

Innkeeper 251

The Innkeeper

Chapter 251: Precarious situation

The Raskal was smashed into the ground, forming a large crater with spiderweb cracks that spread across the forest floor. He was injured and a trail of blood flowed down from his lip, but that was the extent of his injury.

It was not anger that filled the Raskals' eyes, but discipline. He was a trained soldier, but more importantly, he did not have much room to think. In this disadvantaged situation, the only thing running through his brain was the training he received.

He drew his weapon, a section staff with four chained staffs instead of the usual three. Each one of his hands firmly held onto one of the sections. Letting out a battle cry, he attacked!

Dashing up into the air, the Raskal swung his staff furiously at the flying, shining golf cart in an attempt to squash it like a fly.

Yet, instead of clashing, the staff gently patted the cart as all its energy had already been diverted. A green flame shot out of two exhausts at the back of the cart, before the cart seemed to jet out towards the flying alien.

Yet, the cart was still in its original location. What flew towards the Raskal was an attack in the image of the cart, followed closely by a few more!

No longer underestimating the opponent, the Raskal promptly dodged the raining golf carts and pulled back his staff. Holding the two ends of the staff, he started swinging it around himself like a jump rope, while his two free hands pulled out a slingshot and took aim at Gerard.

It did not matter if his attacks were useful or not; the Raskal was not able to think so far ahead. All it knew was to attack, and so it did. Launching endless projectiles at the cart, the Raskal also moved closer to smash the cart with his staff that he was constantly swinging. Even if Gerard absorbed some energy from it, the alien was providing energy constantly. And yet, it seemed to make no difference.

Like a swan gliding across a lake, the golf cart moved around the forest, easily dodging the attacks. Realizing his attacks up until now had failed, a seriousness entered Gerard's eyes as a silver, shining clutch and gear appeared beside him.

Wiping off the first bead of sweat he had ever experienced in his entire life, Gerard revved the cart. He was far from done.

Near the forest, four Raskals were searching for enemies. Since they had appeared in an isolated area, Lex had yet to teleport them into the formation because they were not a priority and he was too busy taking care of nonstop emergencies. Suddenly, they heard a familiar battle-cry coming from the forest, and immediately turned that way.

The battle-cry was actually a signal of a tough fight and a call for reinforcements. Since their aid was needed, they would respond, for that was how they had been trained. They began jogging towards their goal, pulling out their weapons as they did.

Z was at the edge of his seat, watching an anime called Sasuke, doing his best to hold back his tears. The start of the show was so emotional, and he could really feel the protagonist's pain, while cursing the antagonist of the show, Sakura, with all his heart. But then, suddenly, everything changed.

One moment he was in the Gamer's Den, the next moment he was at the front gate of the Inn. Before he could even begin to feel confused about what had just happened, the assistant innkeeper sent him, as well as all the other workers, a message telling them that they were being invaded.

Still amped up by all the emotions he had been feeling, and filled with frustration and hate, he immediately turned on his battle music and let loose a war cry. Instead of a single card, all 52 cards from his deck started flying in the surrounding air, before they flew directly into the army of Raskals.

This time, he did not use the flat of the cards, and used their sharp edges to cut through the enemy horde! He was visualizing all the enemies from every anime he had ever seen, and did not forget to yell the name of his attack while he was at it.

"Is-this-your-card jutsu!"

But, as spirited as Z was, unlike Gerard, he was neither at the peak of Qi training nor had his bloodline evolved. Let alone killing, even hurting the Foundation realm Raskals was a difficult task for him.

Fortunately, even as his cards swept through the enemy ranks, and the surrounding guests were starting to realize something unusual was happening, he was not the only staff member there.

Doe, the rarely seen worker who was John's assistant, along with Pamela, were up on their feet and quickly bringing the guests to a corner away from the fighting that had abruptly erupted.

Gerard's fellow chauffeurs were also doing their best at separating the enemies and the guests, even as Lex began teleporting them away one by one. The caretakers and staff from Avallon were doing their parts as well.

On one side, Harry was frozen in fear, unable to fight because he was just a normal human until recently... not! He was standing still because he was using his sorcery and literally burning the souls of any Raskals that dared near him. He was born and bred in New York. Something as mundane as a fight to the death could not phase him at all.

But, even with all their help, as well as the hundreds of vines that started to emerge from the ground to attack the Raskals, the Inn staff was but a single strong attack from the Nascents away from being destroyed.

So far, the only reason the strongest of the Raskals hadn't attacked yet was because, according to their training, they had to let their subordinates test out the enemy's strength first. They would wait 2 whole minutes before attacking, unlike what they would have done if they were alone, in which case they would have attacked immediately.

The Golden core Raskals would attack after 1 minute. While these intervals were short, they were enough to analyze the enemy's battle strength. Fortunately for the Inn, this is where their lack of intellect played in. The strategy they employed was for direct or pitched battles, and not a surprise raid, in which case they should have used their strongest attacks first.

This gave the Inn's staff, Mary and Lex enough time to respond.

While Lex was still teleporting his guests away, managing to move several each second, Mary was not resting either. She was controlling the vines, yes, but she was also doing something else equally important.

John had not even begun to torture- no, eh, to interrogate his attacks when she appeared right before him.

"John, the Inn is under attack. I need you to go to the front gate and help out," she said in a commanding tone.

John, however, was not too keen on it. Not that he didn't want to help, but that he would rather not get involved with anyone with the guts to attack this Inn, whether they were misguided or not. He was even more reluctant to fight since his cultivation was actually sealed, and while he had a tough body, in actuality, he was not a body cultivator. Not to mention, he was not an actual official Inn staff member as he had never used the Platinum key, so technically, it was none of his business. Finally, while the Innkeeper was mysterious and powerful, he could tell this assistant was nothing more than a hologram. She did not intimidate him.

"Assistant innkeeper, I don't mean to be rude, but you probably know that my cultivation is actually sealed. Although it may not seem like it, I am not really able to fight."

Mary, who had been about to leave, froze. She turned and gave John a look that spelled death.

John was not deterred, and just as he was waiting for her to threaten him or something, he heard a sound that he never would have expected. It was the familiar ping of his system.

New Quest: Eliminate invaders

Quest time limit: 5 minutes

Quest Reward: Jericho puzzle piece

Quest failure punishment: Permanent drop in cultivation by 1 major realm

Remarks: A good assassin needs to be able to eliminate armies

John was not only startled, he was aghast. This was not the kind of quests his system usually gave him, and he had never encountered a quest punishment before. But more than that, he dreaded a single thought that was roaming in his mind.

"But, despite my inability, as a part of the Inn, I will do my best to protect it," he quickly said, and bolted towards the Inn's gates. 5 minutes was not a lot of time, he absolutely could not suffer such a disability as letting his cultivation drop. To be fair, he had gained all his cultivation through the system so it made sense that it could also take it away. Still, it was not something he wanted to experience.

Especially since, in the back of his mind, he could not stop imagining the death stare Mary gave him moments before his quest popped up.

'Could she have... No, It was Impossible!' he thought to himself, but his grimace only worsened.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 252: Punishment

From the moment the Raskals entered the Inn to Mary telling John to fight, roughly 40 seconds had passed. In this time, Lex had teleported nearly 100 guests away and coordinated with Mary to have her attack certain areas with the Delinquent Viper Vine. With the immediate threat to most guests and his staff gone, Lex started going through his various new permissions to see the best way to resolve the situation.

Back in his tent, Lex had gone pale and his entire body was drenched in sweat. His mental exertion had gone beyond anything he had ever experienced before. Between constantly scanning the Inn, coordinating, teleporting and ensuring everyone's security, in these few seconds, he had already done hundreds of tasks, and he was not done yet.

