

Innkeeper 221

The Innkeeper

Chapter 221: A bitter fight

The battle arena was much smaller than the coliseum that used to host massive crowds, even the few hundred guests and workers now had their vision blocked. The few existing seats were filled to beyond their capacity, with many people sitting on each other's laps.

Lex, who was watching the scene with his arms folded, standing midair, let loose a sigh as he had no choice but to make the arena and its stands bigger.

He really wanted to avoid spending his MP on nonessential things, but in the end quality of life improvements did count as essential for an Inn. With a wave of his hand, and 30,000 MP from his balance, the arena spontaneously turned into an open-air stadium.

The crowd that was standing suddenly found themselves sitting. The nearby food stall was naturally incorporated into the stadium, and some of the workers found themselves holding a tray with a strap round their neck, full of hot dogs, fries, and a few foreign dishes from the other planets the Inn was attached to.

Ragnar, who had been floating in the air right beside the Innkeeper, was impressed as usual. The Innkeeper had a certain flair in doing seemingly impossible tasks with casual effort.

Xeon, who also suddenly found himself sitting down, was fairly impressed, but more inspired! This Inn was just lovely! He was too used to being able to predict things, which affected his creativity, but now he was bursting with ideas. He really wanted to go ask the Innkeeper if he created this out of thin air, or summoned a pre-existing building from somewhere else. The answer would guide him in his next invention.

On stage, Z stood casually with his arms still folded, looking indifferently towards Heidi. From time to time, his armor would crack and his cool expression would momentarily shift to an awkward smile, but he always regained his cool quick enough for anyone to notice. He hoped.

On the other end stood Heidi and Sean, along with four of his friends. To be honest, his friends did not want to get involved in this, they were just having some fun earlier by teasing the waitress. But they didn't even have time to process what happened when Z challenged them, and Heidi accepted on their behalf.

Even after she accepted, they tried to get out of it, but the crowds were too big, and they were under too much pressure. Anyway they saw it, it looked like they were bullying a little kid. They were hoping to get Z to take back his challenge by pressuring him until someone told them that it wasn't an unfair fight. After all, Z was an employee for the Innkeeper. How could he be judged by normal standards?

Maybe if they were able to fight him, or even beat him, they might be able to earn the opportunity to impress the Innkeeper and get hired by him. The logic of being rewarded by the Innkeeper for beating his own employee was extremely flawed, but from the point of view of these kids whose lives only revolved around their own needs, it made perfect sense.

Everyone was split on who they thought would win, some anticipating the Inns employee to wipe the floor with these kids, while others thinking he would be overpowered due to their numbers. Lex was among the people who were undecided. Z, albeit his introverted personality, was not stupid so he should know what he can handle. At the same time, Lex had never seen any of his workers fight so he really didn't know what to expect. He hadn't even given them any techniques, only providing them with cultivation methods, so what could he really achieve?

Just as the tension was slowly building up, and Heidi was furiously whispering to Sean, telling him how to attack, the Innkeeper finally spoke.

"I would like to give a reminder to stop the fight in a timely manner in case the opponent is unable to continue. I also do not want anyone attacking to kill."

His voice was placid, as if he already knew the result, but was only speaking for the formality of it.

As Lex did not like giving long speeches or dramatic build ups, he directly said, "begin."

The group of teenagers from Troy academy as well as Z were taken by surprise by the sudden start, but Z recovered first.

True to his words, Z folded his left arm behind himself and extended his right arm forward and flicked his fingers, as if indicating them to come attack him.

As if that wasn't provocation enough for the extremely prideful teenagers, music started playing catching the audience by surprise. Then someone noticed that there was a bluetooth speaker hanging from one of Z's belt loops which was the source of the music.

"What do you think you're doing?" Heidi asked, her body trembling from fury. Let alone being insulted as such, she felt like the level of disregard being shown to her was monumental. This kid was totally taking this fight as a joke!

"It's my theme music," Z answered very seriously. "I'm still working on it, but all the heroes have background music when they fight right? This is just an electronic copy of the music from Attack on Tetanus, but it's all I had right now."

Unable to process what Z was saying she let out a frustrated scream, before yelling at her partners.

"What are you waiting for? Can't you see he's humiliating you? Hurry up and end this!"

Sean was a typical bully and liked to take advantage of people when no one was watching. Being under the scrutiny of hundreds of people made him hesitant, but his ego and pride prevented him from backing down.

"Let's go," he said to his friends, as he slowly started walking towards Z, trying to look cool. 5 second later, when he was still walking and had not even covered a third of the distance, he suddenly became hyper-aware of the hundreds of eyes on him, and how long it would take to reach Z at this rate. Suddenly getting flustered, he let out an angry yell, and bolted towards him.

Despite what Heidi thought, Z was taking this fight very seriously from the beginning. Seeing his opponents rush at him, Z's eyes suddenly shone with a silver light as he activated Regalia Bloom, the bloodline all the Inn's workers seemed to share.

From his pocket emerged a trading card of an anime Z liked to watch, covered in a silver light as well. A lot of the guests watching assumed it was some kind of weapon, the higher realm cultivators recognized

it as some kind of card, and only some very few cultural connoisseurs from Earth recognized what it really was - after all, the figure of a small flaming lizard on it was unmistakable.

Z waited till his foes were closer and, timing it perfectly with the beat drop, launched his attack! The silver card flew too fast for the kids to follow and so Sean was caught completely unprepared when he felt the flat of the card smack him on the face so hard that he lost balance and tripped!

While the attack itself had not been too hard, Z did not accidentally want to kill him so he controlled his strength, the sound of the smack was like a clap of thunder that rang across the stadium.

The crowd erupted in cheer and Lex secretly breathed a sigh of relief, but the four boys behind Sean panicked! The sound was loud enough to scare them, and the way Sean had fallen over made them assume it was a devastating blow.

Feeling a mix of anxiousness, fear, anger, hesitation and confusion, they did the only thing they could think of, and attacked Z blindly!

The man of the hour, Z, did not bother to move from his stance as his eyes followed the four boys who were trying to attack him from all sides.

With a blinding silver glow, the card streaked through the air, smacking faces before anyone could get close.

Since the attacks weren't strong enough to actually knock them unconscious, Sean and the boys picked themselves back up, thinking themselves hardened warriors who could resist a lethal blow.

Battle cries drowned Z's music, and various techniques flashed through the air, but the symphony of slapping faces never paused, and Z had played his music on repeat so it didn't matter if he missed any of the good parts.

It was a bitter fight and a testament to Z's endless will that he never flattered under the relentless onslaught. After all, standing still in the sunlight for so long had caused him to start sweating, and he had forgotten to wear deodorant! It was only a slight absolution from his plight that every time he

hurled an opponent with a face slap worth of a shounen MC, their bodies would blow a gentle wind that somewhat cooled him.

In the stands, the Troy academy principal didn't know whether to be relieved whether his students did not harm the Innkeepers worker, or embarrassed at their predicament. Any positive image Alexander had created for the academy during the Midnight Games had been wasted by these fools.

In the end, all he could do was console himself by saying that it was an honor to lose to someone from the Midnight Inn. Yes, that was it. For all he knew, Z might even be the Innkeepers personal disciple. Yes, it was completely honorable to lose to such a fighter.

On stage, Z finally used up 4% of his bloodline power. These were formidable enemies indeed.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 222: Ragnar gets a room

While Z felt that the fight had gone on forever, barely a few minutes had passed. Even with him holding back, being slapped in the face repeatedly by a card reinforced by his bloodline power made Sean and the kids lay on the ground with swollen faces, unable to get up.

Heidi instead, stood frozen.

It was not fear that painted her face, but shock! Sean and the rest may not be at Alexander's level - to be honest who was? Yet still, they had a decent standing within Troy academy. Their physical fitness was high, they excelled at sports and they had all taken some form of combat training.

Z's statement about fighting with only one hand had turned into a joke. From start to end, he had not moved an inch.

She grit her teeth, but as much as she didn't want to feel pain, the dire situation had woken her from her privilege induced rage. Vaguely, some of the things her father told her flashed in her mind, and, as much as she hated to do it, she walked forward.

The rage, the frustration, the bitterness on her face only accentuated the audience's enjoyment. It was like watching a scene from a drama. Most of them did not even know what had prompted the fight, but that no longer mattered. In situations like this, the winner was in the right. They were waiting to see what she would do. Would she attack? Would she scream? Would she accuse him of cheating?

Her actual decision surprised everyone. When she reached close enough to Z, she suppressed all her feelings and made herself say, "end it. I refuse to give up, and I don't want to be insulted by some 'I don't hit women' speech."

