

Innkeeper 681

The Innkeeper

Chapter 681: Valesco

Lex once again reiterated his whole experience, by now having mentally decided that his conjecture was most likely accurate. Mere moments after Lex was done explaining, as if confirming Lex's thoughts, Lord Belmont said, "the 'elder' who invited you is one of our most heavily guarded prisoners, locked up in maximum penitentiary. He has been under lockdown for a few hundred years, so there is no way he should have been able to invite you. Either someone else was posing as him, or he has found a way in and out of prison under our noses."

Lex did not bother to resist his sigh. Of course he would be caught up in some grand scheme. To be honest, he didn't even care about that. His greatest concern was that he was planning on leveraging the position of the elder who invited him to host a meeting of leaders at his tavern during the upcoming wedding.

Clearly that was no longer an option. But Lex had already picked out an alternative. This Lord Belmont seemed like a significant figure. If he played an integral role in resolving this situation then perhaps he could build enough of a relationship to have him come over. For this, he would pull out all the stops, including using the Golden key for the Midnight Inn to attract his attention.

"So what now?" Lex asked, though he already knew the most probable course of action.

"We have to investigate, of course. That will require some of your cooperation, as we will have to have you meet Ezio to confirm his identity."

Lex nodded, as if he was acquiesce to a request. Although Silvia had already told him that he would be required to cooperate in case he was involved in a legal dispute, that did not apply to him. If he wanted to leave, who could really stop him? He merely needed to think about it to begin the teleportation process to the Inn.

"Lord Belmont," Lex addressed the man, deciding to keep using his title for now. "Although the situation has changed now that I know Ezio is a criminal, the reason I came to the Crystal nation is regarding a matter imperative to the situation of the entire realm. I was hoping that after sharing certain important information with him, he could help me contact someone with a higher authority."

Lord Belmont smiled, as if he heard a child say something cute.

"Although we need your help to identify if the person you met was Ezio, once that is done you can have your conversation. Though he may be a criminal, he still has great influence over the nation. Your purpose may still be completed. If the matter is not a secret, I can also listen in. If it really is a matter that can influence the whole realm, then we shall do whatever is in our power to fix it."

If the matter had not been so serious, Lex somehow doubted they would have really helped. After all, they had allowed war to wage across the entire realm without caring about the consequences. Or perhaps there were still some hidden secrets in this that he was not privy to.

Either way, this was the best he could do for now.

Since the matter was decided, Lord Belmont did not procrastinate. He sent back Silvia and put his hand on Lex's shoulder, teleporting the duo to an entirely new place. During this single jump Lex was exposed to the laws of space to a greater extent than ever before, giving him some insight in teleportation.

Before he could spend any time reflecting on the experience, Belmont led him through a number of guarded rooms until they finally reached their destination. Having used them so frequently, Lex easily recognized the teleportation formation that had been established in the middle of the room. Yet how could it be that something used by the Crystal race was of the same quality as others? The formation was larger and more complex than he had ever seen, and at the same time extremely beautiful. Most other places hid the formation underneath the floor tiles, but the Crystal race had put it out on full display to be admired.

Of course, Lex had no time to admire or learn from it, for Lord Belmont did not delay for even a second.

Communication with the control room, probably through spirit senses, he ordered the formation to target Valesco. Lex could do nothing but follow along.

"Believe it or not, you're the first human who will be allowed to enter Valesco."

"Does that have special significance?" Lex asked, his question displaying a lack of reverence for the Crystal race. Such a thing was rare enough to be taken note of. Belmont raised an eyebrow, or what was equivalent of an eyebrow for their race, and simply said, "I guess not. It's more of a matter related to security. Holed up in Valesco are the most dangerous criminals of our race. If they are allowed to escape, the havoc and destruction they could spread is beyond what others can imagine."

Lex refrained from commenting, but wondered if their danger could meet the same level as the havoc wrought by the Kraven. He doubted it, for how can individuals match an entire hostile race?

The formation activated, and Lex once again found himself in the familiar folds of space through which they traveled while teleporting. But what was unique though was that Lex was not being oppressed by the force of space, and being forced to remain in a fixed position. He could walk around and even talk so long as he stood on the platform underneath them that seemed to be teleporting as well.

"How dangerous is Ezio?" Lex couldn't help but ask. "When I met him, he did not seem like a criminal."

"Ezio's crimes are of a different sort. Instead of harming people, he is responsible for the destruction of the history of the realm. Single-handedly he has destroyed the history and heritage, not only of the Crystal race, but of countless other races. I realize that such a crime may not seem so serious to others, but to the immortal Crystal race, the destruction of history is one of the most serious crimes!

Without art, culture and history to enrich our lives, living for eternity will become a curse rather than a blessing. Many of the Crystals who enter long hibernation do it so that they can find an entire host of new histories to discover."

Lex nodded. It made sense, somewhat. Moreover, when he met Ezio, he seemed to be destroying any ruins that may depict any information about the arrival of the Kraven. It seemed even his reasoning might not be so simple.

Before the conversation could continue, the teleportation ended, and Lex found himself in a similarly designed room.

"Though it is not entirely significant that you are the first human to be allowed in here, do take the opportunity to take in as many of the sights as possible. We Crystals take great pride in our arts, and architecture is one of the ways we bring life to art in this world."

Lex chuckled internally. It seemed to be bothering Belmont that Lex was not worshiping him as others usually do. He's taking this opportunity to show off.

Following Belmont, Lex exited the building, curious as to what he would find. He was not expecting to be impressed, but the moment he stepped out, he had to admit that he was wrong.

The teleportation building seemed to be built on a hill, so the view upon exiting encompassed the entirety of the Valesco complex. A massive, inverted pyramid that seemed to be descending into the ground rather than rising up came into view. The pyramid seemed to have countless levels as it neared the center, and each level was a massive open space filled with exquisite smaller structures that looked akin to chapels and theaters. The use of mosaics could be seen all around, accompanied by endless legends depicted in murals painted on the building walls.

It was not just the view of Valesco that was impressive, but the aura it radiated as well. Through clever use of spirit stones as tiles and marble, a massive formation was hidden that elevated the building to seem like the palace of a Deity, not a prison for dangerous criminals.

Thousands of soldiers were patrolling each level, moving in synchronization that made the palace seem like it was alive, and the moving soldiers were the pulse of the place.

The splendid use of colors, from subtle ones like beige and off white, to vibrant colors like red and orange, brought another layer of life to the place, making it shine with remarkable splendor. He had to admit, even at the Midnight Inn they had no buildings like this. That meant only one thing to Lex: he had to get himself a Crystal race architect!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 682: Prison cell

Belmont did not say much, but a subtle smirk grew on his face as he watched mesmerization in Lex's eyes. Sure, his reaction was still tame and not nearly on the level he expected, but no one could deny the greatness of the Crystal race.

Indeed, Lex really could not come up with a single flaw in the exquisite structure. Despite all the ease the system afforded him in designing buildings, there was no replacement for meticulous and detailed planning. This was a step beyond anything he or even the Planning division had designed. What's more,

he was a hundred percent sure that there were many details of this place that he was overlooking or simply unable to detect, for the fundamental purpose of this place was a prison, so how could there be no security measures?

Sure, he saw the endless number of guards, but he was sure that the security measures were greater than just that. Sure the majestic pressure the structure radiated was impressive, but he was sure that it had other more practical reasons as well.

Instead of directly taking Lex and himself to their next destination, as Belmont had been doing previously, he decided to walk and allow Lex to take more of the structure in. Unfortunately, walking through the structure did not elicit anymore reactions from Lex as his expression had long since returned to normal. Sure, he was studying the structure, but his motive was to absorb ideas to implement at the Inn rather than to appreciate its beauty.

