

Innkeeper 271

The Innkeeper

Chapter 271: Peculiarities

Three days passed before the representative for the academy finally arrived. The war did not cease for even a moment, but fortunately, the humans were left alone during this time. The rep had a long meeting with Ptolemy wherein he conducted a detailed interview of everything that had happened so far, as well as the reason for summoning him.

Once he learnt about the Spirit well, he picked up Ptolemy to guide him, and directly flew over the forest until they reached the tunnel. The original tunnel that Lex had discovered had collapsed, but it was not a problem for the rep to dig it up once again. Not bothering with any of the creatures in his path, he zipped through the tunnels as he followed the marker Barry had placed down by the well.

When he reached the well, he checked the authenticity of the well, and then sealed it using a special talisman. No one would be able to access the well until the seal was removed, which was easier said than done. Naturally, any Gu or monster or beast that protested against the seal met with a swift end.

The details such as figuring out the size of the well, how it would be used, who would be allocated the rights to harvest the water all were someone else's responsibility - he was just there to verify the report to the academy.

He would not help the expedition too much, as this was also a kind of graduation test for these students, nor would he interfere with the Trelops war, as that was not his job. In the future, should Goli refuse to compromise and insist on keeping the spirit well, then someone else would be sent to deal with him. The matter would be handled in a way that best served human interests.

But, while he did not interfere, the timing of the war was too coincidental, so it required further investigation. The representative was not exactly 'polite' with his investigation, either. With his superior cultivation, it was not a problem at all finding the Trelops' real bodies, not the leaf-humanoid form or snake form the Trelops liked to show the world.

He did not bother sharing the result of his investigation with Ptolemy, but considering the fact that the war continued as it had previously, there must not have been any big issues. It was time for him to

return, and he was supposed to bring all the seriously injured members of the expedition as well, as they were no longer fit to continue.

But one of the doctors stopped him. To be more specific, the doctor that had been looking after Lex.

"I have to report some special circumstances relating to the patient," the doctor said with a lot of hesitation in his voice.

"What's the matter?" the rep asked without dismissing the doctor. Normally, it was unlikely for something like a patient's condition to be relevant to someone like him, but he trusted the competence and professionalism of the academy students.

"The patient in question is at the Qi training level, and suffered severe burns and blunt force trauma from being smashed into a pool of lava by a collapsing wall. Furthermore, his body's condition was worsened during escape, where he carried an incapacitated student back to the camp. Under normal circumstances, with injuries like these, we would not expect full recovery, ever, and partial recovery would take well up to a year at least - if he managed to live that long at all. However, not only is the patient's recovery the fastest I've ever seen, there are a few factors that don't strictly adhere to common medical logic with the patient."

"Show me," the rep said, reserving his final judgment until the report was complete.

The doctor led the rep into a medical tent where Lex was being treated separately from all the other patients. His body was floating three feet in the air over a white marble platform on the ground, and various tubes were connected to his body.

He had been kept sedated this entire time, as the doctors expected Lex would go into shock if he saw the actual situation of his body. With all the char, dirt and grime cleaned from his body, you could now see that he looked more like a diagram for the human cardiovascular system than a living person. This was because he had nearly no skin left and was wrapped in a white gauze that was mostly see-through. Where his skeleton was exposed, visible cracks ran through the bone.

The rep was not a squeamish man, but even he was surprised by what he saw.

"You say he's recovering the fastest? What was he like before this?"

"Much, much worse," the doctor replied gravely. "A lot of the meat on his body was cooked, rocks and dirt had stabbed through his organs and he had completely drained all his Qi. I honestly have no idea how he was even able to run from the tunnel all the way back to the camp. A normal man would have died a million times over just from the exertion from breathing, let alone carrying someone else."

Silence once again filled the tent for a moment, before the doctor continued.

"But, that's not why I brought you here. I was the first to notice the patient's peculiarities, and so I ordered that I alone would take care of this patient to keep the matter from getting out. Let me show you the first peculiarity," the doctor said before turning Lex around.

Since Lex's body was floating in the air, turning him around was easy, but the moment his back was exposed it became evident what the issue was. Just because his back hadn't been directly exposed to the lava didn't mean it suffered no burns. But, while his back carried various degrees of injuries, there was a patch of skin on his back completely unblemished - except for a tattoo of a Lotus on it.

"Not only did his skin around the tattoo not suffer any burns," the doctor said, his eyes stuck on Lex's back, "but even his spine directly below the tattoo remained completely unharmed. I suspect this played a major role in him being able to come back to the camp on his own two feet."

The rep, now truly curious, scanned Lex's back, and his body, thoroughly. But the system was able to hide itself even from Ballom, this rep was no obstacle. The Lotus, on the other hand, did not even try to hide - its existence was on a completely different realm compared to the rep. Let alone the Lotus, the rep could not even sense the various energies the Lotus was always absorbing to feed itself.

"What else?" the rep asked, when he was unable to find anything out of the ordinary in Lex's body.

"This next bit is truly remarkable. Like I told you, the patient is recovering faster than I've seen anyone recover, and that was no exaggeration. You see all these tubes connected to him? Only one of them carries any medicine, the rest are all nutrition solutions. This is because any medicine we give him, no matter what kind, is thousands of times more effective on him than it should be, and is actively recovering his body so fast, if we don't feed him with these nutrition solutions, he will literally starve to death.

"I have a theory about why this is so, but I can't think of a way to prove the theory yet. You see, when we administer medicine, any medicine, not all of it is being used. If we're really lucky, maybe a few percent of the medicine will be absorbed and properly work as intended while the rest never makes it to the targeted area, or is even excreted from the body as waste. Yet, based on my study of the patient, I believe that regardless of what kind of medicine we administer, it is being used up to 100% of its capacity!"

The doctor had excitement and fervor in his eyes, but this was much less impressive to the rep than the back tattoo. While the truth of the matter was that the Lotus was using any and all ingredients absorbed by Lex to best help him recover, going even beyond the 100% theoretical efficiency of the medicine, the rep had a completely different understanding of the situation.

"This is a gap in your knowledge," the rep patiently explained to the doctor. "You've focused your study on general medicine, and so have a limited understanding of the various cultivation techniques. Your patient is clearly a body cultivator, there is nothing unusual about him having elevated recovery and absorption. Was there anything else you meant to report?"

The doctor naturally understood the advantages of body cultivation, and knew this went beyond that, but could not argue with the rep.

"The final thing is about the patient's cultivation. Considering the state of his body, I thought it would collapse, but if not, the best should have been him being able to keep his cultivation. However, based on his absorption rate of Qi, and the state of his body, I estimate that by the time he recovers completely, he will have reached the peak of Qi training. I and many others from the camp can verify that he was not at that level at the time he entered the tunnels."

"Alright," the rep replied impassively, giving nothing of his thoughts away. "If that's everything, I'll be taking him back to the academy now."

With his tasks completed, the academy representative returned, flying out of the forest and over the ongoing war. While he was flying though, he started to write a letter from his personal terminal to Vernan - the crazy man responsible for Lex's insane tests.

'I think I found an interesting one for you,' he wrote, not knowing that Vernan had long been paying attention to Lex.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 272: Oh Honey

Lex woke up feeling extremely well rested. There was no stiffness in his body, no bed sores and if anything, he felt thoroughly reinvigorated. He drowsily picked himself up and stretched while letting out a massive yawn that forced him to close his eyes.

When he was done stretching, he wiped the accumulated sleep dust from his eyes. He just felt like he just woke up from the best nap of his life. He looked at his fair, spotless hands and felt there was something strange about them. It took him a moment to realize he had no hair on his arm. Had he waxed recently?

Just as he tried to recall, memories of what he had last experienced came flooding back. The emotions he felt from being boiled in lava were still locked away, so after impassively going over everything, Lex focused on the next important thing. He checked how much energy he had managed to accumulate after all that hassle, and was pleasantly surprised to discover a huge 2.5% accumulation!

The accumulation was not bad at all, but in the process he had also lost a lot. The Heavy Harley was gone, the Fancy Monocle... that one really hurt Lex. More than once the monocle had directly saved his life, and it had helped him tremendously otherwise as well. In fact, had it not been for the monocle, he would have never found the tunnel leading to the spirit well in the first place.

He would need to figure out some other way to detect or scan things. He had also lost basically every other personal item that he had. The expensive inks he bought for using arrays...

Just as Lex was wallowing in the losses he suffered, the white curtain around his bed was pulled aside and a familiar, smiling face welcomed Lex.

"Good morning sleepy head. I know I asked to see you again, but you can see me too without coming in as a patient," said Honey, the nurse that took care of Lex the last time as well.

