

Innkeeper 261

The Innkeeper

Chapter 261: Spirit well

In the dead of night, which was to say, during the well lit, and fairly active portion of the day that Lex usually slept - since it was never dark in this forest - Lex stood alone in front of the Deadfall cliff.

It had been 3 days since he visited the tunnel, and this was the first opportunity he had gotten for some privacy - mainly because everyone was focusing on the tunnel so much, Ptolemy included. Of course, because of all the hubbub created due to his discovery, Lex had learnt a great deal about Spirit wells, which is what caused him the most frustration!

Some people at the camp had started calling him their lucky charm, but he didn't feel lucky at all!

After ensuring that he really was alone, and that there were no animals or beasts around, Lex withdrew one of the many acorns in his bag and crushed it against the cliff side. A short while later, a thin and weak looking root emerged from the cliff.

"Everything alright bro? You contacted me a lot sooner than I was expecting. Don't tell me Goli discovered you?"

"No, Goli did not find me. But why didn't you tell me about the Spirit well? That would have helped even more than a mine! Because I didn't know what it was, I ended up telling the camp about it, and now neither I nor you will be able to benefit from it!"

The root froze for a moment as it tried to process what it had heard. Spiritual energy tended to flow from one area to another and had currents much in the way there were ocean or air currents. Of course, the flow was not based on going from regions of high to low concentration, as this energy had its own sets of behaviors, but that was besides the point.

Sometimes these currents faced an obstruction, and instead of flowing, spiritual energy started to gather in spots with increasing concentration. At this point, there were many ways in which spirit stones could be formed, and the way in which they would be formed would dictate their purity and concentration.

What was more important to Lex, however, was the fact that, even after the spirit mine was created, the concentration of energy did not drop but continued to increase, there were chances of a well being formed.

If scientists from Earth studied this phenomenon, their attention would be most attracted to the fact that, following this logic, spiritual energy being contained in a liquid state of spirit water had a higher concentration than in the solid state of a spirit stone. The truth behind such an occurrence was that spiritual energy was a lot more complicated than it seemed at a glance, and many more matters were at play here, but at Lex's level there was no need for him to know of them.

All that mattered was, a single spirit well was better than several spirit mines put together. If he had known this matter beforehand, he would have directly used the method Karom gave him to dig underground and bypass the Druk.

Eventually, Karom spoke hesitantly, "I was there when Goli moved in. I swept the whole area myself, there was no Spirit well anywhere that I recall."

"Well, how long ago was that?" Lex asked the question that really had him feeling frustrated. It occurred to him that an oversight on his part was treating a Trelop similar to humans when he clearly recalled that due to their different physiology, they treat the world differently. Trelops especially...

"It was some 60,000 years ago, I think," Karom said, as it was counting the years in his mind.

Lex let out a defeated sigh, as his suspicion had proven true. Trelops had a very different sense of time, since their lifespans were infinitely longer than humans. The amount of time Karom was talking about was more than enough for a spirit mine to turn into a spirit well, not to mention all the landmarks he knew to change that could be used to identify the location of the mines.

There was no point in explaining to Karom how it had messed up, Lex would rather move on to the next issue.

"Alright listen up Karom, the situation has changed. There's no way of knowing if the spirit mines you knew about still even exist, let alone being able to find them. On top of that, if they end up really discovering a spirit well, then it'll only be a matter of time before the academy takes over. When that

happens, I won't be able to get any spirit mines and you won't be able to absorb any of your cousins' forestland. So, if you want to go ahead with your plan, we need to come up with a solution and act on it within the next few days or at most a week."

Karom was once again silent for a while, before he answered.

"I understand bro. I will think of something, come back in a short while."

"Make sure you confirm with me before doing anything," Lex told him, not at all trusting the sensibility of the Trelap. In the end, although Karom agreed with him, Lex ultimately decided not to rely only on him.

"Hey Lotus, if there was a Spirit well there, why weren't you able to sense it?" Lex asked, after tapping his back.

"Mr. Innkeeper, I can only detect spiritual energy if I physically feel it. With mines and wells, their energy is completely shielded and blocked from escaping, which is what causes a mine to develop in the first place. Otherwise, not only me, but everyone would easily be able to detect mines."

"Figures," Lex muttered as he made his way back to the camp. His trip to the cliff had not been so simple, and he had to hide and run from some predators a few times, but even when he came back to camp with his clothes clearly having suffered damage, no one batted an eye.

Instead, whoever saw Lex let out an excited cheer. He was the man of the hour, the good luck charm, and some even called him the noble prince. Lex naturally maintained the banter with everyone, but did not stay for long as he needed to get back to his tent and rest up. The backup plan he had made was fairly simple.

He had already shown everyone where the tunnel was, but they had not proceeded to exploring it yet as a Druk was not an easy foe to face, even assuming there was the only one Lex saw instead of a whole family of them.

Lex had decided, despite his better judgment, to join them on their exploration of the tunnel, for even if they did discover a spirit well, no one would notice if he ended up absorbing some energy from that as well. Right?

He figured, as long as the well wasn't completely drained, he would be alright.

Ptolemy, on the other hand, took Lex's insistence on accompanying them as a form of mistrust, as if he would deny Lex's role in finding the well if he didn't accompany them.

He felt so frustrated, in fact, that a part of him even wished that there was no well to begin with.

While all of this was going on, back in his own domain, a small humanoid clump of leaves that sort of looked like Lex walked back and forth trying to figure something out. Karom had spent too long as an adolescent, and unless he could find a way of expanding his territory, he would be stuck like that.

"Brooooooooooooooooooooo I got it!" he suddenly yelled, as an idea came to him. If the humans were too preoccupied to determine the existence of the well, that would give Lex more time to find spirit mines and lay down his seeds.

Why was he stressing out over such a minor issue? All he had to do was distract the humans, maybe even trap them for a few years - that would give Lex plenty of time to search.

He was so enthused by his new idea that he completely forgot about Lex's warning not to do anything without consulting him.

'Dear aunty Jeena,' he started to write down on a rock, preparing to send it as a letter. 'You will never guess what I just saw. Goli has been meeting with humans...'

Karom wrote down his own version of the 'latest gossip' of how Goli had decided to embrace the humans. The fastest way for Trelops to grow stronger was to absorb parts of other Trelops. This was why there were so few of them, not to mention the fact that so few of them ever remained close to one another.

Karom did not specifically lay down any allegations, but the fact that he was so nonchalant about Goli deciding to work with humans would obviously insinuate that Karom was not the target of Goli's and the humans' cooperation.

How this beloved aunty would take this news, he did not bother speculating. Soon, a massive boulder could be seen being pulled by hundreds of roots through the forest, its body entirely covered in writing.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 262: Heartbeat

Instead of sleeping, Lex chose to cultivate to recover. He needed to be in top shape to protect himself while the rest of his cohorts fought the Druks or any other enemies that might crop up.

A benefit of all the exertion he was experiencing was that his cultivation was progressing quickly. While the concentration of spiritual energy mattered little for Qi training, since he was absorbing individual strands of Qi, the indirect benefits he was receiving of being in an energy rich environment, such as eating healthier food or recovering from fatigue quicker, were speeding up his cultivation nonetheless.

The whole process of forcing a higher number of Qi into your body, and then having your body get accustomed to it, was apparently greatly facilitated by being beaten up and then recovering quickly. Considering Lex's defense, this was not how should have been cultivating, but just based on the fact that he was always surrounded by higher realm enemies made it so that the effect of his defense was always mitigated.

Lex firmly entered the 6th level of Qi training, and was already on his way to the peak of it. The good news was, if he continued to get hassled the way he was, it would speed up his cultivation. The bad news was, the protection talisman he had to protect him from Nascent realm attacks had limited energy. While it had sustained itself so far, it was because he had not yet taken any direct hits and mostly suffered shockwave damage. Even so, eventually it would run out. While it was not a concern yet, it was something Lex had to keep in mind.

