

Innkeeper 291

The Innkeeper

Chapter 291: Party Village

It was not just Lex who was awestruck by the massive beast, nay, dragon that had appeared in a vast, open area of the Inn. Longtime guests, and especially all the workers, had become accustomed to the unannounced expansions the Inn occasionally went through. They would all come outside and admire the buildings appearing out of thin air, and the Inn spontaneously becoming bigger. It was a good reminder of the power wielded by the mysterious Innkeeper.

But the number of guests who were seeing this for the first time outnumbered those who knew what was happening. Even after they were assured this was a normal occurrence, they were curious. They had heard about the Innkeeper, but it had been months since he was gone, and since the number of guests coming had only increased recently, most had never met him, or even actually know about him. After all, how frequently would one bump into the owner of any establishment?

So when these first timers were basking in the changes, and a massive, deadly looking dragon appeared surrounded by what looked like an army, many of them instantly froze. An air of tension and uncertainty filled the air. They were unsure if they should be screaming or running, or if this was just another occurrence at the Inn.

But the tension lasted only a moment, for Mary announced the identity of the new arrivals, and everyone disbursed. While they were only temporary guards, they were guards nonetheless and so all came under Gerards command. For all other than the Immortals and the dragon, he started passing out instructions and began explaining their plans for security during the event. While it may seem that a few thousand guards were too few to manage millions of people, when considering the average person in the universe, a golden core cultivator was already much stronger than them.

But, even if they weren't enough, Immortals were absolutely rare. Under normal circumstances, a leisure-based event such as this would not usually attract the attention of anyone at that level. The only reason, in fact, that the Midnight Games managed to attract so many high-level cultivators was because it directly interfered with the interests of various powerful entities. Even then, it was the silent deterrence of the Celestial, Lex's bodyguard at the time, that managed to dissuade the devils from causing problems. Otherwise, there was no telling what kind of mess they would have caused.

Lex finally finished admiring the dragon, and then turned his attention to his current remaining MP of 1,050,000. He had to stop spending now to handle any emergencies that rose up, but the income from the event should start pouring in soon.

Just to be sure, however, he instructed Mary to, in passing, show the dragon the Dragonburn Locket. It was an item he had gotten from the Emporium back on X-142 and had priced it at 10,000,000 MP. It could help dragons gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of breathing fire.

Lex did not have a complete understanding of Dragons and how valuable their fire breathing powers were, so he originally felt like a price of 10 million was very hefty. Now though, when he considered how vast the universe really was, and the fact that he could earn millions from a single planet, if, by chance, dragons were really as esteemed as myths on Earth, that price may be too low.

After deliberating a bit, he altered the price to 50 million. If it was too high a price, he would change it eventually, and if it was too low a price, he would treat it as a learning experience. Either way, he was done for now.

Over the next five days, Lex kept a close eye on the Inn while he went about his daily routine. The number of guests coming in had jumped drastically, and about 400,000 guests had already come into the Inn.

All the permanent rooms were eventually booked out, and the temporary rooms that Lex had paid for that didn't really occupy any space started to take in the rest of the guests.

Even if each guest only took a normal room, which most did not, with the price being 50 MP a night, and there being 400,000 guests, Lex would have been earning 20 million MP a night. The actual figure currently was around 31 million MP last night, just from rooms! And this figure was rising each day, for more and more guests started to arrive. The total MP he accumulated in these five days, with rental and food and services all included was 145,000,000 MP! Well, actually it was a bit more than that, but for the sanity of the OCD prone, he quickly spent the extra MP rounding it off to a nice number.

The official event hadn't even started yet and Lex was practically drowning in MP! The absolute ecstasy of his wealth was only matched by the overwhelming effort it took to manage such a crowd!

He had to take more days off from training as well as classes, causing Cwenhild to become slightly concerned, but Lex assured her that everything was under control.

In fact, everything was not under control! From Main street to the manor, to the lake and the lazy river, to Midnight Mountain, there was a massive crowd of people.

In the end, Lex had to do something drastic since he didn't want to destroy the careful atmosphere he had been nurturing in the Inn! Spending a no longer significant 30,000,000 MP, he added 3000 acres of land to the Inn.

Up until now, whenever he expanded the Inn, he ensured to maintain a round shape for the Inn. The latest expansion, however, was not balanced, and instead stretched the Inn behind Midnight Mountain, letting the lone mountain stand as a sort of border between the two sides of the Inn.

In the new area, he decided to create a party village. That was a bad name, he hadn't decided what to officially call it yet, but the concept was that this was the part of the Inn where all future large events would take place from now on. This way, the main area could remain relatively uncrowded for those guests who just wanted to visit the Inn. For those that wanted a more happening scene, the village was the destination.

Since he currently had an abundance of MP, he decided to make permanent additions instead of temporary ones to design the village. Furthermore, he really let his creativity flow this time around.

Starting out with a few big attractions, in the center of the village was a very traditional-looking colosseum that could easily seat 1 million guests - nothing too extravagant. Then, just for good measure, he added a massive, floating orb of water above the colosseum, inspired by something he saw in a game called Final Fanta X. What was the purpose of a giant ball of water, how could it be used, what would people think? These were all questions he decided to let his guests answer themselves. Of course, the orb was high enough that it would not obstruct any activities happening in the colosseum grounds themselves.

Next, he created a 1000 story pagoda in another corner of the village. Its purpose? To be determined. Next, for good measure, he built 50, 100 story highrises filled with rentable rooms, all interconnected with bridges built on different levels in a corner of the village. Of course, he was no architect, so making the bridges look nice was somewhat of a challenge, so he decided to turn all the bridges into parks as well, with grass and bushes and trees, connecting each of the buildings.

In another corner of the village, he added a small, crystal clear lake. It wasn't too big, only 20 acres large and built a few hundred houses, added pathways, replaced what could have been parks with coral reefs, and of course, did not forget to designate a portion as an underwater combat arena.

Over another portion of the village that he populated with various kinds of large auditoriums, music halls, palaces, and the likes, was the aerial part of the village. 100 buildings ranging from small to medium, floating at a certain point in the air, all connected thin walkways.

Clouds floated through the city, and many birds visited this unique paradise that one could reach either by flying, or taking one of the many elevator platforms. Hot air balloons surrounded the floating village, adding bright colors to the otherwise mostly silver site.

Of course, Lex also had to take care of transport between the village and the main portion of the Inn.

Several trails existed for those who wanted to walk, going around, and some even over the mountain. For those that did not want to walk, he provided many options that could be taken from a few terminals he placed around the Inn. There was naturally the option for horse, rhino, and golf cart riding. A lazy river was also an option, this time with the option of gondolas as well as the floating plastic doughnuts.

But it was when Lex was designing a train route when he was struck by another brilliant idea - if he did say so himself.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 292: Steam train

Lex looked at how much MP he had spent. Due to the size of his many massive structures, the cost ended up being a lot more than anticipated. For example, just a single one of the 100 story highrises cost him 450,000 MP each. Adding 50 of them then cost him 22.5 million MP.

The colosseum, the city in the sky and the underwater city, as well as all the additional buildings in between them, cost him another 31 million MP. Obviously maintaining all these buildings would require sufficient staff as well.

Although the Inn automatically took care of maintenance and various other services, minimizing the need for actual workers, it was only minimized and not reduced. He hired 3000 more workers solely for the village, with the full expectation that he would need to hire more soon. Hiring them plus putting away their salaries for the next few months cost Lex another 11.7 million MP.

While he allowed Mary to decide their jobs and the division of labor for most of them, he gave her instructions to select 100 of them for a special designation. In his system he had a panel called employee benefits which he had so far only used to distribute pay, give them homes and pass out basic cultivation techniques. Now, however, it was time to make further use of the panel.

He went into specializations and selected architecture, civil engineering and city planning and designated those 100 workers with these specializations. They wouldn't become overnight specialists in these fields, but would be provided relevant knowledge about them. The same way they had to cultivate on their own, the workers would have to study the new material.

Once they were sufficiently educated in the fields, he would have them work on expansion plans for the village and, if he was satisfied, then on Main street and the rest of the Inn. After all, currently, while the village seemed fine, it lacked a sense of cohesion. The large structures in various corners all had drastically different styles, and the city looked more like a hotpot of different designs than a unified whole.

He planned on having these workers, who were now a part of the planning and expansion division of the Inn, gain experience with the village, which had more allowance for errors. After all, the whole purpose of the village was to host large events, so the focus could be slightly diverted towards function over finesse.

