**Chapter 15: Preparation (4)**

"You're going to buy this useless thing?"

"What? What do you mean, "worthless"? Don't you see the brilliant light?"

I couldn't help but be puzzled by the weapons store owner's words.

If it's not some kind of hidden or rare item from a novel, what is it?

"What glow, man, I may not be a dwarf, but I've been working with weapons for over five years now, and I can't even recognize this? This is just an ordinary, no, less than ordinary helm."

The weapons shop owner furrowed her brow in affirmation. Does that really mean I'm mistaken?

I rubbed my eyes, but the helmet was still blue.

However, because of the boss's words, the amount of light seems to have decreased from before⋯

'⋯No, I'm not mistaken, there's something wrong.’

Even if it was just an ordinary helmet, it looked better than the tattered one I was wearing now.

"Three silver coins. No more, no less, just that much."

"Two silver coins. Honestly, it's almost like you're trying to get rid of surplus stock, isn't it? Aren't you being a bit too greedy?"

"I have customers who want the same thing you do, two silver coins and 80 copper coins."

"Two and a half silver coins. I won't pay more than that."

"Hmm, good. We have a deal."

The filthy dung beetle of a shopkeeper doesn't even bat an eyelid.

Still, I rummaged around and found a sturdy-looking helmet. I immediately ducked into a corner and switched helmets.

My field of vision was more restricted and breathing was slightly harder than with my old helmet.

It really does feel like a tin can with eye and breathing holes.

"⋯?"

But then I felt a strange sensation.

I don't know how to describe it, but it felt like my eyes were open even though they were closed. An animalistic extrasensory sense?

It felt like a heightened sensitivity to my surroundings that I had developed while working at Diana's bar.

It wasn't just an illusion. Even though my peripheral vision was more limited, I could clearly feel the movement of the many people passing by on the street.

'⋯This is weird. Is this some kind of enchanted relic? Or an artifact?’

A relic. I think that's what they called the equipment that could be obtained in the Labyrinth with a very rare chance while artifacts are man-made.

I didn't know, but I felt like I could now prepare for and defend against anyone who tried to pucker up or play dirty.

"Is that Balkan? You changed your helmet?"

"Yes. Isn't it kind of cool?"

"Mmm. I see. ⋯But where and how did you get that, and did you get attacked by people or anything? Are you okay? Are you hurt? What the hell happened to you?!"

I arrived at the inn with my new helmet, and for some reason, Deanna's reaction was very different.

She asked me how I was doing in an incredibly worried voice, and then started asking me where I got the helmet.

I thought I had gotten to know her a little bit after living at the inn for a month but this is something I've never seen before.

She had never reacted this way before, and it was strange.

"Diana. I'm fine. Nothing happened."

"⋯You didn't meet any really weird people or anything?"

"Nope. I just bought the helmet at the weapon shop. I only paid two and a half silver coins for it, so it was a good deal, right?"

"If so, I'm glad, but⋯"

"Seriously, by the way, Diana."

"Huh?"

"⋯Please stay away from me."

"⋯⋯Okay."

Diana, realizing she'd been clinging to me, blushed and backed away.

"I'm sorry."

As Diana bent down and apologized to me, I realized a major problem with the helm.

‘Diana’s cleavage cannot be seen because of the steel plate in the center of the field of view…’

I decided to use my old helm, the one I usually wear.

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Time passed quickly, and before I knew it, it was the day the portal to the Labyrinth opened.

It was a day that came only once a week so the explorer's area became extremely busy.

Drrrrrr-

The sound of something being dragged along. The sound of rolling carriages. The sound of people talking.

I wake up to the noise and look out the window to see a long line of people, probably over a hundred strong.

All of them are explorers who have been heading to the Labyrinth since early morning with their luggage.

I've been watching for over a month now, and I'm starting to get used to the scene.

A strange feeling of excitement came over me.

Excitement or fear? It's 50/50, exactly 50/50.

I don't know exactly why I feel this way but one thing is for sure, I'm in the procession now.

This week was the week of the Labyrinth, so Diana was kind enough to give me no tavern work. This allowed me to fully recover my strength.

I wake up slowly, warm up with the usual stretches, and wash my face with water from a bucket.

"The dagger is nicely sheathed. Axe sharpened. Food packs okay. Potions, antidotes, all good. Map of the first floor."

I double-checked the items I'd organized last night to make sure I've got everything.

"Last but not least⋯ helmet. Okay."

I looked in the small mirror in the room and put on the helmet I bought. I finally felt complete.

When I finished getting ready and opened the door, I was greeted by a savory smell.

Naturally, I walked down the stairs and sat down at the table to wait. The bar, right in front of the kitchen, was my usual spot.

After a short wait, a large bowl was placed on the table.

It was a rice bowl-like dish with a mountain of meat on top. Six side dishes and soup were included.