Z, who could already feel a bead of sweat roll down his forehead, could not wait to finish the match either. Like silver lightning, the card flashed through the air, followed by the resounding sound of thunder that was caused by the slap on Heidi's face.

Once she fell on the ground, she did not bother getting up, and only focused on holding back the tears that were welling up in her eyes. She searched the crowd until her eyes landed on Pamela.

She had heard many people say that emotional pain was a lot worse than physical pain, but her stinging, throbbing cheek felt a lot worse than any embarrassment. Of course, the combination of being embarrassed and being in pain definitely superseded all of them.

"I apologize for insulting you," she said through gritted teeth. "It was my fault for jumping to conclusions."

Z nodded, at seeing her apologize, then walked off stage to ensure Pamela was alright.

Heidi, though, wasn't done yet. She then turned towards the Innkeeper who had been watching from the sky and said, "I apologize for my misbehavior. I was not able to control my emotions."

The Innkeeper only nodded at her apology, before departing. Having her apologize to him wasn't a part of the bet, she did it of her free will. Lex could clearly tell that she had forced herself, but the fact that she had done it all was a big deal.

Unwilling to stay the center of attention much longer, Heidi directly left the Inn.

The crowd was disappointed the match ended so quickly, but since they were all gathered here anyway, many people took this opportunity to promote themselves. Rivals began challenging each other in a public way, and another few rounds of fights were quickly scheduled.

Lex, however, was no longer paying attention to that any longer, as he had turned his attention to Ragnar. The General actually looked to be in a good mood, which was a nice change. Normally, whenever someone looked for him, it was due to some kind of bad news.

"It's been a long time, General. How have you been?"

"Great," he replied with a smirk on his face. "After Vegus Minima, we've retaken Vegus Prime as well. Now, only Vegus Maxima remains, and we should be able to regain control in a few weeks at most."

"It is good that your mission is going well, though I expect it is too soon for you to be coming for a vacation. What can I do for you?"

"Hah, vacation! I don't remember the last time I had a vacation!" the general could not stop himself from laughing. "Indeed, I do require your aid in a sensitive matter. Furthermore, I have to apologize in advance if any of my actions offended you."

Lex raised an eyebrow in curiosity. Ragnar, despite his reputation, struck Lex as a very friendly man considering his position.

He elaborated, "during the Midnight Games, I had the opportunity to encounter the devil Loretta and her counterparts. I used that chance to record their aura and energy signatures. While recording the energy signatures themselves do not in any way harm them, they provide us with the potential to possibly track them, or at least identify them should they infiltrate some highly secure auras. The Empire also has a few other uses for them.

"Loretta is a high value target, even though I myself am not privy as to why. I suspected that once I reported the matter, I would be approached by an envoy, asked to return to one of the main planets. This is because for the past few hundred years, I've been on reclamation missions - essentially taking back land lost to demons. Yet that is not what happened.

"Instead of being summoned, my existing orders were overridden and I was ordered to wind up matters in the Vegus system in 6 months, after which my entire fleet and I were ordered to the galactic front lines."

As he said the last line, Ragnar's face was extremely grim, and even without him saying, Lex understood what he meant.

"You think someone is sending you to a dangerous place to possibly harm you, and prevent you from passing on the recorded signatures?"

"Yes. As a general, my chain of command in the military is transparent, so it's easy to track where my orders come from. Yet my orders did not originate from the army, but from the home of a certain Duke. While my authority in the Empire is usually higher, in times of crisis, the authority of local administrative nobility is increased drastically, and so I have no choice but to obey the orders. Keeping the galaxy from being invaded takes priority over reclaiming some planets."

"You suspect this Duke?"

"No, I think the Duke's need is valid, but I think circumstances have been manipulated to create the need for reinforcements artificially. I also think someone brought attention to my information in front of the Duke, prompting him to choose me over other nearby forces.

"Maybe this is a conspiracy, maybe this isn't. Either way, I would like to deposit the recorded aura from you until I take it back, or in the case of my demise, an appointed successor might collect it."

"Unfortunately Ragnar, I cannot hold an item for you," the Innkeeper said in an apologetic tone. Yet before he could get too disappointed, he continued, "but I can guarantee that if you rent a room from me, and leave any belongings, that no one will touch those belongings for the duration that you have the room."

Ragnar grinned and immediately rented a room.

Slowly, Rafael opened his eyes. Because his body had just covered, and this was the first time he regained consciousness in over a decade, his head was a little groggy, and he had not recovered his memories.

His blurry vision just showed him the ceiling, and time seemed to be moving in slow motion. A dull, ringing sound filled his ears, though he did not seem to notice, and for a few minutes he remained like that.

'Where... am... I?' he thought to himself, taking quite a while to complete the thought. But, as soon as the thought was complete, his memories started rushing back to him. They weren't memories just of right before his 'accident', but the memories of his entire life. His parents, his friends, his hopes, his dreams...

Tears started falling down his face as he lifted his trembling hand and brought it in front of his eyes. His youthful hand, free of scars and wrinkles, filled him with more joy than he had ever felt in his entire life.

At that moment, the doors to the room opened, and both his parents were struck by the sight of their son crying as he looked at his hand. They thought he was in pain, or that he was traumatized by the accident, and rushed to his side. They called out to him, and tried talking to him, but Rafael did not hear their words.

He only looked at his hands with unending joy, and thought to himself, 'I can't believe it worked! I did it! I really came back in time!'

The Innkeeper

Chapter 223: Butterfly effect

A few hours later, Rafael found himself being pushed in a wheelchair by his mother, who was grinning ear to ear. When she wasn't grinning, she was talking to her boy nonstop, and Marlo was walking alongside them silently. He may be a King in his own domain, but right now it was his wife who was giving the orders, and so for once, he suppressed himself and simply followed along.

Rafael, though, was currently lost in his own thoughts. Firstly, he was in a wheelchair because after 15 years of not moving at all, he had lost nearly all the muscle mass in his body and even moving his arms put him out of breath. The Recovery pod could do nothing for his strength and stamina as long as he was technically healthy.

Secondly, though he had come back far, FAR into the past, the timeline had already changed drastically despite his inaction.

In fact, the timeline had already changed so much that he was having serious doubts if he could use a lot of the information he knew for his benefit. He had asked his parents what he had missed in the past 15 years, and while they only gave him a few minor details to fill him in, he was sure that he held almost no advantage when it came to his knowledge of future events relating to Earth for at least another few years.

He had strong suspicions about what had caused the timeline to diverge, he just could not understand how the effect of it was so big. In his original timeline, he had never suffered from the grave injury that caused him to be suspended in life support for 15 years.

The reason for that was simple. While Marlo suspected his injury was caused by a breakthrough gone wrong, but the truth of the matter was, he was injured by the treasure that had travelled back in time.

The treasure that was currently in his heart was one he could easily control in the future. But his current body was too weak, and so the fusion process of the treasure, along with Rafael's memories from the future, almost ended up killing him.

So, technically speaking, the only difference between his original timeline and this one should have been his 15 years in a coma. What he could not have imagined was how such a simple thing affected the world in a subtle way that ended up drastically changing the future.

First of all, in his original timeline, since Rafael never got injured, Marlo never had the moment of self-reflection. This was fine for Rafael, as though Marlo was a harsh dad, it was his training that actually allowed Rafael to get so far in life.

Without that self-reflection, though, Marlo never ended up becoming Alexander's teacher, and he never hosted his self-defense lessons, which caused him to meet Lex.

Without his delicate touch in training Alexander, his personality developed in a different way. Instead of being open-minded and humble in his approach to power, Alexander developed a ruthless arrogance that was rightfully fed from his relentless training and strength. That minor yet prominent shift in

personality reflected in how he influenced the Morrison family to develop, and how they interacted with the rest of Earth.

Furthermore, because Lex was never trained by Marlo, his experience at Vegus Minima was extremely different, during which he nearly died and had to be treated in the Recovery pod as well as ORR, which prompted him to take a drastically different approach in developing the Inn.

He was much slower in developing the Inn, despite the quests and prompts from the system, and waited many years until his own cultivation was much higher before he started spreading the Inn to the rest of the universe.

The Butterfly effect was a theory in science on Earth that, when simply explained, stated something as simple as a flap of a butterfly's wing can, through a series of events, cause a hurricane. Similarly, Rafael had no way of knowing how far-reaching the effects of him being injured truly were.

With Lex developing the Inn slower, he would never have been able to help Tiffany, the little girl from Nibiru, never saved Chen and Blane, never influenced the war in the Vegus system, never give Ragnar the opportunity to record Loretta's energy signature, never met Loretta's father, never have saved Fenrir and so many other, seemingly minor things that would one day have monumental effects.