With that done, though, he turned his attention back to transport. This was yet another thing that would be under the purview of the planning department, but he created several terminals for an underground subway system. The 'trains' created by the system were completely silent and levitated off the ground, so they caused no vibrations. This way, guests could be quickly transported throughout the Inn without hassle. Naturally this did not mean he discontinued the golf cart service led by Gerards former crew. They had developed some fans of their own.

Unexpectedly, the underground train system was more expensive than he expected, and cost 15 million MP. This, however, still left him with 35,850,000 MP to spend on his idea.

He remembered, when he was a child, and would travel with his family, they would often take trains to travel overnight. For some reason, the allure of spending the night on a train was beyond comparison when he was a child.

Since it was something he used to enjoy, there was no reason others wouldn't enjoy it as well. He spent the next few hours fiddling with the system interface, trying to get his idea just right. Once he was done with that, he spent several more hours planning a train route.

The route had to be close enough so that those onboard could see the various sites and sceneries the Inn offered. This train's only terminal was in a street branching off from Main street, and its path would begin with a visit around the lake. It would then loop around to the forest surrounding the greenhouse, and would make its way through the grassy slopes to come into view of the Midnight manor. From there it would go towards the hill with the Meditation rooms, visit the mystery trial, go through a tunnel in the Midnight Mountain and then visit the various sites in the village, including the underwater and floating portions of the city since it wasn't actually a steam train, before looping around and ending back at the terminal.

This 'train', which bore the appearance of a steam train, would move much slower on its track, allowing its passengers to enjoy the scenery passing them by. But, the purpose of this train was not transport. No, this train was full of rooms that could be booked. Unfortunately, due to needing to meet the standards of the Inn, there could only be a very limited number of rooms. The train had nine cabins behind the engine, and eight of those cabins could only be rented as a whole.

Each cabin contained a small, cozy room, a relatively large sitting area furnished with the finest carpets, sofas and tables, with a view on either side, and a bathroom. Naturally, anyone who rented a cabin could share it and bring multiple guests along, but ultimately each cabin would belong to one person or party.

The ninth cabin was the kitchen and, through clever use of teleportation that Lex's increased authority allowed him to enable, a waiter could go directly from the kitchen to any cabin that ordered food.

This particular project cost Lex another 2 million MP, and he decided to set the rent for each cabin at 1000 MP a night.

Now, there were a few other things that needed his attention.

Even today, a month later, Hailey found everything surreal. Even as she listened to the explanation for the different portions of the pageant, how each portion would be judged, and how she should prepare, she felt like she was in a dream.

She was but a simple farmer girl, who would spend her days working the land, and her nights dreaming while still awake. She longed for a different life, imagined herself changing overnight and seizing the day, living fabulously without any regrets. But her longings were supposed to remain as longings, her dreams remain as dreams. Whether it was a lack of courage, or an addiction to the pain of a substandard life, something was stopping her either way.

But, in the mundane routine that was her life, an accident had flipped everything over. After all, it had to be an accident. Someone like her couldn't be destined for such things. But whatever it was, her life had changed with that one flash of gold that night.

As she explored the Inn, on that day she had stumbled into this fairy tale - too afraid that she would wake up the next second - she ran into a rather... handsome man named Harry. One look at her, in her dusty old clothes, tangled hair, untidy wings and eyes full of wonder, was all it took for him to see something she herself had never seen.

He asked her to let him do a makeover, and when she told him she couldn't afford his prices, for she truly could not, he said he'd do it for free. Hailey was a proud woman, simple though she may be, and would have normally never accepted such charity. But whether it was the magic in the air, or the excited look in his eyes when he saw her, something forced her to accept his offer - the second accident that day.

That man - Hailey blushed, the color running down to her neck as she thought of him - was a maestro. When he wielded his scissors and his comb, his expression changed. His eyes were sharp and his hands fast, yet Hailey felt not a single tug of her hair as he worked on her - only a tenderness that nearly caused her to shiver. It wasn't as if Hailey was unaware of the ways of the world, nor was she a prude, but somehow she lost all her words that day.

It was not just her hair that he worked on, no, he also groomed her wings. When folded, they fit nicely behind her back, barely visible, but when extended, they stretched even beyond the length of her arms.

Her wings, as dark as her hair, had never been groomed, for they would just get dirty and messed up again the next day at the farm. But as he untangled her curls and brushed their length, she felt like ropes that had been tying her down had been cut.

Many hours later, when she stepped out of his store, her sun-kissed skin practically glowed under the light of the sky lanterns and her long, flowing hair hiding her wings perfectly. When she looked in the mirror, she saw a stranger looking back at her. The stranger was too neat, too clean, too perfect. It was not like how real people looked, at least in her experience.

But, instead of the mirror, when she looked at Harry with his crooked smile and dazed eyes, she got a feeling, deep in her heart, that she must have looked beautiful.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 293: Builder of bonfires

Gathering herself, Hailey thanked Harry for the makeover, and they started talking. She explained that she had been summoned to the Inn for the pageant but, after the initial overwhelming rush of emotions, she was having serious doubts about entering. It wasn't like she was unaware of what a pageant was - just because she was a farm-girl did not mean she was uneducated or uncultured. Instead, she felt like she would only end up making a fool of herself by competing.

Harry, the stranger she had just met today, listened quietly to her story as she expressed her doubts, and in the end, only said one thing. He said that if she felt reluctant, or pressured by it, then she did not need to force herself, after all, the Inn would not force her to enter just because she had come here - but that he felt it would be a pity if she didn't.

After that they parted ways, for Harry had his own tasks he needed to take care of, but more importantly, she had been gone quite a while and was probably already late for her duties at the farm.

But she could not leave. Her mind kept wondering about the things that had been left unsaid. Why would it be a pity if she didn't participate? Was it because he thought she had a shot at winning, or did he just want to see her more? But, a bigger question also burdened her mind.

What did it mean for her if she entered the pageant? Would her life change? Or would she just end up back at the farm after a fleeting moment of freedom? A hundred different thoughts were running through her mind, so that she did not notice a few kids in her path, and bumped into them.

Just as she was about to apologize, the kids looked up at her in wonder and exclaimed, "a fairy!"

Perhaps he meant that Hailey looked like a beautiful and enchanting woman, straight out of a storybook when he called her that. She, instead, heard something different. On her planet, and often in most other places in the universe, Fairies were one of the most oppressed species. Their high affinity for spiritual abilities and innate abilities, paired with the general weakness of their species, made them perfect targets to be taken advantage of. Of course, in X-142 they were not treated like slave but... whatever the case, she did not want to live the life of a fairy!

With her decision made, she registered for the pageant, and now, nearly a month later, she had let the other farmhands know she was taking an extended leave and had come to the Inn.

Two days later, the pageant would begin, and it would be broadcast to many worlds. They were already being briefed on the many divisions of the pageant, and what to do when their turn comes. Though, the first thing they were advised, and very strongly at that, was they should not reveal their names and the planets they were from - for their own safety. Should any opportunities for a career as a celebrity or anything else really present itself, then they would contact the Lady Cosmos organization in the Inn first, and the organization would then contact the participants.

With that, not at all scary advice out of the way, Hailey began practicing. In two days, when the event began, the first portion would be talent. According to the cultivation level, each contestant would be placed in a different group and judged on different parameters. This was so everyone was judged fairly, and no one used their cultivation as an advantage.

Over the last two days, as more and more people came to the Inn, Lex was entirely focused on managing the crowd and ensuring there were no problems. Once the event actually began, he would become relatively freer since he was not the one overseeing the event.

In these past two days, he earned another 63 million MP, bringing his total to 96,850,000 MP. The MP came just in time, for now he had to finish setting up the actual event. Spending 68 million MP and 0.3% of his remaining 1.5% energy accumulation, he established the broadcasting for the event. Any planet, moon, asteroid, spaceship or anything else from which a participant came would end up receiving a broadcast of the show.

The place of origin was advanced enough to have some form of television or streaming service, the system would integrate the broadcast into it. Otherwise, a massive projection in the sky would appear anywhere with a large enough group of living beings.

Another 5 million MP went into establishing a sentiment analysis feature, which would judge how the audience reacted to different participants, which would end up being one of three categories in which they would be judged.

