

Innkeeper 301

The Innkeeper

Chapter 301: Mysterious figure

The ruins that Lex and the group had encountered were not large. Though covered in plant growth and suffering from obvious signs of wear, some of the buildings had collapsed roofs or walls, even combining all of them there were less than 10 buildings. That meant this was too small to be a town or even a village, if those existed in the Crystle race culture. Lex assumed that this must have either been a travel outpost, a small research camp, maybe even the private property of someone rich, or something along those lines.

A small, adventurous part of him had been hoping that when he entered the building, through some mystical magic or miracle of the Crystal race, he would discover the interior untouched by time, and whatever event drove the race from here. That clearly wasn't the case.

However, when he entered the building, for the briefest of moments, Lex felt like he saw a figure standing inside. The figure disappeared so fast that under normal circumstances, Lex would have questioned if he even saw something at all. After all, it wasn't usual to catch something from the corner of your eye, but when you turn to look, it was something entirely different.

What made him so certain the figure really had existed, though, were the goosebumps on the back of his neck. In that absolute split second, he had felt extreme danger. There was a certainty with which his instincts told him that the figure could overcome his defenses easily, and pose a very real risk to his life.

But, for whatever reason, the figure had no intentions of confronting him. Lex squinted his eyes as he scanned the littered room. The floor was covered in dirt and rocks, alongside broken debris that might have once belonged to this building, but was no longer recognizable.

He remained standing in the doorway, observing the room, until Cwenhild finally joined him.

"What are you looking for?" she asked, having noticed him standing there for a while.

"There was someone here before us," Lex informed her. "Whoever it was, they disappeared as soon as I approached. I'm checking for traps, but I don't sense anything out of the ordinary."

"That's not possible, we're the first ones in this realm. There's still a few hours before others start entering."

"I don't know what to tell you, except that there was definitely someone here."

Cwenhild pursed her lips as she took in Lex's statement. A list of scenarios went through her head, including someone sneaking on to punish or even assassinate her for giving up her family name. But it did not seem likely.

"I'll check out the building. Maybe we'll be able to discover what the person wanted."

Cwenhild nodded, and slowly followed Lex. There was too little information to start speculating, and should not cause her to start suspecting anyone, but it was a fact that the group following her all consisted of people she was paying. They followed her for the prestige and the reward, but considering their qualifications and caliber, none of them were people without sufficient backgrounds.

Despite the ongoing war, the politics between the various forces in the human race did not disappear. It became a lot more subtle, and hardly would anyone push things too far, but she was well aware of the cult-like following her father enjoyed.

Lex and Cwenhild swept the entire building but found nothing of note. They could see that over the years, multiple animals and beasts had turned these buildings into their nests, which, in turn, spoke volumes about the strength of these buildings. But that was it.

By the time they exited, the rest of the group was also catching up, Ness panting and completely drenched in yellow blood, but otherwise fine.

"Good job, you guys. Ness, Bearin and Tim, you guys take a rest in this building. Cindy, harvest anything useful from the Bloody Jit. The rest, look through all the buildings and see if you find anything useful. Report back here once you're done. After a short rest and some lunch, we'll move out."

The group dispersed as they went about to perform their tasks. None of them needed the rest, but the three combatants had exerted themselves and it was best to keep them in peak condition than

continuously push them. Furthermore, had Lex not encountered the mysterious person, perhaps Cwenhild would have chosen to quickly look through the ruins before moving on. Now though, she preferred to be more cautious.

Lex noticed that she didn't pass on information about the intruder, but chose not to say anything. The ruins, despite all the promise of the Crystal race, held nothing too special. In the Bloody Jits nest they discovered a small pond of green liquid that apparently had phenomenal value. Since they could not transport it, the entire group took turns drinking from the pond directly. If Cwenhild was able to take control of this Minor realm, they would be able to access it as much as they wanted. Until then, though, it was best not to burden themselves by carrying flasks or waterskins full of the stuff.

When Lex drank it he felt his entire body heat up for a few minutes before returning to normal. Apparently, this liquid was excellent for cleansing meridians and helped boost cultivation speed. But soon, Lex, as well as the entire group, realized that the situation with Lex was unusual. Everyone, Cwenhild included, turned red from the rising body temperature and soon steam seemed to come out of their bodies.

No one commented on it, but the implications of the anomaly were shocking. It was quite simple: Lex's meridians were pure to such a level that the liquid could not provide him with any boost. Everyone quietly contemplated Lex's background, while Cwenhild wondered even more what this 'half-brother' of hers had encountered.

Other than the liquid they encountered a few more precious resources that would have otherwise caused the group to squeal, but considering their expectations from the ruins, it was somewhat disappointing.

Eventually, the group continued their journey, on towards the next set of ruins. As they ventured back into the forest, a figure appeared on the top of one of the buildings and looked at the group. Specifically, the figure stared at Lex. But, for now, that was all the figure did.

The trek through the forest this time was much easier. They were not attacked at all, and all beasts kept their distance. The reason was fairly simple. Ness reeked of the blood of an apex predator, and there was no beast that was aggressive to the point of being suicidal.

One time the group even spotted an extremely rare and precious plant in the territory of a tiger like beast. When they decided to take a risk for the plant because of how genuinely precious it was, the tiger actually ran away!

Lex made a mental note: use the blood of a strong beast to ward off attacks.

For the simple fact that they were no longer obstructed, the group's travel speed picked up and they soon found the next set of ruins, still within the forest. These ruins were bigger, with hundreds of buildings easily, and were simultaneously in a worse condition.

"Are we going to search through these as well?" Lex asked as he looked down at the buildings that had somehow become a part of the forest now. He and the group were looking down from the tip of a particularly long tree that gave them a clear sight over the surrounding area.

He had nothing against looking through the ruins, but it would take too long, and he still wanted to go towards the energy source behind the mountains. He didn't know if it was his imagination, but he felt the blue light behind the mountains had dimmed slightly.

"Patrick, scan the ruins. Are there any concentrated or high energy signatures?" said Cwenhild, prompting the man to take out his trusted beacon. But, before he got to use it, the group spotted hundreds of flashes of light across the Minor realm, spread far apart. At the same time, a massive current was formed in the spiritual energy of the realm, indicating that the realm had formed a permanent open door somewhere leading out of it.

The group immediately picked up on what this meant and turned to look at Cwenhild to see if she changed her orders. She was considering it.

She had not shared this information, but to take over a realm, she would need to find a focal point for the Minor realm. The artificially created Minor realms did not move through space, the way they did in the origin realm, but instead had an entirely different set of rulers governing them. One of those rulers was about the focal point.

A seemingly easy guess would be that the focal point of this Minor realm should be in the energy dense area behind the mountains, but that was not necessarily true as the...

"We're being attacked," Lex said, interrupting her thoughts. Before she could ask about, or even realize, the origin of the attack, he held out his hand and erected his barrier, just in time to intercept an entirely black arrow.

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Chapter 302: Welcome guests

The arrow bounced off Lex's barrier with a simple clang sound, as if nothing happened, but Lex's casual expression turned serious. Although there was no visible sign of it, the arrow had nearly punctured his barrier!

"We're too exposed, jump down," Cwenhild said, before jumping down herself as well. Indeed, the entire group standing near the tip of a very long tree made them easy targets.

Lex jumped down as well, his guard up the entire time, but there was no follow up attack. Considering that they hadn't even been able to see who the attacker was, the group raised their guard instead of relaxing in the absence of a follow up.

"Do you think they gave up after their first attack failed?" one of the group members asked.

"Possibly. But that attack was very misleading. The speed and sound of the arrow made it seem like it was ordinary, but if anyone else would have blocked it, the arrow would have torn through your defense. Whoever attacked was very powerful. If they were just probing, then it's likely that they're gone, but if they're targeting us, then they're probably just waiting for us to drop our guard."

"Lex, stay on guard. Warn us as soon as you sense something off. Patrick, scan the ruins. We're looking for high or concentrated energy signatures. If we don't pick up anything, we'll make a beeline for the mountains."

The group spread out a bit, while Cindy and Ness went out to see if they could learn anything about their tracker. Patrick scanned the ruins, but this time it took much longer for he was being careful not to attract too much attention.

When Cindy and Ness returned, their report was worrying. They couldn't pick up any signs of their attacker whatsoever. This meant that whoever it was, they were extremely proficient in counter tracking, not to mention there was no way of knowing if they were around or had left. Lex couldn't sense anything at the moment, but that wasn't any assurance.

"There are three extremely concentrated energy zones in the ruins, as well as many life forms. I can't differentiate between beasts and people from a basic scan, but regardless, the ruins are full."

"Lead us to the nearest one. We'll take the most direct route."

