**Chapter 28: Short Preparation (2)**

"There's no romance in explorer babies these days."

-Boom!

The masked blonde tanned woman said, slapping her own toned thigh.

The slap was so hard, her palm marks were red on her coppery thighs.

"A sharp and sleek sword? Nice. A nimble and precise spear? That's good too. Rapiers are quite popular as well. I enjoy making those kinds of weapons too. But..."

-Gulp. Gulp.

She ate and drank while wearing a mask with no holes in it.

I stared blankly at that unbelievable phenomenon, then glanced at my level. Seeing that I could not do anything, I just nodded.

"Mmmm! It's delicious. I can't stop coming back for this. ⋯Uh, where was I?"

'Is it dementia?'

The truth is, it was nothing like this.

I was just going to take the order, but she grabbed me at every opportunity to give me a rant.

This is actually the fourth time we've had this conversation. I can already see what she's going to say next.

I glance at the level again. The level is a bully. I have no choice but to shut up and agree.

"They're all efficiency-minded crabs, and no one has a romance in their hearts?"

"Ah. That's right, that's what I was going to say. You're smart enough to know the romance of the⋯Great Helm?"

"⋯⋯"

I'm getting a little dizzy at this point. What kind of a waste is this, after praising my pitching?

"You have eyes that can see through anything."

The woman suddenly clasped her hands together and held them in front of her eyes. As if she were pretending to look through a telescope.

She seemed to be looking straight at me, even though she shouldn't be able to see through her mask.

This is an introduction I've never heard before. Is this the beginning of a new drinking pattern?

I had suspected I had similar abilities, though, regardless of the woman's words.

'For when I first laid eyes on this Great Helm, I saw a brilliant blue glow that not even the arms dealer saw.’

And now a dazzling light, comparable to the Great Helm, radiated from the woman's mask and cloak.

"They are all illusions, the illusion of a name and a cool exterior. Even mid- to high-level explorers who visit workshops and armory shops have a vague idea of what they are, but few have a clear view of their true nature."

"Ah, yes."

I'm not sure what you're talking about. Name value? Appearance? Workshop?

‘A blacksmith…and a pretty successful one at that?’

At least, that's what I inferred from the conversation so far.

"But you're not. You found a treasure hidden in a pile of trash."

With that, she gestured to my face with her hand. Or, more accurately, the helmet I was wearing.

"Well, I'll admit it's a bit, well, crude in its construction. It was my first piece, but still! It hasn't sold in over a decade?!"

-Gulp. Gulp.

The woman gulped down the 82-degree dwarven brew like it was water.

Her esophagus must have been burning, but she continued as if she didn't care.

"Hmph, even after I became truly successful, I still visit the armory I first delivered to every now and then, and it breaks my heart to see the helm lying on the shelf, untouched, and the saddest part is that no one has ever recognized its worth."

The woman spoke as if lamenting her predicament.

"But if I say, 'I made this,' it's a bit⋯ well, it's like I'm asking you to buy it, it's like I'm giving up my pride. Isn't that right, huh?"

"Yes, it's a bit annoying."

"Isn't that right?! You think so?!"

As I continued to listen to the woman's words, my doubts kept piling up. But I summarized the story as best I could.

‘Is she saying that she's upset that her first artwork didn't sell because she's already successful?’

And that piece is the Great Helm I'm writing now?

Is it like a famous artist wanting to be recognized for his work when he was younger?

"Yes, it is. Now that I've found the owner, I don't have any regrets, c'mon, it's finally sold!"

-Gulp. Gulp.

-Kee-hee!

The woman emptied the bottle in a flash and staggered to her feet.

She was so happy that her first creation, the helmet, had finally sold, you could feel it in the air.

"How much is it?"

"Thirty-six silver coins."

Thirty-six silver coins for a meal it's a lot of money, almost two months of my salary.

No wonder she'd just emptied seven bottles of expensive dwarven brew.

As I pondered that, the woman pulled something even more incredible from her bosom, a golden coin, glowing with a brilliant yellow light.

"I don't have any change."

With that, the woman flicked the gold coin.

I flicked it with my callused thumb, and the coin landed on my palm.

"I feel good. Tip the rest. Don't give the rest to Diana."

"Thank you!"

I bowed my head, sincerely. The annoyance and boredom I'd been feeling when dealing with women was gone.

So much for dealing with drunks.

Damn it. For this much, I'd be willing to listen to her talk shit 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

She staggered out of the inn, her hands flailing, and suddenly stopped dead in her tracks against the door.