"I'll keep that in mind for next time," Lex said with a smile, but his hoarse voice ruined the effect he was trying to create.

Honey giggled as she approached Lex and started giving him a check up.

"You've recovered quite well. I thought it would take months, at least, but it's barely been a few weeks and you're as good as new."

"A few weeks?" Lex asked, suddenly realizing he had no idea how much time had passed.

Honey stuck out her tongue, realizing she had made a mistake, but then slowly explained Lex's condition on arrival, the treatment he received and how long it had been.

Throughout the course of treatment Lex was kept unconscious on purpose to relieve him from the pain he would feel during the healing process.

Many things that Honey told Lex surprised him. Learning the true condition of his body surprised him, because honestly, he genuinely didn't feel like he was on the verge of death like everyone kept claiming. This matter went beyond not being able to feel pain because of lost nerve endings. As a cultivator, he had an inherent understanding of his body and the seriousness of his wounds.

He could only attribute the situation to how his body was a combination of his body, spirit and soul. He was much more resilient than it seemed.

The matter that shocked him most, however, was how quickly he healed. This was contrary to his understanding of his body, and genuinely confused him. He didn't even need to ask to know that it wasn't the system that helped him for that was not how the system worked.

But, even with his relatively quick healing, when he calculated the amount of time he had spent, Lex could not help but let out an audible sigh.

Honey, who was doing her best to give Lex her cheeriest smile and keep his mood positive, couldn't help but look at Lex with compassion. She could not even imagine what he must have gone through to get so gravely wounded. Surely he also lost a few partners in the endeavor. It must have been tough.

She squeezed his hand a bit and warmly said, "hey, what's with the sad look? I haven't even told you the best part yet. Apparently, you've accrued quite a reward. I was told to let you know not to break through the Foundation realm before you see Instructor Vernan - he has something for you that should help with your breakthrough."

"Huh?" Lex was confused by what she said until he paid attention to his cultivation. His body currently contained 76 Qi, which was almost the limit of the 7th level of Qi training. But, more importantly, he did not feel the usual bloatedness that came with filling his body with the maximum amount of Qi he could hold. Had his cultivation somehow... grown? Did he really grow stronger by getting beaten up? Was he going to have to walk down the path of a masochist?

Lex pushed away all his thoughts, he was not thinking clearly, and turned his attention to Honey.

"So what's my situation now? Am I good to go?"

"Almost. Your results are all clear, and you've almost completely healed, but we'll keep you under observation till tomorrow. After that, you're good to go. Why? Is there anywhere you need to be?"

"I was thinking we could go and grab some lunch, and I could show you what I'm like when I'm not a patient."

"Hah!" Honey laughed loudly, despite trying to control herself. "My time off work is very precious, Mr. Lex. You're going to have to try harder than that if you want to see me off work. Although, if you're hungry, I'll get someone to bring you some food."

Lex smiled weakly. He was not actually trying to ask Honey out, as nice as she was, for he was too preoccupied with working to get back to the Inn. A part of him was also sure that Honey wasn't actually interested in him, but just had a friendly personality.

Whatever it was, after conversing a little more, she left him to go check on his other patients and Lex properly organized his thoughts while feasting on... he had no idea what he was eating, but it was some kind of soup.

After some deduction, Lex only came to one conclusion about why his body had healed so quickly.

"Hey Lotus," he said, once again lightly tapping his tattoo. "Did you speed up my body's reconstruction?"

"Yes, Mr. Innkeeper. I sensed that you were reconstructing your body, and so I helped a little. I sensed that the makeup of your body was too... wasteful, and too inefficient, so I made some alterations. There was a special alloy in the tunnel that was extremely malleable, and very good at conducting spiritual energy, so I remade your meridians with that. Previously, your meridians were made from some carbon-based material which was very fragile. I sensed the remains of a special lense that had great optical features, so I integrated that into your left eye. There was some metal..."

The Lotus very excitedly told Lex all the alterations it made to his body, like a child showing a parent some macaroni art. In its opinion, it was only flexing its natural instincts to create just a bit, for compared to what its abilities would grow into, it truly was unskilled at the moment. However, unskilled as it was, it had completely altered the makeup on a living being without affecting its life, or abilities in any negative way whatsoever. Lex had no idea if the reason all the Lotus' alterations were successful was because of the unique state of his body, or because it was just that skilled, but his gut feeling told him it was the latter.

He refrained from actually letting the Lotus know that it had helped heal Lex instead of helping him 'reconstruct' his body, as it assumed he was doing. He only commended it on a job well done before he turned his attention to other matters.

Internally, he was both horrified and amazed. As long as he had the Lotus with him in the future, any time he got injured, he could take its aid in healing him. He just had to keep in mind that, even with the Lotus' help, he could not heal overnight as it had still taken him weeks to recover this time. Though, that was the extent he planned on relying on the Lotus, for he did not know if extensive alterations to his body had adverse effects.

Next, he turned his attention towards the Inn. With 2.5% energy, he could now implement some of the changes he had planned earlier that would help him in the long run. He also had to plan for his latest two employees, the sword and the lich.

In the time Lex was unconscious, the sword had also managed to complete its trial and became an employee, though based on its condition, Lex could surmise that it had barely done so.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 273: Security

A lot of time had passed with Lex unconscious and it was fortunate that so far that the Raskals had not caused any trouble, but Lex no longer wanted to leave things to chance. With enough energy, as well as 2,845,000 MP due to his income of nearly 243,000 MP from all the guests entering due to the gaming tournament, he was ready to implement some changes.

Firstly, he finally put to use the Security room he received as a quest reward for exposing the Devil's plot to plant trackers on his various guests. Unlike the private rooms he could give to his workers, the Security room required a physical location. To keep it private and away from his guests, he put down the security room beside the greenhouse, and then immediately spent 500,000 MP on upgrading the room to level 5, one level above his regular authority.

The security room had a few vital functions, and the upgrades not only strengthened them but also added a few new ones.

First and foremost, the Security room could immediately detect anyone who had any malicious intent not only towards the Inn or its staff, but towards other guests as well. How the Security room detected them was beyond Lex's understanding, but after identifying a threat, the security room could perform a very basic form of the scan function to let security best decide how to deal with the threat.

Secondly, just by existing, the Security room allowed any staff registered as guards to directly communicate with one another across the Inn seamlessly. This made it much easier to coordinate than having Mary pass out instructions to each one of them.

Thirdly, the additional upgrade Lex got allowed his guards to teleport to the location of another guard quickly. Once again, it was a watered-down version of Lex's own teleportation abilities, but it was good enough.

Fourthly, having the Security room made various penalties available to Lex, as well as to his guards. Misconduct by a guest towards other guests or staff could allow them to now issue a temporary or permanent ban from entering the Inn. Believe it or not, this was the first time Lex was getting this ability.

Fifth, and perhaps what Lex cared about most right now, the Security room could track associates for offenders, regardless of whether the associates were at the Inn at the time of the offense or not. This

meant that as soon as someone related to the Raskal attack entered the Inn, the Security room would alert the guards as well as Lex.

Finally, the Security room gave all the guards some basic strength and defense buffs, as well as some special equipment and uniforms.

As Gerard was the head of Security, Lex let him pick how many workers he wanted to hire for the position, and gave him the option of selecting existing employees or hiring/creating new ones.

Gerard ended up picking someone named Chad to be his deputy, and Lex used all the strength he could to avoid cracking up at that.

Gerard immediately began to work, as it surprised Lex to learn that there were well over 20 guests with malicious intent towards the Inn staying there immediately. However, they kept it to their intent and did not take any action - for now. After looking into it, Lex let out a defeated sigh. 19 of the 20 guests were thinking of urinating in the Lazy river, but as soon as they even considered it, they felt intense danger. It seemed, for certain things, the system did not need instruction to prevent.

Lex paused for a second, as it suddenly occurred to him that sometimes the system exhibited behavior outside of its usual crankiness, or insulting him. He was reminded of the time the Galactic Turtle was automatically hired - even though he was leading up to that, anyway. Preventing public urination was also good, but considering all the rules it put in place for Lex, something like giving guests a threatening feeling should not have been possible. It was something to think about. He already had various suspicions towards the system - he could not outright call it evil or malevolent since it was helping him out a lot technically, but he didn't quite believe it had no purpose either.

This thought only bothered him for a second, for this was yet again another thing he could do nothing about with his current strength. It was just something to remember for now.

Then, using his advanced authority, he purchased a building that he technically hadn't gained access to yet - the Library. Sustaining the Library would be a huge drain on his energy, but fortunately Lex was not planning on using most of its features, which saved him a lot of energy.

The Library was a monumentally important building at the Inn, for when guests from around the universe stayed, providing entertainment or distractions was crucial. Its importance was proportional to

its size, as it had taken the shape of a massive castle, similar in design to the Red Fort in India, connected to Main street by a diverging road.