Finally, it was time to explore the tunnel. The group going would be the largest group that ventured out into the forest yet, since the camp was founded.

Other than Ptolemy himself, 20 of the 30 guards would be joining as well as another 10 students that would serve auxiliary purposes to help in the combat of Druks. Lex and Barry were the only purely

noncombatants joining in - Lex because he insisted on going and Barry because, should the tunnel end prematurely, or instead form an underground maze, he would be the one to guide them and carve out a new path should it be needed.

Their party set out, once again mounted on their lizards since there was no hope of being discreet with such a large group. Many animals would run away as soon as they saw the size of their party, but some of the stronger beasts still fought with them. However, no matter how much they fought or how much noise they made, the forest no longer made any moves on them. Lex genuinely wondered what Ptolemy had done to achieve such a result.

A few hours later, they finally reached the mouth of the tunnel. At the sight of the descending path, a new mood overtook the group. It was not anxiety, or fear, this time, but that of excitement.

One of the group members ventured ahead while the rest stayed back and secured the area. A small concealing formation was set up so that no other beast would accidentally discover it and attack them from behind.

A short while later, the group member that ventured into the tunnel came back out, a grim look on his face.

"According to the probe, there's three Druks down there."

The group members had various reactions with most grimacing as well, but a few jumped up with ecstatic faces.

"What happened?" Lex asked his fellow noncombatant, Barry.

"Three Druks means the size of the Spirit well is large enough to support three of them. But, at the same time, each Druk is ridiculously difficult to defeat. They eat various metals and absorb them into their body, augmenting their defense. Adolescent Druks, like the one you saw, get their tough body as a result of the metals, but adult Druks form a unique alloy that is even more difficult to penetrate. Three Druks signifies that two are probably parents while one is probably a child. Facing two adult Druks... it's not an exciting concept. But, at the same time, the reward will be all the greater."

Lex silently watched as Ptolemy discussed the plan with the rest of the combatants. He silently wondered, should he use the distraction from the fight to reach the well? If someone found out, it would be highly suspicious.

Once they were done with their plans, the group continued into the tunnel. Their primary plan was to try to capture the younger Druk, if possible, to use against the older ones. However, if capture seemed impossible, they would find ways to fight the beasts one at a time. They held no illusion that fighting all three together would be their demise.

It did not take long, barely a few minutes, before they once again ran into the Druk that Lex had encountered, still asleep.

The built up anticipation mixed with anxiety as the group quietly assumed their positions. Barry and Lex were farthest back, while a few went ahead to ensure the two adults weren't nearby.

The longer they took, the greater the tension that built up. Lex suddenly became very aware of his heartbeat. It was not beating fast, and maintained an even pace, but suddenly he felt like each beat was like a hammer trying to break through his chest.

Ba-dump. One of the guards, a female, moved close to the Druk, holding a rope made of bark. Ba-dump. Three others surrounded the group, trying to set up a suppression array. Ba-dump. Everyone drew their weapons, the sheen of their blades cutting through the darkness of the tunnel. Ba-dump. A drop of sweat rolled down Ptolemy's brow. Ba-dump.

A nod, so subtle one could have missed it if they weren't watching for it, from one of the group members was all the confirmation they needed. The adults were far away. Ba-dump.

Just as they had been ambushed so suddenly a short while ago, the group ambushed the Druk this time. Any kind of metal was useless against Druks, so the weapons they used were made of special synthesized materials and should have been harder and sharper than steel. Despite the surprise, though, their attacks failed to pierce the beast all the way through.

The Druk did not roar angrily when it opened its eyes. No, the tunnel itself released a sharp wail at their blasphemy. The walls shivered under the weight of the beast picking itself up, and then shivered again as all the metal ores were pulled straight out of them and fell to the ground like melting ice.

The sight of a massive, angry beast glaring them down with murder in its eyes would have intimidated a lesser group, but not this one. So far, things were going according to plan. As soon as the beast stood up, various members of the group swung their ropes through the beast's legs.

Their intention wasn't to tie it up, but rather, flip it. With inhuman strength, members of the group used the ropes to pull the beast in the air, while others attacked it once again, flipping it over. Its two front claws, its primary weapons, were pushed deep into the tunnel walls so that the Druk wouldn't be able to pull it out easily.

Upside down, and immobile, the beast was unable to retaliate as the group started to suppress it with their arrays. The beast was definitely a young one, and was too used to its foes being intimidated by its display of power. What it didn't know was that to these academy students, threats meant nothing except time gained to counter attack.

So far, things were going according to plan. But when the Druk finally awoke from the shock of what was happening to it, it finally roared in anger!

Stalactites shattered from the power of its voice alone, and Lex was pushed back, having to take Barry's support, but not much else happened. Its claws were already stuck in the wall, and it had been manipulated in such a way that it wasn't able to exert its full strength to pull them out. An unusual stalemate was formed where the Druk wasn't able to attack, but none of the humans' attacks hurt the Druk. But the stalemate wouldn't last long. If the humans weren't able to do something, the other two would eventually notice something wrong. Time was against them.

"Try taming or subduing techniques," Lex suddenly suggested. Its physical defense was astounding, but that did not necessarily mean the same for its mind.

Ptolemy gave Lex a dirty look before turning to someone else and giving them the nod. They were already going to do that, but with Lex's suggestion, it now seemed like it was his idea. Over all, it didn't matter, but Ptolemy was irked by the fact that Lex seemed to be getting the credit.

Suddenly, Lex's heart started beating faster. Something was wrong.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 263: Aunty Jeena

This time, Lex did not bother warning Ptolemy and the rest for he had understood that their resilience was beyond what he imagined. He grabbed Barry, used Falcons relief, and sped back as fast as he could.

As they moved back, and their view of the tunnel increased, their pupils constricted!

The fight, so far, had been in a realm that Lex could understand. The students were hitting the Druk with all their strength to hurt it, while the Druks' abnormal defense kept it safe. Any tactics or strategies employed still made sense to him, and the way they manipulated the inexperienced Druk to flip him over, and put him in his most vulnerable position also made sense.

But there was a fundamental fact that Lex overlooked, simply because he was used to being around extremely powerful cultivators. Up until the Golden core realm, cultivators gained access to greater and more powerful techniques that allowed them to do increasingly incredible things. However, in the Nascent realm, things became more complex.

Yes, Nascent level cultivators could, of course, use more powerful and destructive techniques than Golden core ones. But, in that realm, their strength transcended realms such as simple physical damage. Even something as simple as a flame produced by them would carry a sense of profoundness anyone other than the desensitized Lex would sense.

But, irrespective of how desensitized he was, currently he could feel it. The various metals that had been pulled out of the tunnel walls, which everyone had been ignoring up until now, surged as if they had come to life and formed a tsunami of liquid metal!

But more than the physical intimidation of a giant wave of molten metal, hurling towards you, the wave had a sense of oppression that pressed on Lex's very existence. Even as Lex retreated and tried to get away, he was reminded of the coercion he faced against the Kraven on his first day in this realm.

There was nothing about this oppression that Lex could defend against, as it touched on matters beyond his understanding. A part of him also suddenly understood why the Inn was so spectacular. When the difference between two beings was too vast, even without them doing anything, the lesser being would naturally be oppressed. The Inn prevented that and created a safe environment where everyone could interact safely as equals.

But this understanding was fleeting. Currently, Lex was running for his life!

He did not turn to see how Ptolemy and the rest would react to the attack, he was sure they had contingencies; he was only concerned about saving his skin! If they hadn't left their lizard mounts outside the tunnel, he might have escaped quicker, but the entrance of the tunnel was too small and narrow, and so now he had to rely on his two feet.