"And you, what's your name?"

"Balkan."

"Balkan⋯ yes. But you, what's your name?"

"⋯?"

‘Are you sure you don’t have dementia?’

"⋯Balkan."

"Okay. Balkan. You should come to my workshop in about ⋯ two months. You're an explorer who knows how to look at weapons, so I'll make you something."

-Hiccup.

With that, the woman waved her hand and turned away.

"No⋯"

So who are you⋯?

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"⋯You said Zirnier was here?"

"His name is Zirnier?"

I was chatting with Diana as we cleaned up the shop after closing, and when I brought up the story of the masked woman, Diana suddenly raised her eyebrows.

Zirnier. Now that I think about it, I remember.

The splendor and variety of weaponry in the luxury weapon shop, the huge, magnificent double-edged axe that struck a man's heart.

Most of the armor on display there bore the name Zirnier Besil.

"⋯Did she ask you to go to her house once?"

"Not her home, but her workshop."

"⋯With lots of tips?"

"Yeah. I took it once, but it was a lot of money⋯"

Diana closed her eyes and waved her hand.

"No, no. It's yours, and I trust you'll spend it properly. Invest in your future."

There were plenty of crooked bosses out there who pocketed their employees' tips, but Diana was far from one of them.

Suddenly, I had a lot of money in her pocket.

The money the blonde tan woman had given me was 64 silver coins. My total wealth is now about 70 silver coins.

‘⋯I'll have to reinvest it.’

There was no money for luxury or leisure.

The money from Zirnier? I'll invest it in the Labyrinth.

The money from the Labyrinth? Invest it in the Labyrinth. That way, the future will be brighter.

"So. Was this the first time you met Zernier?"

"Yes. I've often seen her at the tavern, but this is the first time we've talked."

"I see⋯ I misunderstood you."

- Did you get attacked by a shirtless, weird-haired guy or something? Were you hurt?

I remembered Diana’s strange concern when I switched helmets.

The Zernier I saw this time wasn't naked, but she did seem a bit weird⋯Was she drunk?

'Wait a minute. So Diana realized that the helmet was Zirnier's, right?’

Even I, who can see through glowing armor, hadn't realized that the Great Helm was Zirnier’s until now.

However, to be able to glance at it and recognize it, doesn't it mean that Diana and Zirnier have been in a relationship for quite some time?

Come to think of it, they had often been seen together before.

'Speaking of which, why is Diana working at the inn here?’

A level 70 innkeeper. Honestly, it's a bit of a horror. It's just a hobby, but she's serious about it.

I suddenly wondered about Diana's past, but I quickly dismissed the thought.

- Everyone has their own reasons.

She didn't ask me about my past, and I couldn't ask her about hers if I was curious first.

"Let me finish cleaning up."

"Okay. I always appreciate it."

And that was the end of the day.

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~The weapon shop line in the explorer zone~

On my way to get my gear, I sneak up on a luxury weapon shop where Zirnier’s armor is displayed.

"This spear was forged by a blacksmith from the depths of the world."

The level of the people inspecting the armor is also very strange.

There were no low-level explorers in sight. The minimum cutoff is mid-level explorer.

‘Two months.’

It's hard not to get excited when I see such a fancy weapon.

Still, I took a deep breath to calm myself.

A good weapon is nothing if you don't know how to use it properly.

For now, at least, it was time to focus on my specs rather than my weapon.

I turned and walked down the aisle to the weapon shop. It's not a fly-in-the-wall weapon shop, but one that has a few beginner explorers.

I rummage around, but I can't find any armor that emits a blue glow like Zirnier’s helmet.

Eventually, I settled on a better quality breastplate for 40 silver coins.

"I'll give you 88 silver coins for a full set of half-armor, if not more."

"How badly do you want to live well, that you can't even invest this much in a future talented explorer?"

"Haha. Bullshit. If you want to bargain, take off your pants and tell me."

The reason I only took the breastplate was simply because it was too expensive.

I decided to be grateful that I could at least protect my torso.

My axe was getting to the point where I couldn't use it anymore, so I bought a new one with a good sharpening, and I got gaiters for the long journey.

After purchasing other lesser potions, antidotes, supplies, and food, I evaporated another 25 silver coins.

It took me less than a day to go from 70 to 5 silver coins.

It's so hard to save money, but it's so easy to spend it.

However it wasn't a waste. It was a necessary investment.

I believe this choice will save my life one day.

Time passed quickly and the day when the portal to the Labyrinth reopens arrived.