

## **Innkeeper 241**

The Innkeeper

Chapter 241: War

"Have we met?" Lex asked, completely oblivious to her angry looking expression, mostly because she looked like a cute little doll. "You seem familiar, but I don't know many people here."

"You sat next to me at the mess hall! And now you've done it again. The entire hall is empty, why do you have to sit next to me? I like my personal space!"

Suddenly, Lex recalled the embarrassing encounter and couldn't help but laugh. He took a look around the hall and, indeed, there were many empty chairs.

"My bad, I've been really out of it so I've kinda just been running on autopilot," Lex explained as he got up and moved to a different chair. But, while he was no longer sitting right next to the familiar girl, he was still close to her.

"My name is Lex by the way," he introduced himself, but the girl just made a 'hmp' sound and looked away dramatically flipping her hair as she did.

Despite his stressed mood, Lex chuckled. To be honest, he really wasn't in the mood to be chasing girls. But, on the other hand, socializing a bit might be good for him. It wouldn't help anyone if he burnt out due to stress.

A short while later, their professor entered the room. He was an old man, with a massive bald spot on his head, crowned by streaks of white hair. He was a thin man, almost frail looking, but walked with the vigor of youth.

"Welcome to the 'Basic History of the Crystal realm'. Despite the title, we do not study history too far back, and our course begins 100 years prior to the Kraven war. As most of you know, most of the basic level subjects focus on things related to the Kraven, for they have dominated the trend of the realm these past few centuries. If you want to advance your knowledge beyond the region of influence of the Kraven, you will need to take the more advanced courses.

"Our lesson begins on the day of the coronation of King Cornelius II, after his father passed away on the battlefield. Back then, he was still a boy at the tender young age of 16. The Hum nation did not exist back then, and the territory that composed it..."

Contrary to Lex's expectations, he actually enjoyed the history class a lot. The focus of class was not specific dates, or remembering numerous people, but rather a few key people who influenced monumental events.

For example, neither the heritage nor any significant life events of King Cornelius II were discussed before his crowning, because it was only after he became a King that he became relevant to the history of the realm.

Back then, the Hum nation consisted of hundreds of smaller countries - of course, smaller only being a relative term. From Lex's understanding, some of the smaller countries here were bigger than continents back on Earth.

Cornelius, who inherited a country at war, led the most successful campaign conducted by a human, and expanded his country by so much over the next century, no one dared to challenge his reign.

When the Kraven war started, approximately 300 years ago, Humans were not originally involved. There were two races whose territories neighbored the humans, namely the Sentinels and Varns. The Kraven came from somewhere far away, beyond the scope of understanding of the humans, and waged war with whoever they could reach. Roughly 80 years after the humans heard of the Varns being at war, the Kraven's finally took enough to be exposed to human territories as well.

No one expected that they would involve the humans in the war, for that should be to their disadvantage, but they did. Not only did they wage war, they came with a fury that wiped countries from existence in a matter of days.

Realizing the seriousness of the matter, Cornelius convinced the humans to band together to face this threat, and paid a great deal to even request the Sentinels' help.

Finally, the humans were able to hold off the assault. But hold off did not mean reclaim, as slowly and steadily the human forces were worn out, and once again started to lose land. That was when, under the leadership of Cornelius, the Hum Nation was founded.

For the first time in history, faced with the threat of extinction, humans put away their petty grievances and joined together to face the threat. As for those who resisted, Cornelius gathered them up and used them and their entire families as the first line of defense against the Kraven.

But even so, slowly and steadily, they continued to lose land. It came to the point where the border to the Sentinels was exposed, and they too became involved in the war, not for profit from the humans, but to defend their own lands.

While humans had been on the losing end of the war, guided by one concentrated effort, human technology and civilization underwent a time of rapid expansion. Their cultivation techniques improved. Their weapons became deadlier, their warriors fiercer, their resolve stronger.

That's when grave news came from the Varn. The Poliods, the first race to encounter the Kraven had been completely defeated, and the remnants of their race escaped wherever they could. They joined the other nations in their war efforts, for though they had lost their home, the race was not dead. They fought for the hope that one day, they would succeed.

All of this happened in the first 150 years of war, and there was another 150 years or so to cover when the class ended.

Their professor told them that he would first give them a general overview of the history of the relevant time periods before they delved more deeply into significant events.

The class ended, and the students started to disperse, but Lex remained seated. All the other students had some knowledge of the war. Only he was just learning of it for the first time. This war, whether he wanted it or not, was very significant to his immediate future for unless he found a way to return to the Inn, this was his war too.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 242: Crystal race

The girl who had been irritated with Lex saw the pensive look on his face and made another 'hmph' sound.

"Why are you pretending like this is the first time you're hearing of this? Even toddlers know this history," she said, for some reason feeling annoyed at him.

"My spirit was injured in an encounter with a Kraven while escaping from Gristol, so my memories are messed up," Lex gave the excuse that had become his standard explanation for everything the past few days without really thinking of it. His mind was currently occupied wondering how he was supposed to investigate the origin of the Kraven.

His absent minded words, however, shook the girl. In her mind, she suddenly connected his odd and absent behavior to damage to his spirit, and suddenly felt guilty for being so aggressive with him.

"I heard about Gristol, I'm sorry for your loss," she said, her voice suddenly soft and caring.

"It's fine," Lex said, not sure how else to reply. He literally knew nothing about Gristol or the events that took place there, so it was best to avoid talking about it.

"I have to head to my next class, it's geography. I wouldn't want to miss out," he said as he got up.

"Oh, I'm taking geography too. Do you know the way?"

"Nope, but I'm sure we can figure it out between the two of us."

The girl, Amelia, was very talkative once she became familiar with Lex. Or maybe she was just compensating due to guilt for her attitude earlier. Either way, Lex found her company enjoyable as they found their way to their next class.

Lex was looking forward to geography since he wanted to learn more about active volcanic regions, or really any place that seemed like it would have abundant spirit energy. Unfortunately, the class was just as dry as history was enjoyable. He learnt about city placements, settlement patterns, defensible locations, and so on and so forth. Nothing in the class seemed useful to Lex's predicament. Worst of all was the fact that Lex could not even slack off out of fear that he would end up missing what he was actually awaiting.

Yet, in their first class at least, Lex discovered nothing useful to him. After geography, he and Amelia split, as his next class was politics, plain and simple.

There were seven major races in the crystal realm, and each of those seven were mostly and conveniently within their own regions. Of course, there were some from each race that traveled far and wide for various purposes, but as far as nations were concerned, these were only stragglers.

As a whole, humans mostly only had relations with Sentinels and Varns. Throughout history, there have both been periods of war and peace between the humans and these two races, but most of the time, they minded their own business. This was because, when matters came to conflict between races, internal conflict would always be suppressed. Two constant potential threats had a way of ensuring that even when humans warred amongst themselves, they never weakened themselves too far.

The Varn were a reptilian race and could assume two forms, their ordinary form and combat form. While their combat form never lasted too long, making them unsuited for long combat, their strength was disastrously strong. Furthermore, the Varn all shared a strong affinity for earth and minerals, and so fighting them on the ground was usually akin to suicide.

Unexpected to Lex, the humans and Varn shared a long history of cooperation and friendship, mostly because there was hardly ever a conflict of interest. The things humans found valuable, especially for cultivation, were usually poisonous to the Varn, and vice versa.

The Sentinels, instead, who were a humanoid species, often had conflicts with humans. The Sentinels were a unique, spirit-based species, meaning their bodies were their greatest weaknesses. As it would happen, the resources they required to strengthen their bodies were also strongly suited for cultivation amongst the humans.

There was no need to discuss deeper reasons or divisions. All discrimination originated from a conflict of interest. While the two races sometimes traded or even worked together, they also often waged war for resources wherever they shared a border.

Of course, this was mostly old news now. Since the Kraven war, everyone was desperate for any kind of victory, which had resulted in unprecedented cooperation between the races.

