

## The Fall 325

### Chapter 325: Underworld Nexus

“Who’s going first through the teleporter?” Mr. Trang suddenly asked.

Zac was about to say that he would enter first, but he suddenly froze when he saw the old man imperceptibly glance at the new addition to Port Atwood's forces. Only at that point did he realize the problem.

If he went first Verana would become the strongest person above-ground, and she could easily destroy the teleporter, effectively trapping Zac in the underworld. He didn’t know what she would gain from doing something like that, but he also wasn’t willing to take the risk with so many things riding on him. This place was the only link to the surface, and if it was that easy to reach it by foot the people of the underworld would already have left.

“Verana, Joanna, Mr. Trang, and I will all go down together. When the situation is secured Joanna will return to get the rest,” Zac said, quickly adjusting his plan.

Verana looked a bit surprised at being included in the advance group, but a small smile suddenly crept up on her face and she simply nodded in agreement.

“I want to go as well,” Emily said as she burst through the door, clearly having eavesdropped on them. “You promised.”

“... No, you'll join the second group,” Zac finally rejected after some hesitation.

Things might get a bit crazy when they arrived unprompted, especially when they brought an alien, so bringing Emily in the earliest group was without benefit. He was also worried she would act hastily when she got down there, so he wanted to stabilize the situation first.

“My goal is to make whoever is on the other side open the teleporter within an hour to let the rest of you through,” Zac then added when he saw Emily's face scrunch up. “If that doesn’t happen something might have gone wrong. But don’t enter the teleporter before Joanna has come out even if it opens again.”

The others quickly nodded in agreement before they ironed out the finer details of the expedition. The name of the teleportation destination was Underworld Nexus, and it hinted at what sort of place they were heading into. Since the teleporter opened to the public every day there should be some strong people holding down the fort, and there might also be quite some foot traffic.

If it was possible they would avoid causing any commotion since it might be more convenient to get a better understanding of the underground if their true identities weren’t exposed yet. The fact that Verana would join them would make that a bit harder, but she said she possessed a treasure that would allow her to accompany them without her origins getting exposed.

There was also the risk that the place was like the Cradle of God, a death trap that tried to swallow everyone foolish enough to enter, which was another reason why Zac was hesitant to bring Emily. Better the small group of elites go first and sound out the situation.

In the end, there was only so much that could be done when they had no idea what they dealt with, so soon enough everyone retreated to their respective groups to sit down and meditate while waiting.

Zac briefly pondered on the Dao of Rot until one of Mr. Trang's men let him know that the teleporter was open on the other side. Zac only grunted in affirmation as he got to his feet, and was soon joined by the other three who would go with him as the advance group.

Zac was interested to note that Lulu and Grub were nowhere to be seen, replaced with a rocklike snake that circled her left arm like a bracer. The Beast Master noticed Zac's look and smiled as she scratched the head of the snake, eliciting an odd purring sound.

"This is Slither," she introduced. "Lulu and Grub might be out of their element in the underworld considering their size. Slither is much more accustomed to subterranean fighting and scouting."

Zac nodded in understanding, feeling that Beast Master was a pretty convenient class. One could simply shore up any weakness by capturing another beast, and you stayed out of harm's way while your beasts battled for you.

Then again, Zac knew things weren't that simple. It took both time and a large number of resources to rear a battle beast. And just capturing it was not enough since if there was no connection it might refuse to fight for you, or even betray you at a critical juncture. Zac didn't like the concept of relying on others for keeping himself safe. He would rather depend on his own fists for protection than some familiar.

Time was of the essence so the small group immediately headed over to the Teleportation array. Zac still donned his mask, making him look like a human hiding his identity. Verana instead wrapped a white cowl to obscure her features, and it completely hid her non-human features.

More interestingly the cowl seemed to possess some magical feature that made Verana less conspicuous, and Zac had a hard time focusing on her even though he knew about it. It was as though he got distracted by stray thoughts any time he looked in her direction, and soon his eyes drifted away.

"How curious," Mr. Trang muttered with some interest, clearly having realized the magical feature of the cowl as well.

Since it looked like Verana wouldn't be a problem Zac immediately activated the array, and in short order all four had stepped through and disappeared.

After a brief stint in the darkness, the foursome found themselves in a large vaulted cavern teeming with people. They stood on a platform that was raised around a meter into the air, and as he looked over the sea of people he noted that most were streaming toward two large exits on the opposite side of the cave.

The cave itself didn't feel as stuffy as Zac had feared, and the ceiling reached almost twenty meters in the air. The area was also pretty well lit by a combination of large inlaid crystals in the walls and the ever-present glowing moss. The air was a bit stale though, and the lack of any natural light was a bit uncomfortable. But Zac easily adjusted his state of mind, since he had been in a similar place for weeks during the hunt.

A quick estimation would put the number in the cave above a thousand, and he noted that this place was far more integrated between the races than how it was on the surface. Humans made up almost

half of the people in the cave, which wasn't surprising considering how populous the old Earth was compared to the other planets that got smashed together.

But there were representatives from all three of the other races in the streams of pedestrians, and many groups consisted of a mix of human, Ishiate and the Ratmen. Even a handful of Zhix walked along without causing any trouble, though it looked that the Zhix always only walked with their own kind.

"Hey, stop dawdling! Present your tokens and make way for the next group," a gruff voice said, making Zac look over at a guard who glared at them from beneath the platform.

