present seemed to have forgotten how to breathe, their attention focused on the huge monitor mounted at the front. Every so often, the sound of someone swallowing nervously broke the quiet.

The screen displayed a satellite feed of Shinjuku as seen through a mana-detecting camera. Magic power appeared as blips of light on the map, and the stronger the magic power, the bigger the light.

Everyone in the room knew what the huge light in the middle of Tokyo represented, but they were all shocked to see the thousand or so smaller lights gathered in front of it.

"Are all of those Hunter Sung's minions?"

"Dear Lord……"

"There are easily more than five hundred, no?"

President Matsumoto quietly leaned toward the analyst sitting next to him. "How many minions are there?"

"We don't have an exact count because many of the dots overlap, but our estimate is well over eight hundred."

"Well over eight hundred" meant eight hundred at the very least. That was more than double the number of minions Jinwoo had utilized on Jeju Island.

President Matsumoto was gobsmacked.

He doubled their number in that short a time?

Heck, being able to increase one's minions at all was unheard of in and of

itself.

He slid a trembling hand down his face. If Jinwoo had been the enemy, it would've been a lost cause, so it was a relief to call him an ally. President Matsumoto was thankful for the mercy the hunter had shown Japan.

Barely over the shock, he returned his attention to the screen. The smaller points of light converged on the bigger one. The battle between Jinwoo's minions and the giant guarding the gate was about to go down. With sweaty palms, everyone nervously watched the lights continuously tangling with one another until finally…

The large blip of light dimmed and disappeared.

"Yeaaah!"

They erupted in cheers loud enough to shake the whole room. People laughed and cried as they exchanged hugs. The Japanese archipelago was free from the terror of the giants.

And the person to thank was a hunter from Korea.

"……" President Matsumoto stared at the screen in silence and then nodded. When Jinwoo had ruined his plans, he'd resented the heavens for giving this great hunter to Korea instead of Japan. But now he was thankful Jinwoo had been on the Korean side of events.

If it wasn't for him, Japan would be……

He shuddered at the thought, then picked up his phone to perform one of his final acts as the president of the association. The call went through immediately.

"How did it go?"

The prime minister's nervous voice came from the other end.

President Matsumoto was a little choked up but able to relay the news in an official tone. "Japan…… Japan is safe."

Loud cheers could be heard over the phone.

The prime minister managed to subdue himself to continue their

conversation.

“Good work, President Matsumoto. However, do not expect this to lessen the things you must answer for.”

“Of course not, sir.”

President Matsumoto was already prepared for this. A general who failed to kill the enemy’s general was expected to offer his own neck. And if the same enemy’s general saved their country? President Matsumoto had no excuse in the face of a complete defeat.

He spoke quietly. “I shall take any punishment. That is…the last thing I must do as president.”

* * *

The news that the giants had been eliminated instantly spread around the world, from the neighboring country of Korea to Brazil, the nation located on the opposite side of the planet. The whole world heard about Jinwoo’s achievement.

A Single Hunter Saves a Whole Nation!

Social media was abuzz about the possibility of a new national-level hunter. Koreans had been the only ones who cared about Jeju Island, but this time, the whole world had their eyes on him.

In Maryland, USA, the American hunters had safely completed the S-rank-gate raid and were on their way to attend a party hosted by the government, but a TV monitor in the hotel lobby caught their attention. The hunters stopped to watch the coverage from Japan, and their jaws dropped.

“What?”

“But……that doesn’t make sense……”

It defied logic. Yuri Orlov, the most famous support-type hunter in the world, had been killed in the blink of an eye. The boss giant’s movements had been captured on camera during that incident. *Monster* was barely an apt word for something of that speed and size. But a lone S-rank hunter had gotten rid of that fearsome creature?

“……Hunter Jinwoo Sung and his companion, D-rank hunter Jinho Yoo, arrived in Japan earlier that same day and……”

Actually, it would’ve been better if Jinwoo had gone in alone, but he got the job done with a D-rank hunter to protect? It was hard to believe, but the footage of teary Japanese people expressing their delight showed that it had to be true to some extent.

The news then switched over to coverage of a massive giant lying lifeless on the ground.

“Ack!” The three S-rank hunters simultaneously exclaimed. The reality finally started to hit them.

“There you guys are.”

The three hunters turned toward the voice, and their eyes went wide.

“Thomas……”

Thomas Andre grinned and waved a piece of paper at them.

“Wh-what’s that?”

“A contract stating that you accept the results.”

“What……?”

Thomas ignored their confusion and began jotting down the list of items they’d carelessly bet.

“You bet your yacht, and you bet your house, and you……” He stared at the third hunter and scratched his head with the end of the pen. “What did you bet again?”

The man swallowed hard and quickly clarified. “I didn’t bet anything.”

“Hey, that’s a pretty nice tie.”

“But I didn’t—”

“The tie.”

“No, I said I—”

Thomas pushed down the sunglasses he was wearing and gave the third

hunter a look that rendered him speechless. Having just witnessed another S-Rank take down a goliath of a magic beast on his own, the third hunter didn't want to offend a man who went around casually raiding S-rank dungeons.

"My necktie." With tears in his eyes, the man removed his tie.

A little later, Thomas hummed as he walked into the dining hall. He stopped when he spotted Laura, the manager of the top-rank hunters in Scavenger Guild. Thomas showed off the tie as she approached.

"How's my tie?"

"It looks expensive, but it doesn't go with your Hawaiian shirt."

"Really?" Thomas took it off and stuffed it in a nearby garbage can. "Yeah, I didn't think so, either."

Laura was used to Thomas's eccentricities, so she jumped into the issue at hand without missing a beat.

"We have a problem."

"A problem?" Thomas looked up. Based on his experience, if Laura deigned to make a personal appearance rather than discuss the matter over the phone, it was a big deal. "What problem?"

Laura anxiously explained. "They've announced the list of guilds invited to the International Guild Conference, and it includes the Ahjin Guild from Korea."

"Ahjin……Guild?" Thomas had a bad feeling about this. His voice turned serious.

Laura nodded. "Yes. That's the guild Hunter Sung recently established."

And there it was.

Thomas groaned. "So he's coming to America."

* * *

At a village in Ishikawa prefecture, the town's entrance was crowded despite the early hour.

"What's going on? Why is everyone out here?" a clueless man asked his neighbors.

The village was supposed to be in the middle of restorations, but people were milling around instead of working. He'd been diligently hauling away wreckage from the destroyed buildings so he was unnerved to see his fellow villagers acting this way.

"The thing is—" a friendly woman started to explain but became distracted by the sight of an approaching vehicle. "Oh my! He's coming! He's here!"

The crowd went wild, as if eager to welcome a long-lost relative home.

But there's no way it's that……

Curious, the man used a towel to wipe sweat off his neck. "Can anyone tell me who's coming?"

An older man seemed exasperated by his question. "They say the hunter is coming."

"The hunter? Which hunter?"

"Who else would it be?"

The villagers frantically waved their hands as the car drew near. Their expressions beamed with sincere joy and gratitude.

Wait……!

The man finally realized who they were all talking about and instinctively glanced over his shoulder. He took in the miserable reality of the half-destroyed village with idle tools and machines strewn everywhere.

Had nobody stopped the giant, their village would have been wiped off the face of the earth. The schools he'd attended, the roads he'd traveled, the places where he'd worked his ass off…… The hometown that elicited so many precious memories would've disappeared without a trace. His heart ached at the mere thought of it, and his eyes stung with unshed tears.

Is he really coming here?

He turned his head back toward the road.

The villagers hadn't been prompted to gather by their leaders to put on a show. They had done so on their own, motivated by their overflowing

appreciation.

The man was swept up in the mood soon enough, and he cheered loudly while swinging his towel around. “Whoooo!”

Though the expensive black van coming down the empty street was new, the caked-on dirt made it look at least ten years old. The Hunter’s Association of Japan stamp embossed on the license plate was hard to make out. The condition of the vehicle told the story of a battle, and the sight touched the villagers even more. The most emotional of them were in tears.

Soon, the van came to a smooth stop.

“Yaaaaay!”

“Mr. Hunter!”

Jinho, sporting sunglasses, exited from the driver’s seat to an enthusiastic welcome by the crowd. Jinho waved at every single villager.

“Mr. Hunter!” An employee of the Hunter’s Association of Japan had been waiting for them. He was barely able to push through the throng to get to Jinho. Huffing and puffing, he finally pulled it together enough to ask, “Are you Hunter Jinwoo Sung?”

The employee spoke Japanese, but luckily, Jinho understood a few words.

“No.” Jinho shook his head and pointed at the sky. “There.”

Kreeeee!

Kaisel the winged dragon let out a joyful roar.

“Wh-what the heck is that?”

“Huh?!”

Just like the saying *once bitten, twice shy*, the creature flying overhead made the villagers, who had been living in fear of the giants for some time, quiver where they stood.

However, Kaisel merely continued circling above them.

Kreeee!

Once the people realized that Kaisel meant no harm, they stared at the dragon with both wonder and trepidation. Just then, a shadowy human figure leaped from Kaisel's back.

Thud!

The villagers gaped in awe as Jinwoo cushioned his landing with Ruler's Authority.

"……" The association employee, who was closest to Jinwoo, could only stare while holding his glasses.

Jinho spoke to Jinwoo on his behalf. "Boss, this man was asking for you."

"Really?" Jinwoo approached the employee.

The fellow snapped back to his senses as soon as Jinwoo stopped in front of him. He had been instructed not to falter in the presence of this most important hunter. He bowed solemnly, just barely able to think straight.

"Nice to meet you, Hunter Sung. I am Hiroshi Tanaka from the Hunter's Association of Japan, Kanazawa branch." He raised his head. "I have been assigned to be your guide for today. I'm at your service."

Of course, Hiroshi said everything in Japanese.

Jinwoo looked at Jinho. "……"

Jinho looked back at Jinwoo. "……"

Jinho's carefree smile made it clear he had no intention of trying to piece together what the employee had said. Jinwoo let out a big sigh and summoned a shadow soldier who could interpret for them.

My liege……

Beru emerged and bowed to Jinwoo. He then turned to the employee.

I shall take care of this man.

Wait, you realize that can have a totally different meaning……

Jinwoo wasn't the only one with reservations. Hiroshi and the villagers were stunned.

“Human.” Beru rolled back his shoulders and approached Hiroshi. “What would you like to tell my king?”

The villagers witnessing this scene squawked in astonishment.

This was also Jinho’s first time seeing a shadow soldier make conversation. Surprised, he turned to Jinwoo. “Boss, he can talk?”

“Yeah.”

Beru’s voice resonated like a beast’s roar, but he spoke fluent Japanese.

I mean……

This made sense, considering how most of the humans Beru had consumed had been Japanese. Jinwoo could feel a headache coming at the very thought.

Beru turned back to him after speaking to the employee. “My king, this man will be your guide in this village and will serve you with sincerity.”

“But what did you say to him to make him look so pale?”

“I told him that if he made one false move, I would eat him whole.”

“……I see.”

What did it matter? As long as they understood each other.

Hiroshi was clearly painfully conscious of the ant who had taken his position behind Jinwoo. “Please come this way.”

Jinwoo nodded, feeling sorry for him. The man looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“Okay.”

Hiroshi led their group to a deserted storage unit located deeper within the village. One of the walls had been destroyed, and a dead giant lay inside on its back.

“It’s right here.” Hiroshi gestured to the corpse and stepped aside.

Jinwoo walked up to the remains. Traces of a fierce battle remained on the magic beast’s dead body, including bite marks and bits of torn flesh.

……You guys ate this, didn’t you?

Jinwoo’s eyes narrowed as he turned to interrogate Beru. The ant was already

bent at the waist in a deep, apologetic bow.

The pair reminded Jinho of a company manager bowing to a department head.

Jinwoo looked back at the giant. He would have no problem extracting a shadow as long as enough of the carcass remained.

It just doesn't feel right.

Jinwoo was currently on a quest across Japan to extract the shadows of the giants his shadow army had eliminated. He found that he was able to tell which of his units had battled which giant based on the state of the remains. Others left by the ant army had all been in a similar state.

"Haah…" Jinwoo sighed as he gazed upon the magic beast that had most likely been eaten alive. He then rolled up his sleeves and reached his hand out to the giant.

He solemnly uttered, "Arise."

The villagers who had trailed after them exclaimed in amazement as a giant soldier in perfect condition emerged screaming from the shadow. It went down on one knee in front of Jinwoo.

Thud!

Jinwoo easily succeeded in extracting his twenty-seventh shadow.

That leaves two more.

Jinwoo smiled as he gazed up at the imposing giant.

* * *

Meanwhile, in South Korea, President Go was flipping through TV channels in his office at the headquarters of the Hunter's Association of Korea, remote in hand. Every station featured Jinwoo's performance in Japan, both Korean and worldwide. The name Jinwoo Sung had been imprinted on everyone's brain across the planet.

"Oh-ho." President Go couldn't stop smiling, as if he were the hunter about whom they were speaking.

Thank goodness he hadn't prevented Jinwoo from going. That would've been the biggest mistake of his long life.

Jinwoo stepping forward to deal with the crisis boosted the reputation of the Korean hunters in the international community. There was even talk of Korea as a new global superpower. Hence President Go's extreme pride and appreciation of Jinwoo's contribution.

There was one thing that made him uneasy, however.

"President Go."

As if on cue, Jinchul Woo, the youngest-ever department head in the history of the association, knocked on the door before entering. He gave a small bow before issuing his report.

"The magic beast has changed direction and is headed to China."

"Really?"

This was rather unexpected. While Jinwoo was busy taking care of the giants in Japan, one had jumped into the East Ocean. At first, the beast appeared to be heading toward the Pacific, but it had apparently changed course toward China in a strange turn of events.

"How is China handling it?"

"Zhigang Liu will personally deal with the threat."

President Go leaned back on the couch. "There shouldn't be a problem, then."

If Zhigang, one of the five strongest hunters in the world, responded to the situation, the giant would be torn apart before setting foot on Chinese soil. It was a relief to hear it wasn't heading toward Korea during Jinwoo's absence.

Jinchul smiled seeing the relief on President Go's face, but something on the TV screen caught his eye. It was a montage of clips showing the destruction in Japan, the people suffering and screaming, and the rescue and restoration work being done.

"What a tragedy." Jinchul pursed his lips.

“Indeed……,” President Go agreed.

They had experienced the same pain with Jeju Island four years ago, wounds too deep to be forgotten, especially with the reconstruction work still ongoing.

“But one person’s pain could become another person’s hope.”

“Pardon me, sir?”

“Do you know how Japan became the second-richest country after losing World War II and becoming financially ruined?”

“Because of the Korean War, right?”

“That’s right. It was an economic benefit of a war. A similar thing is about to happen in Korea.” With a bitter look on his face, President Go put his hand on top of a pile of documents. “These are quotes from Korean companies that want to help rebuild and restore Japan.”

Korean companies had been quick to make their moves. Some had submitted their bids as soon as Jinwoo flew to Japan, and most others were already primed to jump into action.

Someone’s pain can be someone else’s hope……?

More accurately, it would be to their benefit.

Jinchul understood exactly what President Go meant, and a similar feeling of resentment gleamed in his eyes. He then remembered something.

“Oh yes, President Go.”

“Yes?”

“I heard that President Matsumoto from the Hunter’s Association of Japan turned himself in.”

“He did?”

Why would such a shameless man have a change of heart?

Before President Go could ask for details, his phone rang.

Riiiiiing!

The voice on the other end sounded urgent.

“President Go, it’s me.”

It was his primary care physician, but he was normally very busy with patients around this time of the day.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m calling because I figured this was important……”

“Important……?” President Go was concerned. Several possible scenarios ran through his mind, but he couldn’t have predicted the name his doctor uttered.

“President Go, are you aware of Chairman Myunghan Yoo’s condition by any chance?”

Chairman Yoo was one of the biggest supporters of the Hunter’s Association of Korea and a personal friend of President Go. What in the world could have happened to him?

“Chairman Yoo was admitted to our hospital today.”

President Go sprang to his feet. “Is it an emergency?”

“Unfortunately……there was nothing we could do for him.”

A heavy silence fell on the room. After a brief pause, the doctor quietly explained.

“Chairman Yoo has reached the final rest stage of the Eternal Sleep Disease.”

* * *

The employees of the Hunter’s Association of Japan couldn’t get any work done because of the barrage of phone calls from broadcasters and journalists wanting to interview Hunter Jinwoo Sung.

Riiiing!

“Thank you for calling the Hunter’s Association of Japan—”

“I’m the person who just called earlier. How about a quick Q and A instead of an interview?”

“Sir, that’s still an interview.”

“No, see, we could just put subtitles instead of Hunter Sung’s face.”

“I’m sorry, but Hunter Sung refuses to do any broadcasts or interviews.”

Click.

Riiing!

“Thank you for calling the Hunter’s Association of Japan—”

“I’m the executive producer from XX TV, and I just wanted to ask—”

“I’m sorry, but it’s a no.”

Click.

They received hundreds of these calls every day, making it impossible to do other work. The department head got a migraine anytime he heard a phone ring.

I guess this shows how focused the media is on Hunter Sung.

Who wouldn’t be interested in the man who had single-handedly saved Japan after nearly 40 percent of the country had been decimated? He, too, was curious about what kind of person Jinwoo was and what he had to say.

Yet that was neither here nor there. Hunter Sung had made it clear he did not want to do interviews. It was the department head’s duty as an employee of the Hunter’s Association of Japan to decline all media requests in accordance with Hunter Sung’s wishes.

I can’t disappoint the savior of our country.

The department manager gave a firm nod. Just then, one of the new hires nervously approached him.

“Excuse me, sir—?”

The manager cut him off. “Tell them no.”

No need to hear him out. Some higher-up from a broadcasting station or a newspaper had probably yelled at the newbie, so he’d come to check with his boss.

“That’s not it, sir. I think we got a phone call from Korea.”

“From Korea?”

“Gunhee Go from the Hunter’s Association of Korea says he needs to talk to the person in charge.”

The manager was in a panic now. “Gunhee Go, you said?”

“Yes, sir.”

There was no way there was another Gunhee Go within the Hunter’s Association of Korea. The cooperative relationship between Jinwoo and the Hunter’s Association of Korea was public knowledge, and hadn’t it been President Go who had announced Jinwoo’s intentions to help Japan?

The manager rushed to his desk, yelling. “Connect the call! Right now!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hello, President Go. I’m the department head.” The manager had still had some doubts as he picked up the phone, but he froze at the fluent Japanese coming from the other end of the line. “Yes. Yes. Understood. Yes, I will contact him right away.”

* * *

It didn’t matter how many times he watched it; Jinho never got tired of it.

“Wow……” He couldn’t repress yet another outburst of admiration.

The sight of a huge black creature that had emerged from a giant’s dead body, kneeling and pledging loyalty to Jinwoo, was like something out of a movie. It got Jinho every time.

You’re so awesome, boss!

Jinho’s eyes shone with respect for Jinwoo as he heard exclamations coming from behind them.

“Whoa!”

“How is that possible……?”

“Wh-what the heck is that?”

Considering how Jinho still wasn’t used to the shadow extraction process despite having seen it many times before, it was no wonder the villagers were

aghast.

Although he didn't understand Japanese, he could guess what they were saying. Pride swelled inside him, as if he was the subject of their conversation.

Ahem!

An employee from the Hunter's Association of Japan interrupted his train of thought. "Are you Mr. Hunter by any chance?"

"Oh, if you're looking for my boss, he's over there……"

Jinho pointed at Jinwoo, assuming he was the hunter for whom the man was looking, but the employee shook his head, pointed right at Jinho, and switched to English.

"No, no. You."

Jinho blinked in surprise. "Me?"

"Yes."

Perplexed after the exchange in broken English, Jinho accepted the cell phone handed to him. As he listened to the person on the other side, his expression turned grim, and he kept repeating "yes" until he hung up.

Jinwoo exited the ruined storage unit after stowing the giant shadow soldier, and Jinho immediately hurried over and hung his head.

"I'm sorry, boss, but I think I need to head back to Korea."

Jinwoo noted the serious look on his face. "Something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I was just told to return to Korea for a family matter."

"……" Jinwoo kept his mouth shut, but he had an inkling.

Chairman Yoo's disease……

If that was the reason, Jinwoo understood why the person calling hadn't gone into detail over the phone. How do you explain to a child currently in a different country that his father has fallen into a coma?

Jinwoo didn't ask any further questions. "I understand. Thanks for your help."

"No, it was nothing. I'm sorry I can't stay with you until the end." Jinho

apologized one more time before he got in the car sent by the Hunter's Association of Japan and headed to the airport.

……

Wordlessly, Jinwoo watched the car drive away.

Jinho had tried to appear calm in front of Jinwoo, but he was unable to hide his anxiety. This was the first time he'd ever heard his mother's normally gentle and warm voice shaking.

What's going on?

Jinho's heart raced. Was his father angry he had followed Jinwoo to Japan without his permission? What parent would approve of their child walking into the jaws of death?

In a daze, he looked out the window of the moving car, then shook his head to try and snap out of it.

No, don't think about it now.

He would only give himself a headache worrying about maybes. It could all turn out to be nothing. Jinho clung to that thought until his plane landed at Incheon Airport.

"Jinho." Mr. Kim, Chairman Yoo's secretary, was there to pick him up. Seeing the older man's red eyes, Jinho knew at once something big had happened.

"Mr. Kim……"

"The car is waiting for you. Please come with me."

What's going on?

Jinho was dying to ask but couldn't bring himself to for fear of the answer.

"Let's hurry." Secretary Kim directed him toward the exit.

"Oh……" But somehow, Jinho couldn't move his legs.

Secretary Kim placed a hand on Jinho's shoulder as if he sympathized, his face betraying his mixed feelings. "Jinho…… You must stay strong at a time like this. I'll explain everything on the way."

Tears welled in Jinho's eyes, and as promised, Secretary Kim explained Chairman Yoo's status while they drove.

Jinho went into denial. There was no way Secretary Kim was telling the truth. However, he had no choice but to accept it once he saw his father asleep through the glass partition in the hospital. He had always envisioned his father as a strong man, and his heart broke at the sight of his frail body lying on the bed.

"Father!"

The doctors blocked Jinho from bursting into the hospital room. His father's condition would get worse if a hunter who couldn't control magic got too close to him.

His expression crumbled as he listened. "I see……"

As a son, Jinho had always been a disappointment to his father, but he never imagined he wouldn't even get to hold his hand in his final moments. Just one more way he'd let his father down.

"Looks like I'm a useless son until the end." Despondent, Jinho turned away from his father and found Secretary Kim standing there with a black leather portfolio. "What's this……?"

Jinho took it, and Secretary Kim explained. "It's something Chairman Yoo was working on right before he collapsed. I was keeping it with me in case he asks for it when he wakes up, but I think you need it more, Jinho."

"Me?" Jinho glanced between Secretary Kim and the portfolio before slowly opening it.

There were newspaper clippings about his older brother, Jinsung, and older sister, Jinhee, organized like a scrapbook. Like father, like son. Jinho had always wondered where his scrapbooking inclination had come from, but it seemed to have originated with his father.

I didn't know Father had this kind of hobby.

He couldn't help but smile at the childhood pictures of his siblings. His brother and sister were his father's pride. From academic competitions to contests to

performances, his siblings were well-known geniuses in their respective fields. Naturally, the scrapbook was filled with articles about the two of them.

Jinho was embarrassed there wasn't a single picture of him, but then he flipped to the last page and paused.

Who is Jinho Yoo, Vice President of Ahjin Guild?

The Two Hunters Heading to Japan

The D-Rank Hunter's Decision: Brave or Reckless?

They were all articles about Jinho. Even gossip columns and small-press articles had been clipped and neatly preserved.

"Oh……" Jinho was speechless.

Then, a newspaper clipping that wasn't completely cut out fluttered to the ground. Crying, Jinho quickly bent over and picked it up. The article featured a picture of Jinho smiling brightly for the cameras that had rushed to the scene after the fall of the boss giant in place of Jinwoo, who had refused to have his photo taken.

The article bore today's date.

Secretary Kim put his hand on Jinho's shoulder. "It wasn't like Chairman Yoo didn't love you, Jinho. It's just that his expectations for you were as big as his love."

Jinho quietly sobbed for a long while. As soon as he was able to compose himself, he stood up. "Is…… Is there any way to wake him up?"

Secretary Kim solemnly shook his head.

No patient had ever awoken after entering the final rest stage—except one.

As soon as Secretary Kim recalled who, he hesitantly tried to bring it up. "By any chance, Jinho……?"

"Yes?"

"……It's nothing. Never mind."

He couldn't bring himself to ask. Sometimes, it was crueler to give someone hope, so Secretary Kim swallowed the question he desperately wanted to ask

the crying hunter.

All the while, Jinho’s shadow quietly eavesdropped on their conversation.

3

A MIRACLE

3

A MIRACLE

“Let’s go home for today.”

“……Okay.”

Jinho and Secretary Kim left Chairman Yoo’s hospital room. Neither of them noticed part of the shadow beneath Jinho’s feet separating and flowing back into the room right before the door closed.

Click.

The lights automatically turned off.

Time passed, and in the middle of the night with no visitors around, the shadow crawled out from under Chairman Yoo’s bed.

Whish……

The shadow took the form of an ant shadow soldier. Its eyes lit up when they landed on Chairman Yoo.

Skree!

As the ant soldier smacked its lips, it was suddenly sucked back into the shadows and replaced with Jinwoo, who had activated the Shadow Exchange skill.

Despite concealing himself with Stealth beforehand, he made sure to cautiously scan his surroundings. The room was pitch-black, but thanks to his maxed-out perception stat, Jinwoo was able to see everything as clearly as if it was daytime. His eyes gleamed as he checked for a security camera.

I don’t see any.

The only other humans around were the four bodyguards stationed outside the door. Short of Chairman Yoo suddenly waking up and screaming at the sight of him, Jinwoo was in the clear. He turned off Stealth.

Fshhh……

His invisible body materialized, gradually taking shape. Jinwoo was taking extra precautions to avoid accidentally revealing the existence of the Elixir of Life.

Not too long ago, Chairman Yoo had tried to entice Jinwoo with a blank check and an offer to grant any favor within the chairman's power. Had he done this out of the kindness of his heart? Of course not. Successful businessmen know how to calculate profit-and-loss numbers to their advantage, and Chairman Yoo was unparalleled in Korea. He was a natural-born businessman who had inherited a small company from his parents and had grown it into a Fortune Global 500 company. He knew exactly what a cure for his illness was worth and had simply made Jinwoo the best offer imaginable.

But not every person was as fair as Chairman Yoo, and given that desperation often led to foolish mistakes, there was no need to introduce another source of conflict into the world. For this reason, Jinwoo wanted to keep the Elixir of Life a secret, and he wasn't naive enough to risk potential disaster for the sake of a close friend's relative.

How many people out there would carelessly reveal such an item just because someone asked?

Instead, Jinwoo bided his time. The delay hadn't caused Chairman Yoo further harm nor would it alter the effectiveness of the treatment. To be frank, the only losers would be the shareholders in Yoojin Construction who sold their stock in as soon as they heard about Chairman Yoo's hospitalization.

Is this why people say the stock market is all-or-nothing?

Jinwoo grinned and removed from his inventory one of five bottles containing the Elixir of Life. He knew what it was like to lose a parent, so using one of these for Jinho's sake seemed like a no-brainer.

The poor guy was crying and everything……

Jinwoo propped up Chairman Yoo's torso, opened his mouth, and slowly poured out the elixir drop by drop.

Chairman Yoo swallowed the medicine as if his unconscious body was aware that this was his only chance for survival.

"Cough!"

Jinwoo laid Chairman Yoo back down on his bed and put away the empty bottle.

Just like Jinwoo's mother, the chairman's complexion returned to normal, and his weak heartbeat gradually grew stronger.

Jinwoo nodded in satisfaction.

There we go.

The Elixir of Life had worked like a charm. The only thing left to do was to get out of the room before Chairman Yoo woke up. Jinwoo stood at the door and used Stealth.

Vweee……

"Huh?"

"Um……"

The sound of the door, built to open automatically at the press of a button, startled the guards.

"Ah!"

They spotted something a thousand times more shocking than the door opening on its own. The guards were stunned as they watched Chairman Yoo sit up.

"Wh-what……?"

"M-Mr. Yoo!"

One of the flabbergasted guards yelled at the top of his lungs:

"Doctor! Doctorrrrr!"

As he ran to get a medical professional, his three partners rushed into the

room.

“Chairman Yoo!”

“Are you okay?”

The chairman looked very relaxed, as if he’d enjoyed a good night’s sleep. He blinked at them. “What’s all this fuss? Who are you people anyway?”

“We’re—”

“No, wait.” Chairman Yoo cut them off as he took in his surroundings.

He recognized the VIP hospital room reserved for patients with Eternal Sleep that he’d prepared as soon as he’d received his initial diagnosis.

That means……

No way.

“Did I pass out and wake up again?”

Vweee……

The chairman looked in the direction of the sound just in time to see the door on the other side of the glass wall slowly shut.

* * *

Ding!

The elevator door slid open. Jinwoo saw a herd of doctors dashing toward Chairman Yoo’s room before he stepped inside the lift.

Now that he thought about it, Jinho’s birthday was this month.

It’s a little early, but happy birthday, Jinho.

A cure for his father might be the best birthday gift of all. Satisfied, Jinwoo hit the button for the first floor.

A man who had stepped in behind the hunter paused when he saw the button light up on its own. “Well……that’s freaky.”

Jinwoo had Stealth activated, so it looked like the man was alone in the elevator. Unnerved, the man ran out, muttering, “Oh hell no.”

I’m sorry, sir……

Jinwoo apologized mentally as he jabbed the button to close the doors. When the elevator began to move, he decided to check one of his skills.

Skill info.

[SKILL: SHADOW EXCHANGE, LV.2]

Job-exclusive skill.

No mana required.

The caster may switch locations with a designated shadow soldier.

Once used, you may activate it again only after a three-hour cooldown period. Wait times can vary depending on skill level.

You may use the skill after 01:54:11.

One hour and fifty-four minutes……

The eleven seconds aside, he had two hours to kill before he could use Shadow Exchange again. He still had a couple of giants from which he wanted to extract shadows, so he needed to return to Japan. Since he'd left a shadow overseas, he would be able to do that as soon as the cooldown period was over. The problem was figuring out what to do in the meantime.

I can't go home……

How would his mother feel if Jinwoo came back from a week in Japan only to return two hours later? He could practically picture her expression.

Ding!

The elevator doors opened on the first floor. Jinwoo debated what to do once he left Seoul Ilshin Hospital. An idea struck him.

Should I look for a dungeon that hasn't been claimed?

Jinwoo deactivated Stealth and expanded his perception. He sensed four or five gates in the vicinity. He looked up their information on the association's smartphone app.

……Aha!

To his delight, two of the gates hadn't been reported yet.

* * *

“Miss Yoo, we’re here.”

“Thank you.”

Jinhee, the eldest daughter of Chairman Yoo, had returned to the hospital after escorting her distraught mother home.

When she first found out about her father’s illness, it had felt like her whole world was crumbling, but she’d believed her father’s reassurances.

“I’m searching high and low for a cure and think I have a good lead, so don’t worry.”

Had anyone else claimed they could find a treatment for their terminal disease, she wouldn’t have believed it for a second. But this was Chairman Myunghan Yoo, the colossus of Korea’s financial sector, so Jinhee had held on to hope despite the dire situation. And yet……

She wiped her tears as she recalled how her father had attempted to hide his grief when she moved overseas. If she’d known things would turn out this way, she would’ve given up studying abroad to spend more time with him.

Suddenly, someone rather familiar passed by her.

Hey, isn’t that……?

She’d definitely seen him somewhere, but before she could remember where, he pulled down on his hood and quickened his pace as if he could feel her stare.

She curiously watched him walk away before hastily moving on. Whoever he was, the man’s identity was unimportant.

As she anxiously waited for the elevator doors to open, her cell phone rang.

Briiiiing!

This late at night in the empty hospital lobby, the chime sounded louder than usual. Jinhee didn’t recognize the number. She normally wouldn’t pick up such calls, but……

Who could it be……?

Considering how crazy the last twenty-four hours had been, she felt she should. She put the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Hello, this is Seoul Ilshin Hospital. We’re contacting you because we couldn’t reach your mother.”