Finally, he came to the part that personally interested him the most - his income! The Inn itself would not put any ads during its broadcast, but if any local entities tried to put in ads between the show, then 95% of their profits would be transferred to the Inn automatically!

Then, naturally, there was the numerous merchandise for the Lady Cosmos show. The apparel was no longer limited to just T-shirts, but also included suits, dresses, gowns, saris, kimonos, and hundreds of other traditional dresses from each planet participating in the show. Then, as per usual, there was the betting pool. Finally, he would also implement an idea Mary gave him.

According to her, a majority of the participants were financially struggling. So they decided to implement a very common feature of many platforms on Earth, wherein the audience could support the participants they liked by sending them gifts. The Inn would take 1% of the value for each gift as revenue for Lady Cosmos, but the rest would be given to the participants themselves.

Setting up all this cost him another 10 million MP, leaving him 13,850,000 MP. That was more than enough to deal with any emergency that popped up.

One day later, the event finally kicked off. In the end, the number of participants who actually showed up for the event was only 1.5 million, a lot lower than the number who registered, but no one was complaining.

With a majority of all issues handled, Lex breathed a sigh of relief, and turned his attention back to the Crystal realm. They would begin their excursion to the Minor realm in less than 2 weeks. He had to be ready.

Earth, Unnamed Island in the middle of the ocean

Emperor Silius, First of his name, Savior of the luggage, Fisherman Supreme, Builder of bonfires and makeshift barbeques, stared in a daze at the broken tv screen that was still embedded into the airplane seat. It had been... he had no idea how long it had been since the commercial plane he was on crash landed on this island.

Almost everyone on the plane survived, but after what seemed like thousands of years and no rescue, nothing to do and barely surviving by foraging what little they could, most had lost hope and some, unlike Emperor Silius, had lost their minds. Of course, the patchy beard on his face indicated barely a month had passed, but who cared about these technicalities?

But the supremely important thoughts in which he was lost were interrupted by a sound too alien to this island: music. Alarmed, he looked up and saw that the tv screen latched into the seat in front of him had turned on, despite the prominent lack of electricity and any kind of signals, and was playing some kind of introduction.

Confounded, he looked around and saw that all the tv screens had turned on, and he wasn't the only one who had noticed. All the passengers who had been resting in the shade of the plane were alarmed. Was this a case of mass hysteria?

"Lady Cosmos!" screamed the Diva Queen in excitement, a ruthless and ferocious adversary who had kept Emperor Silius on his toes.

But, since this strange magic seemed to be the domain of this Queen, the various Lords and Ladies turned to her for guidance. But she was too engrossed in the show to pay attention.

Planet SSY-534, Plains of Carnage

Four separate armies clashed together in an epic free for all. There was no indication of what these beasts and aliens fought for, or where their allegiance lay, for none wore armor or identifying tags, but the soldiers themselves seemed to know their enemies.

Like rain, blood fell to the ground, like thunder, bodies clashed in the skies, like the wind, carnage washed over all.

This was a planet owned by no one, but housed the largest black market in the nearest thousand star systems. Anyone from pirates, merchants, contractors, artists and even actual lords and ladies visited this planet for some reason or another. On an unowned planet, where the rules and regulations of the wild were rampant, such a brutal war was not an uncommon sight.

What was uncommon, however, was a massive projection appearing randomly in the sky above said armies, with the most unusual music playing. The soldiers did not stop fighting, but the commanders of the armies looked up in confusion. Was this some new tactic? Since when had their enemies become so devious?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 294: Small performance

Each of the commanders for the four armies looked warily at one another, while also keeping an eye on the projection in the sky. Their senses were deployed to the maximum, and as soon as something unusual happened they would be able to respond to it. But, once the introductory song ended, instead of a conniving plan of some kind, a fabulously dressed woman appeared in the projection. It was Audrey.

"Welcome one and all, to the first ever, Interstellar Lady Cosmos pageant," rang her voice across the plains. Oddly enough, the one army that consisted of a race that had no ears felt her meaning communicated to them through the extrasensory form of communication they normally used.

Audrey began explaining a little about the pageant, since most viewers were probably not familiar with the concept, but the commanders were simply bewildered. Try as they might, they could not find the source of the projection.

The battle on the ground continued, and while the soldiers were slightly distracted by Audrey talking, they managed to continue the fight. Until, that is, over Audrey's monologue they started a slideshow of glimpses of some of the contestants, dressed up in breathtaking attire.

"Martha!" All four of the commanders yelled at the same time, recognizing an image of a half fairy, half human celebrity.

She started out as a pirate, until one of the spaceships she was robbing belonged to an interstellar marketing agency, where one of the recruiters risked his life to get her to sign for one of clients as a model. From there her charm and natural charisma launched her career, and she became a celebrity in many star systems.

The commanders, realizing they momentarily lost composure quickly gathered themselves, until they also realized that the others had done the same.

"Why did you say Martha?" one of them asked hesitantly.

"Martha is my idol!" declared one of the aliens, a humanoid, four armed being with six thin eye slits on its face.

"My daughter is obsessed with her," said another alien.

The fourth, instead of saying anything, showed a tattoo of the name Martha over his heart.

Just as the four commanders were suddenly considering what to do next, Audrey up on the screen said, "follow us on our journey as we showcase and celebrate the best that our contestants have to offer, to compete for the final glory of being titled the first ever, Interstellar Lady Cosmos."

"I'll spare your life today," said one alien, before immediately ordering a retreat back to the nearest city. Another two shouted some random excuse while the third one didn't even bother, and immediately ordered his soldiers to return to base and start a feast. He liked to eat something while he watched stuff.

The show finally started. Lex watched for a few minutes, and also observed his Inn. Currently, other than the contestants themselves, there were only 1 million observers. The early, relatively empty village now seemed somewhat full. Every park, every restaurant, every rooftop had small gatherings and, Lex noticed, that a majority of his guests were some subspecies of humans.

That was probably because most of his exposure so far had been with humans. Or were humans just that common in the universe? Time would tell.

Naturally to take care of 1 million guests, and probably more incoming, was not something a few thousand staff members could handle. But Lex was not ready to hire hundreds of thousands of permanent workers just yet. Fortunately, the event management panel gave him the option of temporary workers.

For the price of 8 million MP, he hired 300,000 temporary workers, all of them at the peak of the Body tempering realm. They came highly trained, and seemed to be easily handling the pressure so far.

He sighed, and then stopped paying attention to the festivities. He really didn't have the time. He had mastered quite a few arrays in the past month, but his deployment time was still low. He would focus on that for now.

As for the Lady Cosmos pageant? With the number of participants they had, even if they aired 24 hours a day, everyday, it would take quite a while for the preliminary round to end.

Since the pageant was no longer primarily focusing on beauty, since with many different species involved judging beauty became more difficult, a great emphasis was placed on talent.

The first portion would allow the participants to showcase their talents. Any participants who were mortals took on tasks such as playing instruments, playing sports, creating arts etc. and would only be judged amongst themselves. They would not be pit against someone at the Foundation realm, who would most likely be using their cultivation as a part of showcasing their talents.

If Lex had been watching, he would notice that one of the first participants being shown was a ballerina, and a familiar one at that. This ballerina had also performed once during the cultural part of the Midnight Games before disappearing. Since then, not only had the poise and technique of the ballerina

improved immensely, but so had her ethereal beauty. Even nonhumans who had completely different criteria for beauty could not help but be attracted to her performance.

But, as moving as her performance was, it was one out of over a million. When the participant disappeared from the Inn after her single performance, almost no one seemed to notice. Almost because Anita, who had a detailed record of everything that happened during the Midnight Games was also currently recording everything happening at the pageant, immediately picked up on the detail, as well as the pattern of disappearance.

It was also at this point that someone tried to harass one of the participants who was waiting her turn.

A slim and greasy fellow tried to slip his hand over the small of the contestants back and pull her close.

The girl yelped and moved away, for she had not been expecting to suddenly be grabbed.

"Oh come on dear, I was only-" the man never got to finish his words.

The Delinquent Viper Vine burst from the ground and tightly wrapped itself around the man. The commotion attracted a lot of attention, and by the time people began to look, the man was being held upside down in the air, 100 feet (30 meters) in the air.

The man continued to hang in the air until the current participant showcasing her talent finished, at which point instead of the next contestant, the screen turned to a projection of the man.

The Dragon, which had up until now kept its distance from the crowds, flew up into the air, its wings spreading strong gusts of wind threatening to topple over anyone nearby.