Before the professor went to discuss more recent relations, he took a pause to take note of a particular race - the Crystal race. They were the true hegemony of this realm, and far surpassed all the other races. In fact, it was a popular opinion that if they took this war seriously, the Crystal race alone could end the war.

Yet, for reasons unknown, they settled for defending their lands and not interfering beyond their borders. The reason the professor made a special note of this race was not to inform the students about them, for who truly didn't know of the crystal race? No, it was to let the students know never to blame them, or accuse them of ignorance or arrogance for not protecting the other races from Kraven. He ensured that each student knew that should anyone be caught cursing or insulting the crystal race, the lightest punishment was life imprisonment.

This drew Lex's curiosity. Such a strong punishment should not have been warranted for a race so far away - especially one uninterested in the affairs of the world outside their own borders. But Lex had a broader view of things than most people. He knew full well that, once a cultivator reached a certain level, even talking about them could draw their attention.

That actually reminded Lex of Ballom, Loretta's father. He wondered if that being would still be able to tell if Lex was thinking about him from a realm away.

Just as quickly as the thought occurred to him, he put the thought behind him, for he didn't believe that Ballom would. In this instance, as in so many others, Lex was wrong. Ballom, who had been searching the fringes of the universe for whatever attracted the Innkeeper's attention, felt a pull from beyond the veil of the Origin realm. That caused him to pause.

That was strange as the attraction he felt was from another realm. Yet the only realms he had ever visited were Garvitz, the realm from which the devils originated, and the origin realm where he currently was. Why would he feel an attraction from yet another realm?

Suddenly, something occurred to him, and he used the golden key. A few minutes later, he returned from the Midnight Inn to his original location. It seemed his suspicions were true. The Innkeeper had gone to another realm. This complicated things, as the Innkeeper's origins became even more mysterious. But wasn't that for the best? Life would be too boring without a little mystery.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 243: Rumors

While Lex was in his politics class, learning the basics of the relations between the Hum nation and the others, Amelia was sitting with her usual group of friends.

"You'll never guess who I ran into," she said excitedly, before sharing Lex's story. In this day and age, where everything in their society revolved around fighting the Kraven, the greatest celebrity was one who had fought a Kraven.

"Did he really face a Kraven though? Maybe he's just lying to get your attention," said Miscellaneous Friend A.

"No, this makes sense," said another one of her friends excitedly. "You said his name is Lex, right? I heard a story about a survivor from Gristol named Lex! It wasn't just a Kraven he faced. I heard it was the flesh of an Immortal! I heard he fought it off with his bare hands to save his fellow survivors..."

Unbeknownst to Lex, rumors of his unwitting endeavor had already started to spread amongst the student body, growing more wild and wonderful with each retelling. Whether it was by design or coincidence, the stars in Amelia's eyes and jealousy in others were a clear indicator that his story had taken on a life of its own. As for whether there would be any consequences for this... Lex would soon find out.

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After his politics class, Lex had some free time before his first basic combat class. He did nothing special during that time and just reviewed the information he had learnt today in case there was anything important he missed.

Once it was time for class, he went over expecting to arrive at a gymnasium full of people, since this was the one mandatory class amongst all professions, but the reality was quite contrary.

He arrived in a small room with only 9 other students as well as the trainer, who were all waiting for him, despite the fact that he was early. He expected the trainer would motivate them to learn to the best of their abilities, but his expectations were once again superseded.

"This class is the basics of the basics, and it serves only one purpose," the trainer said with the utmost seriousness. "That should you be in a life or death situation, you kill at least one Kraven before you die. As humans, killing at least one Kraven is your most basic responsibility to your nation, and to your race!"

The trainer did not look like he was kidding, and in fact looked a little disgusted with these students who could only fulfill the most basic requirements.

"I understand that not everyone is a soldier, and the Hum nation also needs more than just soldiers. We need farmers, we need scientists, we need teachers, we need accountants, we need all the cogs and gear in the machine that is this nation. And that is exactly who this class is for. You will not be burdened with more difficult techniques, you will not be burdened with relentless practice, you will not be burdened with elaborate attacks.

"In your life, as the lawyers and gardeners and anything else that does not require a soldier's training, should you come into a situation where you need to fight for your life against a Kraven, it is best to consider your life already forfeit! All you need to focus on is taking down the enemy with you. And, if somehow you manage to take down two Kraven instead of just one, then consider your nation proud of your achievements!"

Lex was shocked by how brutal and direct the trainer was in diminishing the value of their lives, but none of the other students were. In fact, many of them were nodding along. In moments like this, it would have helped Lex if he had actually investigated the motto of the academy and learnt about the meaning behind it. But that would come later.

For now, the trainer continued, "Of course, if you feel motivated to do more, to learn more, to be more, after completing this mandatory course, you can take more advanced combat classes. They do not focus on damage for sacrifice and instead train actual warriors who may have a chance of fighting longer and harder. But the rest of you should just hone your skills here."

Once the trainer was done with the 'pep talk', he immediately began the class. Each student received a personal trainer, with the main trainer supervising.

As soon as the training began, Lex realized two things. First, the thing their training was focused on was trading injuries and doing the maximum amount of damage in any exchange. For this, each trainer took special care in teaching them how to identify weak spots in the enemies defense.

They began, of course, with human targets because that was the body each student was most familiar with, and once the students showed some mastery of the skill, they would move onto Kraven, and even the other races.

The second thing Lex realized was this kind of combat was actually strongly suited for Lex. Obviously, at his current stage, it was not so evident. But later on, when his defense would be much stronger than the enemies he would most likely face, trading blows, when he was likely to not take any injuries, was a fast and easy way of winning fights.

Naturally, he would need to be better trained not only in combat but also judging the strength of his enemies before he could employ such tactics. But it was a good plan, for now.

After a long and arduous class where Lex learned as much theoretical knowledge as he practiced, it was time for his most unusually named class: strategic planning.

Did people normally perform non-strategic planning? Or did they normally make foolish plans on purpose? It was almost as if whoever named the class was doing some sort of mass naming of classes, and releasing them on the go, which caused this oversight. A sort of mass release, if you will.

But, even besides the name, this class had many oddities. There were only two other students in this class. Furthermore, usually Lex was the oldest or at least one of the oldest in his other classes, but this time he seemed to be within his own age group.

Lastly, the two students seemed to be wary of him. This was strange as Lex was sure he'd never met them, nor had he done anything too outrageous that he should develop some kind of reputation.

Just as he was about to greet the other students and inquire if anything was wrong, the professor stepped in.

"Welcome students," said the professor as she looked them over, a mature lady with a no-nonsense look on her face.

"I am professor Adelaide, and I will conduct your classes for this subject regardless of whichever level you take, so it is best if you get familiar with my way of doing things as soon as possible.

"This is not a class that is available to everyone, and if you have been selected for this class, you have displayed some sort of level headedness under dire circumstances. This class is, and will be, the most important class you will take. You may be wondering why I say that. It's because while every other class you take may be creating a foundation for your future, how you perform in this class will determine whether you live to see that future or not. After all, if you fail this class, that means you're dead."

Adelaide paused for a moment for her three students to absorb what she said before she continued.

"Unlike your other classes, this one will have a field test and the end of the course. The test will be different for each one of you, since you have different designations, and I will pass to you the details of that field test today, so you may already begin preparing. What will be the same for all of you, however, is that each test will contain some element of danger. If you are not able to overcome it, then that likely means you will die. In other courses, if you fail, you can get a second chance by applying again. In this course, the only second chance you will get is the one you create for yourself."

Before getting into specific details about her course, however, she looked directly at Lex and said, "Lex, the legendary survivor of Gristol that fought off an Immortal with your teeth, I've heard a lot about you already. If half the rumors I've heard are true, then I look forward to seeing your performance."

Lex, who was staring at the professor with a dropped jaw, was unable to respond. Fought off an immortal with his teeth? What the hell? Suddenly, he realized something, and looked at his class fellows, and their wary looks suddenly made sense.

