**Chapter 14: Preparation (3)**

~The main street of the eastern sector of Valerus~

The Explorers' Union headquarters was located on the busiest street in the Explorers' District.

"That's a lot of money."

Twenty silver coins for a pass is a lot of money to spend.

I stare at the Union's building, which stands alone amongst the low medieval buildings, rising to rival modern corporate skyscrapers, and head inside.

My destination is the second floor. That's where I'm told they register explorers.

‘I thought I was early.’

I turned my gaze toward the stairs and saw a line of people. I wondered how long the line had to be to spill out onto the stairs.

Apparently, being an explorer is a high-traffic job.

Those with fantasies of the Labyrinth, and those with a bit of ambition, flock to the Labyrinth City from all over the continent.

‘Why would they want to go into that crazy place on their own?’

Sadly, I was not in a position to say that.

After all, I was standing in line to enter the labyrinth myself.

I observed my surroundings and waited for my turn. The dozens of windows looked small in the crowd.

"Haha."

Naturally, the tellers, who were dealing with dozens of people per hour, were being split up in real time.

"Come on, come on, come on."

The teller, who was trying to mechanically ask about business, froze like a broken machine.

He stopped moving, but his eyes rolled quickly, scanning me from helmet to toe.

It's probably not for nothing that his gaze lingered on my abs for an unusually long time.

"I'm here to get my explorer's license."

"⋯Ah, yes, you're here to get your explorer's license, 20 silver coins!"

‘Bye bye. My pretty silver coins.'

I handed the clerk 20 silver coins, feeling like I was handing over my child to someone else.

My hands were shaking. How did I earn this money?

"Here, please fill in your personal details in the circles on this paper."

I felt like he was a bank teller. I wrote down my name and where I live, checked off a few boxes, and signed.

‘Come to think of it, how do I understand the text?’

It's a question I've had since I arrived in this world.

Reading, writing, and even speaking came so naturally to me, like a filter in my brain, but I didn't know how it worked.

"Okay. Please look into the crystal ball here and tell me your name, affiliation, and age."

"Didn't I just write that down on the paperwork?"

"It's mandatory."

"⋯Do I have to take off my helmet as well?"

"The Explorers' Union respects your privacy."

"My name is Balkan⋯no affiliation⋯and I’m twenty-two years old⋯"

After a bit of extra work with a strangely excited staff member, I was handed a wooden identification plaque.

"You are now registered as a junior explorer. If you lose the identification plaque, you will be charged 15 silver coins to replace it."

I could tell at this point how money-crazed the Explorers' Union was.

I hate to say it, but I was now an openly suspicious man in a helmet.

I know there's the whole privacy thing, but wouldn't a criminal be able to register as an explorer and not know?

"Don't worry too much, the Explorers' Alliance building has a special sign on it that prohibits the 'branded' from entering."

"Ah, yes."

I nodded at the employee's words.

The Branded. That was what the Labyrinth City called those who had committed felonies.

In the Labyrinth City's lax policing, where violence and rape were just part of the daily landscape, to be a felon was to be a madman who killed for a living.

"If you're looking for a party member, you can go to the third floor."

I followed the clerk's instructions and headed to the third floor.

Ding!

The door swung open and the explorers inside stared.

The scene on the third floor was similar to the second floor. There were windows and people.

The only difference was that people were sitting at tables instead of standing.

Feeling suspicious of the stares I received, I made my way to the window.

"We're offering party matching to junior explorers who have just registered. Would you agree to be matched with a party?"

It was necessary to get a party member. I knew from past experience that two was better than one and three was better than two in the Labyrinth.

But only if she was with someone I trusted, or if I was holding the leash.

Otherwise, it's just uncomfortable cohabitation.

'If only I'd held her leash properly, I wouldn't have to come here⋯'

It's unavoidable. The dog threw off all the harnesses and shackles and left to find her own happiness.

Life doesn't always work out the way you want it to.

Not every woman in this world has sex in her head.

And the risk of being attacked by a monster due to lack of sleep was far greater than the risk of rape.

‘Take a little risk, prevent a lot more.’

"Yeah. I agree."

I nodded, and shortly after signaled my intention to join a party.

Thump!

"Hey male, do you have any interest in joining our party?"

"Nope. Come join our party. Our party will be more pleasant than that stupid cow's."

"Shut up, non-humans, there's no way a human male would join a non-human's party, not even a weirdo. Look, how about our party? We'll be good to you."

As if waiting for those words, they burst through the table and offered me countless requests.

If the request to join them had been innocent, I would have been happy to accept it, but⋯.

‘I haven't even announced my position yet.’

I never revealed whether I used a sword, an axe, a shield, a spear, or even if I was a mage.

They just looked at my appearance and offered me a party.

It didn't matter if I was a front or back, just that I was a man.

‘They've got their heads full of shit.’

I could tell their attitudes would change as soon as they entered the labyrinth, packed as tight as giblets.

At the same time, a thought flashed through my mind.

'Ah. If I skip these guys, I'll be halfway there.’

I turned to the staff, not paying attention to the parties that had gathered around me.

"These are the guys around me right now. Please weed them out and match me up."

