

## The Fall 328

### Chapter 328: Captive

Zac looked down at Smaug that was still being kept at sword-point, unsure what to think about the rapid change in his demeanor. It looked like he was truly telling the truth about his sister, but it wouldn't be surprising if the second-place holder on the wealth ladder was someone adept at deception.

Besides, even if he was telling the truth, did it even matter? Zac if anyone could sympathize with the desire to save and protect one's sister, but the fact remained that Smaug had launched a terrifying barrage of attacks on them. If Zac wasn't strong enough he and his people would have been blasted to pieces by the offensive arrays.

But Zac finally decided it was worth to keep asking questions before deciding what to do about this man.

"Why would the Union want to attack us?" Zac finally asked.

"They are working with the invaders," Smaug said, looking relieved Zac held off on skewering him. "Not the flame golem one, but the others. They are trying to take all of Earth's natural resources for themselves. The invaders provide the Union with pills and other items that are hard to get down here, and the Union provides them with raw resources and Slaves."

"Slaves?" Zac repeated with a frown, though it couldn't be seen through his mask.

"I have been investigating them for months. Some settlements that were said to be eradicated by the golems were actually captured by the Union's people and sold to the invaders for forced labor," Smaug wheezed. "They don't want you here because they are afraid their profiteering will be cut short."

"You should know that if we fell the Super Brother-Man would just come here in person," Zac retorted.

"By that time they would have been able to turn black to white, pinning all the blame on me," Smaug sighed.

"Still, it's quite the coincidence that they managed to kidnap your sister just when we arrived, and immediately had you attack us?" Zac said. "We haven't even been in the underworld for an hour."

"I don't know how, but they must have known her identity for some time. I had bodyguards around her, but more than half turned out to be the Union's men. They acted just 5minutes after you left with Farid," he said.

Zac was about to continue the line of questions but the sound of disturbed rubble from behind stopped him in his tracks. He turned around to see it was Joanna who had come over, her spear at the ready. Zac quickly deactivated the array, making her almost launch an attack at him in shock.

"Get the others, but just our people," Zac said.

"No problem. The manager started running for his life the moment the fighting subsided," Joanna nodded.

"Wait, help me disarm this guy first," Zac said.

Joanna understood what he meant, and she quickly took off every piece of equipment on Smaug that might have been a treasure. Soon enough a small mound of jewelry lay to the side of the man, and Joanna had even found a few talisman papers stuck to his inner thighs. He was truly a walking arsenal, decked head to toe with treasures. Even Calrin would likely have to admit defeat against that kind of collection.

A minute later the whole Port Atwood party stood hidden within an array, and Zac recounted his exchange with Smaug, whose real name turned out to be Hassan. He was originally from Syria, but had lived in Europe the past years with his sister. However, it looked like Hassan had completely discarded his old identity, and insisted of being called Smaug.

"What forces do the four Incursions contain?" Mr. Trang asked.

"One looks like humans, though they have vertical pupils," Smaug quickly said, still stressed even though Zac no longer pointed a sword at him.

Verana's snake had instead scuttled over to his shoulder and was seemingly napping with its head against his throat. But Smaug was obviously aware of the snake's power since he had turned extremely pale the moment the snake moved over to him. After that he became even more cooperative, and it felt like he couldn't spill all the secrets of the underworld quick enough.

"One has literal demons, it's pretty crazy. Horns and everything. These two are the ones who have bought the most slaves. They keep mostly to themselves, relentlessly mining. The third has some odd walking fish or something, they look pretty scary. I don't think the Union works with them, they attack everything," Smaug explained. "The fourth is the fire golems, and they are the strongest. But there is actually a fifth incursion"

"A fifth?" Zac asked with surprise. "The guard earlier said there was only four."

"I only know about them because of a leak in the Union. They have never appeared and they are even more holed up than the first two incursions. I have no idea what they are up to, but I guess they're busy mining as well," Smaug shrugged.

Zac didn't care too much about there being a fifth incursion. The fact that they kept to themselves hopefully meant that they didn't feel confident in their strength to expand, and instead opted to gather as many resources as possible from their area.

"Do the Underworld Council work with the invaders as well?" Joanna asked next.

"Not really, though they are indirectly benefitting from them. They buy things from the Union that they, in turn, have gotten from the invaders. And they almost exclusively fight with the fishmen and the fire golems, so I'm pretty sure they know about the dealings with the other incursions," Smaug explained. "It's all pretty muddy down here, no clear black and white."

Zac slowly nodded, not feeling the actions of the Council was too big of a deal. They had their hands full as it was, and if they could get resources from the one incursion to fight another it was making the best of a bad situation. It wouldn't be too late to turn their attention toward the demons and invading humans after the more dangerous invaders were dealt with.

He felt the actions of the Union to be far more troublesome. He had seen the treatment of slaves on the surface, and he knew that almost no force would treat them as well as Verana had. To profiteer from something like that in a time of crisis was beyond reprehensible.

He could have looked the other way if the Union just traded normally with the invaders, but since they decided to use their own people as currency he knew he would have to act. If it was true that the Union sells people as slaves to the invaders they didn't need to continue existing.

When they had gotten all out of Smaug that they could Zac suddenly flashed forward and knocked Smaug out cold, giving the rest some privacy.

"So what do you guys think?" he asked.

