

Innkeeper 121

The Innkeeper

Chapter 121: A little bit of tact

Since all the services around had sizeable crowds and long queues, Ragnar instead decided to walk around the Inn and observe everything for himself. He investigated the Mystery trial as well, but it could only accommodate one person at a time and was already in use.

He saw some people sitting and eating in the garden. Some of them were eating spirit food - a huge surprise for Earthlings but nothing special for Ragnar. He walked to the Meditation room as well as the Recovery room and saw first hand their capabilities. Although he could not be sure about the effectiveness of the Meditation room, judging from the level of all the other services he could garner a guess.

The more he saw, the more he believed that the Inn was designed to cater to low leveled cultivators, and really only served the purpose of a vacation spot. Naturally the services were a great boon for Earthlings and Beasts from Nibiru even, but anyone with a certain amount of standing in a Star class civilization or greater could receive the same benefits through spending money.

All in all, the Inn seemed unique enough to attract attention, but was generic enough not to step on any high leveled toes. Perhaps the Innkeeper did not have any hidden, ulterior motives, and was only fulfilling a whim of his to run an inn. Who knew what these ancient, powerful beings did to pass the time?

Since he had to pass the time waiting for the humans to conclude their meeting, he decided to try out their food. Thorough reconnaissance required every part of the Inn to be investigated.

In a private room in the coliseum, the five human Nascent cultivators were sitting along with the observer sent by the lady in the hologram, and Audery, of course. Who said ancestor level cultivators can't be simps?

The observer, Adrian, did not contribute much to their discussion, much to the frustration of the others. They were hoping he would provide some insight about the forces of the universe, but he told them nothing.

All Adrian said was, "My role on this mission is to only record everything down so I can report it later. I don't have the qualifications or the authority to share information with you freely, as it may affect plans that I am not aware of. All I can say is, you do not need to worry too much. The Jotun Empire is a friendly force, and not our enemy. Having said that, you should maintain the facade that you have no contact with anyone outside of your galaxy."

"What about the Devils?" the fat man asked. Out of everyone here, he was the only one who had little to no combat experience. Even with his strength, the stigma of Devils affected him.

Adrian let out an exasperated sigh. "I keep telling you, I am just a clerk. I don't know these things, I am only here to observe! Before this, I didn't even know that Devils were a race! Instead of asking me, you should ask the soldiers from the empire these questions. They will have answers for you."

"How long are we going to drill him on useless things?" Brandon asked in annoyance, before anyone could question Adrian some more. "Let's focus on what really matters. How has there been no progress on those rebels? My grandson suffered an assassination attempt just so that we could get a few leads. Several families on Earth and the Moon were implicated, not to mention an ICPA. We had the entire country of Egypt on lockdown, yet still we got nothing besides a few deadends."

Brandons question caused everyone to grimace. This really was a conundrum. Many years ago, the five families had noticed a certain force manipulating people and events to harm their interests. For a while, the force tried to sow discord between the families - something that could have worked if they weren't all actually secretly working together.

Losses, scandals, assassinations and more threatened to bring the families to war. Yet, for reasons unknown to the rest, they never worked against one another. At a certain point it became evident that such a strategy would not work, which suppressed that mysterious forces movements - but did not completely finish them. Slowly and steadily the force kept working in the shadows, slowly chipping away at the families' influence and strength. Yet that was also meaningless since the foundation of their strength were the Nascent cultivators and there were few that could threaten them.

At one point, those forces instigated Beasts to act out so that the Nascants would be forced to act. That was actually the incident in which Marlo had also been caught, the time he was in Australia. Yet that

yielded no results either. The five families did not actually feel threatened by the force, they were just concerned that they may become desperate and do something that would harm the masses.

Yet despite their best efforts for years, they were not able to learn the details regarding whoever was behind it all. They did not even know the name of the organization or entity, choosing to call them 'rebels' for simplicity.

"It was handled too cleanly, as if they were already expecting to be traced. The entire Sigmund family has been implicated, but we have not been able to find any actual proof of their involvement in the matter. It seems as if they themselves were duped. It's the same with every other lead we have."

"Then I think it's about time we ask the hard questions. Why do they always know what steps we are going to take? Why are they familiar with our forces and how we are going to act?" Brandon's last question caused the rest to grimace even more.

"Are you saying some of our families are involved?"

"No," Brandon said, shaking his head. "I'm saying at least one person from EACH family is involved. And not just any random person, someone with influence and knowledge of how the family operates."

Silence filled the room, but no one chose to refute him. At this point, even if no one said it out loud, they had all been thinking about the possibility.

"I think the Midnight Games will be an opportunity. It's impossible for them not to know that we would be going, even if they weren't involved with the families. They must be planning to make a few big moves during the games. If we're still not able to trace them, then we need to start planning on how to investigate the families themselves. Meeting at the Inn will be the most convenient, as we can teleport here directly with no one aware of when we'll be meeting."

Everyone eventually came to a consensus, though what they were actually thinking could only be speculated. How easy was it to suspect one's own family?

With their dirty laundry handled, it was now time to meet with the Jotun soldiers. The Queen had one of her followers let the empire's soldiers know they were ready to meet. At the same time, Marlo was also brought into the meeting.

Marlo, in fact, was not too popular. Other than the Morrison family, the other families all had a bad impression of him, or at least wanted to keep some distance. But he had interacted with both the zombies and a soldier of the empire before, so his input could serve to be useful.

After a short wait, Ragnar entered the room followed by Slag and Anthony. Marlo flashed Slag a grin, but did nothing else. Despite his boisterous behavior he was a shrewd man, and knew when to behave.