They’d given her mother a sedative to put her to sleep, so that tracked. But what was going on? The unexpected call from her father’s primary doctor frightened Jinhee.

She cautiously asked, “Did something happen?”

“The thing is, Chairman Yoo……”

As she listened, her eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. It had to be a lie. Did the doctor really think she’d buy this?

She fought back tears as she asked, “A-are you sure……?”

“If I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it, either. It’s extremely rare for patients in the final rest stage to wake up. In any case, please get here as soon as you can. We’re not sure when Chairman Yoo will fall back asleep.”

“P-please hold on! I’m already at the hospital.”

Ding!

The elevator doors opened right on time, and Jinhee practically threw herself through them.

She’d never thought in a million years……

I-is this for real?

The short elevator ride felt like an eternity.

Ding!

She made a beeline straight for her father’s room and was met by the sight of the old man turning to see who it was. Without a doubt, it was him from head to toe.

“Dad!”

Surrounded by doctors, Myunghan Yoo took in the sight of his daughter. “Jinhee……?”

“Dad!” She jumped into her father’s arms.

As he consoled her, it hit Myunghan once again that he had come back from the dead.

I’m alive!

But was this truly some kind of coincidence? Amid the doctors discussing this miracle and his sobbing daughter, Myunghan focused on his heartbeat.

H-how could this be?

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

He was well over fifty, yet his heartbeat was steady and strong like a man in his twenties. Sure enough, Myunghan’s primary doctor was bewildered by his charts.

“How does any of this make sense……?”

Myunghan carefully asked, “Is it bad?”

“Oh, that’s not it. Not at all,” said the doctor reassuringly before posing a question in turn. “Sir, by any chance, did you take your medication for high blood pressure before taking these tests?”

Up until last night, Myunghan had been suspended in a state between life and death. After he woke up, he hadn’t had the presence of mind to take his medication.

“No, I did not.” He shook his head.

The doctor nodded as if he’d expected this answer, but his expression was troubled.

“And yet, your blood pressure is quite stable right now. In fact, you seem to be healthier than the average person according to these numbers.”

Chairman Yoo was taken aback.

What in the world is he talking about?

He’d expected to die once he entered the final rest stage, but instead, he’d awoken to find his high blood pressure cured?

The doctor continued to pore over the file. “In addition, all your organs are functioning properly. If I blanked out your age, people would think these were the vital signs of a twenty-year-old.”

How was this possible? The doctor was more stunned than Myunghan himself, despite seeing the evidence with his own two eyes.

The ink had barely dried on the test results from when Chairman Yoo had first been admitted, but here were results with drastically different numbers. How could this be explained? Had Chairman Yoo’s body been transformed in recent weeks? But he had been dying of a terminal disease until just last night.

He laid out his conclusion. “I’ve been a doctor for thirty years, but this is the first time I’ve seen anything like this. This…… This can only be explained as a miracle.”

A patient with the Eternal Sleep Disease had woken up from the final rest stage, more physically fit than ever. What else could this be but a miracle?

He happily announced his verdict. “Congratulations, sir. Your Eternal Sleep Disease has been cured. You could even run a full marathon this very minute if you wanted to.”

However, Myunghan didn’t celebrate just yet.

……

He thought long and hard before asking, “By any chance, are there security cameras in my hospital room?”

“Pardon me? Why do you ask……?”

“There is something I want to check. Is there a camera in the room or out in the hall?”

“There’s no camera in the room, but there should be one outside.”

Perfect. Chairman Yoo nodded.

I can’t chalk this up to coincidence.

This was way beyond a mere happenstance. Someone with unimaginable power had interceded here, and Myunghan had an idea who it could be.

What an enormous debt I now owe.

Chairman Yoo had never owed anyone anything, and he had no intention of starting now. But how to repay someone for saving your life? And before any of that, he wanted personally to confirm his savior's name.

"Please show me the security footage from last night."

* * *

Of course, nothing had been caught on camera.

"The only odd thing was the door malfunctioning right here."

One of the guards pointed it out on the screen. The windows had been locked from the inside, so the single entrance into the hospital room had been through the door. The testimonies from all four guards matched. They were professional security personnel, so they wouldn't have been slacking on the job. Not even an insect could've entered Chairman Yoo's room.

"Hmm……"

The possibility of Jinwoo possessing the Stealth skill didn't cross Chairman Yoo's mind, so his thoughts were a jumbled mess.

Secretary Kim rushed into the monitoring room. "Sir, I've looked into the matter you requested."

"And?"

"Well……" Secretary Kim eyed the other people in the room and whispered in Chairman Yoo's ear. "The association confirmed that Hunter Sung was in Japan at the time. They said he'll most likely return to Korea tomorrow."

"……"

Chairman Yoo had assumed no one except Jinwoo could've accomplished this, but he had to accept that he'd been mistaken. It couldn't have been Hunter Sung.

But then why……?

Despite the evidence to the contrary, he couldn't quite shake the niggling feeling that it had been Jinwoo.

However, if Chairman Yoo and Jinwoo had one thing in common, it was that they didn't dwell on things outside their control.

"Understood." He switched the subject. "According to the doctor, I could run a marathon if I wanted, so I'll be back to work tomorrow. Make sure everything is ready, would you?"

The chairman was back to his old self.

Secretary Kim swallowed a giddy laugh, then brought up another matter. "By the way, Chairman Yoo, do you know what the media is saying about you?"

The media must have had a field day with the story about the man coming back from the dead.

The chairman didn't look bothered. "What?"

"They're saying you're immortal."

"Immortal?"

Chairman Yoo wasn't one to grin, but he couldn't suppress his growing smile. Immortal. That was much better than when they called him "King Midas" or "Poker Face."

Ha!

Chairman Yoo repeated the word. "Immortal. Immortal, huh?"

It was the perfect way to describe someone who never gave up under any circumstances, even to a terminal illness. Chairman Yoo gratefully accepted his second chance and laughed contentedly.

"I quite like it."

* * *

While Korea was abuzz with the news about Chairman Yoo, Jinwoo made it back to Japan and succeeded in collecting all twenty-nine giant shadow soldiers.

At last……

He became emotional as the giant shadow soldiers lined up in front of him in order of extraction. Tracking down the dead bodies of the giants and collecting their shadows made him feel like he was on a video game quest, but the reward

at the end of it was so much more satisfying in real life. He felt invincible with twenty-nine dignified giant shadow soldiers on his team.

Too bad one is missing, though……

A total of thirty giant-type magic beasts had escaped from the gate, not including the one that had remained to guard it, but one had escaped into the ocean. Still, he felt quite proud of collecting the other twenty-nine.

With the giants all gathered there, the destroyed city around them felt almost crowded now. But he hadn't summoned the giant shadow soldiers as decoration.

He posed a question to them. "Who is the strongest among you?"

He needed a captain to lead the giants just as Beru, Igris, and Fang commanded their own troops. When the giant soldiers warily gazed at one another and no one came forward, Beru impatiently yelled at them.

Skraaaaaah!

The giants shuddered as the powerful roar ripped through the air. Beru had killed several of them and was undeniably stronger than any of the giants, so they feared him.

Skraaah!

Following Beru's scolding, one of the giants slowly raised his hand. Beru turned to Jinwoo and bowed, receiving a thumbs-up for his work.

"Thanks."

And then something happened that neither Jinwoo nor Beru was expecting. A second giant shot his hand up after seeing his colleague do the same. Its expression made it clear that it firmly believed itself better than the other candidate.

"Ooh."

Jinwoo realized the hesitation had been because the giants themselves had no idea who was strongest. This surprising turn of events made Jinwoo laugh as he called both giants forward.

“No. 22 and No. 6, front and center.”

No. 6 had especially huge fists, and No. 22 looked strong overall. Jinwoo inspected them closely.

Hmm……

Even with his excellent perception, it was hard to tell which was stronger. There was only one way to find out.

Jinwoo smiled brightly. “You two ready?”

The two giants faced each other, determined and unyielding.

“Begin!”

Wham! Pow! Bash!

The giants exchanged blows for a while until No. 6 finally managed to send No. 22 sprawling and squeaked out a close victory.

“Great. From now on, No. 6 is the captain of the giants.”

No. 6 raised its fists in victory, and the other shadow soldiers cheered.

Now that that’s settled……

Jinwoo had accomplished everything he’d set out to do in Japan.

He brought up his stats.

Stat window.

A combination of words and numbers materialized in front of him.

Ping!

[Name: Jinwoo Sung]	**[Level: 122]**
[Job: Shadow Monarch]	[Title: Demon Hunter (and 2 others)]
[HP: 65,230]	[MP: 115,160]
[Fatigue: 0]	

[Stats]

Strength: 292

Stamina: 281

Agility: 305

Intelligence: 310

Perception: 277

(Available ability points: 0)

Physical damage reduced by: 65 percent

[Skills]

Passive skill: (Unknown) Lv.Max, Willpower Lv.1, Dagger Master Lv.Max

Active skill: Flash Lv.Max, Murderous Intent Lv.2, Mutilation Lv.Max, Dagger Barrage Lv.Max, Stealth Lv.2, Ruler's Authority Lv.Max

[Job-Exclusive Skills]

Active skill: Shadow Extraction Lv.2, Shadow Storage Lv.2, Monarch's Domain Lv.2, Shadow Exchange Lv.2

[Item Equipped]

Crimson Knight's Helmet (S), Demon Monarch's Earrings (S), Demon Monarch's Necklace (S), Demon Monarch's Ring (S), Seeker's Shirt (A), Seeker's Gloves (A), Seeker's Pants (A), Seeker's Shoes (A)

He took in his progress since coming to Japan, starting with the insane increase in his stats. Everything was pushing three hundred, and the intelligence stat, which he had invested in the most, had surpassed three hundred a while back. This was a result of the rewards from the daily quests, which he had never missed; his increase in levels from hunting giants; and the super-expensive defensive gear he had purchased from the system's shop.

Seeker's Defense Gear Set.

Until recently, Jinwoo hadn't paid much attention to the items in the system shop. However, since he had no idea how strong these Monarchs and Rulers were, he needed to find a way to protect himself.

If the King of Giants was that strong when weakened, the others could be extremely overpowered.

Jinwoo recalled the angels with six wings he had seen in the memories of the Shadow Monarch. If he wanted to survive a fight with them, Jinwoo would need to get even stronger.

His gaze shifted up from the list of items to his level.

[Level: 122]

His level had gone up eight times after defeating a single Monarch. Jinwoo couldn't even imagine how many levels he would go up once he fought the rest of them.

Ba-dump!

His heart pounded with trepidation but also excitement.

I'll level up.

The power Jinwoo gained from leveling up was the weapon with which he protected everything he held dear. His heart leaped again.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

The pounding of his two hearts hurt his ears, but he didn't mind the pain.

All right, then.

Jinwoo sensed someone's approach and recalled his shadow soldiers.

Takakakakakaka!

A helicopter belonging to the Hunter's Association of Japan was landing in the near distance, and Jinwoo happily climbed aboard.

For now, it was time to go home.

* * *

The Japanese government provided Jinwoo a suite in a five-star hotel. He had originally planned to decline their hospitality because he could use Shadow Exchange instead of waiting for a plane. However, he relented after an earnest plea from them.

“Please stay. You’d be helping us avoid being scorned for not treating the savior of our country accordingly.”

This was his first time setting foot inside a hotel that cost four million won a night. His initial impression of his suite was amazement at having the huge room all to himself. The furniture looked brand-new, as if it had been purchased only yesterday. He then walked to the window and looked out over the city’s the downtown area. A good view always seemed to increase the property value, and he agreed that this one justified the expensive room rate.

I can’t believe magic beasts almost decimated this beautiful city.

Jinwoo sucked his teeth as he recalled the ruins of Tokyo, but he was glad he’d at least arrived in Japan when he had.

……I should go to bed now.

After camping outside for days on end, a night in a hotel room was bliss.

The next day, employees from the Hunter’s Association of Japan came to fetch Jinwoo for his flight.

“Good day, Hunter Sung.” His guide greeted him in perfect Korean. “There’s a car ready to take you to the airport.”

And not a moment too soon. Jinwoo was growing bored of waiting in the hotel room anyway. He picked up the bag he had tossed in a corner. “Let’s get going.”

“Oh!” The guide looked flustered as Jinwoo made to leave. “H-Hunter Sung…… Do you not have a change of clothes?”

Jinwoo understood the reaction. His battle-worn outfit was stained with blood and perspiration.

I tried to be careful, but……

It had been impossible to avoid all the blood gushing from the giants’ bodies. Jinwoo could only shrug as all the clothes he’d brought with him were in a similar state.

The guide smiled and asked, “Then would it be okay to arrange an outfit for you to wear today?”

That sounded more than okay. Jinwoo had no desire to walk around in bloodstained clothes if he didn't have to or be squirreled away to the airport like a criminal whose identity needed to be concealed.

The guide chuckled as he read Jinwoo's expression. "We'll get you something to wear right away. Please wait here."

Ten minutes later, a group of men each carrying multiples sets of suits paraded into the suite.

That was fast.

The handler saw Jinwoo's raised eyebrow and cheerfully explained. "We had these prepared in advance just in case."

Jinwoo could barely contain his surprise as he looked over the panoply of suits laid out by size and color. They'd been extremely thorough in their preparations.

"And if you need anything else……"

Jinwoo waved his hand. "No, but thank you."

He was more than satisfied with the hospitality he had received up to now and appreciated the efforts of the Hunter's Association of Japan.

Jinwoo inspected the outfits and selected the suit that looked like it would fit him best. He tried it on and checked himself out in the mirror. Perhaps it was because these were high-end threads, but it made him look like a different man.

I think this is good.

He couldn't help but smile.

He turned around, and the guide exclaimed, "That looks perfect on you, Hunter Sung!"

"We should get going."

"Understood. Our staff will take care of your bags."

On cue, two men entered and picked up Jinwoo's belongings. The Hunter's Association of Japan seemed determined to make sure their savior didn't lift a

finger.

Jinwoo left the five-star hotel appreciating the hospitality, got in a black sedan, and headed to the airport.

* * *

As the car neared the airport, Jinwoo suddenly realized why the Hunter's Association of Japan was so concerned about his appearance. Through the window, he saw throngs and throngs of people.

"……" Jinwoo was rendered speechless at the sight.

His guide excitedly told him, "They're all here to see you, Hunter Sung."

There were way too many people for this to be a crowd gathered by the association for show.

"Do you know how many there are?"

"We're estimating more than a hundred thousand."

"That many……?"

The car transporting Jinwoo made its way down the barricaded road without incident. The vehicle turned a corner to reveal an even bigger crowd waiting to welcome Jinwoo.

"You're the hero who saved Japan, Hunter Sung."

"……"

From Jinwoo's point of view, he'd simply done what he could. The thing was, nobody else could have accomplished what he had.

The citizens of Japan had fallen into despair after witnessing the giants through social media, on TV channels, and in person. Instead of extending a hand, the international community had collectively agreed that it was over for Japan.

But that was when President Gunhee Go of the Hunter's Association of their neighboring country Korea, someone more well-known than the Korean president, had made an announcement.

"There is one such hunter who wishes to take on the giants."

The many Japanese people watching the live press conference had glued their eyes to the screen with bated breath.

“Just who is this hunter?”

At the question, President Go had brought his lips as close to the mic as possible and replied.

“Hunter Jinwoo Sung.”

Jinwoo’s exploits on Jeju Island were already widely known, so the mere mention of his name had people cheering. He had been their last and only hope.

A week later, Jinwoo was headed home, having made good on his promise to rid the country of giants. Naturally, the people of Japan came in droves to see him off. His guide mentioned that were it not for the fact that cleanup of destroyed areas was underway, more would have shown up.

The guide then made a request. “The prime minister would really like to meet you, Hunter Sung. Could you please spare some of your time for him?”

This was the most serious expression Jinwoo had seen on his escort, and the hunter guessed he had been pressured by some higher-ups to ask. But Jinwoo refused to do anything he didn’t want to, so he repeated his usual response.

“I don’t want to waste my time on anything unnecessary.”

The handler nodded while trying to stifle a laugh at Jinwoo’s firm stance. “Ha-ha…… Understood.”

As they made small talk, the car pulled up to the entrance.

Jinwoo stepped out of the car as cool as ever. At his appearance, the air exploded in applause. Jinwoo looked around at the crowd.

“Hunter Sung!”

“Hunter Jinwoo Sung!”

Although he didn’t speak their language, Jinwoo understood the emotion in their voices, the look in their eyes, and the hand gestures they made. Their immense gratitude and deep admiration were conveyed to him.

Beru observed the whole thing from within Jinwoo's shadow.

My king, these subjects are pledging their loyalty to you.

It's not like that.

You wave and acknowledge them, my king—

I said, it's not like that.

Where in the world was Beru learning stuff like this? But a question popped into his mind before he could ignore the ant.

Hey, do the other ants like it when you do that?

Jinwoo could practically see the majestic expression on Beru's face at the pride in the ant's voice.

Of course, my king.

Jinwoo should have expected that; Beru had the ability to boost the ant soldiers' morale with a single roar. Jinwoo nodded to himself. If an ant could do it, then the least he could do was greet the people who had traveled to see him.

Jinwoo turned toward the crowd, hesitantly raised his hand, and waved it back and forth. The applause and cheering grew louder.

WHOOOO!

As he did, he noticed that even his guide was enthusiastically clapping with teary eyes.

"Thank you!"

"Thank you, Hunter Sung!"

"Thank you so much!"

The guide wiped his eyes with his sleeve and beckoned to Jinwoo. "Let's go, Hunter Sung. Your airplane is departing soon."

Jinwoo lowered his hand, but the clapping didn't stop. It continued long after he entered the airport and vanished from their view. A hundred thousand people watched his plane take off.

The following day, a renowned Japanese columnist wrote:

If the leader of the country was decided solely on their support from the people, Japan would have its first ever foreigner as prime minister.

⁎ ⁎ ⁎

Christopher Reed jolted awake in the middle of the night because of the sound. As one of the most powerful hunters in the world, he'd never have slept if he let all the inconsequential white noise bother him. So, more specifically, what had disturbed him wasn't so much the presence of noise…

Why is it so quiet?

No matter how hard he concentrated, he couldn't hear a sound. He threw off his blanket and opened his bedroom door. Chris couldn't sense any of the household staff, and the creepy atmosphere made it feel like the mansion had been abandoned.

Chris stared down the empty hallway, then grabbed a wineglass from the table, returned to the door, and threw it down the hall. The wineglass left his hand, drawing an arc in the air, before it hit the floor and shattered into tiny pieces……soundlessly.

Something impossible had occurred. He shuddered, keen senses warning him of a danger he had never experienced before. He instinctively moved to his bedside table to grab his cell phone and the crumpled note inside the drawer.

If you ever need help, call this number. President Gunhee Go of the Hunter's Association of Korea will connect you to him.

The assistant director had slipped this note to one of the hunter's staff before leaving the mansion. Chris found out after the fact and had been about to angrily throw it away, but he'd stopped when Mrs. Sellner's face unexpectedly popped into his head.

Did Mrs. Sellner foresee this?

He didn't know the answer to that, but he'd have to survive this ordeal in order to get one.

Chris flipped over the paper. President Go's phone number was written on the other side. He knew President Go could speak English fluently, so he wouldn't have a problem communicating. If he contacted President Go, he'd be

able to receive Jinwoo's help.

……

Chris had assumed Jinwoo was biting off far more than he could chew and had expected him to perish in Japan, but he changed his mind after watching Jinwoo's performance with his shadow soldiers. Jinwoo's abilities were legitimate.

Plus, Mrs. Sellner had already told him:

"Hunter Jinwoo Sung. He may be able to protect you."

Mrs. Sellner might've been on to something.

Chris moved to enter the numbers but paused when he felt a presence behind him.

"……"

It was too late to request help or notify someone about his situation. Chris placed his phone and the note back down on the nightstand, straightened, and slowly turned to see a man with blond hair beaming at him. He had one hand in his pocket and seemed very relaxed for someone who had infiltrated the home of a world-class S-rank hunter.

"Who are you guys?" asked Chris.

There was one in front of him and two more on the other side of the wall behind him, so three in total. He wasn't sure if he could handle just the one in front of him, but to have to deal with two more after that…

Chris broke out into a cold sweat. As a bead of perspiration rolled down his temple to his chin, the blond man spoke.

"You won't get very far by being gentle with the humans, O Fragment of Luminosity."

His voice was strange, almost otherworldly.

The language of magic beasts?

Chris glared and yelled, "What kind of bullshit are you yapping about?!"

But the man put his index finger to his lips. "Shush. I wasn't talking to you."

The fluent English coming from the man's mouth stunned Chris. As far as he knew, there wasn't a single person in the world who could freely speak both the language of humans and that of magic beasts.

The blond man pointed the same finger at the ceiling. "Up there. I'm talking to the one connected to you."

Chris didn't have the faintest idea what he was talking about, but one thing was certain. The intruder was being very condescending.

Chris's voice began echoing loudly. "You think I'm some sort of a joke?"

His eyes flashed red, and his whole body burst into flames and grew in size, pushing aside furniture.

Fwoosh!

He was soon entirely engulfed in flames, close to four meters tall, and sparks flew from his eyes like a god of fire.

"I'm taking at least one of you bastards with me!"

Chris struck the wall behind him with his fist, causing it to explode.

Kaboom!

The hole revealed the figures of two more men, who had stepped back to avoid the blow.

"Is that an astral body……?"

"A human can have one?"

They studied Chris's transformation with interest. The floor where the hunter stood began to bubble and melt. He resolved to fight to the death for the first time since his battle with Kamish.

Fwooooosh!

The flames surrounding him flared and engulfed everything in his vicinity. As the contents of the room were swept away, Chris roared from the eye of the firestorm and shook the very foundation of the house.

"Die, you fucking beasts!"

* * *

What were the odds Jinwoo would be seated beside an acquaintance? When he followed the flight attendant to his seat in first class, he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw who was in the seat next to him.

"Are you going to insist this is just a coincidence?"

"I'd prefer if you thought of it that way…… But I guess that would be too much to ask?"

Jinwoo was always taken off guard for a second to hear fluent Korean coming out of a blue-eyed foreigner.

Jinwoo took his seat without looking away from him. "We meet again, Mr. White."

"It's an honor to see you again, Hunter Sung." Adam White, a senior agent of the Hunter Command Center of the US, bowed and smiled to Jinwoo.

Jinwoo looked around the cabin.

No wonder……

He'd already noticed that two high-rank hunters were present in the first-class cabin, and he now realized that they were also with the Hunter Command Center. The two men in black suits nodded in greeting when he met their eyes. Why did all agents, including the surveillance team of the Hunter's Association of Korea, wear black suits? Was that their way of making their jobs obvious to those around them?

Adam interrupted Jinwoo's pointless musings. "We've only met once, but you remembered my name."

"Our first meeting was quite memorable."

"My apologies. We never imagined that there'd be a hunter immune to Mrs. Sellner's—"

Jinwoo waved his hand. He'd been bombarded with fervent apologies from the assistant director that day, so he wasn't interested in revisiting the incident. He was, however, curious as to why the Hunter Command Center was back after apparently having given up on him. He had no intention of playing a game of tug-of-war with them.

“Aren’t we done negotiating?” Jinwoo asked quietly.

Adam’s smile slid off his face. “Pardon me for turning up unannounced, but there’s an urgent matter I need to discuss with you.”

Jinwoo suddenly remembered the news about the S-rank gate that had appeared on the East Coast of the US.

“Did you also have trouble closing that S-rank gate……?”

“Hmm? Oh, no, that’s been taken care of.”

Then what else could this be about? Maybe it had something to do with the elimination of the King of Giants?

Noticing that he’d captured Jinwoo’s interest, Adam took out his laptop and showed him a video of thick black smoke seemingly coming from a large wildfire. Adam passed the laptop to Jinwoo, and the hunter gave the footage his full attention.

The firefighters had no idea how to deal with the mana-powered flames that were growing stronger by the second.

“What is with this fire? It won’t go out!”

“This is no ordinary fire!”

“Hey, you there! Stay back! You’ll be a pile of ash if a spark so much as lands on you!”

The firefighters were in a panic. No matter what method they used, the fire wouldn’t relent. Rather, it continued spreading, encroaching on their position. Burning trees fell on to others, causing a deadly domino effect. It was an ever-growing sea of flames.

“God help us!”

“What about backup?”

“When’s our backup getting here?!”

Just then, a helicopter arrived, carrying mage hunters, who poured as much water magic as they could onto the fire. As the water inundated the forest, the fire slowly died down.

Jinwoo watched closely.

These people…… They're high-rank hunters.

Based on the strength of their magic, there was no doubt about it. Yet even they could barely get the inferno under control, which indicated that whoever had caused this disaster was no ordinary hunter.

"Oh, hunters!"

"W-we're safe……"

"Thank you!"

The firefighters offered their profuse gratitude, then went to work taking care of the remaining stray flames. Had the hunters arrived a moment later, many of the first responders would've lost their lives.

"Move in!"

"The fire is dying!"

"It's over. The fire is under control."

The video was almost done, but Jinwoo was confused.

"Why are you showing me this?"

As fascinating as the footage was, there was no reason for Adam to go out of his way to show it to him. Adam reached over and fast-forwarded to the very end.

"Here……watch the last part."

The firefighters walked deeper into the blackened forest through the cloud of smoke to discover the fire's origin. A point of impact evidenced by a wide blast radius revealed there had been a powerful explosion.

In the very center, a dead body lay facedown. The gaping hole in the torso right where the corpse's heart should've been made the status obvious.

"In order to put out the fire this man caused, we had to mobilize eighteen hundred firefighters and fourteen mage hunters."

And not just any hunters, either, but fourteen high-rank mage hunters.

Jinwoo had an inkling as to the identity of the body lying on the ground.

"That can't be……?"

Adam sorrowfully confirmed. "I thought you would recognize him. Yes, it's Hunter Christopher Reed."

Jinwoo's eyes widened in disbelief. This didn't make any sense. But that meant a national-level hunter had, against all odds, been murdered.

"We couldn't believe it, either, but Mr. Reed was definitely murdered."

The last few seconds of the video showed a firefighter turning the corpse on its back. Jinwoo took in the condition of the American's body. In addition to the hole in his chest, terrible wounds scored his body.

"And these—" Adam produced some photographs from his inner pocket. "These are pictures of the creature the Hunter Command Center considers the most likely suspect."

Creature?

Not man, woman, or person? Jinwoo's gaze shifted to the pictures, then bolted up and curled his finger to drag Adam's body toward him using Ruler's Authority.

"Huh? What?" Adam was bewildered as Jinwoo grabbed him by the collar. "Urk!"

They were close enough to almost touch noses. Jinwoo growled.

"If this is some kind of prank, you're not going to walk off this plane on your own feet."

This wasn't an empty threat. Jinwoo's eyes glinted like those of a feral beast.

As his collar tightened around his neck, Adam yelled, "Don't do it! Don't do it!"

He wasn't talking to Jinwoo. The other hunters in the cabin stopped just short of jumping on Jinwoo. Adam's desperate cries prevented them from fanning the flames.

He then rushed to explain to Jinwoo. "The creature in the photo came out of a

dungeon! He might not be who you think he is!”

“A dungeon……?”

Jinwoo loosened his grip on Adam’s collar. Able to breathe better, Adam hurriedly continued. “His mana signature is the same as that of a magic beast, and he attacked one of our S-rank hunters unprovoked.”

Jinwoo looked down at the photos Adam had dropped. The person in the screenshots taken from a security camera was……Jinwoo’s father.

My father came out of a dungeon and attacked hunters?

Adam provided more information for the perplexed Jinwoo. “Do you remember the accidental explosion at the Hunter Command Center?”

How could Jinwoo forget? That incident had put the whole world on edge. People had theorized it had been the result of an underground experiment, that a high-rank hunter had gone crazy, or that a fight had broken out between two S-rank hunters.

“Are you saying my father caused that?”

Adam nodded. “He knocked out one of our hunters and then vanished. The Hunter Command Center secretly gave chase, but we never found even a trace of him, as if he had evaporated into thin air.”

“……” Jinwoo listened in silence.

“I understand how you must feel, Hunter Sung. But all the evidence points to him.”

That man was strong enough to overpower an S rank, had already attacked a hunter, and had vanished without a trace. It made sense for the Hunter Command Center to suspect the creature passing himself off as Ilhwan Sung. But even if everything Adam had said was completely true, that still left one question.

Jinwoo’s eyes narrowed. “Why did you go to the trouble of showing me these photos?”

“Because of the International Guild Conference.”

"……?"

"The upper management of the Hunter Command Center is planning to distribute a wanted poster of this man at the International Guild Conference where all the notable hunters of the world will be present."

So they no longer planned to keep the investigation under wraps. The US government was furious about losing an invaluable resource and wanted to capture the man responsible by any means necessary. The guild conference was their best chance of accomplishing this.

And once the Hunter Command Center revealed the assassination of a national-level hunter, no hunter would be able to ignore the matter.

"The Hunter Command Center wants to maintain the amicable relationship we have, Hunter Sung."

"And that's why you came to inform me about this guy before it went public?"

Adam nodded as best he could with his neck still restrained. "S-since you were also invited to the conference, it would have put you in a tough spot."

Whether or not it was really his father, it would still cause him trouble. They deigned to give Jinwoo a heads-up about Chris's death and Ilhwan Sung's reappearance and warrant to stay in his good graces. No one wanted him as an enemy.

……

Jinwoo was lost in thought. He could tell Adam was being completely truthful by his desperate eyes and voice. He bore no ill will toward Jinwoo. Had he sensed even just a hint of hostility from Adam, Jinwoo wouldn't have hesitated to act.

However, here was photographic evidence of the creature with his father's appearance stepping on the neck of Korean-born US citizen Hunter Dongsoo Hwang. Jinwoo understood why the Hunter Command Center had concluded they weren't dealing with a human being.

"We hope you understand that we had no choice."

Finally, Jinwoo let go of Adam's collar. The American's face was as red as a tomato as he coughed and gasped for air.

Jinwoo picked up the photos. There was no denying they were pictures of his father. His heart raced at the sight of him.

At that very moment, an announcement was made.

"We will be landing shortly."

During the commotion, the airplane had arrived safely at Incheon Airport. Using Stealth, Jinwoo avoided the reporters staking out the airport and called Jinho.

"Boss! Are you back in Korea?"

Jinho's voice sounded much lighter, likely because of his father's recovery.

But Jinwoo couldn't bring himself to smile. "I have to go to the US next week."

"Huh? You mean for the International Guild Conference? I thought you said you weren't going."

"Things have changed."

Jinwoo needed more information. He needed irrefutable proof whether that creature was his father or not. In order to get that, he had no choice but to attend the conference.

"Could you book me a plane ticket?"

Jinho didn't miss a beat.

"I'll book two round-trip tickets, boss!"

* * *

Some time passed after Jinwoo left before Adam could stand. The two hunters grew worried as they saw him struggling to rise from the floor.

"Are you okay, sir?"

"I'm fine. Just a little tired," Adam assured them as they helped him up.

As someone who had gone to school for criminal psychology, he'd had a lot of experience interrogating criminals, but none of them had ever scared him like

this. Jinwoo's gaze might be calm, but it was also cold and suffocating. And although he knew Jinwoo wasn't going to come back to hurt him, he came close to soiling his pants just thinking about those eyes.

The photos had flipped a switch in the hunter.

I didn't know one person could wig out like that.

But there was something even more surprising. Adam turned to the two hunters.

"I want to make sure because it happened so fast. Did Hunter Sung move me without touching me?"

The two high-rank hunters had excellent eyesight, and they nodded in confirmation.

I knew it……!

Adam was astounded. He was certain Jinwoo had telekinetic power. Telekinesis was a skill only national-level hunters could obtain, but Jinwoo had used it so casually.

Adam got goose bumps. This was the first person outside of the five established national-level hunters to showcase that ability.

Gotta act quickly!

He raised his cell phone with a shaky hand. It took a few rings before the assistant director answered the phone.

Adam tried to calm his trembling voice before speaking. "Mr. Connor…… I think I've found the sixth."

⁎ ⁎ ⁎

The Hunter Command Center announced the roster of invited guilds.

- **Sicario Guild, Alron Diaz (Mexico)**
- **Ahjin Guild, Jinwoo Sung (South Korea)**
- **Ira et Vitae Guild, Fabio Garco (Italy)**
- **……**

The International Guild Conference was an important event in which representative guilds from various countries were invited to discuss the trends and prospects of the hunters' community.