The quicker he found a solution, the better, so now all his focus was on searching for an answer.

Gerard was already panting and his hands were trembling, but his grip on the steering wheel never loosened. Even now, he had not suffered a single attack, but he was showing signs of exhaustion. After all, regardless of how powerful his bloodline was, he was facing an enemy 3 major realms higher than himself!

But, despite his severe disadvantage, surprisingly, the Raskal was in a worse condition. He was not bleeding or hurt, but his leathery skin was pressing against his bones as if he was malnourished. The frequency of his attacks had dropped, and he had stopped flying, deciding instead to stand on the ground.

There was no time for hesitation so Gerard sped his cart towards the Raskal in an attempt to ram it once again. Suddenly, as if out of thin air, a massive ball of flame appeared in Gerard's path, threatening to crash into him, but just as it touched the cart, it seemed to vanish, as if siphoned into the cart itself.

The four Raskals that had worked together to set up the ambush were dumbstruck, as that attack should have worked. The next thing they saw was two jet blue flames erupting from behind the cart as it smashed into the Nascent Raskal, once again launching him into a crater.

Gerard was not surprised at the presence of the additional enemies, for he had identified them as soon as they started using their techniques. He was, however, concerned about facing more foes. Velma, fortunately, had already retreated somewhere, so at least he didn't need to worry about her.

It wasn't that she didn't want to help, but that she was too weak compared to these enemies to make a meaningful difference.

Quite sure that he hadn't managed to deal significant damage to the first Raskal, Gerard instead turned his attention to the other four that had just arrived. Two of them were in the Golden core, and two of them were in the Foundation realm. They, at least, shouldn't be as much of a challenge.

Gerard reversed the cart without looking back and swiftly made a turn, changing the direction of the cart to face where the Raskals had been hidden amongst the tree branches. Not giving them any time to evade, he promptly launched the long range attack that traveled forth in the shape of the cart.

The two Golden core Raskals managed to evade, barely, but the two Foundation ones were hit dead on, blowing up their bodies in the process.

An attack hit the golf cart from behind, as the Nascent realm Raskal climbed out of the crater, but it was impossible to surprise Gerard as he was aware of all changes in the surrounding energy. Like all the others before, this attack vanished, and the energy from it was channeled into another attack that Gerard launched towards the other Golden Core experts.

At this point, despite his best efforts, Gerard was having a tough time keeping his eyes open. It might be a good time to retreat.

"Oh dear, oh dear, you Raskals really know how to make a mess," the Galactic Sovereign turtle said, as it walked through the woods. Somewhere behind it stood Velma and the gardener. Velma was looking at Gerard with worry and concern, while the gardener... well, he was crying over the trunk of a broken tree. His art, it seemed, would never see the light of day.

"It seems some punishment is in order," it said, once it got a clear view of all the destruction. What happened next will shock you! No, eh, what happened next was very anticlimactic.

The grass on the ground started growing around the Raskals, tying them up. They tried to resist, but whether it was brute strength or a complicated spiritual attack, the grass seemed impervious.

The Nascent Raskal was especially concerned because it discovered that not only was the grass trapping its body, it was also trapping its soul. In such a dangerous situation, with no alternative, it decided to use the final ultimate attack it had been trained to carry out - the destruction of his core!

As soon as it activated the technique... nothing happened. Like a mummy wrapped in grass instead of cloth, the last Raskal fell over as Little Blue flew over to pick them up one by one. Seeing the situation resolved, Gerard finally relaxed his grip on the steering wheel and nearly fell out, but Velma quickly appeared to help him.

They turned to thank the turtle, but it had already moved on, dragging the weeping gardener behind it. As for the Raskals... back in the day, Lex had made an interrogation room near the greenhouse where Little Blue went and deposited the still struggling Raskals. There were already a few in the room, neatly stacked in a corner.

For the first minute of the fight, the Inn's staff managed to hold their own against the small army of Raskals. But, as the second minute started, they immediately fell into a disadvantaged situation. After all, on one side was a trained army and on the other side were waiters and waitresses.

More than Z, who had caused a lot of the Raskals to nearly bleed out, Harry proved to be the man of the hour. Dozens of bodies lay on the ground around him. They were not dead, and in fact, seemed the exact picture of health, as they were still at their physical peak. It was their souls that had been badly damaged.

Harry didn't even need to try to kill anyone, as at lower levels, even the mildest of damage to the soul left one nearly crippled and unable to move.

Whether they were Foundation experts or Golden Core ones, just an altered version of the spell he used to cut hair left them with cuts all over their souls. Even if they managed to avoid being crippled, the pain was enough to leave them powerless.

Yet despite his success, he was no longer actively attacking enemies. Now he was focused on defending the Inn's staff. The golf carts, unfortunately, had been destroyed and a lot of the staff were injured to various degrees. On this battlefield, only three warriors from the Inn remained in relatively good condition.

One was Harry, of course, while another was Z, and the last was one of the lifeguards from the lake called Todd. Standing at 6 feet eight inches with a body sculpted as if the after in a 'before and after' collage, Todd had activated his Regalia Bloom bloodline mid battle, and used it on his surfboard to smash enemies like beavers in a carnival game.

With the combined efforts of the three, they had managed to barely hold off the enemies, but no one knew how long it would last. Then, just as the song on Z's speaker changed, and the first chords of 'Seven Nation Armwrestlers' played, John fell from the sky right in front of the three.

He did not waste any time in talking and immediately started a massacre, his speed only increasing the deeper he went into the enemy lines, not slowing down. Out of everyone here, he seemed the most anxious to resolve this battle.

This was because, while his cultivation was sealed, as he had achieved the Earth Immortal realm, his body had gone through a transformation to immortality. Compared to these lower leveled cultivators, his body seemed like an unrelenting force of nature.

As someone who had benefited from such an advantage, it made perfect sense that he was determined to complete his quest, otherwise his cultivation would fall back down to the Nascent realm.

His skills as an assassin were finally put on full display, and even unarmed, he was like a scythe cutting down grass.

For a moment, it seemed like the tide had turned, but then the strongest few of the Raskal army decided to change their plans. According to their training, when fighting an enemy much stronger than themselves, they should focus on causing as much collateral damage as possible.

Following that logic, they gave up on observing the fight and all ran in different directions, determined to kill as many people as they could manage before John got to them.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 253: Lex, the harbinger of loopholes

In his tent, Lex was completely drenched in sweat. His shirt was stuck to his skin and his eyes were squeezed shut because he could not continuously wipe them. Right now, it was only due to his 'flow' state that he was not panicking.

No matter what his authority, the Inn never provided him with a single direct way of defending itself. There were a few very specific defensive formations he could buy, but he had neither the MP nor the energy to power them.

Every few seconds he would scan the Inn to ensure everything was not deteriorating into a mess and, fortunately, things had taken a positive turn. John had joined the fight and was rampaging amidst the enemy army.

If only he could buy guards similar to that who could just fight alongside him, but the Inn prevented him from doing that. The only way he could buy anyone with any fighting ability...

"Eureka!" Lex literally yelled out as his mind quickly moved to implement his idea!

20 Nascent Raskals invaded the Inn. Of those, 1 had fought Gerard and 1 was currently exploring the Midnight Mountain, unaware of what else was happening, and the remaining 18 were on the battlefield.

When they decided to split, all 18 moved at the same time. 3 of them decided to target John, to hold his attention and distract him from what the rest were doing. Of the remaining 15, 2 decided to attack the Inn's staff for the same purpose, while the remainder tried to escape the formation.

The speed of a Nascent cultivator was one that was near impossible to keep up with under normal circumstances, and their attacks were only faster. Z and Todd sensed a massive surge in some kind of energy, and immediately tried to divert it all, but not only were they limited in how much energy they could divert at a time, the attack was too fast!