Cwenhild's focus now was on being as direct as possible to save time, but for better or for worse, the peaceful portion of their journey came to an end. While they still created an intimidating enemy for beasts, the beasts were already being attacked by numerous students who teleported near these ruins. In the midst of battle, even if they faced an impossible foe, they had no choice but to fight - and fight they did.

The group quickly figured out that the ruins had split into three territories belonging to two different beast packs and one flock of avian beasts, and all of them were ferocious. Perhaps under normal circumstances, it would have taken them time to cut through them, but Cwenhild had finally stepped away from just commanding, and was leading the group directly beside Patrick.

Her choice of weapon was an enchanted glaive, though Lex had yet to see her use her enchantments because no foe could survive more than a single cut. Lex wasn't measuring time, but they reached the first concentrated energy zone fairly quickly - and it became immediately apparent why the energy was so dense here.

There was a formation, surrounding a single story building. The building was completely untouched, and gave the group a glimpse of what these ruins must have looked like in their glory days.

But neither the smooth white walls nor the intricate blue tile patterns drew the group's attention here. Instead, it was a battle between a group of humans and beasts that drew their sight.

Cwenhild frowned, then sighed. She could foresee how this would end, but... the beasts had to die for them to figure out how to get through the formation, so she led her group to attack.

The beasts gave them no problem at all, and in a few minutes, the fighting ended. The humans didn't immediately thank them for the assistance, though, and eyed them warily.

A glance was all it took to tell that Cwenhild and the rest were together, while the others had come together out of the necessity of the moment. Cwenhild held the advantage but the allure of whatever treasure this building held was enough to get them to try.

There was a silent stand off between the two groups, each waiting to see how the other would react, until Lex let out an annoyed sigh.

"Alright, alright. Let's get on with it. Which one of you is the strongest? Try and attack me. If you can prick my finger, you can join us. If not, I suggest you leave. This is not me forcing you, just by the way. This is me strongly advising you not to fling yourself off a cliff, because you won't like the ending."

Without waiting for a reply, Lex held out his hand, as if inviting them to attack. His nonchalance irritated the other group, while his companions silently observed him. In the end, a particularly well dressed student broke out of the group, looking at Lex with disdain.

"Who do you think you are, to advise me? I'm advising you, little kid. Get lost, and never show me your face again. If I unleash an attack, let alone your finger, even your ancestors will be decimated. Next time, wash your teeth before talking to me, because your breath stinks just as bad as your threats. You..."

Lex stopped listening as his expression fell. He was not one to be easily irked by insults, but he suddenly had flashbacks of the system telling him to brush as well. He was an extremely clean and hygienic person, goddammit!

"Do whatever you want," Lex said as he put down his arm and returned to the group, ignoring the verbal diarrhea being spewed by the arrogant prick. The group was smirking and chuckling as Lex walked back, all enjoying his slight humiliation.

It was not out of spite. It was just that Lex was the only one who ever came out of their fights and training unharmed, so now that he finally suffered some kind of loss they couldn't help but enjoy it. Cwenhild, too, felt the urge to tease Lex, but ultimately didn't as she wanted to stay on task.

Without any forewarning, Cwenhild appeared before the ranting student and rammed the backend of her glaive into his stomach, throwing him to the ground. The remaining students, caught off guard, were shocked, and then angered. Though before they could respond, Bearin appeared in front of them and crashed right into their group.

He was careful not to use too much force, as he didn't want to kill anyone. But the difference between an elite, dual path cultivator and a single path cultivator became easily apparent.

"This is your only warning," Cwenhild said, looking at the group with stern eyes. "Get lost or we'll stop holding back."

As he watched the fear and anger paint the students faces, Lex snorted. That's what they got for wasting his good intentions.

"Any idea how to open the formation?" Tim asked. "I can try using my bloodline to do some damage, but if opening this was as simple as brute force, I doubt this formation would have lasted this long."

"I could try to read the formation, but that would take a while," said Lex.

"No need, we've come prepared. Jovi, link up."

Jovi quickly ran up to the formation and opened up his backpack, taking out a number of items that looked like hex nuts. One by one, he began attaching them to the formation surrounding the building, making sure he attached them perfectly level with one another. In the end, he handed the last one to Cwenhild who did not waste time on explanations or ceremony. She channeled her spirit energy, activating whatever items these were. The formation immediately reacted, warping into odd shapes until, eventually, the formation shattered.

A wave of dense spirit energy flooded out when the formation collapsed, causing Lex to become momentarily stunned. He was not the only one, as the entire group froze. Not only was this energy extremely concentrated, it was of a much higher quality than whatever they were absorbing.

But the stun effect only lasted a moment, mostly because the system absorbed it all! The accumulation rose by 0.1%, bringing his total to 1.3%.

Once the rest of the group recovered as well, their eyes became frenzied with excitement and greed as they looked at the building. Whatever it was holding had to be absolutely amazing!

"Let go," Cwenhild said, "but don't drop your guard. If whoever shot that arrow is still around, they'll take advantage of any distraction."

The group quickly recomposed themselves and went towards the building, only for the doors to open on their own.

"Welcome guests," said a warm, deep voice.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 303: Sleeping Bunker

Lex felt weird being at the opposite end of a welcome, but he did not let the greeting drop his guard. He peered inside the door, but could not see anyone. The little he could make of the room inside gave him the impression that it was a cozy, carpeted reception, well lit and with a line of chairs to sit in, as well as an empty reception desk.

But when he was done looking, he realized that his companions seemed much more wary than him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Didn't you hear that creepy noise?" Bearin remarked, slightly annoyed. The sound... whatever that sound was gave him chills down his spine. The best way to describe it was an utter gut wrenching squeal of a dying man.

"The noise? You mean the welcome?" he asked, confused. But the confusion lasted only a moment, as he quickly realized what happened. Lex could speak and understand all languages in the universe due to the Universal Language Converter that had been tattooed behind his ear. In fact, most of the time he wasn't even aware that he was speaking in another language, as to him, it was all in English. But the difference became evident in a situation like this, where they encountered a language no one else spoke.

The greatest problem Lex had now was... he had no idea what language he was speaking, so if anyone asked, he'd have to make something up.

"The 'sound' was a greeting which said 'welcome guests'. Though, I can't seem to see who was speaking."

"Alright, get in defensive formation. Lex, you lead. No matter what the situation, we need to investigate the house."

Lex nodded, and walked in, his shield in his hand. It wasn't that he didn't trust his own defenses, but after that arrow nearly broke through his barrier, he decided to stop underestimating everyone.

As soon as they entered, a projection appeared behind the reception desk and looked at them. The projection seemed to be a female from the Crystal race. Their body structure - externally, at least - was remarkably similar to humans except, instead of skin, their body was made up of see through crystals. The way humans wore clothes to cover their skin, the Crystal race covered their bodies in cloth and colored gems. To allow others to look through their clear body was considered extremely indecent, equivalent to a human in the nude.

But even wrapped in a simple cloth, with turquoise crystals forming a smooth mask to cover her face, the projection looked immaculate. Under the gaze of her purple eyes, Lex felt a warmth in his heart, as if it pleased him to be looked at by her. The innocence in her eyes, the gentleness of her...

Lex's soft expression turned hard as he brought his shield forward and drew his sword, glaring at the projection like an enemy. His sudden action startled the group, as well as the projection, but before anyone could inquire, Lex spoke in the same gut wrenching language that the group had heard earlier.

"If the hospitality of your race involves influencing your guests spirit, then I must say, I am quite disgusted by the Crystal race."

The projection of the woman was suddenly even more surprised by his words, but then giggled.

"Silly human, why do you resist? Is it not your honor to be deemed a guest by the great- the great - the great..." the projection started stuttering, while her seemingly simple and innocent visage began to morph.

"There's something wrong with the projection," Lex warned but, just as he was expecting the worst, the projection disappeared and the lights turned off. They waited a few more moments to see if anything would happen, but nothing did.

It seemed time had eventually caught up with whatever mechanism was keeping this building operating.

Turning on the talisman equivalent of a flashlight, the group continued further in. From the outside, it appeared as though the building was only one story large. Yet when they began exploring, they found stairs leading to a basement. Since the remainder of the building was empty Lex continued to lead the group down as he tried hard not to think of every horror movie he had ever seen.

It seemed that the hold horror movies had on a dark basement guarded by a crazy, hostile projection could affect even cultivators. Yet nothing crazy happened. Instead, after a couple flights down the stairs, they encountered a sealed metal door. There was no grip, handle or anything of the sort so he had no idea how to open it.

While Lex was comparing everything he saw to a zombie movie called Evil Resident, Cwenhild was keeping herself from having too much hope. Her instincts told her that such a well protected and guarded place would surely be the focal point, right? But at the same time, experience told her not to jump to conclusions.