"This is the first and only warning," the dragon said in a deeply terrifying, grunted voice. "On orders of the Innkeeper, anyone who targets a guest of the Inn in anyway will be treated as an enemy of the Inn."

The appearance of a dragon on the show was nearly enough to shock anyone watching, but the fact that the dragon took orders from someone was about to rock several worlds. Lex had planned this little performance early on, anticipating someone trying to take advantage of the numerous girls. His aim had

been to dissuade any trouble makers. While he did achieve that, what he did not expect was that the viewership of the show was about to explode, along with the popularity of the Inn!

"I... was... only... try..." the man tried to speak with a trembling voice, but before he could finish, he disappeared. He had been kicked out of the Inn, but none of the viewers knew that. Instead of horrified, they were enamored! Strong, decisive, cruel. These were the things people loved. Well, at least the people on the planets the pirates had spread the Inns keys to. At the same time, many people who were hiding from various threats or enemies suddenly gained a new destination to run towards.

With such a dramatic start, the Lady Cosmos show was kicked off. Ragnar too was shown a recording of the scene where the dragon made an appearance, and suddenly raised an eyebrow. First a Celestial, and now a dragon? The Innkeeper really knew how to pick his guards.

He was tempted to go see the dragon firsthand, but now that he was on his way to a battlefield, his every move was likely being monitored. He did not want it to seem like he paid too much attention to the Inn, so he dismissed the video,

Back at the Inn, Xeon, the Drake refiner who was vacationing at the Inn had just come out of his room after a several weeks long nap, and was dumbstruck. A... a... a real dragon? And it seemed to be... working for the Inn!

Suddenly, he ran at his fastest speed to search for Gerard, the only person he really knew at the Inn. He had to get a job at the Inn! HE ABSOLUTELY HAD TO!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 295: How fancy

"Bearin, cover me," yelled a woman who leaped into the air and fell behind her cohorts, her focus already on another task she was completing. As it happened, she landed furthest back at the group, directly behind Jovi, the synergist, and Lex, the all around survival expert of the group.

The group was locked in combat, fighting against a pack of Raila's. Raila's were actually parasites that often took over hosts' bodies and used them to fight, most commonly affecting slimes. In exchange for completely destroying the body in a short time, they would be able to exert power countless times more than the actual strength of the original body's owner.

The pack they were facing had, as usual, taken over slimes, but that did not mean that they were weak. On the contrary, every drop of a slime's body was energy rich, making the Raila's particularly formidable.

Bearin, one of the main combatants of the group, moved to intercept the Raila's attack, but missed it by mere centimeters. He could not be blamed, for the orange beam moved at inhuman speeds and with devastating strength. The target of the attack remained Sohee, the girl who had yelled, but since she had fallen back, and the attack seemed to have adjusted to follow her direction, it lined up perfectly to hit Lex instead.

Too quick to block, or even yell out a warning, the group could only watch as the beam struck Lex. It wasn't like Lex was a weakling, or that he couldn't fight, but that his role in the group was as a safety and survival advisor, and had proved himself capable in that regard. As for fighting... it was generally understood that combatants were better trained and stronger than noncombatants, so in a situation where Lex suffered a surprise attack, they expected him to be gravely injured.

When the group recovered from the bright flash of light and looked towards Lex to investigate the degree of Lex's injury, they were surprised to find him unharmed. He remained standing in the same spot, a rather bored look on his face and not a single ruffle on his clothes, with his left hand extended out and his palm stretched out, as if to block the attack with his bare hands.

In truth, he had employed the technique Talk to the Hand, but since the barrier erected was invisible, no one noticed. It truly did seem like he blocked the attack with his bare head.

"Don't get distracted, keep blocking," Lex said, breaking the group from their reverie. His tone was instructive, as if he was still continuing his job as a safety advisor.

Too busy to feel embarrassed, the group continued to defend, while Lex continued to stand there, putting his hands in his pockets as he observed the fight. Cwenhild had already informed him that he was not expected to fight, and each member of this group was as elite as they got, which is why he did not really feel bad about not helping out.

A short while later, Sohee, the girl taking cover behind Lex, finally finished her task. Her hair turned purple and her pupils took on a lilac hue. She took in a deep breath and, after looking towards the main group of Raila's, shrieked. As if the sound of her scream had become visible, purple zigzagging streaks ran through the air, doing no harm to her allies but directly crushing the parasites inside the slime bodies.

A few still survived, but having lost their numerical advantage, they were quickly crushed. As soon as the fight finished, the group gathered around Cwenhild, who had been silently observing the fight from the side.

By now, Lex had learnt a number of things about her. First of all, she was not at all as amicable as she usually was with him. No, she was extremely decisive and firm, and took great pleasure in bending others to her will. That did not, however, mean that she was arrogant or incompetent. In fact, she was quite capable, which is where the issue actually originated from. She assumed, rightfully most of the time, that others could not match up to the standards she held for herself, and so gave little to no importance to their opinions. After all, their perspectives on any issue would end up being vastly different. Most would look up to something as an achievement to something she would consider a failure.

Secondly, he had finally heard about her dropping her name, as well as the statement she gave when doing it. It was quite unfortunate but Lex could now determine that she did not at all believe his story about not being a child of the Kings, and instead felt that both of them were in the same boat. He also learnt about why their party was only 12 people instead of more.

Yes, this party was made up of the elite of the elite, but even if Cwenhild was limited to only foundation realm cultivators, there was no need to stop at 12. The reason was since she publicly dropped her name, certain people had started targeting her as a form of punishment for her arrogance. No one would have the gall to actually harm her, since the presence or absence of a name did not change her lineage, but many could not swallow the insult to the King her actions had wrought.

Fortunately, no one knew her actions were prompted by his hypothetical advice or he would have attracted a whole host of trouble for himself as well. The members of her party, or at least the two that were targeting him, did have some suspicions about him though. They assumed that Lex was trying to win her heart, which is why they wanted to remove him.

Initially, Lex was ready to retaliate lethally if her two followers dared try anything over the line. Now, however, he could not see them as any more than little kids fighting over a crush.

"Good job on the block, Lex. After this group session, I'll have to have your defenses tested. If they're adequate, you can serve the perfect role as Sohee's defender while she readies her spells."

Sohee, the girl who yelled, was a witch, meaning she had a special profession that made use of spiritual energy and soul energy combined. Indeed, she was a dual cultivator. In fact, everyone in Cwenhild's party other than Lex was a dual cultivator, hence their status as the elite.

"It was nothing. I always anticipate Bearin's incompetence," Lex replied casually. Bearin, one of the two guys who always tried to pick on Lex, glared at him, but he dared not say anything in front of Cwenhild. It was not just her temper that was scary, but her strength as well.

"Sohee, good job with your spell. Jovi, if you'd been faster with augmenting Bearin's speed he wouldn't have missed that block. The rest of you, good job, you've been performing excellently. Tomorrow we'll take a rest, and instead of practicing, I'll be providing all of you with your gear. Day after tomorrow, as you know, the Minor realms open. We'll be facing the real deal, and the fights won't be as tame as the ones we've been having."

A rare compliment invigorated many of the group members, but Lex had diverted his attention towards the Inn while Cwenild spoke. He was not paying attention to the pageant, or the many guests, but instead his attention was on Midnight Mountain.

Velma was sitting opposite to the dragon and... drinking tea? No, it was Boba tea. As long as he was paying attention, the dragon did no more than grunt, but Velma was not at all bothered by the dragon's dismissive attitude and kept regaling it with tales from different worlds.

As if that was not odd enough... Gerard was bringing with him, pulled by the strength of his upgraded golf cart, a thirty foot long tea cup up the mountain. Were they... about to offer the dragon tea? Where did they get the massive cup from? Oh, it was a standard cup for massive guests, Mary informed him.

Once the empty cup was in place, Velma put a ladder against the cup and climbed, all the while holding an ordinary sized tea kettle and continuing her story. When she reached the top, she tilted the kettle to pour, and a thin, unending stream of tea came out, filling the cup with unusual speed.

After he recovered from the shock of what was happening, he felt proud. Yes, this was the Inn. Why should his workers feel intimidated by dragons, or extend less courtesy?

Once the cup was filled, and Velma climbed down, the dragon finally opened an eye and looked at the little human girl.

She looked like a teenager, barely 16, but her eyes contained only an innocent curiosity, and were distinctly lacking fear.

