

**Chapter 326: Subterranean Diplomacy**

"He controls this town by himself? How is that possible? He is not even on the power Ladder," Mr. Trang said with some suspicion after hearing the inscriber's proclamation.

"Wealth trumps over power," the inscriber said. "Anyone who tries to cause trouble will get blasted by his various treasures or arrays. I doubt even the Super Brother-Man would dare to cause a ruckus in the Underworld Nexus."

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Ogras' words. With enough wealth it was possible to completely ensconce yourself within your sphere of influence, buying layers after layers of defensive and offensive structures. Of course, while it was entirely possible to smash your enemies with piles of money it was also true that wealth couldn't trump over supreme power.

"So he's not part of any force?" Mr. Trang asked curiously. "Seems like he would be better off joining this Union."

"He has his own company, Dragonwing Enterprises, and many underlings here in the city. I work for Dragonwing Enterprises for example," the inscriber explained drawing a glare from the guard.

"They only recruit locally though," the Ishiate hurriedly added. "So how about it? Shall we head to the Union? Or if fighting is more your style, I actually have some friends working for the Council as well."

Zac didn't immediately answer but instead went over what they had learned. He knew they might only have scratched the surface, but it still felt like they had a good enough understanding of the underworld to get to work.

The splintered forces had generally clumped together into larger groups, but it seemed there were no individuals strong enough to become sole leaders. Instead, councils were formed where power was shared. The only exception was this Smaug character who seemed solely to control this town by virtue of wealth rather than strength.

Now that they knew who the players were and what kind of place they had arrived at there was no longer any need for subterfuge. Zac never meant for them to keep their anonymity forever, as there was no point in doing so. They needed to speak with Smaug, and the quickest way to do this was to explain who they were. Mr. Trang seemed to be of the same idea, as he shot a glance at Zac who made a small signal with his hand.

"I am afraid that we do not plan to join any force," Mr. Trang said with a smile at the Ishiate, before turning toward the inscriber. "We would like to meet your boss."

Both the ishiate and the inscriber looked a bit startled at the quick change in demeanor before the beastman let out a guffaw.

"Are you crazy? Do you think just anyone can just walk in here and act as they please?" the guard laughed derisively. "I am being nice enough to help you out, but you better smarten up before something bad happens."

But the inscriber's eyes thinned as he glanced at Zac's party, and he seemed to take the situation seriously even though all of their auras were completely restrained.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We come from the surface, and we represent the Super Brother-Man," Mr. Trang said, hiding nothing. "The forces of the surface world all tried to reach this place the moment the hunt ended, but currently it is only the Super Brother-Man who possess the capabilities needed to reach this place."

"Oh, the Super Brother-Man, is it?" the Ishiate laughed even harder. "I forgot to introduce myself, I am Starlight's long-lost brother, and this inscriber here is the cousin of Thea Marshall."

"That's enough Terre-" the inscriber said, but his words got caught in his throat as an aura as heavy as a mountain spread out, suffused with killing intent.

The whole cavernous room started shaking and the two men both were unable to move. The Ishiate had fallen down on his belly and was crawling toward the door with horror in his eyes. The inscriber was not much better off as he had fallen back into the pile of empty tokens, his face white as a sheet.

It wasn't Zac, but rather the snake who peeked out of Verana's sleeve that was emitting the dense aura, proving that it was another E-Grade beast under her command. In fact, the aura it emitted was even stronger than those of Grub and Lulu, making Zac wonder if Verana held back during their fight.

"The Super Brother-Man has closed multiple incursions in the past week, but there is far more to do. He sent his right-hand man and a general to close the incursions down here, and help the people stuck here," Joanna explained when the snake finally crawled back inside Verana's sleeve and restrained its aura.

"Are you... truly from the surface?" the inscriber said, clearly starting to believe their words. "Then why have only you arrived and no one else? We have waited for so long for assistance. And do you have any proof you're with the Super Brother-Man?"

"It is simple. Most of the people on the surface believe that our new world consists of one huge continent, but that isn't true. There is, in fact, a second continent, but it is separated by a vast ocean. The Super Brother-Man is the only one with a fleet powerful enough to cross the ocean and survive the leviathans of the sea," Sap Trang explained.

"Shortly after we set up our outpost we noticed this place appearing now and then on the teleportation panel," Joanna added. "And as for proof? The force of the Super-Brother-man is Port Atwood, which you should know after the hunt."

The next moment both her alignment from her status screen appeared, and her current position on the ladder.

"Atwood Valkyrie... a ranker!" the inscriber said with shock. "Are you his right-hand man? Or General?"

"No, I am not strong enough for that yet," Joanna said, looking a bit pained before gesturing at Zac and Verana. "It's those two."

The implication was clear, and the inscriber immediately understood what she was getting at. Not even low rankers were strong enough to become generals under the Super Brother-Man.

“So, can you take us to Smaug now?” Mr. Trang asked.

“Well... It’s not that simple,” the inscriber said with a grimace before turning to the Ishiate who was still on the ground. “Terrek, you can leave. I will take it from here.”

The Ishiate had been frozen by the door, both afraid to speak up and leave. When he heard the inscriber’s words it was as though he was granted a pardon, and after giving Zac’s party a deep bow he scrambled out of the door.

“Why can’t we meet him?” Joanna pressured, her eyes thinning.

