

Innkeeper 231

The Innkeeper

Chapter 231: Another Programming language

"How can you be okay with this?" asked an exasperated Drum. It had been a few hours since they arrived and both he and Lex had been given one room to share in the village leader's house.

While Drum had tried hard to impress upon the villagers that he could help reinforce their buildings, or perhaps build some formations, the villagers did not take up his suggestions. First of all, their houses were not weak structures, and had survived their fair share of snow storms. Secondly, due to the weather in these parts, they had encountered many wild beasts and so long as they stayed inside their well-built homes, they would be fine.

Not only were their homes sturdy, the wood they had used was actually an excellent insulator, so they could remain warm and cozy even in the harshest of conditions. The only thing they had to care about was food.

"If they don't want our help, then it's not like you can force them. Just take your own precautions. The assessment will last a long time, and I don't like relying on others. Maybe you should scavenge some food, 40 hours is a long time. Or, if you really want to build a formation, build one in our room. We tried to help the villagers, if they don't want help it's on them, doesn't mean we need to risk our own lives."

"Fine, let's go scavenge what we can."

"Not right now, I'm taking a nap."

Lex's reply irked Drum, which in turn entertained Lex. Once Lex was done with his 'nap' they went out to gather some more food from the forest and helped out around the village however they could. Once they returned to their room, Drum confessed that he couldn't build a formation because he didn't have any of the materials required, as he had hoped that the villagers would be able to provide him with the basics since he was supposed to be helping them.

That reminded Lex of the ring John had given him which stored a book about arrays. Since they were stuck in a room for 40 hours, or so it seemed, Lex took out the ring and started reading up on it.

The books did not seem to be written in an instructive format, but was rather the author's introspection on the topics being discussed. Let alone the universe, even a single galaxy was too wide a scope for the author to speculate on the origin of formations and arrays within it, so he simply discussed how he himself first discovered them.

It started when the author became the strongest being on his planet, but was not strong enough to actually leave the planet, nor was his civilization technologically advanced enough. With endless power and nothing to do, the author began to explore his world when he encountered a strange phenomenon.

There was a single point in an otherwise unremarkable place that had the highest concentration of spirit energy he had ever seen. But the energy only covered roughly ten square feet of area. A single step outside, and not only would he return to an area of common energy concentration, he could not even detect the higher concentration energy, as it was perfectly camouflaged.

After studying it for a while, he discovered that there was no hidden heritage or overwhelming secret. The way physical features influenced the common world, like wind speeding up in a valley or the chill of winter turning rain into snow, so too were various coincidental spiritual features resulting in this specific outcome.

The small area happened to be above the tip of an undiscovered spirit stone vein. But the vein was covered by a certain type of rock that acted as an insulator. However, a recent earthquake caused a crack to form, which allowed the spiritual energy to break through. Then, there was a certain type of vegetation in the area that had deep roots and absorbed any stray spiritual energy, but the specific ten square feet area was devoid of roots as it was host to a kind of insect that fed on roots.

Long story short, basically a series of seemingly mundane events led to a phenomenal result. That's when the author started experimenting, since he literally had nothing better to do. He did not delve into the nature of his experiments, and skipped directly to the result.

According to the author, formations and arrays both were simply taking the mundane and using them to produce extraordinary results.

After that the book was abridged and directly went to the topic of arrays. Lex read for about five minutes before he facepalmed. Then he read the description again and then facepalmed one more time.

Drum noticed Lex's strange behavior, but he was not in the mood to inquire. After a few minutes of feeling sorry for himself, Lex resumed reading the book.

The author gave a long and convoluted, as well as unnecessarily philosophical explanation for what arrays were and how they functioned. Lex, instead, could define an array in three words. It was programming.

Arrays could theoretically do everything a formation could do, albeit a weaker version of it, but the benefit was that arrays did not require any external material the way formations did. Arrays only required the array master, spiritual energy and a series of symbols that the author had categorized as the universal language.

The symbols weren't really a language, but the author observed that when spiritual energy was manipulated in certain shapes outside of one's body, in the natural environment, they gave birth to certain effects. The author compiled these symbols by studying things that existed in nature. For example, by studying a plant that released frosty spiritual energy, after a lot of trial and error, he was able to surmise a symbol that did the same - again, on a much weaker level than the actual physical plant. The symbol itself was identical to the venation of that plant.

After collecting thousands of such symbols, he gathered them together and called them the universal language, since these patterns were what the universe used to express its design. Of course, just having the symbols was not good enough, he needed to understand the 'grammar' of the language to understand how the multiple symbols could be arranged.

So much fancy jargon, but to Lex, it meant something simple. An 'array master' was the programmer, the array itself was the software, and the universal language was the programming language, and the 'grammar' was the syntax.

No doubt, arrays were an extremely useful tool as the author had given many examples of scenarios where he had used them, but just thinking about the fact that Lex had to learn yet ANOTHER programming language made him facepalm.

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Chapter 232: Death flags

As daunting as it was, trying to learn another programming lang- no, uh, trying to learn arrays, Lex only paused temporarily to lament. Once he got it out of his system, he continued to read the book.

The first and most basic principle of arrays was that to use one, you needed to control spirit energy outside of your body. This was not something Qi training cultivators could do, but the author had stated a few ways around this drawback. To use any of them though, Lex would need certain tools which he did not currently have, so he skipped that part and continued onwards to how arrays worked.

It was... both very simple, and yet complex at the same time. Perhaps because Lex was used to writing code, he was used to thinking in a systematic manner which would allow him to create working software from scratch. In this scenario, he could understand the building blocks of a functioning array and could envision how to reach a certain effect from scratch.

It remained to be tested if things would be as simple as he assumed, but, in theory, it should be. What was hard for him was memorizing the thousands of symbols and their subsequent effects.