They only saw a bright light, and before they could understand what was happening, they were blown away, crashing into those they had been trying so hard to save.

Harry similarly had sensed a surge in soul energy, and immediately attacked it! His attack had slowed down the other Nascent soul Raskal attacking them, but could not stop it. The Raskal didn't even need to attack Harry - he fainted from exhaustion on his own.

The battle, which had so far been a concert of yelling and clashing weapons, had been blanketed by a shocking silence, followed by endless explosions.

John was an assassin, not a frontal fighter, so the three Raskals that went after him were more than enough to trouble him. He had dodged a dozen sudden attacks without any chance of retaliating. The Raskals, who knew they were ultimately the weaker ones, continued to use long range area of effect attacks, resulting in dozens of explosions that, ironically, did more damage to other Raskals than anyone else.

It was a split second, and the tide of the battle had drastically shifted. The worker who was holding onto Z's bloodied and unconscious body had only just recognized what, or rather who, he was holding when their assailants flashed in front of them.

The workers could not even respond. They only looked at the four-armed, leathery alien like the harbinger of death. The Raskal did not waste any time and gathered a shining white energy in its arms to attack when a shadow fell over its body.

Surprised, it looked around to see for any incoming attackers when a giant, ivory foot crushed him into the ground. The other Nascent Raskal, who had seen the giant appear out of thin air, tried to retreat. Unfortunately for it, the giant's size did not diminish its speed in any way, and before the Raskal could move but a few feet, the giant kicked it, breaking dozens of bones and incapacitating it.

The appearance of the giant caused a huge disturbance, as almost everyone turned to look at it as neither the Raskals nor the workers had seen it before.

But, after the initial shock, many immediately realized that the giant strongly resembled the faceless training dummies in the Training room. But while the other training dummies had been made of wood and did not do much other than attack physically, this one seemed to be made of ivory and actually used various techniques.

The ivory giant did not wait around to observe or give his opponents any time to react. It identified its next target and rushed, breaking the sound barrier as it did so, before seriously damaging each one of its targets.

The dummy did not kill any of the Raskals, its sole purpose was training after all. Instead, it helped them train their will power by leaving them with broken bodies and extreme pain.

Just as drastically and quickly as the battle had begun, it ended, and the dummy left the formation to pursue the remaining few Raskals. Except that no one clapped or wooed as the crowds usually did after a tournament. They were still in shock.

"What are you just standing round for?" Mary asked, as she appeared in front of the workers.

"Take all the injured to the Recovery room, quickly! The danger has ended."

She quickly started organizing those that were uninjured or less hurt and, after giving one look to the ruined landscape of the Inn and a kneeling, panting John, turned to her duties. The Raskals were not killed and if left alone, they could cause more of a mess. Fortunately, Lex let her know that the Galactic Sovereign turtle was on the way, and that he would take care of imprisoning the Raskals and fixing the damage from the battle.

She had to focus on only a few things now. First, she had to make sure no one died by immediately sending them to the Recovery room. Second, she had to apologize to all the guests who were caught up in this mess and give them all a one week free stay at the Inn, as instructed by Lex. Of course, it wasn't really free as he could pay for their stay.

Thirdly, and perhaps, most importantly, it was her job to oversee the interrogation of the Raskals and find out exactly why they had come and what was their goal. They needed to know if more enemies would be on the way.

The only suspects Lex had at the moment were the pirates who visited every so often, just because of the nature of their work. But that didn't make sense. She needed to find out if there was any lingering danger.

Lex collapsed onto the ground, his state of flow immediately breaking once the situation at the Inn was resolved. Although the system did not let him directly buy any kind of defensive measures, he had once again found a loophole. He upgraded the Training room even more than he previously had the greenhouse, spending 500,000 MP on the upgrades alone. Then he spent another 250,000 MP on this massive, incredibly powered Training dummy that could reach the peak of the Nascent realm in strength.

This was of course the theoretical peak of the Nascent realm, and also took in mind species much stronger than the Raskals as well, which is why it would be able to easily defeat them. But, technically the training dummies shouldn't have been able to leave the training room, however once upgraded, the room had more features. Not every kind of training can be done in a secure environment, and not every technique can be carried out alone. This is why the Training room allowed for the training to be conducted in any environment within the Inn, and could target not just one person, but entire groups.

Using a massive amount of MP and his remaining energy, he bought and powered this massive training dummy, while registering the entire invading army for training sessions for near death harm and threats.

This was a method Lex would be able to replicate in the future should he be invaded again, but this massive dummy would need him to absorb extra energy to run. This was not to mention that, now that he was once again down to 0% energy, the systems operations were once again compromised and it was running on metaphorical energy saving mode.

While Lex lay on the ground panting like he had just run a marathon, his mind still recovering from the extreme exertion it had just experienced, two thin wooden roots emerged from the ground behind him.

At first, they froze once they left the ground, as if to see whether they would be detected. But, after a few seconds, when Lex didn't show any reaction, they slowly continued to pull out of the ground silently, and stealthily moved towards Lex's neck.

The two roots slithered in the air, as if snakes, slowly approaching helpless prey and only took a few moments before reaching Lex. Too tired, and too caught up with the invasion at the Inn, Lex was completely unprepared when the roots wrapped around his neck!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 254: Bro

Lex was so mentally drained that at first, he didn't even notice the increased pressure around his neck. But when his head actually moved a little because of one of the roots, he promptly realized... someone was giving him a massage.

Alarmed, he jolted up and turned around to see two roots bending upwards, as if someone was holding up their hands to explain they meant no harm.

"What the..." Lex murmured while he tried to make sense of the situation.

"Bro, broseph, brobert, brosellini, relax. You're so stressed. It's totally killing my peaceful vibe."

The voice... seemed to be coming from the roots. Lex saw no mouth and no one else, so it could only be that.

"Are you a... Trelop?" Lex asked, suddenly remembering something from one of his classes. Trelops were one of the main 7 races of this realm, but the information about them seemed to be vague. What he could firmly conclude, however, was that they were some kind of sentient plants.

"Bro, of course I'm a Trelop. The name's Karom, nice to meet you. I must say, the negative vibes you've been giving off got me shook, bro. You need to relax. It doesn't suit your aura."

"Karom, like the Forest? The forest is named after you?"

"Bro, why you gotta do me like that? If you must use my full legal name, it is Karom Alejandro Forest III. I am the forest bro, it's not named after me. Well, I'm the forest up until the Deadfall cliff. After that is my cousin, Goli Malevolent Forest. Don't let his fresh maple appearance fool you, that bro is a racist. He don't deal with no one other than Trelops."

Lex was once again confused, but he tried to let go of his normal precepts about living beings, since he was in a new realm now. This was a forest full of hundreds of different species of plants and probably hundreds of thousands of trees. Yet Karom claimed to be the whole forest itself - how was that

possible? But, it seemed that it wasn't that the definitions of Trelops that were vague in his class, just that he was unable to comprehend them properly.

"Well, it's nice to meet you too," Lex finally replied, getting a handle on the situation. "In the future, you shouldn't wrap your roots around someone's neck without asking, it can be considered rude."

"Bro, can you blame me? You're the one that lay down on my roots. If anything, that was rude. But it's fine, I get it, you humans are weird. I keep telling that other human as well that Goli won't like it if you pass through him, but he's adamant. Well, it's no bark off my trunk what you guys do. Say bro, you wearing some cologne or something on your back? It smells really nice."

"No cologne," Lex replied briefly as he sat back down on the ground. The surprise of having roots around his neck gave him a boost of adrenaline, but now that the situation had calmed down, Lex was once again reminded that he was tired. Furthermore, he suspected the 'nice smell' that Karom was referring to was from the Lotus on his back. There would be no way Lex would share any information about that. Just another half a million years and the Lotus would give him a 5 star world.