To get through this sealed door, Cwenhild turned to the last two members of the group, the jade twins. They were both body and spirit path dual cultivators, but that was where the similarity between the two ended. Jade 1, as the older twin was called, was an intellectual, and specialized in materials engineering. Long story short, he was exceptionally good at destroying any object.

Jade 2 was strong. That was all there was to Jade 2, but when something excelled to a certain level, it entered a league of its own. Although he had not been able to break Lex's defense with his brute strength, he once picked Lex up and flung him hundreds of feet away with a single flick of the hand.

Owing to the hurry they were in, Jade 1 approached the metal wall and, after observing it, began to concoct some kind of solution from different items he had in his backpack. Barely a few minutes later, he added the solution to a plastic spray bottle and lightly sprayed the metal door, immediately causing it to start sizzling, and then eventually dissolve.

"Hold your breath," was all Jade 1 said as he returned the items to his bag.

Unfortunately, though, the mystery of the building was not immediately solved as they continued down a few more stories before reaching a massive hall that seemed to extend far beyond what their feeble lights could reveal.

"What are the chances this is a wedding hall?" Lex asked aloud while mentally telling himself that he had already killed zombies before so he should not be afraid.

"There's too much security for it to be something mundane, yet we haven't seen anything that would reveal what this place is," said Cwenhild, doing her best to figure out where they could be.

"The highest concentration of energy is that way," revealed Patrick, pointing straight ahead.

With his shield and sword still in hand, Lex slowly continued towards where Patrick pointed before he reached a large, glass wall. He could vaguely make out a few shapes on the other end of the wall so he squinted his eyes and brightened up his talisman to get a better view.

With the talisman shining brighter, Lex noticed a bit of writing on the glass wall but suddenly, it didn't matter. He no longer needed to read to understand what this place was.

"No way," he muttered in disbelief.

"What is it?" Patrick asked, coming closer. As the one with the best idea of how high the energy concentration was, he was the most excited. But the excitement turned into horror the moment he scanned the area beyond the glass with his spiritual sense.

"This is a sleeping bunker," Lex revealed to his companions, as he recalled what he knew of the Crystal races' culture.

As a species that enjoyed immortality, one of the favorite pastimes among their citizens was to visit the future. More specifically, since they could live for millions of years, their brains and psyches were

developed in such a way that they were not depressed by the thought of living to infinity. As such, the dread of the future was often replaced by curiosity and wonder.

But, actually waiting a million years to see what the future held was a bit tedious. A much better way to see the future was to fast forward through the present - or as near to that as they could achieve.

This desire brought forth the idea of 'sleeping bunkers'. It was like a community time capsule service. Anyone interested could visit a sleeping bunker, state how much time they wanted to sleep, and then be put to rest for dozens, hundreds, thousands of years, or even longer. The bunker would provide them with absolute security, so they need not worry about the hassle of finding an appropriate place to go to sleep for extended periods of time. This was such a popular concept among the Crystal race that many knew of it. Lex had even studied about it in one of his classes.

And now, standing in front of hundreds of glass capsules with sleeping members of the Crystal race, Lex was in one.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 304: For now

Silence filled the room as everyone took in the sight. It was extremely rare for humans to get to see anything of the Crystal races society, let alone something as well protected as a sleeping bunker. Considering the fact that this minor realm had been unoccupied for a countless number of years, he could not even imagine how old these people- eh, crystals? He could not imagine how old these dudes were.

But the level of security suddenly made sense. It was no joke for a protection formation to continue running unsupervised for so many years, let alone the projection that 'welcomed' them once they came inside.

But, now that it had been established that this was a sleeping bunker, the next question was, now what? The implications of this discovery were monumental, but no matter what, they could not be allowed to wake up before Cwenhild took control of this realm. Lex did not want to speculate on whether they would be friendly or not, since he could not even explain to them why this realm had been abandoned in the first place should they wake. It would be perfectly understandable if they assumed the worst at seeing intruders as soon as they awoke.

"Do you think the other high energy spots are sleeping bunkers as well?" Lex asked, after the silence had gone long enough. Patrick had discovered 2 other high energy concentration places that they had yet to visit.

"Unlikely. It wouldn't make sense to have multiple bunkers nearby. Anyway, let's go. This glass wall should be the last barrier to the bunker and should not be easily penetrated. It will keep anyone else from trying to wake them up, but we should not waste any time."

Cwenhild's voice was even, and did not betray any emotion besides calm, but internally she was practically swooning. The value of this realm had suddenly exceeded anything they could have imagined, and as long as she obtained this realm before the crystals woke up, she could even negotiate certain terms with her own mother.

"What do you think it's like, sleeping for years at a time?" Lex asked while they rushed towards the next spot.

"Their consciousness enters an artificial dream shared by all in the sleeping bunker," Jade 1 answered succinctly. "They have to maintain such a state to provide stimuli to their spirit, since they're only asleep, not dead. Still, in the dream, time passes by much slower than in real life. A day in the dream may as well be a year."

"Cool," Lex commented, as he made a mental note of the idea. Maybe he could do something like that in the Inn for guests who rent rooms for extended periods of time.

While no one said anything regarding it, the speed at which the group moved betrayed a sense of urgency that filled them.

The second spot they reached seemed like some sort of temple. Countless students already filled the area, all of them exploring the massive structure in small groups or on their own. Lex and his group paid them no mind and directly followed as Patrick led them to their destination, and if anyone tried to stop them, or worse, rob them... Lex had learnt his lesson and no longer tried to play the good guy, meaning the least any of them got was multiple broken bones.

Deep underground, after exploring for a few hours, they finally reached an extremely well protected chamber. Formations, projections, and automated guards protected the chamber, but their strength had fallen greatly over the course of time and so, after some effort, they broke through.

For a moment, it felt like they had actually discovered what they were looking for. The room was filled with literal treasure. Crystal coins, weapons, clothes, books, tokens, talismans and more filled the room. As tempting as the sight was, it was a floating, gold and crystal crown that attracted everyone's attention. But, after probing it, Cwenhild revealed that the crown was not what they were looking for. Thus, as much as it physically pained them, the group left all that treasure and went towards their next objective. Trying to carry it would only slow them down, and the realm was more valuable than this measly treasure, anyway. The only thing they took was the crown. They did not know what it was, or what it did, but it clearly was significant and did not weigh them down.

The third and final spot in these ruins ended up being a crater. A deep, dark hole, tearing directly through a building and the ground was violently gushing spiritual energy. They could not even get close, as even Lex started to bleed spontaneously when he approached it, let alone anyone else.

Lex could not even absorb the abundant spiritual energy as it was not neutral, and had a very destructive nature. Whatever the cause or origin, it was beyond anything they could handle. With that, they were only left with one option - to head towards the mountains.

There were still other ruins they could explore, but they were out of the way, and it just seemed probably that whatever Cwinheld needed to claim the realm would be at the most energy dense spot in the realm. It was a shame, for crossing the mountain would not be a quick task.

Even if they ran uninterrupted, it would take them hours to simply reach the mountain. As for crossing the mountain and reaching whatever was causing the glow... it would take a while - to say the least.

Not wasting any time, they immediately began their journey, taking the most direct route. Their intimidating presence and urgency caused most to move out of their way, whether they were humans or beasts but a few still sought to stand in their way, either out of misplaced ego or greed. But with the group no longer pulling any punches, no one could stop them for long. Ness especially enjoyed such violent, full force clashes and kept hoping for more of them.

Since the only source of light in the realm was that glow behind the mountains it was hard to track time, but Lex felt like half a day passed before they reached the foot of the mountains. Here they took

another break, using the time to eat and drink some water, and take short naps. An hour later, they resumed their journey.

Lex had been expecting crossing the mountains to be dangerous, since they were getting closer to the most energy rich part of the realm. Instead, the journey became even smoother. Let alone encounter a fight, the group did not even see another living being in the vicinity. While this was good for maintaining their travel speed, the eerie silence caused the group to raise their guard.

At a certain point, as they trekked through a particularly steep valley, the sound of their footsteps echoed for miles, and yet not even a sleeping bird was disturbed. The mountains had been as still and silent as death before their arrival, and after a while, the peaks started to weigh down on them.

An unknown pressure filled the air and began stifling them. Crossing the mountains unabated somehow became more tiring than their journey before. After what felt like an entire day since they entered the mountains, they took their second break. This time, instead of a short break, they rested properly since they had become mentally exhausted. Keeping their guard up continuously for an entire day was more exhausting than actually fighting.

But while the group took turns sleeping, Lex sat in a corner with a frown. A strange sense of déjà vu was hitting him. Normally this wasn't exactly enough to worry him, since the feeling would pass. But that was just it - the feeling wasn't passing, but getting stronger as they crossed the mountains.