“I don’t know where he is. No one does,” the inscriber hurriedly explained. “We don’t know what Smaug looks like or where he lives. He’s only communicating through the network he has set up here, and the few times he appeared he has been disguised.”

“So what now?” Joanna asked with some displeasure.

“I can take your party to the headquarters of Dragonwing Enterprises. I am only middle management so I can’t contact the Lord, but someone there should be able to,” the appraiser said and got up from his seat.

The group nodded since it seemed as good a plan as any. They might have been able to force the man out by wreaking havoc on the town, but they had come to help people, not cause trouble. The appraiser, who introduced himself as Farid, led them out of the passageways into the town proper. A few scared faces peeked out through doors along the way, but hurriedly shied away when they passed.

The Underworld Nexus was completely different from what Zac had expected. It was still a cave, but it was just massive, likely even larger than Port Atwood. It was at least 100 meters to the roof, helping quite a bit with the claustrophobic feeling. There was even some wind getting generated by a massive waterfall that fell into a lake where Zac clearly could spot a large number of fishing vessels.

The structures were simple but sturdy, mainly created from a mix of metal and stone. Many rooms didn’t have roofs or walls though, instead opting for open architecture. Perhaps people felt enough closed-in as it was, and didn’t want to box themselves in even further. Besides, it was not like there was going to be any bad weather down here.

The oddest thing was that the whole thing was brightly lit up as though it was the middle of the day on the surface. The whole cave was illuminated by a couple of massive crystals placed on top of sturdy metal towers.

“We call them Day Crystals, and use them instead of sunlight,” Farid explained when he saw the group’s looks. “Smaug owns a mine where they extract them. These crystals are lit up 18 hours a day, with the first and last hour being at half power. We also sell smaller versions to add to your home because electricity is limited.”

Zac nodded, quite impressed by how quickly these people had adapted to life underground. But even with these pretty optimal conditions for a subterranean town, it was impossible to forget they were stuck under miles of rock. The town sharply ended where it reached the wall, and a few barricaded gates led out into the wild.

As they walked it seemed to become more apparent that the explanation of the guard wasn't completely accurate. It was true that the Union and the Underworld Council were the two most powerful forces along with Hive Arbak, the strongest Zhix hive in the underworld. In truth, their numbers only made up around 10 to 15% of the people in the Underworld Nexus rather than the 60%.

But their influence reached far and wide in the underworld, and it was obvious by how they could so overtly bribe the Underground Nexus guards to do their bidding. As Zac suspected guard did get a commission for enlisting new towns into these forces, which was why he made them sound grander than they truly were.

But Farid explained how there was a large number of varying forces and independent warlords who controlled their respective sectors, making the underworld almost as chaotic as the surface. The towns were far more integrated between species though, mainly since the surface species were dropped off together at the same place when the randomization of the planet took place.

But there was also a large number of refugees as the things Zac heard about the fire incursion was all too real. Every day more refugees streamed through the teleporter, and by now there was no more room to house them in the Underworld Nexus. Luckily there was no lack of crystals, meaning the refugees could be teleported away to reinforce other towns in the underworld network.

"So why has no one of you come to the surface?" Joanna asked as they walked toward the Dragonwing headquarters. "You've had half a year to dig your way out."

"We tried," Farid said with a sigh. "We all tried the first months. But something is odd with the stone, most of it is incredibly hard. Unless you're at least level 30 you can forget about even cutting out a chip from the walls, and even the stronger people have trouble making way. Not even the Geomancers are any good. Perhaps when people start reaching E-rank they will be strong enough."

"Just like there are mines with minerals and Crystals there are also mines with softer stone that can be extracted," the inscriber explained. "Most settlements are made by the molemen though. The Underworld Nexus is almost unique in the fact that it is completely made from scratch. The cave was found by Lord Smaug, and he founded the Nexus by the shore."

The group soon enough reached the Dragonwing Headquarters, a vast complex next to the lake. As they passed through the gate Zac couldn't help but notice there were multiple layers of arrays around the building. He wasn't worried now that they had already been let through, but if he read the energy fluctuations right he guessed that even he would have trouble cracking this place open.

After Farid explained their identities and the snake once again exhibited it's might things proceeded quite quickly from there. The group was led to an open-air conference room while the manager sent an emergency transmission to their boss. The manager kept them company as they waited, ensuring that Smaug never took longer than 20 minutes to respond to a message.

The minutes passed and refreshments were brought in as they waited. The manager was extremely curious about the state of the surface and was elated when he heard that the Super Brother-Man was going around closing one incursion after another. The fact that he had started eyeing the underworld wasn't met with suspicion at all by the stocky middle-aged man, but rather delight. The fire golems had

truly pushed people to their limits, and it looked like there wasn't a single person who hadn't lost someone to their attacks.

But Zac suddenly got a bad feeling as a gust made his black cloak flutter. He immediately looked around and spotted an odd sphere beneath the table that he knew wasn't there before. It didn't emit any energy, but the feeling only got worse by the second, and Zac knew he could tarry any longer.

"Behind me!" he growled as a field of death expanded around him from [Fields of Despair], while his defensive layers were erected one by one.

The large fractal shield was the last to materialize, and Zac placed it square between the rapidly enlarging ball and the group. The manager was held by his neck by a furious Joanna, but he was clearly not part of what was happening since he was screaming in fear, looking completely shocked by the change in atmosphere.

Suddenly it sounded like a piece of glass cracking, and then the world turned white.