"Damn bro, that sucks," the roots replied as they slumped, looking disappointed. "I was hoping to use a cologne to impress some meadows. My moms been on my case about getting a girlfriend. It's true what they say, even when you move out of your parents' forest, they never stop trying to control you. She says if I don't get a girlfriend on my own, she'll set me up with a swamp! Swamps are too clingy bro, trust me, you don't want to get with a swamp!"

"Is that the reason you came to me? To ask about the cologne?" Lex was a little protective when it came to matters of the Lotus, predictably, and this was the first time anyone had shown any indication of sensing the Lotus.

"Partially. You smell nice, so it won't be a problem for you to get along with most Trelops. Not Goli though, so don't even bother trying."

Lex nodded and continued, "this other human you're talking to. His name wouldn't be Ptolemy, would it?"

"Yes bro, Ptolemy. He reached out to me a few weeks ago, and we cut a deal. I'll be moving the trees out of his way until Deadfall cliff, and in exchange, he brought me some very rare seeds for my forest. Bro, once I'm done renovating, you won't recognize me anymore."

On some level, Lex had to admire how well prepared Ptolemy was for this expedition. In that case, he should take a page from Ptolemy's book and start making his own preparations.

"Hey Karom, since you can cover a much larger area than me, I have a question for you. Do you know about any spirit stone mines or large reservoirs of energy nearby?"

"Many bro, and they're all underground. But, I can't tell you bro because I need them. But, I don't mind telling you of a few in Goli's territory. If he had to move away, I would be so happy, bro. He's so annoying."

Unexpectedly, just like that, Lex learnt the location of several spirit stone mines. If their expedition could uncover even one it would be considered a success, which is why Lex knew that it shouldn't have been so easy learning about them.

He spent the rest of the day chatting with Karom, asking him indirect questions to learn more about Trelops. He refused to believe that there wasn't more to it, and that a living being could be something that should be a part of the landscape. It was too strange.

When he went out for dinner, Karom did not follow as he was not used to talking in front of too many humans. When Lex left his tent, he was surprised to see how much the area surrounding the camp had changed. The trees had started moving out of the way on their own, and as if that wasn't enough, they were using their roots to stamp down the ground where they moved from to create an even and level road.

He could see the relatively straight road leading deep into the forest, but some moving or shuffling of trees in the distance made it clear that the path wasn't complete yet.

After dinner, when he returned to his tent, Karom was missing, which Lex was completely fine with. He scanned the Inn once, to make sure everything was in order, before he went to sleep. He needed rest, for tomorrow the expedition would once again start moving.

Mary stood silently in the interrogation room near the greenhouse, her expression frosty. A part of her, admittedly, was slightly upset that they weren't able to properly interrogate the Raskals. This was because the Sovereign turtle had done something to them that turned them into mindless puppets.

Since she hadn't seen him do anything, she wasn't sure exactly what he had done. Regardless, the result was that the Raskals would answer any question that was asked obediently.

What she learnt was... truly frustrating. The Raskals had no idea what organization they worked for, simply because they had never been curious about it. In a way, they were the perfect soldiers because they could not retain any valuable information to leak.

They did not know the reason for the attack, nor did they know if there would be any follow up. All they could share was that their objective was to destroy the Inn, plain and simple.

She resisted the urge to rub her forehead as she thought of the problems that lay ahead.

Let alone the fact that Z and Todd were injured, and that they would have to remain in their respective RPs for the night, they had no effective measure against any subsequent attacks. Whoever attacked should not give up so easily, and if that were the case, they would need to prepare.

If there was any bright side to all this mess, it was that the turtle was planning on using all the dead Raskals as fertilizer, and was thus very satisfied. They should help speed up the Delinquent Vines growth, or so she was told.

Just as she was struggling with indecision about what to do, she noticed something wonderful!

The Lich, Anita, had completed her trial and had officially become a member of the Inns staff. A wide grin painted her face. Lex had told her about Anita's strength, and it would definitely come in handy should they suffer another attack.

Quickly, new plans started to form in her mind as she decided to get to know Anita a little better. This way, when Lex woke up, she would at least have something to present.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 255: Don't do me like that

After a much needed rest, Lex woke up to the sound of shuffling and moving. At first, he didn't pay much attention to it as he yawned and tried to summon the energy to get up. But then, all of a sudden, it occurred to him that the sound was way too close.

He jolted up to find a small clump of humanoid shape of leaves munching through some of the dry rations from Lex's backpack.

"Hey bro, you finally exited from your hibernation. I was getting bored."

"Karom?" Lex asked as he looked at his ransacked backpack. The small leaf man came up to Lex's was it, and the facial features looked oddly similar to his own.

"Of course, bro, who else could so easily enter your tent? Do you have any idea the kind of wards that Ptolemy guy has around this camp? If you don't, well, neither do I. But damn, were they a pain to bypass. I doubt anyone else could do it so easily. Anyway, I have like a serious proposition for you," Karom said as he shoved another protein bar in his leafy mouth.

"Those are my emergency rations you're snacking on," Lex said as he looked through his backpack and checked to see if anything was missing.

"Come on bro, don't be like that. I'll drop you some fruit before you leave, it's not a problem at all. Let's focus on the important stuff. My proposition. If you accept, I'll pay you half up front, and half on completion. What do you say?"

Lex did not reply immediately, and took a moment to deliberate. While Lex was still in the dark about various customs and basic common knowledge of this realm, his classes had enlightened him somewhat about how humans perceived and interacted with the other races.

Understanding that, while all 7 races had a similar level of intelligence, because of their inherent physiology, each race perceived the world around them and their relationships differently, was the absolute foundation of the human race's foreign policy.

In a situation where Lex was in the dark about many things, following the broad stance human leadership took towards the various races should somewhat keep him protected.

Trelops were the only plant-based race of the 7 major ones, and like the rest, they had their own territory. But, unlike the rest, they were also widely spread across the regions for the rest of the races, as they usually had good relations with all races, for they had strong influence over plants which could aid any race, not just the main 7. But this did not mean that their population was huge. Quite the contrary, they were probably the race with the smallest population.

Anyway, all of that was unnecessary information for Lex. What his focus was on were the major trade deals of the Hum nation with the Trelops, which usually had to deal with food, mostly. After going through all the information he had received in his political relations class, he suddenly realized how important that class would come to be if he stayed here long term.

"First, tell me what your proposal is."

"Yesssssssss bro! I knew I could count on you!" Karom fist pumped, as if the deal was already done. "It's quite simple, really. My roots have been getting a little stiff lately, and I need to expand my territory a bit, or I won't really be able to reach adulthood. I was just musing about where to spread my forest, you know I have neighbors on all sides. It's the humans on one, my cousin Goli on another, some really, really hot dudes in the radiation wasteland, and then my aunty Jeena.

"Now bro, trust me when I say, ain't no one got the acorns to mess with aunty Jeena bro. And bro, I really wanna hang in the wasteland, but since I haven't reached adulthood yet, it's bad for my complexion. I have a really good thing going with the humans, so that just leaves my cousin Goli."

The Trelop paused, and threw another protein bar in his mouth, then continued. "Now, I remember you asking me about some spirit mines, and I told you about some in my cousin's territory. But how will you ever get to them? Bro, not to look down on you, but they're at least a dozen miles below ground."

Lex did not answer, for technically even he didn't have an answer. He had hoped that maybe he'd be able to buy something from the system gift shop the way he kept on buying Botlam Dew, but with 0% energy, currently he couldn't even buy that.

Karom continued, "which is where my proposal comes in. I'll help you find a way to get to those mines, and you..."