Try as he might, though, he could not figure out what was causing this feeling. In the end, he chose to focus on the Inn instead. It would likely be another day before they reached their destination, and there was no point in wasting his time dwelling on nonsense in the meantime.

Unknown Planet, Origin realm

A group of angry and anxious looking men were gathered around in a circle, their eyes focused on a young man, as well as a shaman who sat opposite to him. The shaman was burning some kind of paper with a pink flame, the smoke released blood red and the ash falling yellow like sand. His eyes were shut, and he seemed to be in some kind of trance.

Despite all the focus on the shaman, no one noticed as the tips of his hair started glowing red, and then burning away. At first, one could have mistaken the scene and thought that the group's attention was focused elsewhere, but even as his hair went from simply glowing to being fully aflame, no one noticed.

It was only when the flames touched his scalp, and the shaman screamed and let go of the burning paper, that the group suddenly became aware of what had happened. Like magic, the moment the shaman let go of the paper, the flame also disappeared. Yet even in the brief moment that the flame had touched him, all the flesh on his scalp had been burnt away to ash.

The shaman collapsed, losing consciousness, but the group, instead of attending to him, swarmed the young man to ensure he was unharmed.

Physically, he was fine, but his frustration was eating him alive.

"Trash! Vermin! Frauds! Can't do anything right! Find someone else, and this time make sure they're not a fake! I need to be able to track my soulmate before Lady Cosmos ends, or I'll never be able to find her!"

The young man had been trying to divine the location of one of the contestants of the Lady Cosmos show, but how could it be so simple to peek into the secrets of the Midnight Inn? Just like him, countless others all over the universe had learnt of the Lady Cosmos show as its popularity had exploded! And just like him, countless others were undeterred by whatever prestige the Inn may have had, and tried to find its guests, or learn its secrets. For now, only the shamans and prophets who were trying to learn the Inns secrets had suffered its backlash. For now.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 305: Boss Battle

Lex had been checking the Inn on and off, ensuring that no issues occurred. Unfortunately, despite the deterrence of a dragon, petty fights still broke out often. Not all guests were as particular about how they behaved, and others believed themselves special. Lex actually laughed the first time he overheard someone screaming 'do you know who my father is?'.

Now, though, even mild irritation was a huge reaction for such behavior. After all, it was just too common. But, considering that currently he had a little over 5 million guests in the village, it was excusable!

The pressure of so many guests was immense, but so was the reward. On average, most guests came in parties between 2 to 4. Even if all of them shared a room, and only rented the cheapest room, then on the average of 4 guests to a room Lex was earning 62.5 million MP a night! But they most certainly were not just renting the most basic room, and they didn't always cohabit either. Other than the rooms, Lex was earning a lot from food not to mention the income Lady Cosmos was generating directly.

All in all, Lex currently had 978,666,432 MP! This was after he spent another 10 million MP on more security, and another 5 million on more temporary employees. This time there were no more dragons or other over the top cultivators, mostly because what Lex needed was a higher number of guards, not higher quality of guards. After all, just the 30 Earth immortals he already had as guards were more than enough. As of yet, despite the massive influx of guests, Nascent realm was the highest level guest this event attracted. This proved that the kind of attendance he got for the Midnight Games was an anomaly.

Lex was very excited because with this kind of MP, and his elevated authority, he could really upgrade the Inn way beyond its current situation. But that would have to wait till he had more time. Currently, he was just checking in. He saw a system notification stating that due to the Destiny Protection upgrade Lex had previously received as a reward for the Midnight Games, many attempts at scrying or tracking his guests had been blocked.

For once, he was glad an issue was resolved before he even had to do anything. Feeling slightly generous due to his newfound wealth, Lex distributed 566,432 MP to all his permanent workers as a bonus. Obviously, the higher-ranking workers, such as Gerard and Velma, received a higher cut, but either way, it was sufficient for all his workers to enjoy for a while. As it happened, through sheer coincidence, after the bonus, Lex was left with a neat 978,100,000 MP.

With that, Lex stopped monitoring the Inn and decided to get some sleep. Tomorrow would be a long day.

A few hours later, Lex was woken up, and the group continued their journey in the desolate silence. For the most part, they were going through valleys, or around hills, but the last stretch was too wide a diversion, causing them to climb directly towards the top of the last mountain to get to the other side.

The gentle blue glow seemed to get brighter as they neared the top, but it was in sharp contrast to the weight that seemed to be pressing them down into the ground. With each step, it grew stronger and by now, it was no longer something that could simply be ignored. There was something up ahead that was

influencing them from afar, everyone had already come to that conclusion. All they could really do was bear with it and be prepared for anything.

As they approached the final peak, along with the pressure, suspense grew. Lex felt his heart beating in his chest, each beat harder than the last. In the silence, he felt like he could even hear it.

But Lex did not feel like letting the moment lord over him, so his speed only grew until he found himself standing at the peak of the mountain, looking over.

In front of him lay a wasteland. Time had surely corroded away the truth of what happened here, but hundreds of bare craters covered the land. Bits and pieces of armor were still visible, after all this time, but most of it had faded away. In certain areas, the earth was black, as if scorched eternally from the fiercest of flames, marking the land forever.

This was the site of a once great battle, that much was certain. In the center of it all, in a structure like a Roman Pantheon, was a gold dish with a massive blue flame. Right in front of that flame, however, stood a dark figure with its back turned to them. Yet even from so far away Lex could identify who, or rather what, that figure belonged to. Suddenly it all made sense. The pressure they had been feeling, the sense of déjà vu, all of it. It was a Kraven, as well as its coercion. No doubt it had already killed every beast and animal in these mountains.

It made no sense though. What was a Kraven doing here? How did it get here? Why was there only one? But that didn't matter. As if orchestrated by an invisible hand, before them stood their mortal enemy guarding what Lex suspected was their objective to begin with.

"Mr. Innkeeper, that flame is absorbing all the energy in the area. If you put it out, the energy will be free for you to take."

Lex nodded, showing his understanding, but his companions mistook his gesture. To them it seemed like Lex had mentally prepared himself for a tough fight.

"What the hell is a Kraven doing here?" asked Ness, dumbstruck.

"I don't know about that, but I suspect that blue flame has something to do with it," answered Lex.

"It's refining the realm," answered Cwenhild gravely. "It's found the focal point, and is taking the realm for itself. Patrick, can you scan it? How strong is it?"

"I can't confirm how strong it is specifically, but it's somewhere in the Golden core realm," Patrick answered with a look of disgust. He knew that they would have to fight that thing, and he wasn't really looking forward to it.

"A lone opponent in the Golden core realm, it's nothing we can't deal with. This is exactly what we've trained for, to fight enemies stronger than us. Once we beat it, the prize is ours. Cindy, scout out the area. Make sure there are no other surprises waiting for us. Silvia, bring everyone to top shape. Jovi, start planning the best approach. Tim, replenish your strength as much as you can, we'll be depending on your bloodline. Sohee..."

Cwenhild did not let anyone dwell on the task that lay ahead of them and immediately started making preparations. It was fitting for the final enemy to be a Kraven. No one would hold back, and everyone here had trained exceptionally long on how to defeat one. Furthermore, everyone here was an elite. The difference in a major realm was not one they couldn't overcome.

Whether Cwenhild's distractions worked or not, Lex didn't care. He wanted that fire put out so he could get the energy, so he was ready to fight, he needed no pumping.

No one was taking the upcoming fight lightly so the preparations took a few hours. There were no indications of any other Kraven which was a huge relief for them. With everyone ready, they directly trekked down the mountain.

They did not try to be stealthy, or hide their approach. Their actions were not out of bravado, but simple knowledge of their enemy. None of the races had studied the Kraven with as much depth as the humans, which is why everyone knew that this creature that had been dominating the Crystal realm was not doing it out of sheer luck. Its senses and awareness were beyond many other races, and had several extra senses than just sight or hearing to detect enemies.

Let alone the echoes that had been heralding their approach, just the slight temperature difference their bodies caused in the ground was enough to alert this enemy. A simple example of its foreknowledge was the coercion it had been putting out on them the last two days.

Coercion was not a trait specific to Kraven, and even humans could do it once their cultivation rose a bit, which is why there was such a deep understanding of it. Coercion didn't naturally exist, and had to be exhibited. Just this was proof that the Kraven had been warning them not to approach.

But since when had the human race taken instructions from Kraven? Bearin loudly popped his knuckles as they continued their approach, and Ness was sharpening her blade. Sohee's eyes were already emitted a purple glow as she readied her spells. The rest were also winding themselves up for the incoming fight.