The one thing he noticed only once he reached the structure was that the pattern made using spirit stones as tiles was identical to one of the characters he had studied for arrays.

The meaning of the character could not be expressed in a single word, and the nearest English translation of its meaning, or the way it expressed its power, meant 'strong earth'.

"The addition of a 'character' into the structure's design is ingenious," Lex said lightly. Of course now that he had seen the idea he could mimic it at the Inn, but something told him his implementation would still fall short of the original architect that designed this place.

"Returning to nature is a strong theme within the Crystal lifestyle," Belmont said with pride. "Biomimicry goes beyond just basic shapes and structures. True biomimicry is when one is able to recreate the laws of the universe within one's own design."

Lex nodded very seriously. This was already a very enlightening experience for him. If he could recreate what he learnt here, and implement it across the Inn, he felt he would reach a whole new level. But he still needed to study more. He had only seen things at a surface level. The most ideal situation would be if he hired a Crystal race architect for the Inn, and then thoroughly studied his process and learned it himself.

Though they were walking, it was not as if they were out for a casual stroll. Their speed was still incredibly fast, and in mere minutes they reached the center point of the pyramid, which was the entrance to a massive and elaborate underground structure.

Once inside, they took a spiral staircase that seemed like it was carved right out of the ground and seemed to go down forever. Since there were walls on both sides there was no way of seeing how far deep the staircase went, but every so often they would encounter a door to a certain floor.

Even with their impressive speed, they had to descend for at least 20 minutes before they reached not the bottom but the door they had to use. If Lex had to guess he would say they were around 60 miles (100 km) deep underground, which was an inconceivable concept to him. Across the various floors he felt differing auras, meaning that different restrictions were applied to each floor.

Although he did not know what the effects of those auras were, his instincts told him plainly that if he were to get trapped here, there would be no chance of escape. Teleporting to the Inn would be his only option.

Suddenly it occurred to Lex that there was probably some kind of formation deployed here to prevent teleportation as well. That was probably the first and most important part of a prison holding cultivators. But since he could still feel his connection to the Inn, he was sure he could still teleport out. At most, his teleportation would be delayed, like it had been on earth when the A.I. locked space somehow.

Lex continued to study the elaborate complex and took down notes as they went along. Luthor had long been asking for a prison, and Lex was considering taking inspiration from here and making one for him to manage when he returned from the war.

After going through various twists and turns, and descending several more floors as well as traveling through short distance teleportation formations which could not be accessed from outside the structure, they finally arrived at what was supposed to be a prison cell.

To Lex, however, it seemed like an underground mansion furnished luxuriously! Was this really the Crystal races concept of a prison? He was dumbfounded. This made even Swedish prisons look drab!

The duo did not knock or announce their presence, and simply walked through the forcefield that was shielding the 'prison cell'. They entered the building and made their way through, as if Belmont knew exactly where Ezio would be, and indeed he was correct.

They found their target meditating inside what looked like a zen garden, a small bird resting on his shoulder. Small yet colorful insects flew around him, reminiscent of butterflies and ladybugs. The scene was very beautiful and peaceful to watch. Lex decided that in the prison that he made... he might not add this feature. Or maybe he would. Who knows what kind of requirements he might have in the future.

Lex studied Ezio and tried to determine if he was the same Crystal elder he saw. As far as appearances went, he looked more or less the same, but Lex had very limited experience with Crystals so he was not sure if that was enough to identify him.

"When I gave you the letter, I expected it would be at least a century or two before you arrived," Ezio suddenly said, opening his eyes and focusing on Lex. As soon as Lex felt Ezio's gaze on him, he was sure of one thing: this was actually not the same Crystal he saw earlier!

Although back then Lex was comparatively much weaker than he was now, he still had a very good idea of the power level and aura of the Crystal he met. The Ezio in front of him was countless times more powerful.

But then Lex frowned. Despite the power difference, he could not explain why he knew Lex. Unsure of the correct answer, Lex could only share his findings with Belmont and leave it up to him to judge.

"This Crystal is a lot stronger than the one I met in the Minor realm. They cannot be the same."

Both Ezio and Belmont were surprised by the certainty in Lex's voice.

"How can you be sure?" asked Ezio, studying Lex thoroughly.

"About these things, I've never been wrong yet. You're definitely a lot stronger than the Crystal I met before."

Ezio shook his head in disappointment.

"There's a reason for that. If you had arrived in a couple of centuries as I expected, it wouldn't have mattered. But now that you've arrived so early, my plan is completely ruined. They'll find out sooner or later anyway, so I'll just tell you. The person you met earlier was still me, but that was just a clone of me that I've left in the outside world. That's why I appear more powerful in person."

Both Lex and Belmont were startled. Lex had been searching for a good cloning technique for so long. If he was able to discover one now, then Ezio really would be his lucky star. Not only had Lex received his 'thinking hat' from him last time, but had learnt incredible things just on the way to meet him. Should he hire him at the Inn?

"Ezio, do you know what you've done?" Belmont asked gravely, his body emitting a dangerous and furious aura. "Your sentence will only be increased further if what you've said is proven true. You know we'll track the activities of your clone now that we know about it. How many more crimes will we uncover?"

Ezio shook his head, as if he was uninterested in conversing with Belmont. Instead, his attention remained on Lex.

"I told you to find me when you've discovered enough secrets, and for every secret you share with me, I'll share one with you. The fact that you've come so quickly must mean you've learnt something important, or you wouldn't be confident enough to find me. So, tell me what you've learnt."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 683: Flaws

Lex really wanted to get into this, but he did not want to start the conversation while Belmont was still distracted. After all, as things stood now, Belmont was a more reliable person to get what he wanted. At the same time, he had already started making plans for how to proceed if neither of them decided to help.

The situation had already deviated from what Lex originally would have expected, and although the situation was not completely out of control, it was best to be prepared for the worst. Although common sense dictated that faced with the destruction of this realm that they lived in itself they would definitely want to resolve the problem, he wanted to be prepared for the worst in any case.

"I have, indeed, learnt a few things that I want to discuss with you. But before I get into that..." Lex did not really continue, but he looked towards Belmont who still looked furious.

Ezio sighed, as if he had been asked to take care of an extremely tedious matter. Eventually though, he turned to look at Belmont.

"What is it that you are surprised about exactly? That in this instance of forceful imprisonment, I did not cooperate with you wholeheartedly? Are you familiar with the concept of prisons and prisoners? What part is surprising for you exactly? Allow me to educate you on the matter."

Despite the blatant condescension, Belmont was not provoked. Though he allowed a bit of his pride to get to him when it concerned Lex's reaction to the Crystal races achievements, in professional matters he maintained his calm always.

"The only thing I am curious about is how you managed to hide the existence of the clone. Our methods are supposed to be thorough, so before anyone is admitted we test for clones among other things. If there is a loophole then the security of the entire place will be compromised."

Ezio shook his head as if disappointed.

"Young man, the moment you think you know everything or are prepared for everything, you enter the territory of arrogance. To keep this place secure, you must preclude endless threats and possibilities, but I only need to come up with a single weakness or flaw to penetrate this place's security."

"Do not be pedantic, old man," Belmont said, his earlier grace of a lord all gone. "If you do not wish to say that is fine. We can still find out on our own now that we know there is an issue."

"When did I say that I wouldn't tell you? When I was imprisoned, I was tested for any soul connected devices or techniques outside my body, and the test came back negative. That was simply because the clone was in the gestation period. The connection with my main soul had not been formed yet, but within the clone I had left a small piece of my soul as well, which was absorbed. Thus, as a result, at the time of my capture there was no response to your tests."

"But you have been under lockdown. There is no way your clone should have been able to connect to your soul."

"It was not needed. Since the clone already absorbed a part of my soul, it already became destined to become an extension of me the moment it was born. It's just that during your testing, it had not been born and so was not picked up."

Belmont did not immediately reply, for he could not confirm the authenticity of his claim. According to his own understanding, such a thing still should not have been able to circumvent their investigations. After all, Valesco was not a project undertaken by the young and inexperienced Crystals. Some of the Crystals involved in establishing it were even older and stronger than Ezio, and so should have enough experience to account for such things.

Still, since Ezio had given his explanation, he would be sure to report it. They would, of course, still go through with their own investigations. But none of that was actually Belmonts' domain. After all, his responsibility was the border. The only reason he had conducted the investigation himself was because he felt if he went through the 'proper protocol' things would have taken much longer, and this was not a matter on which they could afford to lose time.

As if Ezio had read his mind, he smiled and turned to Lex.

"Now then, shall we discuss. I am quite eager to see what you have learned. I'll have you know, quite a bit of effort was put into erasing records of events from back then. Even many of the people who lived through the time remain ignorant of what actually happened. But do not be too worried. Even if what you have learned falls short of my expectations, you can always visit me again later. After all, like I said, I was not expecting you for another century or so."

Lex did not hesitate to smile as he heard Ezio. Clearly the Crystal did not want to raise its hopes too high for whatever Lex had managed to learn, and was trying to leave an opportunity for him to return in the future. He had no idea why he would be allowed to visit Ezio again in the future after his misconduct had already been discovered, perhaps he was expecting some leniency for unknown reasons. But that did not matter, for Lex could not even determine if the realm had a few centuries left to exist.

What if the realm was destroyed long before then? What would be the point in keeping all these secrets by then?

"I am also eager to see if I can meet your expectations. After all, if I cannot, who knows if I'll ever be able to get a chance to meet you once again. If you don't mind, I've also asked Lord Belmont to listen in on our conversation, since I may need his help in the matters that follow."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 684: Silent

Lex had purposefully been cryptic in his wording to attract the two Crystals attention, yet he did not explain what he meant immediately. Nor did he wait for Ezio to respond, for in the given situation Belmont was of more use to him than Ezio. Moreover, based on his behavior of eliminating records of what happened, who knew if he was somehow complicit in whatever scheme was in place which was resulting in the realms degradation.

Therefore, while he wanted to still have a conversation with him to uncover as many secrets as possible, he had to ensure Belmont stayed as well.

"If I'm being entirely honest, I haven't had any time to conduct any real research into the matter myself," Lex confessed. "Anything I learnt was through a series of coincidences. There are some things the sources of which I can share with you, and some that I cannot. It's up to you whether you trust me or not, or find my narrative believable.

"I will assume that you already know about the existence of realms, so I won't go into detail about them. The first thing that requires scrutiny is that I was informed that this realm is suffering from some kind of anomaly."

Both the Crystals were taken aback by Lex's knowledge of realms. This was not a topic that could be considered common knowledge even in more mature realms, let alone the Crystal realm. Technically speaking, such information should have, at most, been shared with those who were about to break through the limits of the realm and transcend. Even then, most immortals actually thought the stories of ascendance and going to a higher realm were just rumors, and that earth immortals were actually the limit of cultivation. Only a select, elite few knew the truth.

The Crystal race was an unusual exception to this solely due to the fact that their entire race was abnormally powerful. Although for many of them, their cultivation rate was low, mainly because they felt no pressure to cultivate quickly, it was a common perception that every member of their race would reach the immortal realm sooner or later.

After all, the entire race was immortal. Even if they cultivated at the slowest pace possible, sooner or later they were bound to make enough progress to reach a higher realm. While other races had to speed up so that they do not become victims of declining vitality and their bodies failing them, the Crystal race had no such concerns.

As a result of this, they were a lot more liberal with sharing sensitive information as well. After all, to them it was only a matter of time till they became eligible to learn this information. It was only learning a little earlier than later.

Using his sixth sense Lex knew that his words had an impact on the two Crystals, but he did not pause for emphasis. There was too much to cover.

"I repeat, I was informed that the realm itself is suffering from some kind of anomaly, not that there is an anomaly inside the realm. Out of curiosity, I began to conduct some research on the matter. Due to my limited power, I obviously could not begin searching the entire realm, so then I began studying the history of the realm.

"The thing that stood out to me the most in the recent past is the abrupt hegemony of the Kraven. I tried to look into the Kraven a little more. Were they some suppressed race, hidden off somewhere in the realm? Were they a race that was born from mutation? Or, perhaps, were they invaders from another realm?"

Lex paused for a moment, to allow the two Crystals to absorb what he was saying. The most unfortunate thing was that if Lex had been able to converse with Luthor and the others, and talked to them about it, the Kraven would have been extremely familiar to them. It was not like they had run into the Kraven anywhere. Instead, they had already faced biological creatures who had been designed explicitly to fight against the inhabitants of a certain planet. If they had heard Lex's explanation, their first thought would have been that the Kraven sound like they were designed explicitly to take over the Crystal realm.

"These were, again, things I could not verify on my own, but I continued to pay attention to them and how the various nations reacted to them. Although I cannot begin to guess the rationale of the Crystal race, the reactions of the other races confused me as well. Of the original 7 great nations of the Crystal realm, an entire nation had been wiped out by the Kraven, yet still the remaining nations never sought to retaliate against them, and were forever satisfied to continuously lose land to their invasion, one county at a time.

"At first, these were only my suspicions. But then, I met someone from the royal family of the Hum nation. Although he himself did not understand the reason, I learned from him that the human race had purposefully been avoiding retaliating with full force. They had artificially engineered a situation where the Kraven were putting immense pressure on the entire nation, chipping away at it bit by bit, and somehow they were content with it. In fact, if someone were to take independent measures to retaliate against the Kraven, and achieved a certain level of success, they would be stopped from continuing to do so. The fact that the royal family itself is preventing retaliation against their sworn enemy is just too suspicious."

Lex was about to continue extrapolating, but Belmont interrupted him.

"The matter with the Kraven really is too confusing," he said, admitting to lacking certain knowledge himself. "According to latest reports, an unprecedented army consisting solely of immortal Kraven has laid siege all across the realm, save for the territories of the Crystal race. Yet when our allies solicited the Crystal nation for help due to the extenuating circumstances, our leadership remained suspiciously silent."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 685: Secrets

Lex was shocked to hear the scope of the war taking place! An entire army formed only of immortals? Especially an army large enough to face the entire realm? How many immortals would that even be? Hundreds of thousands no doubt, maybe even millions. Was it even possible for the Crystal realm to produce such a massive army?

The surprised Lex then looked from Belmont to Ezio, who wore a troubled look, but not a surprised one.

"The scope of the army is... is unbelievable," he said, fearing what he would do if such a force invaded the Inn. He probably didn't even have enough MP to hire enough guards to fight such an invasion off. He really should start upgrading his Butter Knife again!

"But I don't know why you're surprised about the fact that the Crystal race is not lending a hand. Based on what I know, they have never interfered in the Kraven war unless their own territories were at risk. The fact that they are choosing not to get involved, especially since there is such a massive threat, should make sense, right?"

Although Lex was not asking directly, he was hinting at the fact that for some reason the Crystals refused to help. Only if their rationale was explained could Lex understand if their lack of action this time as well fell in line with their ideology or there was some other reason for it.

Belmont was about to explain, but Ezio spoke first.

"Well, you have not discovered any exemplary secrets, but a thorough investigation and your deductive reasoning are good so I will reward you with similar information."

Ezio slowly stood up from his meditation position and beckoned them to follow him as he exited the meditation garden and entered a salon. Lex, once again, could not stop himself from wondering how any of this was supposed to be a prison. As if to emphasize his point, an automated bot appeared, carrying a tray full of snacks and delicacies, which Ezio offered the duo.

Lex could not help but wonder if the bot qualified as an A.I. He tried some of the snacks as Ezio began his story.

"Back when the Kraven invasion began at first, no one took them too seriously. After all, such minor wars happened all the time. Moreover, regardless of where they came from, no one had too much of a significant impression of them. The Poliods have their own strengths and weaknesses, but no one could say that they were a weak race. That is why their complete defeat was a huge surprise."

At this point, Ezio paused, as if he were a professor, allowing time for his students to absorb the information he was providing. Sure Belmont knew more than Lex about these matters due to his position, but he definitely did not know as much as Ezio, so he tolerated the situation and listened silently.

"The Kraven, either unsatisfied with their fortunes, or filled with ambition, continued to wage war. The Crystal race, too, faced their probing attacks. Of course, we thoroughly let them know not to mess with us, so they never tried again, but no other race was able to make such a stand. Thus, with the passage of time, all the other races became victims to the Kraven's war efforts. The other races often looked to the Crystal race for help, and asked them for help, or to even eradicate the Kraven.

"But for the Crystal race, the question remained, why should we intervene to begin with? We had a good relationship with some of the other races, sure. But the races themselves have long since forgotten

that once they too carved out a place for themselves through blood and fire, replacing others who were there before them. Back then if we did not help their predecessors against them, why should we help anyone against the Kraven?"

Suddenly, it dawned on Lex that he had not thought of things from such a point of view. He had been influenced by the knowledge that there were 7 dominant races in the Crystal realm, but that did not necessarily mean that it was always as such. In the beginning, to expand their lands and gather more resources, surely each race would have had to fight and conquer territory. In fact, the seven races may not have even become dominant at the same time. One may have come to power before the rest, and witnessed history unfold as 7 races became dominant over the realm. In this case, it need not be guessed that it was the Crystal race who was the oldest, and this had witnessed the rise of all the subsequent races.

Thus, from the point of view of the leader of the Crystal race, the activities of the Kraven might just seem like that of one race replacing another.

But wait... Although Lex's train of thoughts had been led in this direction by Ezio's explanation, a sign of anyone with basic extrapolation skills, he was not someone who would be blindly influenced by others. Though it seemed reasonable when Ezio said it, he could quickly and easily pick out the flaw in this.

Although the Kraven could be like the other races, carving out a space for themselves, they were also fundamentally different. The other races built up their civilizations, and grew alongside nature - even if some were more wasteful than others. They farmed, tended the land and incorporated various beasts and races into their way of life.

But the Kraven were not as such. He had flashbacks to the strangely desolate area in the Minor realm near the Kraven. Wherever they went, they would mindlessly kill and destroy all living things. Their spread was directly harming nature, and they had purposefully made themselves out to be as enemies of all sentient beings.

Such a distinct contrast should have still elicited a sense of disgust in the Crystal race. It should have been easy for them to determine that even if the Kraven were not a threat to them, their spread across the realm would directly harm the environment of the realm, and ultimately lead even the Crystals to suffer some loss.

If things went to an extreme, the Crystal nation might eventually become the last habitable place in the realm if the Kraven continued to spread the way they had been for so long.

"It seems you have noticed the flaw already," Ezio said, with a chuckle. "Yes, what you have heard right now is only the nominal explanation given out to the public. The real reason is a lot more straightforward, and at the same time, a lot more shocking.

"Since you know about realms, you must also know that upon surpassing the Earth Immortal realm, they ascend from the Crystal realm and go to another. They do not head towards a random realm, but one called Primordial Garden. As one can reasonably expect, the Crystal race also has a presence there, though admittedly we are nowhere nearly as indomitable there as we are here.

"When the Kraven invasion began, even before the Poliods were defeated, the Crystal nation detected the true threat that such a race faced. Just as we were getting ready to lend a hand, we were contacted by one of the elders who had transcended the Crystal realm. Contact through the realms is not easy, and so is reserved for only the most important news. The details of that message... I will keep to myself for now. All I will tell you is that afterwards, all plans to actively act against the Kraven were abolished."

Lex was shocked, but at the same time he already expected some kind of conspiracy so this was an acceptable outcome for him. It was instead Belmont who was shaken the most.

"Lies! You have to be lying! I have never heard of such an absurd thing!" he roared furiously, the crystal that made up his face taking on a red hue.

"Why are you reacting like a spoiled child?" Ezio asked, almost annoyed at Belmont.

"It's easy to confirm. Now that you know, you can consult the permanent members of the Crystal Parliament. They will only ask you how you find out, and then fill you in on the details."

The more confident Ezio sounded, the more shaken Belmont became. If he were not already sitting, he might have stumbled. Lex did not understand the relevance as to him it made perfect sense. If orders or instructions came from a more senior person within the same race, it made sense that they followed it.

That did not necessarily mean that the Crystal race was the mastermind behind the scenes. Maybe they were just avoiding some hidden, unknown danger under the guidance of their race members from a higher realm. It was too soon to jump to conclusions as there could be many explanations.

Unfortunately, it seemed like he would not find out why Belmont was so startled right now.

"Do you have more?" Ezio asked Lex. "From the way you spoke, I'm sure you've learnt more important things."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 686: Unexpected response

The way Ezio continuously dismissed Belmont was more than a little insulting. Perhaps there was some history there, or maybe Belmont had some kind of negative reputation amongst the Crystal race. Outsiders, such as Silvia, would still worship him but within his own race perhaps he was looked down on by a certain class. That would also explain his need to boast in front of Lex and feel superior.

That was not necessarily a bad thing, for Lex at least. Equipped with this knowledge he could think of more ways to get what he wanted. After all, he was nearing the end of what he knew.

Although the accumulated evidence kept on pointing towards the anomaly being something to do with the Kraven, what if that was not it at all? Sure, the Kraven could still be a part of some scheme or conspiracy, while the anomaly could be caused by something else entirely. What if the anomaly was actually related to the mysterious birth of monsters in the darkness. Sure, that had a much longer history in the Crystal realm, but who ever said the anomaly was new and not old?

Gathering all his thoughts, Lex took a deep breath in and added all the new information he heard and quickly thought of how to incorporate it into his own theories. Fortunately, for now, all the revelations seemed to support his assumptions.

"Well, yes, I'm about to get to the core of the matter. But first, let's recall what we now know. The royal family of the Hum nation, and possibly the leaders of all other nations, were for some reason suppressing full retaliation. Now, whether having reserved their forces so far will pay off or not facing such an unprecedented assault remains to be seen.

"But unless they all had foreknowledge of this attack, holding back their forces made little sense. That is the first point of suspicion. Then the fact that not only do Crystals from this so-called Primordial Garden know of the Kraven and their invasion, they even felt it necessary to send instructions down not to interfere in it makes me think that the Kraven invasion is not entirely normal.

"Either they were sent from another realm, possibly even the Primordial Garden," Lex paused and gave Ezio an uncertain look before continuing, "or perhaps there is a tear or portal in the realm somewhere, directly linked to wherever the Kraven are coming from.

"Rather than believing that the Kraven were just sent once, I am more inclined to believe there is a breach, or perhaps permanent link through which the Kraven continuously come from. The appearance of an army consisting of hundreds of thousands, or perhaps millions of immortals would also make sense then, because I find it hard to believe that they were able to nurture so many immortals in just a few hundred years. Moreover, if they had such a massive army from the get go, then based on their nature they would not have kept it in reserve.

"But, most importantly, the presence of a tear of some sort in the fabric of the realm itself... would explain my most recent discovery, which led me to come to you so quickly."

Lex did not bother pausing for suspense, though he knew it might have been a good tactic. In this situation where too much was unknown and Lex was not aware of how much information the duo actually had, he could not accurately gauge how to build the necessary environment for suspense. In this case, it was the actual revelation itself that would have to suffice as the ultimate shock.

"So that you can corroborate this information if needed, I will share with you in detail the sequence of events. In the unowned lands, in the territory of the Noel family, in a small port-town called Babylon I have a tavern called Midnight Tavern. From there I noticed an abnormality in the sea, and ventured forth to investigate.

"There I encountered the territory of a peculiar Trelop named Toro. There I learned that an unusual liquid had appeared in his territory which appeared enticing to all living beings, but would actually end up severely harming any who came in contact with it."

Lex spent a few minutes describing in thorough detail what the liquid looked like and the features it presented, and even pulled out a picture of the liquid he had stored in his spatial bangle, and showed it to them.

"The liquid was turning all passerbyers with an even slightly weak spirit into mindless drones, and so Toro was quite eager to get rid of it. As a result, I took a sample and consulted a senior I know about the results.

"The liquid... is called Cosmic Erosion Elixir. According to him, the liquid is produced as a result of a realm destabilizing due to an external influence. The birth of the Elixir means that the realm is on the path to self destruction."

Belmont scoffed, as if he had heard the most absurd thing ever.

"The 'elder' is completely misleading you. I have never heard of such an absurd thing. The realm..."

Belmont stopped talking, or rather his voice stopped traveling to them, when Lex gently reached out and seemed to 'grab' space. He was using Impervious Hands and augmenting the ability with his own spiritual energy, which allowed him to somewhat make use of space affinity.

Since Lex had not practiced much of his affinity, he could not use it as effectively as Z, but that did not mean he was completely inept. After months of long distance teleportation, he had already gained some insights on how he could make use of his ability.

By 'grabbing' space, even if lightly, he produced some visible wrinkles in space. This was not much, and the wrinkles could not even be used to attack or defend, but they were enough to block out the sound of Belmont speaking.

"I've already used the Cosmic Elixir to gain spatial affinity, so I can guarantee that it is real. Moreover, since the Crystal race can contact others from other realms, why do you assume no one else can do the same?"

He pulled out a Golden key, suddenly attracting the full attention of both Crystals. Even without Lex's explanation they could tell that there was something special about the key, though they still waited for him to explain. Ezio was especially intrigued, for this previously simple distraction he had found for himself had turned into something extremely interesting.

"This is the key to the Midnight Inn, a place for guests and travelers across the universe, regardless of any realm. Let me show you."

He smiled at the two, and chose to return to the Inn. Due to the heavily placed restrictions on space, there was an awkward pause as Lex's return was delayed a little. Just as Belmont was about to speak, his pupils constricted and his cultivation roared to life as he saw Lex disappear from right in front of him!

His spirit sense flooded the entire prison cell as he tried to locate Lex, but there were no signs of him at all. But as Belmont grappled with the thought of the ramifications of teleportation within their most secure prison, Ezio frowned, the look in his eyes becoming more and more grave.

He now had reason to believe what Lex was saying was true. If that was the case, and their realm really was at risk of destruction, then...

The couple of minutes Lex disappeared from the cell were spent filled with turbulent emotions for the duo, and his return did not exactly calm them down.

Belmont, especially, reacted extremely aggressively, and locked down Lex with his spirit sense.

"What conspiracy are you plotting, human?" the Crystal roared in anger, unable to think clearly. "Do you wish to break the prisoners out of Velasco? WHO ARE YOU WORKING WITH?"

Lex, who had returned feeling good, assuming that he was about to establish good relations with the Crystals, was taken by surprise. Wasn't this reaction a little too strong? But then his good mood was spoiled.

Even if he was planning on using the Crystals, he had never acted with bad intentions in mind. As such, he absolutely did not appreciate being treated as such.

With his body frozen still and the pressure of an immortal bearing down on him, Lex was not filled with fear. Instead, his eyes were filled with a dangerous anger.

Ezio, who had been ruminating amongst his own thoughts, suddenly noticed the abnormality and sensed that things were not normal. He suddenly realized that if Lex's claims were true, and he had the ability to travel between realms, then his background absolutely wasn't simple. He could not allow that duffer Belmont to screw things up!

"Belmont, restrain yourself!" he let out a roar, his voice filled with an unknown power. Though he was supposed to be restrained, and did not have access to all his abilities, his voice should have been enough to wake him from his manic state.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 687: Contract

Although Lex had an impressive defense, he was nowhere near strong enough to cause immortals any harm. The qualitative leap in power over each large realm resulted in a difference that could only be measured on a scale of order of magnitude. Basically, Lex could do nothing to harm them. This was moreover so for a race that was not only inherently stronger than humans, but had a longer life span and more well-developed techniques.

All he could do was return to the Inn, admitting failure. Moreover, as the place that he returned to the Inn to was from prison, he would only be able to return there in the future if he wished to enter the Crystal realm. Basically, he was stuck. The only option for him now in the Crystal realm was to use his Remote Presence ability.

But Lex was not resigned to running away. Although, yes, if he kept a cool head and behaved logically, he could endure the suppression of Belmont until Ezio knocked some sense into him. The situation was, after all, not yet resolved. There was room for it to progress in any direction, and he could salvage things.

But Lex had long shed his training to cooperate with the authority which living in the legal system on Earth had embedded in him. Yes, he had been pinning his hopes on the Crystal nation. But that did not mean he was helpless without them. So while suppressing his frustration could lead to a better outcome, he was not totally dependent on the Crystal race either.

Now that he was not dependent on them for anything, he did not have to fear acting against them. But the question was, what could he even do? There was absolutely nothing he could do that could harm immortals. Moreover, they would notice and then stop him as soon as he even tried to do anything.

As if that were not all, he was even frozen in place. He had no options - supposedly. Although the pressure of the immortal held him in place, it did not extend to the depths of his body or else even his

blood would be frozen in place, and he would die. If his internals were not frozen, then he could manipulate his spiritual energy.

Of course, using any technique right now would be futile, but he still had arrays did he not?

"Belmont, restrain yourself!" the voice thundered in the small room, waking the Lord from his manic episode, and restraining his aura. But in Lex's eyes, the duo did not see the relief of someone who escaped the wrath of an immortal.

Instead, in his eyes they saw the scorn of someone even more prideful than an immortal!

The duo was once again surprised, but before they could react, Lex once again disappeared, for good this time perhaps. But he did not leave without a departing gift: two arrays hung in the air where he had been.

The first was a simple array that left behind a voice message.

"I came to the Crystal nation with good intentions, to warn of an impending doom. Yet all I found were conspiracies and hostility. Perhaps the reason they do not fight against the Kraven is because they already know this realm is bound to be destroyed, and have already secured their own escape to the Primordial Garden. Why should they waste their time and effort protecting the poor vermin they know will die sooner or later anyway?"

The message was full of spite, and it was clear that Lex had developed an incredibly negative opinion of them. But who could blame him? Being oppressed by the aura of an immortal was easily said, but not easily endured. The physical and mental strain of such an experience could leave others crippled. In fact, the first time Lex had been exposed to the aura of an immortal was also during the Crystal realm, and had left him unconscious for a long time.

Though he was much stronger now, and would not be rendered unconscious just from being exposed to aura, it was still an unpleasant experience. He also did not like the notion that others felt that he could be manhandled.

Just as the duo was absorbing the words from the first array, Belmont even feeling a dash of guilt for overreacting, the second array triggered.

As it happened, the array was built around the character he saw up on the surface, with the intention of causing resonance with that character. Since that character was drawn into the structure, it would not be used up like in an array. Instead, it would continue to express the effects that character was associated with as a representation of the universal laws.

By creating a simple enough array, which resonated by that permanent and empowered character, Lex ended up creating an array with a much greater power than one would have expected.

The mansion around the two immortals morphed a little, as if the very stones making it up had undergone a change. While internally the mansion looked more or less the same, only one real change occurred. All exits from the mansion, and thus the cell, had been blocked off and moreover, reinforced by stones and rocks. Moreover, they were not so easily removed either.

As far as Lex was concerned, this was far from the retaliation he would have wanted. But, given his power, he would have to be content with a forced detention.

Ezio grimaced and looked at Belmont, who looked both awkward and angry.

"For centuries I have been lobbying against the establishment of positions based on nepotism," Ezio said, frustration and irritation evident in his voice. "Such a great accomplishment you have made, Belmont, making any enemy out of someone capable of traveling realms. Let alone the loss we will now suffer being deprived of the possibility of easy traversal between realms, can you imagine what kind of backing he must have? Can you tolerate an enemy able to facilitate inter-realm traversal? Worst of all, what if his claims are true? What if our realm is on the path to destruction?"

"Shut up!" Belmont could not help but roar, his embarrassment coloring his face red. "I will not hear lectures from a criminal!"

Ezio scoffed.

"I could receive a pardon whenever I wish, child. You know nothing of the world and its way. Just wish that things are not irredeemable, or else you may be the one coming here in place of me."

Not paying him any mind, Ezio left to try to exit his mansion. He needed to contact some Crystal on the outside and assess the situation. Behind him, though, Belmont began to worry about the repercussions to his reputation if word got out. As mind conjured up greater and greater threats to his future, his eyes once again were filled with mania. No one must know!

He locked onto Ezio's back, and attacked!

In a room sat a priest, his robe worn and heavily damaged. His once tough and buff body was now also battered and bruised. His beak, one his pride and joy, had now lost a lot of its color. Like the deity he used to worship, the priest had the head of an eagle and the body of a human.

But as the religion worshiping Ra was eradicated from the Origin realm, so were almost all its followers. Even this priest had only survived due to special circumstances.

Opposite to him sat a truly revolting slug creature from a race known as Gilati. A few other creatures sat in the room with them, as well as a devil. They were all waiting patiently for news.

Some time later, a portal opened and the succubus Karen walked through.

"Ladies and gentleman, slugs and bugs, beasts and monsters, the moment we have all been waiting for has finally arrived. The location of the Midnight Inn workers have been verified, and a plan has been put into motion. Soon, you too can try to get your hands on one of them. All you need to do is sign this confidentiality contract, witnessed by an Elder Devil, and we will be ready to go. Whatever your reasons are, so long you deliver on our agreement, we will not care at all."

There was no clapping or celebrating, as everyone in that room was in a sour mood. They were all gathered here as enemies of the Midnight Inn. Some of them just wanted to hurt the Inn somehow, while others wanted to blackmail them while others still wanted to dissect and study those workers.

Their personal reasons varied, but they were unified in their goal. One by one, they got up and signed the contract. In the corner of the room, a devil watched with eager eyes and a massive grin as he rubbed his hands together. Breaking a contract with a devil was nigh impossible, but the devils oh so loved it when someone tried to do so. Even now, this devil was hoping that some of them would change their mind midway.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 688: Invitation

Inside Valesco, the moment certain changes took place inside Ezio's prison cell, the guards noticed. The entire prison entered lockdown and a number of guards approached the prison and tried to enter it, but found to their amazement that they could not! The stones and rocks in the surrounding area had morphed so that all entrances and windows had been blocked. But being blocked was not the main issue. The issue was that the entire 'prison cell' had somehow become an impenetrable box, able to withstand a bombardment of powerful attacks.

Still, the Crystal race could not be underestimated. Based on their judgment of the toughness of the cell, it would take them exactly 12 seconds to break it and enter. They could only hope that nothing ridiculous happened within those dozen seconds, as the sounds of a fierce fight could be heard inside.

Lex, who reappeared at the Inn, was still in a foul mood. But he was not a child, and he was not immature, so he could not let his mood continue to influence him. Instead of checking up on the Inn, as he usually did, Lex entered his own meditation room and began to meditate. He calmed his mind and allowed himself to relax, keeping himself from reflecting on recent events. After a short twenty-minute interval, seeing as how the environment was just right, he decided to spend some time cultivating.

Since he had entered the Golden core realm, he realized that his cultivation speed, despite the excellent environment, was quite low. This was not only because it was harder to grow in the Golden core realm, but also because he barely ever cultivated. He got away with cultivating now and then during the Foundation realm, but in the Golden core realm, that did not seem to be the case.

Several hours later, when he finished cultivating, he slowly exhaled and allowed himself to completely relax.

Now that he was certain that he had completely calmed down, he finally allowed himself to reflect on what had just happened. To a degree, he considered this his own failure as well, not because he could have stayed back and salvaged the situation, but because he should have never even allowed the situation to deteriorate as such.

He had great pride in manipulating people and controlling events subtly, but this time he had allowed the situation to get out of hand. That failure had made his subsequent task more difficult, albeit he still had not given up on it. It had been a while since he tasted such failure.

When he had just begun his journey in the cultivation world, he seemed to be constantly making stupid mistakes, but with time and experience he became better. He faced numerous tricky situations, and always came out the winner. Now, after a long time, he came out as a loser once again.

Instead of cribbing or complaining about it, it was better if he learnt from it. For example, there had been subtle signs of Belmonts character from as early as he met him, yet Lex had become so used to dealing with capable and intellectual people that he overlooked all his faults.

Moreover, he had been so determined that once he met the elder from the Crystal race, Ezio, that his problems would be solved that when he finally encountered the situation, his anticipation had put him in a psychologically inferior position. Although it was not obvious based on Lex's behavior, the fact that he felt like he could not have manipulated them was a sign of such a mentality.

Of course, it was always easier to pick out mistakes and problems in hindsight, so Lex was not too hard on himself. Once he was done contemplating on how he could have done better, he began planning out what he could do now. He still had not learnt the secret of the Crystal realm, and he needed to use some way of gathering as many dignitaries at the wedding to raise the quest performance value.

What resources did he have available? How could he entice people to visit? How could he take advantage of the current situation in the Crystal realm to his benefit? Gathering people at the Inn would have been easier, but that did not in any way benefit his quest.

He had not yet moved from his meditation position as all these thoughts crossed his mind, and he did not intend to relocate either until he was done. Nor did he plan to use his state of flow to help him with his planning.

Almost instinctively, without even thinking about it, Lex felt like this would be the best way for him to recover from his setback.

Soon, an outline of a plan formed in his mind. Some parts were still not certain, and would depend on how things played out in the real world. Now that he had a plan, a smile returned to his lips.

The greatest mistake he made, in his estimate, was relying on the Crystal race to fix all his problems. Since when had he needed others' help? In fact, others should come to him in search of aid.

He teleported to the Innkeeper's office, and grabbed the Innkeeper's Pen, dipped it in the InkWell. He lamented for a moment that there was no 'Innkeeper's memo card' or 'Innkeepers notepad' upon which he could write for even further enhanced effect, but he would make do without it.

A square, white paper was summoned in front of him, and he finally put pen to paper. Although Lex had not specifically practiced calligraphy, he had enough control and sufficient imagination to allow him to write beautiful characters on the page.

As for the language he wrote in, it did not matter at all, so even the characters he wrote were completely made up. No matter what he wrote, even if it was a scribble, so long as he used the ink from the InkWell, anyone who gazed upon his writing would perfectly understand exactly what he meant to convey. Moreover, since he was writing with the Innkeeper's pen, his writing also benefited from the fact that the words were imbued with the aura of the Innkeeper. Of course, since he did not intend to sign his name as the Innkeeper, his identity would remain unknown to the reader.

Once he was done writing, he put the card aside and began writing on another one, resulting in two identical cards. But he was not done, and continued to create a few more cards.