Out from the ground a root came out, holding a bag full of acorns, and handed them to Lex and Karom explained the deal he wanted. Just as Lex had suspected, Karom wanted Lex's help to take over parts of his cousin's forest.

"Won't that hurt your cousin though?" Lex asked, out of curiosity.

"Bro it's no hard feelings, bro. Bro, it's a strategic acquisition of property of declining value, bro. Yeah man, I know big words too. I once attended human business school as a potted plant for the class, I know all about assets and stuff. If anything, Goli will appreciate my help. After all, I doubt you'd just leave those spirit stone mines alone after finding them. Once they disappear, the fertility of the land will quickly decline. In human terminology, that healthy part of Goli's body will quickly turn into cancer."

"In that case, why do you want it?" Lex asked, curious. He did not comment on Karom's suspicions about what Lex would do to the spirit stones. Strictly speaking, by taking those mines for himself instead of declaring them, Lex was committing a crime. But, by helping Karom expand his territory of control without letting anyone know about it was also not something easily shrugged off. Both of them had a vested interest in keeping their deal secret, and such a mutual threat would force them to be good allies.

"Don't do me like that bro! Have some faith, I have my own plans."

Karom shared more of his proposition, and in the end, considering Lex's dire need for energy, Lex said yes. This first half of Karom's payment was the method to reach the crystal mines in Goli's territory. Lex stuffed his acorns, as well as his payment and the fruit he delivered, into his backpack and finally exited the tent.

Now that he had a plan to get some energy, Lex felt much better, and he could finally focus on other stuff. One major part of making a positive impression on a group of new people is to constantly reaffirm

it. He had to go socialize with the rest of the expedition while they were still at camp, because it would be too difficult once they started moving.

After a hearty breakfast that he shared with the group of meteorologists, and gaining some basic understanding of the kind of weather he could expect coming up, he started going around camp and spending some time with various groups. It was easy to spot Lex, he was the only one amongst heavily clothed people to wear a half sleeve shirt.

The character of Ice on his hand was giving off a gentle sheen, but it only continued to absorb all the cold energy. Some of the members of the expedition thought it was a unique tattoo, and he didn't bother to correct them.

Finally, after lunch, Ptolemy called for a group meeting and explained the next part of the expedition. They would leave shortly, and their next camp would be at Deadfall cliffs, the border for human exploration. He explained their goals for the expedition once again, though everyone was quite familiar with them, the safety measures that would be needed and what kind of cooperation he expected from everyone.

Lex couldn't help but notice that he never mentioned Karom, or his cousin Goli. He had understood enough of Ptolemy by now to know that the man must have made some preparations to face the upcoming hostile Trelap, and Lex was curious.

It did not hurt Lex's ego to admit that he found it quite insightful to study how Ptolemy operated. But, since the other person had clearly drawn a metaphorical line in the sand between them, if Lex were to go up and ask him now, he would stir up the possibility of trouble.

After a moment's consideration, he decided to go ask, anyway. Of course, he wouldn't directly ask him the question. If there was anything Lex learnt from being the Innkeeper, it was to hold the power and authority in a conversation. If Lex asked him the question, he would directly be putting himself in the weaker position from the start of the conversation, and there was the chance Ptolemy wouldn't answer.

He had a much better strategy to get his answer.

After the meeting, he went and waited by Ptolemy's tent until the latter arrived. Lex gave him an amused look, as if he was watching a performance, before saying, "I noticed you didn't tell anyone about

the upcoming dangers of a hostile Trelop. Not a bad plan, no need to cause unnecessary panic. After all, since you don't need my help, I'm sure you have your own plan for how to deal with an entire forest that hates humans."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 256: Odyssey

Ptolemy didn't show any visible reaction to Lex's goading, but he was internally surprised by Lex's comments. Information about the Trelops was not exactly roadside knowledge, and to a certain degree, it was even kept hidden. This was because Trelops more often than not played a significant role in food production.

The human population was not small, with it being quite common for counties to have several billion humans. Even as organized as the Hum nation was, arranging for food at such a scale was a massive undertaking.

In the scenario they were facing, there were a few neighboring Trelops, with Karom being one of the weakest, and hence the most cooperative. Unfortunately, right after Karom's territory was that of another, extremely hostile and very aggressive Trelop.

That Trelop alone was the reason why humans stop expanding in this direction. Of course, that didn't mean that this Trelop was so strong that humans couldn't fight it at all, but that high leveled cultivators didn't usually take care of things like these.

Not only did they have their own duties, the Hum nation felt strongly against the idea of becoming used to having others take care of all your problems. While it was true that higher leveled cultivators could take care of everything, first of all, they were not omnipotent and couldn't be everywhere all the time. Secondly, if they did everything, then what would the lower leveled cultivators contribution be?

They were not living in some utopia. Humans needed to become used to the habit of facing trials and dangers to achieve what they want, instead of having someone hand it to them.

Ptolemy was going through various thoughts in his head, but the few moments of silence that created gave Lex the impression that he was ignoring him. In that case, some more goading would be required.

"Or is it possible you hadn't thought so far ahead? If you need help, I don't mind giving you some advice. After all, I wouldn't want to affect the safety of those in the expedition over a little spat."

"The situation is handled," Ptolemy replied, his voice full of vinegar. "If you must know, the guards of the expedition have been fully informed of all the upcoming threats and have made ample preparations. Dealing with a Trelop is not too hard, for at the end of the day, they are just plants. As hostile as they may be, the threat of a forest fire will put them in their place."

After that, Ptolemy did not bother explaining further and went inside his tent. He honestly didn't even want to explain this much to Lex, but he couldn't have him going around telling the expedition that they were heading to certain death. As the leader, he needed to provide some assurances, even to the members of the expedition he didn't like - such was the burden of a leader.

Lex didn't push him any further. The answer was fairly simple, but he doubted that Ptolemy's preparation was lacking. Still, it was interesting to know that sometimes he did not need to search for complicated solutions to everything.

Lex returned to his tent and packed up his stuff. Since this was their first camp, and was built even before they arrived, it would stay here even after they left. Ptolemy had hired a small group of guards to maintain this camp for their return journey, but that was for later.

For now, everyone got on their Delaim lizards and started wading through the snow that had accumulated on their newly built road. Since the Frio birds still seemed to be nearby, the weather had not changed at all, and the endless snow storm raged on. One might wonder how the expedition was able to see and navigate during such a relentless storm.

The answer was that the fresh, falling snow produced in this storm gave off an ethereal, silverish light that made the whole world look like it was in a fairytale. Its beauty was like moonlight but on steroids. As long as one had a sleeping mask for the hours they were resting, no one would complain about it.

So, while they made their way through the forest on the relatively straight-and-level road, Lex finally had the time to divert his attention to the Inn.

Things at the Inn were... well, they were great, considering the circumstances. The invasion had naturally affected the Inn's reputation a bit, and some of the guests had stopped visiting as the Inn no longer seemed as safe as before - at least until the Innkeeper returned. However, that number was still low.

Furthermore, despite the invasion ending over a day ago, another one had not happened. Considering that they still did not know the identity of the attacker and their true motives, this was a grand sign. Last, but not least, after having been abruptly exposed to a life-and-death situation, Fenrir's growth had undergone an explosion. Currently, he was the same size as the Galactic Sovereign turtle, meaning he was much bigger than Lex.

Moreover, while his cultivation growth was the same, he had unlocked various abilities from his bloodline. One of them was the ability to change his appearance - though size was still not an option. This had helped him tremendously, as, by sheer coincidence, one of the slimes Fenrir had befriended back on X-142 was teleported to the Inn through a Golden door.

Fortunately, Fenrir was not alone at the time, and as soon as he recognized the slime and was about to greet it, he was stopped. Then Mary explained to Fenrir that it could not expose its identity and, unexpectedly, the dog understood and complied.

