**Chapter 92: Balkan Unit 2 Production and Supply Plan (1)**

“Ouch, my head⋯”

Zirnier, a half-dwarf, grunted and covered her head with her hands.

“I'm surprised you've gone through dozens of bottles of dwarven brew and ended up with just a slight headache. Here, have some water.”

“Uhhhh, thanks⋯ ughhhhh.”

I handed Zirnier the cup of cold water that No. 3 had brought.

The heat of the furnace had turned it lukewarm in that brief moment, but Zirnier gulped it down as if it were life-giving.

Her lips were hidden by the invisibility mask from the 22nd-floor artifact, but she seemed more relaxed.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Thanks. Ugh.”

Nos. 1, 2, and 3 rushed over and lifted Zirnier's upper body.

Sitting on the anvil, Zirnier looked up at me and opened her mouth.

“Woohoo. So, you did well in the labyrinth this time-you, you!”

Zirnier's eyes widened when she saw my face. Well, not my face, exactly, but my helmet.

-Boom!

As if her hangover had been blown away in one fell swoop, Zirnier jumped up from the anvil and grabbed my helmet by the ears with both arms.

Her fierce gaze traveled to the lower portion of the shattered helm.

Zirnier's uncharacteristic mask filled my eyes so I didn't see her roll her eyes.

I instinctively felt her eyes lingering on the skin of my left cheek, my lips, and my brow.

“Hmmm. Hmmm.”

Zirnier held my head tightly for a moment, observing, then pulled away with an awkward cough.

“⋯Tough luck, you must have been dealing with a pretty tough one.”

Instead of being angry at me for smashing her creation, Zirnier sounded concerned for me.

Still, the way she bobbed and weaved, it was clear that she was upset that her first creation had been smashed after rotting away in a fly shop for so long.

“Give me the helm. I'll have to reinforce it with some relic alloy or something so it won't break-”

I hastily interrupted Zirnier.

“I have a lot of equipment to repair right now. I don't have enough money for fancy materials like relic alloy.”

My leather armor and axe needed work, too.

The money I have on hand now is two gold coins, about fifty silver coins, a Hobgoblin Soulstone worth one and a half gold coins and one gold coin for the commission, which has yet to be paid.

My total wealth is about 5 gold coins.

I've been saving up from my work at Diana's tavern and the money I get for every time I enter the Labyrinth.

'Even relics start at a minimum of gold. Relic alloys, no way.’

The helm was an important piece of armor, but I couldn't invest my entire fortune to repair a few tears.

“Forget it, I'm not going to take money for something with my name on it that's been smashed, I have craftsman's pride, and while I'll take money for other crappy weapons, this helmet is purely for my own satisfaction, so you don't have to pay me.”

Zirnier pounded her fist against her chest, her voice full of confidence.

The bandaged nipple, which could fit in the palm of one hand, bounced and jiggled.

‘As expected, her mindset is different.’

Is this the kind of craftsmanship I've only heard about? In this respect, I am purely in awe.

It was something that I needed to emulate if I wanted to live like a human being in the heartless, overcrowded Labyrinth City.

“Thank you!”

“Hmph. There's no such thing as gratitude. If you're so grateful, why don't you take me out for a drink later?”

-Sshhhhhhhhh.

Zirnier made an awkward gesture of flicking something thick, elongated, and hard out of thin air.

-Thrrrrrrrrrrrr.

And at the end, she gripped the underside of the long, hard thing tightly, tickling the bumpy head with five fingers.

 “⋯Your hand movements⋯”

“⋯Ouch. Is this by human standards?”

Zirnier promptly dusted off her hands and made a gesture of tilting her glass.

Phew. What the hell.

The gesture was so slow and sluggish that I almost mistook it for a flirtatious hand gesture that said, “Would you like to quench your cravings with a cool drink?”

‘Sure. Zirnier's a bit of a drunk.’

I could see how that could be misinterpreted.

‘And the difference in drinking culture between dwarves and humans.’