The majesty of the building and the intricacy of the artwork spoke volumes about the importance it was given. It was not an invisible pedestal of importance that the Inn gave to the preservation and impartation of knowledge, but a structure too glorious for even kings.

The Library, when it was operational, required a librarian - for which there would be stringent requirements - as well as knowledge on topics far and wide. Lex did not think for even a moment that he had even 1% of the knowledge required to open the library.

He did, however, have a historian. A single branch of the Library would be open, and would contain the history of the various planets and star systems connected to the Inn.

The purpose of opening a library, for Lex, was twofold. Firstly, the commonly known history of each planet would be openly available for any of his guests to peruse - after Anita filled it in, of course. Secondly, while Anita had been stuck interviewing guests and staff to learn various histories so far, now she had a special privilege. Following certain rules of noninterference and maintaining anonymity, she could travel to the various planets connected to the Inn! This would be much more helpful in recording down the history of the planets than interviewing a few select guests.

But, as a pregnant woman, Lex had no intention of sending her around the universe to conduct interviews. She could just summon her undead and send them on her behalf - it was all the same. Not to mention, he had already seen the kind of undead she summoned. No one would ever be able to determine the truth of their nature just by looking at them.

Next, it was time for Qawain. He was to be a sword instructor. Guests could hire him for guidance in helping them learn special techniques, figuring out their flaws, or just pointing them in the correct direction for exponential growth. Of course, while his services could be paid for, it was completely at his own discretion. Not only were his services the most expensive to acquire, a guest had to earn Qawain's approval before he could even consider spending his money.

Unlike his wife, who had a location provided by the system, there was no integrated swordsman room or anything of the sort ready for deployment. So, after having Mary consult the sword itself, Lex created a very... dramatic spot for Qawain's dojo.

A sword slash cut vertically across the entire body of Midnight mountain was formed, leaving behind a dark and narrow, yet prominent corridor. The corridor, imbued with some of Qawain's own sword intent, led deep into the mountain itself, where it opened up into a hall seemingly carved directly into the mountain rock.

These were some of the more normal things Lex did with his authority. Next were the few things that would really take advantage of his increased authority as well as energy.

He disabled random teleportation of guests, and made sure all new guests arrived at the front gates, as far as they may be from all the other main buildings. Then, he spent an entire 1% of the energy on upgrading the formation he placed here during the assault of the Raskals that prevented anyone from leaving. Now, not only was the formation much sturdier, it could selectively let people enter or exit as well as obtained a suppression function. This may seem a simple enough use for an entire 1% of the energy it would require for Lex to travel back from another realm, but that just spoke to the new strength of the formation. He doubted even Qawain could damage it now.

Just as he was feeling proud of his work, and was about to turn his attention elsewhere, Mary alerted him to a very serious issue one of his guests was having.

The guest was a proud centaur from Nibiru called F'ther Blaze and when Lex scanned him, he saw in his eyes a look of a man on the verge of death.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 274: A deal with the devil

Lex observed the centaur for a moment, for he had yet to see one before. He fit the build of every cartoon or animation of a centaur he had ever seen, except that he never realized how big they would end up being.

F'ther Blaze had long, red hair falling down his human back - their fiery color perhaps the inspiration for the Blaze in his name. The centaur, of course, could not see Lex, as he had just made his complaint to his personal assistant and was waiting for a response.

"What's the issue?" Lex asked as he inspected the guest. His hands were clenched tight and his jaw was squeezing hard, showing the veins running down his neck.

"The guest... needs to... use the restroom, but the toilet... is designed for humans..." Mary could not look Lex in the eyes as she gave her report, and Lex was not drinking anything but he felt like he just sprayed out something, anyway.

Remembering the deathly look in the centaurs' eyes, Lex felt a tide of sympathy for the guest and quickly looked at the system and found an upgrade for his toilets! For a measly 4000 MP, he bought an upgrade for all his toilets so that they would automatically adjust themselves according to the guest that rented the room or wanted to use them!

Too embarrassed to focus on the topic any longer, Lex didn't ask Mary why they'd never run into a situation like this before. If he had, the answer would have been very predictable. As cultivators grew in strength, their body's ability to absorb and process food - or anything else absorbed - grew to levels where they hardly needed to relieve themselves anymore. However, certain races, such as centaurs, had a more complex biological structure and, well, long story short, their need for restrooms would never disappear.

With the matter taken care of, Lex put away his thoughts about the Inn, and finally feeling no anxiety over security for the Inn, and being safe himself, felt himself relax in a way he hadn't in a long time. Originally, he was planning on cultivating a bit, but he decided to sleep instead. It wasn't the best idea to cultivate in public places, anyway.

The following day he was discharged, and after some friendly banter with Honey, he finally left. He only had a few things on his agenda for the day and finding out about his so-called 'reward' was first on the list.

He had forgotten about how massive the academy was, and once again, taking public transport that took forever was starting to annoy him after the novelty wore off. There had to be a better way to get around.

When he reached his destination, he walked into an office building and towards Instructor Vernan's room. During his time at the academy, he had learnt a lot about the 'special forces' Vernan had once told him about, and had learnt about Vernan as well.

The crystal realm was anything but simple, and the Hum Nation, representing one of the 7 major races of the realm, was not so simple either. The division of power was also complicated, and while as a whole the entire nation was focused on warring with the Kraven, maintaining that cohesion was also a monumental task.

While the royal family, other noble families, national and county level armies and a plethora of private entities had established a complicated and interlinked power distribution, there was only 1 entity focused on keeping the peace within the nation itself: the academy.

It may seem unusual for an educational institute to take care of policing a nation, the truth of the matter was the academy was much more than an educational facility. The most direct example was that the academy directly took in all survivors from Gristol to provide them basic amenities and a new direction in life.

On surface level, it may seem like the academy was using these people with nothing to lose for all their worth, but an observation at a deeper level would note that people who went through such deeply traumatic experiences would, to a degree, become unstable themselves. By bringing them to the academy, they were put into a controlled environment where not only could they get medical and psychological help, the academy would help them cope by keeping them incredibly busy! If they were too busy to think, they were too busy to wallow and regret.

Similarly, the academy took care of numerous issues plaguing the nation that weren't directly related to the Kraven, and somehow, in the process of dealing with them, did not forget to propagate their narrative about the war. These were not things anyone told Lex, these were conclusions he made on his own. This was because the 'special forces' designation was a general term, and both the military and the academy had their own special forces that dealt with various issues.

Lex naturally did not know that Vernan had already pegged Lex to enter the special operations group called Red Hands. In his opinion, Vernan wanted to guide Lex into the kind of special forces that would deal with high risk human targets within the nation. In a way, Lex's evaluation of what Vernan wanted was actually safer than what was actually planned.

Still, Lex had no intentions of getting dragged by the maniac into his schemes. He just wanted the reward, and that's it.

Putting on his passive, emotionless face, Lex knocked on Vernan's door and entered when he heard an excited 'come in'.

The office looked... quite mundane, very unsuited for the unstable man who occupied it. Steading comfortably behind a desk, Vernan was holding a physical file with the name Lex printed out in bold in one corner.

Other than Vernan's immediate surroundings, the office looked too neat and clean. It was to the point where Lex could not detect any dust in the room, regardless of what surface he looked at. Immediately, he got the impression that this office was almost never used, and was more of a staging area.

Not bothering to say anything, he stood there silently until the man who was posing became impatient. He put down the file and acted surprised to see who had come into his room.

"Oh you, I remember you. You're the kid whose assessment started in Fernain village."

Ignoring his comment, Lex said, "I was told to come see you for some reward."

"Reward? Oh wait, don't tell me, were you the kid who, while in the Qi training realm, surrounded by Golden core and Nascent cultivators, found a Spirit well, went underground to locate it, marked the location and then returned to camp while saving a higher leveled cultivator?"

Lex continued to look at the man impassively, and did not respond to him in any way. The more you reacted to people like this, the more you would encourage their behavior.

Vernan, despite his original script, chuckled and threw the file away. He stopped acting, for he wasn't too good at it anyway, and looked at Lex in the eyes. Since Lex had been in the academy for so long, his psychological evaluation had been updated, and Vernan now knew exactly how he should deal with Lex. Leading him by the nose would only cause him to resist, in which case...

"You have a talent for survival, kid. Even more than I expected. And you have drive, you have ambition. I don't know if it's revenge against the Kraven you're after, or something else. But the way you forced yourself to work in your first month here, I know you're after something. As it so happens, so am I.