"Let me," said Barry, as soon as he realized what was happening. Instead of being pulled along by Lex, he grabbed the latter and ran at a speed dozens of times faster than Lex! In a few seconds, they had completely escaped the battleground.

"That was... really something," Lex said, as he tried to catch his breath.

"Yeah, it really was. I had heard rumors about your incredible foreshadowing ability, but seeing it in action as something else entirely."

"My what?" asked the distracted Lex.

"Your foreshadowing ability. Your ability to sense danger. I heard that when we were ambushed on the first day, you detected the attack beforehand and managed to warn Ptolemy. This time again, you detected the Druks attack before anyone else."

"Oh, that. It's just a gut feeling, no ability or anything," Lex said dismissively. Barry did not comment further, but all it took was a single look to detect that he had other thoughts on the matter.

"What now?" Lex finally asked once he had gotten over the shock of the coercion. Mentally, he was planning out how he should get Barry to help him find the Spirit well. However, it seemed like he didn't need to do anything.

"They'll take care of the Druk, don't doubt them, but it might take some time. My objective, however, has always been to find the Spirit well. Since we've already gone deeper into the tunnels, I suggest we don't waste our time and continue searching. I'll leave covert tracks so that the main group will be able to follow us once they're done."

"I agree," Lex said promptly.

Barry opened up his own backpack and took out a pair of black gloves and a few items to help him find the way, while Lex took out his Fancy monocle and put it on.

Barry put his right arm against the tunnel wall and started to slowly move forward. The descending slope in the tunnel slowly started to get steeper until it was almost at a forty-five degree angle. While not ideal, it was not able to stop their progress forward, yet soon they encountered a problem.

It was not the usual, left or right diverging paths in the tunnel, but a direct vertical drop on one side and another descending slope on the other.

Personally, Lex felt they should go directly down, as based on his understanding, the well should be somewhere deep underground. But, in this instance, Lex didn't need to guess, as he had the luxury of being guided by an expert.

In this case, it turned out Lex's instinct was correct, and Barry grabbed hold of Lex before slowly descending the vertical drop.

"How do you tell what way to go?" Lex asked after they finally reached the bottom, only to be welcomed by a few diverging paths.

"Spirit stone mines," Barry began to answer, absentmindedly, as his focus was still on determining their path, "are formed due to a few recurring reasons. Two of the most common reasons for such mines to form are due to two different kinds of ores, Orichalcum and Deatite ores. Both are naturally formed ores, but they both behave exactly opposite to one another. Orichalcum, in its natural state, greedily absorbs spirit energy. When enough of it is found together, and absorbs enough energy, the ore automatically turns into spirit stones."

Lex was suddenly reminded of the 'Red Gold dust', a specific kind of metal found on Mars used by the Morrison family that was great at absorbing spiritual energy. He wondered if it was the same thing.

"Deatite, on the other hand, is an excellent insulator for spiritual energy, and blocks, or in some cases, even traps spiritual energy when it encounters it. Eventually, if enough energy is absorbed, spirit stones naturally begin to form automatically.

"There are a few more ways in which mines are formed, but they are relatively rare. Anyway, this is not an exact science as more often than not, these ores can be found without the presence of any mines, but if you ever suspect the presence of a mine, just go to the area with the highest concentration of these ores. If such a mine exists, it's bound to be located there. Of course, detecting specific ores through several layers of dirt and rocks and other materials is not so simply achieved. Even I need special tools."

Lex asked no more, but he tried to use the monocle to pick up traces of these ores Barry mentioned. He did not see the names, but the monocle detected many ores qualified as unknown, one of which Lex suspected was either one of the ores Barry was talking about. This was good, he had discovered another way to search for mines.

Goli forest, Inside a wooden hut in the middle of the forest

A massive snake with a body made entirely of hundreds of tree branches was slithering around in circles. Goli was furious, but there was not much it could do for now. The cursed human had some kind of evil flame that could not only feed on Goli's own flames but could even attack any of Goli's spirit attached to any plant Goli controlled. Until he found a solution to that flame, attacking the humans would only end up hurting it instead.

There was a knock on the door of the hut, breaking Goli from his reverie. But, more than curious, Goli felt afraid. What kind of entity could reach his hut without him even realizing? He could even think of one.

Before his thoughts could continue, the door to the hut fell onto the ground, and in walked the most lascivious rose bush Goli had ever seen.

"Aunty Jeena," he croaked, chills running down his wooden spine. "What brings you to my humble home?" He could not stop his voice from quivering or his body from trembling. The smell of roses filled

his hut and Goli, despite his subdued plant nature, started to feel urges that were more... human than plant.

"Little Goli, you've grown so big," the bush whispered as it ran a thorny stem across the wooden snake. "And I heard Little Goli wants to grow up. Do you want your good old Aunty to help you... become an adult?"

The Innkeeper

Chapter 264: Buried

Goli trembled so hard his snake form almost unraveled. It may seem like Aunty Jeena was only teasing, but amongst Trelops, using another Trellop to reach adulthood was a very serious issue.

One way for them to reach adulthood, naturally, was to slowly age and eventually grow into it. But this was one of the rare cases where a long lifespan worked against them. Growing into adulthood would take so long that your chances of being killed were incredibly high in the meantime.

The second method was to take over some natural landscape and grow it, but realistically speaking, it was difficult to find an unoccupied area large enough to achieve this. The third and fastest way was to forcefully encroach upon a landscape that was once occupied by a Trellop. To be clear, this was not lethal to the other Trellop, but it would naturally weaken them a lot.

In this case, if Goli admitted to wanting to use her help to reach adulthood, it would mean encroaching on her land. Jeena was so incredibly strong that even the thought of it was borderline insane.

To explain the power difference, Goli, who used his forest to strongly suppress the human expedition, and had for so long resulted in a halt of human expansion of territory, was himself only in the Golden core realm. Despite his own individual low cultivation, the might he could wield was much larger, due to having the entire forest and its energy at his beck and call. Karom too was in the Golden core realm, albeit he was weaker than Goli.

So then it could be imagined how powerful Jeena was, as an Earth Immortal Trellop.

"No aunty, not at all," the wooden snake barely managed to say.

"Oh? But then, why am I hearing something else? That you are partnering up with some humans to upgrade your fire and take my land?"

"No! No aunty it's..."

"Stop stuttering. Just answer this: are there humans in the forest, yes or no?"

"Yes," Goli replied meekly.

"And do they not have a flame stronger than your own?"

"Yes," he replied, suddenly feeling like something bad was about to happen. No matter how he tried to explain, it would definitely seem like he wanted the humans' help to upgrade his beautiful, golden flames to that nasty, stinky green flame.

Jeena only chuckled as she saw the young Trelop shy away.

"Dear young Goli, you may not want my help. But, I have some thoughts of my own. I think it's about time you boys grew up, or at least one of you did. Your younger cousin Karom told me that you had partnered up with the humans to take over my land. The fact that he wanted to pit me against you makes me think that he's the one who has partnered with the humans.

"But I don't care about any of that. I see you boys, too content with life and it makes me sad. So I think it was time you boys matured a little. One of you needs to grow up. I don't care who and I don't care how. But if I see you two slacking again, then I might be the one to take over both of your lands. It would be a waste to leave it to either of you."

"What about the humans?" Goli suddenly asked, as he watched his aunt turn around and leave.

"What about them? I don't care about humans, I just want results."

Instead of a groan, Lex just let out an exasperated sigh as he covered the bleeding wound on his chest. It did not matter for squat how good his defenses were if his enemies were just too strong. On the bright side, he had gotten better at responding to his instincts of danger, and dodged almost all attacks.