With his limited knowledge, however, Rafael did know a few simple changes that had happened. When the Council of New Order attacked the five families in his timeline, the effects were extremely drastic - to the point where the ecosystem of the entire planet had changed. His father, who never got an opportunity to complete his new cultivation system, died during that war since he could not recover from his wounds.

North America had become all but a desolate land. Massive shifts in tectonic plates under the pressure of countless battles ended up causing super volcanic eruptions on the continent that not only killed most of the population, it would have clouded the Earth in dust for years without the aid of technology.

The war, which had been dubbed World War 3, had also affected the mortal population so badly, which, followed by the subsequent food shortages, caused the global population to drop below 1 billion.

When the situation was still not resolved, Fernanda ultimately revealed herself to the world and not only killed the five family heads for their incompetence, but all members of the council. She then became Regent of Earth, ruling with the world with an unquestionable strictness.

Many called her a tyrant, but under her rule, Earth made tremendous progress. Many, many more things happened, but of course they were much farther in the future. Rafael neither had any way of knowing if the events he knew of would still happen, nor was he currently focused on them.

With the timeline changed, many of his initial worries were already resolved. All he needed to do now was wait for the treasure in his heart to fully heal his body till it was no longer crippled on the path to cultivation, something he knew for a fact it would be able to do, and then raise his cultivation.

Though many problems had inadvertently been fixed, there were a few upcoming events in the future he strongly believed would not change.

This mysterious place known as the Midnight Inn would help him tremendously, though had never actually been here in his previous timeline.

But instead of relying on something he could not fully understand, he planned on getting close to a few people he knew would be prominent in the future. If Lex had somehow been able to read the list of names he was going through, he would have been surprised to learn that he personally knew quite a few of them, or had at least heard of them.

Larry Dershaw and Matilda Ross had been Lex's class-fellows, and Marlo's students, though Rafael didn't know that yet. But while their names were high on the list, the name highest on the list was Andrew Sigmund, Helen's older step-brother and new CEO of Sigmund corp.

But, before he could start planning, he needed to understand the current timeline, and that would not be a short endeavor.

Back on Earth, Vera Joel, more commonly known as RussianPrincess77, was silently cursing her luck. She had told Alexander that he would lose someone important to him, so that he would venture into the

Minor realm and prevent Helen from being teleported away. While Alexander was distraught that he had been unable to save Helen, Vera was also upset because that portal was supposed to be her way out of Earth.

But that was the drawback of being an oracle. She could not always accurately predict the future. What's more, her peculiarity as an oracle made it even harder for her to give accurate predictions to other people because, quite simply, she could only see her own future! If she had been able to see other people's futures, she would have given Alexander better information.

Instead, all she saw was that for her to escape Earth, Alexander needed to save someone in the Minor realm.

She let out a disappointed sigh. Well, there will be opportunities in the future. She turned just in time to see a few guards escorting someone new through the compound where they stayed as 'guests'. This new person happened to be Heidi.

The spoiled girl, as much as she didn't want to, had to report what happened to her, to her Father. As much as she feared his punishment, she knew keeping secrets would result in something even worse, so she had to fess up.

When she was finally brought to his room, he was surprised to see her father was actually in a very good mood. He was humming to himself as he tied his tie before fixing his collar and putting on his blazer.

"Good morning, father," she said, with a bright smile, hoping to improve his mood.

"Ah, Heidi. You're here. I have wonderful news, the Williams family is finally letting me out of this hellhole of a planet. Today is going to be a good day."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 224: 7 Nation Crystal realm

"Ah, Heidi. You're here. I have wonderful news, the Williams family is finally letting me out of this hellhole of a planet. Today is going to be a good day."

Heidi almost stumbled when she heard the news! Even with her best effort to maintain a smiling face, she could not stop her jaw from dropping as she continued to stare at her father.

Heidi, along with all of her other siblings, were born on Earth over the past few decades, but they all knew that their father had a prestigious position somewhere out in the universe. They knew, because their father was very vocal about how disgusting it was to be stuck as a political prisoner.

For an unknown amount of time, considering the severe lack of spiritual energy in his region of space, Earth had been used as a planet where the Williams family hosted their political prisoners. They were given free reign, as well as all the luxury Earth had to offer during their stay, but they could just never leave. At least until their purpose in keeping them prisoner was fulfilled.

Heidi's father was being held because the 'Williams' family he had heard so much about was pressuring the organization he worked for into giving them a good deal on something they were working on. Officially, Heidi's father was a guest of the Williams family, but unofficially he had been dumped on this planet until further notice. Considering his own personal worth, after a long, exhaustive negotiation, they had finally come to an agreement and he was allowed to leave.

For him, this was excellent news. For Heidi and her siblings, not so much. This was because on Earth they had free reign to do whatever they wanted as long as they refrain from things like murder and kidnapping. Out in the universe though... Heidi at least had no idea how she would fare.

Her father was not a traditional father figure. Not only did he not raise them personally, his severe detachment from everything related to Earth made her pretty sure he did not truly care for them either.

Noticing her faltering expression, he asked, "what is it child? Something the matter?"

Heidi took a deep breath and then explained in great detail what had happened to her. She did not bother exaggerating or lying, she had never seen anyone successfully lie to her father. She was observing his face to see if his expression changed, but he continued to smile and hum. She did not know whether to be afraid or relieved.

When she finished, her father pointed to an urn in the side of his room.

"You see that dear? You know what that is?"

Heidi looked at it, but had never seen it before, so she shook her head.

"That urn is full of all the ashes of your siblings," the man said nonchalantly as he continued to pack. Heidi's face drained of color and she struggled to keep standing.

"You've all had good lives, I don't see any reason for you to complain about it being cut short. You see, I can't afford any liability, and you kids honestly... you've probably never done a single hard thing in your lives. Well, your siblings, not you. I'm proud of you for not quitting the match, and apologizing without being beaten into it. For that, I think I'll let you live. You can maintain whatever bank balance you have in your account, but from now on, you'll have to depend on yourself for everything else. Good luck, Heidi. I'm sure you'll make me proud."

The girl finally couldn't hold it together anymore, and fainted, though that never stopped her father from continuing to pack. Once he was done, he simply took his luggage and left the room with only an urn full of ashes, and an unconscious girl still lying in it.

Xeon could not suppress his laughter as he felt the wind blow over its scaly body. He was lying flat over the roof of the golf cart encased in silver light, spreading its limbs like it was flying around.

Gerard had to reinforce the roof of the golf cart with his bloodline power, which drastically affected how much he could speed up the cart, but he was determined to fulfill the guests request.

He had interrupted his retreat so that he could watch Z's match, and just as he was done, he ran into this new scaly guest that oozed endless enthusiasm.

Pulling a handbrake made of silver light, Gerard abruptly brought the golf cart into a drift, the sudden change in direction launching Xeon off the roof of the cart and straight into the lazy river.

"That was excellent," the Drake roared as it climbed out, the drops of water on its body causing it to shine.

"I'm glad I could fulfill your request, guest. Hopefully in the near future we will be able to upgrade my vehicle, which will allow me to launch you even further."

"Oh? You want to upgrade your vehicle? How so?"

"A few changes to increase the power, and make its drive more flexible. I cannot promise when we will get our hands on the upgrades, but I assure you the ride will be even more excellent then."

"Do you mind if I take a crack at it?" Xeon asked as he observed Gerard's noble chariot with renewed interest. He had never seen anything like it, and it stroked his once exhausted curiosity.

Gerard hesitated, wondering if he should consult the Innkeeper on the matter first, but it was too late. The Drake was breathing fire out of his nose to heat up its claws, and then began dismantling it.

Gerard shrugged. Since he had already begun there was no harm in investigating.

Things at the Inn were running smoothly, and though Lex had connected to a new planet, since he didn't leave behind any golden keys, he was not expecting a surge in guests any time soon. This was perfect, as X-142 was the most ideal planet for him to send invitations to the expo in a few months, but one planet was not enough.

Which is exactly why, after Lex renewed his gear, and took care of all issues, he was ready to connect to a new planet again. The wooden ticket had served him well so, hoping for the best, he spent another 100,000 MP on it, before crushing it to activate it.

He was looking forward to a new selection of planets, but this time, the menu looked different.

Planets Available:

Planet: -

Planet Rating: -

Planet Distance: -

Planet Environment: -

Realms available:

Realm: 7 Nation Crystal realm

Realm Rating: 2 Stars

Realm Environment: A single crack in an otherwise perfect existence

Lex was extremely confused, but before he had the chance to ask Mary any questions, he disappeared in a flash of light.

When he reappeared, Lex found himself facing a wall in the dark. He looked around, and found himself in a large hall that looked like it had been ransacked. There was nothing there except broken furniture and a dim, depressing mood.