"So let's not beat around the bush, kid, let's just get down to it. Tell me what you want, what you need. The assessment program in the academy is focused on squeezing out the potential of average students, but for people like you, who have the drive to squeeze out their own potential, it's just a distraction.

That's where people like me come in. I can change your classes, change your designation, do whatever I want, as long as it furthers your cause. So don't be shy, let's talk like adults, kid."

Despite his resolution to not give in to Vernan's antics, the bait he threw was too tempting. If Lex could really choose his own classes, and his own direction for growth, it would help him tremendously. But, that was not enough to get Lex to lower his guard. He would not bet his life away to play into someone else's hands.

"And what do you get from that?" he asked, looking Vernan in the eyes.

"What do I get? Kid, you have tremendous potential, but right now, you're not even qualified to even dream of being useful to me. So, I want to help you grow. To nurture you. To strengthen you into the finest blade and the strongest shield. Because what I want is not something as simple as killing Kraven, we have soldiers for that kind of stuff. I want to create a living nightmare that will haunt the Kraven from their dreams to their reality! So don't worry about me, kid. As long as you keep showing the potential to grow more, then all I want from you... is to keep on growing."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 275: Sometimes, size matters

"Very eloquent way of avoiding the answer," Lex said, not letting his thoughts show. Of course, internally, he had already decided. Whatever long-term goals Vernan had meant nothing to Lex, for if everything went according to plan, he would be long gone by then.

This was because there was one very important detail involved in this transaction that was not mentioned, because it was considered common knowledge in the crystal realm.

Since everyone, at least in the academy, was a cultivator, they had a much longer average life expectancy than humans from Earth. The average academy graduate was a golden core cultivator, who normally had a life expectancy of around 250 years. Keeping that in mind, the average student spent well over 15 years in the academy before they graduated - since the course was much larger than then.

Vernan paused, then smiled. The more wary Lex was, the more Vernan liked him.

"The ideal situation would be for you to join the army," Vernan said finally. "But I can see that you don't like being forced, which is fine. My ultimate goal is to create as many experts at the highest level as possible, so long as they help the nation. Even indirect help from a single immortal is often worth more than a million Nascent cultivators efforts."

Lex did not immediately reply, and furrowed his brows as if he was considering something difficult. Internally, though, he was already planning on what classes he wanted to take. Vernan too was gloating in his mind for as far as he was concerned, his only objective right now was to have Lex drop his guard and agree to him once. So long as a precedent was established, getting Lex to follow along in the future would be much easier. His true purpose would be fulfilled then.

Eventually, Lex relented and decided not to keep the matter hanging too long.

"Fine, that is acceptable," was all he said before they began hashing out the details. Lex quickly thought of what his priorities were. He needed to accumulate energy, but to be able to go around exploring the first thing he needed was to increase his survivability. For that, he needed to get stronger.

He also focused on receiving more combat training, leadership skills, business management, learning more about the crystal realm and learning more about the Kraven in particular.

As much as he wanted to take even more subjects, such as a higher level array class, he ended up having to refrain for one very important reason.

Since he was taking more specialized classes, his basic academy covered allowance was no longer enough. He needed to pay some kind of tuition!

Lex had no way of paying for his classes with money, for he barely had any. Fortunately, during the expedition, he ended up accumulating some academy credit. He could pay for classes with his credits, but the more classes he took, the quicker he would run out of those credits. So now, other than taking classes, he had to think of ways to either make a lot of money, or gather more credit.

Those were all issues for another day, however, as at least during this next round of classes, Lex's tuition was covered.

After that was complete, they discussed Lex's reward. For all of Lex's contributions, other than just the academy credit, he received some of the spirit water as well. Currently, it would be poisonous to Lex, but if he absorbed it, the exact moment he broke through to the Foundation realm, it would boost his cultivation by a large margin.

Lex collected the small, sealed container with the spirit water and finally was free to return. He sent Amelia, his only close friend at the academy, a message from a new PT he got before he got on public transport and returned to his apartment.

He did not focus on how depressingly bare the apartment was, considering all his belongings were lost or burnt. Lex took a shower and then sat down on his bed. He had only one thing left on his agenda for today: cultivation.

Without wasting any time, Lex began cultivating because he was eager to know what his new limit was. But as the time started to pass, and from an hour it went to two, and from two to four, Lex never stopped cultivating. Not only was Lex absorbing Qi seamlessly, he even felt, to a degree, that controlling it within his body had become easier.

For a moment, around the time he was absorbing his 85th strand of Qi, he became confused. Something was off. Even if his cultivation grew a little, it should not have grown so much.

In Qi training, the goal was to absorb Qi slowly into the body, and start getting the body accustomed to the increased amount of Qi. This was a slow process. Even his meridians, the network through which Qi traveled within Lex's body, were being subject to spiritual energy for the first time, and so were supposed to be sensitive and could not...

Suddenly, he remembered what the Lotus told him. It had thought his meridians were too fragile, and so remade them with the alloy it found in the tunnel where Lex had been. While the Lotus had not been specific, Lex knew exactly what alloy it was talking about.

An adolescent Druk strengthened its body by absorbing various ores, but an adult Druk refined them into a special alloy that not only strengthened its body immeasurably, it was an excellent conductor for spirit energy - something they severely needed since having their body covered in metal made it difficult for them to sense the energy in the first place.

If that alloy had been used to reforge his meridians... it seemed, for all intents and purposes, Lex had already surpassed the Qi training realm, and all that was required now was for him to take the official steps.

Still, not taking any risks, Lex continued to cultivate at a stable, measured pace. If things continued at this rate then he would be in the Foundation realm by morning.

Crystal realm, The academy, Perleen Building

On the top floor of the massive skyscraper, a chaotic party was taking place. There was a band playing live music, hundreds of students dancing, a fighting arena right in the center of the dance floor and hundreds of flying Thimble fairies, not only absorbing the ever present glare of the Sol birds, but replacing them with a mellow, auburn light.

The party was the subject of desire for tens of thousands of students, but the host was sitting in a private room, away from all the noise, watching the festivities through a camera. She was a young girl, maybe 17 or 18 years in age, with extremely prominent features.

While she had long hair, on the right side she had shaved all her hair off, revealing a tattoo of a wolf, curled behind her ear. She had a couple of piercings on the left side of her lip, a scar that ran across her jaw and down her neck, as well as clear green eyes.

Were she not radiating charisma and confidence, some may have considered her appearance too much. As things were, however, the worst thing one could possibly say about her appearance was that she only captivated them for a short while.

That, too, was only because anyone who got caught staring at her would usually have their faces bashed in - by her.

"Cwenhild, I heard some interesting news," said one of the dozens of followers she had. "It seems another one of your brothers has joined the academy."

Cwenhild gagged, as if to demonstrate what she thought about that. Cwenhild Cornelliuss could not care less about her many siblings even if she actively tried. While the whole nation swooned after her father, she actively hated him and she was not subtle about her feelings.

In fact, she had never even met the man.

"That's not the part that's interesting. What's interesting is... no one knows anything about his past, except that he's a war veteran and survivor of a Kraven invasion, facing off even immortals. Oh and, somehow, he managed to drop his last name..."

Before the follower could even continue, he felt himself lifted into the air.

"Who is he? Where is he? HOW DID HE DO IT?" Cwenhild screamed, not in anger, but excitement!

There was nothing of her usual dark demeanor, only the giddy excitement of a child about to open some presents. It had been a lifelong dream of hers to take up her mothers name instead of her fathers, but even she dared not drop the name, for fear of the consequences.

Outside the Vegus Star System, on a Juggernaut ship

He was ahead of schedule, but that was the way he liked it. With the Jotun Empire claiming control over all three invaded Vegus planets, he could now turn his attention to his new task. Of course, he did not leave the planets unattended. Between soldiers, administrators, workers, educators and more, Ragnar had left some 30 billion humans behind to expand their presence and integrate the Vegus natives into their empire.

But that was all in the past now. His vision turned to the Command Carrier, the forward operating base for Jotun expeditions, and the ship that he commanded. The vessel was so large that it had to remain outside the star system, at a safe distance, lest it affect the gravity of the system and destroy the delicate equilibrium.

How would one even begin to describe the size of this vessel that he used to travel across and even between galaxies? A comparison could be made with planets. The surface area of the planet Earth was around 197 million square miles (510 million square kilometers) but just the ship hanger of this blimp shaped vessel, where smaller space ships such as the Juggernaut ships were parked, was bigger than that.

Perhaps another comparison could be made by comparing it to a star. If the command carrier crashed head on with the sun, it would continue to move, almost entirely undamaged, with the star being completely decimated.

To explain the size and strength of this vessel... to say it was beyond the comprehension of mortals was enough. How many barren star systems had been mined dry to make this vessel, even Ragnar did not know. For why would he care? This was just one of many command carriers owned by the Empire.