"That Union seems even more shady than the New World Government," Joanna said with disgust. "If they are into the slave trade I'm sure they're doing all kinds of evil stuff."

"I think it's a good target for a take-over," Verana said, drawing skeptical glances from the others.

"Let's not kid ourselves," the Beast Master said with a roll of her eyes. "Getting our hand on the resources for our war efforts is one of the main objectives of this expedition. If we kill the leaders of this Merchant Organization and put our own people there we'll have a working infrastructure for everything from Teleportation Arrays to Mines to personnel. We will even gain their intelligence which is likely invaluable."

"Will their people even work for us?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"The rabbits in the forest do not care which wolf is the pack alpha. They just want to survive," Verana said with a shrug. "We can simply cleanse the arm of the organization that dealt in slavery if it bothers you, and claim the rest."

"I agree. You have so much to deal with as is," Joanna said. "This will save a lot of time, allowing us to focus on what's important."

Mr. Trang nodded in agreement as well, essentially meaning the matter was decided since Zac felt it was the most convenient method as well. But there was still one issue remaining.

"Fine. We'll confirm what Smaug said about the slave trade. If what he says is true we'll take control of the Union, taking out everyone at the top" Zac said before motioning at the unconscious man on the ground. "What do we do about this guy though?"

"I say keep him," Joanna said. "He might seem like a helpless victim, but he must be hiding some secrets. He has been on the top of the Wealth ladder all this time, even eclipsing people like Thea Marshall and Billy who both have closed Incursions. Besides, he attacked us so he owes us restitution, but there is no way his real wealth is on his person"

"I think we should help the sister if possible," Mr. Trang added. "The child was captured because of our arrival, after all. She's innocent in all this."

"Fair enough," Zac agreed. "Wake him up."

Joanna took out a bottle of water and poured it over his face, making him wake up sputtering and disoriented.

"We will help save your sister," Joanna said. "And we'll also take care of the Union if what you've said is true. Of course, if it turns out that you've been lying we'll remove you and Dragonwing Enterprises from the underworld."

"My words are as true as gold!" the man hurriedly said. "But the Union must know something is wrong by now. We've been here for a while, they must wonder what's going on. I have an idea, but you must trust me."

"Trust you?" Zac snorted, but the next moment his eyes widened in alarm as Smaug produced another crystal from nowhere.

Zac's mind blanked out for a second when he saw the pitch-black ball in Smaug's hand. The first thing Joanna had looked for on his body was a cosmos sack, but there was nothing like that on him. They had assumed he simply left it behind before going into battle because he was afraid of losing his wealth. But they were obviously wrong since he still was able to produce objects from nowhere.

If it was just another fire-spewing crystal Zac wouldn't be too worried, but he was actually quite familiar with the thing in Smaug's hand. It was a [Void Ball], identical to the one Zac found during the hunt, and something he still kept on his person as an ace. If that thing went off in this close proximity then even he would perish, since it would release an onslaught of spatial tears destroying everything in the area.

Verana seemed to realize the danger as well, and energy blasted out from her as she started to activate some protective treasure. Zac was much more straightforward and aimed to kill Smaug before he could set the thing off. But before Zac's swing could reach the man the world lurched, making Zac lose his balance and fall to the ground.

He sprung right back up, but he froze when he realized that the surroundings had completely changed. Everyone was there, but they clearly were no longer in the ruins of the Dragonwing complex. Instead they found themselves in some hidden chamber illuminated by a few Day Crystals.

Zac's eyes immediately snapped to Smaug and he was relieved to see that the [Void Ball] was nowhere in sight. But he was still infuriated by that brush with death, and he immediately resumed his advance on him as killing intent started leaking.

"Wait! I needed to make the Union think you were dead, or at least unsure what happened! Otherwise they might have harmed my sister!" Smaug hurriedly explained as he scrambled away from Zac. "So I activated the bomb and used a teleportation treasure to move us to my predesignated spot."

"And you are aware that a [Void Ball] disrupts space, making teleportation an extremely dangerous venture even before it sets off?" Verana said with a voice that could turn water to ice. "We are lucky to not arrive here in a dozen pieces."

"Uh..." was all that Smaug said in response, a sheepish smile spreading on his face as he shrunk further back from the four murderous stares. "Well, there was no instruction manual when I got that thing. My bad, truly."

"The bomb should have destroyed everything in the area where we stood. Hopefully, the Union thinks I took most of you out before escaping. This place is my hidden compartment beneath the Underworld Nexus. I have a private Teleportation array here," Smaug continued, clearly wanting to change the subject.

A minute later the group arrived at the hidden teleportation array, with Smaug sporting swollen lips, a crooked nose, and two black eyes giving him the fabled panda-look. Joanna and Mr. Trang immediately stepped through the teleporter after shooting a last glare at the man, leaving the trio of Zac, Verana, and Smaug behind.

Just moments later battle-hardened warriors of three races started to stream through the teleporter, filling the spacious hall that the teleporter was placed in.

"What is going on?" Smaug stammered as his swollen eyes stared at the demons and the Tal-Eladar all emitting powerful auras. "Those are invaders!"

"They were invaders," Zac corrected him. "Now they fight for the Super Brother-Man."

"Shit, that guy must be a real monster," Smaug muttered with some awe in his voice. "If he can even make those bloodthirsty demons fight for him."

"You have no idea."