\*\*\*

"Nice helmet, nice to meet you. I am Adolph."

A dwarven priest with a dangerous name. Surprisingly, it's a woman.

"My name is Jermi."

"No."

Spearman Jeremy and archer Anya were fresh-faced boy and girl.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Balkan."

A melee fighter, spearman, archer and a priest.

It’s a pretty good mix, although they're all low-level explorers.

We made the appropriate introductions and got down to business.

"Am I the only one here with labyrinth experience?"

Everyone nodded at the dwarf's words.

I had a history of being trapped in the labyrinth, but I kept that fact hidden. It was before I had an identification badge, and I risked being interrogated about how I ended up in the labyrinth.

If I got caught, I'd be in a lot of trouble.

"This is our first time in the Labyrinth City."

"That's right."

Anya and Jermi were blue-eyed newbies who had just gotten their junior explorer status, just like me.

The only difference between them and me was that they were continent-born and bred and had come to Labyrinth City. I didn't want to know much about them, but TMI (too much information).

- If I weed out all those people, you'll only be left with complete beginners or people who are just trying to get by, are you okay with that?

I was matched with newbies, just like they said. Well, it can't be helped.

I didn't think it would be an easy bus ride to get there.

"It's my first time, too."

"Hmm. I've only been in the labyrinth three times myself, but there's no need to be too nervous. We're all aiming for the first floor, right?"

Everyone nodded. In the Labyrinth, where unpredictability was a daily occurrence, it was always best to play it safe.

'It's a good thing they're vaguely strong, or they'd have gotten cocky and gotten fucked.’

We sat around the table and discussed the goals of the expedition.

"We'll stay for five days. Once in the Labyrinth, we'll advance to the escape portal, then hunt goblins from the safety of the perimeter. Does everyone agree?"

"Yes."

"Good!"

"That's a good answer, then we'll meet again at noon on the day the portal to the Labyrinth opens."

"Why do we have to meet at noon to enter?"

"Well, in the morning, mid- to high-level explorers are rushing down the Labyrinth, killing or avoiding all the monsters as they go, and if we go right after that, we can reach the escape portal relatively safely."

"Oh. That's the way⋯"

I could feel the difference in experience between the first and third time.

I felt the vibe coming from the room and left the place.

The labyrinth would open in two days.

I had a lot to do before then.

\*\*\*

In the eastern section, just off the entrance to the Labyrinth, you'll find a number of weapon shops.

I looked at the huge double-edged ax displayed in the window of the most extravagant of them all, a weapons store that was almost as stylish as a high-end luxury store.

I don't know if it was my mood or the sharpness of the blade but it seemed to glow with blue light.

My gaze lingered on the tassel attached to the end of the axe on display.

Zernier Besil's double-edged axe. Five hundred gold coins.

"Five hundred gold coins."

I came to my senses. Crazy. 500 gold coins? Then what about silver coins...I don't know. Anyway, there are so many.

“It’s not something you can lift.”

A man who appeared to be an employee of the blacksmith shop sneered at me as I stared at the axe, clinging to the glass window.

His suit made him look less like a blacksmith and more like a salesman.

"Is this something you can buy?"

"No. I didn't mean to mock you. Literally, it's something a man destined to be a rug for barbaric women can't even lift."

"Don't say we. It's offensive to be compared to men like you."

"⋯⋯?"

I felt bad and left the luxury weapon shop. I was definitely not scared by 500 gold coins and ran away.

I only had three silver coins left.

That's all I had left after I stocked up on five days' worth of preserved food, extra potions and antidotes.

It took me a month to earn it, but only half a day to spend it.

Anyway, I thought I'd use the extra money to buy some armor.

'The axe and dagger could use a good sharpening, and the helmet is a little unnerving.’

My chinstrap was loose and my helmet had a lot of marks on it from the last battle with the goblins.

If nothing else, a helmet is a must, and I'd like to get a breastplate to protect my hands.

But there were only a few places that sold armor that I could afford.

I descended from the luxury district, where people in full armor strolled by, to an area where I could see no one else in my situation.

"You want me to repair this?"

"Yes. Can I?"

"Well, why not⋯ it'll be cheaper to buy a new one."

"Is that so, and how much will you charge me?"

"Hmmm. At least four silver coins, maybe eight?"

“Why are the prices soaring?”

"That's right."

Churrrrr. Churrrrr.

The weapons shop owner flicked her tongue in an obscene manner and made a gesture of sucking on something.

No wonder the smithy attracts dung flies.

"If you won't pay me, so be it. Find someplace else. Or rummage around in the crates over there."

A weapon that would be considered crap by a smithy that only swatted flies.

I had a bad feeling about this, but it didn't matter. Anything would be better than my current helm, and there was nowhere else to go but down.

I'd already been rejected by six smithies.

As I rummaged through the pile of flawed, cheap armor that hadn't been displayed or cleaned in the store.

"⋯?"

From the depths of a box full of junk, a dazzling light began to emanate.

It resembled an axe I'd seen in a luxury forge.

As if possessed, I cleaned out the weapons in the box and searched for the weapon that emits light.

Finally, I found it.

It was a great helm with a rugged design, clad in a brilliant blue light.