He watched impassively as Barry crushed some kind of rock monster. Even though he was not a fighter, all humans here had at least some combat background. That, accompanied by his peak Golden core cultivation, made it so that he could at least defend the two of them.

Lex and Barry had been ambushed by some kind of a rock monster that had escaped the detection of Barry as well as the Fancy monocle. Even now, as Barry broke its body to pieces, his monocle only identified it as sedimentary rock and not a living thing.

After a few moments, when Lex removed his hand, his bleeding had stopped. This was not because he had recovered, but instead because he had gotten injured so many times in the last few hours, he suddenly learnt he could control his body the way body cultivators could. While it would not mitigate the damage done, he could stretch his skin to cover sharp cuts and move his muscles around to accommodate his injuries.

For the glass half full kind of people, it would seem that Lex had gained something from being mercilessly attacked numerous times. For Lex, it just seemed like they still hadn't made it to the mine.

"How much farther?" Lex asked as he surveyed the surrounding area. Suddenly, more rock monsters would be fine for Barry, but they could spell real trouble for him.

"I cannot detect the ores that deep. I can only progressively move to an area of higher concentration of the relevant ore."

"Then we should keep moving."

At some point, Lex considered ditching Barry and directly using the method Karom had given him to directly go underground till he reached the mine. But these tunnels were infested with various Gu, not to mention rock monsters and the like, so he would never make it far on his own. So he continued to stick by Barry and made slow progress.

"Yeah."

They had been slowly moving deeper underground for hours now, and the farther down they got, the hotter the tunnels started to become. They also started getting wider and larger, and Lex had come across many more rocks containing gold. A part of him was sad that he couldn't carry all that gold with him, even though he didn't really have a need for gold.

Twenty minutes later, they reached a deadend. This wasn't the first deadend they had been faced with, but this one was different because...

"I think we've reached the mine," Barry said with excitement.

"Then why are we stopping?"

"Because it's most likely that the other two Druks we detected are in the mine. Are you sure you want to go ahead without waiting for the rest to catch up?"

Lex could not reply as his mouth was left open. He remembered how strong the 'juvenile' Druk had been, he didn't want to face two adults alone. Instead, he limited himself to looking at the wall fondly. In truth, he was trying to see if the system could detect the energy yet.

But the world, or rather the Crystal realm, never truly cared for the plans of others. While Barry was content with waiting for the rest, the situation would not allow it.

The ground began to tremble, and the walls of the tunnel started to groan. There was an earthquake, and the tunnel didn't really seem to be handling it well.

For once, even Lex was caught off guard, and had no idea how to respond. But as the tunnel started to collapse, and they suffered a cave in, he quickly moved next to Barry, which ended up being the right move.

Barry's training and forethought suddenly failed him as his first true life and death situation filled his mind with panic. He used his digging technique to push through the wall towards the mine, trying to escape the collapsing tunnel. No matter how strong he was, he couldn't tolerate hundreds of tonnes of earth crashing down onto him.

Despite his panic, his speed was incredible, and he tore through the supposed deadend until he reached another open cave. Barry and Lex were both hit by a sudden gust of wind, and Lex grinned as the system finally let him know it could detect a massive store of energy.

Just as he told the system to absorb 'some' of the energy, the situation went from bad to horrifically apocalyptic.

The earthquake hadn't stopped, and while they had entered the outermost layer of the spirit mine, or well, instead of tunnel walls filled with shining spirit stones, or caverns full of spirit water, they were welcomed by erupting lava!

Barry let out a scream filled with fear and horror as the lava enveloped them, and before they could even think of retreat, the cave-in caught up with them, pushing the duo firmly into the lake of lava.

Up above, the Trelop Goli was shifting the roots of all the trees in the forest, pushing and pulling the ground with an endless fury as he prepared for a decisive battle with its cousin! Hundreds of trees that were thousands of years old pulled out their roots from the confines of the ground, causing countless artificial quakes and drastically changed the landscape. Goli channeled all the energy of the forest, whether it was held underground in his mines, or in his trees or treasures, all into his emerging army. He was as furious at Karom as he was afraid of Jeena. Someone would definitely pay for disturbing his peaceful life.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 265: Annihilation

In movies, being burnt by lava was a slow and agonizing process where the person exposed to the lava was slowly absorbed into it as if he were being pulled into quicksand. The truth of it was quite different.

Lava was thick and heavy, and being pressed against literally thousands of tons of it felt just about as solid as being pressed against a wall. Of course, this wall was on fire, and the air was on fire and the ground was on fire and basically everything other than Lex himself was on fire.

His protective talisman had turned on, and sandwiched between the lava and debris, Lex remained unhurt, even if only for now. Acting on instinct alone, Lex quickly pulled up his backpack and quickly opened it to find the acorns given to him by Karom.

While at a glance, all the acorns looked the same, they all actually served many purposes. The only one he had used so far was to hide his special 'scent' from Goli, but there were others in here, as well. Some of them were meant to be crushed by Lex once he was inside a spirit mine, while others would drill down and bring him deep underground.

As soon as he found the acorn, he reached out to grab Barry so that the two of them could escape together. That was when, under the combined weight of the debris and the burning fury of the lava, his talisman extinguished.

What Lex felt next was too extreme to be quantified and too varied to be called pain. The pressure on his body was so sudden and so immense that he physically felt himself being squeezed to death. Yet, his mind did not have the time or the capacity to think thoughts such as 'I'm dead' or even 'this hurts'.

It was not a slow process, in the millionth of a second that it took for his body to start being squeezed to death, the lava not only burnt his clothes, his skin, his hair, his muscles, but the small metallic chunks in the lava that had not fully melted started to attach to his body, as if welded together.

There was no plan, no thoughts, no escape, only an orchestra of extremes that bombarded Lex. It was indistinguishable through the glow of the lava, but a piece of his exposed skull shone for a brief moment, and a single word that had been carved into his skull long ago disappeared. Furthermore, had his mind been coherent, he would have realized that his back started to feel cool, and even the temperature of the lava dropped drastically.

But none of that mattered, for the single moment in which Lex felt annihilation close in on his body and mind, the acorns in his hand were also crushed.

A thin, wooden layer covered Lex's skin, and in extension Barry, who Lex was holding onto, formed a wooden shell before it started to pull them underground. The heat of the lava and the pressure of the ground seemed to do nothing to the frail-looking layer of wood, and if anything, seemed to strengthen it further. After all, which root was afraid of digging through the dirt, and which root did not strip the ground of its resources to act as fertilizer for itself?

In front of the power of a Trelap, the lava was nothing more than a consolidated pool of fertilizer.

The duo kept moving deeper into the lava, but Lex had already fainted, so he had no idea. Instead, it was the severely burnt and wounded Barry who gained the awareness that he was no longer in pain. Confused and disoriented, he could not tell what had happened, but he could tell that something seemed to be moving.

Safe now, or at least saved from all that pain, Barry let his mind wander as he allowed his body to slowly heal. Sometime later, they had moved right through the lava, and the wooden shell was now digging through rock and dirt, continuously bringing them deeper underground. Eventually, instead of ground, they dug into a cavern and the duo went into a freefall until they were dropped into a clear, cool pool. As if sensing its task complete, the wooden shell broke open, letting the cool liquid rush in and wash the burnt duo.

This was, of course, spirit water. While it did not have magical, mystical properties that could miraculously heal them, the spirit water nourished their bodies and provided them with the energy to heal. Barry, who was already somewhat conscious, was quickly roused by the cooling, refreshing feeling bathing his body. For a moment, he lost himself in the endless soothing feeling, until he remembered what had happened to him and jolted up.