Ahjin Guild was chosen to represent Korea, and its attendance was a hot topic not only in Korea but across the globe. The only top-tier hunter in their roster was their guild master, so by inviting them, the Hunter Command Center was publicly acknowledging that Jinwoo alone was as good as any of the well-established guilds on their roster.

No one objected to this. What was there to object to? Jinwoo's résumé included single-handedly saving both Korea and Japan from being destroyed by national-level crises. So no one had any doubts about Ahjin Guild or Hunter Jinwoo Sung's qualifications.

On the contrary, most people couldn't hide their excitement that one more powerhouse would show up the event that gathered the powerhouses of the world. Updates on the Japan dungeon break by the world's most trusted news organizations were always followed by a reminder of Ahjin's attendance.

Naturally, Korea was no exception. With the public so hyped up about the conference, one network requested an interview with Jongin Choi, the president of the Hunters Guild. Jongin was aware they'd only asked him because they couldn't get Jinwoo, but he gladly agreed regardless.

The interview took place live at the network's studios at eight in the evening, during prime-time hours.

"Hello. I am Jongin Choi, the president of the Hunters Guild."

The clean-cut smile on his handsome face made female viewers' hearts flutter. The program's website was full of complaints from this very demographic about how they believed the Hunters Guild had been robbed of their rightful invitation.

"Thank you for joining us, President Choi." The female host politely bowed before asking the question on the teleprompter. "Many people are interested in news regarding Ahjin Guild these days. How do you feel about that, President Choi?"

Jongin easily answered. “I think the Hunter Command Center made the right choice.”

“Does that mean you support their decision?”

“I do indeed.”

“But it’s no exaggeration to say that Ahjin is a one-man guild, right?”

“Yes, but that one man is Hunter Jinwoo Sung.” Jongin chuckled, and the host laughed with him. He continued without missing a beat. “If we define guild members as anyone who can be mobilized to do battle, then Hunter Sung has hundreds of guild members.”

“You’re talking about Hunter Sung’s minions, right?”

“Exactly. Ahjin Guild can stand their own against not just guilds in Korea but those around the world.”

“All because of Hunter Sung?”

“Yes, because of him.”

Jongin’s unwavering support of Jinwoo caused a stir in the audience, but he stood behind what he said. Having seen the man in action, Jongin firmly believed in the younger hunter. The memory of Jinwoo carving a path through the ant magic beasts made the hair on the back of his neck stand up and goose bumps spread all over his body.

Who would’ve ever guessed that he used to be an E-rank hunter?

Things heated up as Jongin acknowledged the power gap between Ahjin Guild and his own.

“Still, as the previous Korean representative at the International Guild Conference, I can’t imagine you’re particularly happy about how things have gone?” The host looked pleased with her question and awaited Jongin’s reaction.

“Of course, I’m jealous he gets to go overseas. I’d just renewed my passport and everything.” The audience guffawed at his joke. “However, I’m prouder of Hunter Sung than I am jealous of him.”

Jongin's smile suddenly faded, and at his serious expression, the laughter from the audience died down, and the host's eyes gleamed. The audience could tell from the look on his face that this was the crux of the matter. Their eyes locked on his mouth.

Jongin had appeared on TV often enough to know how to play to the audience. He took a dramatic pause before continuing.

"Imagine this. You're up against a deadly magic beast you cannot hope to defeat. Just then, a hunter appears, one you would trust with your life to keep you safe."

His sincere words had a weight to them that rendered the host and viewers speechless.

Jongin declared to a studio that was now dead silent, "My guild members and I, along with many other members of different guilds, only lived to see this day because of Hunter Sung."

He scanned the audience. He hadn't meant to turn this into such a solemn occasion, so he smiled to lighten the mood.

"I am truly proud that Hunter Jinwoo Sung has been chosen to represent Korea."

He received thunderous applause.

* * *

As Jongin exited the studio after wrapping up the interview, he received a call.

Vrrrr, vrrrr.

Hmm?

The caller ID said Director Myungki Jo, a fellow guildmate who Jongin often turned to for advice.

"Jongin Choi speaking."

"President Choi, we got the permit for the gate that spawned in Suseo-dong this morning. It's an A-rank gate, but the level isn't that high according to the readings."

“Excellent.” He smiled at the good news, but then a thought occurred to him. “Hey, did Ahjin Guild try to book this gate?”

“No, sir. Like you said, they’ve been too quiet lately.”

It had been four days since Jinwoo returned from Japan. Since then, four high-rank gates had appeared near Seoul. The number of high-rank gates had increased rapidly, but there was no movement from Ahjin Guild (aka Jinwoo).

The other large guilds in the metropolitan area welcomed the silence from the so-called destroyer of gates and bringer of death to magic beasts. However, Jongin found the lack of activity strange, and the continued silence made him uneasy.

I know better than Yoonho Baek of White Tiger or Taegyu Lim of the Reapers.

If one rejoiced over an apple falling from a tree, how were they any different from a monkey? While one person smacked their lips over a free apple, another pondered the laws of gravity. Jongin wasn’t foolish enough to get caught in a stroke of good fortune.

Myungki chuckled.

“Either way, our profits are up forty percent due to the lack of competition!”

“Ah, another monkey……”

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind.” Jongin quickly changed the subject. “Did the association say anything?”

“They claim he’s been at home resting. And he apparently hasn’t been to the guild office recently.”

“Hmm……”

“Don’t overthink it, sir. He’s probably getting ready for the International Guild Conference.”

Jongin shook his head. “That can’t be it.”

He knew Jinwoo better than that.

“He cleared three to four low-rank gates per day before his reevaluation, raided gates on other people’s turf after becoming an S rank, and then took care of an S-rank dungeon break in Japan all by himself. That’s the kind of hunter Jinwoo Sung is.”

The more Myungki thought about it, the more he realized Jongin might be right. The director was also curious as to why Ahjin Guild had been so quiet lately. Where there were magic beasts, there was usually Jinwoo Sung. Jinwoo couldn’t have been that tired after the giant fight, either, so Jongin’s suspicions weren’t unfounded.

“You’re right.”

“Wait, wasn’t Ahjin Guild supposed to interview some prospective employees today? But he still didn’t show up at the guild?”

“No, Hunter Sung wasn’t at the interview. Vice President Yoo was conducting them by himself.”

“……” Jongin paused, then calmly asked, “And how did you know that, Director Jo?”

* * *

“I’m dying, boss.”

Jinho groaned into the phone.

It put a smile on Jinwoo’s face.

Jinho was exhausted from interviewing the applicants. He’d managed to narrow it down to a few hundred. Despite his young age, he was doing well as vice president.

The apple didn’t fall far from the tree.

Although he could be a little clumsy, he had the genes of Chairman Yoo, a natural-born businessman. Thanks to Jinho handling all the guild-related work, Jinwoo was able to do whatever he wanted.

“Thanks for all your hard work.”

“Don’t mention it, boss. So how is it going there?”

“Here?”

Jinwoo looked over his shoulder. The soldiers on standby flashed him a signal that they were ready for him.

He grinned. “Same old. I think I’ll be late today, so don’t wait around for me.”

“Got it, boss.”

Jinwoo hung up and handed his cell phone and belongings to an employee from the Hunter’s Association of Japan. With his hands free, Jinwoo slowly stretched his neck and shoulders. He luxuriated in the buoyant feeling he always got when he warmed up before a raid.

Meanwhile, the employee from the association struck up a conversation with him. “If people knew you were clearing high-rank dungeons in decimated areas, your reputation would sparkle like a diamond! May I ask why you’re keeping this a secret?”

Jinwoo smiled and answered simply, “Because I like to keep things quiet.”

Modesty was one of the best virtues, and Jinwoo’s humility brought tears to the employee’s eyes.

“Please feel free to call on me anytime if you need anything! I will do my best — No, I will do whatever it takes!”

……Jinwoo suspected something may have gotten lost in translation, but Jinwoo didn’t mind as long as everything worked out okay. He smiled awkwardly and patted the employee on the shoulder before heading toward the gate. The soldiers saluted as they cleared a path for him.

It was an A-rank gate. Jinwoo was currently jumping back and forth between Korea and Japan, dealing with all the high-rank gates that Japan couldn’t deal with currently. This was made possible by the Japanese satellite, which could detect magic power and Shadow Exchange.

He looked up. It was huge, as befitting of an A-rank gate. Gates were less expensive to book here, and the Japanese government had promised him tax-free profits as a bonus. Better than any financial gains, though, was that Jinwoo got most of the gates in Japan to himself due to the state of Japan’s guilds.

Demon Monarch's Daggers.

Vmmm.

"Oh!" One of the soldiers gasped after seeing the daggers appear in Jinwoo's hands. He ducked his head in embarrassment.

Jinwoo swallowed a chuckle and walked toward the gate.

Just three days left until the conference.

He'd pledged to himself that he wouldn't waste even a day, so he threw himself inside and heard the familiar voice and chime.

Ping!

[You have entered a dungeon.]

* * *

"You don't have a problem with this, sir?" Jinchul asked cautiously.

President Go didn't seem fazed at the report. "Problem with what?"

"Hunter Sung's…continued visits to Japan."

The Hunter's Association of Korea was able to monitor their hunters using the tracking function of their hunter-exclusive phones. Under orders from President Go, Jinchul had fed false information to anybody asking about Jinwoo's whereabouts.

"What if Hunter Sung decides to stay in Japan……?"

If that happened, Korea would lose their best hunter. That was Jinchul's main concern. However, President Go, who valued Jinwoo more highly than anyone else, remained strangely silent when it came to the young man's recent activities, which frustrated Jinchul to no end.

President Go chuckled at how anxious Jinchul was. "Don't worry about it."

"So he's said something to you, then?"

"He came to see me before he went to Japan to defeat the giants."

That much was obvious, as President Go had been the one to announce Jinwoo's intentions.

“I tried to stop him, said that there was too much risk compared to the gains. He wasn’t promised big money like Yuri, right?”

Jinchul nodded. Jinwoo’s single request had been the right to decide what to do with the remains of the magic beasts. It was too small a fee for saving a whole country.

I figured there was no time to negotiate with a country whose cities were falling by the day……

It couldn’t be helped. But it should’ve been a red flag for the president of the association whose job was to protect the hunters of his country. It was rather strange that President Go had let Jinwoo go.

“But then he told me something.” President Go recalled that moment and grinned.

The suspense was killing Jinchul. “What……did he say?”

“He told me that he wants to expand the territory of Ahjin Guild to Japan.”

“What?” Jinchul couldn’t help but gasp.

President Go’s initial reaction had been the same.

“Japan’s largest guilds were rendered powerless because of the damage from Jeju Island and the giants. Hunter Sung confidently told me that Ahjin Guild would fill the void.”

“Huh……” Jinchul couldn’t pick his jaw up off the floor.

To think Jinwoo had planned that far in advance before slaying the giants. Was it sheer confidence or a strategic mind? Whatever it was, Jinwoo had achieved his goal. This was a proposal Japan would welcome with arms wide open.

“How could I not let him go after that?”

While other large guilds fought over territories in the relatively small area of Seoul, Jinwoo had crossed the sea to Japan. When it came to animals, the ability to find fertile hunting grounds made for a good hunter. Jinwoo was a born hunter with the ability to handle any prey.

President Go expressed his admiration. “What an incredible young man he is.”

“……I agree, sir.”

Never mind Jinwoo’s ability to instantly travel between Korea and Japan without getting on a plane. Jinwoo’s ability to set an unrealistic goal and achieve it was extremely impressive.

As if on cue, a clip from Jongin’s interview played on the TV.

“I am truly proud that Hunter Jinwoo Sung has been chosen to represent Korea.”

President Go leaned back on the couch with a hearty laugh. “So am I.”

4

HEADING TO AMERICA

4

HEADING TO AMERICA

President Go turned off the TV. It was already nine o'clock, well past what constituted a late night at the office, but Jinchul still had something to discuss.

"China is requesting information on Hunter Sung."

"Information? Do you mean his personal information?"

"No, sir."

"Then?"

"They want anything that's publicly available, such as his raid records or newspaper articles about him."

This made sense. China knew better than to expect to be privy to the personal information of another country's S-rank hunter, much less a hunter like Jinwoo. But why the sudden interest? The Hunter's Association of Korea had already announced publicly that Jinwoo wasn't looking to entertain offers from other countries at this time.

"The request didn't come from the Chinese government."

"What?"

"It was an individual."

"Who?"

The Hunter's Association of Korea represented the country and worked exclusively with other such organizations, not random people. Jinchul should've rejected the request outright.

"Zhigang Liu, China's seven-star hunter, has taken an interest in Hunter Sung."

Zhigang Liu! That was the last name President Go had expected to hear.

China didn't follow the international standard when it came to ranking hunters. Instead, they used a star-ranking system, and the higher the number of stars, the greater the hunter. Five stars had been the highest rank one could achieve—until Zhigang Liu came along. Naturally, as both a seven-star hunter and one of the renowned national-level hunters, he received preferential treatment like no other. But considering Zhigang's great abilities, no one contested this.

Hunter Sung caught Zhigang's eye?

How had that come to pass?

Jinchul explained. "Zhigang fought one of the giants, so he wanted to know more about the man who took care of the rest."

There it was. President Go nodded.

Not too long ago, one of the giants had escaped from Japan and headed to China. It was reported that Zhigang had taken care of it somewhere along the coast.

"Is this the mighty recognizing the mighty?" President Go smiled mischievously.

First, the Hunter Command Center has invited Ahjin Guild to the International Guild Conference. Then, the great Zhigang Liu asked about Jinwoo Sung. President Go was proud to have recognized Jinwoo's worth from the start.

However, that's a separate matter.

No need to flash the value of their gem to those lusting over it, right? It might get them on the bad side of a national-level hunter, but so what? They had Jinwoo on their side.

President Go came to a decision and chortled. "Go ahead and turn him down."

* * *

The dungeons had changed. It was a realization Jinwoo had come to while clearing high-rank dungeons in Japan the last few days. Alert, he scanned the

interior of the latest. He could sense the presence of magic beasts, but he couldn't see them. He would've been very confused had his perception been low or his experience lacking.

Maybe from above?

Jinwoo stopped and looked up just in time to see a sticky liquid drip onto the ground ahead of him.

Tssssss……

The acid-like substance melted the ground and generated a thick smoke that stung his nostrils and reeked. Jinwoo wrinkled his nose.

Realizing the hunter wouldn't come any closer, the huge blobs stuck to the cave's ceiling dropped down.

Whomp. Whomp.

The blobs slowly formed into twelve humanoid figures. It was a unique-looking magic beast with a white mask where its face should've been and a body composed of slime. Jinwoo had never seen such a creature before.

Jinwoo summoned an old friend.

Knight Killer.

A dagger appeared in his hand. It used to be one of Jinwoo's preferred weapons along with Barca's Dagger, but it had been collecting dust in his inventory ever since he acquired the Demon Monarch's Daggers. He hadn't had an appropriate place to use it in forever. The familiar grip felt good in his hand, and he swiftly threw the dagger at one of the magic beasts.

Dagger Barrage!

Shhhhk.

The blade whistled through the air until it pierced a magic beast square in the chest…and kept going until it stuck in the wall behind it. The black liquid that coated the dagger from passing through the magic beast started melting the metal.

Tssss……

The now-soft dagger lost its original shape and oozed down the wall.

I knew it!

Jinwoo had suspected that physical attacks would have no effect on these beasts. However, before he could mourn the loss of Knight Killer, the magic beasts quickly jumped at him.

Jinwoo repelled them with Ruler's Authority.

Bam!

An invisible hand sent his attackers flying.

Ploop! Ploop!

The magic beasts' bodies broke into several jiggly pieces, but the separated blobs slowly merged and re-formed perfectly.

"Heh." Jinwoo barked out a laugh at the creatures' ridiculous recovery time. He would've loved to experiment as to whether his shadow soldiers' was better, but……

……I need to be patient.

Physical attacks, tangible or not, didn't work on them. Then what else could he try? He pondered a solution while casually avoiding the continuous attacks when Jinwoo noticed one of the creatures moving awkwardly.

Huh?

Jinwoo looked closely to see the magic beast's arm hadn't re-formed. He also noted a crack in its mask, probably from when he'd used Ruler's Hand.

That's their weakness, isn't it?

Jinwoo smiled. Once he figured out how to attack them, it would be easy going from there.

Shhk! Shhk!

Dodging the magic beasts' merciless punches, he summoned his other friends.

Demon Monarch's Daggers.

A blade appeared in each of his hands, and Jinwoo's eyes flashed.

Crack!

One of the beasts went limp as a dagger pierced its mask.

Whoomp.

That was only the beginning. Jinwoo danced through the group, breaking every single mask in the blink of an eye.

Krik!

Snap!

And lastly—

Crack!

The final mask cracked into two pieces, and the beast splashed to the ground, having turned back into liquid. Jinwoo returned the Demon Monarch's Daggers to his inventory.

What if he hadn't been the one raiding the dungeon? At least a few people would've been killed before anyone realized that normal attacks wouldn't work. Even more would've been sacrificed before they found out the weakness. Worst-case scenario, everyone would've died before that, even if it was an elite strike squad. These magic beasts had been that strong, fast, and dangerous.

The problem was that this wasn't the first time he'd noticed this.

Yeah…… The dungeons have definitely changed.

The day Jinwoo killed the King of Giants, magic stones had vanished from dungeons all over the world. These minerals used to absorb much of the mana within dungeons, but with them gone, the magic beasts had it all to themselves. In an instant, dungeons became much more life-threatening than ever before.

And these dangerous new beasts keep appearing……

Jinwoo frowned.

The average strike squad setting foot inside a high-rank dungeon wouldn't be able to avoid a fatality. And the number of gate-related incidents were on the rise as well. He had ordered Beru to guard his home out of worry, since the ant could handle most dungeons by himself.

On the other hand……

It wasn't entirely a bad thing in Jinwoo's perspective that gates were spawning more often and that magic beasts were stronger now, since it allowed him to level up more easily. In this dungeon alone, Jinwoo could sense that there remained many more magic beasts emitting tons of mana.

A smile crossed his face.

Now that I know what I'm dealing with, let's get this party started.

He was done warming up. It was the beginning of their end.

"Come on out."

Vwoooom.

His shadow soldiers emerged behind him from his shadow. He had already informed them how to handle these opponents, so they were prepared.

With Beru guarding Jinwoo's family, Igris was now the commander of the whole army. At his master's nod, the knight signaled to the army to advance.

Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp!

Their marching footsteps echoed loudly inside the cavernous dungeon.

* * *

One by one, the best hunters in the world arrived in the US for the International Guild Conference, the national-level hunters among them. However, Thomas Andre was concerned with only one person.

Jinwoo Sung will arrive tomorrow……

Thomas summoned Dongsoo to the president's office after verifying Jinwoo's schedule.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Dongsoo cautiously asked as he studied Thomas's expression.

He'd been with the Scavenger Guild for a few years now, but he still found it difficult to talk to the guild master. Thomas was extremely powerful, had an unpredictable personality, and was very possessive. Despite being a fellow S-rank hunter, Dongsoo felt small in Thomas's presence.

“Mr. Hwang.” Thomas got straight to the point. “Do not lay a finger on Jinwoo Sung.”

Dongsoo’s eyes widened, unsure how Thomas knew. His eyes then shifted to Laura standing behind the guild master. She stared back at Dongsoo as if to indicate she had just been doing her job.

Tsk!

Dongsoo clicked his tongue.

Thomas continued. “I know what happened between your older brother and Hunter Sung. I understand that there were suspicious circumstances and that you want answers.”

Dongsoo’s older brother, Dongsuk, had gone into a dungeon with Jinwoo a while back. All eight of Dongsuk’s regular squad members had perished in that dungeon alongside him, while two of the survivors went on to form a guild together. No wonder he had questions for Jinwoo.

Dongsoo’s discontent showed on his face. “But—”

Thomas wagged a finger at him, and a corner of his lips curved up. “I don’t remember saying you could speak, Mr. Hwang.”

Just listen. It was a clear warning. Thomas was one of only a handful of hunters who could threaten S-rank hunters like that. Understanding the power dynamic between his guild master and himself, Dongsoo kept his mouth shut.

Thomas emphasized one more time. “Do not do anything to Jinwoo. Heck, why don’t you take a vacation at the guild villa for the duration of the conference? Would you do that for me?”

“……”

“Mr. Hwang?”

Dongsoo reluctantly nodded. “……Sure.”

“Good. You may leave now.”

Dongsoo hastily left the president’s office with a storm cloud over his head.

“Do you think that will do, sir?” Laura asked, seemingly unconvinced.

Thomas shook his head, disgruntled. “Not at all.”

Thomas had seen the hostility on Dongsoo’s face. He wasn’t ready to let go of his brother’s death.

“Laura.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep a close eye on Mr. Hwang until Jinwoo leaves the US.”

“Will he……be okay with that?”

Dongsoo might have behaved in front of Thomas, but he had quite a temper.

Thomas, however, didn’t care about that. This wasn’t a matter where he could try to accommodate Dongsoo’s preferences. He agonized over it for a bit as he scratched his chin, then shrugged.

“Well……better frustrated than dead.”

* * *

“Why are there so many reporters here?” Germany’s top hunter, Lennart Neirmann, gasped at the sight as he exited the airport. As the guild master of Richter Guild, he attended the International Guild Conference yearly, but he had never seen this much press before.

The vice guild master told him, “That popular Korean hunter is arriving in the US today.”

“Ah, got it.”

Lennart understood immediately. Even though he was an S-rank hunter, it was difficult for him to resolve an S-rank dungeon break on his own, much less one with giants. No wonder the media was excited that a hunter who could was about to set foot on US soil for the first time. Lennart also found himself keen to learn more about Jinwoo.

So he’s coming, eh?

At that moment, the passengers deplaning from Korea began pouring out of the airport.

The vice guild master pointed at someone in the crowd. “Oh, there he is!”

He, too, was an S-rank hunter. While not as strong as Lennart, his perception was good enough to be able to pick Jinwoo out of a large crowd.

There was a twinkle in Lennart's eyes. "Shall we introduce ourselves?"

"What?"

"It's not a bad idea to get acquainted with the mighty hunter."

"That's true." The vice guild master agreed.

One never knew when one might need the cooperation of another guild, so the purpose of the International Guild Conference was to gather the world's most powerful hunters in one place to allow them to network. Lennart was simply getting a head start on the festivities.

He straightened his clothes and walked toward Jinwoo's group but paused after a few steps. His face was growing as white as a sheet.

The vice guild master glanced over his shoulder. "Aren't you coming, sir?"

Lennart looked at his colleague, aghast. "Don't you see them……?"

"Excuse me?"

The vice guild master couldn't, but Lennart, one of the top hunters in the world, saw them clear as day.

He mumbled to himself in disbelief. "I thought he summoned his minions from a different dimension, but he actually carries them around with him like this?"

"Pardon?"

What was Lennart talking about? Confused by the reaction, the vice guild master turned back in Jinwoo's direction, but he couldn't see hair nor hide of the minions.

"There are minions here?"

"Yes! Tons of them!"

Lennart concentrated on the army hiding in Jinwoo's shadow. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred… Could he even count them all? He swallowed hard and shuddered.

You'd think he was here to declare war on the US with that many of them……

Had Lennart been hosting this conference, he never would have allowed a hunter to bring such things into the country. There could only be two explanations: Either the Hunter Command Center didn't have a clear idea of just how powerful the Korean hunter was or they were confident that his power wouldn't be used against them.

As Jinwoo approached, Lennart felt an increasing pressure that he'd only ever experienced in the presence of national-level hunters such as Thomas Andre or Christopher Reed.

……

Jinwoo eventually passed by him, but Lennart reflexively looked down. He didn't have the courage to make eye contact with Jinwoo, almost like his instincts refused to let him.

Once Jinwoo's group was farther away, the confused vice guild master probed Lennart about his strange behavior. "Are you feeling okay, sir? You don't look so good……"

"Yeah…… I'm fine." Lennart dabbed at the sweat on his brow.

Perception was everything, and being able to measure another's ability was an important tool for hunters. But just this once, Lennart was envious of the vice guild master and the reporters for being oblivious to such terrifying power.

* * *

Jinho saw Jinwoo tilt his head curiously and asked, "Did you see someone you know, boss?"

"No. Some foreigner kept staring at me, so……"

Jinho laughed it off. "You've been all over the news, so you've got more than a few fans! He probably just wanted your autograph, boss."

Though the foreigner seemed a bit too skilled a hunter to have been simply waiting for an autograph…

Jinwoo broke into a grin.

Besides Jinho, there were two other members of his entourage. The

association had sent along Director Jinchul Woo and a female interpreter.

“Oh! Over there!”

“It’s Jinwoo Sung!”

The reporters spotted him.

Ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak!

As the area lit up with camera flashes, Jinchul fished a pair of sunglasses out from his inner pocket, put them on, and carefully scanned the area.

Jinho noted how tense the older man seemed. “By the way, why did you come with us, Director Woo?”

As someone who held a directorial position at the Seoul branch of the Hunter’s Association of Korea, Director Woo was the head of an entire department. Jinho was thankful to the association for assigning them an interpreter, but he had no idea why someone as important as Jinchul had come along.

Director Woo glanced at Jinwoo and blushed. “I’m in charge of……guarding Hunter Sung.”

It took a lot of courage for him to admit that, but unfortunately, Jinho didn’t hear him over the clamor of the airport.

Jinho put a hand to his ear. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“…in charge…guarding……”

“Who are you guarding?”

Jinchul was now as red as a tomato, so Jinwoo put a hand on Jinho’s shoulder to cut him off.

“Boss?”

Jinwoo pointed toward a familiar face with his chin. “Over there. I think they’re here for us.”

Near the exit stood a young man in a slick suit and nicely coiffed blond hair: Adam White. He made a beeline for Jinwoo, accompanied by the same two bulky bodyguards. As soon as Jinwoo made eye contact with them, they both

ducked their heads, flustered as they recalled their vain attempt to tackle Jinwoo on the plane, forgetting how much stronger the Korean was. They genuinely looked like they were two seconds away from asking for an autograph.

He acknowledged the two guards and shook Adam's hand.

Adam brightly greeted him. "I've been waiting for you, Hunter Sung."

"Didn't you tell me that you were in charge of Asia, Agent White?"

"Ha-ha." Adam scratched the back of his head. "I was until recently, when they put me in charge of assisting you, Hunter Sung."

They exchanged pleasantries, and then Adam led the group out of the airport. "I've arranged your transportation."

Two cars were idling. The two association employees piled into the second while Jinho headed for the first, but Adam blocked his way.

"……?"

Upon seeing Jinwoo's and Jinho's confusion, Adam elaborated. "Everyone except Hunter Sung will be escorted to the hotel."

Adam then turned to Jinwoo. "Would you please come with us, Hunter Sung?"

Did this have anything to do with Jinwoo's father? Jinwoo's expression shuttered, and the temperature around them suddenly dropped.

Adam quickly waved his hand. "I promise this is for your benefit, Hunter Sung. You're aware of what the Hunter Command Center thinks of you, right?"

Adam had previously mentioned that the Hunter Command Center wanted to maintain friendly relations with Jinwoo. They wanted to be helpful to him, and Jinwoo didn't sense any hostility in Adam's words. Had there been any ill will, he would've picked up on it with his highly sharpened perception stat, just as he'd done with the King of Giants' offer to become an ally.

"What's this about that you can't discuss it here?" Jinwoo asked calmly.

Adam smiled awkwardly and glanced at Jinho. "Some of the information is

classified.”

Jinho caught on and stepped back without a fuss. “I’ll see you back at the hotel, boss.”

“Okay.”

Jinwoo watched Jinho get in the second car before following Adam into the first one, which sped away as soon as they closed the door. The two cars split off in different directions.

Jinwoo had been patient enough. “So where are we going?”

“The Hunter Command Center headquarters.”

The Hunter Command Center? The International Guild Conference was to be held in a rented space near the hotel he would be staying at, so this wasn’t conference-related business.

“Can’t you tell me what this is about now?”

Adam pressed a button as if he had been waiting for this moment. A transparent partition rose between the front and back of the car, and a hologram of the English word *soundproof* blinked on the fiberglass.

Adam wondered why Jinwoo didn’t seem to care about the hologram. “This is the latest technology…… Don’t you find it impressive?”

“I see something similar to it every day, so…”

“……” Adam seemed a little disappointed, but he quickly found his smile again. “Please excuse me for a second.”

Knock, knock.

He knocked on the partition to check the soundproofing before turning to Jinwoo. “To be frank, we’re under a lot of pressure right now.”

The tragic death of Christopher Reed, one of two American national-level hunters, was much more painful of a loss than Jinwoo could have imagined.

“Hunter Reed was one of the pillars of America’s fighting forces, and the Hunter Command Center is desperate to fill this vacuum of power. His death is currently confidential, so things are quiet right now, but we will soon do

whatever it takes to recruit a hunter who can replace him."

"Am I a candidate?"

Adam nodded. Jinwoo appreciated his honesty, but he was growing impatient with being pestered with the same offer he had already rejected.

"Aren't we done talking about this?"

"Yes, of course." But Adam looked like he was just getting started. He pulled out his cell phone and showed Jinwoo several pictures. "There's a new offer on the table."

The photos depicted the hunt for the first and only dragon magic beast to ever appear: Kamish the dragon. It had been the worst disaster in human history and the raid people most wanted to forget. Only five participants of that particular raid had survived, and they were now known as national-level hunters.

Adam stopped on an image of the world's best mage hunters extracting a rune stone from Kamish's remains.

"As you well know, the value of a rune stone is proportional to the strength of the magic beast it came from."

He swiped to bring up another picture. Kamish's priceless rune stone, containing the greatest skill to ever exist, rested inside a glass case protected by several layers of security.

"We're looking for the new owner of this rune stone."

Adam didn't have magic power, skills, or spells, but even he felt excited just looking at the stone. What feelings, then, would it elicit in someone like Jinwoo?

Adam peeked at the Korean to gauge his reaction. As expected, the man who hadn't been impressed by the Hunter Command Center's newest technology now looked very anxious. Adam was sure he had done it, and he gave himself a mental pat on the back.

However, Jinwoo made an unexpected request. "Can…can you go back to the previous pictures?"

“Pardon me?”

“I want to see the ones before this.”

Confused, Adam obliged.

“Hold on.”

Jinwoo stopped Adam on one particular image and pointed at something to the side.

“Where is this?”

He was pointing at a pillar that had caught his eye. Pillars had been erected around Kamish, which suggested that a building had been built to contain the corpse.

Kamish had been killed eight years ago. Magic beasts from high-rank dungeons were worth their weight in gold, and its dead body would’ve ordinarily been cut up and used or sold off accordingly, so Jinwoo never would’ve expected Kamish’s corpse to be intact. Countless nations, companies, and research labs would’ve lined up to buy the remains, but based on the photograph, Kamish’s body looked untouched save wounds sustained from the fierce battle. Jinwoo’s heart leaped at the possibility that Kamish’s remains might be within reach.

“Did the US preserve Kamish’s corpse?”

“Y-yes, that’s right……”

Adam didn’t know what to make of Jinwoo’s reaction. He had been hyping up the rune stone every hunter in the world would kill to obtain, yet Jinwoo was focused on the magic beast’s cadaver.

Jinwoo pointed at the picture once again. “Where is this? Let’s go there.”

“Pardon me?”

“I’ve been humoring the Hunter Command Center all this time. You can grant me this one request, can’t you?”

“Ummm……” Adam was caught completely off guard.

But this situation wasn’t unsalvageable, right? Between Jinwoo and the

Hunter Command Center, whoever needed the other more would be at a disadvantage, so the Hunter Command Center's plan was to catch Jinwoo's attention. They'd first tried using Mrs. Sellner's ability, and when that failed, they'd tried dangling Kamish's rune stone in front of him.

But the spark of interest had come from a surprising source. This cloud might have a silver lining for Adam after all.

The higher-ups said by any means necessary, right?

The director and assistant director had gathered the agents of the Hunter Command Center and instructed them to get on Hunter Jinwoo Sung's good side no matter what it took. They were to increase the chances of him defecting to the US. If the Hunter Command Center had it, they were willing to give it to Jinwoo.

Adam reminded himself of his mission and cleared his throat. "I don't actually know where Kamish's remains are located, as I'm strictly on a need-to-know basis."

Jinwoo's face fell as he nodded. That made sense. Adam seemed too young to be privy to any and all classified information.