On the battlefield he was heading to, he would probably see more of them.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 276: A little bit

As the Juggernaut vessel docked into the command carrier, Ragnar thought back to his most recent visit to the Inn. He just learnt that the Innkeeper was gone and, for the first time, felt a little curious what the Innkeeper did when he was away. Was he opening up another Inn? Or maybe he was dealing with a few problems. Well it was a pity that they could not meet, but there was always next time.

But perhaps it was for the best that Lex was not there for Ragnar's last visit. Otherwise he would have drowned in a sea of sorrow for not increasing the price of the golden keys, even just a little more than their cost price. After all, Ragnar just bought 300 million keys to distribute among some of the important personnel on his command carrier. After all, in a war zone, having a safe place to retreat to was invaluable.

Lex cultivated all night long and, just as he suspected, reached 99 Qi seamlessly. 99 Qi strands was the absolute limit of Qi training. There was no such concept as Lex absorbing more Qi strands than normal just because his body could sustain the pressure - mainly because it was redundant. Whether it was 100,

200 or even a million strands of Qi, individual strands of Qi could do nothing against spirit energy in its natural state.

Which is why, the process for the breakthrough to the Foundation realm began at the 100th strand of Qi. Once it was absorbed, under the careful guidance of one's cultivation technique, the remaining 99 strands would blanket it, until the strands began to merge, and instead of Qi strands, they would form a spiritual energy stream.

Once the stream was formed was when the actual process of the breakthrough would begin, as the single stream would attract more and more spiritual energy.

One might think that, since only a short while ago, even a moderately high concentration of spiritual energy was poisonous, absorbing so much energy would be bad for the cultivator. This would make sense if that's all there was to it. It was important to remember that cultivation and cultivation techniques were actually quite complicated, and a description of the behavior of Qi or spiritual energy was just the surface most layer of what was actually happening.

So, the spiritual energy a cultivator would begin to absorb after forming an energy stream was not absorbed to increase cultivation, but to fuel the change that took place as a cultivator entered the Foundation realm. In simple words, the cultivator would be undergoing a process of literally reaching a higher realm of existence, which would be fueled by the energy absorbed.

This is also why Lex was given spirit water for his breakthrough. By drinking it at the time of his breakthrough, the conversion would be more thorough and provide him with long lasting benefits. For Lex in particular, the conversion would be much greater, since it was affecting more than just his spirit.

It was for that reason that he was taking so long to absorb the last strand. But, after making sure he was in peak condition for the third time, and making sure none of the Qi he absorbed was acting volatile, he absorbed the last strand of Qi.

Everything that followed seemed to happen on autopilot. The Qi was guided to his chest, and the rest of the strands that were spread throughout his body started to move towards it on their own. The Qi strands began to join together and, in the smoothest way possible, fused to form a stream of spiritual energy, flowing throughout Lex's body.

It was an endless stream, with no beginning and end, and flowed through Lex like an endless loop. Spiritual energy ebbed and flowed into the meridian branches leading to Lex's extremities.

Lex almost lost himself in the ecstasy of spirit energy filling his entire body, but somehow managed to remember to drink the spirit water. That's when the hurricane began.

Normally, the absorption process of spirit energy would be slow and measured, since the attracting force was exuded by the limited energy within the cultivator's body. But, fueled by the spirit water that Lex drank, the pull was turned from a gentle breeze to a natural calamity.

The flow of spiritual energy in Lex's entire building was affected, and many people had to stop cultivating because the energy had gone into a frenzy!

Lex could feel every inch of his body slowly getting stronger, somehow being enhanced into something... beyond what he already was. This was also true for his meridians, which were already incredibly resilient, made from the special alloy as they were.

He felt his consciousness being altered, and amidst the bizarre sensations that flooded his body, he felt more alive than he had ever been. Considering the fact that life was a product of a soul, and that his soul was literally becoming stronger, his feeling was technically true.

The breakthrough, even as bombastic as it was, would not last too long and then it would be time for him to get accustomed to his new realm. But fate had different plans.

Amelia finally checked her message after one of her classes and was ecstatic to learn about Lex's return. She made her way to his apartment to catch up and ask him all about his trip. Since she was coming directly after a class she was dressed quite normally, but someone familiar with her may notice a light sparkle around her eyes and a gentle blush on her cheeks, an unusual addition. She was wearing something called Fantasy skin, the equivalent of make up in this realm.

She noticed a particularly eye-catching girl enter the building before her, with beautiful brown hair and captivating green eyes. Amelia only caught a glimpse of her, so she did not think much of it, but when she reached Lex's floor, she saw the girl again.

The girl was not alone, and was discussing the unusual behavior of spirit energy nearby with one of her two followers. When Amelia entered the floor, she and that girl exchanged glances for a moment, before looking away again. Neither of them were interested in the other, as they were not in the habit of snooping on random passersby.

But, when they both stopped in front of Lex's door, they realized they had the same destination.

Amelia froze, for she did not recognize this girl, but she knew all of Lex's acquaintances well. Since he was such a focused and dedicated worker, he barely socialized with anyone other than her and her friends at the academy, so who was this? A hundred different thoughts ran through her head, of which 99 were some form of girlfriend.

Cwenhild, on the other hand, deeply analyzed Amelia quite openly. She recognized the Fantasy skin, as well as the fact that Amelia was quite an amateur in the field based on the way she used it. She checked her cultivation, her demeanor, her appearance and everything else before she snorted mentally. As a daughter of Cornelius, she had lived her whole life surrounded by people trying to get close to her because of her father. As such, she was extremely skilled in detecting people who had such intentions, and currently, Amelia was ticking a lot of boxes.

"Hello, my name is Cwenhild. I'm looking for Lex, is this his apartment?" she asked, politely. This was absolutely not Cwenhild's normal attitude, but since she was coming to see Lex, a person who had pulled off something even she could not, she humbled herself a little.

"Hi, I'm Amelia, Lex's friend. Yeah, this is his apartment. How do you know him?"

"I have some business with Lex. He has an... impressive record."

Amelia felt this girl was strange and clearly had some kind of agenda. She looked a little younger than Amelia, but her piercings and tattoos screamed that she was bolder than her age would predict.

Deciding to simply nod, Amelia knocked on Lex's door, which was followed by an awkward silence where no one responded.

"Maybe he's in the restroom," Cwenhild commented as she stayed put, not indicating any sign of wanting to move. Naturally, if their cultivation was high enough, they would be able to detect that the spirit energy was being pulled into his room and deduce that he was having a breakthrough. As things were, they could only sense its odd behavior, not the direction of its flow.

And so the two girls waited outside Lex's room, staring at one another.

"And how do you know Lex?" Cwenhild finally asked as well, trying to fill the silence. Her two followers maintained silence as if their only job was to stand guard.

"It was quite funny actually, we met due to a misunderstanding," Amelie said with a smile, as she thought back to the moment Lex sat beside her for the first time. She was sure he was a shameless stalker. Lost in memory, she didn't even realize as she began to regale Cwenhild with her story, filling in the blanks with her own misunderstandings and commentary.

Did it seem like she was trying to show off the depth of her friendship with Lex to a potential rival? A little bit.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 277: The food has arrived

Lex's breakthrough took around 20 minutes. The moment it was completed, Lex was momentarily overwhelmed by the immense burst of information he started receiving, but quickly adapted. His senses had become infinitely more sensitive, to the point where on his skin, he could even feel the subtle vibration of the blood flowing through his veins. He could hear his own breathing like a gale and see everything in such detail that he could not comprehend it.

But the sensory overload lasted only a moment, for his brain quickly adapted, and as if he had been doing so his entire life, he started filtering out the information he didn't need subconsciously.

It was exactly for this reason as well that he immediately picked up the muffled sounds of a prolonged conversation, even through the insulated material that made his door. Carefully, he got up from the bed, remembering the time when he started cultivating and almost destroyed his own apartment due to a lack of control. He tiptoed to the door and opened the door.

He was pleasantly surprised to see Amelia, but also shocked by the overload of information he got from looking at Cwenhild. His instincts were a lot stronger now, and he picked up on a lot more than just immediate danger to himself. He could tell just by being in her proximity that she was extremely dangerous, and at the same time, that she could do absolutely nothing to him.

Likewise, Amelia, who was somewhere towards the peak of the Foundation realm, suddenly posed no threat to him at all. At the same time, he picked up a strange feeling from her, as if she were uncomfortable or nervous or something.

"Amelia, what're you doing here so late?" he asked, temporarily ignoring Cwenhild.

"I just got done with class and I saw your message, so I came to see you. The way you just showed up without sending any message first, did you get kicked out of the expedition for wooing too many seniors?"