It was raining heavily outside, with the occasional flash of lightning and clap of thunder, echoing endlessly in the hall. In the brief moments of light, Lex realized that he wasn't the only one in this hall. There were nearly a dozen others, all seemingly young, and all of them covered in dirt. A few of them even looked like they were crying.

The situation here wasn't normal, but Lex wasn't sure how to start a conversation with any of them to ask the situation. What he did realize was that unlike the rest, he was completely dry and completely clean, and would stand out in case anyone paid any attention to him.

Not willing to take any chances, Lex slowly exited the hall and stepped into the rain. As he reluctantly covered his clothes with a little bit of mud, he tried to get a sense for his location but visibility was poor. As best as he could tell, the hall seemed to be located on a hill, far away from any other kind of manmade structure.

Just as he was pondering on how to proceed, he saw movement in the rain. He looked up to see four men, flying in the air, quickly approaching the hall.

"Get inside, young one," one of them spoke directly in Lex's mind using their spirit sense. "Otherwise you will get sick."

Lex obeyed since he was still not sure of the situation, but it was quite fortunate he had taken the time to alter his appearance, for as soon as the men entered the hall, they summoned a ball of light, illuminating the area.

The kids in the hall looked at the four men, and they likewise looked at the kids. There were a few moments where the hall was filled with silence and, Lex assumed, some kind of sorrow.

Finally, letting out a painful sigh, one of the men said, "Gristol has fallen, the armies of Mendelay are retreating. We don't have much time, the Kraven will find this place soon, so as much as I want to wait for more survivors... we can't. But you, at least, don't need to worry. From now on, the Academy will take care of you. Remember the pain you feel today in the days ahead, it will help you in your training."

Just as Lex was trying to make sense of everything he just heard, he felt an invisible force wrap around him, and lift him up in the air. The next thing he knew, he, along with all the other survivors in the hall, were lifted into the air and pulled along as the four men escaped whatever catastrophe that was heading their way.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 225: Realms

"Mary, what's a realm?" Lex finally asked. Currently, he was being carried high in the air by some force, flying quickly away from whatever danger the man had been talking about. It was fortunate that

whatever force held him also protected him from the rain and wind. Yet after a while, he was left with nothing to do, and with poor visibility, he wasn't able to see much around him either.

That allowed his mind to wander, and he was finally able to ask some questions.

"The universe is bigger and more complicated than your understanding of it. Your original perception was that the universe, as infinitely vast as it is, is connected by physical space, and that you can traverse that space to reach any destination. That, however, is incorrect.

"The easiest way to explain it to you, so that you can understand, is to think of the universe as a multistory building. The realm that you are from, let's call it the Origin realm, since that is where you originate from, is just a single floor in that building.

"Above and below that floor are other floors, all of which are also realms. The size of each realm is not necessarily the same, and the rules that govern each realm do not have to be the same either."

Lex whistled mentally. The universe, as massive as it already was, had suddenly become much bigger.

"I'm afraid there's more to a realm than just that," Mary said, appearing before him with a worried look on her face. "The information I'm providing you is actually above your authority level. A special event has triggered emergency protocols, which have temporarily given you a higher authority. See, traveling between realms is no simple task. It is something way beyond your authority level, and is definitely way, WAY beyond anything a Wooden ticket should have been able to do.

"Some kind of accident must have happened while the system was scanning for planets, which resulted in you being teleported to a different realm. Now, there's good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?"

"The bad news," Lex said, as he mentally prepared himself.

"To understand the bad news, I need to explain a few things to you first, taking advantage of your increased authority. See, the capabilities of the system are actually linked directly to the user, meaning you. The system is constantly absorbing a higher form of spiritual energy, but how much and how

quickly it can absorb the energy is based on you. The stronger you are, the faster the system can absorb this energy.

"The system uses this energy to function, as well as grow its capabilities. The system hides this growth behind the authority system, which is designed in such a way as to promote you to increase your strength directly or indirectly.

"This is also the reason behind why it takes so long for the system to anchor itself to the planets you visit. If you had a higher cultivation realm, the system itself would be stronger, and the speed at which the planet is anchored would be quicker.

"Now, with that in mind, since you have been sent to a different realm, but you are not as strong as you should have been, the time it will take for the system to anchor to this realm... honestly, I have no idea."

Lex visibly paled when he heard the news, but then quickly recovered. First of all, he was thankful that he wasn't in this situation because of some mistake he himself made. Self doubt was an extremely difficult enemy to overcome in any situation, and didn't need his help in growing it. Secondly, since he had gotten the system, he had been constantly dealing with various difficult situations of different degrees. If this had been Lex prior to the Midnight Games, maybe he would have spent quite a while panicking. Now, however, he quickly took hold of himself and focused on the solution.

"And what's the good news?" he asked, his tone unwavering. Unaware if he was doing it on purpose or by accident, Lex had stepped into his Innkeeper persona. The Innkeeper was strong. The Innkeeper was calm. The Innkeeper would be able to handle any situation thrown at him.

"The good news is your increased authority, as well as the emergency protocols. Instead of waiting for you to grow stronger yourself, to speed up your return, the system has initiated a special feature. You can feed the system any kind of energy you encounter, which will directly go towards speeding up your return. There's a progress bar in the system you can check. Furthermore, during the period of your increased authority, the system will divulge more information to you than you normally would have access to."

Lex silently absorbed the information as he wrapped his head around the new information. His first reaction was cursing at the fact that he put all his spirit stones in his apartment instead of the gift shop. If they were in the gift shop, he would be able to immediately withdraw them and feed them to the system.

His second reaction was asking Mary, "do you still have access to the Inn? Can you still control the Vine?"

"Yes, fortunately, I still have access to the Inn."

"Well that's good at least. In case I get stuck here for too long, I can directly start the expo from here, as well as manage the Inn directly through the system. People might get suspicious though if I don't show up for a long time, if only I had hired a manager or something."

"Hello, what did I tell you? You have increased authority, which means I can directly appear as a hologram at the Inn now. I can stand in as the manager while you're away."

"Yes, that's a good idea," Lex said.

At this point, he was not forcing himself to be calm, he still felt stressed and panicked somewhere in the back of his mind. He had just become trained in handling difficult things so that he was able to continue to function even in difficult times.

"If I have increased authority, can I learn extra information about this realm?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, you can. This place is called the 7 Nation Crystal realm. Unlike the Origin realm, which consists of planets and stars, this realm consists only of one gigantic land mass that covers the entire realm. The size of this realm is approximately the size of your solar system, and its name originates from the seven dominant countries that rule this realm, consisting of 7 different races.

"There is something unusual about this realm that the system is unable to identify, mainly because the diagnostic function of the system is extremely basic. Whatever the anomaly is, though, it is likely whatever caused you to be pulled in - that's just my personal guess, though."

"Is there any way you can tell me anything specific about this realm and its inhabitants?"

"No, not really. The system..."

Before Mary could continue to talk, there was a flash of lightning particularly close to Lex, and suddenly he saw something in the air in front of them.

Before he could process what the 'thing' was, or react in any way, Lex heard a loud boom, and it wasn't from the thunder.

A fight had broken out in front of them, and three of the men who had been leading them started fighting the enemy while the fourth person quickly brought Lex and the rest to the ground.

"Hide and wait for us," was all the man said, before quickly returning to the sky to fight.

Lex tried to see if his Fancy monocle could observe what was happening up in the sky, but it was too dark and everyone was moving too fast for even the Fancy monocle to detect what was happening.

"What are you doing?" one of the guys from the group whispered aggressively as he yanked Lex and pulled him along. It was still raining heavily and the ground had become very muddy, making it difficult to run, but the fear for their lives pushed the group to keep moving. Lex was surprised at the group's sense of unity, but that didn't change the fact that since all of their cultivation levels were below Lex, they moved very slowly.

"Where are we going?" Lex asked the boy, pulling him along. He hoped they had a plan instead of running randomly, and indeed they did have a plan. It was to run in a straight line as far away from the fight as possible.

"There's no use hiding, the Kraven can track us using our body temperatures. The only thing we can do is get as far from the fight as possible and hope we don't get caught up in the crossfire."

Lex had no idea what these 'Kraven' were, he had only gotten a glimpse, but they definitely weren't human. Despite knowing how weak he was compared to those fighting in the sky, Lex pulled out the Heavy Harley.

Then something crashed in the ground behind them, releasing a shockwave so strong they were all flung onto the ground. Lex quickly picked himself up and looked behind himself. He still could not see anything, so he may as well have just kept running.

That's when the Fancy monocle flashed in giant red letters, "DANGER!"