Adam confidently continued. "However, I'm sure I can get the clearance if it's for you, Hunter Sung. I'll have to report the situation to my superior first, so would you mind waiting?"

Jinwoo brightened at the news.

The chances of Shadow Extraction failing increased the more time passed since death, and in Kamish's case, it had been eight whole years. The odds were against Jinwoo, and it could turn out to be a waste of both his and others' time to even try. But if there was a one-in-a-million chance he could succeed, then he had to try. And if he pulled it off, he would command the shadow soldier born of the most powerful magic beast ever known to mankind. He felt giddy just imagining it.

If he failed, the only loss would be a minute out of people's days. Considering the possible gain, it was worth the effort.

Of course, Jinwoo wasn't sure the US would allow it.

“Aren’t we heading to the Hunter Command Center now?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I’ll just wait there.”

“Oh……” Adam wrinkled his brow, unsure whether he should be happy about Jinwoo’s sudden extreme interest.

* * *

The director of the Hunter Command Center of the US made a similar face when he heard the news, as did Assistant Director Connor standing next to him.

“So Hunter Sung is here? Now?”

Adam nodded.

“What about the rune stone? He didn’t say anything about it?”

He’d made the decision to bequeath Kamish’s rune stone to Jinwoo to persuade the Korean hunter to join America. After all, American hunters growing more powerful meant that America was in turn more powerful. However……

“No, sir. He barely said anything about the rune stone on the way here.”

“Hmm…… That’s not good.” The director rubbed his chin.

Jinwoo reminded him of Thomas Andre. Both apex hunters were rather hard to predict. At this point, the director figured that when people reached the pinnacle as those two had, they simply thought differently than others.

“So he really just wants to see the beast’s remains?”

“Yes, sir.” Adam nodded firmly.

Overall, he couldn’t complain about how things had turned out. Adam’s original mission had been to bring Jinwoo to the bargaining table, and since Jinwoo had willingly come to the Hunter Command Center, Adam’s mission could be considered complete. It was now up to management to negotiate.

The director couldn’t come to an easy decision. “I need to discuss this with Mr. Connor. If you would…”

“Yes, sir.” Adam got up and left the director’s office.

The director was at a loss for what to do. “Why do you think Hunter Sung wants to see Kamish’s remains?”

“I’m not sure…… But he’s definitely not here to play tourist. It’s likely the beast’s remains mean more to him than the rune stone.”

Skills were invaluable. The greatest hunters were willing to spend a fortune on ones they needed, and for good reason. Skills meant power, and power meant survival.

So how can seeing the beast’s cadaver be more beneficial to him than gaining a new skill……?

The two arrived at the same conclusion.

“It probably has something to do with Hunter Sung’s ability,” Michael mused.

“……”

The Hunter Command Center’s ability to retrieve information on hunters was unparalleled, so naturally, they had gathered a substantial amount about Jinwoo. It was based on that intel that they’d deemed him worthy of offering Mrs. Sellner’s ability and Kamish’s rune stone.

“Isn’t his ability restricted to magic beasts he personally defeats?”

After Jinwoo defeated ant magic beasts, ant shadow soldiers had appeared in his army. After he defeated giants, giant shadow soldiers had popped up. The more Jinwoo battled, the stronger he became, which was why the Hunter Command Center was desperate to make him a US hunter by any means necessary. But what if Jinwoo could turn a magic beast that had been killed by others a long time ago into a shadow soldier?

“Oh my word……” The assistant director’s eyes popped out of his head. “He wants to transform Kamish into one of his minions!”

Michael’s voice quivered. He couldn’t believe Jinwoo would even consider making the worst disaster of human history into a minion. But it now made sense why Jinwoo wasn’t concerned with the rune stone.

The director shook his head urgently. “We cannot allow that to happen. No person should wield that much power.”

“But if we reject him, it’ll put a strain on our relationship.”

That Jinwoo had come all the way to their headquarters to wait on an answer showed how eager he was. If one party refused the another’s request due to a lack of trust, their relationship would break down.

“Hmm……” The director turned the matter over in his mind.

If Jinwoo really could make Kamish into his minion and control it like they were speculating, no organization or country would be able to control him. Furthermore, his minions had the ability to quickly regenerate after being destroyed. The risk of Kamish attacking them once more but with a similar unlimited regenerating ability was too great for the sake of maintaining a good relationship with a hunter.

The director wanted to know one thing before making his final decision. “We still have Thomas Andre, a national-level hunter, and almost fifty other S-rank hunters scouted from all over the world. Is Hunter Sung really worth pursuing further?”

“Actually……” The assistant director hesitated to disclose unverified information but ultimately decided to share the news. “There is a possibility that Hunter Sung may be a new national-level hunter.”

“What?!” The director abruptly leaped from his chair.

“We received a report from Agent White a week ago that Hunter Sung could use telekinesis.”

“……!”

Apart from a healer, the national-level hunters had the ability to move objects at will, and though many powerful hunters had come before and after them throughout history, they were the only ones ever recorded as having that skill. As the only ones in the world to have made this connection, the Hunter Command Center considered telekinesis a pre-requisite to being classified as a national-level hunter.

If Jinwoo indeed had this ability, he might be God’s gift to the US after losing the mighty Christopher Reed. God bless us, every one. This country was truly blessed.

The director's expression changed. "Do you think we can trust him?"

The evaluation of an individual ability was objective, but the evaluation of whether someone was trustworthy was not.

The assistant director spoke of the Jinwoo he'd observed up until this point. "What do you supposed would happen to anyone who aimed their guns at Thomas Andre or Zhigang Liu?"

"It's terrifying to even think about it."

Both Thomas and Zhigang were merciless. If one was lucky, they might lose an arm and not their lives.

"Hunter Sung doesn't operate like that. You can still talk things out with him, even in urgent situations."

The director lowered his gaze and nodded.

The assistant director continued. "And look at what he's done in Japan. No one else came forward to deal with the dungeon break there, but he took care of it without making any demands."

It was a sharp contrast to Yuri Orlov, who had asked for an insane ten billion yen per day.

"……" The director didn't think on it much longer. He pressed his lips together and rose from his chair. "I'll take him myself. This may be a good opportunity to witness his abilities."

The assistant director brightened as he also stood. "By the way, sir, where exactly are Kamish's remains?"

The director smiled. "Haven't you ever wondered why this building has twenty underground levels?"

* * *

Jinwoo was escorted onto the elevator by the director.

"I would have rather talked to you someplace quiet…… But I thought you would prefer to make haste."

Adam smoothly interpreted for him.

Jinwoo nodded in agreement.

The elevator carrying him, the director, the assistant director, and Adam quickly descended underground.

I can't believe they built the headquarters of the Hunter Command Center on the spot where they killed Kamish.

Only in America, he supposed. The director had explained that Kamish's remains were entombed beneath the Hunter Command Center to commemorate the sacrifice of the hunters who had stopped the worst disaster in human history.

Ding.

The elevator door opened on the twenty-fourth underground floor. Staff members waiting by the elevator greeted the four passengers.

"Sir."

"Sir."

The staffers appeared to be military personnel by the way they saluted the director. The director nodded at them as he led the group past.

"Come this way."

Jinwoo swallowed hard. A tightly secure door opened, and cold air stung his cheeks.

Wait, this isn't just cold air.

Although weak, there was mana in the wind. It was obvious whose it was.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

Jinwoo's heart raced as his odds of shadow extraction seemed to increase. If Kamish's body still had magic power left even after having been dead for eight years, how much power would his shadow soldier possess?

He tried to calm his racing heart as he followed closely behind the director.

"Here we are." His guide stopped in front of an incredibly huge, brightly lit lair.

And there was the red dragon Kamish. It looked the same as it had since the national-level hunters stopped its final rampage. The dragon's imposing figure took Jinwoo's breath away.

"All the electricity used in our building comes from Kamish's essence stone," the director proudly explained.

However, at this point, Jinwoo couldn't hear a thing. His eyes were fixed on the remains.

The director noticed Jinwoo's sparkling gaze and realized it was time. "Hunter Sung, are you satisfied now?"

"Please step back."

The staff began raising their concerns about Jinwoo's request.

"Mr. Brannon, what in the world is he trying to do?"

"Kamish's remains are a national treasure!"

But the director raised his voice. "He has my permission!"

Their objections immediately died down. Jinwoo and the director had already discussed the process, and Jinwoo had promised nothing would happen to Kamish's remains. Just like the assistant director, the director elected to trust Jinwoo.

"Everyone, let's observe what happens."

They obediently retreated as per Jinwoo's instructions.

Jinwoo then stretched his hand toward Kamish and whispered, "Arise."

A notification arrived.

[Shadow Extraction has failed.]

[You have two attempts remaining.]

Jinwoo calmly prepared for the next attempt.

"Arise."

His desire to take control of the most powerful magic beast echoed through the room.

Arise!

The lights on the ceiling flickered, and a chilling wind blew from nowhere.

Roooooar!

It was impossible to tell where the dragon roar came from, but everyone slapped their hands over their ears.

In this chaos, the only person who didn't lose their cool was Jinwoo. He spotted Kamish's shadow spreading across the floor.

Did…… Did I do it?

Jinwoo's eyes widened as something slowly rose from the shadow. Surrounded by black smoke, it was unquestionably shaped like a dragon.

"A-ah!"

"What… What is that?!"

The staff shuddered and retreated farther. Although the director and assistant director knew about Jinwoo's ability, the sight of it in action stole their breath away.

Roooooooar!

The dragon paused upon spotting the human at its feet.

[Shadow Monarch, King of the Dead, is it you who has summoned me?]

5

THE FURIOUS LION

5

THE FURIOUS LION

Only one being had the ability to bring a soul back from the dark abyss, and that was the Shadow Monarch. The dragon recognized who Jinwoo was at once. The King of the Dead, who had taken the form of a human, stood gazing upon Kamish. The power he wielded gave the dragon a great chill.

However, before long, Kamish's eyes shifted to the ones behind the Shadow Monarch and spotted the faces of dumbfounded humans staring at it with their mouths agape.

Humans…… Humans?

The hatred for humans the dragon had held to its dying breath came rushing back. As it did, the dragon also remembered the pain it had felt at the humans' hands.

Kill……humans.

Snap!

Kamish lost its rationality and rose to its full height, eyes glowing red. "All of you…… I will kill all of you."

The air in the chamber began heating up.

"Oh my God……!" the director whispered in horror.

The structure had been built around a sleeping dragon, but it now looked too small to contain the beast as its head reached the ceiling and split the concrete.

"Wh-what?"

"Could that be……?"

A red glow formed within the dragon's mouth. Both the director and assistant director had seen what that mass of red light could do via video footage on repeat.

Adam anxiously yelled at the director and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Mr. Brannon, we need to get out of here—"

"How do you escape a dragon's breath?!"

Once the red light was expelled, destruction of this lair and the entire headquarters of the Hunter Command Center would be assured. There was no escaping the dragon's attack.

Whud!

One of the staff members' knees buckled, his face pale. Two others desperately tried to enter the password to open the door. But both the director and assistant director knew it was all for naught, so they kept staring back and forth between Jinwoo and the revived dragon.

Fwwaaaaah……

The red light transformed into a ball of fire. The dragon was ready to spit flames at the humans in front of it.

"Die!"

Just then, Jinwoo bellowed, "Stop!"

The members of the association, who had instinctively shielded their eyes from the bright light, now cautiously lowered their hands. They had thought themselves doomed, but that had been a hasty conclusion.

"H-how……?"

The fire that had been raging inside Kamish's mouth died down. In the past, the dragon had incinerated hundreds of hunters with its fiery breath, but it now took one hunter to stop it in its tracks.

The director gawked at Jinwoo. And just when he thought he couldn't be more surprised…

Jinwoo spoke to Kamish. "The essence stone that was once inside your head

was taken a long time ago. You don't have to listen to the Rulers anymore."

The assistant director shivered. "I-is he speaking the language of magic beasts?"

"……I don't know what to make of what I'm seeing right now."

While everyone else was trying to work through their shock, Jinwoo let out a sigh of relief. He hadn't had much time to think, so it was a good thing his idea had worked. For a moment there, though, the dragon's aggression coming had caught him off guard.

How can a shadow soldier be so bold?

It looked like the King of Giants had been right about powerful beings having bigger egos.

The dragon itself was surprised at how compliant it was toward the new Monarch.

"So this is how it feels to be subordinate to the Shadow Monarch……"

Kamish lowered itself out of respect to Jinwoo. The humans flinched as the dragon moved but calmed down as nothing else happened.

The dragon's nose touched the floor, and it spoke in a low voice. "This former servant of the Dragon King bows down to its new master."

Despite its guttural voice, a distinctive feature of magic beasts, Kamish spoke with the utmost respect. Jinwoo slowly approached the dragon and laid a hand on Kamish's snout. The dragon closed its eyes, soothed by its master's touch as an inexplicable feeling of relaxation spread throughout its body. Jinwoo could also feel the dragon's mood lifting, and his heart raced at the implications.

Ba-dump, ba-dump!

Kamish the dragon……is really my soldier now……

A smile blossomed on Jinwoo's face.

Adam was rendered speechless by what he was witnessing until something caught his eye. "Mr. Connor, is Kamish wagging its tail now?"

Kamish was called the worst disaster of human history, not man's best friend,

so what kind of nonsense was Adam talking about? But that was the only way to describe what was happening with Kamish's tail.

"Oh my……"

When Jinwoo removed his hand from the dragon's nose, Kamish stopped wagging its tail and looked up.

Humans had named the dragon Kamish for their own convenience, but Jinwoo was considering a new name for his new shadow soldier. He then remembered what the dragon had said when he first greeted it.

"You said you served the Dragon King before?"

"That is right, my king. I served the King of Wild Dragons, the Monarch of Destruction."

The King of the Dead, the Shadow Monarch……

And the King of Giants, the Monarch of the Beginning. It hit Jinwoo that the dragon's former master was one of the nine Monarchs he had heard about from the system.

But that wasn't important right now. He wanted to give the dragon its original name back.

"So what's your n—?" Jinwoo was unable to finish his sentence, his eyes widening at the sight of the dragon.

The dragon's body was slowly crumbling like a sandcastle being blown apart by the wind.

"Alas, my king, I believe it is time for me to bid you farewell."

"What?"

Jinwoo's perception stat picked up on the dragon's emotions. The dragon was truly upset and saddened by the situation.

"It appears we've met a little too late."

Even the power of the Shadow Monarch couldn't overcome the eight years. The dragon's magic power was weak from being stuck at the bottom of the abyss for too long, and it began to disintegrate into the air.

“System! Systemmm!” Devastated, Jinwoo called out to the system for help, but there was no response.

The dragon could sense Jinwoo’s emotions as well. “I envy the soldiers who can serve Your Majesty forever.”

The dragon’s words were sincere. It also had a last bit of advice for a king lamenting the loss of his soldier.

“My king. There exist four humans who have borrowed the powers of the Rulers. Beware!” The dragon’s voice grew distant as its body faded away. “Although it was fleeting, it was an honor to serve—”

The dragon’s shadow vanished as if it had never existed, and silence filled the room. The light fixtures stopped flickering.

The director rushed to examine the dragon’s remains, but they looked untouched. He was dazed, as if he had awoken from a dream.

However, the despair on Jinwoo’s face confirmed that it had really happened.

“……”

For the longest time, Jinwoo couldn’t take his eyes from the spot where the dragon’s shadow had stood until he finally received a notification from the system.

[Shadow Extraction has failed.]

[Too much time has elapsed since the subject’s time of death, rendering the extraction futile.]

[The subject’s shadow has returned to the Void.]

Jinwoo had never hated the sound of the chime as much as he did in this instant. He clenched his fist tightly.

Wham!

Furious, Jinwoo punched the floor, and for a second, the whole building shook.

* * *

Adam escorted Jinwoo back to the hotel. The car ride over was silent due to

Jinwoo's foul mood. After checking in for Jinwoo, Adam finally approached him.

"I'm in charge of looking after you during your stay in the US, so please feel free to call me anytime if you need anything."

Adam's warm hospitality was met with a cold reply. "……Sure."

Adam went from smiling to shivering.

S-scary……

This was his first time dealing with a high-rank hunter in a foul mood, and it was terrifying. Naturally, with Jinwoo in this frame of mind and both the director and assistant director in a state of shock, the negotiations had been postponed.

Jinwoo decided he needed to get some sleep and was about to go up to his room.

"Huh?" Jinchul entered the hotel lobby and spotted Jinwoo. "Hunter Sung, it's been impossible to reach you."

"Oh, I was somewhere that didn't have cell service."

Outsiders were prohibited from using their phones inside the Hunter Command Center headquarters. There were no exceptions, even for important guests, as it was a security measure to guard their secrets. If someone important like Mrs. Sellner was ever photographed, the entire Hunter Command Center would go ballistic.

Jinchul scratched his forehead with his index finger. "Did you see Hunter Yoo there?"

"Pardon?"

Jinchul looked confused. "Hunter Yoo said he received a message from you. He was to meet you at the Hunter Command Center HQ."

"I just got back from there. What are you talking about?"

Adam cut into their conversation. "Hunter Yoo wasn't on the visitor log."

"Huh? But……an S-rank hunter picked him up two hours ago."

Jinwoo urgently asked, "What S-rank hunter?"

“Hunter Dongsoo Hwang. He came by to pick up Hunter Yoo.”

The name didn’t seem to ring any alarms for the other two, but a bad feeling washed over Jinwoo.

Is this because of the perception stat?

Seeing Jinwoo tense up, Adam took out his phone. “I’ll contact Hunter Hwang’s guild.”

After a few rings, Laura of the Scavenger Guild answered the phone. Adam briefly introduced himself and explained what had happened. Adam thought the news would surprise her, but she remained calm.

“Does Hunter Jinwoo Sung know about this?”

Adam had only explained that Dongsoo had taken Jinho, but she was the one who brought up Jinwoo’s name. His brow wrinkled in confusion, and he glanced at Jinwoo, who shook his head.

Adam nodded and quickly made up a story. “Hunter Sung doesn’t know anything yet. Someone in Hunter Yoo’s party reached out to us while he was at the Hunter Command Center.”

“We’ll try to get to the bottom of this as soon as we can.”

Jinwoo had been wordlessly listening in to the call, and he headed to the exit as soon as it ended.

“Hunter Sung! The Scavenger Guild is looking into it, so I’ll contact you when —” Adam rushed after Jinwoo, but the Korean hunter had already vanished.

“What……? Where did he go?” Adam was left to stare down the street, troubled.

⁎ ⁎ ⁎

Jinwoo ducked into a quiet alley in order to avoid the crowds and deactivated Stealth.

An S-rank hunter had used Jinwoo’s name as bait to lure Jinho away. But the guild of said hunter seemed rather dismissive about the whole thing.

Something’s fishy……

There had to be a reason the person on the other end of the call had immediately mentioned him.

Jinwoo was pissed. Whoever was behind this, they had picked the wrong day to stir up trouble. Jinwoo barked out an order.

Find him.

If all his soldiers split up to track Jinho's mana, it shouldn't take too long to locate him.

Whoosh, whoosh!

A thousand shadows shot out from beneath Jinwoo's feet, heading in different directions at an impressive speed.

* * *

Thomas looked around the condo, stone-faced. He had ordered some hunters to monitor Dongsoo, but here they were knocked out inside Dongsoo's condo without him.

"Tsk." Thomas clicked his tongue and took off his trademark sunglasses.

"……" His subordinates turned pale at Thomas's apparent fury.

Thomas gnashed his teeth and gave an order. "Damn him…… Find Dongsoo Hwang before Jinwoo does. Do whatever it takes."

* * *

Jinwoo stood on the roof of a building where he could get a look at the entire city. With his eyesight enhanced by his high perception stat, he scanned the streets surrounding the building all the way to the residential area in the far distance. He also paid attention to the sounds his shadow soldiers were picking up.

"Smith! How are you these days?"

"Miss, our store doesn't allow any returns just because you changed your mind……"

"Why weren't you at the party last night?"

Countless banal conversations, car horns, TV broadcasts, cats meowing, water splashing in bathrooms…the sounds of the city assaulted him. Sweat dripped

from his forehead as he strained to use all his senses as well as perception.

If only I'd kept a shadow soldier with Jinho……

Hindsight was twenty-twenty. Jinwoo had used the soldier placed in Jinho's shadow to teleport to Chairman Yoo's hospital room, and because he had been so busy and had planned to stick by Jinho's side while they were in the US, he had forgotten to replace it. Now they were in this mess.

First, I lost Kamish's shadow and now Jinho……

He gritted his teeth. His foul mood was only getting worse. His eyes seemed to shoot out lightning bolts as they scanned the city, but he could barely find any similar-looking young Asian males, much less Jinho.

Could they have left the city……?

Jinho may have been his cute little brother, but he was still a D-rank brawler. The average person didn't stand a chance against him. Jinho would've sensed that something was wrong. He would've tried to escape once he realized the car was leaving the city instead of going to the Hunter Command Center. The only thing that would have stopped him was……

The bastard who took him was an S-rank hunter.

Jinwoo expanded the search perimeter of his shadow soldiers.

Dongsoo Hwang, huh?

Jinwoo didn't know why Dongsoo had taken Jinho, but he'd poked the lion in doing so, and Jinwoo was more than ready to return the favor. And if something happened to Jinho? Jinwoo's eyes flashed at the mere thought.

An endless stream of information poured in as the shadow soldiers continued their search. It was only a matter of time……

* * *

Dongsoo had finally done it this time. The Scavenger Guild was on high alert. The opponent was Jinwoo Sung. One wrong move, and Dongsoo was dead.

Dongsoo was one of the main pillars of the Scavenger Guild's fighting forces, so Thomas couldn't afford to lose him.

He anxiously waited in his office for updates. “Any news?”

His subordinate shook his head, his expression grim. “Not yet, sir.”

The wrinkles on Thomas’s forehead got even deeper. Dongsoo’s cell phone was off, so they couldn’t track his location that way. Thomas had ordered his men to search the hunter’s usual haunts, but unfortunately, that led nowhere. It appeared Dongsoo had made thorough preparations.

Doesn’t he value his life?

No, as an S-rank hunter, Dongsoo was well aware of the power gap between Jinwoo and himself. He had pulled this reckless stunt because he assumed he would have help.

Dongsoo’s only doing this because he knows I have his back.

Dongsoo was right. Whatever he did, he was still considered an asset to the Scavenger Guild until his contract was up. The guild had invested tons of money in him because they saw his abilities and potential, so he was doing this without thinking of the consequences because he knew Thomas would never give up his assets.

……Have I been too soft on these hunters?

Thomas would have to firmly discipline Dongsoo to avoid this kind of trouble in the future.

His subordinate could barely bring himself to breathe in the tense atmosphere.

Just then, the phone rang, and Thomas quickly picked up.

“I think I’ve found where Mr. Hwang might be.”

It was Laura.

Thomas shot up from his seat. “How?”

Laura rushed to explain.

“I asked the Hunter Command Center for their cooperation, and they checked Mr. Hwang’s pattern of movement in recent months. He broke from his normal routine to go to an unknown location three separate times.”

Excellent! Thomas nodded in approval. Laura had located Dongsoo quicker than expected.

"Send every single man there. I'll head over, too."

"Understood."

He paused before hanging up. "By the way…… How did you get those fogies at the Hunter Command Center to cooperate, Laura?"

Like the Hunter's Association of Korea, the Hunter Command Center also recorded their hunters' movements using the GPS on their hunter-issued phones. However, the organization wasn't known for sharing information freely. Despite being a request from the Scavenger Guild, it should've taken at least several hours to go through approvals. The speed at which they'd given up Dongsoo's information was unparalleled, so Thomas was curious how Laura had pulled it off.

Her answer was much simpler than he thought.

"I told them that if we didn't find Hunter Hwang soon, you and Hunter Sung might come to blows."

* * *

"The guild members have started moving!" Adam, who had been monitoring the Scavenger Guild, hurriedly reported to the assistant director.

"All one hundred of them?"

"They canceled a planned raid just now. All hunters are mobilizing."

"What the heck……? What is going on?"

"……" Adam didn't know how to explain it.

An S-rank hunter belonging to the Scavenger Guild had lied and taken one of Jinwoo's people. Both Jinwoo and the Scavenger Guild were now on the move. This wasn't normal. Guild Master Thomas Andre had to have authorized this for the entirety of the guild to mobilize like this.

Adam had a bad feeling in his gut, and he broke out into a sweat. He froze when he saw Thomas emerge from his headquarters.

Oh……

Thomas scanned the area before getting in the car waiting for him. The car then sped off in the same direction the other hunters from the Scavenger Guild had gone.

Adam tried to steady his shaky voice. “Mr. Connor……‘Goliath’……Thomas Andre is on the move.”

* * *

“You sure this is okay?” a concerned man asked while staring down at Jinho lying unconscious on the floor.

Dongsoo nodded. “I’m not out to end him. I only need to know one thing.”

Thomas had warned him that Jinwoo Sung was not to be harmed. But Dongsoo had no intention of doing that anyway. There was one other person from whom he could extract his answer.

What had happened the day his older brother, Dongsuk; Jinwoo; and Jinho had entered that dungeon? Dongsoo had promised Jinho that he’d let him go if he told the truth. But even after quite a bit of roughing up, Jinho had refused to say anything. The tighter Jinho kept his mouth shut, the deeper Dongsoo’s suspicions grew. He just wanted to hear one thing.

Jinwoo killed your older brother.

With that one sentence, his business with Jinho would be done. But how dare the tiny, naive-looking kid defy an S-rank hunter? Dongsoo admired Jinho’s courage.

But that doesn’t let him off the hook.

Dongsoo kicked the bruised man in the ribs. “Hey. Wake up.”

This was the third or fourth time that Jinho had drifted in and out of consciousness.

Annoyed, Dongsoo kicked the stubborn young man even harder. “I said, wake up!”

Bam!

“Gah!” Jinho coughed out the blood that had pooled in his mouth. His body curled into itself.

The other guy chuckled at the sight. “This one’s a tank all right. Any other guy would be dead by now.”

Dongsoo’s face was devoid of emotion as he yanked Jinho’s head up by his hair. “Listen. I have no intention of killing you. The guy laughing right now? He’s quite a talented healer. He’ll bring you back from the brink of death every time.”

Jinho blearily looked up at the cackling man, who smiled and wagged his finger at him. Dongsoo shook Jinho’s head around.

“Argh!” Jinho’s head flopped to one side. The dusty interior of the building came into view.

Dongsoo continued. “This factory has been closed for more than five years. Scream all you want. No one will hear you.”

Dongsoo held Jinho’s head tightly as he leaned in closer to his face. The two men were soon eye to eye.

“That means you’ll suffer until you tell me what I want to hear.” When they were close enough to touch noses, Dongsoo bared his teeth. “So? Do you want to talk now?”

“……”

Jinho’s lips moved, but Dongsoo couldn’t hear what he was saying. “What?”

“……”

Dongsoo raised an eyebrow and leaned in closer.

Jinho whispered in his ear… “……Fuck you.”

Dongsoo’s face twisted.

Whack!

He slammed Jinho’s head into the ground.

“Whoa! Did you kill him?” Caught off guard, the healer rushed forward and checked Jinho’s pulse.

“Whew……” He breathed a sigh of relief after confirming Jinho was still alive.

Had Dongsoo applied a little more pressure, however, that wouldn’t have been the case.

“Mr. Hwang, please be a little more careful. I don’t want to be an accessory to murder.”

“……Noted.” Dongsoo relented.

Uneasy about this whole affair, another man tried to dissuade Dongsoo. “Let’s just go. Haven’t you pushed him enough?”

“What’re you talking about? I’m just getting started.” A sinister smile crept across Dongsoo’s face. He was just as cruel as his older brother had been.

The man nervously glanced around the room. It was then that he noticed something on the other side of the factory. What was that? He squinted at the mass.

“What? Huh?”

Both Dongsoo and the healer looked toward the man’s panicked noises to find a high orc in black armor standing there.

“……An orc?” Dongsoo stood up.

The healer, who had been checking on Jinho, rose as well. “Was there a dungeon break nearby?”

Dongsoo shook his head. If so, the whole area would’ve been in chaos. Just in case, Dongsoo extended his perception to scan for any magic beasts nearby, but the high orc seemed to be alone.

“How strange.”

Even stranger was that the high orc was shaking in fear, its expression terror-stricken, and it was all it could do to keep from crying.

“It looks like that beast is afraid of you, Mr. Hwang.”

“……I don’t have time for this.”

A white light surrounded Dongsoo’s fist. As he took long strides toward the orc with his fist raised and ready to rock…a man’s deep voice resounded from

out of nowhere.

“Exchange.”

* * *

News regarding more and more dungeon incidents was being reported on the TV. There hadn’t been any major incidents, but the number of hunters getting killed during raids was increasing.

“Is my baby going to be okay?” Kyunghye, Jinwoo’s mother, anxiously watched the news report. No matter how great a hunter they were, mothers would always worry over their children.

Beru, who was hiding in the shadows and guarding her under Jinwoo’s orders, heard her concerns.

O mother of my king, if anyone can survive a dungeon incident, it is your son.

Frustrated, Beru was barely able to keep himself from saying this out loud. He didn’t want to frighten Jinwoo’s mother, but he was affronted that Kyunghye was basically comparing his king to the lowly beasts on the screen. It took all his patience and restraint not to try and educate her.

“Next up, the Hunter Command Center in the US is hosting……”

The anchors changed subjects to the International Guild Conference and showed footage of Jinwoo at the airport. Forgetting her concerns for him, Kyunghye beamed proudly at the sight of her son swarmed by the paparazzi.

“Jinah, your brother is on TV!”

“Really?” Jinah abandoned her studies and skipped out of her room. Although this wasn’t the first time, she still found it fascinating and cool to see Jinwoo on television.

However, the two women were oblivious to another being cheering even more passionately for Jinwoo than they were.

Oh, my king……!

Beru gazed upon the screen with sparkling eyes.

A sudden chill ran up Beru’s spine, and his body began trembling. He had felt

like this once before. When was that? Beru searched his memories until he recalled that moment when Jinwoo had gazed down at Beru with murderous intent in his eyes. The feeling of his inevitable end approaching and the smell of death in the air. This was the first time he'd felt his king's rage since becoming a shadow soldier, and his whole body was paralyzed.

But Beru was the king's soldier now! He snapped back to reality.

……My king is furious.

As terrified as he felt, Beru couldn't just ignore his king's rage. He attempted to communicate with the hunter.

My king, please remain calm. I shall be right there.

A reply came instantly.

No…… Stay there.

The fury in Jinwoo's voice made Beru shiver.

As you wish, sire.

He had no choice but to follow Jinwoo's order. Beru wondered who could be foolish enough to infuriate his king like this.

Who would do such a stupid thing……?

Beru retreated deeper inside the shadow to try and forget his terror.

* * *

In the city of Busan, the Knights Guild was in the middle of preparations for a raid. Guild Master Jongsu Park lit a fire under them as he did a final check on his members.

"There have been a lot of reports of incidents within dungeons, so stay focused, everyone. Let's go home without a single person harmed."

"Yes, sir!" The guild members, who had been humbled after having done a raid with Jinwoo's minions, gave a loud cheer.

Yoontae Jung, the vice president of the guild, was standing behind Jongsu and nodding in support when something distracted him. "Ah!"

Jongsu instantly turned to him. "What? What's wrong?"

Yoontae looked back and forth between Jongsu and Jongsu's shadow and pointed at the floor. "B-boss! The shadow beneath your feet, it just moved—"

Yoontae's mouth snapped shut when Jongsu glared at him.

"How many times have I told you not to drink before a raid?"

"That's not it, boss! I haven't had a single drop today. I swear, your shadow really moved like it was alive!"

Jongsu let out a huge sigh and looked at Yoontae, disappointed. "Okay, you need to sit out today."

"Boss! I'm telling you the truth!"

"Let's move, everyone. We can do this, Knights!"

"But, boss……!" Yoontae's frustrated voice echoed through the air.

Incredulous reports about moving shadows came from every location Jinwoo had placed his soldiers, but the shadow soldiers didn't care about eyewitnesses. They were agitated by their king's rage.

* * *

"Exchange."

Jinwoo appeared in the high orc's place.

……!

Dongsoo and his men froze like mice encountering a snake at the sudden arrival of the unexpected guest. Recognizing Jinwoo, Dongsoo's heart sank.