After a moment, it extended one of its limbs, and picked up the cup. Lex could not help but notice the pinky equivalent of its claw extended as it took a sip. How fancy.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 296: Condottiere

After taking a big, deep gulp, the dragon blew out steam through its nose and its scales vibrated.

"That feels so good, I was absolutely parched," the dragon said, its voice changing drastically from the previous grumble to a surprisingly cute one, that too with a perfectly polished British accent. Lex was standing perfectly still when he heard it, but still nearly fell over.

"It's been a long time since someone has offered me tea. Not since back in the early days when the Condottiere would have a lot more time. How long it has been."

"Condottiere? Your leader?" Velma asked, positively beaming with excitement and curiosity.

At this point, Lex stopped paying attention, leaving Velma to continue her gossip, for Cwenhild was done with her remarks and they were once again about to begin practice. The timing was a shame. A few more moments, and Lex would have heard the dragons next remarks.

"Leader? No, more like the owner. The Condottiere is the owner of the largest mercenary group in the universe. Where trouble brews, and there is gold to be made, the Reaving Dread shall send forth its armies. Well, based on how much gold the client pays."

The dragon took another sip of the tea, quite pleased with itself. Velma did not care much for that news, since she worked at the best hotel in the universe. And weren't the mercenaries working for their hotel? That meant the hierarchy was clearly established, the Innkeeper was better than the Condottiere. She was more curious about other things. Like, do dragons date? And do they have a type?

Back in the Crystal realm, Lex spent the next day training, as promised, followed by Cwenhild privately testing out Lex's defense. He was not one to brag, but when a girl asked for a show, well, Lex put on a show.

In the end, without having to use any ridiculous weapons, Cwenhild wasn't even able to breakthrough Talk to the Hand. To be fair, the technique built a defense proportional to Lex's own. As it was, a Foundation realm cultivator would have to really put in some effort to hurt Lex, and so the defensive ability of the technique was remarkable, to say the least.

He did not have the heart to tell her that he still had the Ripple shell, another powerful defensive technique waiting for anyone who broke through Talk to the Hand. And, should someone finally succeed in breaking both, every millimeter of his flesh has the same defensive capability.

But while he still had these techniques in reserve, he didn't doubt that Cwenhild, a Body and Spirit cultivator, didn't have secret techniques of her own that would deliver awesome power.

The next day, as promised, Cwenhild outfitted her entire group personally. That was to say, each member received personalized equipment that would strengthen their strongest aspects and make up for their weaknesses.

But while everyone received lithe, maneuverable armor, Lex got a solid metal, sleeveless vest. Not only was it incredibly heavy, actually almost causing Lex's knees to buckle, it had abs engraved right onto the armor! It felt like he was walking around shirtless!

According to Cwenhild, his defense was so ridiculous that trying to run or dodge was a waste of his efforts, and he should just continue to increase his defense further, even at the expense of movement speed. Everyone received a similar helmet that would protect them from soul tracks and physical tracks, but also let Cwenhild communicate with all of them simultaneously.

Next, Lex received a massive, round shield, and a single-handed sword. While the rest were getting fancy weapons, guns and even a self aiming mini-gun attachable to a wrist, Lex looked like a Spartan knockoff from a cheap play.

If there was any consolation, it was that Lex's vambraces had an enchantment that would aid him in drawing arrays. Also, they were extremely durable and further improved Lex's defense. He was so well protected, a turtle would shy away in shame.

The remainder of the day was free, so Lex said his farewell to Amelia before spending a few hours checking up on the Inn. They were still continuing with the preliminary round. With over a million participants in the first round, it was bound to take time. Finally, he went to Cwenhild's apartment at night.

The entire group was gathered there, as they had planned to venture off together. Lex was expecting that the next day there would be some kind of ceremony as well as inauguration. Technically, there would be. But certain elite and privileged students were given an unwritten privilege.

The Minor realms were officially opened at midnight, under the bright light of the ever present Sol birds, and before a majority of participants even knew of it, Cwenhild and her group entered a Minor realm. A teacher had especially come to open the entrance right inside her apartment.

The opening to the Minor realm was unusual. It was not dark, nor was it vague. It felt like there was a window, and Lex could look right into the Minor realm. But at the same time, looking at the entrance hurt Lex's eye, and his brain could not actually absorb the image of the realm beyond.

Passing through the opening, which Lex did with steady steps, felt even weirder. It was like Lex suddenly became aware of the sensation of phantom pain, but instead of feeling pain in some missing limb, he felt it in an entire phantom body that was connected to his consciousness, but not his actual body. But, the next second, the phantom body and actual body switched places, while his consciousness remained absolutely centered between the two.

The next moment, the strangeness receded, and Lex found himself standing knee deep in a bog. The water was warm, and bubbles were releasing some kind of green gas. There was no Sol bird in the sky, nor any celestial body. Instead, a light blue light seemed to be emanating from a mountain range in the distance.

As peaceful as the light seemed, there was an urgent matter that required his attention. Neither the warm water nor the strange gas did anything to Lex, but he knew instinctively that it was not good for his companions.

"Activate your isolation talismans, the air is poisonous," Lex said out loud, warning the rest of the group.

They didn't hesitate, not only because of how weird the air looked, but because Lex had proven his survival skills to them. More than once during training, he had made excellent calls and had earned the group's trust. Or at least, Cwenhilds.

Other than just armor and weapons, they had also been gifted with the best survival equipment and gear. It may seem like Cwenhild was being extremely generous, but none of what she gave them could compare to a single corner of a Minor realm.

"So how do we take control of this Minor realm?" Lex finally asked the big question. It wasn't like he hadn't asked before, but all the answers he would receive in the end were that it would be different for each realm.

"Jovi, scan the area. Bearin, look for a temporary base rest point. Ness, stop drinking that water. Patrick, ready the beacon..." Instead of directly answering Lex, Cwenhild first gave out a few different orders.

Before they did anything, they needed to get their bearing, and preferably step out of the bog - though no dry area seemed to be in sight at the moment. Finally, she turned to Lex.

"Each of these realms was discovered by the academy, but none of them were naturally made. No one knows how old the Crystal realm is, other than perhaps the Crystal race. The history, the heritage, possibly even the key to defeating the Kraven could be in any of these realms, which is the real reason the academy has us explore them. But, it's not like they're sending us to unknown realms. They can estimate the relative level of each realm, which is why we have the chance to take control of this realm. As for how we do it... I don't know yet. Once Patrick can deploy the beacon, it will collect information about this realm and I'll..."

"Enemies!" Lex interrupted her, suddenly looking in a different direction.

"There are hundreds of them, they're traversing under water, and they're strong. We need to run, they're coming our way."

Cwenhild didn't doubt him for even a moment, despite the fact that she could not see these enemies and there seemed to be no indication of them yet. The group started running, and after using Hearts Marathon, even Lex was able to keep up despite his heavy armor. Barely.

But, despite their attempts at escape, the pursuers seemed to be catching up, and soon everyone was able to sense something swimming through the murky water in the distance behind them.

"Mr. Innkeeper," an innocent voice spoke in his mind. "There's a lot of energy in this realm, but... something seems to be eating it. You should get to it quickly, or there might be none left."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 297: Too easy

"What direction?" Lex asked the Lotus in his mind.

"In the distance, where the light from behind the mountain is coming from."

Lex nodded and approached Cwenhild.

"Cwen, I'm not sure if this helps with taking control of the Minor realm but there's a massive energy source in the direction of those mountains."

Cwenhild was genuinely surprised at the information that Lex provided, for those mountains were miles away and it should have been impossible for any of them to detect something so far away unaided. Regardless, she still could not determine if what they were searching for was there, but it was a good guess.

"Jovi, any day now," Cwenhild yelled with a hint of impatience in her voice while she looked at the man. An inexperienced person may look at the members of her group and assume that Jovi was one of the weakest and most useless members, whereas that was far from the truth.

Jovi was a synergist, a profession adopted by those who dual cultivated the soul and spirit paths. Due to his extreme sensitivity towards life as well as energy, he was able to greatly bolster his allies. Based on his strength and skill, he could even directly double someone's strength.

"Give me a moment... done!" the exasperated Jovi yelled, before his body started to emit a yellow light, enveloping the group.

The moment Lex felt the subtle warmth of the light fall on him he felt his speed pick up drastically. The entire group's strength had increased, and they changed their direction towards the mountains.