Lex wiped some metaphorical sweat off his brow, as he completely forgot about the whole identity issue when he summoned Fenrir to X-142 with him. He would have to be more careful in the future.

His giant training dummy had assumed the role of a statue beside Midnight Mountain, since there really wasn't any energy to control it. Fortunately, people were used to the Inn changing all the time, so no one questioned it.

His staff was recovering nicely, and surprisingly, none of them seemed to have any mental trauma about going through such an incident. In fact, many of them seemed to consider it normal. That made Lex realize that he had seriously underestimated his workers, and especially the ones that had unlocked their bloodlines.

The fact that Gerard was able to hold his own against a Nascent level Raskal while in the Qi realm... he did not think such an ability could be easily replicated, even in the vast universe. He decided to emphasize their cultivation and training some more. If all of them became powerhouses similar to Gerard, would he need to be worried?

He further reduced their work hours and added mandatory training and cultivation time to their routines. Furthermore, despite Gerards reluctance, Lex upgraded him to head of security. If there was any consolation, it was that Lex allowed him to keep the golf cart. Furthermore, he told Mary to approach the Drake that had upgraded the cart, and see if it was willing to work for the Inn. Of course, actual hiring would have to wait for now, but there was no harm in testing the water.

Which finally led to their newest hire, Anita the Lich. While due to her amazing cultivation prowess, she was an important member of the Inn, Lex's real purpose in hiring her was actually very different.

Once Lex's tumor was removed, he finally became aware of the real weight of what it meant to be a cultivator, as well as the Innkeeper. He had no intentions of being mundane whatsoever, which meant that he had the expectation of reaching a very high cultivation realm. Along with such a cultivation came a long lifespan. He had already seen many of his guests who had lived for thousands of years, let alone Anita herself, who had lived for a ridiculously long time.

Currently, his experience made it impossible for Lex to imagine what living for so long would be like, but he understood the importance of history and recording it. So, among the many other things Lex had planned, Anita's first and most important role was to record the history of the Inn.

He told Mary to have her interview all the workers and start recording a detailed account of all the events that happened within the Inn itself. This history would be highly classified, for now, and Lex had an idea for he would make it accessible in the future, but that would have to wait till he had spare energy to use.

Once she was done with recording the history of the Inn, he told Mary to have her start recording the histories of the planets that were connected to the Inn, one by one. This seemed like a tedious and endless task, one with no seeming purpose or reward, but not only did Lex have a plan on how to use all this, Anita herself, as a person who had once created history, had a strong interest in learning and recording history.

As someone who had firsthand experienced how the events of her time were changed from memories to stories, to legends, to myths, she was endlessly intrigued by learning other myths, and trying to figure out the stories that had inspired them.

It seemed that coming to the Inn was the correct decision, at least for her. And so, it was with this giddy enthusiasm that Antia began recording what would one day be known as the odyssey of the Innkeeper.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 257: Sinister intentions

The ride from the camp to Deadfall cliff was long and monotonous. It was difficult to talk to those around you unless you were in a carriage or sharing the lizard with another person, for you would end up having to yell over the blowing wind.

For most, this was a boring part of the trip that was necessary, but for Lex it gave him much needed time to catch up on what was happening at the Inn. After he was done distributing tasks and making important decisions, he spent some time just catching up. Unfortunately, Mary could not spy on guests' conversations the way Lex could when he was at the Inn, so he had no idea how Earth was doing these days.

Had the political instability finally calmed down or were there new issues now? Had the Jotun Empire finally reclaimed all of the Vegus planets or was the war still ongoing? How was the harvest back on X-142 doing? How was Nibiru progressing?

Lex quite enjoyed knowing about his guests, but it seemed all of that would have to wait till later.

Eventually, when he ran out of things to check up on even at the Inn, Lex decided to use the time to continue reading the book in his ring on arrays. He would have preferred to cultivate, but that wasn't something you could easily do while riding a traveling lizard.

They traveled continuously much longer than a day, but fortunately, the physique of everyone on the trip could handle such exertion without issue.

When they finally arrived at their destination, it was abruptly made clear by the drastic change in scenery. A steep and sudden cliff appeared, marking the end of the forest, as well as the border of human exploration. Hundreds of feet down below was a forest of orangish yellow maple trees, the leaves moving gently in the wind as if welcoming everyone down below.

Even the weather across the cliff was different, as there seemed to be an invisible dividing line that prevented the snowstorm from extending past the cliff, instead replaced by the warm breeze of early summer.

Yet, as welcoming and picturesque as it seemed, no one was fooled. There was a reason this was called Deadfall cliff. As cheesy as the name was, the name was naturally picked up when few, if any, ever returned after venturing past the invisible border. It was the exact place they were going, and was the place where Lex's true trial would finally begin.

Ptolemy did not waste time on any needless ceremony. After ensuring everyone was arranged into proper formation, with the 30 student-soldiers making up the outermost layer of their expedition while the rest formed a close circle within. Then, after ensuring everyone was seated securely on their lizards, they ventured forth into the warm abyss, their lizards climbing down the cliffside as easily as they walked through Karom forest.

Despite the confident demeanor of Ptolemy and their protectors, Lex could not help but tighten his grip on his lizard's leash as he felt a silent tension fill the air. As the temperature around him changed, going from cold to suddenly warm, the array character on his right hand stopped glowing though it did not disappear.

Karom forest had been frigid cold, yet safe and secure. Goli forest was warm and inviting, but his instincts warned him of a sinister evil. It was not fear that filled him, but wariness. None in this expedition were untested and unaware, for beneath their casual banter and smiling faces, each and every person here was born in times of chaos. It was not just the external threat of an unbeatable enemy that tempered them, but the knowledge that they would be abandoned by their own race if they did not prove to be useful. It wasn't that there were none in this realm that procrastinated, or were lazy. It was that those who did were already dead.

Still, while they had skill and strength, making light of the danger ahead was a mistake none made. It was their experienced caution that created a mood Lex mistook for tension. Instead, what he would soon come to realize was, it was their anticipation for whoever dared to bar their way.

After all that build up, their descent was uneventful. As soon as they reached the bottom, Ptolemy sent out scouts to check for nearby threats, as well as to locate a place to establish their new camp. Before wading into danger, they needed to create a secure base of operations.

In a way, staying beside the cliff was both very dangerous and the most secure. This was because, if they built their camp in the forest, they would have to deal with a hostile Trelop. Lex did not fully understand how dangerous Trelops were, but he was not looking forward to fighting a forest. But, if they stayed by the cliff, then they would literally have their backs against a wall should they come under attack.

The situation was bad either way, so it depended more on how they responded.

A short, tension filled wait later, the scouts returned, stating that there were no signs of any dangerous predators nearby. But, at the same time, there was no source of running water in the vicinity either.

Even though they were cultivators, a source of fresh water would be important for any long term base, not only for their consumption but for other uses as well. Of course, they could use water affinity spiritual techniques to artificially create water for themselves, but this was not a good solution as it would exhaust their cultivators energy.

So, as much as Ptolemy wanted to build a base near the cliff, the party eventually moved into the forest. Their speed was much slower now since the trees had not cleared a path for them and the carriages with their luggage needed to maneuver around them.

Initially, everything seemed to be going fine. But, after a certain amount of time, unknowingly, Lex started to feel a certain anxiety growing in his chest. Moving the carriages was taking too long. The expedition party, while trying to stay close, somehow still ended up being divided into clumps. The weather had gone from warm to hot, humid and sticky. The sound of the lizards walking through the grass was too loud.

Suddenly, it struck Lex. The sound of the walking lizards was too loud. The forest, as warm and welcoming as it seemed, was instead too quiet. The bright orange leaves were too prominent.