But Jinwoo strode past him and made a beeline straight for Jinho. The two men standing on either side of Jinho scrambled aside.

Jinwoo took a healing potion from his inventory and slowly poured it in Jinho's mouth.

[Healing potions cannot recover HP when it dips below 10 percent of your total HP.]

Crack!

The empty healing potion bottle shattered in Jinwoo's hand. What else could

he use? The Elixir of Life treated illness, so it wouldn't help his injuries any more than healing magic could cure diseases.

I need healing magic!

Beru was the only soldier who could perform healing magic, but he was in Korea. Even if Jinwoo summoned Beru, he wasn't sure how long it would take.

Dongsoo finally regained his composure. "You…… What the hell are you? The orc just now…… How did you do that?!"

Jinwoo ignored him and turned to the men nearby. "Are either of you a healer?"

One of the men nodded reflexively at the word *healer*.

Jinwoo pointed at Jinho. "Heal him."

The healer looked at Dongsoo, who shook his head.

Jinwoo carefully lowered Jinho back onto the ground and then stood up. "This is the last time I'm going to tell you: Heal him."

The healer looked at Dongsoo again. Dongsoo's answer was the same, and the healer turned to Jinwoo with a smile.

"You'll have to persuade my boss fir—"

Wham!

Jinwoo slammed the healer's head on the floor just as Dongsoo had done to Jinho. It happened so quickly, no one actually saw Jinwoo move, not even Dongsoo the S-rank hunter.

Jinwoo turned to the other guy. "What about you?"

The man trembled as Jinwoo approached him.

"J-Jinwoo Sung? Hunter Jinwoo Sung?" He stepped back and glared at Dongsoo. "Mr. Hwang! You never said this had anything to do with Jinwoo Sung! What's going on? What the hell is going on?!"

"I asked if you were a healer."

"N-no. I'm—"

Wham!

The man's head was knocked into the ground by an invisible hand. Two high-rank hunters had been rendered unconscious in no time. Having witnessed Jinwoo's power with his own eyes, Dongsoo panicked.

"B-boss……" Jinho had regained consciousness, perhaps from the ground shaking. "Boss……"

Jinwoo crouched down. "Jinho."

Jinho opened his swollen eyes and struggled to speak with his bloodied mouth. "Dongsoo Hwang…… Dongsuk Hwang…… Younger brother…… Be caref……"

Jinwoo's heart broke as he watched Jinho struggle to breathe. "Shhh. Don't talk."

"Boss……" Jinho grabbed Jinwoo's hand, and tears welled up in his eyes.

"Can you hold on a little longer?" asked Jinwoo.

Jinho nodded, unable to speak.

Jinwoo put Jinho's hand down and slowly stood. His eyes landed on Dongsoo. Dongsoo stared back. His knees buckled at Jinwoo's murderous gaze, but he wasn't one to run away.

Dongsoo pretended to be all right as he yelled, "It was you! You killed my brother, Dongsuk Hwang, didn't you?!"

Dongsoo's fearful expression drew closer. Jinwoo saw the face of someone who had been strong against the weak and weak against the strong. His gaze turned cold.

"Answer me! Did you kill my brother and his squad members?"

Jinwoo stopped right in front of him. "Go ask your brother."

Dongsoo swung a fist surrounded by light at Jinwoo's face, but Jinwoo ducked and punched Dongsoo right in the stomach.

"Urgh!" One strike and Dongsoo was already coughing up blood.

* * *

“Stop the car!”

“Pardon?”

“I said, stop the car!” Thomas screamed at the driver, who slammed on his brakes.

With the lead car screeching to a halt without any warning, the other cars following quickly braked as well, filling the night with the sounds of skidding rubber.

Bam!

Thomas kicked open the car door and turned to look in a particular direction. He growled. “Damn it……!”

The elite hunters of the Scavenger Guild, among the best in the world, jumped out of the other vehicles.

“Sir, what’s wrong?”

“What’s going on?”

Thomas answered the anxious guild members in clipped sentences. “It’s already begun. I’ll go ahead. Follow me.”

“Excuse me?”

What had begun?

Thomas bent at the knees before his team could ask. His leg muscles bulged as the asphalt heated up, sending the other hunters retreating two or three steps.

Whoom!

Thomas leaped into the air and was out of sight in the blink of an eye.

* * *

Something……is headed this way.

Something powerful was approaching fast. Just as Thomas sensed Jinwoo’s power, Jinwoo sensed Thomas’s.

One hand held Dongsoo by the collar, and the other paused in midair.

Dongsoo was now as severely injured as Jinho was.

Boom!

Part of the factory's roof collapsed as Thomas landed on the ground like a superhero. Without so much as blinking, Jinwoo turned in his direction.

Thomas checked his surroundings as he stood. His gaze moved from Jinho to Jinwoo to Jinwoo's hand before fixing on Dongsoo. He frowned. He had been unable to sense Dongsoo's presence because it was drowned out by Jinwoo's.

Thomas threw off his sunglasses. "Dongsoo Hwang…… Is he still alive?"

"For now."

Thomas used simple English words and enunciated clearly for Jinwoo's sake. "Let him go. If you do, I'll pretend this did not happen. Please."

Jinwoo gripped Dongsoo's collar even tighter. "And if I say no?"

"I'm not asking."

One of the strongest hunters in the world bared his teeth. The average hunter would have been scared half to death, but Jinwoo didn't so much as flinch.

"Come at me, then."

6
The Level of a Beast

6

THE LEVEL OF A BEAST

Thomas raised an eyebrow. Had any other hunter responded to him that way, he would've torn them apart. As a national-level hunter, he had a kind of diplomatic immunity. It was a reward for saving three hundred million American citizens from the worst disaster in human history.

But his opponent this time was Jinwoo Sung, so he couldn't do as he would like. Thomas's fingers twitched as he tried to contain his anger. He ground his teeth as he glared at Dongsoo.

I told him not to do anything……

Like he'd thought, Jinwoo wouldn't be an easy opponent. Seeing him in person confirmed this. If Thomas had to describe this feeling, he'd say it was like being stuck in quicksand. One wrong move, and it would be difficult to escape the dark and ominous mana flowing from the Korean hunter.

Yet Thomas couldn't step down, either. Jinwoo had an ace hunter of the Scavenger Guild by the throat, and more importantly, his pride as a national-level hunter was on the line.

Thomas frowned as he posed a question. "……By any chance, do you know who I am?"

Jinwoo's response was clear. "I don't care who you are."

At that moment, Dongsoo regained consciousness and yelled at Thomas: "Sir, quick! Kill this son of a bitch!"

Whack!

Dongsoo was out like a light, his body limp after a punch from Jinwoo.

Thomas's eyes widened at the audacity. "How dare you……!"

Jinwoo was acting this way despite knowing who Thomas was. Thomas looked like he was ready to kill. He knew from experience how to deal with anyone who defied him.

Thomas had been born to a poor immigrant family in an impoverished neighborhood. As the only white kid in a school full of African American students, Thomas stood out. He made enemies everywhere he went. Often, making eye contact with the wrong person resulted in a fight. Many times, his opponents were armed. Most of the time, it was him versus several people.

Though he had nothing else to his name, he was blessed with one thing: overwhelming physical strength, the power to literally step on other people! Ironically, the place where he grew up was the perfect proving ground.

Thomas demonstrated his strength time and again and soon saw how people treated him changed. He ruled like a king.

Power—authoritative power, financial power, and physical power. He realized early on that the different kinds of power that existed in this world either made you a king or a slave. So when a new kind of power emerged, he seized the opportunity to set himself up as a king. If someone didn't listen to him, he simply used physical strength to make them submit to his will. He made those who looked down on him bow to him. He crushed anyone in his way. He had learned that physical prowess was his truth, and he lived by it.

Time stopped; then Thomas leaped toward Jinwoo, and the gap between the two instantly closed. As their noses practically touched, their eyes met.

Blame your ignorance!

Thomas reached out to grab Jinwoo by the head. His mighty grip was his special weapon, and with it, he could easily crush the skull of even the highest-rank hunter. Now that Jinwoo was within range, victory was surely his.

What……?

Suddenly, a light flashed before his eyes.

* * *

The hunters of Scavenger Guild arrived in time to witness something crashing

through the side of the abandoned factory at lightning speed.

Kaboom!

It took down the whole wall and skidded across the ground, coming to a stop right in front of the other hunters. They couldn't contain their shock.

"Thomas!"

"Sir, are you all right?"

Who could send Thomas Andre flying like this? They couldn't believe their eyes. Steam rose from Thomas's whole body due to the great impact.

Had this been an ordinary human, their skin would've ripped off as they slid across the pavement, or their body would've broken into pieces after being thrown through the wall. However, Thomas was completely fine, as expected of the tank who had withstood Kamish's fire.

But as he got to his feet, his expression was less than fine. His face was dark as he looked around at the others. They belonged to the same guild, but the hostile glare of a national-level hunter was enough to make his guildmates go pale.

"……"

Thomas wordlessly stomped back to the abandoned factory, seething.

The vice guild master snapped out of his stupor and barked at the other members of the guild. "Don't just stand there! Move!"

All at once, a hundred plus of the world's best hunters charged.

* * *

Jinwoo clenched his fist tightly after sending Thomas flying. Had he arrived just a little later, Jinho's life would've been in serious danger. When he saw Dongsoo smack Jinho's head on the ground through the eyes of the high orc soldier, his blood had boiled. So Thomas's proposal that they forget any of this had ever happened was absolutely ridiculous.

Jinwoo had pushed himself to the limit again and again so he wouldn't have to be pushed around by those at the top. What Thomas had suggested wasn't even worth considering.

Yet Thomas's response to Jinwoo's rejection had been to launch a serious attack. The fight was far from over. Thomas returned, angrier than ever.

Jinwoo tossed the unconscious Dongsoo aside and summoned Kaisel and Igris.

Vmmm……

The shadowy winged dragon and knight appeared. Jinwoo carefully picked Jinho up and handed him over to Igris.

"Take Jinho to the closest hospital. Make sure they do whatever it takes to help him."

Igris bowed his head to Jinwoo, mounted the winged dragon, and left the factory.

Kreeeaaahhh!

Thomas paid no heed to the dragon flying away. He was focused solely on Jinwoo.

Jinwoo's gaze finally settled on Thomas and how his face was distorted in anger, as well as the guildmates rushing to join him. They numbered around a hundred, and Jinwoo guessed Thomas had brought every single elite hunter from the Scavenger Guild, the best guild in the world.

So what? I have plenty of soldiers, too.

Jinwoo summoned the shadow soldiers awaiting his call. Darkness slowly spread from underneath his feet as shadow soldiers leaped out one by one.

The sight of them stopped Thomas dead in his tracks. They numbered in the thousands and filled up the abandoned factory all the way to the back.

Thomas's eyes narrowed.

It's not just the numbers, either.

He spotted several minions as strong as S-rank hunters among them, including a knight wielding a gigantic shield, a spell caster in a hooded robe, and even giants bringing up the rear. He wasn't sure whether the Scavenger Guild could defeat them even if they went all out.

Jinwoo's impossible minions sent chills up and down Thomas's spine. Yet at

the same time, he was delighted. The thought of doing battle with such powerful beings sounded entertaining. He licked his lips and smiled.

This no longer had anything to do with Dongsoo. There was only one way to restore his broken pride.

I'll kill that disrespectful bastard……

But before that happened, he offered Jinwoo mercy one last time. "Admit your mistakes and stand down, and I'll let you live."

Jinwoo responded by flipping him off.

"……" Thomas gritted his teeth. "You dare……"

The national-level hunter ripped off his shirt, a luxurious bit of apparel made from materials extracted from magic beasts, without a second thought.

Craaaack!

Krik!

His muscles swelled and then hardened into bulging armor all over his body. Frighteningly powerful energy flowed from beneath Thomas's feet. His impressive magic power looked like golden steam rising from his shoulders. Here was the mightiest tank in the world in all his glory.

After quietly watching this transformation, Jinwoo released his magic power as well.

Fwoooom!

The sight of the two monstrous powerhouses stole the breath of every onlooker.

Oh!

I was wondering who could knock down Thomas like that……

Their hunters' eyes were then focused on the same thing. Jinwoo Sung, the man who had cut a swath through the giants in Japan. He of all people could take Thomas. The members of the Scavenger Guild gawked at the sight of him.

In stark contrast, Jinwoo was cool and collected. This was the perfect opportunity to test how much he'd grown. He could unleash his full powers

against them without worry. Jinwoo suddenly remembered what Kamish had told him.

There exist four humans who have borrowed the powers of the Rulers, right?

Perhaps Kamish had been referring to four of the five national-level hunters who had survived battling the dragon. If so, there was a high possibility that Thomas might be one of them.

Jinwoo made the first move. “Go.”

As soon as their king gave the order, the soldiers charged.

Thomas yelled, “Here they come!”

It was one man versus one guild. Nearly a thousand minions and a hundred elite hunters collided.

Boom!

Thomas thrust Iron aside, charging past the front line and searching for Jinwoo. Someone came at him from one side at an incredible clip. *Over there!*

Thomas turned, but Jinwoo was faster. In an instant, Jinwoo was in Thomas’s personal space and thrusted the Demon Monarch’s Dagger at his waist. But the weapon couldn’t penetrate the guild master’s hardened skin.

……!

Jinwoo was startled.

Pow!

Thomas smiled as he slammed an elbow into Jinwoo. His opponent might have an edge when it came to speed, but Thomas was convinced Jinwoo would be unable to overcome his defenses. Let the Korean hunter despair after seeing the difference in strength between them! Predicting victory, he continued his attack and held out his hand.

Vwoooom.

Thomas pulled Jinwoo back toward him using a gravitational force, like an invisible fist. It was the same ability Thomas had used to yank Kamish’s floating body out of the air and bring him to the ground. As the distance between

Jinwoo and Thomas narrowed at an incredibly fast pace, Jinwoo's eyes widened.

Ruler's Authority!

Wham!

Thomas's shoulders strained from a powerful force slamming down on him.

What?

Thomas was taken aback to discover that Jinwoo possessed the same ability. Seeing his chance, Jinwoo punched Thomas in the face a second time.

Kapow!

And for the first time since becoming a hunter, the man nicknamed Goliath bled.

"Argh!"

* * *

The Hunter Command Center wasn't just sitting on their hands. Dozens of cars carrying hunters were headed in the same direction the Scavenger Guild hunters had gone. But the car leading the pack stopped short of the destination.

Adam, who had been nervously looking out the window, was shaken by the sudden stop.

"Wh-what's wrong?"

The driver looked back at him. He was the only S rank employed in the Hunter Command Center.

"Agent White, please tell me what's going on here."

"There's no time to expl—" Adam stopped as he took in the driver's pale face.

The driver had lived through a great many things that had hardened his heart, but Adam had never seen the man wearing this expression before.

Adam sensed the situation was dire. "Did……something happen?"

The S-rank hunter was firm. "If we go any further, we'll die."

* * *

Jinwoo tore Thomas's lip open with one punch. Startled, Thomas was sent reeling backward.

How does he have this much power……?

It was an incredibly powerful blow, strong enough to rattle Thomas's head.

Furthermore, Jinwoo possessed the ability to move things with his mind, but he hadn't resisted being pulled toward Thomas. Instead, he'd used it to distract Thomas so he could throw an unavoidable punch. Thomas's own ability had been used against him, lending even greater force to the strike. What a brilliant strategy!

How many battles did it take for him to come up with a move like that?

Although Thomas had acknowledged Jinwoo's power, he'd still considered him a rookie, but this changed his mind.

Thomas landed safely on the ground.

Krrrrrkkk!

The friction tore at the cement floor, sending dust and debris everywhere. Jinwoo rushed at his opponent without giving him a moment's break. The battle-tested hunter wanted to strike before Thomas got his bearings, but the American was faster this time.

Thomas realized that if he kept minding his surroundings, he was likely to lose, so he threw caution to the wind.

"Enforcement."

Thomas's armor-like muscles blew up even more.

Whoooosh!

Where he'd already been close to two meters tall, Thomas now easily surpassed three.

Raaaaahhh!

He let out a shout as he raised his arms, now as thick as marble columns, above his head in the blink of an eye.

……!

Jinwoo sensed danger as he approached. He wasn't sure what it was, but his instincts had never betrayed him during a crisis. He skidded to a halt and jumped back in the nick of time.

Thomas's gigantic fists struck the floor with great force, sending out a shock wave.

Kaboom!

Everything within the radius of the overwhelming impact shattered into pieces. The horrific power of the skill known as Demolish compelled Jinwoo to take a few more steps back despite already being at a safe distance.

Pieces of shattered debris fell like raindrops. Thomas was a dragon slayer, so his destructive power was astonishing. However, Jinwoo didn't have time to process his shock.

"Capture!" yelled Thomas almost immediately.

He became the epicenter of a great gravitational pull, drawing everything toward him with massive force like a black hole. Shadow soldiers and hunters alike flew toward the massive hunter. Jinwoo resisted by using Ruler's Authority. Barely free of the gravity, Jinwoo jumped back once again.

Thomas unleashed Demolish once more.

Kaboom!

Everyone, regardless of which side they were on, got swept away by the shock wave.

"Argh!"

"Ahhh……!"

Screams rang out from every direction. Realizing what was going on, the vice guild master bellowed at his hunters.

"Get away from the guild master!"

While three or four of the most agile hunters dragged the wounded to safety, Thomas charged angrily toward Jinwoo. *National-level* meant Thomas himself was a country, so Jinwoo needed to be punished for his affront to a king.

Quickly reaching the object of his rage, Thomas swung his fist.

Whishhh!

It merely sliced the air, but that was what he'd expected. He was too slow to hit someone who moved like a wild animal, especially since he was in Reinforcement mode. As Thomas's physical strength and defensive power increased, his speed dropped proportionately.

Fortunately, Thomas had a skill to cover this weakness. He stretched out his hand toward Jinwoo.

Capture!

Once again, an incredibly powerful gravitational pull materialized between the two hunters. Thomas was convinced he wouldn't miss this time. There was no way he was going to let Jinwoo pull off the same trick twice, not now when his body was fortified with Enforcement. Like last time, Jinwoo was easily drawn toward him.

Thomas made a tight fist with his right hand, pulling it back while keeping his left hand extended and activating the skill Power Smash, which had enough force to crush an S-rank hunter. His right hand began swinging forward, as if in slow motion.

……?

Thomas was bewildered to see the muscles of Jinwoo's right arm bulk up. Was the Korean looking to go head-to-head? With a look of disbelief on his face, Thomas turned up the gravity. Yet Jinwoo didn't avoid it. Rather, he used Ruler's Authority and ramped up the speed.

Thomas spat out a curse. "Crap!"

Jinwoo approached much faster than Thomas had expected. He managed to throw his punch first, but Jinwoo ducked before throwing his own.

Kapow!

It literally hit Thomas then, as a light flashed before his eyes.

This strike……

This strike was just like the first.

Kapow!

Thomas shot off like a missile and tumbled to the ground after crashing through the walls of the factory again, leaving a long, deep trench in his wake.

“Ugh.”

As Thomas quickly pushed himself up, he found Jinwoo already standing in front of him.

Thomas roared and swung his fist. “Raaaah!”

Each time he took a swing, it ripped through the air and left a hole in the ground. His attacks were powerful enough to wreck someone’s body without touching them. But Jinwoo avoided each strike while attacking Thomas’s vulnerable spots.

Pow! Bam! Pow!

Blood began pooling inside Thomas’s mouth. “Urk!”

How can a mage hunter be this strong and fast?

As Thomas’s confusion grew, so did the damage to his body. Thomas Andre……was going to lose? That should’ve been impossible.

No, that was impossible. The strength to overcome his enemies was what defined him.

He gnashed his bloodstained teeth. There was madness in his glaring eyes. “Graaaahhh!”

Jinwoo dodged and struck Thomas on the chin.

Slam!

The American shook his head vigorously to stave off the effects of the impact, but Jinwoo was already nose to nose with him and pouring on the attacks.

Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!

“Argh!” Thomas, a walking fortified castle, began to topple. He stumbled, but once he got his balance back, he began screaming. “I am Thomas Andre! Do you

really think this is enough to best me?!”

“I already told you……”

Whack!

Jinwoo delivered an uppercut. “I don’t care who you are.”

Thomas stopped his head from whipping all the way back. Furious, the man known as Goliath raised his interlocked hands above his head.

“Demolish!”

Kaboom!

Thomas pounded the ground with all his might, causing an earthquake. But Jinwoo was gone.

“Where did he……?”

Thomas’s eyes scoured the area, then belatedly noticed strong magic power above him. He looked up. Jinwoo had leaped before Demolish was activated and was now quickly descending. Jinwoo’s elbow slammed into Thomas’s face.

Wham!

* * *

Dozens of cars came to a stop a good distance from the abandoned factory. It would be dangerous to go any closer. The people emerging from the vehicles were the elite of the Hunter Command Center, each of them a great hunter.

However, despite his amazing colleagues, Adam was still anxious, since they might have to face off against Jinwoo Sung, Thomas Andre, and the entire Scavenger Guild.

The S-rank hunter named Brent commanded the forces of the Hunter Command Center. He shook his head with a grim look on his face.

“Damn……”

What kind of monsters were generating this much magic power? Brent didn’t want to go any farther, but Adam waited anxiously behind him.

Brent relented with a sigh. “It’s right there, but it’s extremely dangerous. Are you sure about this?”

Adam nodded.

Kaboom!

Just then, something shot into the sky and fell back down with a crash.

"……?" Adam looked toward the noise and then turned to Brent. The S-rank hunter's jaw hung open. "Wh-what was that just now?"

"If I'm not mistaken……" There was no way he was, but the hunter hesitated a bit before continuing. "I believe that was Mr. Andre."

"What?"

"But I can't be sure……"

Horrified, Adam urged him along. "Hurry! Let's go!"

Brent gestured for the other hunters to follow them as he took off after Adam. They arrived at the scene of the collision.

"Ah!"

An Asian hunter was beating up the invincible Thomas Andre.

Pow! Bam! Kapow!

Shocked, Brent pointed at the two of them. "Mr. Andre……is getting pummeled by Hunter Sung!"

"I can see that!" Adam didn't know what to do. He could see from this distance that Thomas did not look good.

Brent was at a loss. "What should we do?"

"We need to stop them! Are you really going to watch a national-level hunter get beaten to death?"

"Stop who? Stop him?" Brent stared at the Asian hunter emitting so much magic power that he didn't dare get closer.

However, Adam darted toward them before Brent had a chance to stop him. Adam was an ordinary agent. He could lose his life just coming into contact with magic power from high-rank hunters. Brent hesitated but soon followed with a groan.

“Agent White!”

* * *

The elbow to the head knocked Thomas down on all fours. His hands dug deep into the ground.

“Ugh…… Ahhhh!”

Thomas pushed himself up, but he had lost a lot of his strength at this point, and his fists lacked much of their previous impact. Seeing Thomas’s sluggishness, Jinwoo knew that victory was his. The American kept missing his target, and his punches were weak. All he had left was his rage. Jinwoo effortlessly avoided his attacks and then began counterattacking.

Pow! Kapow!

Unlike Thomas, Jinwoo was still going at full strength. Thomas couldn’t handle the barrage.

“Urkkk!”

Blood splattered in every direction his head was battered. He lost his balance and wobbled before Jinwoo kicked him into the air.

Whack!

“Arrrgh!”

The collision of magic power caused an explosion, and Thomas shot up like a rocket.

Ruler’s Authority.

Jinwoo then pulled Thomas back down to earth. Powerless, he tumbled onto the ground.

Whud!

“Cough! Cough!” Thomas lay spread-eagle in the dirt and coughed up blood.

Jinwoo got on top of Thomas and started whaling on him just as he had done to the Demon Monarch Balan in the Demon’s Castle.

Pow! Pow! Pow!

Jinwoo felt Thomas's resistance gradually weakening.

Pow! Pow! Pow!

Jinwoo raised his fist for the final blow.

A desperate cry rang out. "Hunter Sung! Stop! Please stop!"

Jinwoo's face was devoid of expression as he stared at Adam running toward him. He charged his fist up again. A terrifying amount of formidable magic power emitted from his flexed shoulder and fist.

"No! Stop!" Adam reached his hand out in vain.

Jinwoo's fist was about to connect when Thomas parted his lips.

"……I've lost."

Whoosh!

Jinwoo's fist came to a halt at the tip of Thomas's nose.

The national-level hunter passed out and went limp, totally spent. Jinwoo lowered his fist and quietly stood. The elite of the Hunter Command Center slowly gathered around the victor and the fallen.

* * *

"Wh-what the hell? Is this for real? Seriously?" The reporter muttered to himself as he continued snapping pictures.

He had planned to take a few photos of the Scavenger Guild preparing for a raid, but when they suddenly canceled the raid and headed elsewhere, he'd followed.

But what the hell had just happened? At first, the reporter thought there had been a dungeon break. Instead, he was witnessing something unimaginable.

He zoomed in with his camera on the man lying on the ground. It was the unmistakable face of the national-level hunter Thomas Andre.

Oh my God…… Who in the world could beat Thomas up that badly?

The reporter gasped as he reviewed the pictures he had taken. But at the same time, his heart raced with excitement at the thought of how much money he'd get for them.

* * *

Adam ran to check Thomas for signs of life.

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump!

He put his ear on Thomas's chest and heard a heartbeat. He cupped Thomas's nose to check his breath. Fortunately, there were signs of life, but Thomas was barely hanging on.

To put Thomas Andre in this condition……

How many hunters in the world could do this to Thomas? If this went public, the whole world would turn upside down. Adam had to respect Jinwoo's power, which far exceeded the Hunter Command Center's estimates. But this wasn't the time to be starstruck.

"Hurry!" He gestured to the healers of the Hunter Command Center.

One of the highest-rank healers kneeled beside Thomas and checked his vitals before casting some healing magic. He then sucked his teeth.

"Every single bone in his body is broken. The bleeding is severe. I can't do this on my own. We need every healer to work together."

With this, other healers joined him in reviving Thomas, but it was like trying to fill a lake with tap water. Someone with Thomas's great stamina required extra effort to heal completely.

As the healers struggled to help their shattered patient, Adam stood up. The rest of the Hunter Command Center staffers were busy removing the wounded from the abandoned factory.

"Argh……"

"My leg, my leg!"

The elite hunters of Scavenger were in horrific condition. Adam hadn't witnessed who had done this to them, but he had a good guess. A single hunter just crushed one of the best guilds in the world.

Seriously……

Adam was astonished by both Jinwoo's audacity and the power he had to back it up.

Huh?

It was then that he realized Jinwoo was nowhere to be seen. As Adam scanned the area, he heard his ringtone go off.

“This is Agent White.”

“Agent White, we’ve located Jinho Yoo.”

It was the Hunter Command Center calling with an update. Adam brightened at the good news.

“Really? Where?”

The caller relayed that Jinho had been found outside of a large hospital nearby. He was quickly treated in the ER and was now in stable condition.

“I’ll be right there after I finish cleaning up the mess over here.”

“Understood.”

Adam hung up the phone and breathed a sigh of relief. “Whew……”

Thinking about trying to deal with Jinwoo’s anger if something had happened to Jinho made Adam’s head spin. Spilled water could not be poured back in, but he counted his lucky stars that at least the cup hadn’t broken during the spillage. The good news took a tiny bit of the weight off his shoulders.

“We’re done.” The healers treating Thomas stood up.

“Is Hunter Andre okay?” asked Adam.

“For now.”

“What does that mean?”

“His injuries were severe, so while his body is healed, it will take time for him to regain consciousness.”

“Ah, I see.”

Healers had been able to mend his physical wounds, but mental trauma was another thing entirely. Thomas would be spending a significant amount of time in a hospital room recovering from this ordeal.

A healer tried to comfort the unhappy agent. “He lived through this because

he’s Thomas Andre, a national-level hunter. If it were anybody else, this much damage would’ve killed him at least ten times over.”

“Well, that’s goo—”

Adam was about to agree with the healer but stopped. Thomas had survived only because he was a national-level hunter? A chill ran up Adam’s spine. Then what had happened to Dongsoo Hwang, the initial target of Jinwoo’s rage? Was he here, too?

With a stunned look on his face, Adam ran inside the abandoned factory from which injured hunters were still being extricated.

Someone called out to him. “Agent White! Over here!”

Adam ran toward the urgent voice, trying to keep calm as he went. A somber hunter from the Hunter Command Center stood next to someone he recognized. Adam groaned.

“Dongsoo Hwang……”

The other hunter turned to Adam. “He isn’t breathing. And his heart isn’t beating.”

* * *

“This better not be a joke or a mistake!”

The editor in chief of the bestselling newspaper on the East Coast of the US was not happy about being out this late at night because of a phone call from a reporter. Normally, he wouldn’t go out of his way for a freelancer like this, but he was compelled to make an exception based on what the reporter had told him over the phone. If it ended up being a load of shit, though, he’d see to it that the reporter rotted in jail one way or another. He was pissed about having to change back out of his pajamas.

Seeing the suspicion in the editor’s eyes, the reporter waved his hands. “It’s all true—I’m telling you! One hundred percent real! Aren’t you all about the truth?”

“Well……”

“So how much can I get for this?”

“I need to see the pictures first.”

As if he was afraid of something, the reporter cautiously looked around before carefully removing some photos from his bag. At first, the editor nonchalantly thumbed through the pictures but suddenly froze, and his eyes widened.

H-how could this be?!

The editor cast an incredulous look at the reporter, who shrugged and looked pleased with himself. The editor’s hands trembled as he continued examining the pictures. The reporter had been telling the truth.

The day before the International Guild Conference, and here’s Thomas Andre, unconscious and covered in blood!

And the man casually walking away after defeating Thomas? That was Jinwoo Sung, wasn’t it?

This was a great scoop. No, this was a veritable gold mine. The editor’s breathing quickened.

The reporter saw which picture had captured the editor’s attention. “That’s the guy who did this to Thomas Andre. The world would go nuts over an investigative report about him.”

What an idiot! While Westerners sometimes had trouble telling Asians apart, it looked like the reporter didn’t recognize Jinwoo at all. The Asian-American editor quietly snorted.

Potential headlines for tomorrow’s front page ran through his mind.

Dragon Slayer Bested by Asian Dragon!

Hunter of Giants, Jinwoo Sung, Hunts Goliath!

National-Level Hunter Falls to Korea’s Rising Star!

Regardless of the headline, the entire world would eat up this news. Plus, it would be an exclusive. Getting ahold of all these pictures was like hitting the jackpot, as these images were worth a mint.

The editor’s heart fluttered. Seeing the greed in his prospective buyer’s eyes, the reporter quickly snatched back the photos. The editor smacked his lips in

disappointment.

“You’ve seen the goods, so now let’s talk price. How much are you willing to pay?”

“It’s……hard to say.” The editor hesitated and watched for the reporter’s reaction. “Why don’t you tell me what you think? How much would you say they’re worth?”

The reporter thought hard before he finally held up five fingers.

The editor nodded in agreement. “Fifty thousand? Fine, we can swing that.”

“Nope.” The reporter corrected him. “Five million dollars.”

“F-five million?” The editor was taken aback.

“If it’s too much for you, I can go somewhere else.”

The reporter turned to leave, but the editor quickly stopped him.

“No, wait!”

People shell out millions for pictures of celebrities’ babies, so why shouldn’t he pay five million for the scoop of the century? Once this news leaked, all the broadcasters and newspaper publishers would report on it day in and out for weeks! He couldn’t pass up this opportunity.

He finally came to a decision. “We have a deal on the condition that you hand over everything and any originals and we make it an exclusive. How’s that?”

An offer was made. The reporter thought about how he’d worked as a freelance reporter living on the bottom rung of society and how he might finally be able to visit his parents for the first time since leaving his hometown.

His voice shook as he replied. “……Sounds good.”

* * *

Jinho was no longer in critical condition, but he still hadn’t regained consciousness. His breathing was labored, and the morphine didn’t seem to have much effect on him.

Sometime after the doctor left Jinho’s room, a figure shot out from the shadows inside the hospital room.

Whiiiish……

It was Beru trading locations with Jinwoo via Shadow Exchange. Beru stretched his hand toward Jinho to heal him as per his king's order. Soft blue light spread from the tip of his hand, and the pained expression on Jinho's face soon eased up. Possessing power beyond an ordinary S-rank hunter, Beru had healing magic that was also next level. The ant slowly healed Jinho's wounds in order to allow his psychological healing to begin.