"Greetings, I am General Ragnar Asulf of the Jotun Empire. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"Not at all General. I think we both have much to gain from this meeting" spoke Sam somewhat directly. "My name is Sam, and this is Elizabeth," he said, pointing towards the Queen. "This is Fateh," he said, pointing towards the fat man. "This is Richard, and this is Brandon. We have been looking forward to meeting with you."

"Indeed, it can be quite productive for us both. I've heard a little about Earth from my subordinate," he said, pointing towards Slag. "And I'm sure you've heard a little about the Empire as well. We can spend more time getting to know one another, but I think the first and foremost thing on everyone's mind is how we can benefit one another."

Compared to the Beasts, he was more direct with the humans. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, he was sure that of the three planets, Earth was the weakest in terms of military strength. And secondly, in the entire universe, the Jotun Empire was the biggest backer for humans. So whether the Earthlings realized it or not, they were already in the same camp. And if they were in the same camp, they were already Ragnar's subordinates. He just had to make them aware of that fact, with some tact of course.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 122: Fodder

By being so direct, Ragnar took control of the flow of the conversation. The Earthlings had not planned on being so direct, as it was not the way of things. At least, it was not the way of things on Earth. First they had planned on conversing a little, and establishing the basis for a relationship.

Now, with the conversation moving directly to the topics of benefits, they had lesser room to manoeuvre the conversation. This was not mentioning the fact that, if what Slag said was true, there was hardly anything Earth could provide that the empire didn't already have access to.

Unlike when the Morrisons had negotiated with Chen and Lily, who did not have access to unlimited resources and were in great need of support, the empire probably did not need them to provide spirit stones or ores, or even weapons. So then the question came, what exactly could Earth do for such a giant?

Whatever the case may be, the first rule of negotiation was to never let the other know the cards you were holding. Brandon may not have been a good negotiator, but he was definitely shameless enough to lie with a straight face.

"Indeed, I imagine you would want everyone's full cooperation during the Midnight Games to ensure that the nodes are destroyed. I'm sure I can convince everyone to send an elite force to the Games to assure success if the Empire is willing to concede victory of the games to us," Brandon said in a very serious tone, as if he were doing Ragnar a favor.

Fateh, or rather the fat man as Brandon had titled him because he would always pretend to mispronounce the name, suddenly felt a great deal of sympathy for Ragnar. Brandon's shamelessness was astronomical. If he were pretending to mispronounce the name he should at least say fatty so that it would at least sound remotely similar to his name. Not that he particularly minded being fat. He was secretly quite pleased with his girth.

Ragnar, though, did not seem phased by Brandon's remark. He pondered for a moment, as if truly considering the proposal, and then said, "The Innkeeper has not stated an upper limit for the number of cultivators per game but I'm sure there is a limit. The Empire will have no problem bringing out and equipping tens of thousands of cultivators at each realm, all armed with the latest spirit tech. Yet with a number limit, only the elitist of the elite will have to be selected. If your forces prove to be stronger or more effective than ours, I do not mind working together. It is true, to the empire successfully destroying the formation is worth more than a prize. If the situation permits, working together is a good option."

"It's a pity then that the Innkeeper has shut down the combat arena during the games otherwise we could have our forces compete to settle the matter before the games. After all, if our forces clash during the games, it would be a shame if too many 'elites' go out of commission before the battle with the zombies even begins."

Brandon completely ignored the not so hidden boast about huge armies with trained elites that were probably better equipped than anyone from Earth, and completely pretended as if Earth were the superior force.

"I'm sure we can hash out the details. Please, have a seat. We have much to discuss, it seems."

They had all still been standing to greet Ragnar when he entered. By telling everyone to be seated, Ragnar once again put himself in a position of power during the meeting. Such subtle nuances, when constantly reinforced, had tremendous ramifications on the subconscious mind. This was a truth even cultivators could not ignore, and was a tactic Marlo often used when purchasing businesses. It was unfortunate, then, that the recipient of Ragnar's mind games put everyone other than his wife beneath him. His shameless antics had somewhat been an inspiration for Marlo's own personality, a small detail no one knew.

"Indeed, with a constant battle against zombies and the added pressure of these Devils, I'm sure there are many areas in which Vegus Minima needs Earth's help." The difference between saying Vegus Minima needs help rather than the empire was a bit of mental manipulation of Brandon's own. It put the planet in a weak position of needing help without directly calling the empire weak.

Ragnar smiled. He did not mind Brandon's aggressive manipulation of the conversation at all. In his eyes, Brandon was a junior nurturing whom would ultimately benefit the empire.

"Vegus Minima has been surviving for hundreds of years even before the empire came to help. It is not in as weak a position as it seems. I'm more curious about Earth. From what I understand, you have just started terraforming the other planets in your solar system. Starting your expansion outwards, you should be careful. Most foreign forces are quite hostile towards others. I'm sure in such a situation, you're in desperate need of information about the universe."

"Indeed," Brandon replied without skipping a beat. "We Earthlings need to be careful not to offend any other forces and attract unwanted attention. Especially those Devils, they seem especially dangerous, not to mention all those zombies. Perhaps we need to also consider if it's worth antagonizing such forces just to win an award in the games."

Ragnar grinned internally. This Brandon had successfully attracted his attention. If his performance in other areas continued to be stellar, he would definitely mark the man as someone to be nurtured.

Yet before Ragnar could respond Audery reached out and gently helped Brandon's hand, before speaking in the gentlest of voices. "Darling, put your ego away. We're in a meeting, not a cock fight. And General, a little birdie told me that we do not need to be concerned as the Empire would be a friendly force towards us. With that in mind, why don't we inaugurate the first ever meeting between Earth and the empire with a little bit of sincerity instead of politics?"