The Innkeeper

Chapter 226: Kraven

The glaring red letters screaming danger were telling Lex to run, but he suddenly found himself unable to move. It was not his body that refused to move, but his mind that was frozen. It was like his mind was dipped in sludge, where he was unable to complete even a single thought.

He could only stand there, a silent observer of his own impending demise. Of course, even with his eyes open, he had to wait for lightning to flash before he could even see anything. Would he even have enough time?

As it turns out, yes. Whatever was holding him captive made no moves, and after a minute, when lightning finally flashed, Lex was able to see a ball of black goo with broken bones jutting out in a crater in front of him.

Whatever it was, it was severely injured, which was fortunate for him, though that was a concept he could not comprehend currently. He was stuck, staring into the dark, with brief moments of light occasionally. In a way, his inability to think may have been a good thing, because every flash of light revealed the blob moving.

It was inching towards Lex, bit by bit. After what felt like eternity, the 'goo' had moved close enough for Lex to better observe it. It was not really some kind of goo or slime being, just that its flesh had been completely destroyed by whatever attack it suffered, leaving it in poor shape.

Perhaps originally the creature had distinct features, as the various bones sticking out of its flesh indicated, but currently it was a disgusting ball of slimy black flesh, moving towards him. If Lex's mind were working, he may have been thinking of a way to escape, yet now, he only stood still, drenched in the rain.

Up above in the air, the fight continued, either oblivious to what was happening down below, or too preoccupied to be able to help. The creature started to gain momentum as it closed in on Lex, and soon was only 20 feet away. The next time lightning flashed, it was at 10 feet. Soon, even in the darkness, Lex could identify a vague shape moving towards him.

Suddenly, Lex's protective talisman covered him in a blue light, illuminating the black blob that was pressed against the shield generated by the talisman.

2 feet right in front of Lex, the black blob monster was right in his line of sight. There were no eyes, but anyone observing from a distance may have assumed the sight to be two lovers, staring each other in the eyes - a scene directly out of a romantic horror movie.

The next moment a sword fell out of the sky and eviscerated the blob, freeing Lex from his prison. All the emotions that Lex was unable to feel suddenly hit him like a tsunami, overwhelming him and dropping him to his knees.

"Good job holding the Kraven back," a man said as he touched Lex's shoulder and scanned his body for injuries. "The light attracted my attention, otherwise it would have been too late by the time I noticed. Just hold tight child, we'll be done soon."

The man quickly went back into the sky, but Lex barely noticed. His body felt extremely weak, and his mind was so tired he struggled to stay awake. In the back of his mind, he could hear Mary calling out to him, but he could not focus.

Soon, the rest of the group that had been dropped to the ground surrounded him. They too had been stuck wherever they stood, but since Lex was the closest to the blob, he took the brunt of whatever attack it unleashed.

In the end, he was unable to hold out, and fell unconscious.

He woke up with a jolt, panic and fear gripping his heart, but there was no danger around him. He was in bed in a large hall, and his sudden movement attracted some attention, but not much.

A nearby nurse came up to him and smiled softly.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, her voice sweet like honey. "You've been unconscious for almost a day, so you're probably hungry, but it's best you don't eat anything until we know your condition."

"I...uhh..." Lex was trying to recall what had happened, but his memories were slow to return. "My head's killing me. What happened? I can't remember."

"Headaches and memory loss..." she murmured as the nurse pulled out a strange looking device and put it against his forehead. "No concussion... seems like... yes, probably a mild destabilization of the spirit. Very impressive."

Once the nurse was done examining him and jotting down her findings, she turned to Lex and said, "You suffered from the coercion of an adult Kraven. Even though it was almost dead itself, it's very impressive you were able to stay alive under the circumstances. You've suffered some damage to your spirit, which explains the memory loss, but it's not enough to cause permanent damage. But, you don't need to worry. You're at the Academy now, we'll take good care of you."

"The... academy?" Lex asked, confused. Slowly his memories were coming back to him, but he did not recall anything about any academy.

"Yes child, the academy. Take some rest today, I'll send you some food, and check up with you in the evening. That should be enough time for your spirit to recover, and then I can answer any questions you still have."

The nurse left and soon brought Lex some porridge, which he slowly ate. The nurse's assessment of Lex's condition was accurate, but what she didn't realize was that had it been anyone else, their mind would have already been shattered. Since the nurse did not know the power of the Kraven, her assessment made sense. The only reason Lex's mind had been seemingly frozen, instead of directly shattered, was the impeccable defense of Regal Embrace.

Lex ate the porridge in a seeming haze and, instinctually, drank a bottle of Botlam Dew before falling back asleep. When he woke up a few hours later, he was feeling much better. All his memories came back to him, and the haze around his mind disappeared.

"What the hell was that?" was the first thing Lex asked, not really expecting an answer. He quickly played back the events in his mind, and the horror of having his mind frozen was something entirely new to him. It wasn't even frozen because of fear, or locked in a struggle. It was like someone poured tar into his mind and he became completely unable to formulate a single thought.

Lex closed his eyes, took a long, deep breath, and released. He could not eliminate his fear, it was still there in his mind and his heart, but he could choose not to dwell on it. He needed to understand what that creature was, and more about this world, as soon as possible. Fortunately, the nurse said on her own initiative that Lex lost his memory so he could ask her questions without seeming suspicious.

A short while later, when the nurse started doing her rounds again, Lex waved at her like a child at an amusement park and called her over. Giggling at Lex's antics, she came over and said, "I see someone is feeling better."

"Better? No! Not at all! I feel miserable. What the hell was that black blob thing?"

"Oh, still some memory loss?" she questioned as she observed him, but when she didn't notice anything else off about him, she shrugged and answered.

"According to the report I was given, you were injured in an encounter with a Kraven, so I'm assuming you are referring to that."

"What's a Kraven? Are there a lot of them?"

At this point the nurse giggled, and felt like she was explaining the world to a child.

"A Kraven is a Kraven, you saw it. What more am I supposed to explain? As for if they're a lot? You're from Gristol county, right? I don't know if you know this yet, but, Gristol county was overtaken by Kraven. Very few people managed to escape, with you being one of the lucky few. The neighboring counties of Mendelay and Farwa have strengthened their borders, from what I hear.

"I've never been far away, but from what I hear, all 7 nations have a problem with Kraven. So yeah, I'd say there's a lot of them. But, you don't need to be worried about that, for now at least. You're at the Academy now, far from any border and extremely well protected, so you're safe."

"What's the academy?"

"Oh dear, you really did go through a lot to have even forgotten the Academy. This is the holy land of the Hum nation, the holy land of all humans. This is where the epitome of humanity lies, the dream destination of countless people. Whether it's in terms of crafting, woodworking, medicine, science, cultivation, politics or anything else in which humanity has even a modicum of success, it's taught here.

"For hundreds of years, all people who have been displaced by the Kraven war are relocated to the Academy, where they are taught whatever skill they can best use to contribute to the nation. In times of war, even a single free hand cannot be spared. So, prepare yourself. Once you're feeling better, you'll be off to the assessment center. I know it can't be easy for you, suffering from so much loss, which is why it's even better to focus on something positive."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 227: Assessment Center

The good news was, as Lex understood it, that he was in an academy, so he could finally undergo a systematic learning of cultivation. The bad news was, he was either expected to be a student, or work to somehow contribute to the war efforts of the nation.

He wasn't against contributing per se, but that would likely make it harder for him to gather large amounts of energy for the system. Speaking of which...

Lex opened the system and was surprised to find that it looked quite different. Not only were there many more options available to him, but the system was much more flexible in how it operated. This meant that, for example, if Lex wanted to start a service that wasn't officially offered by the system, he could have the system design it.

An example of this was how the barbershop was something Lex designed on his own, but it wasn't inherently a part of the system. He could not upgrade the shop the same way he could upgrade everything else. Yet now he was able to ask the system to design a barbershop, and not only would the system create it, but it would automatically give it various perks.

The downside to this was that every time Lex used one of the system features that were above his normal authority, the energy consumption from that would come from his pool of energy that he was building to return from this realm.

Speaking of which, there was a progress bar in the system detailing the amount of energy built up for that exact purpose. Currently, it was at 0%, and should Lex leave it up to the system to gather energy on its own, it would take exactly 100 years.

Ways in which Lex could contribute to the energy build up included but were not limited to, absorbing energy on his own - which would barely help - or deposit a large amount of spiritual stones or other treasures which had a high concentration of energy, go to areas with a general higher concentration of energy etc.

Lex spent the night planning ahead, and went over some of the more advanced features of the system he wanted to use. Although using them would slow down his return, god only knew when Lex would actually be able to return, and using these features would help him tremendously. Of course, he needed to wait till he had at least some energy at his disposal until he could use them.