As for Lex? It seemed like he was simply walking with his hands in his pocket, but internally he was debating. Should he risk using an array, or should he risk using Evisceration?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 306: Lex the defender

As the group walked up towards the Kraven, they spread out and assumed their proper formation. Ness, Bearin, Jade 2 and Tim were at the forefront, as they would be attacking. Behind them were Lex and Cwinheld. This was so that Lex could quickly move forward if he needed to block an attack, but mostly it was so that Lex could stop any attacks towards the rest behind him. Cwinheld was close enough to attack as needed, but also a step back so she could coordinate the group.

Behind the two were Jovi, Sohee and Jade 1, to provide support, with the rest farthest back as not only were they the weakest in terms of combat ability, their actual roles allowed them to work from a distance.

Lex recalled everything he had learnt about Kraven so far. First of all, other than the usual sight, sound and spirit sense, Kraven had another sense that made them extremely sensitive to any changes on the ground - whether it was the pressure of someone walking, the moisture from a single drop of sweat, the mild change in temperature due to body heat, all could be sensed by the Kraven.

Their superiority on the ground was unmatched, not because they could manipulate it, but because it basically served as another sensory organ for them. Furthermore, they were completely equipped to not only absorb all that information, they could fully process and act on that information in real time. This meant it was effectively impossible to ambush a Kraven unless one could fly.

Secondly, Kraven had an incredibly muscular structure, but in weaves and layers that somehow multiplied their strength. They had two legs and two arms, but a majority of the time they stood and moved using all their limbs, similar to a gorilla. In lieu of skin, their bodies were covered in a thick, gray leather like material. But, at all times, their bodies excreted and were covered in a viscous, black slime that moved around their bodies. Kraven could use and control that slime as they wished, but not only was it poisonous to almost every other living being, it was very selectively sticky.

That meant that normally the slime would not drip from the Kraven's body, but if a creature came close to it, the slime would latch on to their bodies and was almost impossible to take off conventionally. This way, the slime would often end up endlessly poisoning all of a Kraven's enemies.

Thirdly, Kraven's bones and joints functioned differently from humans, or most other creatures, for that matter. It had to be repeatedly emphasized that Kravens had a very muscular structure, but also that the muscles were layered in weaves, with the Kraven maintaining fine control over every single layer. What did this mean? It meant that while human limbs, for example, were limited in the directions they could move due to their joints, Kraven could move any limb in any direction it wanted whatsoever - a fact that made it incredibly difficult to predict their movements.

After all that, only a few minor details and specifics remained, such as nails that could cut through metal, teeth that could endlessly regrow matched with jaw strength that could allow it to eat a building, not to mention any individual strengths, talents, skills or affinities any individual Kraven may have. Also, its only physical weakness, its energy core, was hidden in its chest surrounded by a dense, metallic structure.

That's correct, its ONLY physical weakness. Even if you cut off a Kraven's head, or even went as far as dicing up its entire body, so long as the core existed, the Kraven would still be alive, and could eventually recover. It was this single fact that allowed the Kraven to fight the entire realm on their own, and still come up as the winning side. This was their own form of immortality, and some believed they were even superior to the Crystal race in this regard. Of course, the fact that the Kraven had not been able to affect the Crystal race in any way whatsoever said otherwise.

Lex took in a long, deep breath before slowly letting it out. This was the first time he was going to participate in killing an immortal - it was alright if he was slightly nervous.

As if Lex's sigh was the signal, the obviously preoccupied Kraven turned around, pointing its long ugly face towards them.

It growled aggressively, the sound causing the groups advance to slow as they coped with a sudden wave of dizziness.

Oh yeah, the Kraven could also launch spiritual attacks with their voice Lex suddenly remembered. It was not an overwhelmingly strong attack, but still an incredibly frustrating one to deal with, especially in the heat of battle.

He was so nonchalant because he was the only one unaffected by the spiritual attack, since his natural defense worked against all paths, body, spirit and soul.

The next moment, the fight abruptly started. There was no probe or buildup of any sort. The Kraven lunged towards the group, swinging its right arm to cleave the entire group in half with a single attack. Yet instead of the distracted humans affected by its growl, what awaited it was Lex, standing in its path with both his arms held forward.

This was yet another alteration he made to Talk to the Hand. By using the technique in both hands simultaneously and overlapping them with each other, he fused them together, making them much stronger.

The Kraven's attack landed on the barrier, but did not manage to break it! Lex was pushed back, his feet digging deep into the ground, his arms nearly buckling under the weight of the armageddon he just blocked, but he managed to hold.

Ness and Bearin raced past him as they kicked off the battle with their strongest attacks. Jovi, though slightly late, had used a technique to increase their resistance to spiritual attacks to prevent such mishaps in the future.

Ness and Bearin's technique did little more than cause the Kraven to stumble backwards, and as they attacked with their weapons, the ever vicious slime coating the Kraven's body absorbed the strength of their attacks. Just as it seemed that their weapons would get stuck in the slime, a familiar shriek filled the air, followed by purple purple ribbons flying through the air to surround the Kraven - Sohee was using one of the numerous attacks that made her profession as a witch so revered. It tried to dodge, sensing danger, but as it happened Tim was standing behind it, prepared.

A massive, fiery explosion occurred. While the Kraven remained unhurt, it had been slowed just enough for the purple ribbons to wrap around its body. The slime on its body sizzled and then was lit aflame in a purple fire.

The Kraven, in pain and angry, let out a roar that shook the very ground, but its anger could do nothing about the fact that it had suddenly become naked of its slime!

Still, the roar disoriented the group once more, for even with Jovi's support, the effect of the spirit attacks had only been weakened, not eliminated.

The Kraven, still on fire, smashed down a palm to kill Tim, but Lex appeared once again in the nick of time. This time, Lex was using his shield to cover his body as he pushed Tim away just in time.

Still, without the barrier to block the attack, Lex would have to face the full brunt of the Kraven's anger - or so it seemed. When the Kraven's palm landed on the shield, instead of the expected sound of metal being crushed, only a solid thud was heard, followed by the sight of Lex sliding back, relatively unharmed.

Lex had used Ripple shell on the shield, so any impact on its surface was equally distributed over its body, making it easier for Lex to manage. But the fact Lex's left arm had dislocated said much about how successful that plan had been, and even more about Lex's own ridiculous endurance.

But there was no follow up attack for the split second it took the Kraven to attack Lex, Cwenhild had launched her own attack. The Kraven, of course, was not at all surprised by her attack and used its other arm to block her attack.

But she was Cwenhild, the daughter of a woman who dared to blackmail even the King, so how could her weapon be simple.

Her glaive encountered little resistance, and cut through the Kraven's hand like, well like a hot glaive through butter.

"WHAT THE SHIT?" the Kraven roared, genuinely surprised. But, for Lex at last, its yell was by far the most surprising thing. Oddly enough, no one told him Kraven could talk.

But Lex didn't have time to be surprised, or enjoy Cwenhild's successful attack, as a feeling of dread fell upon him.

"Ambush!" he roared, and used Home Sweet Home, throwing his body at full speed, just in time to block a black arrow with his shield, saving Cwenhild. But the rest of the group had not been so lucky, and their cries filled the air.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 307: Puppets

Unlike the first time they were attacked, when the arrow had all the indications of just being a normal attack, this time, the attack was silent, swift, and deadly. The group was too split up for Lex to defend them, and while he had perfectly dodged the arrow aiming for him and protected Cwenhild from hers, the rest of the group were left to defend themselves.

Surprisingly, Patrick had managed to dodge the arrow aiming for him perfectly, and even managed to save Silvia, the healer. Everyone else, however, was unable to dodge. Due to Lex's warning, they had dodged a fatal attack, but from Bearin to Ness to Jovi and the rest, everyone had suffered. Cindy and Jade 1 were hurt the worst, with the arrow tearing through their torsos, and were retreating with pale faces, only the fact that they were also body cultivators kept them from immediately collapsing.

The timing of the attack had been perfect, not only ensuring Lex was too far to help but also happened just as everyone was coping with the Kraven's spirit attack. Had it not been for Lex's warning, this simple surprise attack would have ended the entire group.

Very aware of the fact that an angry Kraven was right behind them, Lex leapt forward to get some distance while a furious Cwenhild searched for the attackers. Unexpectedly, they did not hide this time. Twelve figures covered from head to toe in black clothes, all holding bows stood a short distance from them.

She squinted. The number of attackers could not have been a coincidence. Someone had been aiming for them from the very start. But who was crazy enough to do that? Even if she cut her ties with her father, she still had her mother's support, not to mention that each one of the members of her group came from one powerful background or another.

If even a single one of them died, it was not something that could be suppressed, and there would be a full investigation, with Immortals at the lead.