"Not at all. My return was just too hectic to send any messages," he replied with a smile, not going into too much detail at the moment. Then he turned to Cwenhild and her two companions and said, "hi I'm Lex. I don't believe we've met."

"No, we haven't," Cwenhild said in the most polite tone she could muster, flashing Lex a smile that could cause anyone to swoon. Honestly, her relationship with her other step-siblings was horrible, so she didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with Lex. "But your reputation roars like thunder among the students, so I wanted to introduce myself to you."

Lex raised an eyebrow out of curiosity. His reputation? He hardly knew anyone here. What reputation was there to talk about? Still, he was curious about her, so he invited them in.

"Well, come on inside. I would offer you all something to drink or eat, but I don't really have much at home."

Even as he said that, he ordered some snacks to be delivered to his apartment via the dorms room service application. Amelia had been to his place before, so she knew what condition he lived in, and was not surprised but Cwenhild... well, she hid her feelings well, but internally she was a little surprised. It was a good thing she dismissed her attendants before coming in. It would not do if rumors about Lex started to spread because of her.

Even though the famous King did not care much for his children, each and everyone of his partners was from an extremely prominent family, or were themselves extremely well off. Someone living in such squalor was... unheard of. He almost had no personal belongings at all. Considering the fact that Lex was currently dressed in the academy uniform... she wondered if he even had other clothes. The uniform was expected during classes, but otherwise was not mandatory.

"Not at all," said Cwenhild, "I came over unannounced as is. How can I expect you to host me under such circumstances?"

"I am curious about what you've heard about me," said Lex as he carefully sat down. So far, he hadn't shown any indication of losing control of his strength, despite not having any time to adjust his state after his breakthrough, and he was quite proud of it.

"Instead of asking what I've heard about you, I think the question should be, what have I not heard?" she said with a light laugh.

"The stories were so outrageous, from facing an Immortal to shooting at one with a simple weapon, to the tales of your numerous feats at your latest expedition. Even if I took them with a grain of salt, or a whole fistful of it, they were too much. I had to investigate. But the school reports I found were... even more bizarre than the stories."

"I can't believe... people are actually talking about me, especially about the expedition - that literally just happened." Lex didn't know whether to feel flattered or creeped out. Who were these people talking about him, and how had his stories spread?

"Oh come now, don't be humble. You weren't the only one who was brought back from the expedition, and everyone who came back was full of praise for you. Actually, I head to the hospital first to meet you, because when I read the report on the returnees, I thought you'd still be in the hospital. Based on the pictures... I'm surprised you're awake, let alone good enough to return home."

Amelia was suddenly alarmed at hearing the mention of Lex being hospitalized, but Lex instead was intrigued about what that revealed about Cwenhild. He knew that someone would definitely report everything that had happened with him during the expedition, but being able to get access to academy records like that was no simple task. Even among school personnel, one would need relevant authority

to read files pertaining to things like this. In a situation where a Spirit well was involved, Lex imagined the authority should have been even higher.

"You've heard a lot about me, but I don't seem to know anything about you," said Lex, shifting the focus of the conversation. He didn't think a simple introduction warranted someone like her looking for him all over.

Cwenhild smiled, as if anticipating this change, and said, "What's there to say about me? My life is not nearly as interesting as yours. I'm just a simple girl, stuck under a couple of overbearing parents. That's the reason why I wanted to meet with you, in fact. Of all your achievements, dropping your family name might be the greatest of them all."

Amelia suddenly became extremely tense, as she too had heard the rumors about Lex's origins. In the time she had known him, he never brought it up, and she never asked him about his past, but it would be a lie to say she never wondered about it.

"My greatest achievement?" Lex repeated, confused. Suddenly, he felt a little offended. There was no shortage of incredibly insane things that he had done since he came to the Crystal realm. How could claiming he had no last name be a greater achievement? It was ridiculous.

Seeing that Lex continued with the facade, Cwenhild smiled.

"Well, isn't it? The rumor is, you dropped your family name because you were dissatisfied with your father. That you wanted to carve out your own legend and create your own legacy, unrelated to the Cornelius name."

Lex did not immediately make the connection between the name she mentioned and the king, for he was too bewildered by the story attached to him.

"Me? Carve out a legend?" he said, laughing. "I have no interest in legend, I am... no, wait, did you say Cornelius? As in, the royal family?"

His ignorance of the implied meaning behind Cwenhild's words did not last long, for with his increase in cultivation, his brain worked much faster.

"That's ridiculous," Lex said, laughing even harder. "How can I be connected to the royal family? I'm just a simple man, trying to survive in a chaotic world. I am not trying to create any legends, I'm just trying to live a good life. Besides, how believable is it for a member of the royal family to be randomly roaming around? I'm afraid that's one of the more ridiculous rumors you've probably heard."

"Why can't the children of the King randomly walk around?" she asked with an eyebrow raised. She was careful not to say members of the royal family, for one would need the King's actual recognition before could make that claim. "After all, I, Cwenhild Haugen Cornelius, am a daughter of the Kings and aren't I here, 'walking around' right beside you?"

Both Lex and Amelia were startled by her revelation. Lex, who had been so meticulous so far, lost control of his strength, and ripped the arm off his chair and in the silence that followed, both by the revelation and Lex's minor display of strength, there was a knock on the door. The food had arrived.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 278: Wild imagination

Lex and Amelia both were taken aback by Cwenhild's surprise, and while Lex's lapse was due to his recent breakthrough, Cwenhild saw it in a different light. King Cornelius II had done much for mankind, and was seen as a savior by the masses, but his personality was in no way temperate. He was a ruthless, coldhearted and yet focused man who lived guided by a very strict code of conduct. Unfortunately, his code of conduct did not include kindness.

In fact, he could even be extremely cruel to people who he did not see as useful or productive. His focus on pragmatism bled into every facet of his life, and while this was a huge boon for the nation, it was often a huge burden for those close to him. It was often his wives, concubines or children who suffered the most due to this. She could well imagine the kind of hate Lex probably felt for the man, based on whatever his experiences were, mostly because she herself hated him as well. This small 'flaw' in Lex's otherwise perfect facade convinced her even more that she was correct.

"Excuse me," Lex said awkwardly as he put down the broken chair handle and opened the door. He grabbed the food and turned back, but froze again. Was he really about to serve royalty... rice pudding cups?

Lex did not doubt for even a moment that Cwenhild was lying about her parentage, mostly because how crazy would you have to be to make such a claim? Back on Earth, in his youth he had traveled the world,

and he remembered strongly how ardent people who lived in monarchies were about their ruler. This was mostly because, if you dared to insult the monarchy in any way, and word got out, no one would even know how you disappeared.

Here, in the Crystal realm, he couldn't imagine things were much different. Yet Lex's feeling of awkwardness did not last long. He lacked a fundamental reverence many people felt towards the strong or in high positions, mostly because he was so used to being around so many strong people.

For example, just based on the fluctuations he could vaguely feel, he knew that Ragnar, the Jotun general, was stronger than anyone he had seen or met in the Crystal realm so far. Likewise, the Celestial bodyguard he had for a while was even stronger than Ragnar. And then, he had met multiple people even stronger than his bodyguard. This was exactly why, even though he was still vulnerable if strong cultivators used their coercion to physically restrain him - whatever that was - mentally, they could not intimidate him.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, your highness," Lex said, unsure of how he was supposed to address royalty here, "but that rumor really is just a rumor. I don't have a surname because I don't have any family in the Crystal realm. But, even if I did, for example, have any relation to the royal family, from what I understand, they wouldn't really care if I removed their name or not as long as I don't directly insult them while doing it. After all, isn't the King's motto 'I don't give a shit'? If he doesn't care, why should anyone else?"

He laid out the pudding cups on the table, along with some fruit. He froze again for a moment, recalling that he had no cutlery, nor any plates to offer his guests. He really should stalk his apartment a little more, but he was so used to not spending any time at home that it never occurred to him.

Amelia and Cwenhild, on the other hand, looked at Lex who was laying the table, his back turned to them, and felt numerous emotions well up in their hearts when he paused. The way he said he had no family in the Crystal realm seemed too sincere, and clearly this line of questioning had brought back dark memories. That, alongside his statement of the King's motto, told the story of a neglected son, severing ties after a painful loss. They filled in numerous blanks, and made up weird scenarios in their head that would explain his lacking cultivation, and why he would be in Gristol in the middle of his invasion.

Somehow, in the midst of imagining completely different scenarios, the two girls' thoughts coincided as they visualized Lex standing in the rain, alone in front of a grave with the marching hordes of the Kraven, slowly gaining land. The filial son stayed until the last moment, and as he turned his back on the grave for the last time, so too did he turn his back on the father that had failed him.