The darkness of the cavern was not a problem for him, for he had excellent vision even in the dark and fortunately, his eyes had not been damaged. It took but a moment for him to realize they had discovered the Spirit well and ecstasy flooded his battered mind before it converted to panic just as quickly.

Spirit water was extremely nourishing to him for he was in the Golden core realm, but for Lex, who was still in Qi training, it was naught but poison! Qi training cultivators absolutely could not allow a high concentration of spirit energy to enter their body, as they were still only dealing with individual strands of energy - Qi.

He grabbed Lex's unconscious body and quickly jumped out of the pool before carefully examining him, ready to expect the worst. Somehow, though, Lex seemed to be alright. Well, about as alright as one could be after having their entire body burnt and buried. He was exhibiting signs of energy poisoning, and though his body was covered in severe burns from top to bottom, he was breathing normally and did not seem to be dying.

Not completely relieved, Barry decided to check Lex's condition thoroughly to ensure the boy was alright. Although he was not sure how they escaped, he knew for a fact that it wasn't due to anything he did, nor did he believe in some God blessing them and allowing them to miraculously survive. That obviously only left Lex - he must have done something or used some treasure that allowed them to survive.

Unfortunately, while Lex did not seem to be dying, his condition otherwise could not be called good by any measure. He had severe burns on every part of his body, except a small patch on his back that somehow survived, and some parts of his body had even burned directly to the bone.

To be frank, Barry had no idea how Lex was even alive in this condition. While he himself was in a similar state, at least he had his cultivation to support him. What did Lex have?

But while this may have been a good question in another situation, after making sure Lex was alright, Barry turned his attention to the cavern.

They had finally reached the spirit well, but he had not yet seen the remaining two Druks. Where were they?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 266: Reforging Lex

Slowly and carefully, the naked Barry searched the cavern. All signs pointed towards the fact that the two Druks had been here only a short while ago, but had just left. Maybe they had finally been attracted to Ptolemy and the rest.

What he didn't know was that Goli had summoned all the strongest beasts living in his territory for the upcoming war. They had managed to avoid the Druks by only a few minutes.

Whatever the case, they seemed to be safe for now, but just barely. Barry had none of his treasures with him, they had been lost, except for one of the gloves he previously wore and had melted right into his hand.

They didn't have any medicine either. All Barry could do was submerge himself in the spirit water to help accelerate his healing, and when he felt strong enough, he would start to look for a way out.

Contrary to what one might expect, Barry was not actually being greedy for the spirit water and was just doing whatever he thought the best thing was to escape because... HE WAS IN AN INSANE AMOUNT OF PAIN!

The fact that he wasn't yelling and groaning around despite the condition of his body, wincing at the slightest movement, was a testament to his determination, as well as how afraid he was for his life. His only thought right now was how to get back to the camp.

But, without any medicine, and without a mystical Inn that would heal all their wounds to retreat to, recovery was slow.

Soon, the cavern became so quiet that the sound of Lex's breathing could be heard like a concert.

As for Lex, his situation was complicated. Being squeezed like a lemon while also being burnt like BBQ prepared by an amateur cook, all the while having his mind bombarded with the most intense stimuli he had ever experienced, was not really enough to kill him. Maybe if he had stayed in that situation a while longer, he would have died, but currently he was only wounded.

Due to the special condition of his body, it was not so easy to kill him or hamper his recovery. For all intents and purposes, a majority of his wounds were only cosmetic. Furthermore, since the experience he had undergone was extremely intense, as a function of Regal Embrace, his thoughts and feelings about the experience had been packed away in a corner of his brain until he was strong enough to handle them.

This didn't mean his memory was erased. It just meant that when he thought back to the experience of being cooked alive, he would only feel emotionless.

So, Lex was alive and not in mortal danger. Then what was his current situation? He was extremely, severely physically exhausted, and so had fallen asleep. It would take him exceptionally long to heal - or it should have if his body was only operating under the influence of the Regal Embrace.

But, while it only appeared like a tattoo on his back, in truth, his body was housing a World Seed Lotus. The most basic function of this Lotus was to create a 5 star world, but was that it? Was such a function

enough for the seed to this flower to be considered rare in the entire universe? That would be like saying 5 star worlds were rare in the universe, which was not the case.

But while the other functions of the Lotus remained a mystery, just its ability to create a world, any world let alone a 5 star one, was more than enough to give the Lotus the energy to help heal a simple Qi training human body.

But it could not create something out of nothing. So it began to absorb the bits of metal from the lava that had welded onto Lex's body, into Lex's body. It absorbed the melted remains of the Fancy monocle that had covered Lex's left eye, into his left eye. It absorbed the spirit water into Lex's body to replace some of his blood that had boiled away.

It absorbed the ash from the numerous acorns Karom had given Lex into his body. It absorbed the clump of metal that had once been the Heavy Harley. And, when it discovered that all of this was not enough, slowly and steadily it began absorbing the unusual alloy that filled the walls of the cavern around Lex.

To the Lotus, these were just ingredients, and all it had to do was use them in the best possible way to create whatever it wanted. As a creator of worlds, this was as natural to it as breathing was to humans, so it did not even need to use all its attention for this matter. 99% of the Lotus was still asleep and only 1% of the infant Lotus worked on Lex, which is why it was taking so long to begin with. Otherwise, had it fully woken up, it would have taken mere moments.

But this ended up working in Lex's favor, as such an abrupt recovery would have alarmed Barry.

So, for the next six hours, the duo remained where they were, silently recovering. After six hours, Barry still had not recovered enough to come even close to his full strength, but he was too nervous to stay in the Druk lair any longer.

He picked up Lex's body and, for a moment, wondered why Lex's body felt heavier than he remembered. But he attributed the change to his own exhaustion, to be honest, he was still amazed that Lex was even alive.

He used a technique to engrave some markers into the walls here, so that he would be able to find this place again, and quickly made his way out one of the many exits. He no longer had his treasures to detect ore density and the like, so he could only go down a path blindly, hoping for the best.

Midnight Inn, In front of the lazy river.

Rafael Carter Bravi, son of King Hanson Marlo Bravi IV, slowly stood up from his wheelchair and grinned. As he took his first, unsteady step towards the lazy river, he felt a sleeping tiger within him waking up. He had not come back from the future to laze around. He had come to dominate.

Much like the first literal step he had just taken, it was time to take his first step towards his new, glorious future.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 267: Bare survival

They had suffered a cave in, were lurking in the layer of two incredibly strong beasts and had their entire bodies cindered, which is exactly why Barry was not at all concerned that he was buck naked, carrying another unconscious naked man through the darkness.

But while he slowly explored the tunnel, looking for a way out, he did not know that they were probably the most relaxed in the entire forest right now. However, such good luck would not last much longer. With the two Druks gone, for a while the underground tunnels were filled with peace. But, as perceptive as they were, the numerous creatures that the Druks had suppressed, and were subsequently kept away from the spirit well, began to detect their absence.

With such a once in a lifetime opportunity before them, how could they remain calm for long? At first, Barry was only assaulted by some of the unusual rock monsters that could even escape his detection. Fortunately, while their camouflage was immaculate, their strength was well within Barry's capacity to face. It was when Barry started to see strange insects that the situation took a turn for the worse.

A millipede with a massive body and each leg the size of Barry himself suddenly dug out of the roof in front of Barry and paused for a moment as it scanned the two humans. It considered whether to stop its journey for a snack, but then continued to dig downwards, its tunnel collapsing behind it.

Ants that came all the way up to Barry's waist started to appear in the tunnels, scurrying around as if searching for something. They were still ignoring them, but Barry began getting more and more nervous. It was only a matter of time before some decided to attack him, and while he could hold his own for now, he would easily get outnumbered.