Actual programming language was easier for Lex to learn because it was written in English and the syntax was usually designed to make sense. These symbols, however, were not an actual language and did not have meanings but effects. Lex could already tell that it would take him a long, long time before he began to grasp the nature of the symbols well enough to make his own arrays rather than copy existing ones.

Of course, it must not be forgotten that even copying existing arrays was not a simple and easy task or else everyone would be doing it.

Lex lost himself in studying so deeply that he did not feel the time pass at all. He did not notice Drum pacing in the room, nor when a soft, constant buzzing sound started to creep into the room.

For Lex, it felt like one moment it was complete silence and he was engrossed in his studies, and the next second a loud, constant scraping sound filled the room, breaking his concentration.

"What's that?" Lex asked in alarm.

"It's the snowstorm," Drum answered. By now, he had calmed down and was meditating in a corner. "It's odd because only 18 hours have passed since I arrived. The snowstorm is early. Usually, the academy's information is accurate."

"Were the villagers able to finish their preparations?"

"Yes, though when they saw the storm on the horizon, even they were worried. It's larger and faster than usual, which could mean trouble. I asked about the Kalter Flug. They're an unusual species of spirits that live in snowstorms. They fuse with snowflakes or hail, and are extremely vicious. They have short lives, but are generally very strong and very violent, and will attack any living thing caught in the storm."

"Sounds excellent. Any idea on how one is supposed to fight them? Or at least, hide from them?"

"When they're born, they're very small, but the more time they spend in the storm, the bigger they get. Small ones are easy to deal with, if you are able to hit them. A simple bash of any kind will destroy them. But the bigger they get, the harder they are to deal with. Not only does their defense increase, the ones made from snowflakes have extremely sharp bodies that could cut you in half in a split second. Again, the only real way to fight them is to destroy their bodies."

Lex rubbed his eyes. This was excellent news. Who didn't love being stuck in a snowstorm surrounded by monsters that grew stronger the longer they spent in the storm?

"The assessment didn't state how long the storm would last, but I'm going to assume it'll last the entire time we're here. The Kalter Fluf may be weak in the beginning, but they'll grow stronger towards the end, which is why we should get as much rest as we can," Lex said, as he put the book away.

He ate most of the food he had managed to scavenge and then lay down to sleep. Despite the constant noise, it was not a problem for Lex to fall asleep. Drum continued to meditate, and the duo remained that way until a sharp, screeching sound abruptly woke up Lex. Before he could ask what happened, the building shook, as if something had struck it. It happened a few more times before the shaking finally stopped.

"They're here," Drum said as he looked Lex in the eye. Outside, the storm was still raging, and the Kalter Flug had finally shown up. Occasionally, they would hear more screeches, and the building would shake, but nothing more happened.

Just to be safe, the duo decided to go ask their host if this was normal. The village leader's house was only slightly bigger than the rest of the houses in the village, and so it was not hard at all for them to locate him. He was sitting in the dining hall, drinking tea while his wife read a story to his two children.

Seeing them so calm and peaceful, Lex was able to relax a bit and set his worries aside. He also pretended the village leader, whose name Lex could not remember for even a moment, did not raise any death flags when he laughed and told Lex that their houses were absolutely secure and there had never been an incident where the storm or the spirits were able break in.

Yes, no death flags were raised at all, even by Drum, who laughed and said this would be the easiest assessment he ever had. As for why Lex took out Heavy Harley and started counting his ammunition and checking up on all his defensive gear? No reason in particular.

Then, a few hours later, the Sol birds also left. Even though all the windows to the outside had been shut, Lex was easily able to tell the birds left because the temperature dropped sharply. Even with a heavily insulated house and central heating, Lex was able to see fog when he exhaled.

An hour later, the lights in the house shutdown and the heating stopped. Something had gone awry.

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Chapter 233: Snowflakes

"Wake up," said Lex very seriously as took out a flashlight and attached it to his gun. Drum had been sleeping comfortably after stuffing himself. Lex had spent this time reading the array book and resting, making sure that he was ready in case anything happened.

While Drum woke up and tried to understand what was happening while still groggy, Lex went out and searched for the village leader.

"What happened?" Lex asked, his voice somber.

"Nothing, young man," the village leader replied while chucking. "There seems to be an issue with my house's internal wiring. We'll have to wait till the storm is over to fix it, so it'll be a little tough having to

make do with the cold, but it's nothing too serious. I was just coming over to give you boys some blankets."

Since he was insisting that there was no issue, Lex did not press the matter, but he kept his guard up. The very next moment the village leader's house was hit once again, as it continuously had been for the past few hours, but this time, the whole house wobbled.

'Mr. Innkeeper,' the Lotus suddenly spoke in Lex's mind. 'There's a wave of very strong spiritual energy heading our way. It'll pass us by in around an hour.'

As soon as the Lotus spoke, Lex was sure that things would not go by smoothly. He could not tell if the wave of energy was the result of the snowstorm, or vice versa, but he was sure that this would not be 'just another storm' as the village leader kept insisting.

Unfortunately, Lex was right. The house suffered yet another attack, followed by a screech so loud it shook Lex to his core, accompanied by the sound of a collapsing wall. The temperature in the house dropped immediately as all the doors were banged open by a raging wind.

It was fortunate that the wall that collapsed was of their living room, which was empty at the moment. It didn't matter for much though, as the Kalter Flug were already swarming in the house. All Lex saw was the snow carried by the wind, but his protective treasure turned on and covered Lex in a blue light. It saved him from getting cut in half, but could not stop the momentum of the attack launching him back.

Whatever had attacked him was way stronger than him! What the hell kind of test was this? Lex picked himself up just in time to see the village leader get sliced into many pieces. Many ravenous, massive snowflakes piled up on the leader's body, ready to eat the corpse.

Horror and shock filled Lex's heart, but not panic. As if he had practiced a million times, Lex raised his gun and started shooting at the snowflakes.

Despite their incredible strength, their bodies were extremely fragile, and each bullet was able to easily kill them. Yet the sound only attracted the snowflakes, and more and more swarmed towards him.