Lex, meanwhile, was chiding himself for being a bad host. His reputation as the Innkeeper would be tarnished if anyone ever found out he didn't even have a napkin to offer alongside his snacks to literal royalty.

"It's not much, but please, help yourselves," he finally said, perfectly hiding his embarrassment.

The girls helped themselves, and since the pudding cups came with their own disposable utensils, it wasn't really an issue.

"Well, if you insist it was just a rumor, then I'll believe you. Such topics are more fit for gossiping little children, anyway. Let's talk about something more practical. Have you heard of the Realm Races?"

"Not really, no."

"Considering your short time at the academy, I assumed you probably hadn't. Every few decades, the academy opens up a bunch of new Minor realms altogether and lets the students scout them out. Despite what it sounds like, it's not a tournament, and there are no prizes, but the students can keep anything they find in any of the Minor realms. Since it's usually so beneficial, many students treat it like a race, trying to go through as many of the Minor realms as possible before the event finishes.

"But, not everyone has the same objective. I am planning on participating in the Race, but with a completely different agenda. If I can subdue an entire Minor realm before the race ends, and take complete control of it, the academy will let me keep the minor realm till I graduate. Your excellent performance recently has attracted a lot of attention, and surely a lot of people will approach you to recruit you - I just wanted to be the one to make the first bid."

After that, the conversation became transactional in nature, wherein Cwenhild explained her plans to Lex briefly, and her offer to recruit him for her team during the races. There was no theoretical upper or lower limit on any team, as long as all the participants were students, but quite sensibly, Cwenhild took a quality over quantity approach.

At no point at all during the conversation did it feel like this conversation wasn't the primary reason she had approached Lex, and even Amelia began believing. In fact, Cwenhild was so well prepared, and the

detail Lex received on his offer was so extensive that if his instincts weren't telling him that she was hiding something, he would have believed it.

He didn't immediately accept her offer, and told her he would get back to her. Since the races were still some time off, she didn't mind. Once their conversation was done, she excused herself, leaving Lex and a perplexed Amelia behind.

"Don't tell me you heard those rumors too," Lex said to her, after Cwenhild left.

Looking embarrassed, she smiled weakly and said, "some people did mention it to me, seeing how much time we spent together."

Lex laughed at the absurdity of the claim, but didn't address it again, for he genuinely believed no reasonable person would actually believe the rumor. Instead, the two friends started catching up, and Lex honestly told her about the things that happened on the expedition that weren't a secret.

She was startled to learn of the seriousness of his injuries and apologized for making fun of him, but Lex didn't mind. What else were friends for if not teasing one another?

Eventually, she left and Lex was genuinely surprised that she didn't notice his breakthrough - not that he brought it up either. He spent the rest of the day meditating and cultivating, slowly getting used to his newfound strength and abilities. Tomorrow was going to be exciting, for he would go look for new techniques to use, and more importantly, he would finally start using arrays.

He also needed new weapons, so he would have to visit his old boss. He wondered if he should look for another gun, or ranged weapon basically, or go for something more traditional?

Lex was completely engrossed in his own thoughts, oblivious to the earth shattering statement that would rock the gossip columns of the nation. Well, it wasn't as much of a statement as a discovery. Cwenhild Haugen had removed the Cornelius name from her student documents at the academy, and when questioned for the reasons, or if she was afraid of any repercussions, she gave a simple reply.

"I don't give a shit about that name."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 279: Unlimited access

King Cornelius II was not an idle man. Every minute of every day was filled with purpose, and not the kind where others schedule meetings or appointments, giving you commitments that you had to keep. No, he was a man who planned his day himself, and filled each part of it with a conscious effort to fulfill his goals.

Due to this stringent discipline he maintained, he was often called callous or uncaring towards those close to him. The truth, however, was not that he was uncaring specifically towards them, but that he cared too much about his goals. The people he chose to surround himself with knew this well, and so were selective in providing him news unrelated to whatever he asked. Sometimes, however, there were situations that could not be expected and needed his comments.

For events like these, Cornelius had allocated a certain time during his regular briefings. Of course, all of this was dictated by the fact that the event did not require urgency! In case of an emergency, his assistants would obviously interrupt him.

Today, however, was not such a case, which is why, as he ate breakfast, he received various bits of news. To be clear, he wasn't receiving news while eating breakfast, but that so much time was wasted on these things, he decided to eat to fill the time. Someone like him didn't actually have any need for food. He was an immortal, after all.

"There is a bit of news about one of your children again," said Miscellaneous Assistant A. Despite having the same first name, there was no connection and Miscellaneous Assistant A and Miscellaneous Friend A.

"Ah, tell me, another disappointment or did one of them achieve something worthy of note?" the King asked.

Assistant A paused, unsure how to respond, directly shared the news. "Cwenhild, your daughter from the Haugen estate, has dropped your name from her academy identification papers and when asked about the reason, responded with, 'I don't give a shit about that name,'."

Despite himself, Cornelius chuckled, then paused. He didn't care about the name being dropped or her comment - he was a King by right and power, and had forged his position through blood and carnage. He did not feel his position threatened by such things.

No, he paused because the mention of the Haugen estate reminded him of some unpleasant memories. In his life, due to his position and power, there were few who dared accost him, and fewer still of those were humans. Cwenhilds' mother happened to be one of them, though. She was his only legal wife who he did not actively pursue.

Instead, she was the one who approached him and, very bluntly, negotiated the title of wife as well as a child from him. It was not like she was in love with him or anything. She was an extremely capable woman of influence and merely needed the title to progress her own agenda. Of course, she could not threaten him because, honestly, who could? But her influence was genuine, and she could create endless problems for him, and she was not afraid even in the slightest that he would be offended by her bluntness, or think he would harm her. In the end, she outmaneuvered him politically, gained what she wanted, and then left of her own violation. The latest news he had of her, she had expanded her influence to the realm of the Sentinels and actually controlled vast territories there!

"Next," he said placidly, unconcerned by the news.

"On the topic of your children, there is another one showing potential, just that... it is actually unconfirmed if he's actually your child."

"Oh?" Cornelius was actually genuinely surprised. "Elaborate."

Assistant A briefly detailed Lex's various achievements with a degree of accuracy that would have shocked Lex himself had he heard - especially his involvement in the battle between the Trellops. The details of his actions on that front were stated as inconclusive, but he was listed as the primary instigator of the battle. His breakthrough to the Foundation realm was not mentioned, for that had only just happened, but a medical report stating that his body seemed ready to undergo the breakthrough at any time was attached as well.

"The issue arose when he was being treated for his wounds. Having heard the rumor as well, Vernan, the local instructor, ordered his bloodline tested to see if he was related to you. The tests were inconclusive! There's something in his blood that prevents it from being traced to any relative, and he showed signs of a lineage bloodline, but that too has been hidden somehow. He, or at least someone, has taken great care to ensure the boy cannot be connected to his family in any way."

"Inconsequential," Cornelius answered, having lost interest in Lex's origin. Whether Lex was his son or not, why did it matter? "But I like his focus and initiative. Update his file. So long as his purpose is to improve himself, help him however the academy can. Reassess him in six months, and if he maintains such discipline, notify me again."

Of everything he heard, he really liked the way Lex spent all his time either working, studying or improving himself in one way or another. This kind of focus he appreciated, and wouldn't mind helping to nurture.

"While we're on the topic of your children, 12 of them have tried to breakthrough to the Earth Immortal realm since I last updated you. 11 of them failed, and their funerals were organized. The one that succeeded..."

The reports continued for only a short while longer, for the King had too many other things to do.

Lex hummed the tune to 'I feel good,' as he walked into the academy library, a ridiculous grin painting his handsome face. Despite its size, the academy had only one library that had been built directly into a mountain range. There was only limited alteration to the natural appearance of the mountain Lex was currently on, mostly to mark the entrance to the library. How far the library itself ran, and how many mountains it filled, perhaps only a few handful of people knew.

None of that mattered to Lex, for early in the morning he received a notification on his PT, and it was one that surprised him, as well as filled him with enormous glee. Due to the size of his contribution during the expedition, he was provided free access to a limited portion of the library, which included the spirit techniques section! The free access would only last for 6 months, but that was more than enough time for Lex!

Oh yes, Lex felt good because he was about to have a free hand at whatever technique he wanted for the Foundation realm!

"Good morning," Lex said in the warmest way he knew how to one of the librarians as he passed his student identification.

"I'd like to look at the list of Foundation realm techniques, please."

"That's a big list. Do you have anything specific you want?"

"I'm good for now, thanks," replied Lex, flashing a generous smile.

