**Chapter 58: Taking a short break (3)**

Hendrik, an apprentice at Zirnier’s Workshop, the premier weapons shop in the Labyrinth City, frowned at the beggar in front of him.

An old, shabby, raw-looking Great Helm, wearing a tight black T-shirt like he couldn't even afford to wear clothes that fit his size.

'⋯There's no way there are men's clothes that fit a body like that⋯'

Hendrick's eyes never left the man's body, which was filled with hideous muscles.

It would be more accurate to say that he deliberately avoided it.

The reason was obvious. Inferiority complex.

Every time he saw a body that looked strong at first glance, he felt an instinctive sense of defeat and humiliation as a male.

He's fucking tall. At least two meters.

Hendrik tried a common escape method that many people use.

Instead of seeing the good in others, he rolled his eyes, scanning the man as if trying to find flaws somehow.

Raw skin, scars, calluses, a lack of wealth, and clothing that was obvious from a mile away.

A sleekly designed axe could be seen at his waist, but he was no more than a lowly explorer.

Conclusion. The man in front of him is a low-level explorer.

That made it even more ridiculous.

"What did you just say?"

"I'm here to see Ms. Zirnier."

The helmeted man said confidently. He didn't seem to realize how crazy he sounded.

Several of the explorers who had been sneaking glances at him since he entered the armory also looked at him in disbelief.

"No, you, ha⋯"

Hendrik was at a loss for words.

'We often have guests of this nature. Mostly nobility, snot-nosed professors with distinguished papers, and big money lenders who make the Labyrinth City's commerce crinkle.’

Hundreds of servants and slaves at the snap of a finger, dozens of blacksmiths at the beck and call of a single one.

‘They're all broken.’

By the hammer of Zirnier.

In the workshop of the continent's only maker of relic-quality artifacts, even the most powerful have been reduced to mere guests.

What confidence did this man have to ask to meet with Zirnier, even in such high places?

Hendrik felt a little sorry for the foolish man who didn't even know his own limits.

So, he decided to take matters into his own hands and make him realize his predicament.

"Sir. Please take a look around."

The helmeted man complied. He took a quick look around and then looked back at Hendrik.

"Do you sense anything, sir?"

A glance around the room revealed lavish interiors, refined armor that had reached a state of art, and people gazing admiringly at the armor on display.

All of them are either dignitaries dressed in extravagant luxuries or mid- to high-level explorers with different equipment.

This is because being a mid-level explorer is the minimum requirement to have the means and skill to obtain a Zirnier armor.

However, the man in front of him, even with the best of intentions, was only a low to mid-level explorer.

"I like the armor you're wearing. I want one of those."

"Yes. You see?"

The quality of the armor is different. Look at you. You don't belong here. You're not fit for this place.

He turned it around, but that's what he meant.

"What do you know, I'm just here because Ms. Zirnier asked me to come here."

The man repeated the same words. He didn't understand the meaning behind the words. Perhaps he's not thinking straight.

After a moment of mild irritation at the man's tone, Hendrik sighed inwardly and turned to shoo away the man who didn't fit the weapon shop's description.

"Sir. This is not the place for guests!"

Ugh!

At that moment, a gust of wind mixed with a tremendous amount of heat came from behind Hendrik.

It was a common occurrence. When the door to the Zirnier workshop opened, in the basement of the weapon shop, such an explosion of energy was released.

The overwhelming energy knocked Hendrik off-center and he rolled unceremoniously on the floor.

"Ohhhh. Finally, finally, the Zirnier is coming out!"

"I've been waiting half a year to customize one, this time for sure!"

Everyone's faces lit up with competition.

They had all waited at least half a year to 'ask' Zirnier to customize their armor.

It was up to Zirnier to decide whether or not to make the armor, and there was a good chance the order would be canceled, but her armor was worth the long wait.

Greedy eyes turned to the stairs leading down to the workshop.

Soon, there would be the one they all waited for.

-Tuck! Tuck!

The sharp-eyed observers shook their heads at the light footsteps.

No wonder. It wasn't footsteps at all.

Chirp.

It was an arm, a clunky, mechanical-scented arm, with a hint of the arm's form.

The mechanical arm came up the stairs, palm to the floor, jumping eagerly.

"⋯What is this?"

"Where's Zirnier and what's that?"

The mechanical arm kept jumping, heading somewhere, amidst the questions and attention.

Hendrik gaped, dumbfounded.

The mechanical arm stopped in front of the helmeted man.

It leaped once more, changing the position of its palm and forearm.

-Kirik. Kirik.

A finger snapped, pointing underground.

"You want me to follow you?"

-Kirik.

His thumb and index finger curled into a circle, an okay sign.

"Okay."

It jumped up, grabbed the helmeted man's arm, and started dragging him away.

The man followed the direction of the arm's pull.

Hendrik and the rest of the staff and people in the armory stared at the scene but neither the helmeted man nor the mechanical arm paid them the slightest attention.

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Down a flight of stairs, through a massive door, and past dozens of security measures, I reached Zirnier’s workshop.

-Bang! Bang!

As soon as I entered, I heard the distant sound of iron pounding.

My senses, including my hearing, told me that I had stepped into a place that was completely different from the usual.

I breathed without thinking, but my chest felt strangely tight. I wondered if this was what it felt like to have ripening lungs.