In the Heavy Harley, Lex had loaded the spirit magazine, which could fire up to 100 bullets with one magazine. But while 100 was a lot, it was not infinite so Lex had to be mindful and not shoot endlessly.

Lex failed on his first try, but on his second try, Lex started using Falcon's relief to speed up his movements as he dodged the snowflakes as he tried to kill him. The raging winds chilled and slowed down Lex, and fought against him to slow him down, the Kalter Flug rushed him in swarms, moving faster than his eyes could track.

Lex was not dodging consciously, but moving around randomly to try to avoid as many as he could because they were just too fast. Suddenly, Drum was beside Lex and he fired a weapon that released some kind of pulse that shattered all the snowflakes in the room, giving them a much needed moment of respite.

"I went... the family... dead..." Drum stuttered between ragged breaths, his face as pale as the snow that was quickly filling up the house.

"We need to hide..." Lex had only begun to say, when more Kalter Flug, this time even larger than the previous ones, entered the room and rushed at them. It was too dark for Lex to have noticed them when they entered, and by the time he saw them, they were mere millimeters away from Drums neck.

A light flashed, and Drum disappeared, causing the clump of snowflakes to fly right past Lex. No longer wasting any time, Lex started running again, but could not dodge an attack that once again flung him across the room.

"Shit," Lex cursed as he hurried to pick himself up. His protective treasure managed to keep him from taking the worst damage, but it still hurt like hell every time he was flung around like a rag doll.

But this time, despite Lex's quick reflexes and endless resilience, the Kalter Flug were too strong, too many, and too fast! Smart enough to realize attacks didn't work on Lex, they latched onto him harmlessly and dragged him out of the house.

At this point, Lex could not even shoot because the snowflakes were hugging his body so tight he could not move and the hand holding the Harley was pressed against his chest, aiming directly at Lex's mouth. Yet while they restrained him, they made sure not to hurt him to avoid triggering his treasure.

Everything was happening too fast. Lex felt like he was on a rollercoaster that never stopped spinning.

Unexpectedly, once they brought him out of the house, they flung Lex into a pile of snow and backed off. Dizzy, groggy, beaten and in pain, Lex picked himself up, his will still raging to crush some snowflakes! Yet, when he got his bearings, he froze.

Hundreds, no thousands, no millions of Kalter Flug of all shapes and sizes surrounded him, looking at him even though they had no eyes. The village was already gone, the houses already reduced to rubble, with little proof left that humans had once lived here.

He felt their hunger, their cruelty, their desire to consume everything as they surrounded him. Yet none of them moved. Even Lex knew that his treasure could not possibly protect him from such a horde, so what were they waiting for?

Lex was not quite sure why but, slowly, he looked up. Above him, in the sky that should have been as dark as the deepest void, a snowflake as massive as a mountain, with a pattern that drew a face, looked down upon him. The snowflake gave off a light of its own, which is why Lex was able to see that its face was too large to even fit into this valley, yet for some reason, the actual mountains that formed this valley suddenly seemed fragile.

Lex looked at the face that could even terrify death. Then he pointed his gun at the sky and fired.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 234: Crazy assessments

A few minutes before Lex's battle, back at the assessment center, a room full of analysts calmly watched what they knew would be the end of this humble human settlement.

"Isn't this a little too cruel?" asked a man before he started chewing on some nuts. This was the man that had saved Lex's life from the Kraven, and the one who had personally carried Lex back to the academy. "He just escaped the Kraven, aren't you worried you'll cripple him mentally?"

"Cripple him?" asked the uniformed man. "The little brat asked me what the big deal was in facing a Kraven even after facing the coercion of immortal Kraven flesh. He has no signs of mental trauma, but he also doesn't have any signs of the strong will for revenge that is common in Kraven attack survivors.

His entire county died and the kid still had no reaction. You think he'll flinch because some villagers died? I doubt it. But I'm still curious to see how he reacts to the situation. At least this village will get a chance to contribute slightly to the human cause before it's wiped."

No one in the room had any visible reaction as they saw the next scene unfold and the fight that ensued. Everyone was busy taking notes, but when the massive snowflake appeared, even they took a pause.

Then Lex shot at the sky, and they all freaked out! The uniform man yelled as he rushed to hit the emergency bail button that teleported Lex out from his location, but it was too late. By the time Lex was teleported away, he had already fired three shots. Lex had been sent to his next assessment, but now the academy had to deal with an angry tyrant.

"Send our Vice-Dean Elvis. That thing needs to die before it explodes!" the uniformed man yelled, his back drenched in sweat. What the hell kind of maniac was this kid?

Then he grinned. He would definitely get this kid in his class.

The teleportation applied by the academy had none of the finesse and gentleness of the Inns. Lex, who had been firing in the air, had been hit with another whiplash, and when he got up, he found himself standing on a plateau.

There were two Sol birds in the sky, but at opposite ends and both far on the horizon. It was like watching two sunsets at the same time.

A warm, gentle breeze blew across the slope, filling Lex's lungs with the smell of wild flowers. Animals grazed on the tall grass and flocks of birds flew in the air.

The dissonance from what Lex had just been experiencing, and what he was experiencing now was jarring.

Before he had time to think, a yellow orb appeared before him and started giving him instructions.

"3 kilometers directly to your right, a wounded academy student is fighting against a Red eared Gojur. The assessment will end in 30 minutes."

"What the shit!" Lex cursed loudly. He could not stop himself from getting angry. What kind of twisted game was this? They threw him into a village just to watch it be destroyed? If they teleported him there, then the academy could surely teleport some stronger people there as well. They could have saved all those people, but instead they turned it into a test.

And now, before he even had time to adjust to what happened, they were throwing another student's life away.

Lex really wanted to curse again. Instead, he activated Falcon's relief and started running 'to his right'. What the hell kind of stupid instructions were those?