I was a little confused, but I decided to assume that the last gesture was the uncorking of a bottle of soju.

“Since you're going out of your way to take care of me, I can do that for you anytime, as long as you come before the bar closes.”

“Zee, are you serious, you promised me, you can't be mooching, you know?!”

Zirnier urged, her voice rising in excitement.

“Yes. Can you take a look at my other armor?”

“Sure. Let's see-”

-Boom!

-Boom! Boom!

The backpack opened, revealing a half-snapped axe and tattered leather armor.

Zirnier replied with a grimace, as if she were looking at a pile of food waste.

“It's all fucked up. Throw them away. They won't live.”

The armor was condemned to death by a master craftsman but I begged her not to throw it away.

I silently bemoaned the thought of a wallet that would be thinner and lighter with more gear but I wasn't done yet.

“This one's a little tattered, too.”

I gently placed Zirnier artifact axe on top of my armor. The handle was slightly cracked.

Zirnier's mood hardened slightly at the sight of the axe's condition.

“This one's broken, too? You shouldn't have made it past the tenth floor, and this one's broken?”

In disbelief, she asked me twice how it was broken.

“Oh. I was going to ask you something about that.”

I dug through my backpack again. And then, clutching it tightly in my hand, I pulled out the Abomination Soulstone. No, the Soulstone of [Gluttony].

[⋯!!!]

I wondered what this thing was, and why it was howling as if it were alive.

'I thought Zirnier would know⋯'

“Crazy⋯”

Cursing, Zirnier lowered her hand in a daze.

The reaction was much faster and more violent than I expected.

Ting! Ting!

The relic alloy axe clattered to the floor, making a loud noise as the fluttering hand came closer and closer.

Then, Zirnier's face fell toward the soulstone.

“Holy, fucking shit, how did you get this!”

It was a thick double entendre.

Her voice was filled with glee, like a treasure hunter who has found a treasure.

\*\*\*

Zirnier's mask faded, revealing a vague silhouette of a face.

The rest of her was unclear, but her glittering eyes were unmistakable.

“Some of the finest of the Labyrinth's beings,” she said, ”are not easy to find.”

Within the blue jewel-like wall, the image of Gluttony soulstone was reflected.

“There's a small chance you'll die with your 'identity' contained in a soulstone, but that doesn't happen until the mid-twentieth floor.”

Zirnier stared at the Gluttony Soulstone in front of her with dazed eyes.

Soulstones that monsters rarely drop when they die are rare but an even rarer one that contained something called an 'identity' was right in front of her.

“A soulstone with an identity?”

Zirnier was so excited that she even rubbed the soulstone against her cheek.

[--!!]

The Gluttony Soulstone trembled in fright.

For reference, Zirnier had been staring at the Gluttony Soulstone in a daze for half an hour.

“I wonder what kind of creature I'll get if I reforge this thing? Look at it. It's even wriggling. Isn't it amazing?”

“Yes. It's amazing, so stop rubbing it and give it to me now.”

“⋯⋯”

Zirnier glanced at me, then averted her eyes.

“⋯No.”

“Wait. I have something to say.”

Zirnier smiled awkwardly behind her blurred mask.

“Make a deal with me. I'll give you a fair price. Five hundred gold coins?”

“What?”

I was momentarily stunned by the vagueness of the number.

“Five hundred gold coins?” I thought to myself.

Suddenly, I realized the world was different.

Was that the economic sense of an artisan, one of the few in the Labyrinth City?

Or does it mean that the Gluttony Soulstone is worth the investment?

“It'll take me a while to raise the cash, all I can give you up front is three hundred gold coins, and more later-”

“No, no, wait, let's calm down and talk.”

Even though I said this, I couldn't calm down easily.

“Is this really that expensive?”

“Yes. In my entire blacksmithing career, I've only seen material worth more than this six times, and that was when I was an apprentice and didn't even get a chance to hammer. Ah. Now that I think about it, I'm pissed again.”

Zirnier gritted her teeth.