With his planning done, Lex decided to try something out. Since one of his most immediate priorities was to absorb energy, there was a possibility that he had the perfect helper for that.

"Hey, World Seed Lotus, are you awake?" Lex whispered, as he rubbed his hand across the tattoo on his back.

'Yes, Mr. Innkeeper, how can I help you?' Lex heard a drowsy, infantile voice in his head. He also noticed that the gentle stream of energy he was always receiving from the tattoo became slightly warmer. Maybe that was an indication of when the Lotus was awake or asleep.

'I'm looking for areas or items with a very high energy density,' Lex replied in his mind. 'You think you could point them out to me if I come near one?'

'Okay Mr. Innkeeper,' the Lotus replied, followed by the sound of a yawn. Once that was done, the tattoo returned to its normal temperature, indicating that it had returned to its slumber.

Lex didn't know if the Lotus would be able to help him, but he could only hope. Once he was done, he went to sleep, as tomorrow would be a long day.

He was woken up early in the morning by the nurse, who took him for a checkup. After answering a number of questions, and ensuring the nurse that he was fine despite the fact that 'his memories did not return', he was escorted to a doctor's room. The doctor, an old man rifling through a horde of papers, mumbling to himself, eyed Lex once he entered the room and told him to stand on the silver platform.

The technology in this realm was quite advanced, but did not progress in the same way as humans on Earth who relied on a version of science lacking any understanding of spirit energy, and fueled by electricity. Here, not only was their understanding of science more complete, their technology was fueled by spirit energy.

As soon as Lex was positioned on the silver platform correctly, the doctor turned it on. Small grains of light started floating upwards from the platform, and every time one would touch Lex, his body would absorb it.

After a few minutes, the platform stopped releasing light, and the doctor indicated Lex to take a seat as he pulled up a hologram of Lex's body.

"A detailed report indicates that your spirit is still slightly injured, and you have a minor wound on your left temple. Neither of those are a major concern. I'll write you a prescription, and you should be as good as new in a couple of days. These wounds should not prevent you from undergoing the assessment, so I'll have the nurse discharge you."

Lex was surprised that his left temple was still wounded. It was, of course, from the injury he had received back on X-142, but while it seemed his skin had recovered, his skull had not yet fully healed.

Once Lex was discharged, the nurse returned all his personal items he had when he was admitted into the hospital, including his backpack, weapons and clothes. After that, she led him to a train that would lead him to the assessment center.

"Once you register for the academy, feel free to look for me if you're feeling under the weather," the nurse said as she winked at Lex. "My name's Honey, from the School of Medicine."

Before Lex could reply, the nurse had run off, giggling. Lex was dumbstruck. Had she been flirting with him the entire time, or was it just now? Completely unaware that he was grinning, Lex climbed onto the train, still thinking about Honey. She was definitely very pretty, and her voice was like a sweet melody. But this wasn't a good time to get caught up in a relationship. Or was it?

As wonderful as it was catching the eye of a lovely lady, Lex snapped out of his stupor as he arrived at the assessment center. To be clear, Lex was currently inside the academy, and it was bigger than any campus or university Lex had ever seen back on Earth. Considering he had to take a train while still within the Academy was a clear indicator of how large it really was.

Lex admired the architecture of the building in front of him. Unlike Earth, where buildings often repeated squares or rectangles in their design often, the buildings here rarely had sharp corners. Instead, they were melded into the environment so naturally, Lex could have almost believed that the buildings were natural traits of this world. Heck, since this realm operated under its own rules, that might actually be the case.

Lex walked into the building where a number of hosts were standing at the ready, asking those who entered the building for their purpose, then guiding them into the appropriate line. Things were operating so smoothly and efficiently that, as a New Yorker, Lex was slightly freaked out.

As Lex had been told he needed to report for an assessment before officially starting at the academy, he was brought to one of the shorter lines. Only a few minutes later, Lex reached the front of the line where a lady in uniform was registering everyone.

"Name?" she asked, not looking up from the silver pad in her lap. Lex could not see anything on the pad, but then again, maybe that was a security feature.

"Lex."

"Sponsor?"

"Excuse me?"

"Who sponsored your entry into the academy?" she asked with irritation evident in her voice.

"I'm not sure. I woke up at the hospital, and the nurse told me to get assessed."

"Woke up at the...?" The woman was startled as she quickly looked up and seemed to recognize Lex.

"Oh, you're the survivor from Gristol? Please follow me. Your registration will be handled by someone else."

Lex felt it strange that people knew about him. What the nurse told him made him think surviving an attack by Kraven was a common occurrence, but special treatment meant something else. Whether this was a good thing or bad thing was yet to be determined, mostly by how much it would interfere with his plan. He was hoping the academy would be a good source of information, not just about cultivation and stuff, but about this world... or realm, whatever the correct terminology was.

He was led into a room where a man in some kind of military uniform had been waiting. When he saw Lex he blatantly observed him, but refrained from saying anything, and only took the silver pad from the lady before she left.

"Now let's get started, shall we," the man said with a glaring smile. Somehow, his smile only made Lex nervous.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 228: Fernain Village

"What's your name?" the uniformed man asked.

"Lex."

"Just Lex?"

"Yes."

"Alright, Lex from Gristol, stand on this platform," the man indicated to a silver platform identical to the one used by the doctor.

"My health has already been verified by a doctor, I'm good to take the assessment."

"This is not a health check up child, this IS the assessment. Or at least, the start of it."

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Lex went and stood on the platform, once again prompting the release of the grains of floating light.

"Are you familiar with how the assessment goes?" the man asked while reviewing the result of Lex's exam.

"No."

"The assessment is not so simple or straightforward, and it is a lengthy ordeal. It does not have a fixed format, because the result of each test affects the proceeding test. When the Academy started, the way we operated was mundane, and we let the students choose what they wanted to study. Eventually we learnt, not only was such a method inefficient in garnering results, students were choosing their subjects on things as arbitrary as happiness."

The man paused at this moment and grinned at Lex, as if waiting for him to respond. When Lex gave him a deadpan look, completely uncaring, he chuckled and continued.

"Maybe things such as pursuing happiness and personal interests can be done in times of peace. But we are not at peace, we are at war. And not only that, we are in a war we have been slowly losing for hundreds of years. So, the Academy is not a place for you to pursue your hobbies or passions, it's a place where your most useful skill is identified and then trained.

"People think they know what they are good at, or what they like, based on what they've experienced. But out of hundreds of professions and skills, how many could you have really tried? So, child, we designed an assessment to accurately determine what profession is most suited to you."

The uniformed man paused again, but Lex gave him no reaction. He had plenty of experience with weirdos, and this guy was giving Lex very strong Marlo vibes. Yes, he had yet to burst into maniacal laughter. But, his grinning every five seconds was creeping Lex out, and there was no way Lex was going to give the man more reasons to unveil his weirdness.

Besides, as it was, Lex didn't care what profession he was assigned as long as it didn't hamper him from getting the information he wanted later on. With limited options, and a limited understanding of how things operated here, Lex remained silent, his face completely blank of all expressions.

Lex could visibly see the disappointment in his eyes when he got no reaction, but he continued. "However, the assessment is not limited to what happens once you start. Sometimes, if you have notable moments in your life, they are fed into the assessment before you even begin, which influences how your tests go. The reason why I am taking your personal details, instead of going through the regular procedure, is because of what you encountered on your way here."

"Wasn't it just a Kraven? I thought they were very common."

"JUST A KRAVEN!" the man finally yelled in excitement, confirming Lex's suspicions that this man was kin to the mad Marlo. "No, my child, that was not JUST a Kraven. I can't believe after facing that thing, you still have the guts to call it 'just a Kraven'. I was actually the one to personally debrief the rescue party, and what you faced technically wasn't even a Kraven. It was merely the cut off flesh of a Kraven, acting on instinct. But that's not what's important. The important thing here is that the flesh belonged to an Earth Immortal Kraven."

That term attracted Lex's attention, as he strongly suspected it was the name of yet another cultivation level, but the man did not seem to notice.

"Child, even if it was a piece of flesh, I have never seen a kid face even the flesh of an Immortal and survive, let alone a Qi training brat! The how, the why, the maybe of it all doesn't matter to me. What matters is, all the other survivors gave testimony of how you faced the brunt of that beings focus, and your mind hasn't exploded!

"So, I am here to view your assessment personally, and to let you know, child, that the end result of the assessment can still be anything, but you're already being tested for the most elite special forces of the Hum Nation." The man grinned as he stared at Lex, as if he was looking at the most beautiful woman in the world.