Running in a bog was frustrating to say the least, and while their combined teamwork should have allowed them to fight off most enemies, there was no point in wasting their energy doing so. After all, it had to be remembered that while they entered the realm early, others would also enter in a few hours. While a majority of them would simply be hunting for anything valuable, some may also have the same objective. It would be best to take the greatest advantage of their head start.

"Tim, do your things," Cwenhild yelled, and the tall man nodded and stopped running, getting left behind. No one questioned it, for they were all familiar with Tim. He was a body and spirit cultivator, and though he did not have a unique profession to set him apart, he had a strong bloodline that made him a demolition expert, as well as extremely capable in setting up traps.

A few minutes later he caught up, looking slightly pale. But his face showed only a satisfied expression, and only a few moments later when an earthshaking explosion took place, his smile grew wider.

Whatever had been following them stopped after that and the group encountered a massive boulder, jutting out of the ground, giving them a dry place to rest for a while. Not that any of them other than Tim needed a rest. The real reason they stopped was so that Patrick, a soul and spirit cultivator, could scan the realm using a special beacon.

Looking at this group might cause one to begin doubting the rarity of dual cultivators, but it had to be remembered that even to be qualified to have Cwenhild consider them, they had to be the best in their respective fields. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they were each one out of a million. In fact, it was probably an underestimation.

Regardless, what set Patrick apart was his unusual cultivation technique. For various, complex reasons, all originating from that technique, he had developed his spiritual sense prior to the Golden Core realm. In exchange, until he reached the Golden core realm, his body would be very frail, and could not take strenuous exertion. But the advantage that he gained in reconnaissance abilities with the help of various equipment was too great to give up.

The rest took this time to check their equipment and keep an eye out for any more trouble. Lex similarly remained vigilant. There was no doubt that his instincts would warn him should any danger approach, but that did not mean he should become complacent. His own experiences were enough to let him know that there were always exceptions to anything you might think is a concrete rule.

A few times, he sensed some creatures approach them beneath the murky water. But each time, after sensing the strength and vigilance of his group, the creatures would retreat. He had not yet actually seen what form the creatures in this realm actually were.

The fact that they hid in the water so far may be one reason, but considering the only light source in this minor realm was very dim, he may as well have missed a few creatures passing by in the distance.

"The scan is complete," Patrick said after some time, attracting the attention of the group. "The approximate size of this realm is around 100,000 acres, though with areas that large it becomes difficult to get an accurate guess. There are several, distinct biomes all beside one another. More importantly, there seem to be signs of large ruins in many areas, all of which may contain valuable treasures, or perhaps records about the origin of this realm. There's a lot of interference around the mountains, so I can't get a detailed reading, but I can vaguely detect large structures there as well. There's a good possibility that the largest, or perhaps most intact ruins are there."

Cwenhild considered the possibilities for a moment, then had Patrick chart out a path for them towards the mountain while exploring any nearby ruins. With slight detours, they would be able to fit two different ruins on their journey.

"There we go, we already know what to do. This conquering minor realms stuff is a lot easier than you said it would be," said one of the group members called Ness. Lex's lip twitched as he looked at the girl raising death flags.

Ness was... not the brightest person Lex had ever met. Even trying to be reserved with his judgement, she could only be called dumb. In fact, when they arrived at this realm, Cwenhild had to stop her from drinking the murky bog water from which the poisonous gas was being released. But, for everything she lacked, she was perhaps the most dangerous person Lex had seen at the Foundation realm. To be fair, he had yet to see Cwinhild fight seriously.

But Ness, who followed the body path and a rare and dangerous path called Tino, which was also actually a form of the body path, was extremely fast, strong and vicious. He just hoped that her strength would help her combat the endless death flags she was raising, for even as they left the boulder and headed towards the first ruins, she kept emphasizing how boring this was turning out to be.

After an hour more of jogging Lex couldn't help but admit that the journey had, indeed, so far been much easier than anticipated. Maybe visiting multiple realms and absorbing energy won't be such an ordeal after all.

No sooner had Lex completed the thought that the ground erupted from beneath them, with no forewarning whatsoever. By the time Lex's instincts kicked in, he was already flying through the air, a sharp stone like spear stuck in a large dent in his armor.

In the air, with no sense of what was happening to the rest, he quickly pulled his legs up to his chest, just in time to dodge another rock spear.

Despite the surprise attack, Lex wasn't at all injured. This wasn't a result of his sturdiness, but rather of his preparations. He had used Ripple shell, a defensive technique that covered his body the moment he entered the minor realm. The best part was that the technique would stay active until disabled or defeated.

When Lex finally landed, he quickly leaped aside, in case anyone was attacking his landing spot, and took note of the situation. The enemy was... it looked like some kind of sentient rock that could manipulate the minerals in the ground around it. He took note of the clothes and found that Jovi, Sohee and Patrick were hurt, with Patrick in the worst condition.

Without wasting a moment, he employed Hearts Marathon to boost his speed and sprinted right into the fray. With the element of surprise lost, and with his instincts fully working, he dodged each of the stone spears launched his way with ease.

Without a thought for attacking the rock, he grabbed all the injured and promptly retreated from the fight. This was not cowardice, but the simple fact that if he attacked, he would interfere with the coordinated attack the rest were performing. In any given situation, he would first follow his training, and only take the initiative to make different decisions should a drastic change occur.

Just as he retreated from the combat zone, and set the three down, the ground behind him burst once again, and a barrage of stone spears flew at him.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 298: Irony

A cloud of dust and smoke closely followed the eruption of the ground, which, along with the already low visibility, made it impossible to see.

"Damn!" exclaimed Cwenhild as she dashed into the dust cloud. She had no doubt that Lex would survive even if he was taken by surprise, but the other three might not. She used a seemingly simple palm attack in the air, causing a gust of wind to clear the cloud, revealing Lex heroically blocking the stone spears from attacking the three behind him.

If it had just been a single stone attacking him, or even multiple attacking from the same direction, he could have gotten by with using Talk to the Hand. But three different sentient stones seemed to be attacking him from various directions, causing him to run around, blocking each attack with his shield. The three injured members weren't just sitting idly by either. Jovi had Patrick on his back and was trying to build some distance, while Sohee prepared a spell to attack, her attention completely diverted, leaving her vulnerable.

Upon learning the situation was under control, Cwenhild diverted her momentum and attacked one of the sentient stones. Were this a normal stone, her single attack would have pulverized it, but on this rock it only spread a few cracks.

The rocks had no mouths so they could not scream, but the spirit energy surrounding them vibrated violently, causing everyone to be hit by a wave of dizziness. Sohee, however, was able to finish her spell in time. A dome of purple light formed around the three sentient stones, blocking their attacks while simultaneously attacking their souls!

The spirit energy in the air began to vibrate even more frenziedly, giving birth to the illusion of shrieking. Just as Sohee was about to sigh in relief, the ground started cracking, revealing more and more stones.

"We need to regroup!" yelled Lex to Cwenhild. "I can't tell how many there are, but even as is, we're surrounded." Even Lex could only block attacks from a single direction at a time, and with them being surrounded and outnumbered, they would need to work together.

"Leave it to me," yelled Patrick and clapped his hands together.

An invisible, yet strangely tangible ripple traveled through the air, originating from his clap, slowing down the rocks attacks. He did not need to explain what he had done for all the team members knew each other's abilities. The rocks did not have eyes, and while no one could tell exactly how they perceived the world around them, there was a good chance that their perception was based on spiritual energy - similar to the way spiritual sense was derived from spiritual energy.

Patrick's clap could create energy ripples within a small radius, effectively weakening all spiritual perception abilities. It was originally designed to work against scouts, but for creatures solely dependent on such abilities, the ripple was even more effective.

Taking advantage of the short interruption, Lex and the others regrouped, though there seemed to be no hope of escaping. More and more rocks were revealing themselves, already increasing the numbers to over a dozen, and during the brief clashes they had, they were not able to kill any of the rocks.

"Can you tell why you aren't able to sense them?" Cwenhild asked Lex. This was the first time Lex hadn't been able to foretell an attack, and they needed to understand if this was a unique circumstance or something that could be replicated.

"Pretty much. I didn't sense anything, because this wasn't a trap. These rocks just happened to be in the ground we were covering. Even so, if they had been asleep, I would still have been able to sense the danger. It's more like they were in some kind of stasis that made them no different from ordinary rocks in the ground."

Cwenhild nodded, understanding the limits of Lex's ability, and moved on to the next matter.