Though Lex was running, he made sure not to run too fast, as he was in no mood to exhaust himself if he was going to face a fight.

He reached into his backpack, took out a shot of adrenaline mixed with rejuvenating serum, and stabbed it into his arm. His fight with the Kalter Flug had been short, but extremely draining.

15 minutes later, he finally saw the wounded student. It was a man covered in blood fighting against what could only be described as a kangaroo with the skin of a rhino, size of a hippo and the aggression of a chihuahua. Lex didn't bother to get a good look because he immediately turned around and ran in the opposite direction.

Both the student and whatever he was fighting were way too strong for Lex. He didn't need to use his instincts to tell, just the various craters in the ground told him enough. Fortunately, as he was still far away, neither of them noticed him and continued to fight with each other.

Once he was far enough, Lex took a break and started eating some dry rations.

Once his thirty minutes were up, Lex felt another whiplash teleporting him away.

This time, Lex stood on the mouth of a volcano. He looked down into the massive hole, despite the waves of boiling hot air emerging, and saw a pool of lava.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he murmured.

'Mr. Innkeeper,' the Lotus called, once again. 'I can feel a wave of spirit energy coming at us from underground. It'll arrive in about an hour.'

"No, this can't be happening," Lex said to himself. His luck possibly couldn't be that bad.

A yellow ball of light appeared in the air and started narrating the details of his assessment.

"In one hour, this volcano will explode. In three hours, the assessment will end."

A vein appeared in Lex's neck as he tried to suppress his anger. There was no way this was normal. They had to be doing this to him on purpose. A part of him wanted to jump right into the lava, knowing that the academy would teleport him out and end this stupid assessment. But, he could not bring himself to trust the academy so much.

Lex turned around and started sprinting. It was a tragedy that Lex had to save his breath for running, otherwise the people viewing him would have witnessed a series of curses so creative, they would have qualified as poetry.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 235: A blur

Lex was running low on Qi, but he couldn't afford to be conservative. The only detail he had was that the volcano would erupt, not how strong or large the eruption would be. But, with his luck, and the fact that he felt like that uniformed man from earlier was targeting him somehow, he was sure it would be a massive eruption.

In that case, even running would not put him out of the danger zone, but he couldn't think of any other solution. He could buy Icarus' wings from the Gift shop at the Inn, but a part of him was sure he was

under surveillance and did not want the extra attention pulling something out of thin air would garner him.

It was while he was thinking of solutions while running downhill from the volcano as fast as he could without tripping, that he heard a sound similar to the new quest sound in his mind. He stopped running for a moment to check the system and then grinned.

System notification: A massive buildup of natural spirit energy detected. Should the system absorb it?

"Mary, why is the system asking me if it can absorb the energy now, but not during the snowstorm?"

"According to system surveillance... the energy signature within the snowstorm belonged to something, and so was under its influence. The energy signature now is the result of a natural phenomenon and is not under the influence of anyone or thing, which means the system can absorb it. I suspect the impending volcanic eruption is partly due to the massive surge in energy."

"Which means if the system absorbs the energy, the eruption shouldn't happen, or at least should not be as big."

Without waiting for Mary's answer, he directly let the system absorb the energy. He expected it would take a while, but only a few moments later, the system had already absorbed it, and his progress bar for energy accumulation went up to 0.5%.

Immediately after, a few things happened. Firstly, Lex felt a minor earthquake, but that was it. Secondly, he received a bunch of system updates, which were apparently a thing. Thirdly, he finally received a quest.

Lex checked the updates, but they all culminated into a performance index. Basically, because the system had been forced to activate additional features due to the advanced authority, while not meeting the energy requirements to actually run those features, the system had selectively turned off features to compensate. Long story short, the system was currently performing a lot of features at a subpar level. That was also the reason why he had only just received a quest - the absorbed energy helped the system loosen its restrictions.

This was also bad news for Lex in a way, since if the system kept using the energy he absorbed to run its features, the accumulated energy would slowly decline.

Lex put that thought out of his mind for now, since he literally could do nothing about it except avoid using advanced features, and checked out his quest.

New Quest: Investigate the source of the anomaly in 7 Nation Crystal Realm

Quest Reward: Realm Seed

Remarks: Your reflection is not the anomaly, you really are that ugly.

"What is the anomaly? The quest doesn't say," Lex asked Mary.

"Whatever caused you to enter the realm is the anomaly. Entering and exiting a realm is no simple feat, even for a small one like this."

"And how exactly am I supposed to look for it?"

"To be honest, I don't really think you can. My suggestion is that you just focus on getting enough energy to come back. If this quest were easy, the reward wouldn't be so big."

"The Realm Seed? What is that?"

"It's an upgrade for the system. It'll allow you to convert the Midnight Inn into its own realm. Currently, the Inn exists inside an artificial Minor realm inside the Origin realm, but upgrading to its own realm will massively increase the Inn's capabilities."

Lex's jaw nearly dropped, and a familiar tinge of greed appeared in his heart before he quickly suppressed it. Since the quest had no time-limit... it was definitely one he would complete one day. But for now, Mary was right. Returning took priority.

Lex continued to jog for the rest of the assessment, but nothing happened the entire time. There was no eruption, or earthquake, or anything that might even remotely endanger him. His next assessment sent him to a detention center. He shared a cell with another prisoner and had to wait 4 hours before the assessment was over.

Lex knocked him out and tied him up, not taking any chances that he may call guards. The assessment after that put him on stage in front of thousands of people who were waiting for him to give a speech. Lex did not know what the event was for, or what subject he was supposed to give a speech on, but he had to survive for 30 minutes before it ended. Lex flawlessly gave a speech about the importance of having fun. As for stage fright? Please, Lex was used to talking down to devils, let alone a crowd of humans.

The assessment after that put him in a pitch black environment. There was no source of light, but Lex could hear a lot of things moving in the darkness close to him. He didn't risk trying to turn on his own flashlight, as even the usual yellow ball was replaced by something that whispered his assessment in his ear.

All he had to do to pass was remain undetected for 10 minutes. Lex slowed down his breathing, and didn't move even when something brushed against him, easily passing the assessment.

Like this, the assessments continued for what felt like days. Lex did everything from teaching kids a subject, to cooking at a restaurant, to fighting for a crowd's entertainment. Most of the assessments were a blur to him, but the one that he remembered clearly was executing an imprisoned Kraven.

Lex paused for a moment, to observe the strange creature that had caused a war that continued for centuries. Then his quest, the one that he had given up on, updated.

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Chapter 236: Hint

The Kraven, the ugly beast, was tied with multiple chains holding it in place, so Lex felt no concern in pausing to read his quest update.

Quest update: Anomaly signature detected. Identified foreign species - current designation: Kraven.

Quest hint: The anomaly may be related to the non-indigenous species of Kraven.

Lex raised an eyebrow. That was a major hint, as Kraven seemed to be a big theme in this realm. Doing some research about them should not be too difficult. It was unlikely that some simple research in a library would resolve the quest, but it wouldn't hurt to try.

Without stepping too close, Lex turned his attention to the Kraven, and observed it. It was a black, four-legged creature with large forelegs, but even the hind legs did not lack muscle. He wasn't sure if this was the only skeleton, but the creature had its bones on the outside, covering its body and vitals like armor.

The head had two round eyes that glared at Lex with hunger, and a mouth that Lex assumed was once full of sharp teeth, that had now been removed. The flesh of this creature released some kind of slime that made its body perpetually look wet, though Lex was sure it served other purposes than just making it more repulsive.

Feeling exhausted from all the assessments, Lex could not be bothered to think more about it, or study its body further. Having run dangerously low on ammo for his gun, he instead drew his short sword and stabbed the creature in the base of its skull, cutting through its neck.

Yet, when he pulled the sword back out, its slime quickly covered the area of the cut, and prevented it from bleeding out. Lex was surprised, but back in the assessment center, everyone who had seen him use his gun repeatedly assumed Lex was doing it on purpose and trying to torture the beast. Like he was getting some kind of revenge. Instead of being appalled, understanding was the most common reaction of those who watched Lex's assessment. Some even built a positive impression of Lex.

Not wasting any more time, used Qi blade, one of his two offensive techniques. This technique did not form actual blades from Qi, but was an attack that enhanced the sharpness of blades, making it easier to slice or cleave. Holding his sword in both hands, Lex sliced with all his strength, cutting right through the bone and cutting its head off. This Kraven was not nearly as strong as the one he had seen earlier, so his single attack was more than enough.

Once the head fell on the ground, Lex was teleported away, back to a familiar room. He was back in the assessment center, and the uniformed man was standing there, looking at him with a smirk.

"Well done, child," was all he said, not at all bringing up Lex's remarks about himself. "It will take some time for your result to come out, but in the meantime, why don't I show you to your dorm? I've heard you've suffered some memory loss, so I'll introduce you to the academy along the way."

"I'm not joining any elite squads," Lex said straight up. "I know the academy chooses the professions or skill or whatever, but if I don't cooperate, I doubt it'll be 'efficient'. I won't be a part of any black ops teams, or a part of any job that'll take over my life. There's no shortage of ways I can contribute to the Hum nation, but throwing away my life isn't one of them."

Being so direct may not have been such a good thing, because he was in need of the academy, not the other way around. But, at the same time, he was more than sure that whatever this uniformed guy was doing was not a part of how the academy's system worked.

The man grinned at Lex, happy that the kid was finally responding to him. Of course, a large part of it was probably because he had been taking assessments back to back for days, and was extremely sleep deprived. In this state, people usually lost a lot of their inhibitions and it was difficult to focus.

"No need for concern, child. Even if you did want to be a part of the elites, it's not something you can achieve by taking a simple assessment. You're right though, I was getting ahead of myself earlier. Let's just start from the beginning and wait to see what your assessment results say."

Lex reluctantly nodded, mostly because he was sure this man wouldn't leave him alone.

"Perfect. You can call me Vernan. I'm the Professor in charge of physical education, and hand-to-hand combat. Come on, let's take you to your dorm before you fall asleep right here."

Vernan brought Lex outside the assessment center where what looked like a carriage without any horses was waiting for them. Once inside, the carriage started moving and Vernan started telling Lex what his near future would look like at the academy.

For a moment, to Lex's dull and exhausted mind, it almost seemed like the worst of it was over and things would proceed normally now. That was because Lex had no idea about his psych evaluation that Vernan had read right before greeting Lex.

A preliminary evaluation, based on his assessments, and particularly the moments where he fired up at the giant monster, as well as when he left the student to fight the Red eared Gojur when he saw it was too strong for him, stated that Lex had a strong sense of self and reacted negatively to being pressured or forced. He had basic sympathy where he would aid someone if he could, but would not do so if the target of the aid resisted or put Lex's life in danger. He had strong survival skills and strong instincts, if somewhat unpolished still. There was a chance his loyalty could be built, but if he felt the slightest indication of coercion or threat, he would react strongly.

Such a tough mentality also explained why he was able to survive while facing the Immortal level Kraven flesh. Vernan chuckled in his mind as he watched Lex slightly lower his guard. Oh yes, he would definitely have Lex as a student.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 237: Consultant

What Vernan did not know was that for each of the situations, there was another explanation. Lex survived the Immortal level Kraven's coercion because of Regal Embrace. He was not intimidated by the massive, mountain sized Kalter Flug because Lex had seen stronger beings at his Inn, and also because the giant snowflake had not restricted Lex by using its coercion. When Lex encountered the student fighting the Red-eared whatever the hell that was, Lex's instincts directly told him that Lex would die if he interfered.

Likewise, for each point of interest, his evaluation was incorrect because no one would be able to understand Lex's reasoning for his actions. After all, only body cultivators had honed instincts, and that too at a higher level. But Lex did not display any of the key indicators of a body cultivator, whereas his spirit cultivation was prominent.

This was yet again another subtle self defense mechanism employed by Regal Embrace, where he had all the perks of body cultivators, spirit cultivators and soul cultivators, but all the prominent indicators of these perks would be hidden until Lex displayed them.

Unfortunately, Lex did not know how to display them because he had not even realized they existed. For example, something like instinct was often described as a gut feeling. Lex had been listening to his 'gut feeling' subconsciously, but on a conscious level, he never analyzed his actions to realize what had prompted them. Heck, he hadn't even noticed that it was much easier for him to enter the state of 'flow' and just took it for granted. Maybe over time, he would slowly realize what instincts were, and notice the increased frequency of him entering that special flow state, but for now, his focus was on his dorm room.

It was tiny as hell. There was a single bed, a small study desk, a bathroom, and that was it. It must be mentioned that all of this could easily fit into Lex's bathroom back at the Inn, that's how cramped his dorm was. Considering how big the academy was, and how much space they left to open fields, his room should have been at least bigger than a prison cell, right?

Unfortunately, there was no one to complain to. Vernan had left after dropping Lex off and giving him the details of what he would be doing.

The academy did not have a semester or class system, because students would come and go all year around. Some would have to leave at random times and come back months or even years later to continue to study.

Instead, the classes split into smaller, more specialized ranks that would be repeated continuously throughout the year, so anyone could join at any time. For example, if Lex ended up taking array classes, he would start at the lowest rank and division, which would be Iron grade level 1. Classes for this would happen every month, and would be 1 month long. If, during that time, Lex learned enough to go to a higher class, he would be promoted to level 2 and so forth.

He would have to wait till tomorrow to find out what his profession designation would be, and that would determine his classes. Lex took a shower and threw himself into his bed, ready to get some sleep.

It made sense that he was dead tired, during the relentless onslaught of assessments, he hadn't slept in well over 40 hours. At some point, while he was asleep, his designation was published. According to his psych and skill evaluation, he was not fit for any military roles due to the high chance of noncooperation.

But the way the designation worked was that it would list the best fit as the highest recommendation, and a series of alternative options down below, with these options usually being hidden unless some kind of extraneous circumstances prevented the student from following the primary selection.

So, while orthodox military roles had been disqualified for Lex, somewhere down on the list, Lex had been recommended for a group called Red Hands. While Red Hands were not the elite of the elite, they consisted of highly specialized trained operatives that operated independently in highly volatile and extremely dangerous situations.

It was the kind of team that would be sent behind enemy lines to do recon before a high value target assassination. The kind of team sent into Kraven infested lands to sabotage supply lines, and then escape on their own. The kind of team one sent into situations too dangerous for any sane man to walk into - exactly what was expected from a man who looked death in the eyes and then shot at it.

It was the kind of team Vernan loved. He chuckled as he manually altered the order of Lex's designations. His Red Hands designation ended up being second to top, and thus conveniently hidden from view. His primary designation was changed to Combat zone strategic consultant.

This kind of job required Lex to be highly trained and experienced in various combat situations, as well as to have a detailed understanding of the military capability and operations of all 7 nations of the Crystal realm. This was because he would be a consultant for businesses that operated in active and potential war zones.

It would provide him with the perfect foundation for if he wanted to enter any combat unit himself in the future, due to unforeseen and completely coincidental reasons that in no way had anything to do with Vernan.

After making sure everything was in order, and going over the predicted path for Lex during his stay at the academy, Vernan closed Lex's personal file and had it sealed under his authority. Then he turned his attention to the next student that had caught his eye. After all, Lex was just one of many that joined the academy everyday. Vernan would not limit himself by focusing on only him, no. The world was his oyster, and he was determined to fill it with highly trained murderers.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 238: First day at the academy

When Lex woke up, the first thing he did was open the academy console, a computer connected to the academy's database provided on Lex's study desk, and checked his designation.

Lex had been designated as a combat zone strategic consultant. At first, he was highly suspicious that Vernan had somehow influenced his designation. But when he started reading the kinds of classes he would be enrolled in, he realized that this job was perfect.

He would have to learn both the history and geography of the Crystal realm, which could help him locate more areas like that volcano that provided him with energy. He would have to learn the political relations between the nations, which kind of sucked, but he could tolerate it.

Other than that, he would have to study cultivation, as well as its many forms used in this realm. Basic combat was a class all designations had to take, but then Lex would later be entered into more specialized combat classes. His last mandatory class was the basics of strategic planning.

After that, he had the option of taking two elective classes. He selected studying arrays and left the second elective open for now. He had a few days free, since all the classes started anew each month, which is when he would begin.

After changing into his uniform, which had been provided to him along with the dorm, Lex left towards the mess hall to get some food. Since he had some time, Lex was finally able to turn his attention to how the Inn had been doing.

He shared some of the things he was planning with Mary and asked her if this was acceptable with the level of energy he had accumulated, since it involved using his higher authority. She told him how much energy it would use up and, after a long internal struggle, Lex decided to go ahead with it anyway.

After all, he had no idea how long he would be stuck here, and 0.5% was not a lot. It would be safer to use it up now to prevent issues with the Inn in the long run. The first thing he did was raise the level of the greenhouse to level 5, basically one level above his allowed limit. This would put a strain on the Inns energy usage, but it was important since it could speed up the development of the Vine.

The upgrade cost him 250,000 MP! Since the last time he checked, he had only made a profit of 40,000 MP so this was another strain on his wallet, leaving him only 4,202,000 MP.

His second he did was lower the frequency of the golden door appearing on random worlds to a minimum. While this would affect his income and the growth of his Inn, right now it was better to focus on maintaining the status quo.

