

The Fall 332

Chapter 332: New Management

"We've been used as a tool from the start," Ogras snorted as he glared at Smaug, some killing intent leaking from his body. "I knew something was off about this brat."

Zac glared at the young man as well, quickly putting two and two together. Smaug had mixed truths and lies in order to push Zac and his group into a collision course with the Union. The fact that the conglomerate sold people as slaves to the invaders had already been proven, but whether they ever pressured Smaug to attack his party was another matter entirely.

"Why?" was all that Zac said with a cold voice, somewhat regretting they had removed his shackles so that he would be able to keep up with them as they traveled.

"My sister is innocent in this. I saw an opportunity. I couldn't be sure how you would act in the underworld, so I needed to create a conflict with these assholes. But they deserve to be run to the ground," Smaug said, some ruthlessness flashing in his eyes before his face returned to that of a hapless youngster.

"You asshole!" a muffled voice came from within the sack. "You've been tricking people again? You've already got me kidnapped, now you're going to get me killed."

Ogras glanced at the sack with some humor before putting the girl down on the ground and untied her cover. A beautiful girl in her teens emerged, and her energetic emerald eyes were an obvious sign she was related to Smaug. She had long black hair with a thin braid running down her side, and she wore a hipster ensemble from the old world. A glance with [Inquisive Eye] showed that her name was Rima and that she was level 25.

She was a completely different sight from the dirty and bedraggled slaves they had just emancipated, and it looked like she hadn't suffered any injustice in captivity. She glared at Smaug for a second before pushing closer to a bemused Ogras.

"I'm sorry about my useless brother, Mr. Knight. He's an idiot and a liar, but he's a good guy," she said, looking up at the demon with adoring eyes.

"Mr. Knight?" the demon echoed with confusion.

"Well, you're my handsome knight in shining armor. You broke into the stronghold of the bad guys and saved me," she explained, showing no inclination to walk over to her brother.

"Sorry girl, you're a bit young for my taste," Ogras said with a snort, but after a brief pause looked her up and down once more. "Come back in five years."

"Animal," Joanna and Verana echoed in unison, but the demon was completely unaffected by their ire.

"Rima, don't be like that," Smaug entreated, looking a bit embarrassed. "I did what I had to do to keep us safe."

"Stop using me to justify your shady business practices," Rima said with a roll of her eyes. "Do you know how it feels to be mentioned as the reason for you turning into a drug lord?"

"You're a drug dealer?" Zac said with a frown. "Is that why you're so rich?"

"I worked in, uh, pain management before the integration," Smaug said with a cough. "I haven't dabbled in that since the world turned crazy though, even though there is a massive demand from people who want to escape reality."

"Mr. Mask, is it true you work for the Super Brother-Man?" Rima said, looking at Zac with interest. "I heard from Mr. Knight."

"I'm Mr. Black," Zac said. "And yes."

"Mr. Black? How is that any better?" Rima muttered, before perking up again. "Is the Super Brother-Man handsome? How old is he? Is he single?"

"Already abandoning me, girl?" Ogras grunted, though he clearly was just messing around.

"Enough," Zac said and knocked the girl unconscious with a burst of his aura before taking out [Hunger]. "You attacked us, using arrays that would kill most people. I was already considering what punishment you deserved when I thought you acted under duress. Why shouldn't I kill you right now?"

"I am useful!" Smaug hurriedly said, some fear appearing on his face. "I can provide all sorts of information on the Underworld. I possess riches, and know where to find more."

"We can get information from the Union and the Council and we already possess more wealth than you," Ogras laughed. "Try again."

"I... I'll work for the Super Brother-Man as well!" Smaug said. "You should understand I'm good with money from my Ladder ranking."

"People willing to work for The Super Brother-Man would be able to fill a country. Why should we risk letting a shady person like you close to our business interests?" Joanna asked.

"I'll sign a contract of servitude! I'll make you money to the best of my abilities for 50 years!" he said, finally starting to panic.

"Sounds annoying to have you around. Who knows what hidden troubles you would cause," Zac shrugged, lifting his sword as if he wanted to decapitate him just like the two merchants.

"Wait! I have an incomplete license with a limited product line!" Smaug screamed as he backed away.

"Five hundred years," Zac said, the sword frozen mid-swing.

"Wh—" Smaug was about to exclaim, but forcibly stopped himself. "Five hundred, happy to be on board."

"Good. Joanna will be your handler," Zac said, "She is under a contract of servitude as well, so signing with her will be like signing with the Super Brother-Man."

Smaug sighed, and soon enough he had entered a 500-year contract with Joanna. Smaug clearly had a complicated relationship with the truth, and Zac didn't want the man to know of his real identity. Having Joanna sign the contract still counted toward his contract limit though, and with all the Valkyries he only had four spots remaining.

Luckily the contracts to keep silent about his identity was a simple agreement between two parties, and those one could enter as many as one pleased. However, since it was a contract of reciprocity he needed to give something in return, which in his case was a monthly stipend for as long as the contract was active.

Zac looked at Smaug's forlorn figure with some humor, knowing things were not really as they seemed. It might have appeared as though the man was forced to sign the contract, but that was simply impossible.

Unless the man wanted to form a contract and work for him the contract wouldn't even materialize, proving that it was all a ploy. Zac guessed that the only thing that Smaug hadn't planned was to share the fact that he had an incomplete license.

In the end, he got his hand on a helper that he sorely needed. He had wanted to find someone to manage his business interests while he focused on cultivation. As time passed his ventures only got more numerous, and someone needed to take charge. Zac himself didn't know exactly what he owned any longer as his empire kept expanding through conquest and development.