"The situation is serious, but not impossibly so. Form a circle, and coordinate on the attack. Ness, you take lead on the attack and the rest will support you."

"I'll cover the ground so that it doesn't erupt under us," Lex added. "But the range is only about 10 feet so stay close."

Lex's defensive technique, Talk to the Hand, was originally designed only to be used from the hands. However for Lex, who mastered the technique with a depth that may have even surpassed the creator of the technique, making small alterations to use it from his feet was no issue.

The three injured gathered in the center of the circle, all the while activating their abilities to support the team. Silvia, another one of the group members, a body and soul cultivator, began healing them while the rest focused on attacking and defending.

Having collected themselves, and working together once again, their lethality shot through the roof. Ness was a human torpedo, shooting through the distance that separated herself and the target, leaving only destruction in her wake. Tim was using his bloodline to boost the explosiveness of her attacks while Jovi was increasing her speed. Patrick kept causing ripples, to distract the rocks, while the rest either intercepted attacks aimed towards Ness or protected their circle.

The tides changed like a flip of a switch, and the number of rocks finally started decreasing instead of increasing. In just a few seconds, when she managed to destroy 5 of the rocks, even the rocks changed their strategies. Instead of endlessly barraging the circle with stone spears, the rocks rolled towards one another.

The rocks attached themselves to one another with practiced precision, and in a moment, they went from being numerous individual sentient rocks to one massive, humanoid monster made of many small rocks. Ironically, though, the shift made it even easier for them to destroy the newly formed rock monster.

The only reason they were disadvantaged to begin with was the overwhelming numbers, attacking them from different angles. With that advantage lost, it did not matter at all that the rock monster was stronger in this form. After all, their group was not lacking in strength.

"Investigate the rocks, see if there is anything of value. If not, we'll move from here before taking a rest once we put some distance between this place and us," said Cwinheld.

Since Patrick was best at investigation, he scanned the rocks and discovered these rocks were not normal. They could serve as valuable crafting or forging material, but unfortunately that was as far as their speciality went. The rocks were too heavy to take along, and after they grabbed a small memento of the fight, the group sprinted away, this time more vigilant.

As it turned out, the prudence was well founded, for only a few minutes after they left, many strange creatures had been attracted by the sound of fighting. Finding nothing other than the corpses of the rock monsters, the creatures dispersed. Some who were interested in the corpses fought with one another. Yet none of that had anything to do with Lex's group.

They ran all the way to the entrance of a forest and, after scouting for a bit, found a secluded area to rest in. They weren't tired enough to warrant rest, but if the three injured members of the group weren't adequately healed, they would not be able to keep up with the group.

All in all, they had performed well, considering this was their first actual encounter as a group, but the three who were injured couldn't help but feel embarrassed. After all that training, they had been the first to falter.

Of course, there were two other people who were feeling something else entirely. Bearin and Nick, the two who had been targeting Lex, stared at him with disgust. In their opinion, Lex was entirely incompetent, and had proved as much by the fact that he hadn't warned them about the attack. One could argue that detecting enemies wasn't what Lex was brought onboard for in the first place, so a misstep in this regard mattered little. After all, every warning he gave them benefited them greatly, and was a bonus on the fact he was supposed to advise them on survival. It was just that, he had been so good and so consistent with it that this little matter had slipped their minds.

Once the three were finally healed, or rather healed enough, the group continued their journey. As they were running in a forest now, they encountered more beasts, but fortunately Lex was able to warn them with ample time, allowing them to overcome the ordeal smoothly.

A few hours later, they finally reached the first ruin, and the moment they laid eyes on the ancient structure, everyone other than Lex gasped in excitement. A moment later though, Lex caught on as well.

These were no ordinary buildings - their design, their material, even the size of them, they all signified who the inhabitants of these buildings had once been. The Crystal race!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 299: An interesting guest

It would not require a genius to realize the value this realm held if it used to belong to the Crystal race - after all, they were the strongest race around. Furthermore, in the long history of the Crystal realm, it would be unrealistic to say that the Crystal race had never suffered any defeat, or given up any realms.

But, while suffering defeat was a possibility, it was much, much rarer for the Crystal race for several reasons. To fully explain the reasoning, a comparison between a settlement of the Crystal race and the human race can be made.

The first and foremost challenge of a human settlement would come from a hostile environment. The time required for a newborn human to even embark upon the cultivation road was 15 years, and so it was reasonable to say that on average, at least 20 years were required for humans to train a basic soldier from birth. If, during this time, a human settlement faced too many losses or deaths from hostile forces, the settlement would then become vulnerable. In contrast, a newborn from the Crystal race was born with the power level equivalent to a human Golden core cultivator. Even if at birth they could not contribute to security, just by existing, the Crystal race had a higher threshold for the danger they could tolerate.

The second challenge a settlement would face would be transmitting knowledge or skills. For example, a carpenter, no matter how good, is limited in how much they can work. More would have to be trained just to maintain the minimum requirements of a settlement, and regardless of field, the process was a long and tedious one. The Crystal race, however, had a much faster way of transmitting information, in which they could imbue their experiences to those who wanted to learn. While skill would still require training and effort, the learning period was drastically reduced this way. This not only allowed them to retain their settlement, but also easily expand if needed.

Lastly, one of the greatest challenges every settlement would face was the inevitable march of time, and the changes it brought. Leaders would die, buildings would collapse, policies would become outdated and so much more. If each successive generation of that settlement did not rise to the challenges of their times, a single lifetime was enough to destroy even the sturdiest of foundations. But for the Crystal race, while time brought its own challenges, the one thing it did not bring was old age and deterioration. This was because every member of the Crystal race, regardless of age or cultivation, was born immortal.

This was not to say that they never got sick, or could not be killed. Rather, it just meant that the declines that humans faced after they passed their prime was something the Crystal race would never encounter. This meant that they would forever retain their great leaders, their best doctors, their legendary crafters, and since each of them had all but infinity to master their crafts, their standard for 'legendary' was something the other races considered myths.

So now, looking at the ruins of what must have been some kind of Crystal race settlement, the entire group could not help but wonder what had happened here.

"Can you sense anything?" Cwenhild asked Patrick, who was already scanning the buildings using his beacon.

"There are many energy signatures in the buildings - but they're not living. Which means there are either items or treasures of very high value in there or, the most likely scenario, is that the buildings still have some functioning formations."

"Scout the area, I want to know if any beasts have made this their territory before going inside."

Most of the group waited while Patrick and Cindy, the tracking expert, a body and spirit cultivator, went out to scout the area. When they returned, they brought back predictable news.

The ruins had become the nest for a large predator, the Bloody Jit. It was a flightless bird, not because it lacked wings, but because its body was so massive, its wings could not support its weight.

It was extremely deadly, ridiculously strong and had the ferocity of a tornado, so naturally the first order of business was killing the bird. This is where all their training began to shine, and as soon as Patrick provided the group with a map of the ruins and the surrounding terrain, they began planning the fight.

One would expect that in a battle like this, Lex would serve as the bait to bring the beast to an ambush spot. But no, he had a different job, one that would finally allow him to put his arrays to use.

Once the creature was lured to wherever the group wanted to fight, and the combatants began fighting, they would have to ensure that the beast did not escape once the tide of the battle turned against it. Essentially, he would have to create an inescapable cage.

For requests of this level, Lex would have to rely on the book he had gotten from John. The author had recorded a number of excellent arrays, seemingly for any scenario and now Lex would put them to use. But, as he was still a beginner, it would take him well over an hour to create such an array.

Fortunately, preparing to fight the Bloody Jit would also take time. The group began working.

Planet Aram, Jotun Empire Territory

This planet, which was several times larger than Jupiter, was one of the most popular tourist spots in all of Jotun territory. Such a claim was no small matter, as it was not just considering a single galaxy, but all the galaxies under Jotun rule. The reason for that was not only the fact that this planet was abundant in every kind of resource, rich in beauty, absolutely secure as well as a hub for commerce on an interstellar scale, but because this planet was the private property of one of the most noble families in the Jotun Empire.

The Jotun Empire, along with its royal family, had several noble families as well, all with varying levels of importance. Of those families, there were three ranked directly below the royal family, in both prestige and power. Each family had their own speciality, but in such a utilitarian universe, absolute power was the most important factor in deciding a family's worth.

The intricacies of the Jotun societal system were complex, and the standings of the noble families even more so, however, all complexities aside, no matter what, it was absolutely unusual that a member of such a family was running in such panic, on his own planet no less!

The 19 year old Golden core cultivator looked nothing like a scion as he ran through the empty, but usually crowded fruit farm. There was no one chasing him. In fact, this entire region of the planet seemed to be devoid of any people beside the running boy. But the lack of pursuers did not soothe the boy.

At this point, he was running on fumes, as not only had he been awake for several days, he had already overdrawn his spiritual energy. In a few minutes at most, he would collapse. As if aware of this, whoever was after the boy made no effort to close the distance. They were content to watch and wait.

"Where is it... where is it?" he mumbled to himself, his mind on the brink of collapse. Just as he was losing hope, the bracelet on his wrist vibrated and the boy's eyes widened in joy.

With no energy left to put on a performance, he did not hide his actions as he suddenly stopped and started digging in the ground.

As if sensing something unusual about his actions, hundreds of figures suddenly appeared in the farm, all of them hooded, ethereal figures. But, their arrogance had cost them.

The boy suddenly dug up a small container and smashed it open, revealing a golden key and a letter.

Not wasting any time, he grabbed the letter and crushed the key, disappearing in a golden light mere moments before the nearest hooded figure reached his spot.

"I've lost his trace," the hooded figure said, devoid of all emotions.

As if that was all they needed to hear, the remaining figures vanished into thin air, as if they had never been there.

As soon as the boy arrived at the Inn, he fell to his knees, fighting to keep his consciousness. He didn't know where he was, or if it was safe.

As if sensing his distress, a hologram of a human appeared in front of him and informed him that he was at the Midnight Inn, and that he was absolutely safe. Help was already on the way to give him medical aid.

Upon hearing that, the boy smiled, and allowed himself to lose consciousness. After all, he, Noman Butt, was born with a very special power. No one or thing in the universe, regardless of their cultivation level, could lie to him without him finding out. The hologram had not lied when it introduced the Inn, and so he knew he was safe. For now.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 300: Arrogance or confidence?

Some time later, Noman woke up in the Recovery room. He wasn't in the Recovery Pod for he hadn't actually suffered any grave injuries, just severe exhaustion. It was not something that would recover quickly, and he would be in a weakened state for weeks if not months to come. However, it did seem like the Recovery room had a positive effect on him, so maybe that time could be cut short.

He was in a private room, so he was alone, which allowed him to relax - a little. The letter he brought alongside him was on a table beside him, so he tore it open to read. The message it conveyed was short and simple:

Stay at the Inn as long as you can, it will be able to hide your trace. Adopt a false identity and only leave the Inn once you're able to block all forms of scrying or prophecy.

Your helper in the dark

Noman grimaced when he read the letter. His ability to detect truth was not as simple as it seemed. Regardless of the medium, his ability would stay active. This meant that, even just by reading this letter, he could tell whoever wrote this letter was telling the truth. Furthermore, it was not so easy-to-use technicalities to mislead him. If a person told a truth, but with the intention of providing a false perception, then Noman's ability would detect that as a lie as well.

This was an ability he had since birth, and though he did not understand it completely when he was a child, since the moment he realized what it was, he had kept this ability secret. He was not an heir, or some high-ranking member of the Butt family, but even just as a regular member, the exposure he had was beyond what others could comprehend.

As such, he never even told his parents, or the seniors in his family, about this ability, for more than once he heard the seniors lie. Of course, detecting a lie did not mean he would automatically learn the truth, but sometimes, just knowing falsehood was enough. After all, he had seen many speeches made by prominent politicians and nobles, some even from the royal family, and would immediately know when they were lying.

People would kill him to keep their secrets, and others would kill just to get their hands on his ability. All in all, he just wanted to pretend to be a regular boy from a big family. But it was not meant to be.

Some time ago, he received a letter from the mysterious 'helper in the dark' claiming that, using some kind of oracle, a certain organization had learnt the truth of his ability and was coming to kidnap him for their own purposes. Since then, his life had turned upside down.

Infiltrating his family's planet was already a big deal, but somehow isolating him from everyone, and blocking off anyone else from approaching, took power and influence he could not even imagine. At the very least, they hadn't been blatant about their motives, which meant they were still wary of his family.

He considered just informing his family of his secret as well, but he knew that would lead to a life of being a puppet, which was not something he wanted. He closed his eyes and went back to sleep. When he was feeling a little better, he would go investigate this Inn. At least they were nice enough to not ask him for money before treating him.

But how was he supposed to know that the Inn had directly sent the invoice to his family, who had paid without bothering to investigate what it was for?

Lex stood calmly out in an open field, his mind wandering. He had already finished the array, and all that was needed now was to wait for the Bloody Jit to enter the trap so he could finally activate it. Until he did that, he could not move away.

Eventually, the beast was lured here. He heard it before he saw it, the sharp screeching of a furious bird accompanied by the dull sound of earth being ripped apart, like a massive till cutting through the land.

When it came into sight, to his surprise, Lex found that the bird simply looked like an eagle, just expanded to about fifty feet (15 meters). Its body was pressed directly against the ground, and Lex didn't blame it, for he doubted its leg would be able to carry the weight of its massive body. Instead, it was using its wings to pull itself forward, like a baby just learning to crawl.

Despite the odd nature in which it moved, it was not slow at all. It moved like a train, hurling anything in its path away. It was chasing after Bearin originally, but something about the way Lex stood in the open casually, looking at it as if watching a show, greatly antagonized it. Letting loose another deafening screech, it changed its target to Lex. Yet still, even as its hulking figure bore down towards Lex, he did not so much as flinch.

The calm in his eyes was more deafening than any screech, and his stationary figure more arrogant than any beast. The Bloody Jit was looking forward to crushing the puny human, but it was not meant to be.

Just as the Jit was a few feet away from bulldozing Lex into a bloody pulp, he snapped his fingers and a barrier of light and air erected itself in front of him. The Jit was too close to even comprehend slowing down and crashed into the barrier full force.

Within the barrier, the earth shattered as if struck by a missile, launching massive clumps of dirt and rocks into the air, yet the barrier itself did not even tremble. The Bloody Jit had turned bloody, with its beak caved in, its head disfigured and its body morphed into a ball. Many of its bones were likely broken if not entirely crushed, and Lex did not even want to imagine the condition its spine was in.

Yet the anger in the Jit's eyes did not diminish or weaken, and it glared at Lex like the very purpose of its existence was to murder him.

A whim struck Lex as he watched the unyielding beast and he asked, "Can you understand me? A beast at your level should have some basic intelligence, right? This is a fight you've already lost. Yield to me, and I'll stop them from killing you."

The Bloody Jit's aura exploded as it screeched up into the sky, a declaration of its power and hatred.

"A pity," Lex said, feeling disappointed. But he no longer paid the bird any heed. Ness, Bearin and Tim had entered the barrier as well to deal with it, and he did not doubt their ability to slay it even when the Jit was in good health, let alone now.

With his hands in his pockets, Lex began to make his way towards the ruins. He strolled towards the nearest building, ignoring the sounds of combat behind him, and instead he was contemplating his own behavior. It occurred to him that as his cultivation, and along with it his various abilities, grew, his personality was also slowly changing.

This was his first outing since the expedition with Ptolemy, and already he could feel the difference. He was no longer wrecked with worry about his survival, and in fact tested the limits of ability and his control over it. Previously, he would have never waited until the bird almost reached the end of the

barrier. As soon as it entered, he would have activated it. Now, though, he pushed it to the absolute last minute.

Maybe it was arrogance in his new found power. Maybe it was an inherent confidence in knowing his limits. Maybe it was just him experimenting with something new.

All he knew for certain, though, was that it felt good not to be worried about dying at the slightest incident. The calm, confident expression on his face finally broke, letting through a small smile. Now he finally felt like he was living. Now he could finally start actually enjoying all the blessings the Inn brought him. He had to be careful not to let his newfound power go to his head, but he could also let himself enjoy it a little.

He suddenly recalled a feeling he once got when he first started hosting the Midnight Games. When the strong and powerful deferred to him, and when he overcame fear to take control of the situation. It was feeling your heart beat in your chest, it was feeling the blood course through your veins.

He took in a deep breath, taking in all the smells of the forest, and as he let the air out of his lungs, he clenched his fists.

'Lex freaking Williams,' he said in his mind, his smile becoming even bigger. Then he stepped into the first ruins - and froze.