"The assessment is long and arduous, and can sometimes take days or weeks. I will give you only one piece of advice: survive. The assessments are open-ended, with no specific objective designated, so my suggestion to you is, take in all the information you are given, and focus on survival, and if you face any opposition, just remember the Academy's motto."

"What's the motto?" Lex asked, before suddenly remembering he was trying to avoid reacting to the man.

But the man did not answer, and only grinned, making Lex flinch. There was definitely something wrong with the motto, just like there was something wrong with this man. Maybe all strong people were a little crazy.

"When you're ready, step onto the gold platform and your assessment will begin," the man said, before stepping out of the room and leaving Lex on his own.

The theory behind the Academy's assessment was amazing. Lex didn't like it one bit, but it was amazing nonetheless - if it truly achieved what it claimed.

Lex took a deep breath, and let out a sigh. Lex was stuck in this realm for a while, so it was best to integrate into this world as seamlessly as possible, but the way things were going... Lex strongly doubted the people here were believers of democracy and choice. Whatever the case was, Lex knew he could not under any circumstances qualify as an 'elite special forces'. Lex had seen enough movies to know how they all ended up, and he had no intention of bogging himself down with endless training and fighting.

No one had stopped Lex from taking his equipment along with him so, after checking if everything was in place, Lex stepped off the silver platform and stepped onto the gold one. A green ring of light seemed to scan Lex once, before Lex suddenly felt a whiplash and fell backwards.

Suddenly, he was no longer in an office. Lex had fallen into a deep pile of snow, burying his body all the way to his chest. He was at the edge of a snow-covered forest, with an endless sea of trees behind him and a clearing leading towards a valley in front of him.

Some distance off, Lex could see a small village, with smoke coming out of multiple chimneys. The streets were nearly empty, with only a few people moving about.

A ball of yellow light appeared in front of Lex, and started to say, "Assessment Number 1: In front of you is Fernain Village. In 24 hours, the village will be hit with a tremendous snowstorm. In approximately 26 hours, a tribe of Kalter Flug will pass through this area. In approximately 30 hours, the Sol birds are expected to leave the area. In 40 hours, the assessment will be complete."

With the information given, the yellow light disappeared, leaving a confused and flabbergasted Lex behind. What the hell kind of an assessment was this? There was no objective, no instructions, no...

Lex paused as something suddenly clicked in his mind. He didn't know how they would assess him, if this was a real place or a simulation of some kind, and if he was being recorded, but he had a theory. By dropping him in a potentially dangerous environment, with forewarning of various impending threats and events, his reaction would reveal a lot. How he handled the stress, how he gathered information, how he survived, whether he helped people or used them, everything could be analyzed.

Suffering from a severe lack of information, Lex picked himself up, first looked at the village, then turned towards the forest as he equipped his Fancy Monocle. He would eventually go to the village, but scouting out the forest a bit wasn't a bad idea either.

If a snowstorm was coming, the ideal place to survive would be in the village. But the building's strength and integrity also mattered a lot, not to mention they would need firewood, as well as a small supply of food. Since it was winter time wherever this place was, hunting was probably hard, so fruits and nuts would be his main source of food.

Of course, Lex had some dry rations in his backpack, but that was not something he planned on revealing to a village full of strangers.

He also needed to find out what these 'Kalter Flug' and 'Sol birds' were. Chances were high that these beings were native to the area, and so the villagers would have at least some basic information about them, and how to deal with them if they became a problem.

The most important thing to figure out was, could he get hurt during the assessment or were there some kind of safety measures? It would be a bad idea to kill your students before you even had a chance to teach them anything, but this wouldn't be the first society to take a spartan approach to training, and Lex didn't want to take any chances.

Just as Lex was monologuing in his mind, Mary reappeared after a long time.

"Hey Lex, there's a situation at the Inn," she said, looking awkward.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 229: Husband and Wife

"What happened?" Lex asked calmly, keeping himself from expecting the worst. Being a universal business owner meant constantly putting out fires. He no longer let something as minor as being trapped in another realm, or hiccups with his primary business, cause him to panic.

"Well, remember how you were searching for people with special skills using the Mystery trial? A couple showed up yesterday, both went into the Mystery trial, and after a few tries, both of them completed the trial! On top of that, the husband is a swordsman, and the wife is a historian, two of the kinds of people you were looking for. I... cannot see what prize the trial gave them, but they both seemed very pleased with the results, and wanted to talk to you.

"Since you obviously cannot meet with them, I took the liberty to do so, but uh... I cannot help them with their concern. Both of them want to be hired at the Inn."

"That... doesn't sound like a problem. Why are you so embarrassed?"

"Well, it's the first time I appeared in front of a guest, and I really wanted to help them... but I... anyway, with your increased authority you can scan them even though you're not at the Inn. And then, you can initiate the hiring test via the Platinum key directly from there as well, if you wish."

Lex paused for a moment as he tried to focus on the Inn, and an image popped in his head like a surveillance camera. The couple in question were... unusual, to say the least.

The husband was wearing a robe, while his hands, feet and face were covered in bandages, making him look like a mummy out of a movie. The wife, instead of bandages, had covered her entire body in mismatching clothes, ensuring that none of her skin was visible either. To top it all off, black smoke hovered around her, making it hard for people to see her figure in the first place.

Lex scanned them mentally and was quite intrigued by the results.

The husbands scan was:

Name: Qawiun

Age: 120,384

Sex: -/Male

Cultivation Details: Earth Immortal

Species: -/Sentient Sword

Midnight Inn Prestige Level: 1

History: A sword that gained sentience through a twist of fate. Starting out as a common sword, it was given to a soldier who made many contributions, until it became nothing more than a memento and family heirloom. Eventually, as the family declined, the sword was sold to an adventurer, who later died in a spirit well, leaving the sword there for several millennia. For reasons unknown, instead of developing a spirit stone mine, the well channeled all its energy into the sword until it gained sentience.

Remarks: A sword identifying as a man gives a whole new meaning to gender identity

The wife's scan was:

Name: Anita

Age: 499,999

Sex: Female

Cultivation Details: Earth Immortal

Species: Human/Lich

Midnight Inn Prestige Level: 1

Bloodline: -/Luminous Spirit

History: At the dawn of human civilization on her planet, she was the Queen she led, the warrior that fought, the murderer that massacred, and the mother of innovation. When she felt her subjects were too stupid to rule, she ended her retirement and discovered a way around death and led the humans out from the brink of extinction. Then, one day, she decided to nap, but forgot to wake up. 350,000 years later, she was woken from her slumber by the sword that became her husband.

Condition: The patient has been pregnant for 2950 years. Her expected date of delivery is in 50 years. The patient is in an extremely weakened state and should avoid strenuous activities such as traversing space, disinfected in active volcanoes, leading a revolution against the zombies, trying to subvert fate and relinquish the control of her own destiny, etc.

Remarks: Impending motherhood has made her docile. She no longer tortures the souls of her enemies and even lets them go sometimes.

Lex sighed in awe of how unusual the universe was, but didn't dwell on it for too long. He shared the information with Mary, before telling her, "they are too powerful to enter the Inn permanently. I can still accept them, but I need to wait till I have at least 1% energy in the system so I can use some of the higher authority functions. Tell them that I'm slightly busy, and will give an answer soon. Considering their long lives, even making them wait a dozen years probably won't mean much to them."

Mary nodded and turned to her task. Lex would have loved to observe the Inn some more, but he had more pressing matters at the moment. Getting a decent understanding of the terrain and the kind of

trees in the forest, and more importantly, feeding all that information to his monocle, gave him the edge he needed.

He gathered some pinecones - or the equivalent in this realm - as well as some fruit that the monocle said was not poisonous to him, and then headed towards the village. As he expected, he didn't run into any wildlife while he scouted and the path towards the village was completely desolate. Well, mostly desolate...

Lex saw a familiar green ring of light and then saw someone fall in the snow. However, unlike Lex's bewildered reaction, the boy, who seemed much younger than Lex, quickly got up and assessed his surroundings. Upon noticing Lex, he took a step back and drew out a short sword, instantly creating a standoff.

The strange situation only lasted a few seconds before a yellow orb appeared and informed the boy of his assessment details, which were identical to Lex's.

"What's with the dagger? Are we supposed to be competing for the assessment or something?"

Lex was not taking the kids' threat too seriously, mostly because, as a defense mechanism, Lex could easily gauge the threat level of anyone weaker than him, or near his cultivation level. It was instinctual. The kid's cultivation was higher than Lex's, but his threat was minimal to none.

"You're also taking this assessment?" he asked, surprised.

"Yeah, though I didn't know other people could take the assessment with you. I guess they're checking teamwork or something. Do you have any idea if this is a simulation or if this place is real?"

"Simulation? What are you talking about? Of course this place is real. Didn't they brief you about the assessment before sending you?"