"What's an incomplete license?" Zac asked when the contract was signed.

"I have a mercantile class as you already know," Smaug shrugged, his sad demeanor already gone. "I got a quest to rise as high as possible on the Wealth ladder, and the license was the reward. I think I would have gotten a real license if it wasn't for your boss keeping the first spot for himself. Uh, our boss."

"What's the difference?" Zac asked, and even Ogras perked up in interest.

Calrin had been pretty fleeting in his explanations about the mercantile system since the start, likely wanting to keep details vague so that others wouldn't know when he was scamming them. Ogras had no idea either, only knowing it enabled intergalactic trade as long as you fulfilled certain criteria.

"The Mercantile System is like a hidden website where you need to unlock every ware one by one. A Mercantile License is your login to the main website, but it is only the start from what I understand. You still need to perform various tasks to upgrade the license to give access to better wares and rates. My license is limited, meaning that it only lasts for 100 years, and I can only buy wares from a corporation called [Stumpbugle Bombs]," Smaug explained.

"That's some name," Ogras whistled.

"It's a goblin company, and they make weird arrays, like the ones I... presented to you earlier," Smaug coughed. "They only sell consumable weapons, from simple arrays to weapons of mass destruction. I can't access those though."

"We'll find some work for you. Remember, if we find you're working against the interest of Port Atwood..." Zac said, lifting [Hunger] again.

"I know, I know," Smaug said with a disarming smile.

Zac would look further into that Smaug could bring to the table at a later date, but for now he wanted to focus on the Union. He saw no reason to change his plan just because Smaug had been lying. The Union still needed to be stopped.

Ogras had already made some preliminary reconnaissance while scouring the Union headquarters for Rima, and as luck would have it the top brass of the Union was holding an emergency meeting in response to suddenly losing the transit camp.

Since the hostage was saved Zac felt there to be no need for any subversion as he walked toward the main gate of the newly erected wall that ran around the headquarters. It was guarded by over twenty cultivators, and the Union had even got their hands on some nasty-looking turrets placed upon the wall walk.

"Halt! This is a restricted area," a guard shouted as the large mounted weapons turned toward Zac.

"The Super Brother-Man has judged the Union to be working with the foreign invaders. Stand down and you will not be hurt. We are only interested in the leaders," Zac said as his aura billowed out.

The guards were shocked by the unexpected turn and looked at Zac like he was a primordial beast. It was no surprise since the strongest warriors of Earth could barely release an aura by now, whereas Zac's aura was heavy enough to almost feel like solid matter. Worse yet, it was rife with killing intent he had accumulated through his constant battles.

A few of the cultivators immediately ran away, not giving their companions a second look. But a few stood still with indecision on their faces. Seeing the guards not stand down Zac rolled his eyes and took out two metal balls from his cosmos sack, and threw them at the two turrets in quick succession. The balls ripped through the air and the weapons instantly turned to scrap metal.

The display of might was all that was needed to sway the last few guards who remained, and Zac was able to push open the gate without having to kill anyone. But a shimmering wall suddenly stopped him in his tracks, and Zac frowned when he realized someone had activated a defensive array.

Zac quickly realized it was just a standard array bought from the Town Shop, and his right arm started swelling from infusing it with [Unholy Strike]. He didn't even deign to push the skill to its limit before he punched out with enough force to make the air distort around his fist.

The barrier shuddered and large cracks started to spread, but the barrier held fast. However, Zac only snorted and punched out again, making the shield completely crumble this time. Ogras, now completely shrouded in shadows, and the others walked through as this was the most normal thing in the world, leaving a shocked Smaug behind.

"Monster," Smaug muttered from behind as he carried his unconscious sister.

The group ripped through the building without any resistance. Any time a guard or an employee saw their approach they needlessly ran away, no one even pretending to muster a resistance. It proved how fragile a force like the Union was in the face of true power. There were many weaker forces around, but many would put up a far fiercer resistance against invaders.

Zac followed Ogras' directions, but it was barely needed as he could sense a clump of weak auras gathered together at the same spot. With their superhuman speeds, it took them less than 20 seconds before they barged into a large hall, where almost forty people were seated.

These were the leaders of the Union, and behind them stood just as many warriors with somewhat impressive auras. But both hesitation and unwillingness to act was clear on their faces as Zac, Verana,

and Ogras all released their auras. It submerged the whole building in oppressive might, and most immediately threw their weapons on the ground in hopes of being spared.

A few tried to unleash desperate attacks on Zac's group, perhaps knowing their sins were too heavy to be spared if they were captured. But they were quickly and ruthlessly dealt with, leaving a dozen corpses on the ground.

Some of the seated leaders tried to flee in the commotion, but between Ogras' shadow spears and Zac's oppressive aura they found themselves trapped. Zac looked over the group of fearful people, noticing that people from all races apart from Zhix were represented.

"Is this them?" Zac asked with a sigh as he turned to Smaug.

"Yes, a few people are missing, like Little Treasure and Copperfield, the Ishiate at the 11th spot of the wealth ladder," Smaug said as he looked across the room. "But this is over 80% of the top brass of the Union."

It was a bit disheartening to Zac to see this diverse ensemble. This group represented some of the best and the brightest of the underworld, bringing together not only strong warriors but skilled non-combat cultivators. The group even transcended the racial barriers, something the surface still hadn't accomplished. But instead of working together to rebuff the invaders, they had sold their souls for riches.

"Starting today, the Union and all its subsidiaries are under new management."