What were these rumors his professor was speaking about? How had they spread so fast so far? Before he had a chance to ask, the professor began their class.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 244: A rudimentary system

The course for the strategic planning class was a lot more abstract than his other classes, at least in the beginning. Instead of teaching him concrete topics, the class focused rather on the way of thinking. How to evaluate situations, how to juggle objectives, how to prioritize and so much more.

He was given theoretical problems similar to the famous trolley problem, only in this case, instead of people's lives, he usually had to compromise on his objectives. The professor told them that, after some theoretical practice, they would go through some drills to practice decision making under duress.

When the class ended, Adelaide, the professor, handed each student a folder with the details of their field test in it. Since Lex's designation was a combat zone consultant, his field test put him in the same position.

A month from now, there would be an expedition led by some students to some uninhabited lands within the territory of Hum nation. The group would be a mix of students of various designations, and the group would similarly have a mix of objectives.

The group had to not only explore these new lands; they had to scout for potential valuable resources, mark down areas suitable for new settlements, and finally establish a forward camp for future explorations. These were just the publicly stated objectives, for there was always the possibility of hidden objectives as well.

Lex would not only serve as the communication channel between the combatant students or 'soldiers' and the leader of the expedition, Lex would have to advise the leader in matters of security and combat.

As for what the territory they were exploring held, what kind of dangers could he expect, and what he needed to watch out for were all things he would have to research on his own. Conducting research and being adequately prepared were also parts of being such a consultant, so the quality of his preparation depended solely on him.

Lex felt a headache developing. From having too much time on his hands, he went directly to feeling like he was overworked.

Next, it was time for his arrays class. For once, the class was as he expected, and the study of arrays was very similar to what he read in the book given to him by John. But similar did not mean the same.

The approach to arrays in the Crystal realm seemed to be a lot more stringent than what the book stated. There was a very specific way in which the 'characters' could be arranged. They had discovered certain rules, and how the characters responded in certain situations, and somehow reverse engineered a fixed template for all arrays to follow.

In this way, compared to the book Lex was reading, it was much easier to form new arrays, as you could simply follow those rules. But it was also comparatively a lot more wasteful. They heavily employed the use of conjunction characters - characters that had no effects on their own, but could bond the effect of two accompanying characters without a volatile reaction.

For example, if someone were trying to fuse characters that represented fire and air together, if the characters were not compatible, instead of resulting in an explosion, the characters would just fizzle away instead of working together. This was important for even for something as simple as fire there were hundreds of characters, each personifying a different characteristic or behavior of the flame. In this way, discovering which one suited the needs of your situation was not only a hassle, it was dangerous. The conjunction characters eliminated the danger.

This not only allowed the array masters of the crystal realm to have a much more diverse library of arrays, it allowed them to experiment safely whenever they were creating new arrays. But there were also drawbacks.

Since arrays were cast using spirit energy, the more characters an array had, the more draining it would be. Furthermore, due to the dampening effect of conjunction characters, defensive and offensive arrays were a lot weaker.

Since both techniques worked, Lex decided to continue studying both of them. Although the arrays of the crystal realm were weaker in strength and wasteful in energy, they allowed Lex to learn the behavior of each character safely. Furthermore, once he had a deep understanding of the characters, as well as how an array worked, he could try to recreate the arrays from the crystal realm using the method of the author. Theoretically, those arrays should maintain the same effects, but with stronger results.

By the time he was done with all his classes, it was already evening. After making up for his missed meal, Lex returned to his dorm, mentally exhausted. But, as much as Lex wanted to do nothing, leaving himself with so much time to think did him no good.

His mind would wander towards the Inn, towards the fact that he was far from home, towards being in a different realm. It made him realize how small and insignificant he was when compared to the universe, to a realm, even. But, just as his mind veered towards these dark thoughts, he would pull himself back up.

He would spend some time meditating before he began cultivating. Instead of feeling small, he would tell himself that he was strong. That so long as he had breath in his body, the vast universe had not defeated him yet.

Instead of exhaustion and weakness, a fierce will shone in his eyes. In a time where he should have felt the most helpless, ironically, Lex became the most focused he had ever been. His mind worked faster than ever before, repeating and memorizing each and everything he covered in classes, and then, when he had free time, he went to a library to do more research.

When he worked for the weaponsmith, he observed and memorized each action, and asked every question his brain could conjure. Most of the time, the weaponsmith was too preoccupied to answer, but when she did, she explained thoroughly.

When he had combat classes, he gave everything he had, and he was fearless in his attacks. Objectively speaking, Lex was actually becoming a worse fighter since he ended up taking more hits, but from this class's point of view, Lex was excelling.

The subject that most held Lex's attention, though, was arrays. It was difficult and complex, with seemingly an ocean's worth of characters to learn. But, one time, when his professor demonstrated an array that artificially created the circumstances required for rain, before letting nature take over, resulting in impromptu rain, Lex felt something click in his mind.

It was like he had an epiphany, not on a specific array, but on arrays in general. Initially, when Lex had described arrays as a programming language, he treated it half as a joke.

But, if he were to consider for a moment, and treat arrays as a way of programming nature, or the universe itself, what he could achieve was immeasurable.

The fire in his eyes only grew stronger. He knew that his perspective was limited, and that there were many things he didn't know, but in his professor doing something as simple as causing rain, Lex saw his own limitless future.

If he could create rain, why stop there? He didn't believe in 'magic', and so started to think of everything the system did in terms of arrays. If the system could do something, then one day he'd be able to do it

too. And if there was something his system couldn't do, that didn't mean it was something Lex couldn't do.

So long as he was at the system's mercy, he could get stuck on a different planet, or in a different realm, the moment something went wrong. But if he could traverse the universe on his own, why would he care what the system can or cannot do? Why would he care about his authority not being high enough? Authority was shit, arrays were what truly mattered.

But, just as Lex began to think in this way, he was faced with the glaring weakness of arrays which was that they themselves were weak. How could he get around them? Formations were stronger than arrays because they relied on various physical items and treasures, but that made them immobile and weak in their own way.

The best result would be if he could craft something, a treasure, an item, a piece of technology, anything, and then engrave his arrays onto it. The array would then be as strong as the item, and could function as long as the engraved arrays weren't compromised. But then he would require an energy source...

Countless thought went through Lex's mind and he didn't limit his thoughts either. He allowed himself to think big, because that was the only way he would achieve big results. He consulted the weaponsmith about his idea of imbuing weapons with arrays, and when she finally replied, learnt that such a thing already existed and showed him multiple examples.

Little did Lex know that on his journey to overcome the system, and form arrays that would allow him to replicate the systems functions, he had stumbled upon a very rudimentary explanation for the system itself.

## The Innkeeper

### Chapter 245: One month

Suffice to say, Lex's first month in the academy was extremely busy. Between his various classes, doing his own research for the impending field test, and cultivating when able, he barely had any free time.

That limited free time that he had was often spent in the company of Amelia and a few of her friends. Truth be told, she was as helpful, if not more, in bridging the gap between Lex's knowledge and common sense in the Crystal realm than many of his classes.

For example, the device that looked like a watch he was wearing today was called PT (personal terminal) which, for all intents and purposes, was like a mobile phone but with more features, given to him by Amelia. He was also better able to get accustomed to the day/night cycle here, as well as understand how the calendar in the crystal realm worked.

Each day was 25 hours long, with five days in a week and six weeks in a month. Since Sol-light did not have a fixed pattern, the plants, the people and the civilizations had adjusted to it accordingly. Not all, but many of the plants as well as insects were luminescent, and many animals had developed extra senses to accommodate for the long periods of time without light.

The humans here, in general, had much better eyesight than Lex, as well as a small degree of night vision. But for academy students, that wasn't an issue, as apparently the academy had its own dedicated Sol birds. Apparently, the dean had a flock of them as pets, so at least in the academy it was never dark.

