

**Chapter 329: Negotiations**

As Zac oversaw his people streaming out through the teleporter a thought suddenly struck him, and he motioned for Harvath to join him. The demon captain walked over, throwing a curious glance at Smaug and his wretched appearance.

"We've learned that there is a second demonkin Incursion in the underworld," Zac explained after covering them in a sound-isolating array. "Will it be a problem for you?"

Harvath thoughtfully furrowed his brows before he looked at Smaug.

"Does this one possess information about our cousins?" he asked, getting a nod from Zac.

Smaug himself gaped when he stood in front of the demon, making Zac realize the man had never stood face to face with one of the invaders before. It looked like he was hovering between fear of being eaten and fascination with the unknown.

"Do these demons look like us?" Harvath asked, pointing at his face.

"N-No, not really," Smaug stammered. "Well, they have horns, but I am told that they look a lot bulkier, and don't have hair?"

"Big black horns?" Harvath probed, "And they are over two meters tall?"

"Yes!" Smaug hurriedly nodded. "And tails."

"Abyssal Demons," Harvath said with a grimace before turning to Zac. "Can we speak privately?"

Zac nodded and had Verana take over the task of keeping a watch on Smaug. He still didn't understand how he could take out items when he was stripped of his possessions, and Zac didn't want him to take out something else and cause even more trouble.

"What's going on?" Zac asked when the two were alone.

Harvath hesitated a bit before speaking up.

"Do you know how Demon society works?" he asked.

"Isn't it a feudal society? Your former clan controls a certain area, but you are part of a larger kingdom. That kingdom ultimately reports to the planet's leader, though they are largely independent," Zac asked with some confusion.

"That's true for our planet, but our planet is just a backwater member of something larger," Harvath said.

"The Azh'Kir'Khat Horde?" Zac ventured, remembering Verana mentioning the odd name.

"Exactly," Harvath nodded. "I am not too sure about all the details since clan Azh'Rezak was the lowest rung of what could be called a noble clan, and our information was somewhat limited. But the horde consists of hundreds of demonic species."

Zac nodded, still not sure what he was getting at.

“The position of the races in the horde depends on their respective powerhouses at the top. The Abyssal Demons has a terrifying leader who controls one of the top ten clans, making them one of the most prominent demonic species in the horde. These Abyssal Demons are likely not part of that clan, but they still hold some sway back home. I fear that if we rout them it might have dire implications for clan Azh’Rezak,” Harvath said with some hesitation.

Zac nodded with a sigh. It was as Zac had feared. He hadn’t expected running into a second demonkin Incursion on Earth, and he knew it might cause trouble for the demons of Port Atwood, or rather their former clan.

Even if they left their clan behind many still had people they cared for back home. Even Ogras had his grandfather. Everyone had friends or relatives who were still part of the clan, and while they chose to cut ties to forge their own path they didn’t want to bring trouble down on the head of Azh’Rezak.

“So what do you think we should do?” Zac finally asked.

“I cannot make this decision for our people,” Harvath finally said. “I think we should call the young master.”

Zac agreed with the demon’s assessment. Exploring the Mystic Realm was important, but they had other pressing matters. It would be for the best to call Ogras over now that it turned out that there were four other Incursions in the underworld that weren’t fire-attuned.

“Fine, I’ll have someone get Ogras,” Zac agreed.

Zac had one of the Valkyries head over to the mystic realm to look for Ogras. Most people still didn’t know that the realm was already being explored, though scattered rumors had started to spread about its existence. But he wanted to keep the details Vague, so only the Valkyries and a few other core personnel were allowed close to the center of Mystic Island. It had turned to a restricted area just like his own zone in Port Atwood.

Since he knew it would take some time before Ogras arrived he decided to deal with some other matters. First he went over to Calrin, who seemed extremely impatient to get going.

“I hear we’re taking over a rival business?” Calrin said with excitement in his eyes. “It’s quite exhilarating, all that free money. It’s a lot harder to do something like this when mercantile licenses are involved. We truly should consolidate all budding enterprises before people manage to get their hands on licenses.”

Zac understood what Calrin meant. His own consortium was targeted by a mighty C-grade Clan, but even they had been forced to use trickery and bribes to steadily whittle down the Thayer Consortia for an eventual takeover. Brute force was not an option when mercantile licenses were involved.

“I’ll consider it,” Zac said with a smile. “Do you know if Cosmos Sacks can take different shapes than actual sacks?”

“High-grade spatial tools can look like rings or other jewelry, or anything for that matter,” Calrin said. “But it’s usually not worth the trouble unless you’re a true magnate. That kind of spatial tools requires

actual insight into the Dao of Space to create, making them over a thousand times more expensive. Why do you ask?"

"That guy over there managed to take out an item from thin air. I am trying to figure out how," Zac said as he glanced at Smaug.

"Oh," Calrin said thoughtfully before a small dagger suddenly appeared in his hand from nowhere, without touching one of his Cosmos Sacks. "Like this?"

"Yes, exactly like that," Zac said with surprise. "How did you do it?"

"He has a mercantile class or at least a hybrid class. We get actual skills that work like Cosmos Sacks, allowing us to hide and protect our wares as we travel. A Cosmos Sack can be stolen, but our personal space can't."

"Makes sense, he's the second-place holder on the wealth ladder," Zac nodded. "Is there any way to prevent it?"

"Sure, if you have energy shackles," Calrin nodded. "If he can't circulate his energy he won't be able to activate his skill."

Zac's eyes lit up and he immediately produced the chain that he stowed away when he saved Thea from the Medhin clan.

"Will this work?" Zac asked as he handed it over to Calrin.

"It's not a high-quality restraint, but it should suffice against someone like him," Calrin nodded. "I'll handle it. I am a bit curious about him anyway."