My nostrils, throat, and respiratory tract felt like they were being cooked like dumplings.

I hadn't even walked a few steps before I was drenched in sweat.

It's so hot and humid that my head feels dizzy. I could be dropped in the middle of the desert and still feel cold.

-Chirp, chirp, chirp.

The arm kept moving, guiding me. Where are we going, it's getting hotter by the minute.

-Ka-ang!

But the sound of the iron pounding got closer and closer. It's hot, but I hang in there.

I pushed forward through the heat and steam.

After about ten minutes of walking, I reached the center of the workshop.

'Somehow, the basement is frighteningly large.’

The first thing I saw was an enormous furnace, almost the size of a four-story building.

-Boom!

In the center of the furnace, in the hottest part, where the red molten iron was flowing, a woman was swinging a hammer.

Her tight blonde hair bounced with each blow, and her breasts, wrapped tightly in white bandages, jiggled.

Diana, Idelbert, Zirnier, and the other top explorers all had poor fashion sense.

My mouth dropped open when I saw Idelbert's leotard, but even she hid a great deal of fashion under her cloak.

The sparks splattered against his tanned skin, but Zirnier continued hammering as if he felt no pain.

-Ka-ang!

"Whoosh!"

Zirnier let out a harsh breath as she slammed the hammer against the gleaming steel on the anvil.

-Pow, pow, pow.

The mechanical hand that held my arm snapped off.

I grabbed the dwarven ale and towel lying around and brought them to Zirnier.

"Well done Number One."

-Squeak, squeak, squeak.

The mechanical arm she called Number One waved happily at Zirnier’s praise.

Zirnier, wearing a mask that covered his entire face, wiped the sweat from his face and gulped down alcohol.

The mask was more curious than the way she gulped down the alcohol like it was water. How is that possible when there's no mouth hole or anything?

Zirnier sat on the anvil, a white towel roughly wrapped around her neck, and looked at me.

I couldn't see her face behind the mask, but I could tell by the way she tilted her head that she was puzzled.

Finally, Zirnier’s mouth opened.

"What the hell. Who are you?"

"⋯?"

⋯After that last time, I seriously suspect she has dementia.

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"Ah. You're the one, hiya. It's been months and you've grown so much, I almost didn't recognize you!"

"Yeah."

-Gulp. Gulp.

Zirnier looked at me, wiping the corner of her mouth, probably under her mask⋯.

"Hiccup. Hmph. Actually, I was just messing with you, you don't think I'd recognize the guy who bought my first piece?"

"⋯⋯"

I honestly thought she didn't recognize me.

I remembered the last time I was held captive for hours in this woman's endless drinking hell.

I wondered if her memory had deteriorated from drinking such strong alcohol like water while working.

If I let it out of my mouth, there would be no turning back, I thought.

"I thought you completely forgot, because you were saying such strange things."

"Yeah, well, having a crazy guy in the store is a good way to keep customers away."

"⋯For keeping customers away?"

It was an odd thing to hear coming from a blacksmith who owned a weapons shop. What kind of owner would actually repel customers?

"If I get customers, I'll have to make something boring again. I'd rather make something I'm not good at."

Zirnier sat cross-legged and stared at me, cracking open a bottle of wine, and there was something about her that gave me a strange sense of security.

"I said I'd make you something, but if you pick something bland and boring, it won't be fun."

Something bland and boring.

I remembered Zirnier complaining about the romance of weapons, something I heard over and over again at the bar.

She had her own standards, having spent over a decade making only the weapons that people wanted and that she herself didn't want, in order to reach the top."

Efficiency-obsessed tryhards, led by swords, knives, spears, and rapiers or idiotic romantic suckers, led by axes, clubs, and gauntlets.

Fortunately or unfortunately, my tastes are likely to be quite off-putting to Zirnier.

I explained to Zirnier what I wanted in a weapon.

At first she listened with boredom, but then her expression hardened.

"⋯⋯Really, you want me to do that?"

"Yes. What do you think?"

"⋯⋯⋯⋯"

As soon as she heard my explanation, Zirnier's hands started to shake.

-Gulp. Gulp.

She gulped down the entire bottle of dwarven brew.

When she couldn't stop herself, she summoned a No. 1 and threw it into the air.

Crazy drunk.

No. 1 bounced off the ceiling and landed softly next to Zirnier. In their hands, they both had hammers.

" ⋯ Romantic pass!"

With that, Zirnier abandoned all pretense of boredom and stood in front of the furnace.

"I knew you were discerning when you picked my helm, but I didn't realize you were this romance-crazed."

She lifted the gleaming steel she'd been pounding vigorously until I arrived, something that didn't look like much at first glance.

"It's the sincerity of your romance."

No. 1 swung the hammer around excitedly, and Zirnier looked at me with a smirk.

“I'll make you an awesome sex partner.”

Seeing her so excited, it seems even Zirnier can't resist a dual-axe barbarian warrior...

‘⋯What?’

Why the fuck would you make that?

The misunderstanding would be cleared up later.

Zirnier said she heard a bizarre theory from Idelbert that combat = competing with an opponent while sweating = essentially no different from sex.

As expected, I thought it was a crazy idea befitting someone cursed with the 'rejection of inferior genitals' curse.

‘Wait, does that mean I've been having sex with Master all this time?’

My hands and feet shook with frustration.