It was while Barry was having this crisis that Lex, who had been asleep so far, suddenly opened his eyes. His instincts were screaming death and time was too short to communicate.

Flipping over, he fell out of Barry's grasp and onto the floor, immediately employed Falcon's relief and bolted while dragging Barry behind him.

An evil, gut wrenching screech reverberated through the tunnels, as if mad that its ambush had been detected, before a bony, metallic creature fell from the ceiling right above where the two humans had been.

"Bloody hell!" Barry exclaimed as the hairs on his back lifted and he felt the malevolent hunger the creature looked at them with. "Guide me," he said, as he took over running once again, and lifted Lex on his back.

Initially, a deep part of him was feeling like some kind of savior for bringing the wounded Lex with him, but now he knew well enough that without Lex's keen sense for danger, he may not even get out.

Due to the urgency of the situation, Lex did not notice that despite his current situation, he was not in any pain. This was not a result of any mystical magic, in fact, all his nerves had burnt and so he could not feel anything. It was only when he tried to speak, but no sound came out, that he somewhat realized that his body's condition was not the best.

Still, now was not the time to waste on stuff like that. He patted Barry's left shoulder to let him know to turn left, and thereafter started communicating through taps. While his physical condition was far from ideal, his instincts for danger were as keen as ever. This was not to say that Barry was unable to detect enemies with his own spirit senses, but just that in this situation Lex served as a better compass.

He was not guiding Barry towards the outside, he had no way of knowing that, he was simply guiding him on the path that felt the least dangerous. But as the current situation was far from ideal, they still ended up encountering some enemies on their path.

This was when Barry showed his real ruthlessness. He had no time for a careful, drawn out fight. He used the most direct and overpowering methods to bulldoze his way through any obstacle.

There was another earthquake, and despite himself, Barry paused to look at the ceiling. Even the many monsters and insects that were fighting paused, though for entirely different reasons. Up above, on the ground, the war had begun.

Since he made the first move, Goli caught Karom unprepared and managed to deal a considerable amount of damage. But Karom had a strategically superior position that made it easier for him to retaliate. While the 'bro' was not able to drive out Goli's invading forces, he could easily counterattack while he defended. The matter was as simple as hurling a massive boulder off the cliff. Just the force generated from gravity was enough to deal considerable damage.

The quake that they felt was the result of one such attack. The insects and monsters, however, were not responding to a call for arms by Goli. Instead, they, or at least the leaders for their respective colonies, were realizing that the situation might be more beneficial than they thought. Unlike the beasts, the insects, or Gu, did not have a cooperative relationship with the Trelops. A situation in which the Trelop was distracted was the perfect opportunity for them to plunder.

Lex suddenly squeezed Barry's shoulders hard, a sign that they were in intense danger. And indeed, the moment Barry began running once again, a cacophony of celebratory shrieks filled the tunnels and chaos erupted.

The insects were not even chasing after the humans anymore. They were outright destroying the tunnel walls and eating any ores or roots that they discovered. Of course, if Barry and Lex came their way, they were more than delighted to add them to the menu.

Tunnels started collapsing left and right, and more quakes seemed to follow. Suddenly, when Lex went from squeezing Barry's shoulder to digging his nails into him, he knew the situation called for drastic measures.

"Hold on," Barry yelled, and activated a technique he was trying to avoid using. A violent surge of spirit energy erupted from Barry and coated the two in a bronze light. Like a bullet, Barry shot directly upwards even as the ground collapsed under him, and instead of crashing into the ceiling, he fell into the rock as if he were diving into a pool.

They were moving at incredible speeds, but the already wounded and exhausted Barry could maintain the technique for only a few seconds, bringing them much higher and closer to the surface.

Once the technique ended, Barry's legs crumpled as his exhaustion caught up to him. But instead of falling on the ground, Lex swapped positions and put the man on his back. Not wasting any time, Lex began running.

His skin and nerves were burnt so he could not feel the warm breeze, and his nose was broken so he could not smell the scent of burning wood, but his vision had improved - though he hadn't realized that yet - and even in the darkness he could see the grooves of the rocks in the tunnel walls. For some reason, looking at them and observing the shape and direction they were bent in, he could determine the direction the tunnel met the surface.

He did not know the nuances behind why he knew this, but he was not in the mood to question anything right now. He attributed it to his instincts and ran for his life.

But, just because he was the one running now instead of Barry did not mean the insects disappeared, or ignored him. That would have been too coincidental and fortunate. No, the chaos was only increasing and the attacks Lex faced were even more numerous than Barry had.

But, instead of facing them head on, he did something that would surprise even him when he thought back to this moment later on. He started dodging his enemies with the precision and accuracy of an American football player dodging tackles.

He swerved just enough to dodge a scythe-like claw, jumped just high enough to avoid a biting ant and evaded just enough to feel the wind of an attacking monster, but avoid its body. For a moment, Lex even felt like he heard thunderous clapping of a crowd. Then his mind connected the sound not to a stadium crowd, but the thumping sound of a marching army.

Lex saw a part of the tunnel collapse, and light shone in like the rays of salvation that would rescue them from their plight. With skill Lex had no right to possess, he dodged every attack - well not really, he just couldn't feel pain so he had no idea that he had actually been struck a few times - and finally exited the accursed tunnel.

But what lay awaiting him was not salvation. It was a horde of massive ape like beasts, equipped with wooden spears that might as well have been small trees.

Then, as if he had not just walked into an enemy force that could eliminate him, Lex looked at the nearest beast and somehow, in a croaking voice said, "Quickly inform lord Goli! Karom has invaded the tunnel from the underground and is taking the spirit water! Send your armies underground, we cannot let the enemy succeed!"

The Innkeeper

Chapter 268: Luck

In English, the term 'beast' carried with it a negative or derogatory connotation. It was often used to describe another as lower or less intellectual than oneself. But in the context of actual beasts, as in a group of living beings, that was far from the truth.

First of all, it was important to understand what a beast was in the context of the cultivation world. A common misconception, at least amongst humans, was that beasts were animals that began cultivating. They could not be judged for having this view, for this often was the case for many species of beasts who had an animalistic nature and lacked intelligence whilst in the mortal realm. But strictly speaking, that was not what defined a creature as a beast.

In the cultivation world, a beast was a creature whose cultivation depended upon heritage and would, while growing in cultivation, slowly undergo evolution until it achieved the species that stood at the apex of its heritage.

This was exactly why so many beasts paid so much attention to rare or powerful bloodlines, as they provided a much higher end point than weaker ones. This is also what contributed to Fenrir's high evaluation - not only its heritage, but the purity of that heritage.

This should not be confused with other species that rely on bloodline abilities. For example, even though there were many subspecies of humans, and many humans that carried foreign bloodline, as a human grew in cultivation, his or her species would ultimately change from what it was. Yes, the bloodline ability may become more pronounced, but at the end of the day, it would only be limited to the ability.

Of course, Marlo who was undergoing the path of a prime was different, as his cultivation also depended on evolution, but any kids he had would not be primes but regular humans. Thus, regardless of whatever height he achieved, he could not leave behind a heritage, only a strong bloodline.

What was the point in bringing all this up right now? It was the simple fact that, should anyone be naïve enough to imagine it would be easy to fool a beast, they would be gravely mistaken.

The massive apes that surrounded Lex and Barry were not one of the main 7 races only because they lacked the population for such a claim. As limited as they were, each one of them boasted ridiculous physical strength and an inherent affinity for wielding the spear. If anyone ever thought that an affinity for a weapon would make them weaker than someone with an affinity for an element, such as fire or lightning, for example, was more than welcome to try.

But besides their combat prowess, they had a very intricate tribal system that gave equal value to intelligence and strength. So when they were marching together, off to war, there most certainly was some sort of leader within their ranks who had the ability to distinguish a fallacy.