But, it did not matter. They were in a tough spot now. Had there been no interference, they had a good chance of killing the Kraven. But with these assassins attacking from the back, they were done for.

"Lex, can you delay the Kraven?" she asked, desperately thinking of a plan.

"For a short time, sure."

"Give me five minutes," she said, as she stepped to the ground. From the moment he saved her, Lex had been running while carrying her.

"Five is pushing it, aim for 3. I'm just a man in the Foundation realm, and that's a Kraven in the Golden core. Every second I occupy his time is a miracle, technically."

Cwenhild snorted at Lex's remark. The urgency of the situation and her erupting anger did not mean she didn't notice the complete lack of anxiety or tension in his voice. It was not the tone of one praying for a miracle, but that of one who had the situation completely under control.

During their time together, she had noticed a mild resistance Lex exhibited when following her orders, though with time, he had managed to learn how to hide it better. But since she already knew what to look for, she always found it.

The look in his eyes, the way he stood, even the way he spoke all hinted at the fact that he was used to authority, backed by real power. It was ironic that he, the one sibling of hers who went without his family name, carried the nobility of his royal bloodline the best.

Even now, while he tried to hide the true extent of his abilities behind modest words, his temperament did not allow his diminishing words to actually diminish his image.

All of that was but a passing thought as Cwenhild turned her attention towards the assassins who were once again nocking their arrows, and bolted off. She yelled orders as she ran, quickly reorganizing the groups formation towards attacking the assassins, and allowing the injured to retreat.

Lex was left alone to deal with the Kraven. Speaking of which, Lex turned towards the Kraven in confusion - he was expecting a swift retaliation that never came. But he immediately realized why. The Kraven had picked up its hand and was reattaching it to its body, holding it in place with a lot of slime.

"You know, it actually never occurred to me that Kraven could talk. Though I guess everyone considered this knowledge too basic to even mention to me. Anyway, hi. I'm Lex. I think we got off on the wrong foot. Why don't we just talk this out. I've always been very curious about you Kraven, I have so many questions."

The Kraven looked at Lex with its head twisted, as if looking at something strange. Lex could see it trying to move the claws on its severed hand. It seemed the reattaching process was not so easy.

"It is because inferior races cannot understand our language, or tolerate the resonance our voice brings. How curious that you can understand."

A single claw flinched, but it had not yet perfected its movement.

"Resonance? Is that what causes the spiritual attack in your voice? What is that?" The Kraven didn't answer, and turned its head to look back at its arm. It was regaining movement.

"You're right, that's a bad question. Let's focus on other, more important questions. You see, I have a unique perspective when it comes to looking at the bigger picture. I can see things that others really can't. But I still don't understand - why are the Kraven at war with the whole realm? What's the point of fighting everyone?"

Lex was walking as he talked, positioning himself between the Kraven and the rest. In a rush to save Cwenhild, he had dropped his sword somewhere, but his shield was very much still in his hand.

"According to my teachers, you don't have a biological need driving you. You don't need to slaughter all the races endlessly for your own survival, and I doubt your resource consumption is so high that you need the whole realm."

The Kraven still did not talk. It had regained almost perfect control of its hand, and its body and slowly started to once again secrete the slime that usually covered it.

"Alright, if you don't..." Lex's next question was cut short by the Kraven bursting into motion. One moment it was still, the next it had the full speed and ferocity of an avalanche. It was not running towards Lex, though, and instead its eyes glared angrily towards Cwenhild. But, regardless of how abruptly it had moved, Lex had been expecting it.

Holding out both his hands, Lex appeared in its path, causing the Kraven to smash directly into the barrier. Since it was a crash instead of an attack, Lex's barrier withstood the force with comparative ease, but Lex was still almost knocked over.

"Move out of the way, vermin!" the Kraven roared, still not even bothering to look at Lex.

"I can tell that you think you're a superior race," Lex said, his voice somehow managing to retain its sense of calm and curiosity, even as he ran to once again block the Kraven.

"But if that's the case, why are the Kraven allowing themselves to be used like puppets by all the races?"

The genuine innocence in Lex's voice as he asked was somehow more grating than the question itself.

"WE ARE NO ONES PUPPETS!" the Kraven roared, finally turning to look at Lex. "THE ENTIRE REALM TREMBLES BENEATH OUR MIGHT!"

Lex should not have considered attracting the creature's fury an accomplishment, as the Kraven smashed towards Lex's barrier with both hands, this time firmly breaking it!

Lex tried to jump back, but one of its claws firmly landed on his chest, cutting his armor to ribbons. Three ugly gashes cut open on his chest - though he did not bleed, for slime had covered them up! Well,

it was a good thing he had Ripple shell used on himself the entire time, or instead of a few gashes, he would have a hole in his body. Of course, that single attack had destroyed the shell, so unless he used the technique again, it was best not to get hit.

Lex grimaced. The Kraven's brute strength was already a hassle to face, but its claws were just too damn deadly. As for the slime... Lex looked down, then ignored it. If he tried to pull it off, it would only glue his hand to his chest. The slime would slowly poison him, but he should have some resistance to poison.

He would be able to get rid of it if he used an array, but the Kraven would not give him the time to form one. He really needed to practice with them more.

"Oh yes, the realm is firmly at war with the Kraven, and everyone is losing, and there's so much fear," Lex said blandly, as if he was that water was wet.

"And yeah, you managed to somehow take over the territory of an entire race. But since then, what have you done? There's constant progress, but it's slow. The threat of the Kraven is ever present, but you know..."

Lex used Talk to the Hand with both hands, but also jumped back as the Kraven attacked once again. He couldn't dodge too much or the Kraven would go towards Cwenhild, but he also couldn't take head-on attacks. Why was life so hard?

"But you know, like I said, I have a different perspective on things. Between all the fear, the propaganda, the fighting and mobilizing all the races' strength to fight against the Kraven, all you've really achieved... is strengthening the reign of each of the races respective King. After all, before the Kraven, none of the races had ever banded together to form a unified nation. Now... well yes, you take land each year, but it seems to me that the humans at least put up just enough resistance to slow down your approach to an acceptable level. Speaking just for the humans, all you've really done is strengthen the King's control on these lands. I can tell that much just by studying the basic history for the last few hundred years, so others should be able to tell that much as well, right? Which is why I asked... why are the Kraven acting like puppets?"

The Innkeeper

Chapter 308: A double edged sword

To a degree, Lex was speaking randomly, doing whatever it took to distract the Kraven even for a moment. But at the same time, a lot of what Lex said was based on his own speculations. He had been studying the history of the realm, and while it was mostly focused on the development of the Hum nation, while studying politics, he got bits and pieces of what was going on with the other races.

Under the very real threat of the Kraven, behind the massive war machine that the human race was morphing into, beyond even the endless waves of brainwashing and propaganda that taught the masses the very purpose of their existence was to fight off or kill the Kraven, Lex sensed a severe lack of desperation. That was not to say that the common man wasn't desperate. No, the life of the average person was lived under the shadow of an ever impending doom and a relentless struggle to do absolutely anything to overcome it one day. Even the middle, and some of the upper classes of society had their lives painted with desperation. But at the highest level, where policies and strategies were made, where the future was planned and the direction of the people's lives were decided, Lex sensed a very focused and calculated calm.

Since his background was supposed to be from Gristol, or at least that's where he had been brought from, Lex had studied the retreat and eventual fall of the human forces from there. The very calculated way in which reinforcements had been sent to the border, and not Gristol itself, and the precise way in which important forces were withdrawn while letting the main part of the army in Gristol fight to the death felt all too calculated to Lex. Had true desperation been present among those in power, they would have sacrificed as much as they could to ensure the Kraven suffered the most damage they could inflict, instead of just retreating.

Lex remembered, back when Vegus Minima had not yet come under control of the Jotun forces, how Chen and Blane went on a suicide mission to distract zombies so that their caravan could pass through without being detected. The will and determination of Lily, the head of the caravan, to send her own brother on a suicide mission reeked of the desperation to struggle and survive. The Hum nation, despite all the efforts it was putting into it, had not yet come even close to that.

There were a few other hints he picked up here and there, but the basic gist of it was, the massive realm encompassing war was not as straightforward, or dire as it seemed.

He was hoping to extract some answers from this particular Kraven, but after all that Lex said, the Kraven simply looked at him. It was not that it didn't get baited in by what Lex had said, but that it just did not bother responding. The hate and anger in its eyes though were unusual. It was more than just being taunted - or at least, that's what Lex thought.

"Alright not puppets, but what..."