Woom……

Jinho, who had been tossing and turning in his bed, opened his eyes at the warmth enveloping him.

"Mm……?"

He laid eyes on a huge ant head that put a finger to his lips and made a shushing sound.

"……I must be dreaming." Jinho closed his eyes again and fell asleep with a happy look on his face.

"……" Meanwhile, Beru quietly continued healing him into the night.

* * *

In Seoul, Korea, there was a fourteen-hour difference between the East Coast of the US, so it was morning there.

In a deserted playground next to the swings, a black knight was laying prostrate on the ground, balanced on his feet and forehead.

"My king, how long must I stay like this?"

Jinwoo quietly sat on a swing. "Hmm…… Until Beru tells me that Jinho's treatment is done."

"……" The knight said no more, knowing he had spoken out of turn.

Jinwoo shifted focus from the knight to his hands. The backs of them were a mess. Thomas had been an unbelievably sturdy opponent, so Jinwoo himself had been injured punching him. Of course, they would heal thanks to the power of the passive buff Health and Longevity once he had a good night's rest.

……I'm sleepy.

He felt a little fatigued. The crazy day was about to end on a quiet note.

After a while, the shadow soldier spoke up again. "My king……"

"What?"

"Please bestow a name upon me as well."

Jinwoo looked at his newest shadow soldier.

[?? LV.1]

General Rank

Right, he had to name this one, too. Jinwoo thought about it briefly and smiled bitterly.

"Since you died because you were so selfish, why don't we call you Greed?"

7

What Happens in the International Guild Conference...

7

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE INTERNATIONAL GUILD CONFERENCE…

The next day, almost every broadcast station and newspaper in the US covered the hunters attending the International Guild Conference. But one newspaper on the East Coast had a unique headline.

Thomas Andre Knocked Out!

Thomas Andre was a household name in the US. But how had a national-level hunter been knocked out? Was he sick?

People threw their money down, snatched up the newspaper with the sensational headline, and read it where they stood. The article's contents were even more shocking. According to the report, a single hunter had taken on Thomas Andre and the entire Scavenger Guild single-handedly for reasons unknown.

The article was accompanied by large pictures showing the bloodied and unconscious Thomas and other injured hunters in the aftermath of the fight. Had someone seen the photos without any context, they might've thought it was some kind of terrorist attack.

But weren't these extremely high-rank hunters? Thomas, in particular, was a national-level hunter who had survived the raid of Kamish.

Everyone who read the article was flabbergasted. They were floored, just like the editor of the newspaper had been when he first laid eyes on the evidence. And once readers reached the part of the article revealing the identity of the solo hunter, they couldn't contain their shock.

"Oh my……"

“Damn!”

There was a picture of Jinwoo, the man who had been praised by the international media for rescuing Japan from a great disaster not so long ago. He was walking away from the scene with no emotion on his face, a stark contrast to Thomas lying on his back on the ground.

With most of the media focused on the International Guild Conference, the article had an even greater impact. In Korea, the contents of the report spread faster over social media than through traditional news sources.

└LOL did Jinwoo Sung beat up Thomas Andre fr? Link to article here.

└Whoa, it’s true… Says Thomas Andre’s entire guild got their butts kicked.

└Naaaah, fake news. Makes no sense at all. He crushed the national-level hunter+super-elite hunters by himself?

└Read the article first. It’s true.

└But why were they fighting?

└No clue. No reason stated.

└LOL Yanks love to brag about their national-level hunters but that’s all they got? Lame!

└Thomas is no slouch. Jinwoo’s just that good.

└Yeah, Hunter Jinwoo Sung is the pride of Korea.

└Hey, bartender!! I feel great! Give me a glass of patriotism!

Most of the comments from Korea expressed surprise, but on the other hand, comments from Japan expressed how proud people were of him.

└It’s obvious Thomas Andre is no match for Hunter Sung.

└America probably refused to help us because they didn’t want to reveal how weak they actually are……

└I’m really thankful that we had the right kind of hunter come help us.

└I want to give Hunter Sung a gift of appreciation. Where can I send it?

└You can send it here. The address is…

└Isn’t that your home address?

└LMAO #moron

Jinwoo was already a hero in Japan. That their savior had crushed America’s hero felt like a huge boost to their self-esteem as a nation.

Things had finally quieted down for Jinwoo after he took care of the giants, but now the entire world had its eyes focused on him once more.

Why had Jinwoo Sung beaten up Thomas Andre and his guild members? What had happened between the two guild masters? As theories and rumors circulated the Internet, everyone was dying to find out exactly what went down.

* * *

Jinwoo woke up to find a ridiculous number of reporters gathered in front of his hotel.

“Where did all these people come from?”

He knew why the reporters had come to the hotel, but he was surprised at how quickly the news had spread. Still, he had no intention of avoiding them. This was an opportunity to let everyone know what would happen to anyone who dared to cross Jinwoo Sung.

Besides, he hadn’t broken any laws. In the US, it was legal to shoot someone in self-defense, and this law had been reinforced after the appearance of hunters. It would’ve been a problem if Jinwoo had continued attacking Thomas after he lost consciousness, but he stopped when his opponent acknowledged defeat. And no one would blame Jinwoo for Dongsoo Hwang if they found out what had happened to Jinho.

Jinwoo patiently waited to hear from Adam.

Knock, knock.

He opened the door, and there stood Adam with two hunters from the Hunter Command Center.

Without so much as flinching, Jinwoo asked, “Are you here to arrest me?”

“No, I’m not.” Adam hastily shook his head. “We expected there to be a big fuss, so we’re here to escort you to the International Guild Conference. Also……”

Adam suddenly straightened his jacket and then politely bowed to Jinwoo at a ninety-degree angle.

……?

Jinwoo wasn’t sure what was prompting this.

Adam continued. “We would like to express our extreme gratitude to you.”

Jinwoo had no idea what the Hunter Command Center could be so thankful for after he’d lost Kamish’s shadow, wandered the city looking for Jinho, and beaten up Thomas after the American had just happened to show up.

……

Recalling the previous day’s events disheartened Jinwoo. He didn’t think his demonstration of the shadow extraction process warranted such appreciation, either.

“If you hadn’t stopped when you did, the US would’ve lost both national-level hunters.”

Oh, that’s what Adam was going on about. Jinwoo nodded in understanding, remembering how Adam had run screaming at him to stop. If the agent hadn’t shown up and Thomas had somehow gotten a second wind, things would’ve ended differently.

The US had already lost one national-level hunter, so they would’ve done whatever it took to save Thomas.

Adam continued. “The Hunter Command Center of the US will do our best to

prevent this incident from troubling you further.”

With that, Adam lifted his head. He looked tired after attending a meeting all night regarding how to handle this situation. The final conclusion had been:

“Do not provoke him.”

The powers that be had decided to let Jinwoo have his way. His stock with the Hunter Command Center had skyrocketed after he defeated Thomas. From their perspective, they didn’t want their relationship with Jinwoo to sour because of the Scavenger Guild’s missteps. After all, Thomas was still alive, wasn’t he?

Adam had been ordered to attend to Jinwoo and proceed with the schedule as planned. He swallowed hard as he made eye contact with Jinwoo.

This is the man who crushed the Scavenger Guild……

Under normal circumstances, Jinwoo was a powerful hunter with common sense. However, Adam had witnessed with his own eyes what happened when Jinwoo became enraged.

And truth be told, he was a bit envious of Jinho that this rage had emerged in the name of protecting those Jinwoo considered his people.

“Oh boy, will you look how late it is.” Adam smiled after checking the time. “Shall we go?”

“Sure.”

Adam escorted Jinwoo past a wall of reporters to a car waiting for them.

Ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak!

The press continued taking pictures until their car was no longer in view.

En route to the International Guild Conference, Adam explained what had recently transpired. “We have testimony from Dongsoo Hwang’s accomplices. The Hunter Command Center will soon release a statement regarding the whole incident.”

Adam kept emphasizing that this wouldn’t affect Jinwoo, and the hunter was glad to hear it. Jinwoo was in the US to collect information at the International

Guild Conference on the magic beast who looked like his father.

He had questioned Dongsoo's shadow soldier, but he didn't know much, either. The creature had emerged alone from a dungeon, had the power signature of a magic beast, and had gotten pissed off at the mention of Jinwoo.

So is he or isn't he……?

There was a good chance it wasn't his father, because his real father would've come to see his family first. Jinwoo's curiosity grew as he found out more about this man.

Then, there were Kamish's last words to Jinwoo before he vanished.

"There exist four humans who have borrowed the powers of the Rulers. Beware!"

Five hunters had survived Kamish's raid. Chances were four of the five national-level hunters had borrowed power from the Rulers.

Somebody recently killed one of them.

Christopher Reed…… But who was powerful enough to force a national-level hunter to burn down his mansion and the surrounding woods? Perhaps one of the Monarchs mentioned by the King of Giants? If not, did it have anything to do with the recent changes in the dungeons?

As various thoughts raced through his head, he spotted the venue for the conference in the distance.

* * *

When Jinwoo entered the building, all conversations and exchanges of greetings stopped. Some looked at him with curiosity while others regarded him with fear. Thomas Andre used to rule like a king among hunters, but Jinwoo was the Asian hunter who had beaten Thomas within an inch of his life.

Everyone was abuzz about Jinwoo, but no one dared approach him. Nobody knew why he had taken down the Scavenger Guild. Why even risk greeting Jinwoo when he might've thrashed Thomas for simply looking at him the wrong way? Despite being hunters of magic beasts, they all averted their eyes.

Following a lunch hosted by the Hunter Command Center, everyone filed into

the main hall, where people presented on a variety of topics. But none of them interested Jinwoo, as most of the discussions revolved around current events.

……This wouldn't be so boring if Jinho was here.

Jinwoo patiently waited for something to come up that was worthy of his attention. Eventually, one lecture finally piqued his curiosity, though it wasn't quite what he'd been hoping for.

"As you know, a number of gates have spawned lately, and along with them, some powerful magic beasts."

This wasn't news to anyone congregating in the conference. A few scientists had already presented on the subject earlier, so there was little interest among the attendees.

"But what you may not know is that some strange movement has been detected in the skies."

The hunters finally perked up, Jinwoo included.

"Others have already brought up the fact that the concentration of magic power in the air has grown denser of late." The scientist was excited now that he had everyone's attention. "Allow me to refer to this magic in the atmosphere as 'magic matter' until we come up with a better name for it."

Dr. Belzer then gestured to a world map on the screen behind him. Using a laser pointer, he indicated several locations.

"Did you know this magic matter is clustered in the skies above several countries?"

The chatter from the hunters got louder. The scientist waited for them to quiet down.

"In total, there are nine areas where magic matter has accumulated." The doctor listed them off. "…The province of Alberta, Canada. And finally, where the most magic matter has accumulated: Seoul, South Korea."

No sooner had Jinwoo heard this through an interpreter on his earpiece than the other hunters in the room looked over at him. Jinwoo had read the article about himself on the ride here, and judging by the way everyone was staring at

him over an unrelated matter, it was clear that everyone else had, too, and it was coloring their view of him. When Jinwoo scanned the other hunters, every one of them avoided his gaze.

Oh boy……

He sighed seeing the fear in their eyes.

Looks like there's been a huge misunderstanding.

Still, Jinwoo had no choice but to wait for the Hunter Command Center to clear the air.

Dr. Belzer attempted to lighten the awkward atmosphere by cracking a joke. "I read the article this morning as well, but don't blame Hunter Sung. If he was the cause of all this magic matter, he wouldn't be a hunter, would he?"

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

There was a smattering of nervous laughter before Dr. Belzer continued. "As you may have already guessed, I haven't been able to find any common factors among all these locations."

It would be hard to find the cause if there was no commonality, especially considering how unprecedented it was. The scientist then brought up a new image on the screen.

"Here. This shows the skies above the nine places I mentioned."

He added that a magic power–detecting camera from a satellite had taken the image and that it had been enhanced for easier viewing. People could see the clusters of magic matter in the skies above the nine locations. In person, the phenomenon wouldn't have looked that bad, but even without the image enhancement, it appeared far from natural.

"Hmm……"

"Whoa."

Hunters gasped as they looked at the large screen. They needed to discover the reason behind this quickly. The skies above Seoul appeared especially concerning, making it look like the capital was the eye of a storm. Jinwoo wondered why there were nine.

Could it have anything to do with the nine Monarchs?

There was no way this was just a coincidence. However, since the King of Giants was already dead, the number nine didn't have the same significance.

At that moment, Dr. Belzer snuck a look at Jinwoo. Their eyes met again, but this time, the scientist was no longer laughing.

"Since we don't know the cause of this phenomenon, we currently have no way to handle it." With that, Dr. Belzer wrapped up his long presentation. "However, although we have no method at the moment, we must work toward one, as our world is about to radically change once again."

* * *

As the scheduled programming came to a close, Mr. Brannon, the director of the Hunter Command Center, took the stage to make an important announcement. His unscheduled appearance caused quite a stir.

Was he going to make an official statement regarding last night's incident? The director had to ask the audience to settle down.

"There is an urgent matter I must bring to every hunter's attention."

The hunters gathered here were the top in their field, not a gaggle of rowdy schoolchildren.

"……"

"……"

The director's sentence sent a chilly silence through the room. The average person could not fathom the level of concentration the highest-rank hunters possessed as a basic instinct.

Mr. Brannon nodded as he scanned the room until he spotted Jinwoo.

Hunter Jinwoo Sung……

Mr. Brannon had been briefed on every single detail about yesterday's incident, and he greeted the man at the center of it all with his eyes, expressing his appreciation to the hunter for sparing Thomas's life. Without knowing exactly what was going on, the other hunters stirred upon seeing the director acknowledge Jinwoo.

After a brief pause, Mr. Brannon continued. “With a heavy heart, I regret to inform you that……”

The time had come. Jinwoo realized this was the moment he had been waiting for.

“……two weeks ago, Hunter Christopher Reed was killed by unknown assailants.”

* * *

……!

It was a frightening revelation to the hunters in the audience. To hear that one of the most powerful of their ilk had been murdered was an even bigger shock than the incident involving Jinwoo. It wasn’t just a matter of who won or lost in a fight between two powerful hunters.

The director presented some information on the screen. Remnants of the fire, a mansion in ashes, and the corpse of Christopher Reed with a huge hole in his chest. Moans were heard throughout the room as the images confirmed the death of a national-level hunter. No one could deny that Christopher had been murdered.

Director Brannon was flooded with questions, but he shook them off. “I’m sorry, but I’ll present the facts before I field any questions.”

He had more important things to do than answer queries. The director briefly stole a glance at the corner of the room where Jinwoo was planted, quietly contemplating the matter at hand. Director Brannon had mixed feelings about Jinwoo’s placid demeanor. However, there was no time to waste. He pressed a button on a remote to change the image on the screen.

“This is the prime suspect in this case.”

The face of an Asian man filled the screen. The hunters immediately noticed something odd. He closely resembled someone in the room. But with what had happened to Thomas fresh on their minds, no one dared share their thoughts.

“……” Jinwoo pursed his lips.

The photograph, which had to have been taken when the man was brought to the Hunter Command Center to be identified, resembled his father to a T.

Jinwoo bit his lower lip.

Why was my father……?

Dungeons were the territory of the Rulers, but Jinwoo had no idea why they would send out a magic beast in the form of his father. Whatever the reason, he could feel the rage building inside him.

The other hunters mistook the reason for his anger, so they tried real hard not to glance his way.

Don't look back. Don't look back.

They only look alike; it's just a coincidence.

Asians look very similar to one another, don't they?

But no matter how I look at that picture……

The director referred to Ilhwan Sung as "Suspect S." He went on to explain where Suspect S had been found, what had happened during this discovery, as well as what had followed. The hunters were taken aback to hear he had beaten up Dongsoo Hwang during the interrogation and escaped.

Dongsoo Hwang was someone the Hunter Command Center had recognized for his abilities and scouted to the US. He was an ace hunter with the Scavenger Guild, one of the best guilds in the world. Since Dongsoo's death had yet to be made public, the news of his defeat was shocking. Heck, even a national-level hunter wouldn't have lasted long if they went up against a group of hunters at Dongsoo's level. No wonder Suspect S was the Hunter Command Center's prime suspect.

"The Hunter Command Center has officially concluded that humanoid magic beasts escaped from a dungeon and targeted Hunter Reed."

As Director Brannon continued to speak, footage of Suspect S stepping on Dongsoo's neck appeared on the screen behind him. The prospect of Suspect S holding enough power to stomp on a powerful S-rank hunter such as Dongsoo like a tiny bug horrified those in attendance. But Jinwoo wasn't surprised. The Rulers had the power to create dungeons, and those same beings had created Suspect S, a magic beast, with a certain purpose.

It would've been more shocking if Dongsoo Hwang had won.

Jinwoo was concentrating on Suspect S. He appeared to be trying to communicate with Dongsoo in the footage.

Is he……talking to Dongsoo?

Jinwoo's eyes shot wide open as he focused his perception like he often did in battle. Time seemed to slow down, and he began reading Suspect S's lips.

"……Don't ever set foot in Korea. I say this not for my son's sake but for your own. You won't be able to close your eyes even when you're dead."

Ba-dump!

Jinwoo's heart raced. That last part……

Did he say……not able to close your eyes when you're dead?

If Jinwoo had read the man's lips correctly, that meant Suspect S knew about his existence. Luckily, there was an easier way to verify the contents of the conversation. Jinwoo hastily called to the most recent addition to his shadow army.

Greed!

The new soldier responded immediately to the unspoken question.

It is as you suspect, my king.

……!

While Jinwoo's mind raced, the director's long explanation came to an end.

"We're asking the international community to be on the lookout for Suspect S. Please contact us as soon as you locate this man. That is all."

With that, the floodgates opened, and the questions poured out again as hands flew up in the air.

"Yes, the hunter over there?" The director pointed to someone.

"Is there any evidence that Suspect S isn't human?"

"His magic power signature was identical to that of a magic beast. Next hunter."

“You said he insisted he was a man who went missing in a dungeon. Did the hunter he claimed to be actually exist?”

“Yes, he did exist. Next hunter.”

“Then why don’t you reveal his identity?”

“Oh……” Director Brannon tried his best not to look at Jinwoo as he responded. “We have decided not to reveal his identity because he is related to one of the hunters here.”

That put a sudden end to the questions, as the statement pretty much confirmed their suspicions.

The room had fallen silent, so the director prepared to leave the stage. “Any last questions?”

Someone sitting in the last row raised his hand and opened his mouth even before the director pointed to him.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to track him down if you revealed his identity?”

Even without looking, everyone knew from the deep voice speaking Chinese that it was Zhigang Liu, the seven-star and national-level hunter. Surrounded by his guildmates, dozens of China’s best hunters, Zhigang gazed at the director with a serious expression.

The director was at a loss for words, but Zhigang pressed him again. “Don’t you think so, Mr. Brannon?”

The Hunter Command Center had decided to classify Suspect S’s information, but Director Brannon couldn’t see any reason to refuse.

Beep.

He pressed a button on the remote control, and Ilhwan Sung’s information was revealed on the screen.

The room erupted in gasps and murmurs. The hunters couldn’t believe that the first humanoid magic beast emerging from a dungeon had taken the form of Jinwoo’s missing father. Could this be a mere coincidence?

Zhigang observed the screen before raising his hand again.

The director acknowledged him. "……Hunter Liu."

"I have a question for Hunter Sung."

The director looked at Jinwoo, who nodded and turned to face Zhigang.

Zhigang's voice resounded through the large room. "If Suspect S really is your missing father and hunters try to take him down, what will you do?"

Jinwoo thought about it for a second. "If he's a magic beast, I will end him with my own hands. But if he's my actual father……"

What then? The others waited with bated breath.

"I will protect my family even if it means becoming an enemy of all hunters."

* * *

"Did you really mean that?" Adam had been waiting for Jinwoo outside the conference room.

Jinwoo knew exactly what the agent was referring to. He smiled. "Yes."

"Ha-ha……" This was no laughing matter, but Adam couldn't help himself at Jinwoo's smile.

More than five hundred top-rank hunters, the elite of the elite, representing 120 countries, had been in that conference room by the Hunter Command Center's invitation. Jinwoo had told them straight to their faces that he had no problem "becoming an enemy of all hunters." That wasn't something one could pull off with courage alone.

More surprisingly, not one person had mocked him for it. Zhigang, for example, was known to be ruthless, but even he quietly observed Jinwoo's declaration without contesting it. The Hunter Command Center agents who had been watching the event via monitors had also gone slack-jawed over Jinwoo's pronouncement, Adam included.

Presently, Adam sounded impressed. "Only two people in the world could have gotten away with saying something like that in front of those people, Hunter Sung."

Jinwoo was curious. "Who's the other person……?"

“He’s in the hospital right now.” Adam’s bitter smile made it clear to whom he was referring.

Considering Thomas’s arrogant personality, it made sense.

Though I’m not sure he has a leg to stand on anymore.

Jinwoo smiled wryly as he recalled Thomas’s face as he surrendered.

Adam began detailing what was next on the agenda. “Next is the dinner party. The Hunter Command Center went all out, so if you don’t have anything urgent to attend to—”

Jinwoo shook his head. “I’m planning to go to the hospital.”

“Pardon?” Adam was puzzled.

Had Jinwoo sustained an injury last night? That was to be expected. It had been such a fierce battle that Thomas, a national-level hunter, had been so seriously injured he couldn’t even be revived by healers. It stood to reason that Jinwoo would’ve been wounded here and there……

“I’m worried about Jinho.”

“Oh……” Adam had been presumptuous in his concern for Jinwoo. Still, he had to ask. “Are you experiencing any pain in your shoulder or wrist from last night……?”

“Hmm?”

“Um, never mind.” Adam waved, flustered, when he and Jinwoo noticed the hunters conversing in small groups nearby stepping aside to let someone pass.

They made way for Zhigang Liu and his subordinates, who walked right up to Jinwoo.

Ah……!

What’s going on with those two?

The room quieted down as the tension between Jinwoo and Zhigang brought everything to a standstill. The other hunters uncomfortably looked back and forth between the two of them.

Why is Zhigang Liu doing this?

Is this because of what Hunter Sung said earlier?

I thought it was weird Liu let it go so easily……

Jinwoo had clearly been provoking his fellow hunters, and Zhigang had been the one to pose the initial question, after all.

Would Zhigang be next to fall after Thomas? Nervous that something was about to go down, the others paid close attention to any minute changes in the two hunters' expressions.

Adam, who had unintentionally ended up stuck between them, turned pale. "Um, excuse me, sirs……"

Adam snapped his mouth shut when Zhigang took a step closer and started to say something. Jinwoo looked serious as he listened.

……What's he saying?

Jinwoo didn't understand a lick of Chinese. He'd screwed his expression into something approaching seriousness to match Zhigang's, but trying to listen to a language he didn't understand was rather difficult. In any case, it didn't seem like he was being mocked or cursed.

Adam whispered in Jinwoo's ear. "He says he killed the giant-type magic beast on the Chinese coast that escaped from you in Japan."

Jinwoo looked at Adam, startled. "You speak Chinese, too?"

"Since I'm in charge of the Asian branch, I can speak several Asian languages. Oh, plus a little Russian, Spanish, Arabic, and German."

For a fleeting moment, Jinwoo thought about how convenient it would be to have a shadow soldier like Adam, but he checked himself.

Even during their brief exchange, Zhigang kept talking as if he had much he wanted to say to Jinwoo.

"Then I'm counting on you."

"Will do." With a determined look on his face, Adam nodded and continued to interpret for Zhigang. "Hunter Liu says he was quite surprised, as the magic beast was much more powerful than he expected. It was especially difficult

fighting the giant in water.”

Jinwoo had felt similarly when first fighting the giants. They were very quick considering their size. Zhigang must’ve faced quite a challenge battling it in water rather than on solid ground.

As Zhigang continued to speak, Adam brightened. “He’s wanted to meet you ever since then, Hunter Sung. He was curious about the hunter who easily defeated all those powerful magic beasts.”

As soon as Adam finished translating, Zhigang finally smiled and held out his hand. It looked like Zhigang’s serious mien had been a result of nervousness. Jinwoo returned the smile and shook his hand. There was no reason to refuse a handshake offered by one of the best hunters around.

Now that he knew nothing would happen, Adam could finally relax. “Phew……”

This was the purpose of the International Guild Conference, to let hunters bond.

Zhigang laughed as he said something else.

Jinwoo looked back at Adam. “Is he telling a joke?”

“Oh.” Adam listened hard, then chuckled. “He says he’s glad that you laid into Hunter Andre. Even though he wasn’t there, he says Hunter Andre probably did something to deserve it……”

Jinwoo grinned. His first impression of Zhigang was that he was a prickly middle-aged man, but he was funnier than Jinwoo expected.

After this exchange, the two men released each other’s hands. But then Zhigang’s expression turned somber.

The smile disappeared from Adam’s face as well as he hastily translated what Zhigang was saying. “He genuinely hopes that Suspect S is not your father. He says he never wants to fight you, Hunter Sung.”

Jinwoo wordlessly nodded.

“There you two are!”

Both Jinwoo and Zhigang turned toward the newcomer. The person had a presence but no magic power, so it wasn't a hunter. As they suspected, their eyes landed on the director of the Hunter Command Center.

He looked at them both and nervously asked, "Could I trouble you both for a moment?"

Jinwoo looked at Adam, but the agent shook his head. He had no idea what this was about.

What was going on? Before responding to the director, Jinwoo widened his perception and scanned the movement of people in the room.

Two people with a great amount of magic power……

They were being escorted by several people and heading in the same direction. Considering that he and Zhigang had been approached at the same time, Jinwoo concluded that this was no coincidence.

Did something happen?

Seeing Jinwoo's hesitation, Adam decided to interject. "Oh, sir, Hunter Sung needs to go to the hospital where Hunter Jinho Yoo is stay—"

Jinwoo put his hand on Adam's shoulder and shook his head, then turned to the director. "I have time."

The director beamed and turned to Zhigang. "How about you, Hunter Liu?"

"Sure."

"Great. Please follow me." The director led the way, looking rather pleased with himself.

* * *

The two men's destinations were different. Agents escorted Zhigang down a hallway to the left while Jinwoo continued to follow the director.

That's odd……

Three powerful hunters, the two with the strong magic energy who had gone ahead earlier plus Zhigang, had been shepherded to one location. Jinwoo had expected to join them but was being escorted elsewhere. He tried to come up

with a few theories before eventually asking:

"Why am I the only one going in a different direction?"

"Oh……"

Director Brannon considered a response but ended up passing the buck.

"There's someone waiting for you. She'll explain everything."

"……"

Jinwoo sensed a presence in the room located at the end of the hall.

Huh? This magic signature is……

He hadn't expected to ever see her again.

"I see you already know who it is." The apprehensive director had started to sweat. "We go to extreme lengths to keep her in a hidden location, but as this is such an important matter……"

"Did the Hunter Command Center ask her to do this?"

"No, not at all. She requested it. She said she wanted to see you."

Director Brannon opened the door, and Jinwoo met the eyes of the lady awaiting him.

"It's been a while, Hunter Sung."

"Indeed, Mrs. Sellner."

It was the Upgrader Norma Sellner, possessor of a unique ability. Considering how much time had passed since he last saw her, Jinwoo was surprised to see her eyes hadn't changed. The intense fear that erupted whenever she looked at him was still there. But if that was the case, what could compel her to meet him again?

"I wasn't expecting to see you again……" He sat down across from Mrs. Sellner.

Adam was acting as the interpreter, so he stuck close to Jinwoo's side.

Mrs. Sellner politely bowed her head to Jinwoo. "I apologize for last time. My mind wasn't in the right place back then……"

Jinwoo raised his hand to stop her. He didn't mean to bring up the past and solicit an apology from her.

Mrs. Sellner looked at the director, who gave her a resolute nod. She hesitated but finally spoke with some difficulty. "Recently, I keep having the same dream every night."

Jinwoo assumed he hadn't been called here to interpret her dreams. "What kind of dream is it?"

"Every night, I see the top hunters becoming the hunted."

Someone hunting hunters. Jinwoo had a hunch this had something to do with him.

"And a few days later, that dream comes true."

"You mean……Christopher Reed?"

Mrs. Sellner nodded.

The director took over the explanation. "We warned Mr. Reed about the danger, but he didn't listen to us. The result was…… Well, I'm sure you know."

Her voice shaky, Mrs. Sellner continued. "Powerful hunters who defend this world will continue to be killed. The ones hunting them will never stop."

"In other words……" Jinwoo calmly cleared his throat. "You're here to warn me to be on the lookout—"

"No." Mrs. Sellner shook her head firmly.

This wasn't a warning? Jinwoo wasn't sure how to react.

Mrs. Sellner pleaded. "You must protect them."

* * *

"I've lost."

Two words Thomas had never expected to come out of his mouth again. The phrase repeated over and over in his head as he opened his eyes.

He was in the hospital.

When was the last time I was in a hospital?

Unlike Jinwoo, who had practically lived at the hospital for most of his career as a hunter, Thomas hadn't been in one since awakening. Jinwoo had started off as the lowest of the E-rank hunters, while Thomas had been an apex hunter from the start. How the tables had turned.

The result of their match left quite an impact on Thomas.

I really lost……

He felt as if his soul had left his body as he sat up.

Taka-tak.

Someone stopped typing on a keyboard. Thomas turned to see that Laura, the head manager of Scavenger Guild, sat by his bedside at an appropriate distance. Her fingertips hovered above her laptop keyboard.

"You're up."

"……Yeah."

Thomas avoided eye contact with her as he rubbed the bottom of his chin. He was relieved to see by the length of his beard that not much time seemed to have passed.

"It's been……about a day?"

"Yes, sir." Laura nodded. "The doctor who examined you initially said we should be prepared for you to be out for several weeks."

His condition had been that bad at one point. Laura couldn't decide whether him waking up a day after that diagnosis was very much like Thomas, or him being unconscious for a day was very unlike him.

Laura drew closer to him. "Should I call the doctor?"

"No, not yet." Thomas shook his aching head while massaging his temples.

He could still feel the impact from that man striking his head. It was a horrible pain he never wanted to experience again, and there was nothing any doctor could do about it. Besides, there was something he needed to check first.

"What happened to Mr. Hwang?"

Laura opened her mouth but didn't know how to phrase her response.

Instead, she just shook her head.

"……I see." Thomas thought about it for a moment and then casually changed the subject. "Any other damages?"

"Many hunters were injured, but they've all recovered thanks to the Hunter Command Center's quick response."

Thomas couldn't help but raise his voice in shock. "There were no other fatalities?!"

"Yes, that's correct."

"……" He blew out a breath.

No casualties after such a fierce battle could only mean that their opponent had gone easy on them. It was a crushing defeat.

It was difficult to feel upset about such a loss. In fact, Thomas found himself in awe of Jinwoo. The Korean man had not only destroyed Thomas but the elite hunters he had brought with him. Rather than fear, he felt respect for Jinwoo.

Thomas had always thought that power equaled truth, so the loss was a major shock to him. But though Thomas had been soundly defeated, he didn't feel bad about it. Did his lack of regret come from the awareness of the power gap between himself and his opponent? He should've been furious at the defeat and raring for revenge.

But instead—

Laura interrupted his swirling thoughts by handing him a small rectangular glasses case.

……?

Thomas looked at Laura curiously.

"Your sunglasses were collected at the scene, but they were badly damaged, so……"

Clack.

Inside the case was a brand-new pair of Thomas's favorite sunglasses.

Thomas chuckled as he put them on. "I owe you as always."

Laura had been worried that Thomas would awake in a fit. Seeing him react so calmly brought a pleasant smile to her face.

“Just doing my job.”

Thomas stared off into the distance, then quietly spoke. “Mr. Hwang…… Make sure he gets the best funeral. He was still a member of our guild.”

“Understood.”

“And……”

Laura looked up from taking notes.

“Please tell Hunter Sung that Scavenger Guild…… No, I, Thomas Andre, offer him an official apology.”

* * *

Protect the hunters. Why would Mrs. Sellner say something like that?

Jinwoo was confused. “……Why me?”

Mrs. Sellner debated where to begin, then slowly recounted her dream. “I tried to remember the people who were chasing the hunters, but that was in vain.”

The only thing she could remember when she woke up was that their faces were hidden in black.

“So I decided to try something. I used my ability within my dream to try and uncover their true nature.”