Once she said her piece, Audery casually leaned back into her chair as if she did not care about the outcome one way or another. She had changed the flow of conversation once again, and in an ingenious way. Bringing up 'sincerity', she made it so that if Ragnar once again tried to elevate his position in the conversation, or threaten Earth with the unknown, he would immediately mar the relationship between the two. That did not mean that they could not work together, but that any future cooperation would be reserved as everyone protected their own interests.

The truth was, Audery's intentions in speaking up weren't so pure. She was just impatient and didn't want to wait around for the 'men' to stroke their egos before getting to the important stuff.

Slag and Anthony frowned, as they did not like the way she spoke to the General, but the man himself let out a visible smile.

"Indeed, helping out one another will build a stronger relationship. Let me then begin by briefly introducing you all to the forces of the universe. Since you have already been introduced to Demons and Devils, let me start from there.

"You all cultivate spiritual energy, as do most beings in the universe. That automatically makes you an enemy of the Demons, whether you want it or not. There is no noble cause there, no greater purpose to eliminate evil in the universe. It is simply a matter of survival. Let me elaborate.

"Demons do not have a specific species or race. Simply put, anyone or anything that cultivates demonic energy is classified as a demon. As for why all demons are your enemies? That's even simpler. Demons grow stronger by feeding on those who cultivate spiritual energy, while those who cultivate spiritual energy grow stronger by feeding on demons. You have already seen the zombies. By absorbing the energy found in the zombies' cores, you can elevate your body cultivation faster than by using most other treasures or medicine you can find. Similarly, as zombies feed on spiritual beings, not only do they grow stronger, they grow smarter as well. The presence of Demons in the universe is not weak, and despite being enemies with almost every other force, their threat is very real.

"Then comes the matter of Devils. Things there are more troublesome. As Devils do not cultivate demonic energy, the universe is not united against them. Yet somehow, Demons treat themselves as the Devil's subordinates. Any demon that encounters a Devil of the same level or higher will unequivocally obey their orders. Because of this, the Devils are able to raise and farm demons in a manner so efficient they are one of the strongest forces in the universe. If the Empire were on its own, there is no doubt at all that it would be eradicated by the Devils." At this point Ragnar paused, his smile vanished, and he looked at the representatives with utter seriousness.

"Unfortunately for you, you once again do not have a say in garnering their hostility. Humans happen to be one of the races the Devils love to use as the demons fodder. Should your planet ever be discovered by a Devil, there is no doubt at all that you will undergo the same fate as Minima Vegus - to be brought to the brink of extinction, yet allowed just enough room so that you can survive for centuries, becoming a renewable source for the demons to feed on."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 123: Test

A heavy silence hung in the room as everyone absorbed what Ragnar had said. Marlo especially recalled the scene where a city was constantly being invaded by endless hordes of zombies. He treated it seriously even when he saw it for the first time, but he imagined that one way or another the zombies would run out, as the rate at which they were being killed was incredible. But when he learnt of the spawning portal, he realized the truth was not so simple. They really were on the brink of extinction.

What Marlo did not know was the city he had visited was founded by the Jotun Empire, and it was their presence that garnered such a strong response from the demons. Before their arrival, such a fierce battle had not occurred since the planet first fell.

Even though they all knew that Earth was not as alone as they portrayed, it was good to be reminded that the universe was a cruel place. They could not even completely secure their planet from internal strife, strong external threats could spell their doom.

"Any other enemies that we should know of?" Brandon asked.

"Enemies who target humans specifically? Not so many. But any random force can become your enemy should they see profit in doing so. Even allies of the Empire are only allies of the Empire in a broad sense. That does not prevent them from seizing control of individual planets or solar systems where they can gain benefits. The only way to gain security is to have a strong enough backer."

"Isn't that always the case?" Brandon remarked offhandedly. It was just a larger example of paying a thug protection money.

"Most notable forces in the universe are based around their species. For example, of the Beasts, some of the strongest clans are the Leviathan clan, the Terror Crow clan and the Serpent clan. Other notable examples are the Dread clan and, ironically, the Goliath clan."

"Why ironically?" asked Brandon.

"Relatively speaking, the Goliath clan is the newest power in the known universe. Their species started out as a mutation of humans that originated on a single planet. When they were discovered by other humans, they were shunned and even persecuted. But as fate would have it, a Prince of the Jotun Empire ended up befriendng a Goliath. Out of friendship, the Prince granted the Goliaths protection, and allowed them room to grow.

"Since no one was paying attention to them, no one noticed how quickly their strength grew. What should have been the beginning of an amazing friendship and partnership soured when that Prince suddenly died. Long story short, the Goliaths broke away from the humans, and quickly surpassed them. Fortunately, they do not hold a grudge against the humans, but they are in no way allies of humans either."

Ragnar paused for a moment, as if thinking about something, but quickly returned back to the topic.

"This does not mean that all forces are based around their species. Most recently, after many millennia of war against one another, Dwarves and Elves have actually formed a coalition. Similarly, many forces are formed from the union of various groups. I cannot even begin to list out all the forces. It would take too long.

"The purpose in me telling you this is to let you know that since you have started expanding outwards, you must also prepare for the threats. It is entirely possible that your planet may not encounter other forces for centuries, or could run into a band of pirates tomorrow."

"And let me guess, you suggest we join the Empire?"

Ragnar grinned, watching the children with amusement. To be clear, to the three and a half thousand year old Ragnar, these Nascent cultivators of Earth were indeed children.