Lex jumped back while using Talk to the Hand with both hands as he tried to avoid the hurtling Kraven. Lex had goosebumps all over his body and he felt with certainty that the fight was no longer the same. If the Kraven was taking things lightly before, which unfortunately for Lex it had been, it was no longer doing so now. Lex narrowly avoided the clash due to his instincts warning him in advance, but comparing speed with a Golden core cultivator was a stupid decision.

The Kraven, when it stood up straight on its legs, was twice the size of Lex but its nimbleness was remarkable. Lex was too close to it for large maneuvers and the tempo of the fight was too fast for him to ask any more questions. While Lex would have jumped completely out of the way before to dodge a punch, now he had to limit himself to moving just his torso just enough to avoid a direct hit.

It was a scene out of a movie, or perhaps an anime, as Lex dodged each of the Kravens claws perfectly, moving his body before the creature had even begun its attack. For a time, they became a blur as their bodies wove the fight into the most intricate dance, with each of them moving just right as if they had practiced the performance a million times. Instead of enemies they seemed two machines, working with mechanical precision.

In the few seconds Lex had become completely drenched in sweat, and then the sweat started rising from his body as steam. Incredibly, he could actually feel his muscles rip, ever so slightly, not from the Kraven's attacks but from the extreme duress he was putting them under. As much as he wanted to pull away and create some distance between them, the Kraven gave him no time at all.

But the seemingly splendid tango ended just as swiftly as it began when a small rock under Lex's foot crumbled. It was not enough of a difference to cause him to fall, or even stumble, but it was enough to affect his balance for a split second. It was in that split second, as if the Kraven had planned for the moment, that Lex found not its arms, but its leg kicking towards his face.

Time seemed to slow as Lex looked right at the claws, gleaming under the soft blue light, heading towards him. Lotus or no Lotus, if his brain was punctured there was no saving him. But what could he do? The beast was too fast. Even knowing how to defend, it would take too much time to actually move his limbs in place. Even if he had a technique that could save him from this situation, he could not move the spirit energy fast enough to perform a whole technique.

A million thoughts ran through his head and he thought of every technique, array, item that could move his body just slightly to get out of the way just enough.

When Lex could not think of a good solution... he settled for a bad one. With his index finger he started drawing the character for fire, and then screwed it up!

Lex's body was flung back, deep orange flames licking his body as he flew through the sky. Lex ignored the uncomfortably familiar sensation of burning skin as he quickly took a look around. Much like him, the Kraven was covered in flames, though they seemed to be dying out quickly.

He looked towards Cwenhild and the rest, and found that their battle was still ongoing. With a groan, he looked back towards the Kraven. Purely defending was getting him nowhere. As much as he wanted to avoid it, he had to attack.

The Kraven had been stunned. Not by the strength of the explosion, or some attack, but by the fact that he had taken the fight seriously and yet, the inferior creature had managed to survive. Then the feeling changed to shame. Then to anger.

It roared, lifting its head to the sky to warn even the heavens of the consequence of crossing it. Everyone in the vicinity save for Lex was affected by the tsunami-like spiritual attack carried in its voice, but that pleased the Kraven. It would be too easy otherwise. It would slowly and purposefully rip that inferior creature limb from limb.

Once again, the Kraven ran towards the inferior creature, this time at full speed. Oddly enough, the creature seemed not to be avoiding this time, and only stood still. Perhaps it had accepted the inevitable.

But just as the Kraven reached its prey, and was about to dismember it, the inferior beings' eyes changed! His pupils turned black, as if hiding a void behind them, and from the void the Kraven felt the threat of death.

There was no ray of light, no shockwave, no sound to mark the attack that came from Lex's black eyes, except maybe the guttural cry of the Kraven as it crashed into the ground, its body dragged by its remaining momentum to Lex's feet.

Lex was still standing straight, like a hunter before its fallen prey, but his sudden paleness hinted at something more. He vomited out some blood, but he wiped his mouth as he looked at the effects of Evisceration.

It was an extremely potent soul attack launched from one's eyes. All the attack needed was for Lex to be looking at whoever he wanted to attack. It could not be blocked using normal means, and would require tools or techniques specifically focused on defending the soul. Furthermore, it did not matter how close or far the enemy was. Without any indication or forewarning, the technique would land on the target as soon as it was used. Moreover, as it so happened, while Kraven had only that one physical weakness of the core in their chest, their soul was as vulnerable as everyone else's.

Under the Nascent realm, wherein most creatures lacked a means to protect their souls, such an attack was the most dangerous. But there was a good reason Lex hadn't used the technique right from the start. He had not yet completely mastered it, and as such, he would also take a lot of damage whenever he used it.

A tremor ran through the Kravens body as it lifted its head to look at Lex with murder in its eyes.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 309: Greater than the rumors

"Don't give me that look, I didn't want this. I just wanted to chat," said Lex as he held out his index finger. Right before he started to draw an array, however, he paused, withdrew the index finger, stuck out his middle finger and started to draw.

A stream of blood started to flow from Lex's nose but he ignored it, and instead continued to talk to the Kraven.

"I doubt you've had a change of heart though, right?"

The Kraven said nothing as it tried to move its body. Physically, he was still in peak condition, but his soul was just in too much pain. All the rage in the world couldn't keep it from losing its control. What's worse, though, was that the pain was slowly getting stronger. His soul was like dry wood, and a flame had started to spread from one corner. No amount of pride could douse such a flame.

"I had so many questions. Where did the Kraven come from? Were they always indigenous to this realm, did they come from somewhere else, or were they just a new species that was somehow born?"

The Kraven was growling as it struggled to gain control even through the pain. The ground gently trembled under the terrifying gurgle but Lex paid it no mind. First of all, if he did something, he would have to give up on his array. Secondly, he had read enough about soul damage to know how debilitating it was. Not everyone could brush it off the way he could.

"Once I had a random thought. What if the Kraven were actually looking for something? Like a treasure or something, right? But since they didn't know what they were looking for, they just fought all the races for their land till they found it. But I have nothing to base that thought on, so I scrapped it. I do have one, slightly more specific question though - maybe you could help me out. How did you get in here?"

Lex paused to look at the Kraven, but it was still growling, so he continued to talk. Honestly, his talking was more to just distract himself from the pain he was feeling - he did not expect the Kraven to give him any answers.

"Like, I'm sure that this realm was searched at least briefly before students were let in. How could a Kraven escape the academy's notice? Did you come in after us? Or have you been here for a long time?"

The Kraven, while still disoriented, managed to move its arm and pressed it against the ground. It was trying to pick itself up.

"What were you doing with that fire, anyway? Were you trying to capture the realm? Wait, was the reason these mountains were empty because of your coercion? If that's the case, you must have been here for a while. Did the Crystal race abandon this realm because of Kravens?"

The answer to his questions didn't matter, for he finally finished his array. It was a very simple, very focused array that served only one purpose - one that Lex would not enjoy.

A bright yellow flame formed midair, where Lex finished the array, and slowly moved towards Lex's bare chest.

The black slime covering his wounds sizzled as the flames approached and soon started boiling. Lex clenched his teeth and groaned as he allowed the flame to burn away the slime and cauterize his wounds. Somehow, he managed not to yell.

But once the array faded, Lex did not feel any better. There was poison in his system and Evisceration had caused him internal injuries. He could not even focus on whether his scars would look cool over his abs as he turned to look towards Cwenhild and the rest. Their fight was almost over, with only a few assailants left. Had he managed to defeat the Kraven before they finished their fight? It seemed so.

It would be smart to use this time to crush the Kraven's core, but he was not strong enough, and a sufficient array would take too much time. He turned his attention towards the blue flame. So long as he put that out, he would be able to absorb some energy. But he didn't know if putting out the flame would somehow affect Cwenhild taking the realm, so he did the most anticlimactic thing ever. He just waited for them to finish.

The Kraven was grunting and even yelling as it continued to lift its body, but kept on stumbling. Lex would be highly impressed if it could do anything in this state. The pain from its soul aside, the soul is literally what gave it life. With a damaged soul, its ability to continue to even stay alive was highly compromised, let alone anything else. If anything, its state was a testament to how superior Kraven actually were, for a lesser beings' soul would have already collapsed after taking such a hit.

About a minute later, the group finished their fight. Not taking any time to relax, they quickly turned to give Lex aid, and froze. The Kraven lay there, collapsed on the ground, grunting like its mind had been fractured, while Lex stood casually beside it.

The slight sweat that covered his body did not make him look exhausted, but rather was a testament to how little he had exerted himself. The char from the flame that burned his chest covered his body, hiding how pale he really was, and instead made him look like a man who had walked out of hell fire. Neither his shield nor his sword were anywhere in sight, but the way the Kraven kept wailing gave the impression that he had used his bare hands to bring the creature to its current state.