Immediately, without even realizing what he was doing, Lex lifted his hand from the Heavy Harley attached to his waist and put it on his sword, before prompting his lizard to move up to Ptolemy.

The man was not happy to see him, but the seriousness in Lex's eyes caused him to hesitate from insulting him. But, at the end of the day, no matter how strong Lex's instincts were and how accurate his premonition, his level was just too low. By the time his instincts had warned him, it was already too late.

Before Lex could even speak, chaos erupted.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 258: A will to challenge the heavens

On a battlefield of giants, every step they take would be like an earthquake to the mortals living down below. Their battlecry would be the sonic boom that threatened to tear the eardrums of lesser beings, each of their clashes a biblical armageddon for those suffering the misfortune of being nearby.

So when Lex, a mere Qi training cultivator, was caught in the middle of an ambush, with flaming, razor sharp leaves slicing through the air threatening to cut the world in half, and batons of tree branches beat down on them to crush their backs, it was a testament to Regal Embrace that he remained unharmed.

One moment he was looking Ptolemy in the eyes, about to warn him about danger, the next moment his pupils constricted when he saw the canopy alight with flames. The array character for ice on his hand shone with a silverish blue light, and an armor made of ice suddenly covered not only Lex, but his lizard as well.

The raining bullets made of leaves could not melt his armor, for unbeknownst even to Lex himself, the ice was that of the Frio birds themselves. But, while he was saved from the temperature, he doubted he would be safe from the branches that came crashing down on him.

After such a long time of riding Fenrir, Lex was long accustomed to controlling his mount effortlessly and so it was with finesse undeserving of its race that the lizard dodged all attacks.

He had been saved from the rising temperature, and avoided the direct clashes, but there was nothing that could protect him from the shockwaves that traveled through the air. The weakest of these attacks was in the Golden core realm, while most were in the Nascent realm. How could Lex expect to survive such shockwaves traveling through his body?

The answer was with a straight back, eyes full of unyielding determination and a will to challenge the heavens! Also, he still had the talisman to protect him from Nascent level attacks that automatically turned on when he was threatened.

So, when death rained down on the expedition and the forest tried to beat them like drums, the weakest of the expedition, Lex, was the most unhurt. But though they had been taken by surprise, if a simple, extremely lethal ambush was all it took to eliminate the students of the academy, then as the holy land of the human race, its reputation was undeserved.

The moment Lex's armor had appeared, Ptolemy already reacted and launched a counterattack! Unlike the orange flames produced by the forest, Ptolemy produced green flames that spread around as if he was someone who vaped, competing with a smoke machine! The green flames consumed the orange ones, and clashed as if the two were solid entities.

Around them, while the other students did not respond as fast, many of them were able to quickly retaliate. Especially the 30 students trained as soldiers. Lex could not understand exactly what they had done, because he was busy trying not to die, but they all looked very cool whenever he saw them.

The fight was not short, but for Lex it only involved controlling his lizard to stay out of everyone's way. An hour later, or maybe it was several hours later, the fight ended just as abruptly as it had begun. While initially they had been surrounded by a dense forest, they now appeared to be in a burnt down clearing.

As Lex saw green flames spreading in the distance, eating at the trees, Lex suddenly understood what Ptolemy meant when he said he threatened a forest fire. Maybe Goli would not be afraid of normal flames, as it appeared Goli himself was adept at controlling fire, but the green, malevolent flames produced by Ptolemy was anything but normal.

Suddenly, the armor around Lex receded, and the character on his right hand reformed, although much dimmer now. While Lex was analyzing their situation, suddenly it occurred to him that the whole expedition was staring at him.

Over a 100 soot-covered, bruised and beaten students looked at the neat and clean Lex, seated comfortably upon his uninjured noble lizard. It was like a scene out of a story and, unbeknownst to Lex, the few members of the expedition who had heard rumors about him, suddenly recalled the latest one.

It was said that even immortal Kravens could not injure a hair from his head, and though he had been born from 'that' family, he had forsaken his family name so that any prestige he built, it would be of his own design.

Reverence flashed in a few eyes, before it quickly disappeared. They were still in danger, and now was not the time to dwell on such things.

Ptolemy did a quick check, and though there were a dozen injured, no one had died. No longer bothering to be gentle, the expedition bulldozed through the forest to the camp site one of the scouts had picked for them and immediately began laying down defense.

For the first time, Lex saw formation masters at work as they erected protective formations around their new campsite. Others chopped down all nearby trees, while others still used their techniques to level the ground.

In a few hours, the expedition managed to monopolize a sizable pond with fresh running water from multiple small streams, put up formation reinforced, wooden fences and built watch towers. The efficiency with which they worked was only matched by the nonchalance of the students. None of them were at all bothered by the ambush, and even the injured had conveniently taken sedatives and gone to sleep so as to accelerate their healing process.

Lex was only just beginning to comprehend the mentality of humans who had been raised knowing they would die at war when one of the watchtowers sounded an alarm.

Their camp, which they had not even finished setting up, was facing its first attack already. As if that wasn't enough the enemy this time even managed to scare Lex. It was snakes. Tens of thousands of snakes.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 259: The expedition begins

The battle that followed left Lex unusually flustered. Their camp's defenses, despite only having just been built, seemed impenetrable, which meant there was no actual threat to Lex. But at the same time, he couldn't just relax or focus on something else, because if the defenses fell short, he would need to protect himself.

He couldn't participate in repelling the attack because, frankly, he was too weak to make a meaningful contribution. He couldn't even watch the fight because if he came too close, he would make himself vulnerable to shockwaves from the battle, and might even get in the way of his allies.

In the end, he spent multiple hours just... waiting for something to happen. In the end, the battle ended with their camp managing to defend successfully. Ptolemy, afterwards, went into the forest with a few

guards, and though he did not say what he did, assured the camp there would be no of such more attacks once he returned.

With his assurance began the true purpose of the expedition. This entire region was unmapped, with little to no knowledge of anything. Cartographers built themselves their own watch tower, from where they used telescopes and other devices to map out the surrounding terrain, as well as try to figure out the best direction for their expedition to proceed.

Others started studying the snakes physiology, as they were the first living things they had encountered other than the trees. Speaking of which, from mingling with the various small groups, Lex learnt that these were not actually maple trees, but an as of yet unknown species of trees, the bark of which was extremely resistant to flame while the leaves themselves were very flammable.

They had already begun studying the sap and the roots of the trees they had cut down, and were proposing new uses for them. Others were studying the soil and mineral composition while other groups still were studying the currents of spiritual energy in the area.

The camp had truly come alive, which brought a lot of emphasis on the fact that Lex had nothing to do. Well, officially he had nothing to do, since Ptolemy could not be bothered with him. Unofficially, though, Lex had a lot to do.

This expedition had only just begun, and would likely continue for months if not years, but Lex only had a limited time with them as he was just undergoing a trial. That meant, in the next few weeks, Lex had to get access to at least one of the buried spirit stone mines without alerting anyone.

The trouble was, Karom had not given him a map of their location, rather, he had only told Lex key or identifying features of the area nearby. To help Karom fulfill his own agenda as well, he had provided Lex a way of escaping Goli's supervision as well, but that did nothing for hiding Lex from the beasts.

Over the next few days, small hunting and exploration parties would venture out from the camp several times a day, and Lex would accompany at least one such party everyday. He had proven capable of ensuring his own security, so no one really minded, not to mention that everyone more or less knew that Lex was supposed to have a say in their defenses, so just accepted this as a part of his duty.

Furthermore, even on the trips that Lex did not venture out on, he made sure to interview the scouts or guards that went out so he could develop a deeper understanding of the terrain, as well as the habits of the fauna of the region.