"Joining the Empire is not so easy or simple. Your planet cannot join simply because you are human, or because you wish it. At most, talented individuals from your planet can be recruited for now. Before even beginning to consider the requirements of the Empire, the location of your planet will determine whether you are even eligible. If your planet falls under the domain of another force, then unfortunately, you are on your own."

Technically, they weren't on their own even if they were in someone else's domain, but Ragnar could not be bothered to explain the details. The politics of the universe were a lot more complicated and had many more layers than that of Earth. For now, this level of detail was sufficient.

What he did not expect was that instead of feeling pressured, they felt a burden lift off their shoulders, knowing that the Empire was not recruiting them directly. Even as arrogant as Brandon was, he did not want to imagine the consequences of offending such an entity by refusing their offer.

"So if you are not looking to recruit Earth, other than help in the games, what benefits are you actually looking for?" asked the Queen directly.

"It is always in the interest of the Empire to see humans grow and prosper, even if they are not under the banner of the Empire itself. But even with that in mind, nothing in the world is absolutely free.

"There are many ways in which we can benefit one another, but I directly propose what I think is the best deal to you. Earth will send five hundred thousand men and women under the age of thirty to receive training in various fields such as medicine, mechanics, computing, cultivation, crafting and more for five hundred years - during which they will be employed by the empire. Another five hundred thousand will be employed under the same conditions for three hundred years, and another five hundred thousand for one hundred years.

"As a part of their salary, the Empire will provide Earth with some basic knowledge and technology that will boost the growth of your own civilization, while the rest of the salary will be paid to them directly. Once the employment period for these people is over, they are free to return to Earth, at which point their own skills and expertise will be enough to slingshot your planet's growth while also strengthening its own foundations."

The Earthlings did not reply immediately, and only exchanged looks with one another filled with a meaning they all understood very well. Ragnar's offer seemed straightforward, but was layered with both benefits as well as tests. He did not say it, but the offer was a blatant test of their character.

Theoretically speaking, as Nascent leveled cultivators, their life expectancy barely reached five hundred years. This meant that if they accepted the offer, in the future, Earth would be flooded with cultivators at their level, along with the potential to surpass them. This may not affect them directly as they may never break through a higher realm and may not even live to see the day the last recruits return, but it would be clear that the position of their respective families would be threatened very seriously.

This was not even considering the two waves of recruits who would come back first, who would also be brimming with the strength and potential that came with the nurturing of a superior civilization. It was a test to first see if they valued the growth and prosperity of their people over their own desire for power. Second, to see if they had the courage to send their own families as a part of the recruitment, as that would possibly be the only way they could continue to maintain their position of power in the future.

Another layer of the test was that even if they sent their own children or grandchildren, which one of the three waves of recruits would they be a part of? The longer they stayed away, the lesser their attachment to the planet they spent the first few decades of their life on be. So then, would they even be willing to return to the backwards planet to struggle and help it grow?

"We will need some time to discuss this," Brandon finally said.

"Take your time. Watching your people during the games will also give me a chance to see the caliber of the people of Earth. In the future, Anthony will coordinate with you on this, so you can approach him once you've decided on how you want to proceed. He will also coordinate with you on how we can cooperate during the games."

After seeing all that he wanted to see, Ragnar delegated handling the nitty gritty of things to his subordinates. Over all, the trip to the Inn had been very beneficial, but he had to return to focusing on his original task. Since the Innkeeper was no longer around and the Midnight Inn itself wanted to establish itself as a neutral organization, the things that required his personal attention were all taken care of. Now it was time for him to return to Vegus Minima and start preparing for what came next.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 124: The third procedure

Once Ragnar left, Anthony took over the negotiations. Compared to the general, he was a lot more straightforward. He directly set the terms and conditions and if the earthlings found it disagreeable or difficult to meet or wanted to negotiate a bit, he would dismiss it and move on to the next potential point for cooperation.

In the end, they didn't end up agreeing on anything as the Earthlings either wanted time to discuss amongst themselves or were contingent upon their performance in the first round of the combat portion of the games. Still, Anthony was not disappointed or disgruntled and scheduled a time for their next meeting in which they would finalize a lot of their cooperation.

The difference in treatment between how Ragnar and Anthony treated them was like night and day. Ragnar could be willful, but Anthony was strictly professional. It also gave them a clear understanding of how little importance they were to the empire. Perhaps the only reason they received any attention at all in the first place was because they met at the Inn. If the empire had encountered them elsewhere, with their current strength and standing, they may as well have been ignored.

Once the meeting was concluded, they passed any instructions they had to their own subordinates and returned to Earth to once again convene with the woman in the hologram. Brandon, who was the most concerned about the rebels, inquired about any suspicious movement or activities while they were gone. The answer he received was that everything was normal, which worried him more than relieved him.

There was no way the rebels didn't know about the meeting. If they didn't use this opportunity to make any moves, then maybe they would do so during the games. There was also the potential that they would not do anything during the games as well, but he did not think an organization with the guts to try and assassinate his grandson would miss out on such opportunities.

With limited forces on Earth and no new information to act on, he decided to put Mars under martial law. Any and all activity was stopped until further notice and all military forces were put on full alert. Truthfully speaking, Mars was in the least danger, as it was impossible to approach the planet without being spotted, and he had strict control over everything on Mars, unlike on Earth, where the division of power was too great. Still, he did not want to take chances.

They reconvened the meeting with the lady, and instead of giving the report themselves, Adrian was the one who made the report. Once she heard the report, she ruminated for a bit before saying, "You are free to send anyone you want to the Jotun Empire for training, but only if you can send your recruits

through the Inn itself. You cannot, under any circumstance, accept any deal that would need you to reveal the location of Earth. Furthermore, keep in mind that while it is okay to send people away from Earth, those sent away cannot come back - ever!