Other than that, Amelia also helped him get accustomed to the social norms. As his geography class proceeded, and he began to understand how vast the area controlled by humans really was, he truly began to wonder why everyone suffered from such a sense of crisis when after hundreds of years of war, the Kraven had barely taken over 1% of their land.

The answer, once again, was Cornelius II. As a farsighted man, as well as one of the strongest, if not the strongest, human, he understood the threat of the Kraven early on. After that, well, it was merely a matter of might being right. He forcibly converged all the strength and resources of the humans, created the Hum nation, and organized a unified effort to defend against the Kraven.

Time had proved him right, as only with such a strong and dedicated approach were the humans able to prevent the Kraven from completely destroying them the way they had done to the Poliods. Eventually, human society became accustomed to such a ruthless style of existence - mostly because they had no other option.

This was because King Cornelius II had a personal motto which, as dean of the academy, he implemented here as well.

The motto was simply 'I don't give a shit'. You don't want to fight? No one cared. You don't like the style of government? No one cared. You think the world is round instead of a flat, endless mass of land? No

one cared. The only way to get people to care was to first fulfill your minimum responsibility to the war efforts, one way or another. Then your opinion became relevant, to a degree.

Slowly, and steadily, that motto as well as the singular mentality of doing everything to defeat the Kraven had seeped into the minds and habits of everyone. So long as you cooperated with the system, it was fine, but the moment you stopped cooperating... well, Lex finally understood why no one cared at all about the village that had been destroyed during his assessment. He suddenly realized how dangerous his rant to Vernan about not joining special forces had been.

Even the generally compassionate and understanding Amelia showed no reaction when he mentioned the destroyed village to her, nor did her friends. It chilled Lex at how normal death was here.

During this time, he also focused on managing the Inn when he could. Surprisingly, the husband and wife duo still had not finished their test to join the Inn. But, in a way, it made sense. Since they were the strongest to join to date, they had the toughest test. The one issue he was unable to solve was getting access to more worlds for the incoming expo hosted by Earth. There were some options he could use if push came to shove, but those would be last-minute options. Furthermore, he would also need to use some accumulated energy by the system to access the more advanced features.

He had also given his all to his part-time job, even if he could not understand the forging methods his boss employed.

With all that on his plate, despite Lex managing to deal with his stress, he had an increasing urge to smoke. Unfortunately, smoking did not seem to be a common practice here, and without anything to smoke, Lex could only make do. That did trigger an old habit of his, of playing with something in his fingers.

Since he had no cigarettes, nor pens to play with, without realizing it, Lex had begun to play around with the Inns golden key in his fingers. He was passing it from finger to finger, twisting and turning it around his hand, while not really paying any attention to it. That is, until one day, it occurred to him... to try to use the key to go back to the Inn!

Unfortunately, since this realm had not been anchored to the Inn, the teleportation didn't work. Furthermore, as the Innkeeper, the system restricted him from using the key himself. Since he had increased authority, Lex asked why there was such a stupid restriction. The only reply Mary was able to give was that it would make things 'too easy'.

Unable to understand, Lex put it behind him. He had long since made it his goal to become stronger than the system, and though such a goal could not be achieved any time soon, it allowed him to detach from the system mentally.

All this led him to where he was now, once again in the mess hall with Amelia and her friends. As the month was almost over, they were all already focusing on what their new classes would be next month, mostly a higher level of the same classes. Only Lex had not registered yet, for his field test would take him away from the academy.

"You're so lucky," said Miscellaneous Friend A as she looked at Lex with envy. "A vacation after a single month, while we have to work our butts off."

"It's not a vacation," Amelia very seriously corrected her friend. "He's going on an expedition. It could be dangerous."

"What danger? There's no Kraven in the inner-territories. At most, he'll run into some wild beasts, or maybe encounter some uncivilized tribes that have never been outside their own regions. Can they even be considered a threat? The way I see it, it's a vacation with seniors from the academy. Maybe there will be some beautiful seniors who would like to play with their juniors," she said, and winked.

Although technically Lex was the most junior here, that was only in terms of classes. In age, his seniors would at most be his peers.

"Well, in that case, I shouldn't keep those seniors waiting," Lex said with a chuckle, before he said his farewell and left. The group of friends watched him leave, and the moment he left the room, they started whispering in hushed tones.

"Amelia, do you think THAT rumor is true?" asked one of the friends.

"I... don't think so," she said hesitantly. She didn't like gossiping about Lex now that he was her friend. "His age is too high and cultivation too low. It wouldn't make sense."

"Who cares about cultivation? He faced off an immortal! The way I see it, he's definitely from 'that' family. Not to mention, you've seen how hard he works. He's too focused for someone with no background. The way I see it, you should make your move on him before someone else does."

Amelia kept looking towards where Lex left, feeling confused. Originally, after the rumors about Lex spread, they disappeared just as quickly. Lex himself didn't think anything of it, because he was familiar with the concept of 15 minutes of fame. His reputation was unearned, so it was natural that it would vanish. What he didn't know was that, in truth, an even wilder rumor started spreading about him after he developed a reputation as a good student and hard worker. One that was so... scandalous, that people only whispered about it, and only discussed it amongst themselves. And so, as Lex left to meet his seniors for the first time, he had no idea what his real reputation was.

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Origin Realm, Somewhere in the Milky Way

A man stepped out of one spaceship and into another, taking in a deep breath as if smelling freedom for the first time in a long time. He was escorted by the crew to his private room, where a few people were waiting for him.

"Mr. Jeckal, everything went according to your plan. The Williams family had no idea about your worth, and just a few decades of waiting ended up using you to trade for some minor benefits. If they had any idea of who you really are, things could have gotten tricky."

"It's basic psychology," Jeckal said, as he sat down on one of the sofas, making himself comfortable. "If you ignore something, everyone will assume it's worthless. But, now that I've escaped their clutches, let's make sure nothing like this happens again."

Although Jeckal was smiling, everyone else in the room shivered.

"Take me out of the Galaxy and back home where I can be safe. And, while you're at it, but some bounties out for some of the Williams family kids, I want them to feel uncomfortable. Also, I had to leave one of my daughters, Heidi, back in that infernal prison alive because she got mixed up with some unknown entity called Midnight Inn. Look into it, and if their background isn't an issue, I want you to

make them uncomfortable as well. I had to leave a loose end because of them, and if my wife finds out I had kids, it'll be a problem."

"Right away," answered one of the people. They were used to this kind of behavior. This Jeckal was a calamity for countless people, but he was useful and he knew it, so he knew exactly how to take advantage of his situation.

The name Midnight Inn was just one of many he put on a list to cause trouble for, and who would honestly take the trouble of researching all of them? Usually, all these people had to do was pass the name along, and the organization or people on that list would vanish. So, for better or for worse, they did the same for this list, and a certain powerful organization started killing anyone who used the name Midnight Inn. After all, who would stop them?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 246: Departure

The expedition party had 120 students, each a part of a subgroup that had a certain purpose. Only 30 of the students had combat related designations, with the remaining having their own reasons for joining the group - from prospectors, to cartographers, to wilderness explorers and more.

Despite their various fields, Lex was still the person with the lowest cultivation level here. Although he had made sure to spend time cultivating, and the rich spiritual energy of this world helped speed up his growth, he had still only reached Qi training level 5.

But, as a consultant and advisor, he would not be on the front lines should they encounter any danger. Well, that was what was technically supposed to happen, but once Lex reported to the leader of the expedition, and confirmed his role, his grimace let Lex know exactly what the man thought of him.

Ptolemy Woodman, the leader of this expedition, had worked ridiculously hard to have this expedition organized. This was not a mission from the academy for him, this was something he had to convince the academy to let him do. He proved himself time and time again, and did endless research and preparation to show the academy that this expedition would be profitable. Not only that, he had to sign a contract, stating that should the expedition end up a failure, he would work for 10 years for the academy to make up for it.