“Is that why you looked into my eyes the last time……?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Sellner freely admitted how she employed her ability.

Ba-dump!

Jinwoo’s heart pounded as he thought back to their first encounter. What had Mrs. Sellner seen in Jinwoo’s eyes that had frightened her so? For now, Jinwoo set aside his curiosity and gave her his full attention.

“What I saw was infinite power. But after locking eyes with that thing, I had no choice but to wake up from my dream.”

Jinwoo looked down to see Mrs. Sellner's hands were shaking.

"I still remember the voice I heard the moment I saw it."

Both the director and Adam appeared very nervous.

"What did it tell you?" asked Jinwoo.

"It told me to go back……and quietly wait for the war." Mrs. Sellner got goose bumps, and she quivered as she recalled the dream.

The voice in this dream was vivid and unlike anything she had ever heard in real life. But the words provided a clue for Jinwoo.

That matches what the King of Giants said.

The King of Giants had told Jinwoo about the impending war between the Rulers and the Monarchs. But the Rulers couldn't be the only ones getting ready to battle, so the question was which side the creatures in Mrs. Sellner's dreams were on.

Meanwhile, Jinwoo hadn't gotten an answer, so he asked again. "What does any of this have to do with me protecting the hunters?"

"……Because it was the same power as the one within you, Hunter Sung."

Those words sent a jolt through Jinwoo.

On that day, Mrs. Sellner had seen the power of the Shadow Monarch, so if she had seen the same kind of power in the killers within her dream, that meant they had to be……

……the Monarchs.

Jinwoo's face darkened.

Mrs. Sellner quickly continued her explanation at Jinwoo's peculiar expression.

"They are beings above hunters, so in order to stop them, we need someone who possesses the same level of power they do."

The director spoke up.

"Actually, we're quite torn whether you're the only one who can protect the

hunters as Mrs. Sellner claims……”

But if they had arranged this meeting despite objections……

“Has the Hunter Command Center changed their mind about me after yesterday’s fight?”

With the truth laid bare, Director Brannon responded awkwardly. “That is correct.”

The power gap between Jinwoo and the other national-level hunters was apparent. The unfortunate incident had provided them with hope. The Hunter Command Center needed Jinwoo’s help now more than ever. The US had lost one national-level hunter to the creatures already, so they needed to protect Thomas Andre at all costs.

“You’re an extraordinary hunter. Of course, we would compensate you for helping us out.”

They were ready to give him whatever he wanted, including Kamish’s rune stone. They had given up scouting Jinwoo and annoying him with an offer he’d already declined. After Christopher Reed’s death, they decided the best course of action would be to ask for his help in protecting the most powerful hunter in the US instead.

“……” Jinwoo was torn.

Mrs. Sellner spelled out the situation for him. “In this world, there are hunters who have been very blessed. Until now, they have used their power to defend the world. But without them, this world is in mortal danger.”

Jinwoo made his decision. “……I’m sorry.”

The director was shocked by Jinwoo’s firm rejection that left no room for any doubt. “Is it because you harbor ill will toward Hunter Andre……?”

Jinwoo shook his head. “No. It’s because I don’t know the enemy I have to fight yet.”

Whoever they were, Jinwoo had never encountered them. Jinwoo wasn’t the type of person to make a promise he couldn’t keep, so naturally, he couldn’t promise to protect Thomas Andre from an unknown threat.

I'll keep an eye on the situation for now.

He'd take care of things as best he could in his own way. This was the same cool attitude he'd had when he first entered that double dungeon. His perspective hadn't changed since then.

Plus, Jinwoo had countless shadow soldiers he could rely on to pass him information. If he planted one with every hunter the Hunter Command Center was keeping an eye on, he could respond to any attacks without delay.

"If that's all……"

With a plan in mind, Jinwoo rose from his seat.

* * *

It had been quite a busy day for President Go back in South Korea.

A fight had broken out between Jinwoo and Thomas the day before the International Guild Conference. Worried, he'd requested more information from the Hunter Command Center. Finally, he'd received word that, based on their investigation, the Scavenger Guild had been at fault, and Jinwoo wouldn't suffer any consequences from the incident.

"Whew." Finally able to relax, President Go plopped down in his chair. He'd had quite a fright at the prospect of Jinwoo ending up in an American prison.

Wait a minute……

If he thought about it, who could hope to detain Jinwoo in the first place? He'd knocked out Thomas Andre of all people.

President Go let loose a hearty laugh.

I may have been worried for nothing.

Ha-ha!

He laughed so much that his throat felt dry. A bottle of water sat on a side table a bit farther from his desk.

……

President Go quietly stared at the bottle and then held out his hand. The water bottle flew toward him, and he casually snatched it out of the air with

practiced precision. Smiling, he twisted the lid open.

Director Woo will surely have a story to tell me when he gets back.

Ha-ha!

Having Jinchul accompany Jinwoo to the US had been a great choice.

8
NIGHT OF THE HUNTERS

8

NIGHT OF THE HUNTERS

“Boooss!”

Jinho went in for a hug with tears in his eyes, but Jinwoo easily evaded him. Jinwoo raised an eyebrow at Jinchul, who had volunteered to look after Jinho while Jinwoo attended the conference.

“What’s gotten into him?”

“I showed him this when he woke up……”

Jinchul held up the newspaper he had been reading. The front page contained pictures of the defeated Scavenger Guild members, plus the face of the bloodied and unconscious Thomas. Jinwoo had thought it natural to save Jinho, but Jinho had only found out through the article. Who would’ve thought someone would take on both the best guild in the world and its guild master, Thomas “Goliath” Andre, in order to save Jinho’s life?

Jinho was moved to tears, and he was unable to contain himself upon spotting Jinwoo. “Booooooss!”

But Jinwoo’s agility was well above an S-rank hunter’s, and no matter how hard Jinho tried, he couldn’t hug the man. Dodging Jinho’s attempt one more time, Jinwoo turned quizzically to Jinchul while pointing a thumb over his shoulder.

“Are you saying this guy read the article in English?”

“Oh, the interpreter from the association felt bad that she was being paid to do basically nothing, so I had her translate the article for Hunter Yoo.”

“Ah.”

The tip of Jinho's nose was red, as if he was upset by Jinwoo's continuous dodging. "Boss!"

"Here." Jinho took the tissue Jinwoo handed him and blew his nose hard.

Honk!

Jinwoo understood how Jinho felt, but he couldn't let him slobber all over the expensive suit he'd brought for the conference.

Calming down, Jinho wiped away his tears. "By the way, boss, when did you learn English?"

It looked like Jinho remembered Jinwoo's conversation with Thomas even as he was passing out.

"I had a lot of time on my hands when I was a low-rank hunter."

Jinwoo had basically been jobless when he wasn't scheduled for a raid, so whenever he could, he'd taken the opportunity to pick up some English to prepare for the future when his hunting days were over.

I never thought I'd use it like this.

He had fond memories of teaching himself the English language. But he never would have dreamed that his first conversation in English would be with Thomas Andre.

"Oh right." Jinho nodded. Considering Jinwoo's past, he was even more touched by Jinwoo's loyalty and willingness to fight the whole of the Scavenger Guild just to save him, a mere D-rank hunter.

Jinho began to tear up again. "Boss! I will always believe in you and follow you to the ends of the earth!"

His eyes turned red, and his nose began to run again. Jinwoo smiled but…

……Damn this keen perception stat.

His extremely keen senses heightened his perception of Jinho's emotions, and it made him emotional in turn. He looked to Jinchul to avoid Jinho.

"I guess he can go now?"

"Yes, Hunter Yoo's doctor was quite surprised that his injuries had completely

healed overnight.”

“Okay, then let’s get him discharged and head to the hotel. The Hunter Command Center has a car waiting for us.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll get ready, boss.” Jinho began to pack with swollen eyes.

Jinwoo watched him fondly, thankful that he was safe. Yet at the same time, he still felt bitter and angry at the culprit behind the whole incident.

Greed, you know what to do when we go back to the hotel, right?

……Yes, my king.

As they left the hospital, Jinwoo comforted Greed by telling him that he had to assume the position for only two hours this time.

* * *

The Hunter Command Center had sent two cars. Jinwoo joined Adam in the first because he wanted to discuss a personal matter with the agent. Jinho got in the second car with the two people from the Hunter’s Association.

Jinwoo opened the car door.

Clack.

Adam was sleeping with his head leaning against the window. His shoulders twitched, and he shook the sleep from his head as the door opened.

“Oh, you’re here, Hunter Sung.”

Adam looked run-down. Exhausted from his busy schedule and the events of the last two days, he had bags under his eyes. Jinwoo looked at him with pity as the driver started the car.

Jinwoo got straight to the point. “Could I have a list of the hunters you’d like me to protect?”

This jolted Adam fully awake, and his face brightened. “Have you changed your mind?”

“No, I’m just curious.”

“Oh……”

Adam couldn’t hide his disappointment, though this wasn’t entirely bad news. Apparently, Jinwoo had some interest in the matter.

Adam continued with a smile. “I’ll create a list for you as soon as I get back to the Hunter Command Center.”

Jinwoo checked the time. It was already nine o’clock at night. Was it his imagination, or did Adam look even more run-down than he had a few minutes ago after incurring yet another task? Sure enough, the agent looked like he was struggling to keep his eyes open and not fall asleep in front of Jinwoo.

Tsk, tsk.

Jinwoo couldn’t take it anymore and reached across the seat.

“Huh? What?”

As he covered Adam’s eyes with his left hand, Adam’s voice cracked.

“Hunter Sung?”

He froze at Jinwoo’s instructions. “Stay still, okay?”

This would’ve been creepy under any other circumstances, but it was Jinwoo Sung, the one who had almost beaten Thomas Andre to death, doing this to him. Adam swallowed hard, trying not to panic.

Jinwoo tilted Adam’s head back and poured a healing potion from the system shop into the agent’s mouth.

Wh-what’s this?

The agent was freaking out about being forced to drink an unknown liquid with his eyes covered. But as the mysterious substance went down his throat, he suddenly felt energized. As Jinwoo removed his hand from Adam’s face, the American realized that the drowsiness he’d felt earlier was not just gone, but he felt as if his body was light and refreshed like he had just woken up from a good night’s sleep. He was no longer fatigued, like he had never been to begin with.

“H-Hunter Sung……?”

How did he do this?

Jinwoo just shrugged at the quizzical look in Adam's eyes. "Trade secret."

"I see." Considering how incredible this was, Adam didn't bother to question it. He moved his body this way and that, his voice a mixture of shock and awe. "Hunter Sung…… How should I say this? I feel like even if you weren't a hunter, you'd be successful at whatever you chose to do."

The praise seemed rather over-the-top, considering Adam was a top-notch agent of the Hunter Command Center who knew how to speak more than ten languages. Regardless, Jinwoo smiled at the satisfaction on Adam's face. Besides, this made it easier to ask him a favor. The list of the hunters needing his protection was just the preamble.

"Could you also please organize a meeting with the hunters on the list?"

That would be his golden opportunity to conceal one of his soldiers within each of their shadows to guard against attacks from the Monarchs.

However, Adam shook his head. Jinwoo had been worried about this. Although the Hunter Command Center possessed great power, it might be too complicated to gather such amazing people together on such short notice.

Jinwoo frowned. "I suppose that would be too difficult……"

"No, that's not it. There's no need to organize such a meeting." Adam smiled as he explained the last item on the conference agenda. "Because we've got the Night of the Hunters."

It sounded like the title of a video game, but Adam seemed excited about it. "It's this big party thrown by the Hunter Command Center for the hunters who attend the conference. If you want, you can meet everyone there."

A party. What better way was there to casually meet the hunters he needed to assign shadow soldiers? Jinwoo grinned.

Perfect.

He could get to the Monarchs through the hunters and figure out who were his enemies and who were his allies. And from there, he could figure out who to fight and how to fight them.

"Sounds good."

Jinwoo leaned back in his seat as the car drove into the American night.

* * *

The best hunters from all over the world along with their entourages were gathered inside a banquet hall with a 1,500-person capacity for the Night of the Hunters.

“Wow.” Jinho gawked at the sight of the legendary hunters he had only ever seen on TV.

Meanwhile, those same hunters looked at Jinwoo in a similar light. As soon as he entered the hall, he was the center of attention.

“Hey, over there……”

“I saw.”

“He’s right in front of me, but I can’t sense his presence at all.”

“He really is on another level.”

Jinho received as much attention as his boss.

“So the person next to him is……?”

“He’s the one Hunter Sung fought Thomas to rescue?”

The Hunter Command Center had released a statement earlier that day to clear the air. Hunters were shocked that Jinwoo would take on the entirety of the Scavenger Guild to save his D-rank colleague. It was a sobering testament to the fact that Jinwoo wasn’t merely bluffing on that first day of the conference.

“I will protect my family even if it means becoming an enemy of all hunters.”

They’d seen the pictures of the aftermath of the fight with the Scavenger Guild and hoped that Jinwoo wouldn’t have to make good on his promise.

In any case, now that the truth had been revealed, everyone wanted a chance to talk to Jinwoo. Their image of him had gone from the monster who had beaten Goliath to the hunter who had saved his colleague.

The first person to bravely introduce himself to Jinwoo was the chairman of a well-known company specializing in handling of the remains of magic beasts. “It’s an honor to meet you, Hunter Sung. I’m interested in purchasing the

cadavers of the giant-type magic beasts. Do you have a minute to spare?”

Since giants normally spawned as bosses in A-rank gates, it was very rare to find a perfectly intact corpse. A desire to grow his business compelled the chairman to make contact as soon as possible.

Well, that worked out.

Jinwoo smiled and introduced Jinho to the chairman. “I’m usually in charge of raids, and I let my vice president here handle business matters.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Flattered by Jinwoo’s introduction, Jinho proudly stuck out his chest and extended his hand for a handshake. “I’m Jinho Yoo, vice president of Ahjin Guild.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“I don’t usually like talking business under these circumstances, but I’ll make an exception for you……”

There was a look of satisfaction on Jinwoo’s face as he watched Jinho lead the chairman somewhere quiet to talk.

That kid really is a real businessman now.

With those two distractions out of the way, Jinwoo refocused his attention on the actual reason he was here.

Adam approached Jinwoo. “Here’s the list.”

He handed Jinwoo a tablet that listed the names of the ten best hunters in the world in order.

“The Hunter Command Center has a system that awards each hunter points based on performance. These are the top ten individuals with the most points.”

Jinwoo thought it interesting to see a hunter’s career represented by points. He noticed that his name was missing.

“So where do I rank on this list?”

“If we include points for getting rid of the giant-type magic beasts…… Around here.”

Adam indicated the space between numbers three and four. Zhigang Liu, Thomas Andre, and Christopher Reed topped the list, so to have his name right below those three despite his shorter career meant he had been performing brilliantly.

Number four is Siddharth Bachchan of India. Five is……

One through five were all national-level hunters, and the ones below them were extremely formidable people.

Suddenly, a noise distracted Jinwoo from the list. The hunters seemed confused by the arrival of an unexpected guest.

Once he spotted the newcomer, Jinwoo handed the tablet back to Adam.

“H-Hunter Sung……”

“Don’t worry.”

As expected, the newcomer strode toward Jinwoo without any hesitation. Zhigang tried to intercept but was brushed aside. The guest soon stood before Jinwoo and took off his sunglasses.

“Thomas Andre.”

Everyone was unnerved at the sight of the cool Jinwoo and Thomas, whose arm was bandaged, facing each other. Thomas stood a head taller, so he literally looked down on Jinwoo.

“Hunter Jinwoo Sung…… I’d like to ask you something.”

What could Thomas possibly have to ask him? Jinwoo thought it odd, but the national-level hunter didn’t seem hostile, so he acquiesced.

“This arm……” Thomas raised his left arm wrapped in bandages. “Healers told me they couldn’t fix it because the magic power that hit me was so strong. Doctors told me the same thing. They said it was healing but would take a long time to fully recover.”

Thomas had used his left arm to block a punch from Jinwoo packed with magic power. By the end of the fight, Thomas’s bones were shattered almost into dust. There was a good chance he wouldn’t be able to use his left arm again. It had mended to this extent thanks to the healers’ quick response and

Thomas's own regenerative ability. Jinwoo's attack was unimaginably destructive.

One question plagued Thomas's thoughts as he suffered through the pain of his injuries, but he could only get an answer by approaching Jinwoo like this.

Jinwoo wondered if Thomas was here to show off his injuries.

Thomas continued. "You could've ended me along with everyone else in my guild."

Thomas and his subordinates had been responsible for kidnapping Jinho in a foreign country and then attacking Hunter Sung when he came to rescue his colleague. Hence why the Hunter Command Center had recognized that Jinwoo had acted in self-defense. They wouldn't have punished him even if he had killed everyone there.

Not that there's any way to actually punish him……

However, Jinwoo had spared everyone apart from Dongsoo Hwang. If Thomas had been in Jinwoo's shoes, he wouldn't have let anyone live. He would've had power as well as the justification to do it. But why had Jinwoo chosen not to?

This question had plagued Thomas's thoughts for the last two days.

"Why……did you let us live?"

Thomas himself had admitted defeat and asked for mercy, but the choice had been in Jinwoo's hands. He'd even spared the guild members who had battled his shadow soldiers. Thomas was curious as to why.

But Jinwoo's answer seemed almost too simple to justify Thomas's mental agonizing over the past few days.

"None of you did anything to deserve death."

While his arrogant attitude had been annoying, Thomas and the Scavenger Guild had shown up at the abandoned factory to rescue Dongsoo, one of their own. Though they had attacked Jinwoo first, they had suffered enough for their actions. That was the conclusion Jinwoo had reached in making the decision to spare their lives.

Thomas nodded at the response. "……I see."

Considering Dongsoo's fate for his crimes, Thomas realized that Jinwoo was being genuine. What a simple and clear reason. Thomas had even more to ponder on, but he felt at peace.

He smiled. "When my arm gets better, I'd like to have a meal with you. If you leave your number with my manager, I'll drop you a line later."

With his cautious invitation extended, Thomas turned. Laura, who was waiting behind him, bowed her head. And with that, Thomas left the banquet hall without looking back. The hunters in his way parted like the Red Sea.

Laura watched as Thomas walked off before turning to Jinwoo. "My boss was expressing his gratitude for sparing his and our guild members' lives."

Jinwoo didn't know how to respond to that. How was he supposed to get any of that from what Thomas had said?

Laura explained. "He may not look it, but he gets embarrassed quite easily."

"O……kay."

If she said so. Jinwoo nodded. More importantly, this exchange meant he didn't have to track Thomas down to assign a shadow soldier to him.

Having given a proper interpretation of her boss's words, Laura then pulled out a small notebook and prepared to write something down.

"If it's no trouble, could you let me know how to contact you? Oh, and……" The blond beauty smiled. "Our guild master would like to give you a token of his appreciation. If you need anything, please let me know."

"Oh, thank you, but no." Jinwoo politely declined her offer.

Laura's smile turned awkward, as if this troubled her. "Our guild master is a very……competitive person. He doesn't like being indebted to anyone. So please, it can be anything."

Jinwoo was about to decline again but sensed it would be rude to do so. The issue was……

……I don't really have anything I need.

Jinwoo had already made quite a lot of money through raids. Ahjin Guild's

profits were well above most large guilds thanks to the sale of the giants' remains alone. Of course, it wasn't comparable to the financial might of the Scavenger Guild, but it was more than enough for them.

I don't think I'd need their help, either……

But just as he was about to decline the offer again, something popped into his head.

Wait a minute, this is the Scavenger Guild……

The guild consisted of the most elite hunters ever gathered. They had cleared countless dungeons, so they must have also acquired a great number of artifacts. Perhaps there was something worthwhile in their inventory.

Jinwoo reluctantly asked, "Maybe a useful dagger……?"

The Demon Monarch's Dagger hadn't worked on several adversaries with incredibly strong defense, so the Scavenger Guild might have something that could help. If it wasn't up to par, then he just wouldn't use it.

"A dagger…… Understood. Thank you, Hunger Sung." Laura finished writing down her notes with a wide smile and then left the banquet hall.

Adam had been tense throughout Thomas's unannounced visit, but he finally exhaled in relief. "Hunter Sung, are you going to meet with the other hunters on the list now?"

"I should."

"Let me help you find them. Our agents are stationed throughout the banquet hall, so we can locate the hunters quickly."

"No, thank you." Jinwoo grinned. "There's no need."

Jinwoo had already deployed some shadow soldiers, and they had found the hunters within the banquet hall. All Jinwoo had to do now was greet each hunter.

Adam was perplexed by this refusal. "Pardon?"

Jinwoo asked him a question instead of answering him. "So why is there one hunter missing? I can't find number six."

“How did you know……?”

Jinwoo shrugged, and Adam nodded as if he understood.

Ah, another trade secret.

Adam explained. “We haven’t been able to reach that hunter over the past few days. The Brazilian government is secretly searching for them, but they haven’t turned up yet.”

Jinwoo nodded. He had placed a shadow on number two, Thomas. Numbers three and six, Christopher Reed and the Brazilian hunter, weren’t present.

That leaves seven people.

Jinwoo turned to Adam. “Let’s get started.”

“Roger.”

Jinwoo walked around the banquet hall and talked to all the hunters on the list. He asked Adam to introduce him, as he wanted to find out more about the hunters he was leaving with his shadows. He started with number one, Zhigang Liu, and finished in order with number ten.

Huh?

Is Hunter Sung trying to network here?

But he’s only talking to hunters who are……

After having seen with whom Jinwoo was choosing to converse, they hoped the Korean man would also approach them.

He’s coming this way……!

Yes, of course I’m next.

The hunters who had been anxiously awaiting Jinwoo lowered their heads in disappointment when he passed them by.

Soon, Jinwoo’s work was done, and he left the banquet hall with his entourage after assigning shadow soldiers to all the hunters on the list.

“Oh……”

Hunter number ten cheered, but others sulked and drank in silence. The next

day, the Hunter Command Center was at a loss as to why alcohol consumption had been so much higher compared to previous years.

* * *

“Tomorrow is the last day, right?”

Assistant Director Connor handed a cup of coffee to Adam, slouching in his chair. Adam sat up immediately and politely accepted the drink.

“Thank you, sir.”

Michael patted Adam on the shoulder and took a seat next to him.

“I started to hyperventilate when I first heard that Goliath and Hunter Sung were fighting…… But I’m glad everything turned out okay thanks to your efforts. Good job.”

“You don’t need to mention it, sir.”

Despite his words, Adam’s face lit up at the praise. His reaction brought a smile to the assistant director’s face.

“So what’s it been like with Hunter Sung?”

Adam pondered the question. “Sir, did you know? Hunter Sung still works out every day.”

“He works out?”

“Yes, I’ve witnessed it with my own eyes. He runs ten kilometers, does a hundred push-ups, and sit-ups and squats as well.”

“What?” Michael’s eyes were wide with wonder.

Jinwoo was the most powerful hunter in the world, yet he still did a daily workout routine. Jinwoo’s physical status was already beyond human, so it wasn’t like a bit of jogging would do much for him. The assistant director couldn’t understand why he’d go through the trouble.

Adam explained. “I think he’s doing it more for the mental discipline.”

“For the mental discipline……”

Adam nodded. Based on Jinwoo’s casual attitude toward advanced technology, his commitment to not skipping a workout, his mysterious ability to

heal an exhausted body and mind, Adam considered Jinwoo the living embodiment of *amazing*.

Michael couldn't agree more. "He…… He truly is a great man."

How great would it be if Jinwoo were an American hunter? Michael couldn't help feeling jealous of Korea.

Huh? The coffee tastes different today.

He usually found this coffee quite flavorful, but today, he couldn't bring himself to drink half of it. He found it to taste quite bitter.

* * *

There was a rumor in Korea that if one wanted to locate the office of the president of the Hunter's Association of Korea, just look for the room with the lights on late at night.

President Go was in his office late again, trying to finish his work. There had been more incidents recently due to the growing number of more powerful magic beasts and awakened beings. It was the president's job to handle these matters. It was also the source of the president's headache.

"Hmm……"

President Go put his paperwork down on his desk and rubbed his tired eyes.

……How strange.

He'd had continuous heart palpitations as of late.

Ba-dump, ba-dump!

It had been a while since he was first diagnosed with heart problems, but something was not right these days.

Is this……the end?

His doctor had told him he'd be dead within six months if he didn't retire. He'd made it one year and then another.

Even if this is the end, I've had it good up to now.

Gunhee laughed in spite of himself.

Ha-ha.

In the past, he would have pushed himself to stick around for just a little while more, but he no longer felt as anxious.

What's changed?

What was the difference between then and now? After some quiet thought, President Go chuckled at the obvious answer.

Thanks to Hunter Jinwoo Sung, Korea now had the power to stop an S-rank-level disaster. The country's status had gone up because of Jinwoo's existence.

Maybe……

Maybe his heart had held out until now so he could meet Jinwoo. A bittersweet smile crossed his face.

"What kind of nonsense am I spouting?" President Go's voice echoed in the empty office.

Speaking of Hunter Sung, isn't he back in Korea tomorrow?

He perked up at the thought of Jinchul debriefing him on everything that had gone on with Jinwoo.

Riiiing, riiiing!

It was his phone.

Who's calling me at this hour?

Had there been a terrible accident somewhere? President Go felt uneasy as he answered the phone.

"Are you busy tonight?"

It was his wife.

"……My dear." He relaxed when he realized she was checking on him because of the late hour.

"Of course not. I'm heading home s—"

The call suddenly cut off with the sound of static.

"……Hello? Hello?"

There was no answer from his wife. What was going on?

President Go happened to glance out the window as he put down his phone.

……!

He was rendered speechless.

Everything he should've seen through the window—buildings, roads, even people—were gone without a trace. The scenery outside had changed to pitch-black darkness in a matter of seconds. Something impossible had happened.

"How in the world……?"

Startled, President Go stood up……and realized someone he had never seen before was sitting on his couch as if they had always been there.

A human……? No, this doesn't feel like a human.

Besides its strange presence, the figure also had a face as pale as a corpse, long white hair, sharp pointy ears, and silvery eyes that shone like gems. It was an ice elf, otherwise known as Ice Slayers.

But President Go hadn't sensed it when it entered the room.

He slowly put the phone down and asked in a low voice, "You…… Who are you?"

9

The Frost Monarch

9

THE FROST MONARCH

Would it be possible to communicate with a magic beast?

President Gunhee Go's eyes were locked on his uninvited guest.

"……"

The creature did not say a word. However, unlike other magic beasts, it also did not show any immediate aggression. It just sat there quietly ignoring the occupant of the room.

In this momentary silence, Gunhee took the time to observe the intruder.

It looks similar to an ice elf.

Ice elves, otherwise known as Ice Slayers, usually appeared in high-rank dungeons. Their unique appearance was well-known among hunters.

The uninvited visitor before Gunhee had the universal characteristics of ice elves but was also different enough to make Gunhee to doubt himself.

It's as if……

If ice elves were like individual trees, this particular creature would be the ancient tree that guarded the forest. Its skin was cracked like bark. Its fingers were tapered. Hair appeared here and there on its chin, and its eyes looked weary. This was what an ice elf would look like if it lived for several thousand years.

Its appearance wasn't the only thing out of the ordinary. Gunhee subconsciously swallowed hard.

I……I can't sense its presence.

Although the interloper had entered the room and sat down on the couch, Gunhee hadn't noticed until he set his eyes on it. The hunter would have noticed any normal magic beast straightaway.

……I cannot handle such an adversary.

Having quickly arrived at this conclusion, he quietly turned over the cell phone on his desk and peeked down at the screen.

The magic beast moved to look at him. "This place has been completely isolated from the outside world."

The cell phone had no signal, just as the beast had said. Gunhee put it down.

"Am I dreaming or something?"

Not only had this magic beast stolen into the headquarters of the Hunter's Association located in the middle of the bustling city of Seoul, but it had addressed Gunhee in Korean. How could this be anything but a dream?

"Argh!" A sharp flash of pain made him grab his left shoulder.

This happened as soon as the magic beast pointed at him. Gunhee carefully removed his hand to reveal what looked like a knife-inflicted laceration. Strangely, despite his flesh being torn, there was no blood. The wound was covered in frost, as if it had been frozen over.

How……?!

Gunhee stared at his injury, then looked up. The serene magic beast hadn't moved from its spot.

"Did you dream up that pain as well?"

President Go nodded firmly. "I understand that this is real. So I'll ask you again. Who are you?"

"I shouldn't have expected a mere human to recognize me."

"A mere human……?"

The magic beast slowly stood up, and the furniture from the couch to the table to everything else in the room slammed into the wall.

Wham!

Oh my God……

Gunhee's eyes widened. A cold air slowly crept into the office.

"I don't mess around with weaklings. Show yourself, Fragment of Luminosity."

No one had ever dared to call President Gunhee Go a weakling, but he couldn't refute this creature. The magic beast possessed great power, and each time it opened its mouth, its voice shook the room like a thunder.

"Now!"

This magic beast was on another level. Gunhee's extraordinary perception gauged the power gap between him and his opponent, and his forehead broke out in a cold sweat.

"Are you concerned about damaging your vessel? But this vessel will expire soon in any regard."

But if it was hiding because it was scared… The magic beast raised its palms and aimed them at Gunhee. Cold wind gathered around its hands.

"I suppose there is no use continuing this conversation."

"……?" Gunhee had no idea what his opponent was talking about.

The cold air shot out from one of the magic beast's hands.

Boom!

The blast swept where Gunhee stood and covered the room in a white fog. It was so thick, there was zero visibility.

Two lights emerged from the thick shroud. They were a pair of golden eyes.

The magic beast smiled at the sight and sent another cold blast.

"Hmph!" President Go swung his arm and deflected the torrent into a wall.

Boom!

The wall crumbled to show an endless black void.

As the fog slowly lifted, President Go was fully revealed. A powerful golden aura surrounded his entire body.

"You've confined us in between dimensions. Impressive." Gunhee's voice was

completely unrecognizable.

The magic beast spoke. “Finally…… Finally, we meet, O bright Fragment of Luminosity. I’ve searched a long time for you. Who knew you’d be stuck in a broken vessel, unable to use your power.”

Despite sounding thrilled, its facial expression hadn’t changed this whole time. It continued with the same frozen look on its face. “We’ve located all seven of you. Two of the Fragments have already been destroyed.”

Gunhee was stunned. Not only had he been found, but two of his comrades had lost their vessels. The Rulers hadn’t expected this kind of counterattack.

“That face.” The magic beast smiled. “I’ve always wanted to see panic on that arrogant face of yours. Now I can crush your vessel with no regrets.”

“You can try, Frost Monarch!” Gunhee roared.

The golden aura covering his body intensified until light emanated from his body. He was the brightest beacon illuminating the dark.

Still, even after this display, a mocking smile lingered on the Frost Monarch’s face.

“Are you going to fight me? How futile.”

White light then emitted from the Monarch’s eyes, and frost began to creep up from underneath its feet. Just as Gunhee’s body was covered in light, a chill wrapped itself around the Monarch.

The Frost Monarch bared its teeth. “You’ve only borrowed that human’s body, while I’ve taken over this form completely. Do you really think you stand a chance?”

The Monarch had let its guard down. Gunhee seized this rare opportunity and immediately lunged to get ahold of it, but the Monarch reacted quickly.

Boom!

The entanglement of hot and cold energy caused a tremendous explosion.

Krakoom! Boom! Kaboom!

As the fight progressed, Gunhee’s attacks slowed significantly, and his injuries

increased proportionately. With each labored movement, he exhaled a cold white breath.

“Haah……” In this extreme chill, this frail body could only last about two minutes.

As the Monarch had proclaimed, the result of the conflict was a foregone conclusion. Gunhee’s body had reached its limit. He had consumed more mana than was possible, and his eyes were as red as the blood trickling from his mouth. His efforts proved meaningless.

Shhhk!

A sharp spear of ice pierced Gunhee in the chest and emerged from his back.

“Ackkk!” Gunhee coughed up blood.

The Frost Monarch had delivered a fatal blow by producing ice from its fingertips. It sucked its teeth in pity.

“Is that all your vessel can handle, Fragment of Luminosity? How pathetic.”

Panting, Gunhee lowered his head. The Frost Monarch gazed down at him.

“How long do you think you’ll need to find a new vessel? A year? Two? But our army has already arrived.”

Everything in the world would be gone before the Rulers’ soldiers could arrive.