"As for matters of running into outside forces, you need not concern yourself with it. If you should ever encounter such a threat, we will take care of it. Not to mention, the space near and around your solar system is under our supervision. Should another advanced civilization have existed, we would have already known of it. The chances of space pirates are even lower, so you need not concern yourself."

The discussion went on for a while longer, but the gist of it was that the lady in the hologram did not care what they did as long as they did not expose the location of Earth and followed her orders regarding her 'guests' that she had sent to Earth.

The relative freedom and general assurances provided by the woman relieved the Earthlings a lot. All they had to consider now was what to do about Ragnar's offer? Sending people away was not a problem, but if they ultimately could never return, then what even was the point of sending them in the first place? Maybe they could send out people they hoped could create a better life for themselves amongst the uncertainty of the universe.

Little did they know, they weren't the only ones deliberating over this deal. Far, far in the universe on the planet Vegus Minima, Ragnar was looking solemnly at a report. More specifically, he was looking at the words 'Earth: classified'.

Once he returned from Vegus Minima he needed to report the situation, but the gains were drastically more than expected. As a result, instead of providing a report in the usual way, he had to initiate a platinum level confidential transmission.

As a result of his transmission, it wasn't only the army that was notified, but also the aristocracy of the empire. A nobleman and a commanding general appeared as holograms before him, staring at him with a dignified look. Unfortunately, when a transmission over a certain rank occurred, usually it was bad news. Such was the volatility of the universe.

Ragnar began his report by first stating his assessment of the Midnight Inn as a neutral organization with a SS rank danger potential. To emphasize this point, he informed them that a Celestial seemed to be a subordinate of the Innkeeper. The key word here was 'seemed' as they did not know the details, but putting up such an appearance in itself was impressive.

Then he reported about Earth and Nibiru. Finally, he reported on the Demons and Devils.

When he told them that he had managed to capture their aura signatures using the device in his eye, they were over the moon!

Even Ragnar did not know why Loretta was so high up on the wanted list, but the fact that he had obtained her aura was of the utmost importance to the empire. Of course, it was more than likely that the aura she exuded was fake, and had undergone some concealing or transformation technique. The Empire would still have ways to make use of it. This was a game of subterfuge they had been playing with the Devils for hundreds of thousands of years.

Once the transmission was concluded, Ragnar was undertaking preparation for the days to come when he got a report. He had searched for the names Nibiru and Earth, just in case, to see if there was anything about them in the empire's database. As expected, there was no information on Nibiru, so he made an entry and associated it with the Fiery Mammoths. Unexpectedly, though, there was an entry on Earth. However, it was classified. If, even with his level, he was unable to view the details, then matters relating to Earth were not so simple.

After a moment, he simply put the report aside. He could not be bothered to delve into the details regarding Earth. His only focus ever was the demons. If Earth could aid him then he would make use of them, otherwise he would forget about them by the next day.

On Nibiru, the response was completely different. Most beasts were not interested at all. Being suppressed made them feel uncomfortable, and they had no interest in returning. The few that were interested put everything aside and began preparations. During this time, the letter that Tiffany and Lex had put much effort into having delivered to the Lord Protector of Red Nation arrived at the protector's shrine. Yet Igishima, the Lord Protector, was still in the Midnight Inn, completely unaware that it was being plotted against.

Back at the Inn, things were progressing smoothly even without Lex's presence. Which was fortunate because he only woke up some eight hours later, still feeling somewhat fatigued. Without leaving his bed, he ordered a ridiculous amount of food as he slowly watched replays of everything that had happened while he was asleep.

Lex would not describe himself as a spy, stalker or voyeur, but anyone else who saw him so frequently listening in on his guests definitely would. Still, it was important to know what was happening. When he caught up, he decided to stay put for a while. In the few hours he'd been asleep, he'd made 20,000MP from guests purchasing various products and using his services, bringing his total to 95356 MP. Which was nice, because he decided that before the games start, he will undergo the third procedure to upgrade his cultivation which would affect his soul.

It was not a small expense, but he did not want to wait either. The stronger he was, the easier it would be for him. Lex paid, and the next moment found himself in the white room. He did not even get enough time to finish his sigh before he was once again knocked unconscious, and the process to evolve his soul began. Compared to the previous two, this one was a lot harder and would take a longer time. But fortunately he would be done before the event actually started.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 125: Capitalism across the universe

There were four days between the meeting of the three worlds and the Midnight Games. A lot happened during those four days, not only on the three planets and the Midnight Inn, but amongst the various forces inhabiting the world.

Starting at the lowest level, the atmosphere on Earth became very lively all of a sudden. Rumor had it that various companies, families and organizations received a mysterious invitation. Only the heads of those organizations got the invitation, but when considering that the invitations were sent worldwide, the number easily reached thousands. A lesser known fact was that the elite troops and cultivators for each power and organization were quickly recalled.

An even lesser known fact, and one that scared the few who even heard it, was that the five ruling families released a statement inviting the head of the 'rebels' to a meeting. What happened as a result of that, and if the meeting was ever held was unknown.

A secret that was spread only in the Morrison family was that Alexander left his family's security bunker and relocated to one that he had had built himself. Even his father or grandfather were not privy to the details of this bunker, as Alexander has used his own power and forces nurtured by himself since youth to have it made. It must be remembered that since Alexander reached the Foundation realm, his family could no longer tell him what to do. His intention to participate in the games was clear. What the rest could only do was pray.

Something that wasn't a secret, and was the source of much speculation and gossip, was Marlo's brief return to New York. His visit was swift, as he was still not healed. He did not meet his mother, who had returned from the hospital, nor did he greet his students or address his many businesses. He went directly to his wife.