Yet, in the end, they stuck him with some consultant to help him advise on security measures? He was not an amateur who had never seen combat! He had gained experience doing time on both the front lines during such expeditions and in the command center during army drills. This was an insult. But, as someone who understood the rules, he knew throwing a tantrum was pointless. If this is what it took to lead his own expedition, he would tolerate it. For now.

"We're leaving in three days," Ptolemy said, handing Lex a list. "In this time, become familiar with the roles of everyone in the expedition. Also, if you have any requests in terms of gear or personal equipment, turn it in by today. Since the academy is funding the expedition, there is a certain allowance for equipment needed for it."

Lex was surprised by the fact that he could request gear, as he had spent most of his personal earnings during the past month to purchase all sorts of stuff for this expedition. If he could request more for free... Well, as a New Yorker, it went against his personal code of conduct to refuse free things.

The most expensive things he needed were ingredients for a special kind of ink he could use to form arrays even in the Qi training realm, so he did not hesitate to request as many of those as he could. Ptolemy was confused by the request, but didn't care enough to inquire about their uses.

Over the next three days, Lex spent all his time getting acquainted with the students on the expedition. This is where the skills he had picked up at the Inn shone the most. Lex had become charismatic enough to strike up a conversation with anyone he met, and make a favorable impression when he left. Of course, this was not what he was normally like, but in this instance where he was trying to get to know everyone, and build a positive relationship so that the expedition wouldn't be affected, he could turn on the charm like a switch.

In fact, internally, even he was a little surprised by how easy it was. The contrast between how easily he had ingratiated himself to the members of the expedition, and how much of a loner he had been for the past month was drastic. It seemed sometimes, making an effort was the only difference between two entirely different outcomes. That, and the fact that no one had yet connected Lex to the rumors about him that had spread.

Though, that did not mean he regretted having a small social circle. His focus was on making the best use of his time at the academy, not making friends. Only a small part of him admitted that his time during this past month would have been absolutely miserable if it hadn't been for Amelia's company.

Finally, on the day of departure, Lex stood alongside the 120 other members, his backpack filled to the brim, and a small duffle bag on the ground beside him. Of everyone, he had the least luggage, mostly because he skipped out on bringing many spare clothes and focused only on the essentials - a decision he would soon come to regret.

They did not have to wait for long, as soon Ptolemy arrived alongside some school staff. They would have no chaperones during their excursion, and would have to rely on themselves, but for them to reach their destination, they would require the academy's help.

It need not be said that the Crystal realm was massive. The equivalent of a million Earths would not even cover the amount of land held by just the Kraven's, let alone the other races. This explained why so much land was left unexplored, even in established counties.

They followed them to the teleportation terminal, one of the most important and most well supervised regions of the academy. Trying to move around Hum nation on a vehicle would take exceedingly long times, which is why teleportation was such an important feature.

Teleporting a few individuals around, like it had been done to Lex during his assessment, was relatively easy. But to move 120 students far off, all at once, would require them to use the teleportation formation.

"Lex, to me," Ptolemy said commandingly, summoning Lex to his side. Lex did not like his tone or demeanor, but he listened nonetheless.

"From here, we'll be teleporting directly to Karom city, the nearest settlement to our excursion zone. From there, we will head out, and it will take us a few days to reach the boundary of the explored lands. Since you're here on an advisory role regarding security, do you have any suggestions?"

Lex had already done plenty of research on where they would be heading, so he was not surprised by the mention of the city or their route. He was, however, surprised that Ptolemy asked for his advice.

"The outskirts of Karom city's domain is a dense forest, which we will have to travel through unless you have planned some kind of air transport. Moving on foot will be exhausting and difficult, considering the difficult terrain, so I recommend we rent some Delaim lizards as mounts.

"Furthermore, it'll be difficult to set up camp in a forest, so before we enter, we should send scouts ahead to check any for areas suitable or defensible. Considering the fact that we don't know what we'll be facing as we proceed, it's a good idea to always be as rested as possible. For now, that's all I have."

Delaim lizards were a six-legged species of lizards that were as long as alligators and as large as bulls. Despite their aggressive nature, they were commonly used as mounts in Hum nation as they had mastered the art of subduing them. Admittedly, a forest was not the kind of terrain where they could show their advantage, it was better than nothing. Also, despite being somewhat tame, they could also serve as good guard lizards for when they set camp or rested.

Lex had already noted down this suggestion while he was doing research, along with a few other things. Unfortunately, since the place they were going to was unexplored, there were only so many things Lex could prepare in advance. Any other advice he had to give would have to be as things developed. Luckily, he had his Fancy Monocle to help him out in case they encountered something they didn't know about, so he wasn't too worried.

Ptolemy did not comment on whether he was satisfied with Lex's advice, nor did he let show what he really thought. He simply accepted what Lex said, but showed no indication of whether he planned on listening to Lex.

Going through the procedure to teleport so many people took a couple of hours, but it was still nothing compared to TSA.

"Brace yourself," a student advised Lex as they walked into the formation. Lex thought he knew what to expect, but the moment the teleportation formation activated, he knew he was wrong. His previous teleportations had hit him with a whiplash, but this time Lex felt like a sledgehammer smashed into his chest.

Barely managing to keep himself from falling over, Lex managed to prevent embarrassing himself as soon as the expedition started. But, he was not prepared for the chill that hit him next.

He looked around and found himself in a small chamber, along with all the other students who were quickly putting on some sweaters and gloves. A moment later, he identified the sounds of an unabating gale. He looked out the window and saw what seemed like dunes of snow, and a snowstorm that threatened to freeze Lex to his very core.

What was this? His research never said anything about snow. A moment later, he realized he hadn't packed anything thicker than a T-shirt!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 247: I can be OP too

For a moment, Lex watched the raging snowstorm, he suffered flashbacks of being surrounded by millions of Kalter Flug. But instead of fear or anxiety, Lex only felt curiosity. He had long since learned that much of the weather patterns in the Crystal realm were dictated by ridiculously strong beings.

For example, the way Sol birds brought sunshine and warmth, he was convinced the snow storm he experienced during his assessment was the result of that massive Kalter Flug he saw at the end. Which caused him to wonder if the weather here was also a result of some massive snow creature. Considering this was an established city, they should have some defenses against creatures like that, right?

But before he had an opportunity to sate his curiosity, he felt a look full of disdain fall onto him. He turned to see Ptolemy, fully dressed in winter clothing, watching him. Though his face was neutral, Lex was 100% sure he was internally mocking him. How could Lex serve as an advisor if he couldn't even manage his own wardrobe?

This matter went farther than just needing a sweater, as normal cold would not influence Lex at all. But the cultivation world always added layers of complexity to everything. If Lex normally experienced temperatures such as 0 degrees celsius without trouble, once the chill was enhanced by spirit energy, it was no longer a matter of simple temperature. It was the spirit energy itself that chilled him rather than the weather.

The clothes everyone was donning surely had some protective functions to protect against such a spiritualized chill. One of the other students, who was on good terms with Lex, noticed the latter wasn't changing his clothes. Realizing he might have not brought anything to protect against such an environment, he offered Lex a spare.

Perhaps if Lex wasn't suffering from the mocking gaze of Ptolemy, he would have simply accepted. That was the simpler solution. But he didn't want to give Ptolemy the satisfaction of knowing he was right and that Lex hadn't brought clothes. Instead...

"Thanks, but weather like this doesn't mean much to me," Lex said with a smile.

Lex wasn't just putting up a brave front. If there was one thing Lex had learnt during this one month at the academy, it was that he had seriously underestimated the worth of a SSS+ rank award. While his defense was steadily increasing, and now at level 5 Qi training, he could face most Qi training level cultivators without fear of being killed, it had not yet veered into the realm of overpowered.

Instead, it was the immense ease with which he picked up any kind of defensive technique, and the ridiculous mastery he had over each one of those techniques that amazed him. He remembered once, during his job with the weaponsmith, she gave him a technique that would allow him to negate cold so that he could dip his hands into a liquid so cold it made liquid nitrogen look like fresh soup.

Strictly speaking, it was not a defensive technique, since its actual purpose was to concentrate all the cold he would have felt on his hands to the tip of his fingers, which he could then channel into another object, forcefully dropping its temperature. It was an auxiliary technique used during crafting special equipment.

But Regal Embrace begged to differ. To it, this was a technique designed to protect Lex from element based damage, and so with a glance he learnt it. Even still, Lex did not realize the treasure trove he had until one day, while he was in the library, he encountered a section with various cultivation techniques.

One could not learn those techniques at a whim, as not only did you need proper qualification, you actually needed to pay. Yet, so long as it was a defensive technique, just the introductory paragraph with a vague description of how it manipulated Qi to give birth to various effects were enough for Lex to learn it. As if that wasn't enough, he even managed to learn the techniques that seemed to originate from completely different forms of cultivation!

So, in this moment, when Lex was being assaulted by the passive effects of chilled spiritual energy, he activated one of the many techniques he had learnt - one of his favorites, actually.

Immediately, Lex stopped feeling the chill and, in fact, felt a little warm, while an array character that represented ice appeared on the back of his right hand in a blueish-silver light.

It was important to note that while the character that formed on his hand was used in arrays, the characters themselves were symbols born of the universe and represented its power. Even those who did not study arrays had some basic knowledge of such matters, and so, when the character appeared on his hand, and Lex moved around as if truly unaffected by the chill, some of the students who knew

his role during this trip suddenly had a better impression of him. As an advisor, he did not need to be strong, but instead versatile.

While he received a few acknowledging nods, he flashed a smug grin at Ptolemy. Sometimes, being petty felt good.

The expedition leader snorted, but quickly turned his attention back to important matters.

"The presence of Frio birds complicates things a bit, but we have already planned for this as well. We'll be riding Delaim lizards to cross the terrain and we'll have to get some Hover coaches. We..."

Ptolemy did not bother giving everyone the briefing on what they had to do, only let them know that things were under control. It seemed that, even before Lex's suggestion, he had arranged for the lizards to be their mounts.

As the expedition prepared themselves to move out despite the weather, Lex looked up into the sky. There were no giant monsters, and clouds covered the sky, but sometimes Lex felt like he vaguely saw the shape of birds.

After asking what seemed to be common sense, he learnt that Frio birds were the counterparts of Sol birds. A Frio and Sol bird each formed a couple, but they would only meet during mating season, which usually spelt disaster for the weather.

Both these species of birds, while ridiculously strong, were not usually aggressive, as they did not feed on food to sustain themselves, only spiritual energy. Of course, if someone tried to provoke them, they would show that they were far from harmless.

After exiting the teleportation hall, they made their way outside the city, where 120 saddled Delaim Lizards were waiting for them, with another 30 harnessed to several floating carriages. After loading most of their luggage into the carriages, and purchasing some supplies locally, they left immediately.

Ptolemy had arranged for guides, so the poor visibility and the harsh weather did not seem to slow them down. Other than that, they had also employed some of the city's local guards as an escort - just to avoid any unnecessary problems.

These were just some of the visible things Ptolemy had done, for Lex, who had been accompanying since they set off saw for himself how he kept preemptively preparing for any trouble.

As annoying as Lex found Ptolemy, he found himself learning a lot by following him. Maybe that was the real test, not to effectively advise, but to learn as much as possible.

But, while Lex was having this epiphany, and was considering trying to mend their relationship, Ptolemy knew from the very start that he was not in need of any advice, but rather he was being used to groom this new and upcoming student, which is why he resented Lex even more. While Ptolemy himself worked to gain everything he had, the path was being carved for Lex even if he did not realize it.

What neither of them knew was that the circumstances of their meeting had been carefully orchestrated behind the scenes by a certain department in the academy. They were not meant to be friends, but rather somewhat akin to rivals. Lex would learn from Ptolemy, while the latter was supposed to be egged on by the favor being shown to Lex and work even harder to prove himself. Currently, as things stood, they were playing along perfectly.

Slowed down by the storm, they trod along for almost 12 hours before they reached their first campsite, which, as it turned out, had already been prepared long before their arrival. This camp was right outside the forest, and they would rest here until their path forward had been properly mapped by the forward team.

Moving a small team through the forest might have been easy, but with so many people and carriages to take along, a proper path would be required, and it would take some time to plot such a path.

Just as Lex was beginning to admire Ptolemy, and almost made up his mind to mend their relationship, the latter looked at him and said, "you sure you can keep yourself warm like that for long? It would be a shame if I need your advice, but I find my advisor frozen in a corner somewhere."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 248: Invasion

Lex was suddenly struck by Ptolemy's sudden outburst. While it could not veer into the domain of an actual insult, up until this moment, the man had kept his disdain in check. He behaved professionally

and did not let his personal feelings affect how he was supposed to behave. So then, why the sudden change?

After a moment, Lex realized what had happened. Once they reached the first campsite, they were officially on their own, as even the escorts from the nearby city had begun to retreat. Now, Ptolemy was the true leader, and did not need to put up on a front. This did not spell well. But Lex was not one to back down so easily.

"Even if I maintain this technique for a thousand years, it won't tire me," he replied, as if he was talking about something mundane, like a crease on his shirt.

But he had not lied. The only Qi required on Lex's behalf to use this technique was the one required to activate it. Once activated, and the character on his hand formed, the technique would continue to run so long as there was ambient chilled spiritual energy, as it was that very energy that powered the technique.

At a glance, this seemed like a very powerful technique which could make him immune to all cold elemental damage, but that was just a facade. Absorbing the cold was just the auxiliary purpose of this defensive technique, as its true purpose lay elsewhere. Therefore, while it could absorb the energy seemingly endlessly, such absorption was only focused on the ambient energy that passively surrounded Lex. In the case of an attack, this effect would not be able to absorb any of the energy, and the true purpose of the ability would be triggered.

Although he had mastered this technique, it took a while for Lex to understand the concept behind this technique itself.

This was because the definition of cold on Earth was the absence of heat. Since cold in itself was nothing except the relative distribution of heat, absorbing cold actually meant distributing heat away. Yet in an environment colder than his body temperature, the technique was 'absorbing' the surrounding cold, therefore making him feel warm. Where was this warmth coming from?

Eventually Lex understood. The heat was coming from the physics class he decided to drop in college. With that, he stopped thinking about it.

His current focus was on Ptolemy, who was looking back at Lex with mild disgust.

"I think it's time we figure a few things out. To me, your aid is unnecessary and your presence is an irritation distraction at best. To you, this expedition is your passing grade. So, you can stick around, but stay out of my way and everything will go smoothly for the both of us. Stick to the middle of camp where you'll be safe, and treat this like a vacation and soon it'll all be over. Dismissed."

Not bothering with Lex anymore, the man left. Lex, on the other hand, felt extremely aggravated, but at the same time, considering the circumstances, being ignored was the best thing that could have come from the situation. Had Ptolemy decided to do more... dastardly things to express his discontent, life would have become very difficult for Lex.

This still did not mean that Ptolemy wouldn't decide to take out his frustration on Lex again later, that was still a possibility, so Lex did not let down his guard.

But, freed from responsibility, Lex could now spend more time learning arrays. Not to mention, there was another purpose this expedition happened to fill for Lex. Since they were soon going to enter unexplored lands, there was a possibility of Lex running into untapped energy sources.

Although rare, it was not unheard of for an expedition to discover spirit stone mines, energy wells, natural formations and more wonderful things. In fact, searching for such things was a big part of every expedition.

With nothing left to do, Lex returned to his tent to get some rest and chat with Mary. While things had not been all sunshine and rainbows, at least there hadn't been any major events at the Inn to worry him, which was nice.

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In front of Avallon building, Midnight Inn

A small group of 6 aliens called Raskals appeared and immediately started looking around, assessing for any threats. They were wearing regular clothes, or so it seemed, for under their clothes they were all wearing skin tight combat armor.

Unlike in the old days, when Lex or one of his workers would greet new guests, personal holograms did that these days. These Raskals received the standard welcome and explanation, but that did not diminish their wariness towards the Inn.

The Raskals were an aggressive, war prone race with limited intelligence. The upside to this was that, when trained, they followed their training dutifully without any extra thoughts - mostly because they had no extra thoughts. Not to mention, their intelligence had no detriment to their combat prowess, and so they served as excellent soldiers and scouts.

These four feet tall, leathery aliens were humanoid, but had four arms, two facing forwards and two backwards, as well as retractable wings that had coiled on their backs. The closest thing on Earth that resembled these aliens were skin rats. But, just because they looked weird, did not mean they would be refused service.

The six Raskals exchanged looks, and then split up, each heading in a different direction. They had arrived here using golden keys provided by Jeckal, Heidi's father. Their preliminary purpose was to study the Inn and gather as much information as possible, as well as anything on any forces that might be backing them, and the strength of their members.

Jackal was a very vindictive man, but he was extremely useful for his organization, and so many of his desires were fulfilled. That did not, however, mean the organization would recklessly kill everyone the man wanted killed. They would at least do some background research first.

They had no information about the Midnight Inn in their database, which dropped their evaluation of the Inn by a lot. After all, if they were important, they would be known. Sending the Raskals at this point was just a formality.

A few hours later, when the Raskals returned and submitted their report, the organization assessed it to be a lot of unverifiable claims. The staff that the Raskals encountered were pathetically weak, and though there were rumors of the Innkeeper being a hegemon of the universe, it appeared that currently he was away from the Inn.

The organization determined it was nothing more than bolstering and bluffing, and deemed the Midnight Inn inconsequential. Of course, one flaw in their report was that they did not mention arriving at the Inn via teleportation across space activated using a key. Since it was not mentioned, the organization assumed it was a place reached by more regular means, and one of the things that had intimidated so many others who visited the Inn became overlooked.

In the end, to satisfy Jeckal, an execution order was sent. A team of 500 Raskals was organized, with the strongest few being in the Nascent realm. The original team of six distributed enough keys for all of them and then, the first ever invasion of the Inn commenced.

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John clenched his fists as he kept himself from screaming out of frustration. He had come so ruddy close to finishing the Mystery trial, but once again failed! The most frustrating thing was that this time, his failure was all his own fault.

For the first time, he executed his own assassination plan without his systems help, and actually succeeded! He had stabbed the enemy in the neck, and the moment felt so great that he momentarily forgot that at higher levels, that was not enough to kill. The single moment he took to celebrate his victory was all his target needed to kill him in return.

Just as he was writhing in bitter agony, four short guests appeared before him. He groaned internally, and just as he was about to put on a friendly face, they attacked him!

The two nearest to him threw what looked like metal nets covered in spikes at him, while the two further back launched blow darts at his face. Before the attack even landed, they considered the man dead, for they could feel no cultivation from him. They were already looking for their next target when the two Raskals holding the nets were yanked into the air.

Grabbing the two metal nets with his hand, he pulled the enemies towards himself with no regard for the spikes. As the two Raskals flew towards him, a simple backhand slap cracked their skulls and knocked them unconscious.

He grinned at the remaining two Raskals, his teeth conveniently holding the darts that shot at him. Then, as if they were candy, he sucked the darts into his mouth and started to chew.

Fear and horror gripped the Raskals as they realized they had encountered a formidable foe, a sharp contrast to the delight on John's face. He was just happy he had someone to vent on. After all, the Innkeeper couldn't blame him for playing a little if the guests attacked him first, right?

## The Innkeeper

### Chapter 249: 4 seconds

Rafael was sitting in his wheelchair, sunbathing. Since he had woken up, he barely returned to Earth for a few days before returning to the Inn. Not only was the Inn safer, considering Earth's volatile political situation, it was better for his recovery as well. Not to mention, he had thoroughly confirmed that most of his information about the future in the near future was useless now. Only events further out in the future, or events unrelated to the situation on Earth itself, were still relevant. This meant he had to spend a lot of time figuring out what he needed to do.

Just as his internal monologue was going on, two ugly, leathery rat monsters appeared in front of him. No, wait, that was insensitive. Rat aliens appeared in front of him. They took a look around to get an understanding of the situation, and then their sight landed on Rafael.

As an experienced war veteran, he immediately recognized the look in their eyes, but instead of being alarmed, he raised an eyebrow in curiosity?

Really? They were going to attack him? The answer was yes.

The closest ugly, skinny, leathery rat monster immediately lunged at him with a frail-looking spear, aiming towards his skull. Given his current condition there wasn't much he could do anyway, but Rafael did not as much as flinch as he watched the spear closing in on him with a smirk.

From the initial distance of a few feet, the spear closed in on him in a flash. As it drew close, aiming somewhere towards the middle of his face, he even took the time to observe the craftsmanship of the spear. It was made of some kind of white material and he could not tell if it was something synthetic or a kind of material he'd never seen before. It had green colored lines running up and down its body, as if the odd material had some kind of disgusting veins sticking out of its body.

Even as the spear was a few inches from his face, he did not move. Even as the squeaky battle cry of the rat monster hit him, his smirk did not disappear. The tip of the spear was but a few centimeters from his face.

Then it hit him. That is, the gust of wind carried by the spear hit him, but the spear itself was held firmly in place by a vine that suddenly emerged from the ground. To be clear, the vine had wrapped itself not only around the spear, but the ugly, stinky, disgusting rat monster as well as its counterpart.

For a moment everything was still, as the monsters tried to struggle within the vines, but could not. Then the vine pulled the two into the ground, the grass quickly covering up the area the vine had come from, as if nothing ever happened.

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Crystal realm, Karom Forest, Lex's tent

Lex had been sitting on the ground, chatting with Mary about the Inn and the Crystal realm, when suddenly he received the loudest system notification to date.

He did not need to go and check the notification because, for the first time, in a robotic yet disgruntled voice, the system directly read the notification out to him.

Quest: MIDNIGHT INN IS BEING INVADED! WARD OFF THE INVASION WITHOUT ALLOWING THE GUESTS TO SUFFER HARM

Quest time limit: IMMEDIATELY

Quest Reward: Gamblers coin

Quest failure punishment: REDUCTION IN AUTHORITY!

For a time that seemed to stretch to eternity, Lex was frozen as he suddenly panicked! This was exactly what he had been fearing! Not only was the Inn under attack, he was far away and could not do anything.

But Lex was not inexperienced anymore! He managed to recover from his panic and his mind went into overdrive!

From the moment of the system's announcement, to him panicking, to his eventual recovery, exactly one second had passed. The system had given the quest before the Raskals even appeared, but by the time Lex had recovered, they were already in the Inn.

Working faster than his mind had ever done before, he scanned the entire Inn with his mind, identifying the various locations of the invaders. Whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, most of the invaders appeared in three different places.

Most of them, around 300, appeared near the gate built into the boundary wall of the Inn. This was a common place for new guests to appear, but as there was no attraction near it, it was fortunately empty of guests. The second place a lot of them appeared was on Main street, near Avallon. Around 100 well equipped Raskals had just appeared, and unfortunately, it was a crowded spot. The third place they appeared in a large group was in front of Midnight manor, a couple dozen or so of them. This place also had guests around, though not as many as Main street.

The remainder appeared in random locations throughout the Inn. Once Lex understood their locations, he scanned them for their strengths. The strongest Raskals' status was:

Name: K-789465

Age: 110

Sex: Male

Cultivation Details: Nascent realm middle

Species: Raskal

Midnight Inn Prestige Level: -

Remarks: He's cannon fodder for the universe, and a boss for you.

He immediately understood the division in power levels. 400 of them were at various levels in the foundation realm, 80 of them were in the Golden core and 20 of them were in the Nascent realm.

This was an army that could decimate the Inn! He didn't have any workers in those realms and the vine was only in the Initial Golden Core realm. What could he do? If the husband and wife duo had managed to pass their tests by now, he could have used them, but currently they were both away, conducting their respective tests. There had to be a solution.