“It was your mistake to try to protect the citizens of this world. Did you consider us inconsequential and forget about us?” The Frost Monarch gave a victorious grin. “Well then……”

For its finale, the Monarch raised its other hand. Cold energy began forming as the creature readied the final attack meant to end the life of the human vessel the Ruler had been occupying.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!” Gunhee laughed with his bloody mouth.

The Monarch stayed its hand. “……?”

Breathless, Gunhee glared at the Monarch. “Did you……think I picked a meaningless fight with you?” His left hand tightly grabbed the Monarch by the

wrist. “Just as we weren’t aware of your plan, we have a contingency you know nothing about.”

“……A contingency?” The Monarch’s eyes widened at Gunhee’s confidence.

Was he bluffing? No, Gunhee looked too resolute.

Just then, the Monarch quickly jerked its head to the side.

……!

In that instant, an immense blast of magic power brushed past his face, so intense that it burned Gunhee’s right arm. It hit the wall that separated the dimensions and caused an explosion.

Kaboom!

The entire room shook. What would’ve happened if the Monarch had been hit by the blast?

……That was close.

Fortunately for the Monarch, it saw the move coming and was had been able to dodge the powerful attack. It laughed. Gunhee had probably spent all his power with that attack.

“So was that your secret weapon?” It smiled mockingly.

But Gunhee returned the smile. “That’s right.”

The grin on Gunhee’s face, pale from blood loss, made the Monarch uneasy. Why was it getting chills when victory had been claimed? It didn’t have long to wonder.

Craaack!

……?

The Monarch turned to see the barrier it had erected splintering from the mana blast.

Is this what he was trying to do?

But this was a futile effort, no?

“Tearing down the wall between dimensions changes nothing.”

But the spirit of the Ruler within the old man's body smirked. "Do you…… really think so?"

Craaash!

The barrier completely shattered, and the world reverted to its original appearance. The lights from buildings, the cars on the streets below, the president's office—it was all back to normal. As soon as order was restored, Gunhee unleashed the last of his energy and cried out to the floor.

"Now!"

Beneath his feet, a shadow split from Gunhee's, transforming into the shape of an ant. It evaded the Monarch and leaped screaming out the window.

Skraaaaah!

The Monarch stared after it, confused as to where this denizen of chaos had come from. But it was a single ant, a mere foot soldier of the insect king. Still, the Monarch could not take his eyes off the shadow as it receded farther and farther away.

Wait!

The Monarch's eyes widened. It should've realized earlier. The Ruler had been conserving his energy, even at the cost of his own vessel, so he had enough power to break the barrier for a reason.

No!

The Frost Monarch looked aghast as it realized the ant's true identity.

Whoosh!

The confounded creature cast Gunhee aside and bounded after the runaway ant. Cold air spun around its hand to form a sharp ice sickle. In an instant, it was within striking distance of the foot soldier, but before it could land a blow, someone grabbed the hand brandishing the sickle in a death grip. Before the Monarch could react, it had been seized by the throat.

"Urk!" The Monarch's heart sank when it saw the adversary who now appeared where the ant had just been. "You…… But why?"

Jinwoo clenched the Frost Monarch's neck tightly so it couldn't escape. He stared at the creature, puzzled.

"An ice elf?"

Jinwoo had a bone to pick with ice elves. He had encountered them within the red gate but had failed to extract the shadow of Barca, the boss. He'd been left with only its dagger to remember it by.

Just when I was getting over that……

Jinwoo tightened his grip on the magic beast's throat and wrist.

Crack!

"Argh!"

But what was a high-rank magic beast doing here outside a gate? Jinwoo had exchanged places with his shadow soldier in midair, so he was using Ruler's Authority to hover about seven or eight stories aloft.

He interrogated the beast. "What are you?"

Its pointy ears and silvery eyes gave the appearance of an Ice Slayer, but there was something ancient about it. Plus……

"Graaah!" The magic beast gritted its teeth and shook itself free of Jinwoo's grasp.

……!

What an incredible show of strength! Jinwoo had no time to be shocked as cold energy gathered within the magic beast's mouth. The image of the Demon King Balan spitting lightning popped into his head, so Jinwoo instinctively bent his upper body to the side.

Hwaaaah!

A blast of frozen air shot past Jinwoo, narrowly missing him. Seeing this display of powerful magic, Jinwoo quickly put some distance between them.

……

Jinwoo observed the Frost Monarch as it dusted ice off its shoulder. This was no ordinary magic beast. His perception warned him that this opponent was

stronger than anyone he had ever fought.

However, Jinwoo wasn't the only one caught off guard.

"How did you……?" The Monarch urgently looked within Jinwoo's shadow and was unable to hide its shock at the number of soldiers found there. "You have amassed such an army! Why haven't we heard from you?"

When Jinwoo didn't say anything, the Monarch looked into Jinwoo's eyes and soon let out a plaintive cry.

"I see…… So you're the contingency."

What was this magic beast going on about? While he was dying to understand what the creature meant, Jinwoo didn't have the time for a Q&A session. If the hunter let his guard down even for a split second, his enemy's blade would come at him, and that would be a wound he wouldn't be able to shrug off. His shoulder, which had been frozen for only a moment, was still throbbing.

As he quickly inspected his shoulder, he quietly summoned the Demon Monarch's Daggers from his inventory. He held one in each hand.

Is it a mage type?

Considering how it had struggled to break free of Jinwoo's grip, it looked like its strength and defensive power were lower than its magic power. Jinwoo was okay with that. From his numerous experiences fighting magic beasts, mage-type enemies were the easiest to handle. One hit was usually all it took.

Even if they had the same level of magic power, Jinwoo simply needed to avoid its magic spells to eke out an advantage. And the Frost Monarch could tell from the hostile energy emanating from Jinwoo that an attack without a plan would be inadvisable.

After briefly agonizing over its next move, the Frost Monarch reached a decision. "……We are done here. I'm not interested in a fight to the death."

"What?" Jinwoo frowned. He had no intention of letting the magic beast off, so what did it mean that they were "done"?

His opponent possessed an incredible amount of magic power. Jinwoo couldn't even imagine how many experience points he'd gain from defeating it.

He might level up close to ten times like he had after killing the King of Giants.

……Wait a minute.

He had a sudden realization regarding the magic beast's identity.

Could it be……?

The Monarch pointed to a broken window at the Hunter's Association HQ. "Aren't you here to save the human back there?"

Jinwoo had rushed over because the ant he had assigned to President Go had sounded an alarm. Jinwoo's gaze shifted toward where the Monarch was pointing and spotted the prone figure of President Go.

……!

President Go was unconscious and covered in blood. He looked like he was on the brink of death.

"Choose." The Monarch materialized a large, sharp ice spear. "Fight me or save him."

With that, it launched the spear at President Go.

Jinwoo's eyes went wide. Time moved slowly around him as his perception sharpened to the extreme. The ice spear slowly but surely flew toward the president.

Ruler's Authority!

He attempted to stop the spear telekinetically, but the magic power of the weapon repelled the effort. Enraged, Jinwoo glared back at the Frost Monarch, who awaited his decision.

Jinwoo bit his bottom lip hard before dashing to President Go's body.

Hwwwooom!

A powerful gust of wind erupted from where Jinwoo had been floating. He appeared by President Go's side right before the killing blow was struck, and he knocked the spear off its trajectory.

Kriiiiik!

The tip penetrated the floor, and cold air began freezing the entire room.

Krik, craaack!

In an instant, the extreme temperature turned the floor of the president's office into solid ice.

Yikes!

Jinwoo picked up President Go and floated them both in the air to escape the spreading ice. He came back down once the frigid process stopped.

When he looked through the window, he saw the magic beast dashing toward a small gate. Angered by these dirty tricks, Jinwoo summoned Barca's Dagger from inventory and threw it at the Monarch.

Dagger Barrage!

Shhhk!

The blade flew straight into the Monarch's shoulder.

"Argh!" The Frost Monarch glared at the dagger lodged in its shoulder and then at Jinwoo. It gnashed its teeth before vanishing into the gate.

As the portal slowly shrank, Jinwoo gave up on pursuing the magic beast. Besides, President Go was in too bad a shape for him to attempt to give chase.

"Ughhh…" President Go moaned in pain.

Jinwoo pressed his lips together as he watched the old man struggle to stay alive.

He's too far gone for a healing potion.

He had one other method to try.

Jinwoo bellowed, "Beru!"

Jinwoo could sense a familiar presence speedily flying toward him from the distance.

Krakoom!

Beru crashed through several walls before arriving to kneel before Jinwoo. "You called, my liege."

Jinwoo carefully laid President Go down on the floor and stepped back. The elderly man had lost a lot of blood, and Jinwoo's hands were stained with it from holding him for a short time. Jinwoo somberly watched the blood drip from his fingers.

Beru applied all his magic power toward healing President Go as his master wished. A warm energy enshrouded the president.

Woooom……

But to the ant's surprise, his patient's complexion remained pale.

"Sire……" He was afraid to look at his master. "My magic……isn't working. I cannot heal him."

"What?"

Beru's hands trembled as he kept working, demonstrating that he was telling the truth. Jinwoo sensed that his soldier was consuming a great amount of magic power. If this continued, Beru would collapse, too.

Jinwoo stopped the ant and checked President Go's condition. Even with Beru's devoted effort, the old man's presence had weakened. Jinwoo didn't know what had caused the hole in President Go's chest, but it couldn't be treated even if he poured a whole bottle of the best healing potion into it.

Damn it!

Jinwoo's breathing quickened as he thought about how President Go had done so much for him. In desperation, he pulled out the Elixir of Life. But someone grabbed his wrist.

"That's……enough." The president struggled to open his eyes.

"President Go?"

Gunhee tried to breathe as if his next breath might be his last. He looked up at Jinwoo and Beru.

"……You came. Thank you." A smile spread across his face.

"Please hang on a little longer. I'll bring you to the hospital."

Despite the urgency in Jinwoo's voice, Gunhee shook his head.

“It’s a waste of time…… Healing magic can’t reverse what the attack did.”

“President Go!” Jinwoo was upset with him for talking that way, but he paused as the president’s trembling hand clasped his own.

“Listen carefully!” Gunhee opened his eyes wide like a fire flaring up just before it died out. “I have seen the will of the Great Existence. Their plans, their enemies as well as ours, and what we need to do……”

Blood filled his mouth.

“I’m so glad that we have you…… Who knew you possessed that kind of power……? Thank God……”

Gunhee began tearing up as he looked at Jinwoo. He held the young hunter’s hand in both of his as he continued in a shaky voice.

“The gates and dungeons weren’t for them. They chose those to protect us……”

Gunhee coughed out a clot of dark-red blood. Jinwoo quickly tried to use the Elixir of Life, but President Go shook his head. He knew how bad his condition was better than anyone.

“Someday……you’ll have to make a choice. When that time comes, please…… please stay on the side of humans.”

The pain in Gunhee’s voice broke Jinwoo’s heart, but all he could do was quietly listen and do as the president requested.

“I wanted to……fight alongside youngsters like you, but……with this body, that was never possible.”

Gunhee was sharing this desire for the first time in his life. Some had accused him of founding the association for financial gain. Others insulted him by calling him a crazy old man mad for political power. However, what angered him most was not being able to use the great power he had received. Gunhee had founded the association with his own money in search of a place to use his power, and he had made a place for himself where he could stay close to hunters and advocate for them.

“Still……I have no regrets. I leave the future in the hands of young people like

you.”

President Go’s hand released Jinwoo’s and hit the floor. He shifted his gaze from Jinwoo to the ceiling of his office. Maybe it was because of his tears, but the normally dim ceiling lights looked particularly bright, so he blinked.

“I’m so relieved…… Thank you, thank you……”

With that, President Go said no more. Upon confirming that the president was no longer breathing, Jinwoo gently shut Gunhee’s eyes.

President Go had never looked more peaceful than when he uttered those words of thanks.

Jinwoo raised his head.

Drip, drip, drip!

The sky had been cloudy all morning, and the raindrops finally began falling outside the broken window.

* * *

The next day, the same set of breaking news graced the front page of every newspaper.

First, the great Brazilian hunter Jonas had been found dead near a river.

Second, the president of the Hunter’s Association of Korea had died of a gaping hole in his chest.

Last, Jinwoo Sung had returned to Korea.

10
Complicated Thoughts

10

COMPLICATED THOUGHTS

Christopher Reed. Jonas. Gunhee Go.

The world was plunged into chaos as the media announced the deaths of these legendary hunters one after another. Who would be able to defeat whoever had taken down these apex hunters?

The mainstream media across the planet reported on the legends' deaths. The Hunter Command Center of the US released an official statement on the situation, indicating that they were working in cooperation with guilds internationally to try and apprehend those responsible. Understandably, this did little to settle people's nerves. The defensive walls that had protected everyone from the threat of magic beasts had been torn down.

Amid the chatter of the media and the hunter community, the Hunter's Association of Korea released some video footage from the security camera in President Go's office.

"Oh my God!"

"Oh!"

People couldn't contain their horror.

The footage showed two men: President Go and another man who stabbed the president in the chest with something sharp. It was easy to tell that the second man wasn't human.

An ice elf!

A magic beast that belonged in a dungeon killing a top hunter had been clearly captured on video. A close-up of the monster's face spread throughout

the Internet.

The impact of the footage was staggering. Not only could hunters hunt magic beasts, but they could also be hunted. A wave of terror hit the general population. Hunters had protected them, but who could protect the hunters?

To complicate matters, people started arguing that hunters should not be permitted to leave their own country, since President Go had been murdered while Jinwoo was away from Korea. That shifted the focus back onto Jinwoo during this chaotic time. It was public knowledge that Jinwoo and President Go got along, so people were curious about Jinwoo's reaction. But Jinwoo said nothing.

A few days passed, and the investigation into the cause of President Go's death was completed. A day before his funeral, Jinwoo quietly visited the Hunter's Association.

* * *

Director Jinchul Woo looked exhausted as he entered the waiting room. "Sorry, Hunter Sung. I've been all over the place these past few days……"

He fidgeted with his messy stubble as he apologized to Jinwoo. The day they returned from the US, the shocking news had sent Director Woo rushing straight to the Hunter's Association as soon as they landed at Incheon Airport. That had been three days ago.

Before he got to the reason he was there, Jinwoo had a question for Jinchul. "Why did you……withhold some of the footage from the security camera?"

The Hunter's Association had shared only up to the close-up of the Frost Monarch's face. They didn't release the part showing Jinwoo or Beru entering the president's office.

Scratching his head as he responded, Jinchul sounded despondent. "The safety of hunters is the association's number one priority. We decided that it is not our place to reveal the skills you chose to keep hidden."

Skills were like cards that hunters held close to their chests. Showing off one's skills would be like revealing one's whole hand. Naturally, the higher the hunter's rank, the greater the effort to keep one's skills secret, as it could prove

advantageous during unexpected encounters.

Jinwoo possessed a teleportation skill that allowed him to travel from the US to the Hunter's Association building instantly. The Hunter's Association had decided they couldn't put this skill on display to the world without Jinwoo's consent.

"If President Go were alive, he would've made the same decision."

No one respected or patterned themselves after President Go more than Jinchul Woo. His eyes turned red as he spoke about his late mentor.

"No wonder you looked so grave when we boarded the plane that day."

Jinwoo confirmed Jinchul's suspicion. Jinchul had wondered as to the cause of Jinwoo's strange mood, but it had been easy to surmise once he watched the video footage.

"Was the magic beast too powerful for even you to stop?"

Jinwoo shook his head. "When I arrived, President Go was already……"

Seeing the somber look on Jinwoo's face, Jinchul lowered his head. "I'm sorry…… I'm sure you're mourning him, too, but in my frustration……"

Jinchul knew better than anyone that Jinwoo was not responsible for President Go's death, and the hunter's attempts to reassure him that he didn't take it personally made the director feel even guiltier.

"I still can't believe it." Jinchul fixed his eyes on the floor. "President Go told me to hurry back because he wanted to hear everything that happened in the US. So why did he have to……?"

Jinchul couldn't finish his sentence. Jinwoo patiently waited for him to continue.

"What did……President Go say? Before he passed?"

"He said he was relieved."

"What?" Jinchul looked up in surprise.

"He said he was relieved that there were young people like me to take care of the future……"

“Oh.”

The thought of President Go worrying about everyone else’s future during his final moments brought tears to Jinchul’s eyes again. He wiped his eyes and nodded.

“Thank you for being with President Go at the end.”

The peaceful look on his face showed that the old man had to have been sincere about being relieved. Jinchul was genuinely thankful.

“……” Jinwoo quietly listened to Jinchul. His thoughts had been a jumbled mess over the past few days, so it felt like his head was clearing thanks to Jinchul.

“I’m going to kill him with my own hands.”

“Huh?”

Jinwoo coldly declared, “I’m going to kill the magic beast who took President Go’s life, whatever it takes.”

This wasn’t just for President Go but also a warning to the creatures threatening Jinwoo.

Jinchul swallowed hard. Although the murderous aura coming from the hunter wasn’t directed toward him, he found it hard to breathe. Jinwoo’s murderous rage pressed down on Jinchul’s shoulders like a cold, hard weight.

Jinwoo dialed it down after seeing Jinchul’s face grow pale.

“So please save your thanks for later.”

“Oh……” Jinchul nodded and tried to calm his racing heart. “Understood.”

He then realized he didn’t know why Jinwoo was here in the first place. A hunter like Jinwoo likely wasn’t here simply to find out why the rest of the video footage hadn’t been revealed to the public.

“Oh dear…… Now that I think about it, I haven’t asked why you’ve come.”

Jinwoo made a request for something he’d decided on after a few days of agonizing debate. “Do you think you can arrange a press conference for me?”

* * *

The venue for the press conference was mobbed by reporters. Jinwoo had been a newsworthy hunter for some time now. This was his first press conference, so no reporter wanted to miss the event. The loud chatter died down as Jinwoo appeared. All eyes were focused on him as Jinwoo began to speak.

“A group of highly intelligent magic beasts is targeting the top hunters. These magic beasts are stronger than any hunter and will use any means necessary to get to their targets.”

A group of magic beasts? Was more than one magic beast responsible for killing President Go? The reporters were stunned by the revelation.

But Jinwoo’s information regarding the nine Monarchs and the coming war between them and the Rulers had come from the King of Giants, the Monarch of the Beginning. The Monarchs’ first targets had been the hunters borrowing the Rulers’ powers. Three of them were already dead, and no one knew how many more they were after.

Jinwoo had placed shadows with the hunters on the Hunter Command Center’s radar, but there was no way he could keep an eye on every single hunter out there. Victims could turn up in unexpected places, just like President Go. This impromptu press conference was meant to send a warning across the globe to possible targets of the magic beasts.

“Before attacking, these beasts use magic to trap their intended target between dimensions.”

This revelation was huge. And it was something Jinwoo could share only because he had met a Monarch in person.

“If you think you might be one of these targets, please stick close to colleagues who can help protect you. But……”

But? Jinwoo revealed the ultimate reason for the press conference.

“……But if you don’t have anyone who can help you, I can be reached through the Hunter’s Association of Korea.”

Ohhh!

The reporters let out sounds of admiration. Jinwoo was the man who had defeated Thomas Andre, one of the best hunters in the world. His display of confidence made it seem as if the magic beasts were not a threat to him and relieved some of their worries.

Jinwoo was also looking to kill two birds with one stone.

I need to set traps using the hunters who are potential targets.

That way he could track the Monarchs' movements in case they targeted other retired hunters like President Go. At least one magic beast was sure to fall into his trap.

As Jinwoo wrapped up the press conference, he was inundated with questions.

"Question from the *Daily News*! Where did you get the information about the group of magic beasts, Hunter Sung?"

"I've encountered them in the past."

Twice, in fact, the first time being the King of Giants in Japan and the second being the Frost Monarch in Korea.

Shocked, the reporters scribbled down what Jinwoo had said.

"So you came away from these encounters unscathed?"

Jinwoo's eyes gleamed. "Yes."

Jinwoo Sung had survived encounters with those magic beasts! This was a huge scoop, so the reporters rushed to take pictures.

Ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak, ka-shak!

A reporter sitting farther back from the front of the press pool raised his hand. It was Mr. Kim, the reporter who had followed Jinchul to the double dungeon and wrote about the sacrifice of the hunters there. Jinwoo shifted his gaze to him.

Mr. Kim calmly lowered his hand and posed his question with a clear voice. "What will you do if you encounter the magic beast who killed President Go?"

Jinwoo searched Mr. Kim's furious and devastated expression before turning

off the mic.

"……That's all for now."

With that, Jinwoo stepped off the stage. As he watched the hunter walk away, Mr. Kim felt as if he'd heard Jinwoo's answer even without the hunter verbalizing it.

* * *

"Sir."

"Sir!"

The two security guards were surprised to see Thomas. He gestured for them to stay seated.

Beep.

Thomas placed his thumb on the fingerprint scanner, and the automated door quietly opened for him. Thomas and Laura entered the storage room located in the basement of the Scavenger Guild headquarters.

The two A-rank security guards were among the few people who had access to the storage room. If anything happened, there was a direct line to the penthouse where Thomas worked.

Thomas strode to the innermost part of the chamber.

"Are you really going to give those to him?"

Beep.

Another fingerprint scanner gave them access to where the items were stored.

"Why? Do you think they're worth too much for the lives of my guild members and me?"

"No, I don't, but……"

"Then do you think he isn't good enough to use them?"

"……"

It would be a waste of time to answer that. Laura's mouth snapped shut as

she realized there was no point arguing with Thomas.

The guild master stood in front of the items he had come to retrieve. Although they weren't his choice of weaponry, his heart stuttered whenever he saw them.

"……They amaze me every time."

Thomas admired them. Laura was still reluctant to give them up.

"There are only two of these in the whole world."

"That's right."

"Which won't change in the future, either."

"You're probably right."

"But you're still giving them away?"

"That's exactly why I'm giving them to him."

Thomas grinned.

Eight years had passed since the weapons were forged, yet the incredible energy they emitted hadn't diminished at all.

"The best weapons for the best hunter. You wouldn't want them to just rot in here, would you?"

As if in response to Thomas, the two daggers in the case gleamed, reflecting the light above.

* * *

A certain gloom permeated the streets.

The first president of the Hunter's Association. Someone had to do it, but no one had stepped forward—no one except Gunhee Go.

When the country needed someone to rally its powerful hunters, President Go had closed his own successful business without hesitation and rolled up his sleeves to build the association. The Hunter's Association of Korea had accomplished many things under his leadership. It both regulated and protected hunters and was also proactive in rewarding hunters who sacrificed their lives by discreetly compensating the families they left behind.

Many of the people who had received help from President Go over the years had gathered at the memorial service to publicly mourn him. Citizens descended on the area until it could no longer hold any more people. They held a candlelit vigil and shared their sorrow.

Networks interrupted their regular programming to highlight President Go and his life's work. Footage of President Go calling out Congressman Junwook Nam played on a huge digital billboard in the middle of city.

"I hope you all think carefully about who exactly will keep you safe when another S-rank gate appears on this land. You may be able to buy an expensive condo worth a million or tens of millions, but you cannot buy a life."

Walk signals changed, but not one pedestrian moved. They couldn't look away from the billboard or their cell phones. Next came a clip of President Go's longtime doctor being interviewed.

"I was beside President Go as he watched the broadcast of Hunter Jinwoo Sung fighting the ants on Jeju Island. He told me he wouldn't regret dying as his greatest wish had come true. Little did I know, we would lose him this way……"

The doctor, whose eyes had been red since before the interview, eventually broke down in tears. It reminded viewers of the time President Go had silently cried with the families of the hunters who had lost their lives during the failed mission to stop the ants on Jeju Island.

President Go had as many critics as he did admirers. However, on this day, everyone paid their respects to him.

Later that night, Jinwoo stood at the top of Daesung Tower, a hundred-story skyscraper, unbothered by the wind.

The bright lights of downtown Seoul caught his eye. A documentary about President Go played on a huge outdoor monitor.

……

Jinwoo scanned the entire city like a hawk searching for prey. Having done this before, his shadows efficiently combed the downtown area. The

information they gathered bombarded his mind, but none of it was relevant. There was no trace of the ancient Ice Slayer anywhere.

This isn't going to work.

Jinwoo knew very well that it would be difficult to capture a magic beast able to use gates to move in between dimensions, so he'd tried to put a shadow on the magic beast right before it escaped. He had failed, though, because the creature didn't have the one thing possessed by everything in existence: a shadow.

Maybe it's because of that astral-body thing.

The King of Giants had told Jinwoo that Monarchs and Rulers were unable to become shadow soldiers because they had astral bodies. If that was why Monarchs didn't have shadows, Jinwoo had lost his best method to track them.

……But that doesn't matter.

The King of Giants had warned Jinwoo that once the other Monarchs learned of him, they would mobilize. They would return sooner or later, and this time, they would be after Jinwoo. Of course, when that time came……

Jinwoo growled. Ever since he survived the double dungeon and acquired the abilities of the system, he had never let an enemy escape. This ice elf had been the first to get away. Regardless of whether they were human or magic beasts, Jinwoo had an excellent track record with taking down his enemies, so he wasn't going to let this creature be the exception.

Wait……

Jinwoo paused as he realized something odd about the enemies he had faced recently. When he thought about it……

Did I receive any notifications from the system when I fought Dongsoo Hwang or Thomas Andre?

In the past, the system had warned Jinwoo through messages or urgent quests whenever there was a threat to his life. Dongsuk Hwang, Taesik Kang, Chul Kim—there had been no exceptions. Not only that, but the system had sent Jinwoo a warning when Ryuji Goto had gone all out during a sparring

match.

But the system never warned me about Dongsoo when he came after me to avenge his brother's death or when Thomas threatened to kill me.

That was strange. Any way Jinwoo sliced it, he couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Jinwoo took out his cell phone to confirm something. Luckily, he had gotten the contact number he needed from the manager. It was one o'clock in the morning in Korea, but it should still have been daytime on the East Coast of the US.

Riiing!

As Jinwoo expected, the man answered after a few rings.

"I didn't think you would contact me first, Mr. Sung."

Thomas sounded surprised.

"There's something I want to ask you."

"Me? Sure, ask away. I'll answer you as honestly as I can."

"That day we fought……"

"……What about it?"

"Were you really aiming to kill me?"

"I thought that was water under the bridge."

Thomas seemed reluctant to relive that day, so Jinwoo assured him he was asking out of curiosity. Thomas had no reason to hide anything.

The American hesitated a little but answered truthfully.

"I can't think straight when I'm mad…… So I really did want to kill you back then."

As Jinwoo had suspected, he really had sensed murderous intent from Thomas during their encounter. However, the system had kept silent. There was no question about it.

Something's changed.

“Mr. Sung?”

Thomas broke the awkward silence that followed his answer by changing the subject.

“Let’s get off this gloomy topic! Why don’t we talk about something awesome I’ve prep—”

Click.

Jinwoo wasn’t in the mood to joke around with Thomas, so he cut him off with a quick farewell and hung up.

Thomas’s response had clarified things. The system no longer reacted to a hostile enemy. This was a huge departure from the beginning, when the system had forced him to confront his attackers.

I can’t take this lightly.

Initially, when Jinwoo had received a notification that the system would stop his heart if he didn’t kill his enemies, he’d had a vague idea as to its purpose. The system was trying to make him act according to its wishes, or so he’d surmised.

But the fact that he no longer received urgent quests signaled that there might have been a change in the system’s intent. With that came more choice for Jinwoo, and he was able to show Thomas some mercy and spare his life.

I couldn’t have done that if there had been an urgent quest.

He was pleased to have more free will, but at the same time, he didn’t know why. Did it have anything to do with how the original wielder of Jinwoo’s power had betrayed the other Monarchs somehow? Or had their plans been uprooted after the architect of the system was killed?

Jinwoo shook his head to stave off all the speculation and theories popping up in his mind.

I need to organize my thoughts.

He needed to set some clear goals now. One would be to kill the ancient Ice Slayer. Another would be to dig up some information about the other Monarchs. It would be great if it targeted him first. But even if the Ice Slayer

went after the other hunters, Jinwoo had set traps. Once the Ice Slayer was caught in his net, Jinwoo could accomplish both goals at once.

The problem was time. Since he didn't know when the Monarchs would appear, he had to prepare himself for battle against formidable enemies. Luckily, he had arranged for somewhere he could steadily gain experience points: Japan.

Unable to restore all the damage done by the giants, Japan had been forced to abandon a lot of land. While Jinwoo was in the US, many dungeon breaks had occurred, and magic beasts had established their own territories. These creatures were the stuff of nightmares to the Japanese people, but to Jinwoo, they were nutritious food. He couldn't help feeling excited at the prospect.

His phone vibrated with an incoming message from Thomas.

Mr. Sung, could you call me again? We still have a lot to discuss……

Just as the ground solidified after rain, it looked as though Thomas wanted a good relationship with Jinwoo now that they'd fought. Of course, Jinwoo welcomed it. He wasn't so socially awkward that he'd reject a hand extended to him.

But this conversation could wait, couldn't it? He liked that Thomas didn't hold any grudges, but it was too late at night for this kind of talk. Jinwoo quickly texted back.

Sure, but later. I have some urgent business to take care of.

A smile appeared on Jinwoo's face after he sent his reply.

This doesn't change anything.

He would steadily increase his level in preparation for the future. It was the same as it ever was.

Good.

Jinwoo felt better than when he'd first set foot at the top of Daesung Tower. Now, as he descended the tower, there was a spring in his step.

* * *

Jinwoo wasn't the only one who was preparing for a fight. The Frost Monarch

had escaped to its hideout and summoned all the Monarchs currently inhabiting this world.

Three men and one woman appeared in its ice cave.

The Frost Monarch spoke before the four royals. “The Shadow Monarch is here.”

It explained to them what had transpired.

“……”

“……”

It was cold enough in the cave to freeze a human’s blood, but it didn’t bother the Monarchs. The real chill in the air came from their mood upon hearing this unwelcome news.

“Didn’t you tell us there were no vessels strong enough to contain his power?”

The King of Wild Dragons was unable to find purchase in this world for the same reason.

But the Frost Monarch shook its head. “I saw him with my own eyes. It was him.”

Two of the Monarchs who had already experienced the Shadow Monarch’s power on Jeju Island agreed.

The Frost Monarch proposed something to the somber group. “He represents a bigger threat than the Fragments of Luminosity. I shall eliminate him. Will you help me?”

But the other Monarchs were unmoved. This opponent was the most powerful king among the nine who ruled the World of Chaos. Fighting him would be suicide, so the other Monarchs erred on the side of caution.

One of them spoke up. “Wouldn’t it be better to wait for the King of Wild Dragons?”

The King of Wild Dragons was the Monarch of Destruction and more than capable of punishing the traitor.

The Frost Monarch bared its fangs. “Despite being outcasts, we each rule an army. How long will we drag our feet waiting for the King of Wild Dragons?”

The dagger that had pierced the Frost Monarch hadn’t been just injured its shoulder. It had dealt a blow to its ego. The Frost Monarch had to repay the Shadow Monarch in kind.

“If we want to eliminate the Shadow Monarch, the best time to strike is while he’s still human. Help me send him back to the Void.”

Despite this display of determination, one of the Monarchs withdrew. “I will not participate in this.”

Remembering the fate of Balan, the King of Demons, who had fought the Shadow Monarch, another Monarch vanished.

“I do not want to end up like the Monarch of Lightning.”

“……Cowards!” The Frost Monarch clicked its tongue.

Only three Monarchs remained.

A hulking figure turned to the Frost Monarch. “Where is the evidence that he’s still human?”

As if awaiting this moment, the Frost Monarch showed off the dagger Jinwoo had thrown. A green substance clung to its surface.

“He applied poison to the dagger.”

It was manticore poison. Although ineffective against Monarchs, it would rot the skin of an ordinary denizen of chaos with a single touch. Jinwoo had applied the poison in advance as a secret weapon. It was a detail-oriented and clever move but wasn’t the Shadow Monarch’s style. It was clear evidence that a human currently controlled the Shadow Monarch.

The Frost Monarch politely asked its two lingering brethren, “Are you with me on this matter?”

The Frost Monarch had power comparable to the still-human Shadow Monarch. But with the combined might of the others, it was sure that it could overpower their enemy. The two Monarchs exchanged glances and considered. Eventually, they agreed.

“I will help you.”

“Let us kill the Shadow Monarch.”

The Frost Monarch resolved to instill true fear in the human who had wounded its shoulder and sneered…

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink