

## **Innkeeper 311**

The Innkeeper

Chapter 311: Cursed system

"Is there a quota on how many core students there can be?" Lex asked curiously.

"No, there's no quota. But there's only so many things you can do that count towards getting you a spot as a core student that are as 'easy' as taking control of a Minor realm. There will be a lot of Minor realms, and the fight for the focal point for each of them will be intense. We are probably the first ones to actually reach a focal point, all thanks to you and Patrick sensing the energy signatures. Most others will probably spend weeks scouring the realms for it."

He paused for a moment, looked at Lex, then continued.

"The real prize Cwenhild is after is not this Minor realm, despite how valuable it is. It's the admission into the core of the academy. And when she becomes a member, she can nominate 5 people to come along with her. They won't be core members themselves, but they'll still be better than normal students."

Realization dawned on Lex, and he understood now why Jovi had asked about his relationship with Cwenhild. He probably also understood the animosity Bearin had towards him. The group was full of competitors, and everyone wanted to be the one Cwenhild nominated.

"What actually happens when you become a core disciple?" Lex asked curiously. If the benefits were worth it, he would consider it as well. After all, he had plans on absorbing energy from the other Minor realms, anyway. He didn't mind claiming one if the benefits were worth it. He'd also thought of claiming the Minor realms for himself if possible, but if that opportunity arose, he'd already thought of an alternative that suited him more.

"What happens once you've become a core student is a closely guarded matter. Cwenhild may know a bit, but mostly it is kept secret. What is commonly known, however, is that every student who enters goes through explosive growth. But... most importantly... almost 30% of core students... end up becoming Immortals."

Jovi became out of breath as he said the last sentence, and his eyes widened with longing. Even Lex paused his thoughts, then shook his head. Higher realms were not his focus right now. He needed energy, and that's where his focus lay.

The process of taking control of the focal point was not quick, and it actually took a few hours before Cwenhild finished. As unfortunate as it was, as soon as she did, she ended up absorbing all the accumulated energy. Somehow, the loss of the energy hurt Lex more than the severe burns on his chest and the poison still coursing through his veins.

With the realm under her control now, the blue flame died out. But instead of the realm falling into darkness, an orb of gentle yellow light appeared in the sky, illuminating the lands.

She did not pay attention to the change in lighting and instead the first thing Cwenhild did was give Lex a complicated look full of wonder, gratitude and admiration.

"It's done, the Minor realm is under my control. I'll take you all back to get treated, and then we can discuss payment and the next steps after everyone is healed. But first, let's get rid of all those treasure hunters snooping around my new realm."

No one protested, for everyone needed medical aid, but they all looked at one another with complicated eyes. Lex especially received the most looks of envy and jealousy.

Cwenhild placed a hand on top of the dish in which the fire was lit and, after a moment, let out a sigh of relief.

"It's done, and the timing couldn't be better. Some people were actually trying to break the barrier to the sleeping Crystals. Anyway, let's get out of here."

Instead of a portal opening up for them to walk through, like last time, Lex was directly with the strange yet familiar feeling of the disconnect between his body and his consciousness. But having already experienced it once, Lex handled it like a pro.

A moment later, he was back in the familiar setting of Cwenhild's apartment. A team of doctors and emergency responders were already waiting for them and quickly swarmed the group.

Those who were in the worst conditions were immediately taken away while the slightly less injured were given support while the doctors examined them directly where they stood. While Lex could also use medical attention, there was something slightly more urgent to take care of.

Under the horrified gaze of the doctor who was looking at the massive cauterized wounds on Lex's chest, he signaled Cwenhild to meet him on the side.

"How are you doing?" she asked, now that she could better see his condition. The nonchalance on his face earlier had fooled her into thinking he took on no injuries, but seeing the fact that he had simply been ignoring his wounds worried her. From their voice to their ridiculous strength to the poisonous slime, everything about Kraven was designed to kill. In a way, surviving with injuries was more impressive than not getting injured at all.

"I have a request, a favor and business proposition for you," Lex said, after considering his words.

"I'll start with the request. I'd like to replace my payment with the crown you're carrying."

"This?" Cwenhild asked, holding up the crown that had been hung around her waist, surprised. They'd had the crown for many days, which had given her plenty of time to experiment with it, but she had discovered nothing special. She'd even worn it, and besides acting as a beautiful headpiece, it seemed to offer nothing else.

"Do you know what it does?"

"I know a little about it," Lex said, without elaborating.

Cwenhild shrugged and handed it over without much consideration. As valuable as it might be, it could not compete with the hundreds of actual sleeping Crystals in her realm, and Lex had helped tremendously. He more than earned it.

"Take it as a bonus for beating the Kraven on your own, and expect your payment in full. We cooperated well. I hope we'll be able to do so again in the future/"

"Much appreciated," he said without being pedantic. "Now, for the request. As you know, I still plan on visiting other Minor realms, but I don't want to waste too much time healing. At the same time, I can't afford to go if I'm not in top condition. I need to speed up my recovery as much as possible, and I'm guessing you'd have access to better facilities than anywhere else. If you could help me out, I'd greatly appreciate it."

"Consider it done," Cwenhild said. Even if she didn't believe Lex was her half brother, he had proved himself extremely valuable and she would have wanted to maintain an excellent relationship with him. If she could use something as simple as resources to win over his favor, she'd consider it a bargain. "But it still won't be a miraculous recovery. First the doctors will need to check your condition to figure out the extent of your injuries, and based on that, we can move forward."

"Not a problem. Finally, the business proposal. So I was thinking..."

As Lex explained his plan to her, she gave him a befuddled look, which then fluctuated between absolute disgust and amazement. If he could pull off what he was thinking, it would be the most broken way to earn money she had ever encountered. She had to be a part of this.

\*\*\*\*\*

Osaka, Japan, Earth

Souta Ito slowly wiped the blood from his Katana, ignoring the dozens of dismembered bodies around him. A faint smell of death had begun to envelope the area, but the coming storm clouds should wash away the stain of his sins.

In the distance, a crowd had gathered as they watched, horrified but at the same time, numbed.

For a time, while the Council of New Order ruled Earth, Souta had purged Japan of all external influence, and taken control. The fact that every time he overcame an obstacle, or killed a strong opponent, his system would give him generous rewards was in fact just a bonus to him.

The people of Japan had long since become used to his ruthlessness and brutality. Most looked at him with disgust and hate, though they did their best to hide it. Some formed a zealous cult, worshiping his actions of bringing Japan back to its roots. What no one knew was that, deep inside, this was not what he wanted.

Souta had lived a simple life before receiving the Samurai system, and lived in a small town. His ambitions extended as far as retiring his parents and starting a family, and nothing more. When he received his system, instead of glory and wonder, it brought him hell. The reason was simple.

The Samurai system made him incredibly strong, and as a system that directly increased his strength and combat abilities, made it so that there was no danger he could not face. But it came with one great flaw. In the old days, samurais were retainers under their feudal lords. Similarly now, as a Samurai, his system made him unquestionably loyal to his 'feudal lord'. Unfortunately, through a twist of fate, he had pledged his loyalty to an extremely ambitious man who, while ignorant of the system, understood full well how to take advantage of Souta's strength.

This man, who went only by the name Suzuki, had tasted the power of ruling, before Fernanda retook control of the Earth and stabilized everything. Now though, he spent all his time venting his anger on the weak, through Souta, of course.

"Come Souta," the extremely well dressed man said as he walked away from the bloody scene, even less bothered by the surrounding gore. "We have a new commission - someone named Larry who's been hiding at the Midnight Inn. For now though, we'll only collect information on the target. I've heard security is very tight at the Inn."

Souta said nothing, and followed Suzuki, his expression indifferent. He had learned to hide his emotions from his lord. Until he found a way to regain his freedom from this cursed system, he needed to hide as much as he could.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 312: Error

Lex sat cross-legged, wearing an oxygen mask in a tube of a viscous green liquid. His recovery was a lot slower this time around, considering the fact that the Lotus on his back wasn't helping. In the first place, it had helped last time due to a misunderstanding and Lex didn't want to ask it for help again unless the situation was dire. Thus, he was stuck at the mercy of this healing liquid.

The greatest obstacle to his recovery was the poison in his blood. As he expected, his body was very resistant to the effects of the poison, but resistant was not the same as immune. Fortunately, if there was one thing that humans were well prepared for, it was anything related to Kravens.

The green liquid was not exactly comfortable to sit in and caused Lex's body to itch all over. But, for the sake of a swift recovery, he bore the inconvenience in silence, and instead turned his attention towards the Inn.

The first stage of Lady Cosmos finally ended, and a mere 400,000 contestants would move onto the next stage. This phase of the competition was filled with trials that contestants had to complete in small teams. Lex had given Mary 5 million MP to help Audrey form any kind of trials she wanted, and a short glance at the venue showed them clearing some kind of life-sized maze that required ingenuity and teamwork.

The size of the audience for Lady Cosmos had not decreased with the number of contestants, but had rather increased vastly. For the first time, Lex noticed a couple of Earth Immortals amongst his guests at the Inn. They were not mixed in with the crowd, but rented entire small villages and stayed there with their followers.

They could not be considered his average guests, but he needed to upgrade the Inn to better cater to them as well.

Another aspect of the Inn he was concerned about was security. Things had finally stabilized. This did not mean that there were no incidents, but that the frequency of incidents stabilized and that the hired security was working well with the Inns own security to handle things smoothly. In fact, it was while he was monitoring his guards that he noticed something strange.

One of the Security rooms functions was picking up on malicious intent, either towards the Inn or even its guests. This feature allowed them to often prevent an incident from taking place and was one of the main reasons that the Inn had managed to keep the peace. After all, more than once, a guest had approached one of the contestants from Lady Cosmos with the intention to harass or blackmail, and they had been dealt with swiftly.

It was this feature that picked up a certain pair spying on Larry, with the intention of collecting information on him, and harming him once he left the Inn. Since they had done nothing wrong, they were not punished, but Chad, Gerards deputy, sent a few guards their way to 'advise' them to honor their guests' privacy.

This was very routine, and Lex would have forgotten the incident the moment he looked away, but while he was scanning them, he saw something that he had actually forgotten about. Of the pair, one had an unusual status.

Name: \*&%error%&\*

Age: \*&%error%&\*

Sex: \*&%error%&\*

Cultivation Details: \*&%error%&\*

Midnight Inn Prestige Level: 1

Remarks: This man is pouting with his eyes. Maybe some Saturn cake will cheer him up - and form an addiction that will keep him coming back for more!

Lex frowned as he recalled the last few times he had seen an error message with his scan. First was his unofficial employee, John, and second was the Celestial, who was his bodyguard. They had been enigmatic figures with a mysterious past and unknown origin, so he would understand it if there was something unusual about them that eluded the system. After all, the system had proven that it was not perfect, and there were many loopholes in its functionality.

But Lex had seen enough anime to recognize Japanese when he heard it, even if it was automatically being translated for him. So now the question was, what did these three have in common that could elude the systems scan? Or did they each have separate reasons for avoiding the scans results?

"Mary, I want you to keep a close eye on that guest," he said, pointing towards Souta. "I want you to collect all the information on him and save it for me. While you're at it, compile all the information we have on John, as well as my bodyguard, during the Midnight Games."

Lex made a mental note to consider the cause before turning his attention to other matters. The group of workers he'd hired earlier to plan and design the village had submitted their first report, and Lex took a look at it.

They had proposed many additions to the village, but had also suggested some changes to the already existing design as well. They studied areas with highest and lowest density of guests and tracked their movements, as well as analyzed why those were more or less popular areas for guests.

Things such as attractions, restaurants, parks, and residential areas were generally high density areas, but some were more than others. The reason was the easier flow of traffic. All of Lex's designs had an air of Earth about them, but the best or most common forms of traffic flow were not necessarily the best for other demographics.

The plan they proposed was only the first step in overhauling the entire village - this being only the first because they wanted to study how the changes affected the flow and distribution of guests.

The first change was a major one. Lex, in his pursuit to make the village seem as if it had grown and expanded organically, had placed the various districts slightly haphazardly. The planners proposed small but significant alterations that would make it easier to have a network of roads and paths connected to each area, while at the same time organizing each area into smaller sub-districts.

Furthermore, rather than tile walking paths or usual roads, different species of grass were used to mark different paths. A network of canals was also added alongside these roads in many districts, linking them to the underwater portion of the village.

Moreover, transport through only subways or golf carts and such was also distinctly Earth like, and entirely unnecessary. All transport vehicles were designated an aerial level, and would not obstruct the crowds on the ground. From various silent pods, to booths on ground that would levitate once occupied, to entire small tram like cabins became the main mode of transport. Not only were they extremely quick and silent, through clever use of formations, the level at which all of these vehicles would be traveling became almost invisible, revealing their existence only when focused on.

The random clutter of the city suddenly seemed to take on a more organized look and feel. The massive features of the village, such as the colosseum or giant pagoda, were no longer intrusions, but rather attractions, becoming sufficiently distanced from residential and recreational areas.

Impressed by the detail of their proposal, Lex decided to implement all of it, the complete changes only costing him 3 million MP. Considering the fact that Lex now had 1.1 billion MP, he considered it pocket change.

Next, he looked at the changes they suggested for the floating portion of the village. They believed that keeping the floating portion stationary was a waste, and proposed to turn it into an independent district of the village that could move through the air over the village. Not only that, the floating village would play an integral role in controlling the climate of the village down below.

They replaced the former method of arrival to the floating village and instead created a few terminals through which guests would be brought or taken away. They also reduced the use of glass, and instead added greater elements of nature, making it seem like a paradise, hiding in the clouds.

All kinds of birds made their homes here, so an orchard was also added which would become the designated spot for wildlife.

Lex once again approved all the suggestions without any alterations and, with a snap of his fingers, the system started implementing the changes. The guests were initially alarmed, but then watched in awe as the village moved around them, improving right under their eyes.

The frequent guests took the changes in their stride, but the millions of new guests observed in awe. Some of the workers revealed that this was the work of the enigmatic Innkeeper that none of them had seen, and they all began to wonder what kind of a figure this Innkeeper was. The Immortals especially were alarmed. It was not everyday they encountered a sight that could amaze them.

## The Innkeeper

### Chapter 313: Right on the nose

It took nearly eight hours for the poison to be cleansed from Lex's body. He wasn't completely healed by the time that was done, but he was well enough that he exited the tube to complete some of his other tasks. During this previous expedition, though he had a sword, he had not ended up using it even once. He had practiced using it a little, but the matter of fact was that he was nowhere near competent enough to use it skillfully.

Heck, he had only been a cultivator less than a year, or a little more - he had lost track of time - but he had been so busy during that time that something like training methodically and systematically was

impossible. He had gotten better with his gun, but only because his enhanced senses made using it simple. The amount of time he had trained was miniscule.

As such, for now at least, carrying such a weapon was not feasible for him. Perhaps later, when he had the time to train, he would come back to it. Now, though, he decided to go even simpler.

He made his way to the weaponsmith who he previously used to work for and used his newfound wealth to purchase a pair of black gloves. Other than providing basic protection for his hands, the gloves provided him with a series of benefits due to their enchantments. The gloves conducted spiritual energy, and so would not get in the way of his array casting, while another enchantment would stabilize his hands and fingers to help his precision while drawing characters.

It also had a simple yet powerful shockwave ability. Lex could store spiritual energy into it and activate it while hitting something to launch the shockwaves.

He also bought new armor and gear. He no longer lived with the delusion that either the armor or gear would serve him for long, so he went for items with greater immediate benefits rather than that could serve him long term. After all, it was all too common for him to lose or break whatever gear he had. He still couldn't get over the loss of his Fancy Monocle.

With that done, he returned to Cwenhild. While he was recovering, she had submitted the report of her success, as well as the numerous sleeping Crystals in her new realm. Even the admin for the academy had been startled by the news. An investigation was ongoing and this would most likely turn into a bargaining chip for the academy with the Crystal race. It was not easy to earn their favor, and so they would be sure to make the best use of this opportunity.

Suffice to say, once her realm was thoroughly explored, and the scope of her situation was understood, Cwenhild would be appropriately rewarded. Entrance into the core of the academy was all but guaranteed for her at this point.

Of course, she had also silently and secretly sent information about this event to her mother. Who knew, maybe this could prompt the woman to even come back to the academy, which was something Cwenhild would have enjoyed. After all, there were certain things she could only do with her mother around. Cwenhilds ambitions were no less than her mothers.

Of course, none of that had anything to do with Lex. What he was after was something else entirely.

"This is the list of Minor realms with Foundation realm only designations," Cwenhild said, as she handed Lex a list. "A detailed report of what's happening inside is hard to get, as currently the only source of information is the students who have left. There is one, however, that I think fits your criteria well, though I personally am not so sure about it.

"It has the highest chances that no one has gotten even close to figuring out where the focal point is because the realm is overrun by Imps. And when I say overrun, I'm being modest. Tens of thousands of imps occupy this realm, all part of various warring clans that, I assume usually fight each other, but as soon as the students appeared they all attacked them immediately. There have been dozens of casualties confirmed, with hundreds of missing students, presumed dead or captured. There's a massive battle that's been going on for the past few hours between students and thousands of imps. It is by far the most chaotic realm so far."

"Ah such terrible news, so many innocent students coming to harm. I suppose it is my responsibility to go and end their suffering by taking over the realm and ejecting them from whatever prisons the imps have kept them in."

Cwenhild gave him a bland look, as if she was not at all impressed by his humor.

Lex chuckled and said, "Don't worry, just have a buyer ready for me by the time I come back. You're sure there are no reports of Kravens in the realm? Or any other Golden core creatures?"

"No, that Kraven was an anomaly that the academy is looking into. Such a thing should not happen. As for other Golden core creatures, that's entirely possible. In such matters, as long as the disadvantage is not overwhelming, the academy does not interfere. But Lex, are you really sure you want to do this alone? You've experienced firsthand how difficult it was to claim a realm."

"Don't worry. Even if I can't get this one, I'm sure I can manage at least one. As for going alone, I think it's for the best. No one will be looking for or expecting a lone person to take a realm. Besides, if I don't need to worry about warning others about danger all the time, and only have to look after myself, I'll be much faster."

Cwenhild did not argue. She did not believe in being pedantic, and showing concern for his wellbeing once was already uncharacteristic for her usual self. Besides, Lex's business proposal of capturing realms, and then instead of reporting it to the academy, selling them to students who are pursuing the core of the academy was an extremely... lucrative idea. It was madness to be honest. Who would value money over getting to the core of the academy? Lex apparently. If anything, it seemed he thought of it as an inconvenience to avoid.

She shook her head and then signaled one of her attendants. An academy administrator came into the room and, after being informed of which one, opened a portal for Lex to the realm. By going to the realms from Cwenhilds apartment instead of the public entrances, they could better hide their movements. After all, if the academy registered the achievement of claiming a realm under Lex's name, the value of selling the realm would diminish drastically.

Lex was all too familiar with the sensation of passing through a portal by now and took it in his stride. He was looking forward to the next few days. He had been planning on going to Minor realms in search of energy reserves anyway, but now he could gain double the benefits.

The moment he arrived in the Minor realm, however, a massive hammer the size of a car door smashed him directly in the face. It happened too fast for him to even sense, let alone dodge.

His body was thrown in the air but the disorientation lasted only a moment, and he gathered himself before he even landed. He didn't even need to glance around to realize that he had arrived right in the middle of a massive battle.

Lex crashed into a few imps and while the force of the crash severely damaged them, Lex quickly hopped onto his feet to look around. Hundreds of students were fighting against thousands of imps, as well as trolls.

Lex was already familiar with these two races, as he had studied them in his classes. Imps and trolls were both humanoid creatures, but drastically different in size. Imps were usually around 3 feet (0.9 meters) in size, and were feral creatures with only basic intelligence. They were, however, feral in nature and carriers of various diseases. Trolls were usually anywhere between 8 to 12 feet (2.4 - 3.7 meters) in size and were even dumber, making them easily manipulated by the imps. They boasted mild immunity to spiritual energy and great physical strength.

Still, the academy students were not pushovers and the numerical disadvantage did not deter them.

Yet the fight was a wild skirmish, with each doing whatever they saw fit, which only served to increase the chaos.

Lex paid no attention to any of that, though. Masterfully dodging any attacks coming his way, he rubbed his nose that had taken the brunt of that hammer, and waited for the Lotus to tell him about any nearby energy reserves.

He was not disappointed, and as soon as he got a direction, he used Hearts marathon to bolster his speed and ran off. The one thing he had learnt while helping Cwenhild was that, as long as he only faced those in the Foundation realm, he had little to fear. That's what gave him his confidence in trying to claim multiple realms. Now, he had to put his skills to the test.

\*\*\*\*\*

Origin realm, Pental Galactic Battlefield

Ragnar's command carrier did not alter its paths as it tore through asteroids bigger than Earth, though it had begun to slow down. Six other command carriers were stationed on the border of this battlefield; a void without any stars, let alone star systems and planets. Only an endless field of rocks and desolation as far as the eye could see, with no indication of what this region had once been.

This would be the first time, in a long time, that Ragnar would face an enemy other than demons. But just as that was a war he had to face, so too was this. But, unlike the clash humans had against Devils, which was personal, this battlefield was one they were obligated to fight in, so long as they took advantage of the Henali conventions.

Somewhere else in the command carrier, a tired Alexander looked out into space. The former golden child of destiny was now naught but an exhausted soldier. Yet, hidden deep in his eyes was a fire that burned brighter than the stars. So long as he was alive, the universe had not beaten him.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 314: Flow

When the command carrier appeared close enough to the battlefield, Ragnar retreated to his private chambers and enabled all the security measures the room came with. Soon he heard the sound of a notification he was waiting for and sat down on a throne in the center of his room.

When he sat, his surroundings seemed to change, and he was no longer in his room, but instead he found himself in a cave, facing several other men sitting in similar thrones. This was not holographic projection; the throne had special enchantments that only he could activate which would lead him to a nearby Minor realm, temporarily formed just for the purpose of holding secret meetings.

Only other generals of the Jotun empire had access to such thrones, or those with authority even superior to the generals. This was because every word they spoke had major repercussions on the entire empire, and no chances could be taken for their conversations to be overheard. Even their casual conversations required sufficient authority for one to hear.

"Oh my, we have the honor of Hell's butcher joining us today. Don't tell me the Devils have decided to interfere here as well," said one of the six other men in the hall teasingly.

"You must remember, he is not just a butcher," said another one. "When his rank was raised to general, his Highness Serafol called him Son of the Empire. Where the empire has a need, the son will appear to fulfill it. But that does not bode well for us."

Ragnar only smiled mildly while the other generals joked about. Even the youngest of them were tens of thousands of years older than him. He, at a mere three and a half thousand years, was one of the youngest generals in the entire empire. Furthermore, he always had a soft spot for other humans. His ferocity would usually be reserved for demons and devils, or any of the other races that targeted humans. Now, among his peers in rank and strength, Ragnar did not mind filling the role of being the younger brother.

"This is no time for joking about," a harsh voice cut through the cave. A man walked in from the darkness, his face locked in a stern expression even as he spoke. All generals recognized this being, for it was no man but the spirit body of a sentient treasure that was stored in the center of the Pental Galaxy.

"Now that Ragnar is finally here, I can begin your briefing. Things have changed, and drastically. While it seems that everything has been as usual on the battlefield, we've gotten reports of anomalies. Within the last five years, over 300 star systems just outside the quarantine zone have mysteriously been destroyed."

The battlefield was actually a specific zone just at the border of their galaxy, where this war was fought. What was happening beyond this border, or in the galaxy opposite to them, was none of their concern, their only job was to ensure their so called 'enemies' did not sneak into their galaxy. It was not easy, but at least it was not complicated since their enemies would only come from a specific region of space, so there was no threat of being backstabbed.

Outside the battlefield was a quarantine zone, which was a no development zone, in case the battle ever spread to those regions. Yet now there was trouble right outside the quarantine zone. Typically, it should not have been possible for anyone to sneak past them. Which meant there were two most likely possibilities: either their 'enemies' had somehow gotten reinforcements which were gearing up to attack the generals from the back and front, or that they had discovered a method to sneak past them. Whichever one it was, it was bad for them.

"It gets worse," the man said, his expression somehow becoming even more grave. "We suspect... they're nurturing a Jorlam."

All six generals stood up from their thrones, shock and a hint of fear showing in their eyes, Ragnar included. A Jorlam was an absolutely massive creature born in space such that the average star would be smaller than its eyeball. They were so extremely, ridiculously rare, that in the entire history of the Jotun empire, let alone encountering one, even rumors of a living one had not been heard. If the enemy was 'nurturing' one that meant it had already been born, and that was already too dangerous. The entire Pental galaxy was at risk of being destroyed.

"We need proof of the Jorlam before we can ask for aid from the Henali alliance, but not only do we have no idea where it might be hiding, we have no way to get close without being detected."

A heavy silence filled the cave while everyone absorbed the information, and were waiting for the spirit body to continue, when suddenly, Ragnar had an idea.

"I may have a solution," Ragnar said, attracting disbelieving looks not only from his peers but from the spirit body as well. "News has probably not spread to you all, so first let me update you on my most recent assignment. There is an Inn..."

\*\*\*\*\*

Escaping from the battlefield was actually harder than Lex expected, though it was mostly due to the difficult terrain. Towards the edge of the battle, the ground turned soft and malleable, but his foot didn't actually sink in. The ground itself would stretch under the weight of his body. It was like running on elastic rubber.

In the end, he didn't even bother avoiding attacks because they did next to no harm. He just focused on maintaining his balance and getting away. This Minor realm was extremely desolate, even away from the battle. He had yet to see any vegetation of any kind, and so he could only imagine what the imps and trolls used for sustenance. Instead he saw unusual landscapes and terrains that made no sense. Currently he was standing at the base of a mountain range, except, unlike a normal mountain range that would extend across the land, this one... was shaped like an upside-down pyramid and rose into the sky.

Out of one mountain, grew three that rose vertically, and out of those, three more grew out and so on. The strange thing was that the base of each mountain was extremely small, and instead grew wider the higher it rose into the sky. Stranger still was that, considering the massive structure filling up the sky, it should be extremely dark where Lex stood - but it wasn't.

Each of the mountains was covered in crystals that refracted light so perfectly, sending beams of light to other crystals which then spread the light even further, that it was as bright as midday. He did not even try to understand how this formation came about, or whether it was natural or artificial. He just identified his path towards the energy source, which was somewhere in this range. To be clear, he wouldn't have to climb the mountains vertically. There were roads carved into the mountain sides just like one would see in any mountain that suffered from a flow of traffic.

Once he got a good idea of where he was headed, he didn't embark immediately. Although he had confidence in his defense and other abilities, there was nothing wrong with being fully prepared. Which brought his attention to the crown hanging by his waist. He held it in his hands and observed it.

As far as appearance was concerned, it was wholly unremarkable. There were no gems or intricate designs. It was a simple gold band with a few ridges throughout. But the function mattered more than appearance. He channeled his spiritual energy into it, but nothing seemed to happen. The energy circled through the crown and entered back into his body. The fact that the energy was able to seamlessly reenter his body was unusual, but not enough to be of any use. The Crystal man he had met earlier told him those following the True path could use it, so maybe he had to wear it to actually use it.

He hesitated for a moment, then carefully set the crown on his head. A gentle current of spiritual energy flowed around him as it was absorbed into his body, then directed towards the crown. A few moments later, the crown vibrated and activated.

Lex's senses merged with the crown as if it weren't a piece of jewelry but rather a part of his body. He could feel the crown act as an external meridian wrapped around his forehead with a stream of spiritual energy constantly flowing through it. But, most importantly, Lex felt a familiar, yet somehow foreign sensation overcome him. He entered a state of 'flow'.

It had been a long time since he naturally entered that state of 'flow', and he could immediately tell the difference between the state induced by the crown and the natural one. He had not yet entered the flow since he entered the Foundation realm, but he suspected that the benefits it had on him would have increased manifold. Comparatively, this artificial state still calmed his mind, accelerated his thoughts and helped him gain remarkably precise control over his body - more than he used to back when he was in the Qi training realm at least - but he was all too aware that it was artificial.

This would be extremely helpful to him in forming arrays quickly, as well as boost the effects of his instincts as well.

However, Lex was not focused on the benefits he had gained. Instead, he began to wonder what this state of flow really was. After all, he assumed this crown was an incredibly special tool based on the emphasis it received in the chamber they took it from. It was a great piece of equipment that could only be used by the Crystal race and those on the True path, and yet, it could only provide a pale imitation of something Lex had achieved naturally, albeit, he could not turn it on as and when he wished. It must really be something special. He would have to put it to the test.

## The Innkeeper

### Chapter 315: Mental clarity

Taking even steps, Lex walked slowly up the path on the mountain, the fingers of his left hand dragging against the wall in the path cut into the mountainside. At his current pace, it would take Lex years to reach the focal point, but his mind was not on that. Instead, currently, he was doing multiple things at the same time.

The state of 'flow' was remarkable, and gave Lex the mental clarity he needed to sort out various matters, as well as notice many things he had overlooked. The first thing he noticed, though he could not really blame himself for this, was that due to how busy he had been, Lex had made no progress at all in his cultivation. Lex felt great satisfaction in his achievements so far, and at his amazing performance in

general, but he had only just stepped onto the starting line of the Foundation realm. His performance would improve exponentially so long as his cultivation also improved.

But for that Lex needed time he didn't have, so he directly dismissed the thought. The second thing he noticed was a peculiarity of Regal Embrace. It was excellent at helping him learn defensive techniques, but caused him great issues if he tried to learn offensive techniques. Yet it gave him no benefits or obstacles when he was performing either defensive or offensive arrays. The difference was that arrays were not fueled by his own spiritual energy despite being drawn using it, which is where the influence of Regal Embrace vanished.

This helped him determine that his spiritual energy had certain behavior. But what was the underlying cause in the difference in behavior? It wasn't like the cultivation technique could read his mind to determine what kind of technique he was using, or else he could just say he's learning a defensive technique while learning attacks. After all, self hypnosis was a thing. That meant there was something on a fundamental level about the makeup of these techniques that he did not know about that influenced how his spiritual energy behaved. If he could figure out what that was, he could overcome the obstacle of his techniques.

A simple analogy of the situation could be made using magnets. If Lex had two magnets in his hand, and wanted to join them, but kept trying to do so by pushing the north pole of each magnet towards one another, he would face great resistance. Yet the same situation could easily be resolved if just used the opposite pole for one of the magnets. The situation with Lex's techniques was no doubt much more complex than simply swapping poles, but as long as he understood the difference, he would be able to channel the speed at which he learned defensive techniques into all other kinds of techniques.

This, again, was a topic that required a lot of time to conduct research, and so Lex pushed it to the back of his mind. The next thing he noticed was his greatest problem with arrays. While drawing one, he could do almost nothing else, and was stuck in place. This made sense, after all, the characters would remain stuck in the place where he drew them, right? That was actually incorrect. If his control over his spiritual energy was enough he could make an invisible platform on which he could draw the characters. That way, he could control the platform to move with him.

This level of multitasking was simple for him in a state of flow, but without it, it was still beyond him. This let him appreciate how truly skilled Alexander was, back when he was fighting in the Midnight Games. He would use different spiritual and body techniques simultaneously. He did not even have the advantage Lex had of being able to use all techniques with the same energy, and would have to make sure to fuel his techniques with the relevant energy. Yet not only was he seamless, he controlled six floating blades behind him at the same time as all those techniques.

Truly it was only when you became more familiar with something that you could appreciate the difficulty it involved.

But Lex was getting sidetracked. His focus had been on arrays. While drawing, his speed and stability greatly depended on his finger, but did he really need to use his finger like a pen? Instead of moving his finger to draw, couldn't he directly control the spiritual energy to take the relevant shape?

That was the experiment he was conducting as he slowly walked. The state of flow was not a miracle, and Lex didn't automatically become able to achieve the task. It did, however, speed up the learning process endlessly.

This was all Lex had been doing consciously. That did not, however, mean that Lex did not leave any tasks for his subconscious mind. It occurred to him that so far he had been treating his instincts as a radar for danger, but was that all they were limited to? He hypothesized that it was not so.

The concept of identifying danger or a threat signified that his instincts had a sense of self, and could gauge what was good or bad for him. In that case, his instincts should not only react to harmful things but also notify him if there was something beneficial to him nearby. In simple terms, along with being a radar for danger, his instincts should also work as a radar for treasures that were beneficial to him.

It was for this reason that he was running his fingers across the wall. He was using as many of his senses as he could to absorb all the information from the environment. From the toughness of the rock, to the natural grooves formed by different layers of rock, to the temperature, all of it could end up playing a part in guiding him.

Everything he did portrayed a lack of urgency, which was the opposite of what he should have been doing, considering he was in a rush to gain the realm. But in the state of flow, Lex had a slightly different perspective. In this state, his emotions were considerably numbed, though not completely, so he felt no anxiety or stress to influence his decision making. He simply retained his objective and made the necessary decision.

As things were, he was already late to this realm by many days. There was a chance that no one had found the focal point yet, but based on the premise of assuming his competitors were extremely competent, it was most likely they had a lead on him. The more this was so, the more Lex had to remain calm. If he rushed, he could easily fall into any traps they had set for following competitors, or give away

his position. He also believed that, based on the same premise, if his competitors had not yet taken the focal point, it meant they likely faced some obstruction. It was best to gain a full understanding of the situation before making any decisions.

In the end, Lex maintained his slow tempo for a couple of hours, and only sped up when he made decent progress with drawing arrays while walking. By increasing his speed, he also increased the difficulty of drawing the array, but at this point, it was all training for him.

The pattern of maintaining a certain speed until he got accustomed to drawing arrays, then speeding up, continued well into the next day.

Just as he was due to speed up further and launch into a fast jog, he instead stopped. It happened. His instincts were acting up, and this time instead of danger, it was greed Lex felt. He felt it in his entire body, from his gut to his muscles, down to his very bones! There was something nearby that his body was craving!

He took a short break to replenish his stamina before launching into a run. The closer he got, the stronger the sensation became, to the point where his physical desire almost started to interfere with the calm the state of low provided.

At a certain point, he had to step away from the path, and had to climb the mountain with his hands and legs. With the dexterity of a spider, Lex crawled up the mountain until he found a small, hidden tunnel. His body blocked the light from the reflecting crystals as he entered the tunnel, but he didn't really need his sight to guide him.

At the opposite end, he exited to a small clearing with a cozy little hut carved into the mountain beside a small fountain. Crystal clear water seemed to drip from the fountain, but evaporated before it could fall to the ground.

The hairs on his body stood up and he could feel his body longing for that water. Curious to see what its effects were, he put his hand into the fountain, only to see his hand sucking in the water like a dry sponge.

Then his fingers began to turn to stone.

## The Innkeeper

### Chapter 316: Exhausted

Panic set in, and Lex tried to withdraw his hand, but he was frozen still. He had no choice but to watch as the skin on his hand slowly turned gray, the color cascading up his hand. At the same time, the water from the fountain was quickly being absorbed, and by the time his elbow turned to stone, the fountain was empty.

Besides panic, Lex felt immense confusion because the difference between what he was experiencing and what his body was telling him was different. Pure and complete satisfaction filled him to his very core.

Before he could think further on the subject, his fingers cracked, and then, as if the stone had been nothing more than an outer layer, it started to fall, revealing his hand, completely unharmed.

A moment later, it was as if nothing had happened at all. Lex felt no mystical warmth run down his hand, or noticed any change to his cultivation or anything else. What just happened?

Unsure of how to react, almost instinctively, Lex clenched his right hand into a fist and punched the mountain wall. With a loud bang, his fist buried itself directly into the wall.

Now Lex was really surprised, because there was no way he was that strong. This entire mountain seemed to be one giant stone, carrying the weight of several other mountains. How could it be so fragile? Yet the evidence was in front of him.

He pulled out his hand to find it completely unharmed. He blew on his knuckles and dust flew off, revealing his unharmed skin. To test things further, he clenched his left hand and punched the wall to the predictable result of absolutely nothing happening. Let alone crushing through the stone, there was not even a single crack.

Excitement gleamed in his eyes as he turned to look at the now dry fountain. Oddly enough, there was no water source, so where had the water been coming from?

As if to answer his question, a single, smooth green pebble at the bottom of the fountain spurted out a single drop of water. When he touched the drop, the tip of his finger turned to stone once again.

"Haha, this is excellent," he said as he picked up the green pebble. It was considerably heavier than he expected, but still within a tolerable range. He took the water bottle from his backpack, drank it in its entirety, and then dropped the pebble in there. He had picked up something incredible without much hassle. Wait a minute, was it supposed to be so easy?

Lex looked towards the stone hut, but it seemed uninhabited. A brief investigation revealed that the hut was empty, with no indication of anyone having been here in a while.

Lex shrugged and decided to take a break before continuing. He had been wearing the crown for a long time, and could feel the strain on his mind. One power nap later, Lex left the clearing and headed towards the focal point. He did not notice, as he left, that the bottle he had placed the pebble in had turned to stone.

He picked up his speed now, even going as far as stopping his array practice. He had finished his water and had only a small amount of rations left. When he had packed his gear for this trip, he had packed enough with the assumption that he could supplement his reserves by foraging or hunting, but this realm had yet to show him a single plant and the creatures he encountered... were simply too disgusting to be edible.

But, with the crown on his head, and his thoughts much clearer, it did not take long for him to come up with a possible solution. He found it too coincidental that just as he tried to attune his instincts towards treasure, he found some yet had never given him any such indications before. The most likely possibility was that he could channel his instincts towards something, instead of relying on them to work on their own. Danger was probably the only thing that would automatically trigger them. To put this theory to the test, he firmly made his mind to search for food while he continued to journey towards the focal point.

Speaking of which, his journey was by no means simple or uneventful. The mountain was infested with 3 feet (0.9 meters) long lizards that had bodies as hard as rocks. Fighting them off was extremely tedious, as Lex could ultimately only use brute strength to defeat them. They were too numerous to attempt Evisceration on, as it would only target a single enemy at a time, and they moved and attacked too quickly for him to complete an entire array.

The ridiculous strength of his right arm ended up being his saving grace, and he became somewhat of an expert in this real-life version of whac-a-mole.

The lizards, of course, did not provide Lex with any meat once disposed of because as soon as they died, their bodies could crumble to dust. At least it provided him an opportunity to practice his newfound strength. That, alongside the fact that he had chosen enchanted gloves instead of a weapon, would make anyone think Lex had pre-planned this.

Several hours later, when Lex ate the last of his rations without finding anything to replenish his supply, he frowned slightly despite the crown dimming his usual emotions. It was not like he couldn't survive without food or water, just that he would continuously get weaker. In case he encountered a tough fight, it would put him at a disadvantage.

How he missed the days when he could just buy stuff from the gift shop.

With a sigh, Lex pushed away any distractions and picked up his speed. He made a mental note to ask Cwenhild if there were any storage space items or easier way to transport goods available for sale. The convenience of the Inns inventory was remarkable, but it was limited by the system's various rules. If he could get something like that without the restrictions, it would solve many of his problems.

Lex's journey through the mountains continued for another four days. He did not find anything to replenish his food supply or his water, and he dared not drink the water produced by the green pebble without testing it on another creature first. Instead, he repeatedly used the water to wash his body. Now, his entire right arm and left fist had undergone the strange process of turning to stone and converting back.

The boost in strength was extremely welcome, for he was beginning to feel weak otherwise. It was not severe yet, and Lex could last much longer due to the fact that he was a body cultivator, but undoubtedly the decline had begun.

But at last, on the final day, he approached the focal point. A massive arch was built right on the side of one of the mountains, revealing a tunnel that led deep within the mountain's core. The tunnel was littered with corpses of imps and trolls, and sounds of an ongoing fight could be heard from deep within.

The fact that someone had made their way here was within Lex's expectations. In fact, it was probably a good thing because he would have had real trouble facing so many enemies. Utilizing his arrays would have been the only option available to him.

Lex reached into his backpack and retrieved an item given to him by Cwenhild: a silver mask. Since they were doing something shady, they should follow the usual protocols and hide Lex's identity.

Putting on the silver mask, Lex proceeded into the tunnel, doing his best to avoid making too much noise. The tunnel, still well lit by the reflected rays of light, took Lex nearly half an hour to cross with his reduced speed, and opened up into a massive cave.

It was completely bare, giving Lex no option to hide from the battle taking place. Nearly 20 humans were fighting over 30 trolls, with no imps having survived the battle so far. Lex could not see the focal point, leading him to believe it was right in the center.

Tired, and more mentally drained than anything else, Lex let out a deep sigh. But, the next moment, he looked extremely energized as he used Hearts Marathon and dashed right into the fight.

He did not actually mean to participate in the battle which, alongside guidance from his keen intuition, allowed him to avoid most of the trolls. It was only when he reached the middle of the battlefield that his presence was noticed, both by the trolls and the humans.

But none of it mattered. In front of him was the focal point, an oddly shaped rock balanced perfectly on a metallic dais.

"Who are you?" one of the fighting men roared in anger, while a troll just screamed at him. Perhaps, if he had been well rested and fed, Lex would have taken the opportunity to deliver a quip, but as it was, he simply dodged all attempts to stop him and jumped at the focal point.

Like a mother hen protecting her egg, Lex sat upon the boulder and began channeling his spirit energy into it, while he held out both his hands and used Talk to the Hand, blocking all attacks.

Even the state of flow could not help him come up with a better plan, and only guided him how to best implement his stupid plan, which was to flaunt his defence for as long as it took.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 317: Private audience

The nearest troll and human both stopped their fight and attacked Lex with a burning fury, only to be blocked by his invisible barrier. The troll's anger only grew, and it redoubled its efforts, but the human paused after the shock of a failed attempt.

Still, it only took a glance to be able to pick out a flaw in Lex's so-called defense. If the barrier extended from his hand, and he was holding it forward, all he needed to do was attack from a different angle.

It was the deduction of an experienced fighter, but alas, it made no difference, as Lex simply moved one of his hands so that instead of one strengthened barrier, he had two. His plan was simple: he would block as many attacks as he could, and should any get through, he'd just suffer them.

There were a few reasons why he chose to follow this method. First, he was confident in his defense, obviously. Second, while he was confident he could fight the humans and the trolls here if he met them one on one, in a group like this he had no doubt that he could not win. The coordination of a team was something that would put him at a severe disadvantage. Third, and most importantly, it was only when he finally sat on the rock that it occurred to him that he could have waited for them to at least finish fighting before making a move. That way, there would at least be fewer opponents targeting him.

But after days of no food, water and limited sleep, Lex was finding it hard to think clearly. There was, however, one unexpected pleasant surprise for Lex. He was anticipating taking control of the focal point to be a process that lasted several hours. Yet when he channeled his spirit energy into the rock, he felt none of the resistance Cwenhild warned him of. Instead, it flowed freely into the core and started binding the rock to him.

In the meantime, the troll and the human continued to attack him, to no avail. After a minute, the furious fight surrounding had slowed down, as the trolls and humans alike tried to understand what was happening. Then it stopped. There was a moment of disbelief shared by both parties as they looked at Lex who was actually sitting on the rock with his legs wrapped around it, gripping it tightly.

The humans quickly retreated, freeing the trolls to surround Lex and battering him from all sides. They weren't really afraid, for they knew the usual time to take control of the focal point was a few hours. Instead, they used this reprieve to rest and recover their strength. They planned on letting Lex attract all the trolls' attention. Either when Lex fell off, or when they were ready, they would attack again, kill the further exhausted trolls and finally achieve their goal.

It was a good plan. Furthermore, they took great pleasure in watching the occasional troll attack slip past Lex's barrier and smash him - though he seemed mostly unhurt.

Their plan came to an end, though, five minutes later when Lex finished merging with the focal point.

The all too familiar feeling of control over the realm filled Lex and, with a wave of his hand, all the humans were kicked out of the realm, and the surrounding trolls kicked off to some distant corner of the Minor realm.

He felt a tide of energy begin to rush into his body, but before it could make any real progress, it suddenly disappeared, absorbed by the system.

Lex glanced at the amount of energy accumulated, smiled as he saw the number at 4%, and teleported out as well. He appeared in Cwenhild's living room once again, and received the same treatment of being swarmed by doctors.

"Water..." he said hoarsely. To his dismay, the doctors refused to cater to his request until they fully understood his situation. He rolled his eyes in annoyance, but let them do their job. Eventually, when they were finished with their diagnosis, Lex was provided with a small portion of some kind of soup. It would serve to both rehydrate him and quench his hunger. Furthermore, it was filled with several extremely valuable spirit plants that would speed up recovery.

Forgoing all etiquette, Lex picked up the bowl, put it to his mouth and began gulping it down. A part of him told him to take it slow, as he should not just eat so much so quickly, and another part of him said screw it, he was a cultivator, he could handle it.

Lex let out a satisfied and long 'ah' once he finished, and threw himself on a sofa to relax. He took off the crown and the mask, mostly because being so focused all the time drained him greatly. He would think about its limitations later, when he wasn't so groggy.

Just before he fell asleep, Cwenhild arrived in the room with a look of excitement and anticipation in her eyes. Before she could ask anything, Lex said, "have your buyer ready. We'll make the deal when I wake up."

He closed his eyes and instantly fell asleep, snoring lightly. Cwenhild chuckled as she signaled everyone to leave the room and dimmed the lights. Outside, a woman who looked remarkably similar to Cwenhild was standing, an amused look on her face.

Nora Haugen, head of the Haugen estate, Earth Immortal and an official wife of King Cornelius, was not an easy woman to meet, even for Cwenhild. She was an enigma to everyone, her child included. No one knew what her goals were, they only knew that she was a woman who got what she wanted. Even the King ended up marrying her.

Yet, such a woman had promptly dropped everything and returned to the academy upon hearing news of her daughter's confirmation into the core of the academy. Was it out of pride and love? Not really. Cwenhild sent her a message informing her that if she didn't come, Cwenhild would destroy her art collection.

"Is that your half brother?" she asked, amused. "I can see a bit of Cornelius' flair in him, but it's too mild for now."

"Right now, he's not my half brother, he's my business partner. Have you arranged everything?"

"Yes, the buyer is ready. He will never know who sold him the realm, but the price still needs to be negotiated. We'll need access to the realm to gauge its worth."

"What about the assassins? Did you find out who sent them?"

"I'm your mother, not your nanny. You can take care of these minor things on your own."

Cwenhild pursed her lips in mild frustration, but suppressed her rising emotions.

"Well, what about 'that' thing? I've entered the core academy before entering the Golden core realm, and fulfilled your requirements. When will we leave?"

"'That' thing? Why the need to be so secretive? It's just going over to the Crystal realm and having them disperse your cultivation and designing a custom cultivation technique for you to cultivate the truth path. The arrangements are made. We can leave once your business is concluded. But, you have to remember, if we do this, you owe me two favors."

"Say whatever you want, I'm not letting you pick my husband," Cwenhild said as she rolled her eyes. This mother of hers... all she wanted was grandkids.

"What? I would never. But two favors, remember that."

"I don't owe you anything, you're the one who set the conditions for this exchange."

"That's because you were being annoying and kept breaking my things. Two favors."

"Zero favors, no husband, and you have to help with negotiations. Don't test me, I know where you've planted your Pink Dream Tea. I'll feed it to the dogs!"

"Is this how you talk to your mother?" Nora exclaimed, her face contorting in anger and her immortal aura leaking a bit, but Cwenhild was unperturbed. This woman who could manipulate kings and had more than one nation wrapped around her finger had no idea how to be a mother, and Cwenhild knew her weakness well.

"By the way, did you hear about my name..." Cwenhild continued the conversation, uncaring. One of the main reasons she dropped her father's name... was because it would irritate her mother to no end. It would be so entertaining to watch.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lex's cultivation professor, the one who had taught about the true path, and suspected Lex's cultivation path, had just left one of his classes when he received a letter. A long time ago, he had requested to see the King. He was only a normal professor at the academy, so he did not hold much influence. Yet to be selected as a professor at the academy was no small feat, so even with his limited influence, he was eventually able finally get a response.

One month later, he would be granted a private audience.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 318: Friendly fish

Lex woke up feeling extremely refreshed. His body felt as if he had just come from a hot spring, and the mental drain from the prolonged use of the crown, as well as the physical strain from lack of food, was gone. He credited it to his nap but if he were to know the value of the ingredients used in the soup he had he would be startled. Even the Midnight Inn did not serve food of that quality - yet. Naturally Cwenhild would not treat her business partner poorly.

Before he got up, though, he had to attend to a small matter. Back at the Inn, the Lady Cosmos show was still ongoing, but it was now time for him to set up the Expo for Earth. Unlike Lady Cosmos, which required the Inn to manage the event, the Expo only required the Inn to host it, and market it.

Since it was his home planet he didn't want to treat it lightly, and asked the planning department to design an appropriate auditorium for the event. At the same time, he spent 800,000MP on marketing. While the reach of the Inn had spread far and wide, he chose to target two fronts for this.

All the planets in from the X-14 star system would be targeted, since they were commercial planets in a way. More importantly though, indirectly, he gave Booty a commission to spread the word in large and small trade planets.

He didn't need to worry about much else, as the preparations for the Lady Cosmos event could be shared for this.

With that done, he picked himself up from the sofa and stretched. Unfortunately, a drawback of having his body brought back into peak condition was that he was unable to get the satisfying cracks in his knuckles or any of his bones while he stretched.

He sent Cwenhild a message, and soon she arrived. It did not take a detective to notice the extra spring in her step, which Lex took as a sign that she had arranged a buyer.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked as she sat down. A host of waiters had followed her into the room and began to lay down a feast for Lex and her.

"I slept perfectly. How long was I out?"

"Almost 13 hours. You're lucky you woke up when you did, I almost couldn't wait anymore and dumped a tub of water on you."

"Patience is a virtue," Lex said as he stuffed 6 dumplings in his mouth.

"The only virtue I subscribe to is money. We can't begin negotiations until we get an idea of what the realm is like, but you've blocked off the entrance. Open it up so I can send in a team of appraisers."

"Oh, my bad," Lex said as he snapped, unsealing the realm.

"Once we have a detailed understanding of the realm, we can assign a price to it. We already have more than one buyer ready, so we'll get the best price for it. Do you have any special requirements as far as the payment is concerned?"

"I have a few things in mind," said Lex, though he had not slowed down his consumption of food for even a moment during this conversation. There was a look of deep regret in his eyes as he looked at the now empty dish of dumplings, but he turned his attention elsewhere.

"What are the chances of getting hands on a spatial treasure? Something you can store gear or items in?"

Before Cwenhild could even answer, a woman chuckled. The sound of her laughter filled Lex with immense shock and dread, for she had been standing right beside him this entire time, but he had failed to notice her till she made a sound. The feeling only lasted a moment, though, and Lex started attacking a plate of fresh barbecue with vigor.

"Spatial treasures exist, but they don't fall out of the sky. It would require someone with advanced knowledge of spatial laws to even attempt constructing one. Even most immortals don't have one, so you can forget about getting your hands on one. Oh no, wait, actually, if you stumble onto another realm full of sleeping Crystals, you can trade with the Crystal race for it. Unfortunately for you, we've already cashed in the favor we received for the last batch."

Cwenhild looked at her mother with irritation. Even she had not realized her mother had been snooping.

"Lex, this is my mother, Nora. We'll be using her channels to sell the realm."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Lex said with a sly half smile. If he did not have a cheek full of meat, he may have even looked suave. Honestly, he was too hungry to care right now.

"If a spatial treasure is out of reach, then I want my share all to be in energy crystals. Or spirit water. Whatever the densest form of energy is available, really. First, go for quality, but when that runs out, you can replace it with quantity."

Both Cwenhild and Nora were taken aback by the unusual request.

"All of it? Are you sure?" Cwenhild asked hesitantly. She knew Lex had his own motives, but did he really understand the amount of wealth being discussed right now? There was a huge possibility that he was underestimating what that would result in.

"Yeah, all of it. If possible, make the sale as quickly as possible, and while you're doing it, give me another list of the remaining Minor realms and their details. I'll also give you a list of new supplies, you should prepare those as well. There are just a few things I need to take care of in the meantime."

"Wait, you're planning on going again?" Cwenhild asked. "This is not really the kind of business that can remain under the table for long. Someone will surely notice, and they won't like that we're cheating with the core academy tests."

"Don't worry about it. At most, you can just put the blame on me if anything goes wrong. Besides, they can't blame me for being more skilled than their other students. And I have an entrepreneurial spirit, what's wrong with that? At most, I can just say I was inspired by the academy's motto of not giving a shit."

Cwenhild paused as she thought of the various obstacles they would face should they continue, but Nora had a massive grin on her face. It was good to see the kids growing on their own. She decided not to help in case they got into trouble. This Lex had been using the academy's motto too frequently, and had even influenced her daughter. She hoped he got a spanking. In fact, she would look forward to it.

The discussion went on for a while, but Lex eventually convinced her of his plan. After all, Lex was going after that energy in more Minor realms regardless of anything. Might as well make the most of it.

Once he was done with dinner, though, Lex left to go to the library. He knew he couldn't achieve mastery overnight, but his experience gave him insight into more techniques that he needed to learn.

First, he needed a stealth technique, followed by a reconnaissance one. He also needed lighter and more versatile attacks. His increased strength gave him many new options. Finally, he wanted to look up information on the green pebble that he found. He really wanted to know if the water it produced was safe to drink, and what effects it would yield.

He spent the next day doing research, and when he returned to Cwenhild, the negotiations for the sale of the realm were complete.

She presented Lex with a contract that detailed their division of profits, as well as the remuneration he would be getting and a bunch of minor legalities. He signed it, transferred the Minor realm through a method she taught him to an intermediary who would then pass it to the client.

As much as he wanted to see his income with his own eyes, he had little time to waste. There were only a few dozen realms left at the Foundation realm that were unclaimed, and he wanted to get his hands on as many of them as possible.

Lex chose the next realm and went through the next portal. It was supposed to be a winter wonderland, with ice and snow blanketing everything. The subzero temperatures and local beasts made it difficult for others to operate in the realm, but Lex could simply use the same technique he used to avoid the cold produced by the Frio birds.

But nothing was destined to go according to plan. When Lex teleported to the realm, he found himself submerged in freezing water. Above him, there was a thick layer of ice sealing whatever water body he was in shut, and surrounding him were hundreds of fish. What were the chances they were friendly?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 319: Magikarpet

He readied himself to be swarmed by the fish, but nothing happened. The school of fat, red fish stared at him with their wide eyes full of curiosity. One hesitantly broke free from the rest and came close to Lex, as if observing an animal at a zoo. It swam in a circle around Lex to look at him from all sides before it came closer, as if to test Lex's intentions.

Amused at the fish, Lex slowly reached out his hand and softly rubbed the fish's scales, which the fish seemed to enjoy. Its eyes rolled back slightly and gurgled a little, as if to show enjoyment.

Lex smirked. He was reminded of fat red fish he'd seen in an anime before called Magikarpet. He made special note of this fish and decided to add some whenever he got back to the Inn.

For now, though, he turned his attention back to the ice above him. If he didn't exert himself too much, he could survive underwater for a couple of hours, but that was no reason to stay underwater any longer than he needed to. Under the fish's supervision, Lex swam to the ice and after testing its sturdiness, punched it as hard as he could with his right hand.

There was a loud bang, and massive cracks spread in the ice, but besides that there was nothing else. Surprisingly the fish did not swim away, as if they were not at all intimidated by his display of strength.

Were he not underwater, he would have sighed. These Minor realms really tested his versatility. Fortunately he was not in a rush nor was he under attack, which gave him plenty of time to form an array. But first, Lex used the same technique he used back then against the Frio birds cold storm. The chill of the freezing water stopped affecting and an array character meaning ice appeared on the back of his hand.

With his hand he rubbed the cracks and tried to get a sense for how thick the ice was. It was impossible to simply see through it, and at most he could vaguely see how deep the crack traveled in the ice. He roughly estimated the ice was 3 or 4 (0.9 - 1.2 meters) feet thick.

He took a moment to recall if the book inside the ring given to him by John had any pre-established arrays he could use in his current situation. There were a few, but they were inelegant solutions that either deployed excessive brute force or fire power. This was a good opportunity for him to try creating his own array.

He broke down the task into two simple actions. He needed to cut a hole in the ice, and push the cut ice out to create an opening for him to escape. He then further broke down each action into individual steps. To create a hole, the ice needed to be cut continuously, preferably in a circular shape with a diameter of at least 3 feet (0.9 meters). The cutting force also needed to be sufficient to cut all the way through for the process to be effective.

Pushing the ice out also required sufficient force applied in the appropriate direction for an adequate amount of time. The pushing force should only activate after the cut has been complete, otherwise the upwards force, combined with the action of the ice being cut, could cause the ice to fracture, making it more difficult to remove.

He identified a few more parameters for the required array, then began to think about what characters he needed. Each character existed naturally in nature and had a unique purpose and place so he needed to pick carefully. For example, while there may not necessarily be a character for 'cut', there may be one with the same effect. Furthermore, that character then needed to be paired with other characters determining shape, but at the same time be compatible with the kind of character being used to cut. In this situation, a cylindrical shape was the best option.

Moreover, the kind of force used also had to be compatible with the task as well as the material. Minor details such as the timing and order of tasks would be determined by the format and syntax of the array, not the characters themselves.

Lex equipped the crown, which he had named as his 'thinking cap', and quickly thought about the makeup of the array. Typically, this was the kind of thing that would take him a while to figure out. But his elevated cultivation as well as state of flow allowed him to determine the entire array in a couple of minutes, even allowing him to run some mental simulations of how he expected things to play out.

So far, he had been very lucky in that all of his self created arrays so far had worked as intended. It was time to test his skill once again. Using his index finger he began to draw the characters required, his drawing speed elevated due to the state of flow.

The next moment, the array disappeared and before Lex's eyes he saw the ice started to be cut... cut... cut...

It was too slow. At this rate, it would take him an hour to escape the ice. He made a few adjustments to the array, swam slightly to the side and drew the array again. This time, it worked as he imagined. A

perfect circle was cut right into the ice and, after a seconds delay, the cylindrical ice was shot up into the air with a loud bang, moving faster than Lex could track it.

'Good enough,' Lex thought, as he waved goodbye to all the fish, and began climbing out of the hole, right into a raging snowstorm. Lex literally could not see more than a few feet out in front of him, though fortunately that had no impact on the Lotus' ability to detect the direction of the accumulated energy in this realm.

The cold was hardly an obstacle for Lex, and the additional armor provided to him through the ice character helped him out a lot when he was attacked by the annoying yet familiar Kalter Flug. He had been attacked by these irritating snowflake spirits back during his assessment, but he was much more capable this time.

Relative to his previous realm, this one was a lot easier to tackle for Lex often encountered creatures he could hunt and cook, though cooking was difficult since the snowstorm never ceased.

Eight days later, Lex managed to capture this realm as well. The focal point was in the shape of, of all things, a fireplace. Due to the intensity of the storm, no other humans had been able to find it and it was not defended by any creature either, making it extremely easy for Lex to capture the realm. Once it was done, and Lex absorbed the energy, he had accumulated a total of 9% of his total required energy. He only needed to pay 5% to complete his quest and establish the Midnight tavern, though he planned on accumulating more than the minimum required.

Once he returned, Cwenhild told him the previous realm had been sold, and that only 7 unowned realms at the Foundation level remained.

Lex quickly handed over control of this realm as well and, after some rest, continued to travel to more realms. This time, his luck was not so good, as after 4 days, before he even managed to approach the focal point, someone else captured it.

But, such a thing was predictable, since he was entering late to begin with. He did not waste time and continued to enter more realms. He was so focused during this period that he did not even notice his steady improvements in using his techniques, or his skill with arrays. More than once, he managed to use arrays in the heat of battle, but he was in such a time crunch that he could not slow down to celebrate. It would not be easy to once again encounter random reserves of energy just sitting around.

Three and a half weeks later, he had managed to only capture one more realm, due to the fact that someone else would claim it before him. Still, it was pretty good as he had brought his energy accumulation up to 12%.

One final realm remained, still unowned, and apparently the difficulty in capturing this realm was incredibly high. More than one group had given up, though that was not enough to deter Lex. Not only was his situation unique, allowing him to have a higher threshold for danger, but he was incredibly skilled. Moreover, he had begun to enjoy challenging himself like this.

But, just as Cwenhild had the portal opened for him, and he was about to step through, his oh so reliable instincts acted up, and gave him a warning he had never encountered before.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 320: Impending danger

Cwenhild, her assistants, the professor who opened the portal and Nora all immediately picked up on Lex's oddity when he suddenly stopped. Over the past few weeks, the actual accumulated time they'd spent with Lex was probably less than a day, but he'd made an impression on them nonetheless.

Just the simple fact that he, alone, could claim a Minor realm, while others usually went in massive teams and still often failed, was already enough to crown all the legends floating around about Lex already. The fact that he did it more than once was even more ridiculous. But, it was more than that. Every time they saw Lex, it was after a long, extensive period where he would be trying to claim a Minor realm. As such, the changes brought about in Lex were always loud and pronounced.

Everything from the way he stood, sat, walked and talked seemed to change each time. Instead of becoming more coarse, as one would expect after spending an extended time in the wild, he became more refined. In the beginning, after capturing his first Minor realm, Lex began to radiate confidence befitting a warrior of his skill and standing.

Yet, with each successive trip, instead of that overwhelming, blatant confidence that would cause others to feel inferior or insecure about themselves, he began to carry himself with charm and charisma. His smile was deeper, his eyes brighter, his each move a flourishing dance. Instead of feeling inferior in the presence of his success, others would feel uplifted by his warmth.

Of course, the foundation of all that growth was built on a basis of self-confidence. During this period, not only had Lex overcome unimaginable trials, he'd washed his entire body in the water from the green pebble until it no longer affected him. His strength now was devastating. While it wasn't as ridiculous as his defense, he was definitely living up to the usual standards of body cultivators now. All that remained now was to drink as much of that water as his body could absorb.

Moreover, Lex knew his limits well, and knew exactly how and when to push them to further his growth. Once he said he would do something, he would do it without hesitation or reluctance, and with an excited smile on his face. It could be said that if earlier on, he was filled with potential, then his numerous experiences and challenges in the realms allowed him to truly bring out that potential.

Yet now, suddenly, he froze. Not only that, the expression on his face, for the briefest moment, flashed with concern. It was only a single moment, after which he quickly collected himself, his usual carefree expression returning to his face.

"You know what?" Lex said, as he turned back towards Cwenhild. "I change my mind. Instead of pushing my luck endlessly, I should take a step back, and enjoy my success so far. How long do you think it'll take you to sell the last realm?"

"A few days, a week, max. We still need to complete an analysis of the realms worth before taking bids," Cwenhild answered, reserving her curiosity. The amount of money they'd made so far was truly phenomenal, so she did not feel disappointed. Being too greedy could cause problems, so it was best to know when to stop. Still, she would ask Lex what happened when there were fewer people around.

"Haha, I would expect nothing less. I have a few things I need to take care of, so I'm going to head out." Then, casually, as if nothing unusual happened, Lex left her apartment. During this time, he'd become a lot more familiar with Cwenhild, so he didn't mind using some of her things, which is why he got in one of the many self-driving vehicles she had and entered his destination.

When he finally left her apartment, his expression changed to a frown. He was getting very... unusual feedback from his instincts. He was not being warned of danger in the typical sense. Instead, he felt like his time was running out. It was a very suffocating feeling, since he could not tell exactly what he was being warned from. All he knew was that with each passing second, something... unfavorable to him was coming closer.

He sent Cwenhild a message, telling her to speed up the sale as much as possible. It was fine to suffer a loss in profits if needed, but she should conclude the sale today.

Since he had asked for payment in the form of energy in the densest available forms, whether it was spirit stones or water or anything else, she had been holding his payment for him in a bank vault. He also asked her to have everything prepared as he would visit the vault with her as soon as the sale was concluded.

He knew they had noticed something in his behavior, but since Lex did not know the origin of whatever was coming his way, he decided not to share too much. There were a couple of things Lex wanted to do in the meantime.

First, he wanted to visit the library and quickly jot down a few more techniques he'd thought of. His system was really pathetic in the ways of helping him out with his cultivation journey, so kept having to anticipate anything he would need.

Secondly, he wanted to say goodbye to Amelia. She was the only friend he had at the academy, besides Cwenhild. He felt bad not being able to spend time with her the past couple of months, but he had been extremely busy and he had to prioritize.

At the library, among other techniques, the one Lex really needed was called Tranquil Mind. He had often been using his 'thinking cap' and excessive use would often cause him to suffer from extreme mental exhaustion. Sometimes, even a long sleep would not help him recover, and it would take days before he was back in peak form. Tranquil Mind was a meditation technique focused on not only strengthening his mind, regulating his emotions and calming his thoughts, but also replenishing his mental energy.

He spent a few more hours here, trying to learn any random technique he thought might come in handy. He didn't need to worry about not remembering them, for with the help of his thinking cap, his memories became extremely sharp and this was a non-issue.

Then it was time to say goodbye to Amelia. He found her exactly as she was the first time he bumped into her, eating with her other friends. He did not elaborate on what he would be doing, but only apologized about being so busy, and said that there was a decent chance they might not have the opportunity to meet again in a long time. He saw a lot of complicated emotions in her eyes but, ultimately, she only called him silly for apologizing, as there was no need, and wished him well.

He would have liked to have said more, but his instincts were beginning to send tingles down his spine now. He messaged Cwenhild asking about the bank's details, and directly set off towards it.

When he arrived, she was waiting for him with her mother beside her. She was no longer hiding her curiosity, as a hint of concern showed on her face.

"Is everything alright?" she asked, unsure if she should be intruding.

"Haha everything is great," Lex replied with genuine excitement in his eyes. "Let's go see how much money I've made."

The procedure for entering the bank's vault was extremely complicated, and Lex just found out that if it weren't for Cwenhild's mother accompanying them, it would take a couple of weeks before Lex's verification process was complete, which would allow him to enter the vault. As for the fact that it was his own wealth that had been stored there, it was inconsequential. Cwenhild was the one who put it in the bank, so as far as they were concerned, Lex was just there to accompany her.

Lex rubbed his hands as he let his thoughts run wild, his imagination going to a cartoon he used to watch as a child of a cat and mouse called Timothy and Jeremy, in which their eyes used to turn into dollar signs when they were about to receive money. He could imagine what that felt like.

But it was not a mountain of coins waiting for him, nor a pile of spirit stones. Instead, 10 neatly stacked crystals were the only things waiting for him when he entered.

"Underwhelmed?" Nora asked, as she saw him observing them.

"I'm assuming they're the densest form of energy available," he guessed as he tried to sense something from the crystals. They were so clear, they would have been invisible had there not been a thin, blue ribbon tied to each one.

"Not the densest, but it's up there," she said, looking at them. "Since it'll be hard for you to understand, I'll put it like this. These are used by the Crystal race to cultivate. They're extremely precious resources that the Hum nation exports, since the energy is too violent for humans to absorb. But if humans could, this is what immortals would be using."

"Not bad," Lex said with an approving nod. "Can I have a moment alone?"

Nora raised an eyebrow, but quietly left so that Lex could be alone. The whole reason she had come along, other than to sate her curiosity, was for Lex's security should he want to take them out of the bank, as a favor to her daughter. Most likely, he still did not understand how valuable they were. But it was none of her business. She just wondered what he needed it for.

Inside the bank vault, Lex placed his hand on the crystals and, after a moment, they vanished. To Lex's immense surprise, his energy accumulation actually increased by a whole 8%!

He now had a total of 20%.

Without any hesitation, he paid 10 million MP and 5% energy needed to establish the Midnight tavern, and heard the familiar ting of a system notification.

Lex's professor sat nervously in the palace as he waited his turn to see the King. Honestly, he never thought he'd get an opportunity to see the King upclose, let alone have an audience with him. This was, of course, because he never expected to have a reason good enough to request an audience. But now, soon, he would have his chance.

His attention was attracted to the sound of a door opening, and an escort of guards came in. It was time to meet the King.