Even more impressive was the fact that none of the spiritual attacks in the Kraven's voice did anything to Lex as he just stood there casually next to it. Cwenhild had studied in great detail all the rumors about Lex, and came to the conclusion that while true, they had been somewhat embellished. Now though, she could not help but believe. In fact, at this moment, he even seemed somewhat greater than his rumors.

Ness was gravely injured. In fact, she had to sit still and let Silvia heal her, or there was a strong chance she would go into shock. But as she stared at the man standing beside humanity's greatest foe, she had to remind herself not to move for she found herself filled with lust. To be more specific, she was filled with lust for battle! Lex had been hiding his capabilities and her heart was filled with the greatest desire to find out to what degree.

Bearin was pale, and not just because of his blood loss. He disliked and picked on Lex to show his superiority, so as to let Lex know his place in the competition from Cwenhild. But all he was good for was defending and running away, so never felt seriously threatened. But now he felt threatened.

"What are you waiting for?" Lex asked, waking everyone up from their reverie. "Kill the Kraven and take the realm. It's best not to let these things wait, lest something unexpected happens."

As if listening to Lex, Cwenhild dashed to him and pierced the Kraven through its back towards its core. Her glaive, like always, cut smoothly through all opposition and abruptly ended the creature's life. There was a sense of disbelief that filled the air as the creature fell limp onto the ground, no longer grunting or moving.

That was... it? But apparently, it seemed so. Cwenhild paused to look at the Kraven's body, but could not find a single external wound. She looked towards Lex and saw tired eyes and a nosebleed, nothing else. It seemed... she had still underestimated Lex.

She wanted to talk to him but his words were right. It was best to finish things quickly lest anything else unexpected happened.

Lex saw her turn towards the blue flame and excitement surged within him. He wondered how much energy he would get.

Then, a familiar sense of danger filled his body. Before he could react in any way, though, at a speed incomprehensible to him, a figure appeared in front of him and placed a single finger on his forehead.

Lex felt the cold finger press against him, unable to tell if the sensation was actual temperature or his instincts warning him about death. Yet nothing else happened. The world seemed to have frozen and his body alongside it, with only his thoughts remaining unfrozen.

He focused towards the figure and realized two things. First, this was the same figure he had seen earlier, back in the first ruins. Second, standing in front of him was a member of the Crystal race, and he was far stronger than anything Lex could go up against.

"Do not be alarmed, young human," spoke a warm voice inside his head. "I only came to talk to you. I found your fight quite interesting. But more importantly, I was fascinated by the questions you asked."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 310: Focal point

Lex relaxed considerably, though there was just something about having a finger on his forehead that could drill into his brain at any moment that didn't let him feel completely at ease. He looked at the stranger in front of him. Besides a small gap around his eyes that showed the figure was made of crystal with a blue tint in it, he was covered in wrappings from head to toe. All it would take was a pair of sunglasses and no one would ever be able to tell the figure was from the crystal race, and would mistake him for a human.

He also noticed that by commenting on the fact that he liked Lex's questions to the Kraven, he revealed that he could understand whatever language they had been speaking. Yet, the Kraven had clearly stated that his language could not be understood by inferior races. This either meant that he was lying, which was completely possible, or that the Crystal race did not fall into the category of an inferior race.

"Do you know the answers? Do you know where the Kraven came from?" Lex asked with excitement in his voice. It was a lot harder to mask his emotions when the conversation was taking place in his own brain.

The man laughed before answering.

"Of course I know the answers, and more. In fact, the reason I'm in this realm to begin with is to erase any evidence or historical records that are not for common eyes."

Lex tried to analyze his words, but the man did not give away any details. All he had managed to convey so far was that the origin of the Kraven, or perhaps their goals, may not be such a mystery to everyone. This man at least knew the answers, but wanted to avoid spreading the information.

"I'll give you a few hints though, if you're interested in searching for the answers. Matters relating to the Kraven are more complicated than you realize. At the same time, however, those that need to know about these matters, do. So, there are two ways for you to learn the answers you seek. First, you become important enough to the people who know that they share this knowledge with you. Who they are and how you can become important to them, I will leave for you to figure out on your own. Second,

you find old ruins like the ones in this realm, but in an area that has been long forgotten. After all, any time a new Minor realm is opened, someone like me comes along to scrub the place clean. And any ruins back in the Crystal realm that are common knowledge have already been scrubbed clean. The only way for you to learn the truth through this method is to find a realm, or some ruins, on your own that no one else knows about."

For a moment, Lex did not respond as he thought about the information given to him. In the end, he could not stop himself from asking, "If this information is meant to be kept a secret, why are you telling me how to find it?"

"Why else? Because I think it will be entertaining. If you're able to learn the truth, you can find me in a city called Valesco to share the story of how you found out. If I like the story, for every secret you uncovered, I'll reveal another one. But I think you're still far away from that for now, so I'll give you a little help to speed up the process. The crown that the little girl is carrying around is called the Issle'Garb. It is useless to humans, unless they happen to follow what you call the True Path of cultivation." The crystal winked at Lex as he said that.

"Next, a small tip about Minor realms. Minor realms are a tear in space and so are exposed to a lot of chaotic energy, also known as radiation. If a Minor realm is naturally formed, this chaotic energy will soon cause the realm to collapse, but if a Minor realm is created, the creator naturally equips the realm with a way to harness the radiation, and spread it throughout the realm as spiritual energy. Some of it, however, is saved up in an area known as the focal point which is a treasure that can be used to influence the realm. If someone were to enter an unowned realm, and take control of the focal point, they can absorb all that energy. It's a safe way to quickly raise your cultivation."

The man winked again.

"After all that excess energy is absorbed, the cultivator can still cultivate much faster so long as they do so near the focal point. Of course, it can't compete with taking a new focal point but, typically, a person can only own one focal point at a time."

The man paused after that, almost as if considering if he wanted to give Lex a few more hints to help him, but in the end, decided not to make it too easy for Lex.

"I'll leave you with a letter. If you want to find me, just give that letter to one of the guards in Valesco."

With that the man vanished, as if he had never been there, and time seemed to flow again. Cwenhild was still walking towards the blue flame while the rest of the group was either healing or inspecting the dead Kraven.

In Lex's hand was a sealed letter with no name or destination written on any side. He put away the letter and took a deep breath of relief. Then he thought over the new information the man had given him.

So other than absorb the abundant energy in the realms into the system, he could absorb it himself and speed up his cultivation. This was good news, because it meant that all Minor realms would have a massive amount of energy stored up.

While Cwenhild did whatever she needed to do with the flame, Lex walked towards the dead assassins. Their demise had not been peaceful, as almost all of them had their bodies split in half, while others had been crushed or burned to death.

Lex removed their masks but, as expected, did not recognize any of them. He searched their bodies but, other than their weapons, they carried nothing else that may reveal their origins.

"Find anything?" Jovi asked, limping up to Lex.

"Not a thing," he replied impassively. In Lex's mind, he was already planning his next move. The chances that these assassins were after him was extremely slim, and he was sure Cwenhild would get to the bottom of it, so he already put it out of his mind.

"I... can probably guess their origin," said Jovi as he looked around, making sure no one was close. "I can tell you, but you have to answer a question of mine first."

Lex raised an eyebrow as he looked at Jovi with curiosity. Intrigued, he said, "ask away."

"What kind of relationship do you have with Cwenhild?"

Lex almost felt stupid for being curious. All that build up, and what was it for? Petty jealousy? Did he think they had a romantic relationship or something?

"Strictly professional. My designated profession at the academy is Survival Consultant, and based on my performance during a previous expedition, she thought I would be of assistance and hired me."

Jovi let out a breath of relief, and then actually laughed, for he didn't even realize he had been holding his breath.

"I'm sorry, I just... after you... the Kraven... I..." Jovi stopped and chuckled at his state. He collected his thoughts and asked, "are you familiar with the distinctions between academy students?"

"By profession?"

"No, not like that. Let me explain. The academy, as you probably know it, is a tool used by the King to train the leaders in every possible industry from the entire Hum nation. Its campus, as you've probably noticed, is ridiculously huge. That's because the academy covers more land than entire provinces such as Gristol. I'm not sure how many students the academy has at any one point, but last year, 30 billion students graduated from the academy. After they graduate, those students are sent throughout the realm and assume roles that help their respective communities in massive ways. But, all of that is just the most basic and out level of the academy. These students are, in a way, probationary students. Only by achieving something extraordinary before you graduate can you become eligible to become a true student. Another way of putting it would be that, only after you prove yourself, can you become a core student of the academy."

He paused, and turned to look at Cwenhild.

"She's been proving herself for a while now, and once she gains this Minor realm, she'll be eligible to become a core student. I'm guessing... the assassins were sent by someone who's competing with her for that position."