Zac realized that over twenty guards were standing there, and apart from three who inspected a group in front of them they all looked in their direction. The one who had spoken to them was a muscular Ishiate, but all four races apart from the Zhix were represented among the guards.

He could also breathe out in relief when he realized that neither his nor Verana's hidden features had caused any alarm amongst the guards. Actually, quite a few of the people in the area had obscured their features to varying degrees.

In the end Sap Trang stepped forward after shooting a brief glance at Zac and Verana.

"We do not possess any tokens," he explained with a smile. "It is our first time coming here."

"You cannot enter the Underworld Nexus without a token," the beastman said with a shake of his head.

"Are you members of the Union or the Council?"

"The Union? Council? We are not part of either," Sap Trang said with some confusion.

"Fresh meat?" the Ishiate interrupted with some surprise. "You're the first in a while, must be from a pretty secluded sector. Come with me and I'll explain things."

The man seemed pretty eager, and Zac noted that the other guards looked at the beastman who had spoken up with some envy as he ushered them away from the teleportation platform.

He wasn't worried that this place was a trap since the people who were continuously streaming out of the teleporter seemed aware of the rules of this place, and they hurriedly presented the same sort of token upon arrival. At the same time, there was a smaller stream of people leaving as well, walking against the stream to use another teleportation array to return to wherever they came from.

"The Underworld Nexus is a neutral town meant as a gathering place for all the native factions of the underworld. Most of those you see coming and going either belong to the Union or the Underworld Council. The Union is led by a group of merchants," the guard started explaining as they entered the side passage.

"A notable name among you humans from the Union is Little Treasure, who is one of the eight top figures. The union control most of the high-grade mines and many other lucrative resources, so they are extremely wealthy. That's why many elite cultivators have joined them to enjoy great benefits.

"The Council is a group of extremely strong warriors. They are on the frontline in the fight against the incursions, but they also control a lot of the best training grounds. They aren't as wealthy as the Union, but they make up for it with military might."

"The Incursions? What does that mean?" Zac asked, thankful his voice didn't change too much in his Draugr form.

Zac, of course, knew what the beastman was talking about. But from how he explained it, it sounded like there was more than one incursion in the underworld.

"You are truly lucky if you haven't been impacted by those alien cultivators in all this time," the Ishiate guard muttered as he led the group to a guarded side-exit of the cave. "When the Integration took place it also opened portals to other worlds, and foreign invaders have come through those gates. The main goal of the Council is to close those gates, and the Union is generally helping the war effort with resources."

"How many gates are there?" Mr. Trang asked, understanding what Zac wanted to know.

"There are four that we know off, and the worst of them are the fire golems. They have killed millions of people," the Ishiate sighed. "I moved here after they flooded my hometown with lava. Only a fraction of us survived, our ancestral halls turned to cinders."

Zac was truthfully not too surprised that there were multiple incursions. The Underworld spanned a huge area, and hundreds of millions of humans had been teleported here. In fact, he felt it was pretty good news to hear there was more than one. If the system only sent one incursion to test the whole underworld it would likely have meant that particular incursion was terrifyingly strong.

"So where are we headed?" Sap Trang finally asked after they had walked the empty passage for some time.

"We need to issue tokens if you wish to enter this place. Please beware, these tokens are not free as they require inscriptions to work. Each one costs 50 000 Nexus Coins," the guard explained until he finally stopped in front of a door. "In here."

The group entered and saw a human sit with an engraving kit in his hands, with a small mountain of tokens behind him. The process of acquiring tokens was pretty simple, with only a drop of blood being needed to bind the Token while the inscriber activated it. But Zac suspected the tokens contained a tracking array just like the one in Westfort.

"If you want my advice you should quickly join one of the forces as quickly as possible. There is some semblance of order in the Nexus, but truthfully it is quite dangerous for a small unaffiliated group to walk the streets. You might get robbed of your treasures, or even killed," the guard suddenly said as they got their tokens. "As luck would have it I know a few people in the Union, and I could introduce you."

"Are the two forces the only ones around?" Mr. Trang asked, sidestepping the offer.

The guard looked a bit irritated at getting his pitch derailed, but he quickly controlled his mood.

"Well, there are some smaller groups and towns that are not directly affiliated with the Union or the Underworld Council, but at least 60% of those who walk the streets here are part of either of them. So what do you say, do you want to head over to my friends in the union? It's a pretty rare opportunity, and I wouldn't offer if I hadn't felt that you guys are pretty strong," the Ishiate explained.

Some disdain flashed in the eyes of the inscriber as he worked on the final token, but it quickly disappeared a moment later as the man refocused on his work. But both Zac and Verana had noted it, and they threw each other a look.

It seemed to Zac that the great opportunity was nothing more than a scam. Perhaps joining the Union would mean something like joining the New World Government, getting an overlord taking control of your hometown. It was most likely not very hard to join on one's own, and the guard in front of them perhaps even got a commission for leading new blood to the slaughter.

"Is it the Council or the Union that controls this place?" Zac suddenly asked, as he never heard the guard mention it.

"Actually, neither," the Ishiate said as he scratched his chin.

At this time the inscriber spoke up for the first time, briefly shooting Zac a glance.

"This place is under the control of the richest man in the underworld, Lord Smaug himself."