Her face was filled with desire to reforge this soulstone as an artisan.

“A soulstone with an identity hasn't been available for nearly a decade, and I don't know when I'll be able to get one again.”

Zirnier swallowed nervously.

“So. Sell it to me.”

I pondered his offer.

With that kind of money, why would I hesitate, I thought.

First, a fact check.

‘I am the owner of the Gluttony Soulstone.’

I didn't steal it from Joy Hog's party.

We'd talked about the settlement on the way out of the Labyrinth.

They all acknowledged my revolutionary work in eradicating gluttony, and since neither they nor I knew the Soulstone's true value at the time, they nodded readily.

“But,” I said, ”how would the story change if it were 500 gold coins?”

The units of money being traded were different.

I trust their party to a certain extent, but only for transactions of 20 gold coins or less.

No matter how friendly they are, they are explorers entering a dangerous labyrinth for riches.

The brief memories of a few months of life and death are naturally clouded by the prospect of having enough money to spend the rest of my life debauching and eating like a true noble.

Even if I don't go around bragging about the deal, those who smell money will hear about it somewhere and come looking.

I was fucking hesitant. I wondered if I was making the right decision. My heart fluttered in the face of the staggering amount of money.

‘Okay. Let’s think of it as money that never existed and think about it calmly.’

I imagine the ideal situation.

I win, Zirnier is satisfied, and the rest of the party can nod in agreement.

Zirnier has been honest with me about the value of the Gluttony Soulstone and has offered me a fair trade.

‘She could have cheated me enough, but she didn't.’

It was a sign that she didn't intend to end the relationship with a single transaction.

Dealing with her, the best craftsman in the Labyrinth City, had to be viewed in the long term.

 ‘As long as you're an explorer, there will come a time when you'll need better armor.’

Even Zirnier coveted such a material. It's practically an end-of-the-line item.

If I rush to sell it now, it's likely to fetch more than 500 gold coins, with a premium for having been crafted by Zirnier.

'I'll change it someday, but doing it now is much cheaper and will improve my specs.'

Goodbye. 500 gold coins.

Farewell. Life like an aristocrat.

What I give up now, will be the springboard for my inexorable growth.

“Ms. Zernier.”

Beyond the blurry mask, a blue wall of light turned to me.

“You wish to reforge this soulstone, don't you?”

“Uh. If you let me wield the hammer on that soulstone, I promise to give you my full support.”

Hearing her sincere words, I made a judgment.

“I won't sell the soul stone.”

“⋯⋯!!!”

Zirnier's eyes widened in horror but the corners of her eyes twitched at the next words.

“Instead⋯”

Sigh.

I grabbed her calloused hand, made of countless hammers, and shed a brilliant light on the Gluttony Soulstone she clutched in her hand.

[-!! -!!!!]

Her eyes flicked to the Gluttony Soulstone struggling wildly in her grasp, then locked with mine again.

“With this, I want you to make something for me.”

“⋯”

Zirnier closed her mouth for a moment.

The corners of her mouth quivering, trying to swallow the cheer that threatened to burst forth but only for a moment.

“⋯What kind?”

The look of fear was transmitted all the way here, as if they were saying, “Please, not a crossbow, please, not an inefficient, chewy weapon.”

I smirked at Zernier.

“As you wish, Ms. Zernier.”

When a top chef has the best ingredients at his disposal and creates his favorite dish, the finished product will taste dozens of times better than the average dish.

‘And her tough tastes and mine are very similar.’

The dish she prepares with all her heart will most likely be the weapon I desire.

“Balkan, you bastard, you romantic!!! Thank you so much!!!”

Zirnier was excited and hugged me tightly as she jumped up and down.

Before I could even feel the bandage against my chest, she spoke.

“I'm going to give you the best baby of my life!”

“Ew.”

I was stunned by the sudden declaration of pregnancy.

“You mean you're going to make me a weapon⋯ right⋯?”

Zirnier heard my trembling voice.

“Hmph!”

But she just chuckled.