Zac nodded and let Calrin walk away with the chain. Soon enough everyone had entered the Underworld, but Zac chose to wait for Ogras to arrive before deciding on the next course of action. He instead erected an array and sat down to absorb a few Miasma crystals to restore his energy reserves and rest.

He didn't know how long he had rested when he sensed a person close-by, and he saw the familiar form of Ogras when he opened his eyes. He temporarily deactivated the array and let the demon enter. Ogras looked annoyed for some reason, making Zac look at him curiously.

"Not making headway with the Mystic Realm? It's only been a day," Zac said.

"I can't believe those Abyssal assholes got placed in the middle of a mountain of resources with no enemies in sight while I got stuck with you," Ogras muttered, obviously having been appraised of the situation in the underworld. "The Ruthless Heavens is truly playing favorites. I say we take down that incursion first."

"And that is your unbiased opinion?" Zac snorted.

"Not really, but it makes sense. The sooner we kick those people out of here the sooner the demons will be able to act in the open. Most demons would be hesitant to show their faces with them lurking in the area," Ogras shrugged.

“Agreed. We’ll keep the demons hidden while we deal with the Union,” Zac said.

“How will we split the profits?” Ogras asked.

This was something that Zac had thought about earlier. He was currently the de-facto owner of pretty much everything in Port Atwood, but that wasn’t a long-term solution. He didn’t plan on becoming a tyrant with people toiling under his hegemony.

“All matters related to the underworld will be considered a separate company from Port Atwood and the Thayer Consortia. Port Atwood will own half and the Academy will own 10% to become self-sustaining,” Zac said. “You, Verana, and Calrin can figure out what to do with the rest.”

“Isn’t it a bit early to start giving those people a bunch of benefits?” Ogras said with a frown as he nodded at a clump of Tal-Eladar close-by. “Furthermore, Calrin should be a trading partner rather than a shareholder.”

“As I thought, you are up to no good the moment you arrive,” a frosty voice said as Verana walked straight through the array.

“No manners, spying on a private conversation,” Ogras retorted with a straight face.

“Wait, where’s Smaug?” Zac said with a frown.

“I knocked him out when I saw this demon approach you with greed in his eyes and deceit in his heart,” Verana said. “I had no choice but to listen in to make sure he didn’t do anything stupid.”

“Be careful, I don’t want to turn the guy into a vegetable. I’ve already knocked him out once, it can’t be good for you for that to happen over and over,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “What’s your proposal?”

“Twenty percent to my clan, ten each to the demons and the merchant,” Verana said.

“Negotiation comes from a place of power. You’re barely bringing anything to the table and want twenty percent?” Ogras snorted.

“Do you?” Verana retorted. “Your people won’t fight against the demons. My people are arguing about who gets to be the vanguard.”

“But the beasts of your soldiers will be limited in the underworld. Besides, this isn’t just about how much effort each party exerts in the underworld. The citizens of Port Atwood has slaved away for months with hundreds dying. The resources of this place will be used to repay those who have bled for our force,” Ogras retorted.

Zac sighed as he listened to the two bicker, and things only got more chaotic when the Sky Gnome joined in. In the end the Demons went victorious from the battle, largely thanks to Zac’s support. They would get 25% of the shares, with Verana getting 10% and Calrin 5%.

Calrin wasn’t happy, but he would still make a lot of money from the Underworld since he would become the sole trading partner for the Underworld Venture, while also setting up a network of Thayer Consortia shops through the Underworld to rid all the wealthy Cultivators of their Crystals.

Verana was less than enthused with the results as well, but what Ogras said was true. The demons had risked their lives for Port Atwood over and over without any payment apart from getting to pick a skill. They were long overdue to reap some benefits for their work.

"So, what's the plan? Are we heading straight to this Union?" Verana asked.

"Get Smaug first," Zac said.

Soon the merchant was dragged over, and he sat down opposite Zac after throwing Verana a sullen look.

"Isn't it a bunch of merchants without a license to protect them?" Ogras said after throwing Smaug a dismissive glance. "Just kick down the front door and kill everyone who disagrees with the change in management."

"No! They might kill my sister if you storm their headquarters like that!" Smaug shouted with worry. "Their Arrays will be able to hinder you for a minute or two, who knows what they will do in the meantime?"

"Fine. I'll save the girl first, then Mr. Black and Snake Girl will kick in the front door," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

"Snake girl?" Verana said with a frosty tone. "Just, keep it up."

"We need proof what you've said is true," Joanna cut in before the two leaders started bickering again. "Do you know where they keep slaves, and where your sister is kept?"

"Yes to both!" Smaug nodded enthusiastically. "I have created a private network, I can bring us within an hour's travel from one of their transit camps where they keep slaves before they are sold off. My sister is likely kept at their headquarters."

"Fine, we'll take a look at the camp before taking down their headquarters. This group is enough for that, no need to bring the soldiers. They'll be sent to stabilize the various mines and subsidiaries after we've made our move," Zac said. "Agreed?"

The others nodded in agreement, with Ogras and Verana adding a few suggestions. Zac closed down the array and the group immediately walked toward the teleportation array. Suddenly their group grew with three people as Emily and two helpless Valkyries joined in. He down looked at the teenager for a second, and only got a stubborn look in return. He sighed and nodded slightly, drawing a wide grin from the girl.

Less than an hour later the group stood in a cave mouth, overlooking a large encampment twenty meters below them. An illusion array had already been installed by the exit, obscuring it from the people walking along the streets in the transit camp.

"Animals," Joanna growled as she looked at the scene with wide eyes.

Zac slightly nodded in agreement, anger burning in his heart as he listened to the cries from the shackled people below.

"We proceed. The Union will cease to exist today."