Once he was done, he smiled mischievously as he read the contents of his cards.

"You are cordially invited to the wedding of Pvarti Noel and Jasmine Phillips to celebrate their union. As their houses unite in matrimony, so too should the nations unite to discuss the darkness that ripples through the lands. Although the Crystal nation has forsaken action, and tacitly allowed the growing conspiracy, no other can afford to."

Besides those words, there was only the venue, which was the Midnight Tavern, and the time of the wedding. If the address was explained in too much detail, it would take away from the mystique of the invitation, so he left it up to the recipients to conduct their own investigation on where the tavern was. He was confident that they would manage.

These words seemed simple, and perhaps even underwhelming as the prologue of his plan, but that is only when one failed to consider the immensity of the aura radiating from those words.

For a realm that was limited to Earth Immortals, the full dignity and immensity of the Innkeeper's aura was not something they had ever witnessed or could even conceive. This was an aura that even Dao Lords did not belittle and allowed them to assume the Innkeeper should be of rank with them. So how then could a measly Earth Immortal compare?

When seen from that lens, this entire invitation took an entirely new meaning. Although Lex had not said outright what the invitation was for, anyone would be able to conclude that the only 'darkness' rippling through the lands at the moment was the Kraven. Moreover, there was even a jab at the inaction of the Crystal race in the letter, as well as the insinuation that they were somehow involved in some conspiracy. Even if the recipients actually knew the truth behind the Kraven and the Crystal race turned out not to be involved, just the fact that these words had been written by someone of such immense aura, they would begin to doubt if what they knew was the truth to begin with.

Truthfully, Lex was not so petty that he would malign the whole race just because one member earned his ire. No, he would first create that misunderstanding, and then later pin the entire blame on Belmont. He would pretend as if his entire purpose in going to the Crystal realm was to personally deliver one of these letters to them.

As for the consequences of his actions... well, who asked Belmont to mess with him? Sure, Lex wasn't SO petty, but he was still a little petty. He wouldn't ignore being bullied due to a higher cultivation realm.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 689: The seventh race!

With a number of letters now in hand, the next step was to deliver them. That part, unfortunately, was easier said than done. He no longer had months to travel, as the wedding would take place in less than two months. He would need to recruit some aid, but at the same time finding people with the necessary connections to deliver the letters to the heads of the various nations was not easy.

Frankly speaking, he barely had a way to deliver the letter to King Cornelius. Although, admittedly, he was looking forward to seeing the Kings' reaction when he found Lex at the inn. He had sent his son looking for him, but now Lex was openly inviting the King to his own tavern, and with some kind of mysterious and unknown backing. It would be a good show.

He could ask the Phillips family to have the letters delivered. The letters may reach or they might not, as the connection of that family to other nations was of questionable value.

He had a better idea, though admittedly it was a little crazy. First, though, he scanned the Inn. It would be a test of his luck if it turned out...

He smiled, and teleported away, reappearing at the bar inside Midnight manor. A sulking crown prince by the name of Aegis was futilely attempting to intoxicate himself with the selection available at the bar. Unfortunately, Lex had nothing that would work on immortals, and so he was failing miserably at his objective. Defeated, for now, he was resting his forehead on the bar as he pondered on the future.

"I take it you've had a bad weekend," Lex said extremely casually as he sat beside him.

"Bad weekend. That's one way of putting it," he replied without lifting his head from where it rested on the bar. "I had to run with my tail tucked between my cheeks! I ran into an army made entirely of immortals. Even I'm not stupid enough to think I could take that on. I've been hiding here ever since."

"Yeah I can see how that would bring the mood down," Lex said as he ordered himself a Pina Colada. 'Why was that drink just so good?' a part of him wondered, though mostly he was still just focused on Aegis. "It's unfortunate, then, that I have some more bad news for you."

Aegis finally looked up, his eyes filled with fatigue. He had recently mustered up a lot of courage and determination as he had once again decided to face his undefeatable father. Turning over a new leaf was a lot of work, both literally and mentally. As a recently recovered alcoholic, he was not used to it and was having a tough time, so when he was faced with the tidal wave of immortal Kraven, his newfound resolution immediately crumbled.

Given enough time, he would probably be alright. He only needed to recover mentally before he could once again take up the challenging task of uncovering his fathers secrets regarding the Kraven with newfound vigor! After all, the Kraven just became a much bigger threat.

Unfortunately for his natural development, Lex could not wait so long. Moreover, despite any rebellion he may have shown against his father, Lex now needed him to return to him, so an intervention was absolutely necessary.

He put an invitation on the counter and slid it across the counter till it stopped in front of Aegis. A beautiful yet random scribble adorned the front, radiating a majestic aura, while at the same time translating to a single name: Cornelius.

"The situation in the Crystal realm is a lot more dire than just a massive Kraven invasion," Lex said, taking a sip from the frothy, bubbly drink he received. His visage did not match that of a person discussing potential armageddon at all. "The Crystal realm itself, the very fabric of its reality, is in jeopardy."

Briefly, Lex explained his discovery of Cosmic Erosion Elixir, and put the explanation of the elixir onto the powerful Innkeeper, the mysterious owner of the Midnight Inn, and thus the Midnight Tavern, as well.

Aegis' eyes never left the letter, a feeling of unsurpassed foreboding filling him. If the realm itself was at risk, he had to put aside his grievances and ensure that his own father received this invitation. The upcoming meeting held unprecedented significance and could forever alter the history of the realm. Moreover, this was far more serious than any other conspiracy he could even conceive. He needed to confront his father and discover if he had foreknowledge of this threat. If he did... Aegis could not even imagine what he would do if his father already knew of this.

"As it happens," Lex continued, waking Aegis from his reverie, "I need to send invitations to the leaders of the other nations as well. Do you have any idea how I can do so?"

"Delivering the letters to the capital of the nations of Varns, as well as the Sentinels, is not an issue at all. With our long history of cooperation with the Varns, and the frequent necessity for diplomatic missions to the Sentinels, we have teleportation formations already set that can reach their leadership. For the Crystal race, it is not so easy, but there is a process through which we can go. The new country formed by the Poliod's is completely out of our reach, and we have no ties with them, so I cannot help you there. The Trelops don't really let outsiders into the sacred lands, so delivering a message to them is difficult."

Lex nodded, as if that was already a great help, but then suddenly paused. He counted in his head, and suddenly realized that the number didn't add up.

The Crystals, Humans, Trellops, Sentinels, Varns and Poloids together formed six of the seven races that occupied the Crystal realm, but the seventh wasn't even mentioned. Although Aegis did not know he did not need to deliver a letter to the Crystals, he at least mentioned them. But he had completely ignored the seventh race, and not mentioned it at all. In fact, it was now occurring to him that he had never even heard mention of the seventh major race in the Crystal realm! Not in the academy when he was learning the history and geography of the realm, nor anywhere else had there ever been mention of a seventh race, except in mention of the fact that there were seven main races.

Suddenly, all of Lex's attention was focused on this issue. Why had he never noticed this small oversight before? This was abnormal!

"For the Crystal race, the Trellops and Poloids, I'll think of another way. You know, it occurs to me, that you did not mention the seventh race, nor have I ever heard mention of them."

Lex focused all his attention on Aegis, completely mentally prepared for some unexpected revelation. Could this unknown seventh race be behind the anomaly at the Crystal realm? Could there be some secret behind this matter? Was this unknown race perhaps so enigmatic that people would subconsciously ignore them unless there was a matter that specifically concerned them?

Aegis, who was up until now struggling to deal with shock, gave Lex a peculiar look as if he had heard a most unexpected question. Wasn't this... common knowledge?

Unfortunately, for Lex who was not a native of the Crystal realm, it was not common knowledge.