The librarian shrugged and led Lex to a private room, and helped him log onto the library's terminal. After that, he opened up the entire list of techniques they had available, and showed Lex how to narrow the search if he needed to.

After thanking the librarian, Lex looked at the list. A list of 130 million techniques was before him. The size of the list did not overwhelm him, but instead made him sad. He would have loved to see how helpful the Fancy monocle could have been if it had access to this library. But, it was best not to dwell too much on these things.

He went through the list randomly for a bit, to get an idea for the kinds of techniques they had. But Lex was not here without any focus. He remembered the Midnight Games well, and recalled the performance of the best few Foundation realm players. Alexander Morrison and Cara Deathsworn were two of the best performers, and he thought back well to their fighting styles. He thought back to all the kinds of techniques they deployed, and how they used them.

He had a few days before his classes began, and he was in no rush, so it was best to take his time and choose well. He thought back to the battle with the Druk that he saw. Despite being an almost indestructible beast, it was captured and incapacitated due to cleverly using its own sturdiness against it.

Lex had excellent defense, but that would be pointless if he ever got in a situation where he was captured. Then, it would only be a matter of time before his enemies defeated him. So, his first order of business was to investigate mobility and or escape techniques.

He narrowed down the list in front of him and began searching.

Origin realm, unnamed region of space

An escape ship crash landed on a planet deep in the wilderness. The pilot, a simple merchant, ran out of the ship, covered in blood, and escaped in a random direction. Mere minutes later, a small but vicious looking spaceship landed near the escape vessel, and its inhabitants investigated the escape ship.

Among the various belongings the merchant had been too panicked to bring along with him was a golden key. Along with everything else of value, the key was brought back onto the spaceship, to be brought before the captain.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 280: Midnight Madness

Nzaar, the captain of the small ship, was a Qwash. Qwash were an extremely violent species and lived as nomads throughout the universe. They were not too significant on a large scale because of their severely lacking population, since they never settled anywhere, and they didn't really focus on developing their civilization.

Despite these extremely negative aspects, they could be considered a common sight in many interstellar metropolises due to the simple fact that they were a very talented species. They had a higher growth rate in the lower cultivation levels than many other species, humans included, and were more often than not winners in most fights. And, for the fights that they lost, a lot of the time they managed to escape.

With six, sturdy legs spread across its long, muscular body, four sets of claws, two on either side of its long body, and the ability to move its internal organs as it wanted, a Qwash was a menace in a fight. Naturally, they had their own weapons designed to suit their bodies that were very different from swords and guns, and since they were not commonly seen, they were all the more dangerous.

Nzaar operated as a sort of space pirate, but not exactly. In the Origin realm, pirates were obviously a menace and extremely notorious for their danger, but they weren't inherently evil. Many of them were driven by circumstances of their own, and their target was more towards getting rich and then secretly retiring than anything else.

Rather than a pirate, Nzaar qualified as a pillager. He and his crew actively looked for undefended or weak prey and attacked just as much for resources as for the thrill of the hunt. They would take what was useful to them, and burn the rest - something a pirate would never do, or they would take along even what wasn't useful in an effort to sell it.

He was in the middle of a hunt when his crew, a mix of various species, from slimes to beasts and more, brought him a golden key. As a species that did not have eyes, Qwash had other senses to compensate, which is why he became aware of the key long before it was actually brought to him.

Unlike the humans of Earth, who only felt vague sensations of what the key could offer to them, Nzaar immediately picked up on the purpose of the key - it would teleport him to a special Minor realm. Interested, he gathered his crew to explore this new arena.

At the Midnight Inn, Gerard was currently on his regular patrols in his reliable old golf cart. The video game tournament was going well, as the semi-finals were taking place, and the Inn was more lively than it had been in a while.

Old man Will and Hera were going to finalize a trade agreement today with the Governor of Vegas Minima worth billions of dollars, and so were present with a large entourage. Jimmy and Layla were, as usual, conducting a raid towards the heinous and malevolent peacocks of the Inn.

Queen Sophia of New York was celebrating with her son, Rafael, for not only was he walking once again, he had miraculously learnt about the location of an incredible panacea on Earth that would heal him and allow him to cultivate once more. King Marlo was currently busy retrieving that medicine himself, as it was too important to leave to someone else.

The Morrison family was also gathered at the Inn in its entirety, for Alexander had come to the Inn after many months. His journey in joining the Jotun army had been anything but smooth, but his horizons had expanded rapidly. He was currently having a meeting with his family, discussing the future direction of the family.

Blane, Chen, Lily and Iris also happened to be at the Inn, discussing old times. Considering the fact that Blane and Lily had left on a spaceship, the only time they got to interact with their friends was at the Inn.

Many of the original Nacsents from Earth were here as well, drinking to forget their problems. It had been long enough for the Inn to be connected to Earth, not to mention the new Minor realm that never closed, that the number of Nascent cultivators on Earth had exploded. Of course, these new Nascent cultivators could not compare to the old ones, but suffice to say, the original 5 families had long since lost much of the power they held.

Just the Morrison family had 4 Nascent cultivators, in fact, and Marlo was obscenely strong for incomprehensible reasons making it so he was currently the strongest individual on Earth - at least on the surface.

At this particular time, there were even a few Devils at the Inn. They had claimed that they would visit the Inn regularly to recruit Earthlings, and this was their first ever visit. Pramod and Harriot Shelby Ruby Selma Jane happened to be visiting as well.

Suffice to say, through a random coincidence, the Inn was currently hosting almost all of its most regular or renown guests.

As it so happened, it was at this time that Nzaar and his small crew of 100 aliens entered the Inn. As soon as Nzaar entered the Inn, he got a sense for the size and spiritual concentration of the Inn, and immediately decided to seize the Inn. Without wasting any time, he ordered his subordinates to begin scouting the Inn for all its dangers.

Such insidious intent was obviously picked up by the Security room. Chad, the deputy head of security, was currently in the room and as soon as he got the notification, he activated the formation around the entrance of the Inn, trapping the pillagers there.

Calmly, he notified Gerard of the situation while also reporting to Mary. Mary then reported to Lex, who was currently reviewing spiritual techniques. As soon as he scanned the Inn, and understood the situation not only of the invaders but of his guests as well, he smiled.

He had been waiting for the next time the Inn was invaded, and the situation of the invasion couldn't be better even if he planned it himself. He passed along some instructions to Marry, stunning her, before he turned his attention to the Event Management panel. A small 100,000 MP later, his plan was set in motion. Just to be sure no problems occurred, Lex used his advanced authority to disable the invaders ability to return from the Inn - since they had come here with ill intentions, there was no reason to leave.

Across the Inn, the sound of a gong was heard, followed by the voice of the assistant Innkeeper.

"Dear guests, the Midnight Inn is having a spontaneous, special event for your entertainment. A small horde of invaders have entered the Inn but, under the direction of the Innkeeper, instead of being eliminated, they have been placed in a trapping formation.

"Since there are 101 invaders, 101 participants may enter the special event and take place. The participants will enter the formation and fight the invaders. Killing an enemy gives you one point, but capturing an enemy gets you two points. At the end of the event, the participant with the most points gets an award of 50,000 MP! Betting and special commemorative items for the event will be available. The event will begin in 30 minutes."

As soon as the announcements ended, projected screens showing the invaders army appeared in front of all guests. All spots for the event were filled within the first second, as numerous guests were attracted by the prize, while the others just wanted to join in the fun.

When the list of participants was concluded, the betting pool over the winner began and immediately excitement filled the air.

Many guests left the Inn to call their friends to join in the festivities. Once they returned, since the primary teleportation point was locked, they were teleported to a secondary point surrounded by various Inn guards to ensure no one with evil intentions could enter. After ensuring they were normal guests, they were allowed to go as they pleased.

Rafael watched the screen curiously. This event was titled Midnight madness, and he had no recollection of anything like that from his previous life. But then again, since he lacked all interaction with the Inn, it was not a surprise. He ordered a Saturn cake in anticipation for the event, and placed a few bets himself, though they were mostly small.

By now, Nzaar had noticed that he was trapped in a formation and was trying to figure out a way to bypass it. Little did he know, all his actions were being watched by thousands of people. In a few minutes, as it so happened, the merchant that he had been chasing finally remembered the specialness of the golden keys. He had never tried it before, but he was desperate enough to try anything, since he was too wounded to properly hide his tracks.

When he arrived at the Inn, and then learnt about what was happening, he burst out into a melodious laughter, before eventually fainting due to blood loss. Though, before fainting, he took advantage of a special feature of the event. A placed a special, individually financed bounty on Nzaar that could only be claimed if the person who killed Nzaar sent the unaware Qwash the merchants regards right before killing him. That was bound to haunt him even into the afterlife.