The third thing he did was use his increased authority to produce two of the strictest and most binding versions of the platinum keys - which brought his energy reserves down to 0.1%. This was necessary if he wanted to hire the husband and wife duo, since they were too strong!

This would not enslave them or anything of the sort, it would just ensure that they were unable to harm the Inn or its interests directly or indirectly. He passed the keys to Mary and told her to give them to the husband and wife.

He also told her to let them know the restrictions they would be under, as he did not want to trick anyone, especially if they were going to be working for him.

Next he...

"What are you doing?" a loud and forceful voice woke Lex up from his focus on the Inn. Startled, Lex looked around to see he had sat down at a table with 5 other fairly beautiful girls.

While he was working at the Inn and giving Mary commands, he had also arrived at the mess hall. He took some food, none of which he truly recognized, and sat down in the first empty seat he saw without paying too much attention to his surroundings.

It appeared he had... imposed upon a group of friends.

"Uhh, sorry, I was distracted," Lex said as he got up, perfectly hiding his embarrassment. But the girl's loud voice had already carried across the hall, and the moment Lex got up to move away, he noticed the entire mess hall was staring at him. Some with hostile eyes, some with curious ones, while others were just observing, but all eyes were trained at him.

But how could he, Lex Williams, the Innkeeper, easily expose his awkwardness? He simply nodded to the girls and walked away, as if he did not care at all, before finding an empty table and sitting down.

As he stared at his food and tried to figure out how one was supposed to eat it, a single thought crossed his mind. Was it time for the 'harassed for attracting the academy belle's attention' trope to trigger?

Midnight Inn, Cabin on Midnight Mountain

Qawain, the sentient sword that had assumed the shape of a human, looked fondly at his wife, Anita, the lich who hid her features not because she was an ugly pile of bones, but because she had attained an everlasting beauty that would always attract unnecessary troubles.

"Do not worry my dear, I'm sure things will turn out for the best," Qawain said.

"I hope so," his wife replied, her voice so angelic it could stir the hearts of deadmen. Literally. Like, she literally used her voice to raise the dead. It was one of her abilities as a lich.

"From the moment I entered this place, I felt the ties of destiny disappear. This is the only place we can deliver our child safely. We have to stay here!"

"And we are staying here," Qawain reassured. "From the moment that golden light brought us here from Vegus Prime, I have had no thoughts of returning. To top it all off, this place is an Inn. We can stay as long as we want, even forever, as long as we can pay."

"But it's not enough. If we can work for this mysterious Innkeeper, we can ensure our safety. After all, if he can even interfere with destiny, who knows how powerful he is."

Just as Qawain was about to answer, there was a knock on their door. Mary had appeared with the platinum keys.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 239: Weaponsmith

"Please, come in," said Qawain as soon as he saw the assistant innkeeper. She was a succinct and disciplined woman, who was supposedly taking care of the Inn during the Innkeepers absence.

Qawain and Anita, the socialites that they were, had quickly made friends as soon as they arrived at the Inn. When word spread that they had both successively completed the Mystery trial, they became even more popular, to the point that even some of the Midnight Inn's staff, namely John, approached them.

They had quickly learnt about the Innkeeper, who was generally very genial and had a positive reputation. This assistant innkeeper had only recently appeared, and while most of the staff knew her, the guests felt that she was extremely formal.

Still, she maintained order and performed all her tasks without bias, so there was nothing to complain about.

"I have good news," she said after stepping inside the cabin. "The Innkeeper has sent word. To join the Midnight Inn, you must undergo a trial to prove yourself. Should you pass the trial, you can join the Inn as a tutor in swordsmanship and a historian. However, the Innkeeper also wanted me to let you know the conditions for joining the Midnight Inn. Once you join, you will become a permanent member of the Inn, and cannot quit. Furthermore, a restriction will be placed on you so that you cannot harm the Inn, its interests or any employee of the Inn either."

She handed both of them their platinum keys and then left to give both of them their privacy.

"A historian," Qawain said with a hint of curiosity. "I wonder what kind of job they'll have you do. I hope it's not fieldwork, that'll defeat the purpose of coming here."

"I will go ask the assistant innkeeper, and explain our situation. Wait for me before you take the test."

Qawain nodded as he thought about the tutoring job. He had never taught anyone before, it would be an interesting experience.

After Lex ate, he had a lot of free time on his hands. He found a nice, scenic place near the mess hall where he sat down to rest. Although physically he wasn't tired, it had been a while since he relaxed. It just occurred to him that he couldn't remember the last time he played a video game.

Not that he was sad about it, he spent his time doing interesting things and dealing with entertaining people - usually. Working towards his own goals, and feeling himself slowly getting stronger, and the Inn improving was a kind of satisfaction he had never felt before.

It was not the kind of grind of a 9 to 5 job, which both physically and mentally drained him. This instead felt rewarding.

Still, that did not mean that he should forget to relax from time to time. Unfortunately, with no games to play, no movies to watch and no friends to hang out with, his relaxation soon turned into boredom.

Stretching as he got up, Lex decided instead to tick something off his to do list - get a job. The academy provided him with the most pathetic accommodation Lex had ever seen, but at least there was a roof over his head. At the mess hall, he could eat for free after showing his student ID. But if he needed anything else, he would have to pay for it himself.

Besides, from his college days, Lex knew that working a campus job was an excellent way to expand your social group and just simply meet new people. The only people Lex knew in this realm were Honey, the nurse, and Vernan, the creepy guy, which meant he wanted to avoid about half the people he knew.

As almost everything was far away in this academy, Lex had to get on a bus to hail a ride to the career services department. This was where Lex could apply for jobs, and the process was much easier than expected.

The person at the counter first checked Lex's upcoming schedule, checked his designation, and then provided him with a list of available jobs that would not clash with his schedule and also provided him with work experience relevant to his designation.