Their confrontation was extremely violent and caused the immediate deployment of Blue Bird special forces. Even though higher leveled cultivators were given many allowances, it was only up until a certain point. Some lines could not be crossed.

An arrest warrant for both husband and wife was issued, but both of them disappeared just as spontaneously as Marlo appeared. What was the conclusion of the fight? Why did it happen? What was the fallout? All of these were questions that currently remained unanswered.

Another interesting rumor also spread on the online cultivator portals. The Brown family, the family led by Sam Brown, one of the five Nascants, revealed a secret regiment so powerful and technologically advanced, it outshone the strongest Morrison force.

Such rumors were flying rampantly on the web, and everyone was waiting in anticipation for something to happen. The common masses were unaware what caused all this commotion, but they were awaiting the outcome.

On Nibiru there were fewer movements, but that did not mean there were none. Blood Fang gathered all its subordinates, not only in its own territory, but in the surrounding territories as well.

Some other beasts were also preparing their forces, though whether it was for the games or other purposes, no one knew. Yet Nibiru was not connected via the web like Earth, so more or less there was no change for the masses.

On Vegus Minima, however, the tension was palpable. All forces were put on reserve. Full forces were deployed in each city. All travel off the planet was stopped. All volunteers were called for deployment and all civilians were put under house arrest.

Ragnar did not know how the Innkeeper would prevent external interference during the attack on nodes, but he would not take any risks. All his soldiers were deployed with location trackers. As soon as they reentered the planet during the games, their locations would be revealed. Regardless of how the

games went, Ragnar would have the location of the nodes and would attack in full force - once the games were over, of course. There was no point in provoking the Innkeeper. Not to mention, how could the Innkeeper make such a low level mistake? He was sure that there would be some precautions to prevent external interference.

The Devils, likewise, made their own preparations, though their preparations were very different. They simply recalled the five strongest zombies on the planet and sent them back to Garvitz. It was a pity that they could not be nurtured longer, but it was simply a matter of sending them to a different farm. The loss of a farm as small as Vegus Minima mattered little to them.

Not to mention, it was not as if the upcoming battle would leave them without benefits. Using formations already in place, they would automatically harvest all the zombie cores for all the zombies that died in the upcoming battle. The realm was a little low, but even Devils had low leveled youths that needed resources so they would not go to waste.

In fact, this was the greatest tragedy that the Jotun Empire had to face. They utilized all their resources and forces at great personal cost to fight the demons, but the loss of demons would never make the Devils weaker. It would only enhance their personal strength.

Somewhere else in Garvitz, the upper echelon passed an order regarding the Midnight Inn. As to what the order was, no one could know. Similarly, the details of the Midnight Inn were presented in front of the highest authorities of the Empire, besides the royal family itself.

In fact, even the William family was presented with information that it was suspected that the treasure Lex originally received may have had something to do with the Inn. But since he had given the treasure up already, they did not pay it any more attention. Each and everyone of them had many matters to deal with.

The changes in the Inn were the most drastic. More and more people and Beasts entered the Inn, and started renting rooms and preparing for the Games. Disappointing many, the Innkeeper did not appear again during this time. Yet there were a few members of the Inn who became extremely well known.

It went without saying that Little Blue was declared the unofficial mascot of the Inn. It was still very young and easily startled, so only a few people were allowed by the Galactic Sovereign turtle to approach it at one time.

The second prominent member, unexpectedly, was Gerard. You could often see him leading a fleet of golf carts across the Inn premises. Initially, he just enjoyed the ride. However, with experience, his handling of the cart improved, and with that, his driving style changed. The old man could now be seen taking guests around as if he were drag racing, often drifting the cart in ways that should not have been possible - literally. The speed and momentum of his golf cart did not make sense or obey the laws of physics. Many wondered what secrets he had, but no one had the courage to make him reveal them.

The third most popular, to his great dismay, was Z. It was unknown when exactly, but a group of women that was sent to the Midnight Inn to prepare for the culture show discovered him, instantly activating their motherly instincts. The 'poor', 'frail' and 'overworked' child was constantly smothered by the group. His popularity was due to the fact that he could often be seen walking around the Inn, surrounded by a protective entourage of mothers. He kept telling them that he didn't need to be outdoors and had already 'touched grass' but when has a mother ever felt her instincts were wrong.

John was also fairly popular, but very few people actually saw him because he had not taken a single moment's break and was constantly making techniques. Since he could only see one customer at a time, in four days he had only met around seventy customers.

Harry had seen even fewer guests, as he was very careful about whose hair he cut now. His previous incident left him with a migraine that he would not soon forget. Still, everyone who had the privilege of experiencing his craft was a complete fan.

Finally, early on the fourth day, the Innkeeper reappeared. He announced the opening ceremony would take place at 1 pm, so there were a few hours left. He instructed all participants to start getting ready.

The stage in the coliseum seemed to expand, and the more people that entered it the bigger it became. Yet from the outside, the size of the coliseum remained the same.

Lex observed the crowds with a smile on his face. He did not expect to feel so happy seeing so many guests in his Inn, but he was. There were just a few minor additions that he needed to make before he could begin the ceremony. Fortunately, over the past 4 days, he'd earned another 64,000 MP - mostly from people buying the Midnight Game commemorative coin and the rest from his services.

Even after spending 20,000 MP on his third procedure, he had 139,400 MP! There was just enough for him to spend. After all, since the first portion of the games was about sharing one's culture, how could he not share capitalism with the universe?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 126: Circus

Lex wanted to sell merchandise, but flashing banners and passing out flyers were too tacky. He also didn't want to be like a low budget tech company and sell T-shirts. No, whatever he sold had to have class, first and foremost. It also had to be exclusive.

