**Chapter 27: Short Preparation (1)**

"Second floor. Can we break through?"

We discussed our next goal. The topic was the second floor of the labyrinth.

"Second floor⋯!"

"I think that's enough."

Even on the same topic, the reactions were split.

Jeremy is a beginner who has only been in and out of the labyrinth once but Grumpy had been in the labyrinth many times as a slave.

‘No more than the third floor.’

In other words, she had enough sense to get to the second floor.

"When I was rolling like a dog under Deluna, we made it to the third floor with that party, and while we couldn't do the fourth, I think the second floor is doable for the three of us."

Grumpy continued.

"Of course, Deluna's party had a lot of meatshields⋯and the bitch herself was a mage⋯but we're not a bad combination."

An avant-garde warrior, a spearman, an archer, and a guide.

You don't get much more stable than that with three people.

If there's one thing I'd like, it's a cleric, but it's not always easy to find one.

'Priests and mages are few and far between compared to other classes.’

Demand is high, supply is low.

Unless they have a specific purpose, such as hunting slaves like Deluna, priests and wizards don't bother with the first or second level.

A 'proper' priest or wizard, in particular, can only be found in parties on at least the fifth floors.

I suddenly miss Adolph, but I quickly put her out of my mind.

"Do you think I'll be a burden on the second floor⋯?"

Jeremy seemed worried that she would be a burden after struggling on the first floor, but it's not easy for someone with experience buffs to fall behind.

Perhaps with a few more rolls in the labyrinth, her level would be the highest among us.

"There are plenty of goblins on the second floor, too."

"Guess we'll have to go then, bastards⋯"

Jeremy gritted his teeth and patted her backpack as I pressed the seizure button to motivate her.

"⋯If you don't mind me asking, what's in that backpack-"

"Are you curious?"

"Oh, no. Nothing."

For some reason, I was reluctant to ask because I thought it might contain Anya's head.

Anyway, it was decided that our next labyrinthine trek would be to the second floor.

It wasn't an arrogant decision but a well-thought-out one based on a clear understanding of the topic.

"The second floor is like the first floor but with a few more traps."

We're more than capable of dealing with goblins.

"And the second floor trap field is my home."

She's been to the second floor dozens of times.

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After a quick briefing, we agreed to meet up at the Labyrinth this week, and we parted ways.

"But why are you following me?"

I asked, but for some reason, she followed closely behind me.

"What? A slave has to follow her master?"

Grumpy asked with a puzzled look on her face.

The main reason for keeping her as a slave was to protect her from capture and the convenience of giving orders, but apparently in this world, slaves were treated more like property or possessions.

"I paid you, you can get a room at the inn."

"As a slave, I can't even get a decent room on my own⋯"

Grumpy said with a sour face. The look on her face brought back memories.

I was sleeping on the streets until Diana took me in.

"So. Can't we just move in together?"

"Uh. No."

Just as I'm about to feel sympathy for her, she makes a stereotype-shattering comment.

Grumpy was a woman who had strange hair and was a bit slow, but her appearance was fine, or rather, she could be said to be great.

It's one thing to be in a stressful labyrinth, but sleeping outside, alone, in the same room?

I don't have the confidence to make it through the night safely⋯

"⋯Then let's take a hundred steps and sleep in the room next to yours. Wouldn't it be more comfortable than going back and forth?"

"What's the point of going back and forth?"

"Well, you don't know people's business, so it's bound to happen, huh?"

It didn't seem like she was going to give up her opinion easily.

I could have just ordered her to go away, but I didn't want to waste my emotional energy on this.

"⋯Huh. I'll ask the owner of the inn I'm staying at but it might not work."

"Yay!"

Grumpy threw her arms wide in joy and I tugged once on the leash as she bounced around.

The handle of the leash wrapped itself naturally around my hand.

I'd done it so many times that it was second nature. It felt like walking a dog.

We walked through the modest streets and soon came upon a cozy inn on a winter night.

I walked right up to the door and saw Diana clearing tables for the evening's business.

"I'm back, Ms. Diana."

"Ah. Balkan's home."

Tsk-tsk.

The dishcloth slipped from her hand and fell to the floor.

Diana's eyes creaked like unoiled pedals and turned to Grumpy standing next to me.

 Then her gaze traveled to the leash, then to my hand clutching its handle.

Diana's eyes snapped back to me.

"⋯Balkan?"

It was only then that I realized from an objective point of view how this would look to others.

First of all, it's not a normal situation.

"Ah. She's a future party member and slave, her name is Grumpy⋯no, Denshi."

I quickly let go of the leash and excused myself.

Slavery is legal in this world. Just go out in the marketplace right now and you'll see them everywhere.

I'm sure I've done nothing wrong, but when Diana looks at me like that, I feel like I've done something that should really prick my conscience.

[⋯just now, a term of endearment⋯?]

Diana muttered something but it was muffled by something strange.

"I hope you're well, ma'am!"

Grumpy dipped her head in greeting, and Diana's normally wide-eyed smile instantly crumbled.

Her eyes widened slightly, revealing brilliant amber pupils.

"⋯What did you just say?"

Grumpy looked up and smirked.

"⋯Ahhhh, what do you want me to call you, ma'am?"

"⋯⋯"

The smile vanished from Diana’s face. The corners of her mouth, which were always up, stiffened and her squinted eyes were too cold.

"Ugh-"

I tugged urgently on Grumpy’s leash.

No, what's wrong with her, is she crazy?