"The seventh main race of the Crystal realm... doesn't really have a nation. That's because... that race consists of Sol and Frio birds. The entire Crystal realm is their territory. There is nowhere they are not welcome, and nowhere they cannot accept the worship of all living things."

Lex's extremely serious look morphed just a bit as he suppressed his lips from twitching, but ultimately failed.

"Do they... have some kind of leader or do they just live freely?"

"There is a primogenitor Sol bird, and a primogenitor Frio bird, so I suppose they could be called leaders. They live in the territory of the Crystal race. But, I've never really heard of the Sol birds acting in unison as a race before. The largest their groups go to is a single flock. In fact, even when their flocks began to grow too big, they split and form two smaller ones."

Lex nodded. He would... skip the invitation for the birds as well then, since he had no way of reaching the Crystal race territory. He put down two more invitations on the counter, and requested Aegis deliver them to the Sentinels and Varn capitals to their respective leaders. As for the rest... Lex sighed, and turned his attention to Zagan, the latest Inn worker who had yet to perform a single task.

The moment he had arrived at the Inn, he underwent a breakthrough to a higher realm, and had since then been in retreat. It was time for him to contribute a little.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 690: Work Ethic

A dozen seconds was an inconsequential amount of time for most mortals. Unless one was performing some excruciatingly difficult task, such as performing a plank or counting down the timer on a microwave for food when starving, it would pass without even giving enough time for significant thought. A good stretch early in the morning would easily surpass such a time limit, and there was certainly almost no task that required less time.

Yet for immortals, 12 seconds was an eternity. With minds fast and powerful enough to work through countless scenarios and resolve an untold number of issues, each second was enough to determine life and death. It was ironic, really, considering that the greater their cultivation level became, the longer their fights took.

So for 12 seconds, the guards who stood outside the sealed prison lived through 12 lifetimes as they waited for an opening. Meanwhile, sounds of a bitter struggle could be heard from within. More and more guards also trickled into the outer room, joining the queue of those ready to face any threat.

Finally, when they were able to puncture a hole into the perimeter of the cell, dozens of spirit senses flooded in to investigate. The sight that awaited them was both extremely shocking, but also blatantly predictable. Ezio and Belmont were fighting!

But, with all his powers and cultivation sealed, Ezio was not fighting so much as he was struggling to survive. His entire body was covered in cracks, both big and small, indicating the bitter beating he had just suffered. Yet he was not dead yet. The crystals that made up his body were stronger than Belmont expected, and even with such an overwhelming advantage, he was not able to kill him.

Belmont, on the other hand, did not look so great either. He was not harmed, but the crystals that made up his body were all tinted with a deep, flowing red, hinting at his mania. As a Crystal who had constantly faced scrutiny and had to live with judgment and condescension from his peers, he was extremely sensitive to any negative news relating to him being spread.

Although not a shred of him believed Lex's claims, facing the possibility where it might be even 1% true and he had driven Lex away, he could not imagine the reproach he would face. But now, it was all for naught. Ezio had survived, and so he could not spin his own tale.

Before he could consider anything even more drastic, the guards streamed in and suppressed him as well. Things were out of his hands now, and his mania finally subsided. All that remained was regret - regret that he had not directly killed that stupid human the moment he saw him. Hatred flashed in his eyes.

Ezio, on the other hand, looked quite happy and even content. Soon he would be treated, and then he could investigate the matter that they had been informed of by Lex. Moreover, he still needed to pay Lex back for sharing a secret. While he himself was stuck in prison, for now, his clone was not. Fortunately, Lex had already shared the location of his tavern. The clone would head there directly.

While Aegis waited for the Kraven army to pass so he could return to the Crystal realm, Lex teleported away. In a distant corner of the Inn sat Zagan, currently in a human form. He looked incredibly pale, almost as if he was sick, and had straight black hair. At a glance, he looked like a highschool kid from Japan.

But of course he was not. He was an immortal monster which had gained sufficient sentience, and a lazy loafer besides. He had spent a ridiculously long time to pass the test, and since passing he had only been cultivating. He had been no help at all.

Though, to be fair, from Zagan's point of view, he was the pinnacle of haste! The monster had lived for millions of years, so its concept of time was very different. Any ordinary task it performed would be stretched over a few years at least. In contrast, it did not even take a single year to finish the test. Moreover, it was currently undergoing a tribulation. If it succeeded, then it would undergo a period of rapid growth during which time it could only cultivate.

In his modest expectations, it would be another 6 or 7,000 years before his current cultivation cycle ended. It did not know much about the Midnight Inn, to be honest, but when it became a worker, it felt the bond created within its soul, linking it to the Inn. To be able to do that, the owner of the Inn definitely had to be much more powerful than it. In that case, he had probably lived much longer than Zagan, right? If that was the case, a few thousand years to get accustomed to its current level should be completely understandable.

In fact, he would not be surprised if he was commended for his speedy resolution of his personal affairs to show up to work. As his first ever job, he was looking forward to seeing what it would entail.

These were only some of the passing thoughts Zagan had while it underwent its latest tribulation. After the more commonly known tribulations, such as fire and lightning, ones it had already experienced before, it was now undergoing an entirely new form of tribulation.

An entity presented itself to Zagan in his mind in the form of an ancient, extinct race known as Farham. The Farham, for crimes unknown, were excluded from the cycle of life and death, and were sentenced to the bidding of 'Heaven' or the universe until they can atone for their sins.

In this case, that atonement was in the form of testing Zagan's mentality through a series of illusions it suffered in its mind. But as a monster that had lived for millions of years, this was perhaps the easiest tribulation it had ever faced. It was others, with far less life experience than it, who would really struggle with this tribulation.

Just as it was focused on its illusion, it felt a physical stimulus attracting its attention. Was this also a part of the tribulation? He felt the stimulus again, and opened its eyes to find a human standing in front of it, poking him.

Zagan immediately shut his eyes again! Although the tribulation it was suffering was easy, it could not afford to be distracted! Opening his eyes activated all kinds of techniques and abilities which subtracted

from his main energy reserve. Too much of such stimulation would be dangerous for he currently did not have the ability to control his cultivation.

"What do you want, human?" he asked, his tone filled with arrogance and condescension. Excluding Alyssa, who had treated his wounds continuously, Zagan still saw humans as inferior beings. It was too used to it, after living an entire lifetime of only seeing them cower and fear before they died.

Unfortunately, Lex could not care less about his superiority complex.

"You're from the Crystal realm, right? You've lived there a long time? You probably have a lot of contacts and know a lot of secrets. I need your help."

"Now is not the time, human! Come back in 10 thousand years and I will consider sparing you for your transgression!"

Uncaring, Lex poked him in the face again.

"Listen here buddy, you've been freeloading off the Inn from the moment you came. I don't really mind, since the Innkeeper doesn't mind, but you better pay your dues. Are you going to help me, or should I have you sent back to the Crystal realm? I'm sure absolutely no one will come and bother you once they find out you're undergoing a tribulation."

Zagan panicked. What was going on? It had not even been a century yet and people were complaining that he wasn't working? What kind of job was this? He should have at least a 100,000 year notice before he is required to do any task so that he could rouse himself and adjust his mentality!

This... this... this was employee suppression! This was slavery! This... this was animal cruelty! Wait. Did it count as an animal?

"Wait till I am done cultivating. It will only take a few years."

"It's now or never buddy. You don't need to do much. Since you can talk, then just talk. I need to deliver a letter to the sacred lands of the Trelops and need to reach the Poloids' new country. I don't have a lot of time either, maybe a few days to a couple of weeks maximum."

"I cannot be distracted," Zagan said in a weak, pleading voice. But little did he know, his boss had his work ethics trained in the capitalistic center of the world. Humanity? Workers rights? Decent working hours? Such concepts were for hippies. Here, they got the job done.