Another second passed.

He had to think of solutions fast, and he had to protect his guests and workers as well! He had over 4 million MP at his disposal, as well as 0.1% energy accumulated. If this wasn't enough to eradicate his enemies from the face of this universe, then as the Innkeeper he should just retire.

Lex's overworking mind suddenly entered a state of flow and he began doing multiple things at once. He immediately identified the Raskals that were near guests and workers, other than the ones on Main street.

There were 12 such situations, including the ones near Rafael. Of these 12 situations, most guests were faced with foundation Raskals, one guest was faced with a Golden Core Raskal and the last one was Gerard and Velma, who faced a Nascent realm Raskal!

'Mary, control the Vine and stop these Raskal immediately!' Lex said as he mentally sent her the image of the locations as well as the Raskals that needed to be stopped. He was not aware if she would be able to multitask and control the Vine in so many places at once, so he sent her images in decreasing order of urgency. The first image was of the Raskal closest to harming someone, then one slightly further off and so forth.

In the meantime, he spent 100,000MP to create a teleportation circle on Main street and teleported all the Raskals away, directly to the front gate with the rest of the Raskals. Unfortunately, this was not targeted teleportation, as he was able to do when he himself was at the Inn, so anyone within was also teleported along, Raskal or not.

He quickly scanned the Inn again, to understand what was the most pressing situation, expecting it to be Gerard and Velma but, beyond anything he could have expected, the situation was under control. In fact, the circumstances of those two and the Raskal were so peculiar Lex actually lost 0.4 second in shock, despite the state of flow!

But he moved on. The situation was far from handled, as a couple of fights had already broken out! Fortunately, the two fights involved John and Fenrir. He should have been worried for Fenrir, but in the single second he had not been observing the dog, it had already killed all the Raskal near it. John, on the other hand, was... eating darts?

Not wasting any more time, he bought a formation for the sole purpose of trapping an army for 1.5 million MP and then started buying smaller, targeted teleportation circles to teleport his guests out of the formation one by one. Despite being smaller, each circle cost him 10,000 MP, but he couldn't be picky right now.

Another second passed. By now John had taken care of his Raskal and Rafael had been rescued. But some guests were still being attacked. Fortunately, a couple of the guests, being warriors themselves, didn't wait for a rescue and directly retaliated as soon as they were threatened.

As another second passed, the most immediate threat had been handled, but the battle had not yet even begun.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 250: Welcome to the Midnight Inn

Gerard was having a very good day. He was at the peak of the Qi training realm, and his bloodline had upgraded! A bloodline evolution was ridiculously difficult, because there was no set way to make a bloodline evolve and level up. Of the people who had bloodlines, most went their entire lives without upgrading their bloodline, regardless of what their cultivation level was.

Of course, Gerard didn't know that. All he was concerned about was that, with the golf cart that Xeon had upgraded and his new bloodline, his rides would be a lot smoother.

Furthermore, today was his day off, so he was spending time with his friend. How could he not be happy?

"How is Pamela doing? Has she recovered from the incident?" he asked as he took a sip of hot chocolate from the finest china.

"She's fine, she's fine. She was over it in a couple of hours. These days though, she seems to be spending all of her free time at the Gamer's Den," Velma replied, a special gleam in her eyes. She loved to gossip - it gave her such a thrill. Since Helen had disappeared, she had lost her gossiping buddy, so now she rarely had an opportunity.

"It's good that the kids are getting along," replied Gerard, the worker who, himself, was only a few months old.

Just as Velma was about to elaborate on the juicy gossip surrounding Pamela and Z, a Raskal appeared in front of them. The duo had been having their chat in a picnic spot in the forest near the greenhouse, so that they could have their privacy. The appearance of a guest here, so far from all the main structures, was unusual, but not impossible.

Despite being on a break, the duo prepared to greet the guest when the Nascent launched a spirit attack on them. There was a devastating explosion and a smoke cloud filled the air while some of the surrounding trees fell over, now leaning against the trees that had not yet broken.

The Raskal had already looked past the two Qi training insects and was sweeping the area with his spirit sense, his attention attracted towards a formation he discovered in the forest.

"That was quite rude," said Gerard with a frown, as he dusted off his waistcoat with a frown. His right hand was still holding onto the cup, the hot chocolate in it without a single ripple. Behind him, Velma was disoriented and leaning against Gerard for support, her hair a mess but otherwise unharmed.

The Raskal was taken aback, but suddenly started sweeping the area with his spirit sense, trying to see the hidden expert that had protected the two. But, after a few seconds of searching, he found no one.

"The assistant innkeeper has informed me that you are from a group of invaders, and that we are understaffed at the moment, so I'll have to take care of you myself," Gerard spoke, as he put the teacup on the floor, his eyes starting to shine with a silver light as he did so.

Gerard, like the other workers at the Inn, was the proud owner of the Regalia Bloom bloodline. This was an incredibly powerful bloodline that came along with an immense cost. The bloodline allowed the user to take control of energy within a certain zone around himself. As for what kind of energy? Any energy that the user can perceive, whether it be gravitational, kinetic, heat, electromagnetic, chaos, primordial, spiritual, etc.

They could then manipulate that energy to coat any item or weapon of their choosing as a medium for that energy.

It sounded straightforward, but it was anything but simple. An example would be that if Gerard stood in the epicenter of an explosion, he could channel all the heat, sound and kinetic energy produced into the thrusters of his new golf cart, and then use it to propel the cart, all without suffering any harm.

Of course, there were limits to how much he could transfer, as each time he used the ability, he would suffer physical exhaustion, and his bloodline would also need to recover. So it was not like he could be dropped into a nuclear explosion, and then be expected to transfer all of that energy away from himself. Even if he had a dozen hot chocolates, he would eventually be physically exhausted to the point where he could not use the ability, and then the explosion would kill him.

If, however, he had the physical capabilities of Marlo, then it could not be a problem at all for him to channel the energy from a nuclear blast. But, no great power came without price. The Regalia Bloom was the same. In exchange for granting him access to all the energy in the universe, the bloodline altered his body, slowly and steadily, like a cancer that could not be treated.

Yes, no matter how he tried to resist, Gerard was unable to avoid the price. The Regalia Bloom continued to work on his body, slowly making him irresistibly attractive. Do not underestimate the seriousness of this burden. This was not the kind of delicate beauty mentioned in novels that would make the MC fairer and more beautiful. No, this was an attraction that transcended space and time.

Without actually changing his appearance, Gerard would slowly become beloved by any who saw him, regardless of their preferences or tastes. He originally underestimated the effects of the bloodline when he gathered a host of old ladies who only wanted to be chauffeured by him.

Now, even countless middle-aged women expressed their love to him, unable to resist the sheen of his white hair. But how could he, a gentleman, tear up their families? The burden of their endless love was one he had barely learnt to tolerate.

But, it was important to remember, all that was the effect and price of the Regalia Bloom bloodline before he upgraded it. Now though...

As the silver shine in his eyes grew stronger, Gerard's body was lifted up into the air and he looked down at the Raskal like a King, looking down at a peasant.

"Don't you know it's against etiquette to strike a lady?" he said, his voice hitting the Raskal like a shockwave, threatening to tear his ear drums.

"Let me teach you some manners."

Gerard's new and improved golf cart, which had been parked outside the forest, flew to him like a silver star shooting through the sky. Gerard carefully took off his blazer and put it down, just in time for the golf cart to appear, setting the blazer on the passenger seat as he himself took his place behind the wheel.

Giving no time to the Raskal to respond, the moving golf cart drifted through the air and smashed against the side of its body against him without so much as scratching the new paint job.

The Raskal was launched mercilessly through the forest, crashing through a series of trees. Even as the alien tried to stop itself using its spirit sense, the golf cart appeared again, this time smacking him in the face with one of the tires.

"Oh and, welcome to the Midnight Inn."