He opened his panel and quickly designed the item he had in mind. Unlike the Midnight Games commemorative coin, which was made from a special material, the next item he designed was not special in its material. Instead, its look and feel were what Lex focused on as well as, oddly enough, its smell.

What Lex was designing was a suit. It was the same suit that all his guards wore and, more importantly, the one Little Blue wore. As much as Lex wanted to give the suit special protective abilities, that would become too expensive for him at the moment. He settled for the suit's ability to look flattering regardless of who wore it, feel great to wear and always smell amazing. It also came with a gold lapel pin with the initials MI that one could wear or take off. The price for the suit was 9000 MP! It was the single most expensive item he was selling at the moment, priced far more than even the Tier 4 zombie core that he once sold.

The suit did not have a functional purpose like the core, but Lex had no doubt that it would definitely sell. When people achieved a certain level of success, they spent more on luxury than other things. Lex made a quick mental note to hire a really good tailor. The one drawback to this was it was becoming relatively apparent that the Inn put a lot of emphasis on attire that originated on Earth. But Lex did not care. He was the Innkeeper. Who did he need to explain himself to?

With that done, and an embarrassing 40,000 MP spent on preparing 100 of those suits, Lex was ready to proceed. Quickly making an appearance as Leo, he went towards the Guild room and added a commission for items that could nurture low level souls. This was necessary, as Mary let him know that, unlike his previous two procedures, there was nothing he could do to accelerate the stabilization process himself. The only option he had was to use medicine or natural treasures that nurtured the soul, both of which were rare and expensive. He could only hope someone would quickly respond to his commission.

Following that, he changed back to the Innkeeper and appeared in the coliseum, where hundreds of smaller, individual stages were set up on the main stage. When the event began, guests would be able to walk between the smaller stages and view them from up close or stay seated and watch projections

of them. For those who were in their rooms or sitting elsewhere, they would be able to summon individual projections to view the several stages. They would be able to flick through the different stages like channels on a TV in the pre-streaming era.

The event management panel would record live the genuine response from each audience member to each stage that they saw. For those whose presentation comprised a play or performance, the Inn would automatically record it and play it back for anyone who wanted to view it. This would avoid having them constantly perform.

Something interesting Lex noticed was that many people from Earth who were setting up their stages actually did not know where they were, or the significance of what they were doing. They had just been given massive financial incentives by their superiors and thought they were performing at a special event. Lex wondered what they thought about arriving here by the use of the key, but it seemed some sort of explanation must have been given to them prior, as they just casually accepted it.

Just as the center stage was filling up, so were the seats. Most of the viewers were human, even those were mostly from Earth. A few of the guests were from Vegus Minima, and even those were mostly soldiers. The only civilians from Vegus Minima seemed to be a small group brought by Chen and Lily. The number of Beasts was in double digits. It seemed that such an event did not really appeal to Beasts. For future reference, he would have to remember that.

What did make him happy was that many of his guests were enjoying a Saturn cake, and the smell of it was enticing the other guests nearby. The environment was jolly and festive, and all the guests were behaving. That's what he liked to see.

At 12 pm Lex made an Inn wide announcement that the opening ceremony will begin in one hour, prompting all the bigwigs to show up. The representatives of the five families sat together, while Ragnar and his entourage sat in another corner. Worth noticing was that only two Devils remained, probably the ones who would be managing the stalls, and the rest had disappeared somewhere. Of the Beasts, Golden Hair and Greens Haven sat side by side.

As the time neared for the opening ceremony, Lex once again felt himself getting nervous. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths. Entering the state of 'flow' was not easy, and not something he could control. To be exact, he did not even know what that state was or why it drained him so much. Even Mary was unclear about it, though to be fair her knowledge was limited by the Inns authority level.

As much as he wanted to re-enter that state, he was unable to. So, when it was finally 1 pm, he appeared in the air in front of the massive crowd with some nervousness in his heart. He was unable to calm himself down, but he continuously brainwashed himself by saying that he was completely calm.

"Welcome," he said with a loud and forceful voice, hushing the various crowds around the Inn.

"Welcome to the Midnight Games! Some of you may already know about them, and some of you may not, so I will simply say this. The Midnight Games are to promote friendship and camaraderie between different worlds, and to introduce you to new possibilities. By understanding and experiencing each other's cultures, you may develop bonds that you carry with you throughout your lives. I won't say much, long speeches are not really my style. I hereby announce that the Midnight Games now begin!"

He clapped his hands loudly as he concluded, and as if on cue, two streams of fireworks spread into the sky and exploded in a spectacular display of colors. His 'speech' was exactly one minute long and as soon as it ended, various things started happening at once.

Invisible walls were constructed around the individual stages, so that the performers would not be interrupted by any heckling - only positive sounds would be let through, such as clapping and applause, and even those in moderate amounts so as to not disturb them. On the stages, the air itself seemed to become fresher. All the performers felt invigorated and felt as if they could go all day if they needed to.

From silence the Inn slowly went to the steady buzz that accompanied any festival.

In total, there were 3427 stages, of which 3000 came from Earth. Although Lex did not want to jump the gun, it was safe to say that Earth had a great advantage in this portion. Around 70 of the stages were from various Beasts, and the rest were all soldiers.

Lex himself was a little curious about the various displays, but first he had to ensure that everything was progressing smoothly.

At opposite ends of the main stage were two recruitment stalls, one for the empire and one for the Devils. What they hoped to achieve was beyond Lex but a part of him had really been concerned about facilitating leading Devils back to Earth. Fortunately, he overheard Brandon saying that Earth was under some kind of protection and it would be impossible for anyone to find the location of Earth, even if someone was tricked into taking back a transmitter or locator of some sort. Nibiru most likely did not have such protection but the sloth did not seem to be worried.