This leader would also know that, while the current war did not seem to target humans, Goli was infamously racist towards humans and would never work with them. So, regardless of what kind of important or vital information a human brought, they would never escape suspicion.

Which is why it was incredibly fortunate that neither Lex nor Barry seemed like they had anything to do with humans. Lex may have been bipedal, but then so were the apes, so that was not enough to arouse doubt.

Instead of the soft and fragile skin that humans were most commonly identified by, these two creatures were covered in char and soot. They wore dirt and small rocks on their bodies the way humans wore clothes, and the muscles on their limbs were tough and wore signs of being tempered in fire. Furthermore, they did not smell of humans either, but of fire and smoke. The ape identified them as some variant of moles with a strong fire affinity - perfect subordinates for the Druks that would temper their bodies in molten metal.

"I will pass on your message," the leader of this troop said, giving an acknowledging nod to these two valiant beasts. They had suffered great harm to bring them this important news, when they could have easily hidden instead.

Taking that as his sign to leave, Lex identified the direction the apes were heading in, and decided to run in the opposite direction, completely unhindered by the beasts who saw them interact with the apes.

His face only showed his determined expression, but internally Lex was flooded with relief. He had taken a big gamble back there, because honestly, he saw no way of surviving should they get into a fight.

His mind worked at incredible speeds to determine the best way he could resolve the situation. Since they had already suffered many attacks from various beasts, and he could determine that the beasts had attacked under the instruction of Goli, he estimated that Goli was the leader of all the beasts.

That guess was not accurate, but functionally, such a guess worked well enough. Second, because of his contact with Karom, he knew the two Trelops were not on the best of terms and even harbored subtle hostilities towards one another. Third, he knew that the spirit well would be an important asset regardless of the situation.

Keeping in mind these points, he instantly fabricated a story that put him in the right. It was not some intricate plan he concocted, but something he did so instinctively he was speaking before he even realized. A number of other factors played into his ruse working, including the ongoing war and his current appearance, but Lex would never know how lucky he had just been. However, even though he was lucky, it was because of his believable story that they got away, so he still deserved some credit.

Lex did not know about the ongoing war but he suspected that his remarks may spark some tension, but he couldn't be bothered about that right now. His attention lay elsewhere.

The tunnel they exited from was not the one they went in from, and so he had no idea which direction their camp was in. The lack of any celestial bodies in the sky made it impossible for him to determine the location he was heading in.

The best he could do, currently, was climb a tree to determine the direction of the cliff and head that way.

The task was harder than he expected, even when leaving Barry on the ground, not only because of his exhaustion, but because he had not given his body any rest after being wounded. Such strenuous exertion in such a wounded state only served to exacerbate the seriousness of his injuries.

Lex was just thinking of how he would finally rest when he breached the forest canopy and froze. The cliff, as massive as it was, was easy to find. The searing class between two forests, one aflame while the other fiercely resisting, was not a sight easily overlooked.

If he ignored the trees that had uprooted themselves and seemed to be climbing the cliffs, and the hordes of birds that clashed in the skies, and even the countless beasts that seemed to be using the cliff as a battlefield, the boulders being flung towards Goli forest were not so easy to escape because one could fall on him at any time.

'Safety consultant my arse, I'm going to be a painter when I return.'

While scouting the forest, Lex suddenly noticed another area in the forest that seemed unusually devoid of trees. After focusing for a bit, he realized it wasn't that there were no trees there, but that they had all been burnt down. He found the camp! For the first time ever, Lex praised Ptolemy and his green flames as he climbed back down the tree. He wasn't too far, and should be able to reach it fairly quickly if he ran.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 269: The legend of Lex

The expedition camp was filled with an eerie silence, as everyone who was able, stood guard with their weapons drawn. At first, when Ptolemy and the rest set out, all was normal. But when the war began, Goli's first target was the humans.

They faced an assault the likes of which could fit in with the greatest legends in human history. Beasts, trees, flames, all assaulted them with passion hitherto unseen. But against all odds, with the fury of the world against them, the humans banded together and proved their resilience. There was no fear of death in their eyes as they battled the horde that had no end, no reluctance, only the one core value all humans in this realm had ingrained in them from birth. If they were going to die, then the enemy would die with them.

In history, it is said that humans fought their greatest battle in the darkness, abandoned by the graceful light of the Sol birds, abandoned by hope, abandoned by any notion of tomorrow. It was in the darkness that they forged the greatest of their legends, and it was from the darkness that the humans had clawed their way to becoming one of the seven great races. But these students fought under the light of their enemies burning leaves, under the glare of senseless hate, so that when their end came, they would see it coming.

Hours later, when the strength of their limbs was leaving them, and the last of their swords were breaking, it was not the abyss that came for them, but Ptolemy and his group.

Lizard astride, bloodied warriors tore through the enemy ranks behind the charge of their leader, shrouded in green flames. And when they finally reached the camp, Ptolemy made good on his promise of starting a forest fire.

A flame so greedy it absorbed the yellow color of life itself engulfed the forest that surrounded them, and the wails of beasts filled the skies. Unable to counter such a sinister villain, Goli abandoned the area around the human camp and focused solely on Karom - for now. But even abandoned, the flames roared for hours until every last shred of life surrounding the camp was erased from existence.

In the end, the humans finally had their rest. Many of them fell onto their knees, and then onto the ground. How many of them would ever get back up was a question no one had an answer to. No one asked about Lex and Barry, for in the chaos, who knew how many of them had gone missing?

No, they only rested, as the camp doctors made their rounds, doing whatever their failing strength allowed. For who knew when the next battle would come down upon them? The once green and lush camp was now carpeted in ash, with tendrils of smoke rising up into the air all around.

"Movement from the front!" a yell from a watchtower broke the silence, rousing all to their feet. They had come to the expedition as specialists in their fields, as geologists, doctors, cartographers and more, but none would regret ending the expedition as warriors dead on the field of battle.

Ptolemy stood at the forefront of the camp, looking out towards the trees in the distance. Normally his vision would allow him to see unabated even at a greater distance, but through the gray smoke he could only see vague figures.

Slowly, a crowd gathered behind him, swords and spears drawn, arrows knocked, shields at the ready. At the moment, no one blamed the expedition for being a failure. The truth was, if expanding to regions where entire human settlements had withdrawn from was easy, then it would never have been their turn to complete this task. Everything that happened, to some extent, was already expected.

With the ever present threat of the Kraven hanging over their heads, the human race needed brave men and women to face the dangers of the unknown, and carve out the path to their survival.

Just as Ptolemy tightened his grip on his sword, thinking about the fact that he had not yet recovered enough strength from the previous battle, a dark shape was outlined in the smoke.

All the warriors turned their eyes to that approaching shape, as the scouts on the watchtower looked elsewhere to ensure they were not ambushed from another side. The dark figure in the smoke looked too alien to identify what creature it belonged to, but if it was following up after the previous attack, there was no doubt that it must be the forest's champion.

Yet just as they harden themselves to face whatever monstrosity emerged, from the smoke emerged a thin, charred creature that stumbled more than it walked. It seemed to be carrying something on its shoulder.

But it only took a moment before the confusion was swept away and Ptolemy recognized that damned figure. More of a walking charcoal than a person, he would have never recognized the figure if it wasn't for those damned, determined eyes!

Suddenly he recalled the rumors he had been hearing in camp, the stories that made him spit on the ground and somehow hate Lex even more. No, not rumors... legends.

Legends of a lone human who walked through the carnage of Gristol and gathered a group of survivors, fighting an endless horde of enemies until they were saved by the representatives of the academy. Legends of how, when they faced an ambush, the human stood tall and strong against the flesh of an Immortal Kraven, teeth barred as if ready to bite, his knees unwilling to bend even in the face of death.