"I'm sorry, Ms. Diana. She's just not learning, and I'll apologize for her."

I pressed her head and we bowed our heads together.

"She has nowhere else to go, and I happen to be her master, so I was wondering if you had a spare room at the inn, and I'd pay for it, of course."

"Double room, do you have a double room, ma'am? Big fluffy bed. If not, I'll take a twin room."

"Will you please just shut up⋯"

Every time you open your mouth, Diana's expression changes dramatically.

I hadn't seen her like that in the past month.

‘No, it's not just her expression.’

A cold chill emanated from her surroundings, and her normally neatly organized hair stood on end.

"⋯⋯You're funny, kid."

Diana glared at the brat as she said it, though her expression was anything but amused. When she opened her eyes, her mood had completely changed. Honestly, I'm a little nervous.

"It's a shame that we don't have any rooms left."

"⋯Yes, Master. Come to think of it, slaves are considered property anyway, so we can share a room. Why don't we just share a bed?"

"Our inn is single occupancy. Of course, slaves are not allowed."

Nope. There were quite a few rooms with three or four people in them on a cozy winter's night but it looked like it would be single occupancy from now on because Diana said so.

"⋯⋯"

"⋯⋯"

Diana and Grumpy crossed their arms and glared at each other. If this were a cartoon, sparks would be flying from their gazes.

The atmosphere sucked and I could barely breathe.

If there were customers around the table, I would have been sniffling and sniffling.

Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore and left the inn, dragging the dog by her leash.

She was dragged along, arms still crossed, glaring at Diana the whole way.

Only after dragging her down the alleyway of the inn did I catch my breath.

"Hey. What the fuck are doing?"

‘You don't have a status window, you're stupid, yes. I understand. But there's no next.’

"Did you just say she's the innkeeper?"

"Uh. She's like a benefactor to me. So be sure to apologize to her later."

"⋯She?"

I wonder what kind of person Diana looks like in her eyes.

"My lord. I'm not usually the one to say this, but⋯"

Grumpy crossed her arms and considered for a moment, then finally spoke up.

"She's really dangerous. She's a crazed female with a head full of ideas, from contemplation to stature."

It was insane bullshit.

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Grumpy entered another inn a block away and I returned to Diana's inn.

"⋯I'm fine. I don't know how you ended up with such a shitty⋯ No, I don't know how you ended up with such a slave, but to each his own."

"Well, it's nice of you to think so⋯"

"Yeah. Of course. By the way, I'm really fine, so don't worry too much."

I soothed her as I stood next to Diana, who seemed to be quite shocked, and didn't look the least bit okay.

I didn't know what to do or say to comfort her, so I just stayed with her.

"⋯"

Diana didn't say anything, but that alone seemed to make her feel better.

Her face was slowly regaining its original smile.

Apart from that, I was a little curious. How old could she be?

I heard rumors that the stronger one became in the Labyrinth, the more one would defy aging, but I swallowed hard, knowing that asking now would be like crossing an irreversible river.

After killing time, it was time for dinner.

It was time to go from being Balkan the Explorer to Balkan the part-time innkeeper on a cozy winter's night.

As the sun set and the ground creaked beneath his feet, the tavern was flooded with customers.

"Tables six and eight are served!"

"Yes!"

I scrambled around, passing out menus and clearing the hall in a hurry. I couldn't afford to neglect my work when she paid me so much.

By now, the sun was setting and the stars were appearing in the sky.

The moonlight was so bright in a world without streetlights, but I didn't have time to take in the scenery and relax, instead, I had to deal with the raucous laughter of the drinking crowd.

I suddenly realized that Diana's cooking skills were impressive.

With a steady stream of customers coming in this late at night, it's no wonder this tavern is one of the best in Valerus.

No wonder there are so many unusual people who come here.

[G■■■ ■■ Lv.6■]

A woman wearing a mask with a strange design and covered by a cloak.

Other than that, the woman has waist-length blonde hair and lightly tanned skin.

She was one of a mysterious duo that occasionally visited Diana's tavern.

Normally, when one of them came, Diana would appear like a ghost, taking menus, serving, and doing it all herself, but today, perhaps due to the effects of her mental damage, she still showed no sign of coming out of the kitchen.

There were several stoves burning in the kitchen. The food was still a long way off.

Eventually I made my way to the masked woman.

"What would you like to order?"

"The usual."

What's the usual, bitch?

I was stunned for a second, and then the masked woman, who had been talking without looking at me, turned her head slightly to the side.

She still had her head down, so the angle probably only allowed her to see my abdomen and lower half.

"What? It's not Diana? Ah, that makes sense.”

The woman chuckled to herself and slowly looked up at me.

"You're that guy that Diana said she saved."

She paused.

"⋯⋯"

I could feel a strange gaze beneath the mask with no eye holes and no breathing holes thanks to my perception and I could faintly sense the direction of the gaze.

Other people's eyes would have slowly moved down to the body or crotch, but hers were only fixed on the head.

 I touched my face without realizing it.

‘Ah, I was still wearing the helmet.‘

The Great Helm I saved before the Labyrinth.

It was the woman's icy voice that ended the strange confrontation between the masked woman and the helmeted man.

"The helm, did you buy it?"

It was a surprising question but I had no choice but to answer. It was one of the wisest purchases I made in the Labyrinth City.

Not only is it effective, but the design is exactly to my taste, so I'm quite happy with it.

"Yeah. Pretty stylish, right?" I said confidently, making the woman chuckle.

"Kid, you actually know a thing or two, huh?"