"No, I didn't get any briefings. To be honest, I didn't even feel like asking questions because the guy assessing me was smiling at me like some kind of predator. The first thing I'm going to do once I get out of here is report him to the police as some kind of threat."

Back in the assessment center, in a room full of people watching this particular assessment, the uniformed man's wide grin suddenly twitched and everyone in the room turned to look at him with wary eyes.

"He's just joking," the uniformed man managed to say between gritted teeth, right before Lex said, "I swear I'm not joking. It was so creepy, I would have jumped into a lion's den without asking questions to get away from him. Speaking of which, do you know what the academy's motto is? Also, if this place is real, does that mean our life is in danger?"

The man's face spasmed as he tried to control himself, but that made his grin look even creepier.

Back on the snowy mountain, the kid explained to Lex, "our life is not in danger because as soon as it's threatened, we'll be teleported back. But, if that happens, that'll affect our assessment score. To pass the assessment, we just need to survive long enough for the assessment to end. But barely anyone does that. The more stuff you do, the better and more accurate your result will be.

"A snowstorm is coming, not to mention a tribe of Kalter Flug. We can survive on our own if we hide or run far away, but the damage that village will suffer is real. Their houses could be damaged and lives could be lost. Even if I have to risk cutting the assessment short, I can't just ignore real human lives over something like that."

Lex thought for a second. Even with his increased strength, he would not risk being without shelter in a snowstorm. Hypothermia was a real risk, even to cultivators, not to mention any other danger a snowstorm would bring with it. That was absolutely fine because it had never even occurred to Lex to run away from the village like the boy was suggesting, but if he planned on helping out, he needed to understand the incoming dangers some more."

"Do you know what a Kalter Flug is? Because I've never heard of it. And while we're on that topic, why did you dismiss the Sol birds? Are they not a threat?"

"How do you not know what a Sol bird is?" the boy asked, genuinely startled by Lex's ignorance.

Even the uniformed man and his team who were watching the assessment frowned at this revelation.

Lex shrugged as he casually answered, "I suffered some damage to my spirit and lost some memories. The nurse told me I'll either get them back or make up for them."

"But... how bad is your memory loss if you even forgot that? How could they let you take the assessment like this?"

Upon seeing Lex only casually shrug, the boy pointed a finger up into the sky towards the sun.

"That up there is a flock of Sol birds. They're the primary source of light in our world."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 230: False expectations

Lex's jaw dropped as he looked up into the sky with squinted eyes. It was only then that he noticed that what he had so far assumed was the 'sun' seemed to be moving in the sky.

The birds were too bright for Lex to observe them directly, but now that he was looking up in the sky, he was able to notice that there was no great ball of fire in the sky. It was only now that Mary's description of a realm had sunk in. This realm or world or large landmass, whatever it was, existed as a single entity as large as Earth's solar system. First of all, that was so much land that Lex found it difficult to comprehend. Secondly, if the entire realm existed as one landmass, how did the seasons work? What was the distinction between night and day? What would happen if you kept traveling directly up? Would you hit some kind of ceiling?

What would happen if one of those birds wanted to take a rest, and flew down? Were they just a source of light, or were they extremely hot as well, like the sun? How did the plants survive if this world was dependent on birds for light? Was there a secondary source of light?

Lex suppressed all his curiosity and focused on the matter at hand. His survival was not in question since he would be pulled back if his life was in danger, but that did not mean he was looking forward to being pushed to that brink. The birds were... a matter he would look into later.

It was clear to him now that he lacked certain 'common sense and knowledge' when it came to this realm, so sticking with this kid would be for the best. After all, between these Kraven everyone was at

war with, and these birds that gave sunlight... sol-light? Basically, with all the weird stuff going on, he had no idea what to expect.

"My name is Lex," he introduced himself. "My memory may be foggy, but I think we'll do better if we stick together, don't you? My combat skills are not bad, so if we encounter any danger I should be able to take care of it."

The boy quickly went over a few thoughts in his mind, and suddenly realized this for the opportunity that it was. If he could get Lex to follow him, it would show leadership skill in his assessment, and affect his final role.

"The name is Drum," the boy said, putting his short-sword away finally. "Since your memory is affected, I think it might be a good idea if you follow my lead. This is already my third assessment, and I did really well in all the previous ones, so this should be no different."

"What's the plan then, Drum?" Lex asked, neither saying yes nor no to his suggestion. Although Lex himself had the idea of using the kid to cover his gaps in knowledge, taking orders from him felt... icky. Of course, that didn't mean he wouldn't listen to good sense when he heard it.

Besides, the feeling had nothing to do with the kid in question. Rather, Lex had gotten so used to being in charge and then giving orders as the Innkeeper, suddenly taking orders felt wrong to him. That was also part of the reason why Lex was so uncooperative with the uniformed man. Lex had no authority here while that man could do as he pleased, a thought that was off-putting.

Drum didn't seem to notice, and started heading towards the village. "They need to be warned about the snowstorm and everything else. We can just tell them we're students of the academy, that should help convince them that we're telling the truth. And, to answer your earlier question, I don't know much about Kalter Flug so we can also collect some information about them if the villagers know anything."

"Do you have a student ID or something to prove what you're saying? Unless you do, I suggest we own up about taking an assessment, and be truthful about the incoming dangers. More importantly, we need to find the village head, or someone well respected in the village. Explaining the situation to one person will be a lot easier than explaining the story to every person in the village. Once that's done, we can take suggestions from him about how to plan for the upcoming storm. A native of the area would know better than us about how to survive in these conditions."

Drum nodded and accepted Lex's suggestions. As long as he was the one walking in front, and the so-called 'party leader', he was completely fine listening to Lex's suggestions.

As the duo approached the village, they discussed ways in which they could help overcome the incoming issues. That's when Lex realized that he was severely lacking in skills.

Drum boasted some basic woodworking and engineering skills, which should help reinforce some buildings if required, as well as advanced knowledge of formations. Well, advanced for his level. Either way, the only help Lex could provide was manual labor.

While Drums' ego was boosted seeing how he was more skilled than his older counterpart, Lex was actually happy with how things were turning out. The more Drum shined, the less likely he would be selected for some elite squad. All Lex wanted was some decent guidance on cultivation and access to a library. He had no idea how he would gather the energy he needed and would have to do plenty of research.

The duo attracted quite a bit of attention as they neared the village, as two men walking through waist high snow to reach an unremarkable village was not a common sight. A small crowd of what Lex assumed was the patrol or volunteer guards waited for them on the boundary of the village.

"Ahoy strangers, you're pretty far off from civilization. Are ye lost or something?" one of the men yelled towards them.

"Not lost, we're assessment takers for the Academy," Drum yelled back, which seemed to garner a positive response. "Take us to your village elder, we need to have a discussion with him."

The modestly armed villagers happily 'escorted' Lex and Drum to the village leader so that they could talk, and so that they'd be near at hand should the leader decide the two were untrustworthy.

Drum explained the incoming danger, as well as how they knew the information. There was a risk in doing this, for if the villagers didn't believe them, then they would have no recourse. If they had instead lied and just asked for lodging, and weathered the storm while hiding and not informing anyone of the incoming danger, it would have been easier to survive, but it would have also affected how they would be designated.

Drum had explained the grading process to Lex. The assessment would give two results, the first being what profession was most suitable for the student to pursue, and the second being their grade within that profession. For example, Drum explained that he hoped to be designated a formation master. But not all formation masters were the same, as some were better than others. The better your grade within the profession, the more you would be nurtured by the academy. It need not be said that Drum was aiming for the highest level.

Lex didn't care much for trying to pick a specific profession, since he was not familiar with the options. He would just take things as they came, and currently, things were not going according to how Drum wanted.

The villagers believed the two about the incoming storm as well as danger, but Drum had envisioned the village then treating him as some kind of leader afterwards, which would give him a chance to show off his skills. They should have been grateful for the information and impressed by their status as students of the academy. They should have been awed and honored.

Instead, as the villagers were so used to these problems, they already had a system in place of how to react, leaving Lex and Drum with little to contribute. At most, they could help with manual labor. Furthermore, because Drum was fairly young, and Lex only just coming into proper adulthood, they did not give either of them any of the reverence Drum had been expecting.

Drum didn't like being sidelined and was sulking, while Lex had already inquired about where they could stay, and how they could get food. The villagers may have a way to take care of themselves, but that didn't mean that the hospitality they extended would provide the same security. Now Lex had to look out for himself.

Lex also asked about heating, and if they required chopping down trees and logging, but he had underestimated the village. All the houses had central heating, powered by spirit stones, with each house having its own independent supply so they didn't need to worry about power loss during the storm.