He recalled the legend of the human thrown in the path of the Kalter Flug, to a village destined to be erased from memory, which, ironically, became a village whose name people would never forget. It was the village where that human stood his ground against a calamity of nature and even dared to attack the strongest Kalter Flug that caused a Vice Dean of the academy some trouble, all to protect his fellow humans.

Ptolemy recalled legends of the man so distraught with his weakness, he worked all day and all night to grow stronger, so he would never fail again. He recalled the legend of the human that had forsaken his

surname so as not to rely on the prestige of his forefathers. He recalled the legend of Lex, noble son of Gristol... suspected heir of Cornelius II.

Despite all the frustration he had felt towards the man, as he watched the charred body of the irritating plebeian that refused to die, carrying on his back a cultivator much stronger than himself, he couldn't help but believe the legends for a moment.

"Call the doctors," Ptolemy told the crowd that was still ready to fight. "They're with us."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 270: The return of Booty

Lex's journey to the camp was, for the lack of a better word, boring. A few times he ran into a few beasts, and just as he was preparing to give an explanation to avoid a fight, or perhaps even run away, the beasts would only nod at him and move away. How was he supposed to know that he was being identified as a mutated mole?

So in the end, the return ended up being him carrying the exhausted Barry through the forest for hours until he finally reached the camp. He hadn't had any time yet to think about his future plans, but this incident would surely affect them. Just as he was about to enter the camp though, Mary gave him an update about something happening at the Inn that put him in a foul mood.

He was cursing and whining internally, not realizing that he had made it to camp. This led to the misunderstanding where his eyes full of frustration were mistaken for unwavering determination by Ptolemy. This was a misunderstanding destined to never be cleared up, for when would two men actively talk about the expression in each other's eyes?

As matters at the Inn didn't actually require his attention, he put the matter behind him as he refocused on the matter at hand.

It was only when the doctors came and wrapped him and Barry in blankets that he actually realized he was nude. They started testing him and applying various salves on his skin, but it was only when he saw them prick his skin and he felt nothing that he realized that he had no sensation. Well, maybe considering the circumstances, that was for the better.

The doctors asked him some questions, and when he tried to answer, he discovered once again how difficult it was to speak. If he forced himself, like he had with the apes, he would release a grotesque, hoarse sound that did not sound human so in the end they stopped asking him questions for now.

During the entire process, Lex felt nothing, and in fact was once again bored so much so that he hoped he could fall asleep or at least faint so he could in a way 'fast forward' this process.

But to his viewers, Lex showed a silent resilience, and refused to utter a single wince even as his burnt and battered body was treated. Surrounded by valiant warriors who had fought off death and destruction with tooth and nail, it was instead Lex who did nothing but run whose legend once again began to grow. Accompanied by the already positive impression everyone had of Lex, everyone was more than happy to fill in the blanks of his no doubt perilous journey with the most arduous of trials.

Of course, Ptolemy refused to be one of those. So what if he was the heir to Cornelius II? The King had lived for hundreds of years, had thousands of wives and concubines and literally had tens of thousands of children. He never favored any until they made real, quantifiable contributions to the human race. It was actually because of how little he cared for his children that made the story of relinquishing his family name more believable. Who could know the real reason Lex never gave his family name was because he was seriously creeped out by the guy interviewing him, and didn't want to give him any accurate information.

In the end, one of the doctors gave Lex a powerful sedative and put him to sleep. Barry, however, did not receive the same treatment. This was not because they were being harsh on him, but because he would be able to communicate with his spirit sense at least, and Ptolemy really needed to know the details of what happened.

But Barry was in much better condition than Lex, and after being given a dose of stimulants, quickly recovered. He did not need to use his spirit sense, and told the tale of how Lex saved him multiple times; from somehow bringing them out of the cave in, to guiding him to avoid danger, to carrying him after he thoroughly exhausted himself.

Ptolemy, of course, was no longer listening. He had gotten the news he was hoping for: the spirit well existed!

One of the many objectives of the expedition was to locate valuable resources. Since he was hunting for resources, naturally the resources had been allocated ranks and value quantifiers. Spirit wells, while not being the highest value target, were still high on the list since about only one in a hundred mines ever

even had the chance to become one. It was high enough that, using the potential danger to the well due to the ongoing war, he could request academy intervention!

Naturally, the academy would not interfere in the struggle between the Trellops, but as this was still the human domain, they retained the rights to any valuable resources. Distribution rights would be discussed later, for that had nothing to do with Ptolemy. He only had to report the situation back to the academy, and they would send someone over to secure the well - and, hopefully, take that irritating Lex away considering his situation.

Midnight Inn, Gamer's Den

"I'LL MURDER YOUR WHOLE CLAN!" roared a wrinkled old man, dressed in traditional daosit clothes. His beard, hundreds of feet long and previously wild and untamed, now bore the signs of having been treated by Harry and braided in viking fashion. His weapon, an eight feet (2.4 meters) long spear, leaned against the wall, gathering dust.

Instead, the tool he was using to inflict damage was a controller. His character in Immortal Combat was constantly being beaten by his opponent who used the forbidden technique of repeatedly doing low attacks that knocked him back. He did not know how to block low attacks, nor did he know how to attack low either - the cause of his frustration!

"OLD MAN, YOU'RE MY FATHER! DOES THAT MEAN YOU'LL KILL YOURSELF?" yelled back another man who looked equally old. In fact, he was also dressed similarly and had a weapon that looked almost identical to his father, so that the two looked more like twins than parents and child. He was instead fighting using a mouse and keyboard - the superior option!

Hundreds of viewers gathered around them and hooted and chanted for the ones they supported. The group looked like they were taken from a comic con convention, as they were too varied and unique to look like they came from the same place.

In the end, the son won the round, using his forbidden technique, launching his supporters into a frenzy.

"Do not be so smug, child, for the journey to victory is long and filled with obstacles."

"The proverbs of a failure who could not even get past the qualifying rounds mean nothing to me," replied the son, as he ran his hands down his new beard braid.

The father, enraged, snorted before he left with his weapon.

While the father son match ended quickly, many matches in the Gamer's den were still going on. A gaming tournament organized by Booty, the pirate was taking place. After the Iron Heart pirates discovered the Inn, they began using it on and off until one of them had the idea to sell the keys as treasures. Their business was good, since they visited numerous space stations and planets on their journey to loot and pillage.

After they had distributed the keys to many places, however, it occurred to Booty that they could take things a step further. Immediately, he sent out a message to his entire network, and they organized a 'friendly tournament' over some of the video games Booty liked.

The idea was an instant success, and hundreds of people paid a good deal of money. It made sense, for not everyone who was a cultivator was highly motivated. After living over a 100 years, most people would actively pursue new forms of entertainment.

Of course, Booty specifically targeted the non-problematic people from his network for this tournament. He didn't want to risk a fight breaking out over disagreements and then being blamed by the Inn staff for it.

It was the entrepreneurial efforts of Booty that saw a sudden spike in new Inn guests, and what's more, ended up in a gaming tournament for contestants from around a galaxy. Lex was extremely bitter over missing the tournament, for he wanted to be there for it. Z was also bitter, because the Gamer's Den had never been more popular, and he didn't like being around so many people.

Another round of cheers erupted as an intense match finally came to a close. As for what game they were playing? Call of Da-money: Modern Capitalism II. There were a few tournaments happening concurrently, and this game was the one that had the highest anticipated finale.

That was because, in one qualifying bracket was a team from Earth formed by famous Youtubers who just happened to be visiting the Inn, while in the other, soldiers trained to remotely operate combat robots in active war zones. To them, this was more than just a game. It was a matter of pride. And good quality content for their channels. No one would back down.