"Is this right? This is the same dish for the same price-"

"Hoohoo!"

"Nothing."

The customer next to me started to complain, but was drowned out by Diana's soundless laughter.

"Isn't it more substantial today?"

"Because the worst part of the Labyrinth is not being able to eat what you want, so chew it up and be careful."

I did, since for the next five days, I'll have to eat only preserved food. It's a terrible future. I savor Diana’s dish as much as I can, eating it slowly.

"Thank you, I'll be right back!"

"Oh, Balkan. Wait a minute."

Diana pulled a small box from under the table and opened it.

"A ⋯watch?"

"It's my old favorite watch. In the Labyrinth, where there is no day and night, one must maintain a regular pattern of life."

Indeed. Once a person's circadian rhythm is disrupted, it is not easily restored.

A disrupted circadian rhythm leads to a decline in physical condition, which leads to lapses and mistakes.

It was something I hadn't thought of when all I wanted to do was fight monsters and eat.

Diana reached out gingerly and placed the watch on my arm.

"Thank you for your advice. Ms. Diana. "

"If you want to repay me, come back safely."

I waved to Diana, who looked worried, and left the inn.

The streets were a little quieter than the morning's explorers' mass migration, and I made my way to the Labyrinth entrance.

"Junior Explorer Balkan. You have been identified, please enter."

The Labyrinth entrance was heavily guarded. It was a busy day and the guards were controlling the perimeter.

It was a miracle I had made it through the gates, I thought to myself.

"Oh. You're here. You're early."

"Yes. When did you get here, Ms. Adolf?"

"I just got here, too. Oh, there's the rest of my friends."

I greeted Adolf, the dwarven priest standing by the portal, and then looked back.

In the distance, a scowling boy and a smooth-faced girl were approaching.

"I apologize, sir. I couldn't sleep because of the tension⋯"

"I couldn't sleep, so I played a game and then went to bed. It helped me sleep well."

"No!"

"Why? I'm right, you lousy little shit."

"⋯⋯"

Is this the level of conversation between a boy and a girl? It's so advanced I can barely keep up.

“If you get distracted in the labyrinth, you’ll be in trouble. Are you okay?”

"Yes. There’s nothing that would interfere with my first exploration."

"Then I don't mind, but you'll have to show some restraint in the labyrinth."

"⋯⋯Yes."

Adolf scolded Jeremy and Anya.

She wasn't wrong. If you let your guard down in the Labyrinth, the party will be destroyed.

"Come on. Hold hands, everyone. Hold on tight. We don't want to fall into the labyrinth separately."

We stood in a line and held hands with each other, the reason for this being simple.

‘If we go one by one, we'll fall in random places.’

Once you cross the portal to the Labyrinth, you'll be dropped at a random location on the first floor.

If a party of four enters the portal one by one, all four will fall into a random area, splitting the party.

However, if you hold hands with each other, you will be treated as one and will be able to go to the same location together instead of splitting up.

We stand so that I, Adolf, and Jeremy are on the far left, and Anya is on the far right.

"Okay. Are you all ready to go?"

"Yes!"

"Good."

I was full of energy, thanks to a hearty breakfast.

My body is refreshed, my head is calm. I don't feel sick. I'm at my best.

‘But I can't let my guard down.’

Despite the game-like elements of the status window, I shouldn't approach it lightly like a game.

In the real world, I only have one life. There are no save and load or extra lives.

I only get one life, and one mistake can bring it crashing down.

This required a level of preparation and vigilance that was almost excessive.

I was as prepared as I could be. I've tensed my mind and set my guard.

Now, we enter the labyrinth.

We cautiously stepped through the portal.

The next thing I knew, I smelled blood.

"Amy."

For a moment, time passed extremely slowly. Feeling strangely alert, I peered through my helmet, scanning my surroundings.

Come on. Calm down. My right hand is still gripped tightly by Adolf.

I rolled my eyes quickly, taking in the situation.

We were transferred over the warm corpse of an explorer who had just engaged and lost against goblins.

The goblins immediately visible are one on the left and two on the right.

As I expanded my range of perception, I caught the sound of small footsteps with my heightened senses wearing the helmet.

Unforgettable footsteps, coming from a place I could never see with my limited vision.

Two to my left, three to my right, eight in all. That's a lot of them.

The ones on the right are far enough away that they pose no immediate danger to me.

The two on the left are the ones that are a danger right now.

The best that can be said for the worst is that the goblins were caught off guard by our sudden appearance.

We need to move quickly. Now is our chance.

When I finished thinking, the situation in the battle hadn't changed a bit.

With everyone panicked and unable to move, the first thing I did was

Zzzzzzzzzz!

Drawing my axe from my waist like lightning as a fountain of blood spurted from the goblin's head.