From the list, two jobs in particular appealed to him greatly. The first was as an assistant to a weaponsmith. This job would expose him to the various kinds of weapons used in this world, though he would take no part in the manufacturing process. He was only to take care of miscellaneous work such as cleaning and categorization. The second job was transcription. It would involve writing down and recording the research of various professors and tutors at the academy. This job, while extremely boring, should provide him with vast sources of information about various topics.

In the end, Lex ended up choosing to become assistant to the weaponsmith. The transcription job was too unreliable, what if he got stuck recording the work of some ridiculous job?

As soon as he was done selecting, he was told where to go, and that he had to check in immediately. It surprised Lex how quickly the job started, but it wasn't like he had anything else to do.

He once again got on a bus, but his destination this time was different from all the ones he had been to before. So far, all the buildings he saw in the academy were far apart and seemed to blend into nature. Now, however, it seemed like he was heading into a city.

Skyscrapers that would put New York to shame filled the skyline with an endless stream of vehicles going in and out. Roads seemed to be stacked atop one another, all going in the same direction to facilitate speedy travel. What looked like small flying ships zoomed up above in the air, and in the distance, it seemed like Lex could see a river full of ships heading into the city as well.

It seemed like he had just stepped from a fantasy wonderland into a utopian cyberpunk future. The craziest thing was that... this was still just a single region in the academy. Lex took in the sights, mostly because once he got off the bus, he got lost on the way to his job. He was not used to navigating a city without a map on his phone. Eventually, with the help of numerous strangers on the streets, Lex found himself in front of a quaint little house with a small front yard and a yellow picket fence. This... was not what he was expecting from a 'weaponsmith'.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 240: Dirty mind

Convinced that he had found the wrong place, Lex went up to knock on the door anyway. At least he would be able to ask for directions.

But when he knocked on the wooden door, it divided in two and split open to what looked like the inside of a computer... if the computer was the size of a house.

A floating orb appeared and scanned Lex and said, "follow me".

The orb led Lex inside the house and into a room full of what seemed like clothes made of black chain mail. The orb scanned the clothes until it found one appropriate for Lex's size and said, "put these on. Cover your entire body and ensure that there is no skin exposed."

Confused and curious, Lex put on the chain mail clothes and gear, even an unusual head piece that not only covered his face but also had goggles and breathing gear.

Once Lex was geared up, Lex led him deeper into the house until he entered a particularly hot room. That's when he saw another person, possibly the fat- no uh, large- no uh, healthiest human Lex had ever seen. With a waist that had to be just ten feet across, the figure showed none of the lack of dexterity one would expect.

Taking a step closer, Lex noticed the person had their hands in a tub of... it looked like lava. Lex's eyes widened in shock, but before he could make sense of what was happening, the woman - Lex assumed it was a woman due to the feminine voice - spoke.

"Hurry up and come here. Put your hands in the tub and start scraping the rod clean. Don't worry, your gear will protect you from getting burned."

Lex walked up hesitantly, not really excited about putting his hands in lava, but the woman wasn't having it. Moving faster than Lex could comprehend, she grabbed his hand and plunged it deep into the lava.

"Grab the rod and start rubbing it! It's releasing a lot of impurities and we can't let any of them settle on the rod."

What happened next was probably one of the most horrific experiences of Lex's life. Not because of the lava or the danger or anything, but because of the weaponsmith's choice of words. Lex did not know if she was doing it on purpose, or he was just dirty minded, but... it seemed like she was only speaking in innuendos.

The 'rod' that she had been asking him to 'stroke' and 'rub' was the body of a spear. He did not understand the logic of it, just as he could not understand what material it was made from, but by dipping the spear in the lava and exerting great pressure on it, impurities within the metal were pushed out. However, unless manually removed from the spear, the impurities would quickly encase the spear like an outer coat. All Lex had to do was scrap the impurities from it.

But that was not all. After he was done with the spear, in the words of the weaponsmith, he had to work on swords that 'needed to go deep', meaning bury them in sandpits made of some unusual metal, work on certain guns that needed to be 'jerked until they were done' meaning the components were too tight and he had to push them into place, and so much more.

Whether Lex would ever learn anything about weapons was a mystery because he spent the rest of his days at this job trying not to get scarred. The weaponsmith, for all her quirkiness, never seemed to stop working. She would be working when he left at night, and would still be working when he returned the next day. In her words, if she ever stopped giving it her all, a lot of people would be left unsatisfied.

He did not once see what she looked like, because she was always in her chain mail gear, nor did he get her name because she only talked about her weapons and what Lex needed to do. He worked on numerous weapons that he didn't even understand. They consisted of some kind of technology Lex had never seen or experienced, and after he was done washing it in lava, walking it through an electric field, literally smashing it relentlessly with a hammer, or polishing it with oil, he still could not make sense of it. At least he got paid well, since few others were willing to do this job. He earned 100 crystals a day. That was what the currency of this realm was called. He never actually saw the crystals as they were deposited in his student account, but he could access the money whenever he wanted.

Finally, after 8 days of such torture, the new month started, and Lex's work hours were reduced just a few hours each week so he could properly focus on his classes.

He had combat classes 3 times a week, while for the rest of the subjects, he had each of them every day.

At this point, as he walked into his first class early in the morning, Lex was feeling extremely restless. Not only was it because of how hectic his job was, but he had already been in this realm for around 2 weeks, give or take. He had not even begun to understand how he could gather enough energy for his system, and according to the speed at which things were progressing, it would be months before he'd be able to do it. Maybe even years.

Lex had been trying hard not to stress about things he could not control, and focus only on the task at hand, yet sometimes it was impossible. Not to mention, the unnecessarily long commute from his dorm to where his classes would be held gave him plenty of free time to fret.

So, by the time Lex finally sat down, he was completely out of it. He kept worrying about the Inn, about his life, about...

"Why is it you again?" an aggressive but familiar tone woke Lex up from his thoughts. He looked up to see that he was sitting beside a cute looking girl. Had he seen her somewhere before? She looked so familiar.