He corroborated all of his analysis with the zoologists in the expedition so that he could be sure instead of forming baseless speculations.

What Lex was actually doing was creating his own map, and formulating his own plan for how he would get the spirit stones. To the people of the expedition, however, it seemed like Lex was taking his job very seriously, and was working hard to ensure they suffered no more unexpected attacks. Some people had noticed how, even before their first ambush, Lex seemed to have sensed some danger and tried to warn Ptolemy about it. The extra attention, of course, was due to the rumors about him. Cut off from society, the only thing the people from the expedition had to do during their free time was gossip. Of course, there were many more people being gossiped about as well, with Ptolemy being a key figure. However, it was exactly because rumors of Lex were mixed in with so many other stories that people actually forgot that they were supposed to be just rumors, instead of facts.

Of course, none of that had anything to do with Lex. After a week of scouting and research, he was prepared to venture out of the camp alone to properly begin looking for the mines. There was just one problem.

"Why are you going out alone?" asked the student who was watching the gate. It wasn't an interrogation, since they all somewhat knew one another now, but he still had to ask.

"To do some personal reconnaissance. There are some places it's much easier to scout alone."

"Are you sure? Not that I mean to doubt you or anything, but, if you run into trouble... you might have a hard time surviving on your own."

"Not to worry, I have taken adequate precautions."

"Still... I think I need to let Ptolemy know about this, just to be safe."

"Sure," Lex replied, letting out an exhausted sigh. Considering that they were living in such close quarters, Lex did not expect to be able to hide the fact that he was going out alone from anyone. He was just hoping for more of an 'apology instead of permission' approach. He didn't relish having to explain his actions to Ptolemy.

Ptolemy, likewise, was not happy about the fact that Lex had been so active. If Lex had just been a lazy, entitled brat, it would have better fit his internal narrative about him just being someone who was handed everything instead of earning it. Even though he knew he should have looked into how Lex was able to detect the ambush before him, his existing bias had prevented him from doing so. His strategy for dealing with Lex had been out of sight, out of mind. But when the latter was literally taking the initiative to contribute by scouting on his own, it was entirely impossible to ignore him.

"You're not a scout, and we have no scouting missions that require going alone. What exactly do you want to do? We don't have the manpower to waste on a rescue mission if you get yourself in trouble."

"Then don't," Lex replied, rolling his eyes. "I thought you didn't care what I did as long as I didn't get in your way. And I'm literally getting out of your way, so why do you even care?"

"Do whatever," Ptolemy replied. "Just remember, I'm not going to waste any manpower on saving you if you disappear."

Lex was relieved that Ptolemy wasn't going to try to stop him from leaving, but it also increased the pressure on him as well knowing there would be no fall back or rescue should things go wrong.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 260: Druk

The crunch of stepping on dead leaves on the ground was unusually audible as Lex stepped out of the camp alone for the first time. While normally he would have admired the satisfaction of such a crisp sound, this time Lex could only worry about the fact that he was not trained to move silently through a forest, or without leaving a trail.

But there was no room for self doubt on this journey through a sentient forest, stuck in a realm that was not his own, without so much as a GPS or even a compass for that matter. No, there was no kind of hand holding going on. The only way Lex would ever get back was if he took the steps and risks necessary.

Anyway, who needed a GPS when he had the Fancy Monocle? Fitting the monocle in front of his left eye, Lex quickly departed. Since Lex did not have the skill to hide his trail, he had decided to actually submit a scouting report when he returned, to make his venture more credible. With the monocle feeding him information, he was bound to learn more than the expedition members, anyway.

Lex moved at a light jog for fifteen minutes until he was on the border of the camp's radius of influence. He didn't know what Ptolemy had done, but Goli hadn't attacked the camp after the first day, and most animals had vacated the area. That did not mean the danger was eliminated, but at least they weren't being targeted in the same way.

Lex took out an acorn from his backpack and crushed it in his fist before covering himself with acorn dust. This acorn provided by Karom would allow Lex to hide from Goli's senses and eliminate much of the danger for him.

But, moving forward, he would still need to be more careful. The best he could do to stay hidden was move close to trees and crouch between the tall grass or behind random bushes. That would in no way hide his figure, nor would it prevent the sound of his footsteps on crunchy leaves.

Fortunately, things were not as bad as he made them seem, as he had gotten somewhat used to moving through the forest while he accompanied previous scouting parties.

He was currently following a stream of water, hoping to find its source. One of the mines nearest to him was deep underneath a lake, Karom had told him, but no one had as of yet found one.

It was hard to tell how much time passed in the forest, as there was no concept of the sun rising or declining in this realm. Instead, the leaves seemed to always emit a warm, candescent yellow light that made it seem like the forest was stuck in perpetually at noon.

At least that made it easier for Lex to identify any creatures in his path. Up ahead, he saw a small scaly creature that looked somewhat like a grasshopper, only about 3 feet wide, drinking water from the stream.

Not wanting to take any chances, Lex moved around the creature, as he had done so many times before, when the monocle showed him something interesting. It identified gold!

Hidden behind a few bushes was a naturally formed tunnel that seemed to descend underground at a 30-degree angle. Right at the mouth of the tunnel, however, was a small rock with bits of gold in it.

Having worked with the weaponsmith for so long, Lex learned an interesting tidbit that he suspected fed the actual reason for the value of gold back on Earth. It was a great conductor for spiritual energy, and when mixed with other metals in the manufacturing of weapons, or any item really, it served to enhance its capabilities greatly.

Could this be a gold mine? Lex put the gold infused rock in his backpack and decided to carefully explore the tunnel.

The immediately dark tunnel was a sharp contrast to the ever bright forest, but while it troubled Lex, the monocle was in no way impeded from functioning. As Lex slowly descended, the monocle started to detect other valuable ores and minerals.

Lex was congratulating himself on making a huge discovery when the monocle flashed a familiar red sign stating danger. Thankfully, the danger was not in the usual bold letters that meant Lex was about to be attacked.

Up ahead in the cave, hidden in the darkness, was some kind of creature, asleep thankfully, that the monocle did not have any information on in its repository. But, while it could not identify the creature, it gave Lex plenty of information on it. It was massive, with the length of its body at 20 feet (6.1 meters), nearly a dozen short and fat legs, two scythe-like claws and a face that seemed to exist directly on its torso.

Its body was not scaly or lethargy, but instead consisted of an unusual blend of metals and minerals.

Whatever it was, it weighed a few tonnes and Lex thought that the metals that made up its body were extremely valuable. Deciding not to take any more risks, Lex silently exited the cave and grabbed a few more rocks on the way out.

Lex spent another few hours searching for any identifying landmark that could help him locate one of the mines he was looking for, but when he could not, he decided it was safe to share the story about the tunnel with the camp. With this, if the tunnel proved to be valuable, their attention would be focused here, making it easier for Lex to explore other places in the forest.

Once he returned to the camp, much to the relief of the student on gate duty, Lex first went to someone called Barry and told him about the tunnel and showed him the rocks he had brought out. Barry was a sort of jack of all trades kind of guy, and had deep knowledge of geology, metallurgy, energetics, thermodynamics and a bunch of other fields Lex did not know the meaning of.

Initially, Barry was listening with interest, but as soon as Lx began to describe the creature he jumped off his seat and yelled, "Druk! You found a Druk lair? Rich! We're going to be rich! Quick, someone called Ptolemy! Tell him we're going to be rich!"

Lex was startled and confused at Barry, who was laughing like a maniac.

"Barry, what the hell is a Druk and why are we going to be rich?"

"Druks are creatures that live in Spirit Well, Lex! If we can confirm the presence of a Spirit Well, then the academy itself will reward us for this discovery!"

Suddenly, Lex felt like cursing Karom from the bottom of his heart.