After spending a dozen minutes to see if any problems arose, Lex finally breathed a sigh of relief when nothing happened. Finally he turned his attention to the various stages and started admiring them. Internally he was extremely nervous, hoping that the performances were a success. It was not only the incentive of the quest that motivated Lex - he did not want the Inns first major event to end up in failure.

He walked to the first stage and noticed acrobats swinging around using tight ropes. At first he thought this was circus, until he noticed the performers were all at Qi training realm. In that case, there had to be more to it, right?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 127: Exhibitionists

This particular stage was fifty feet wide and thirty feet long. There were two individual tight ropes going from end to end on either side that some of the acrobats were walking atop. Several ropes hung from the ceiling as well that the rest of the acrobats used to swing from side to side.

Synchronously acrobats from the left and right swung towards the center at the same time. They let go of the ropes and did a few flips in the air before latching onto the rope that the other had just used with their feet.

Lex himself had never been to a circus, but had seen enough of them on the television. Their performance was very impressive and the timing of it was immaculate, especially when you considered there was no safety net below. Yet somehow, Lex had expected a little more when he noticed they were cultivators.

To be fair, their performance had just begun. They were likely warming up the crowd before. But Lex did not want to wait as there were many other stages as well. He would watch a replay of this later to see if they did anything more interesting.

Driven by curiosity, Lex skipped all the human stages and went to a Beast one. This particular stage was not raised like the rest, but was instead lowered so that the viewers would have a top-down view. A layer of sand covered the stage, and various snakes slithered through it. At first, Lex did not understand what they were meant to be doing. He observed each snake individually and focused on it as it went from slithering on the surface to somewhere below it.

The confusion disappeared, however, when he noticed that his focus should not be on the snakes but on the sand. Influenced by dozens of snakes moving in calculated coordination, the sand pulsed, as if a beating heart lay right under it. Dunes rose and fell quickly in the sand, making it feel as if Lex was watching an accelerated view of a changing dessert. Slowly, he became aware of patterns in the rise and fall of the sand, but to view it he had to stop focusing on the sand, and somehow focus on the whole.

This was a little difficult for humans, as the human eye was designed to be attracted to and focus on certain points. To forcefully stop yourself from focusing on a certain point and somehow taking in the whole was a bit of a challenge, and something most others would miss out on unless they were actively trying to do so.

Lex had an easy out in this, as he could rely on his awareness of the entire Inn to view this stage as a whole, rather than focusing on it with his eyes. But the moment he did so was when Lex realized just how much he was actually missing and was momentarily stunned. The movement of the sand had a strange kind of symmetry. The rise and fall of the dunes started forming patterns in the landscape and started to form some kind of art.

This was unlike the art humans created, but seemed like it was a creation of nature. It was so wholly random even while maintaining its previous pattern. It was like Lex was becoming aware of the course of how things progressed as nature intended. He was reminded of an old documentary he saw about repeating shapes and patterns in nature called fractals - where the shape or pattern would be repeated on various scales. Whether you focused in on a certain part, or focused out on the larger whole, the patterns would be present. The strange way of repeating the pattern is also what gave birth to the sense of symmetry.

But if all there was to it, Lex would not have been so overwhelmed. The depth of the snake's art was not just limited to the visage of it. When Lex used his awareness to view the stage, he also felt the vibrations in the sand. As the snakes moved through the different layers, the way the sand in between the layers rose and fell between them, the way they rubbed against other grains of sand and the way they pressed against the scales of the snakes produced a sensation Lex could only describe as music.

The oscillations weren't large enough to produce a sound greater than a gentle hum, one that could easily have been mistaken for wind, gently caressing the dunes into its desired shape like the paintbrush of an artist. Yet since Lex was aware of it in greater detail, he felt the same visual pattern emerge in each and every vibration. He saw the pattern in the way that each grain of sand fell, and in the way that each grain of sand rose.

The pattern that emerged was so much greater than the two-dimensional ones he had seen on paper, or a three-dimensional one a person might encounter in an art exhibit. The pattern existed in the top down view. It existed between the layers. It existed in the vibrations. It existed in the way the snakes moved. For a moment, Lex felt himself enter a trance, and felt a strange thought form right outside of his range of perception. It was like a word on the tip on his tongue - he knew what it was, but could not say it. The feeling was abstract, yet at the same time concrete.

"Not bad," Lex murmured, and decided to make a change to this stage. Currently, to prevent the performers, each stage prevented spiritual senses from coming through. Yet now, Lex changed it so that others would be able to use their spiritual senses only to view the stage. This would still prevent them from using it to pressure or communicate with the performers. Lex did not want others to disturb the snakes, yet at the same time he wanted them to enjoy it on a greater level as just simply viewing the sand would leave them missing out.

Indeed, if some simply focused on the snakes, and did not take in the whole, this was probably one of the least interesting exhibits. It was only snakes moving in the sand. He hoped others would also be able to pick up on the intricacies of this display.

What Lex did not realize was that all the people at the top of each respective world were paying a lot of attention to the Innkeepers' every move. His murmur may have been soft, but it was like an announcement on a loudspeaker for them. Especially when they felt the changes on this stage, they immediately used their spiritual senses to try and observe the peculiarity of this display. Whether any of them noticed it to the depth that Lex had, there was no way of knowing.

Impressed by what he had just witnessed, Lex went to the next Beast stage. This one only had two Beasts that Lex had never seen or recognized before. This Beast's hind legs were similar to that of a frog and allowed it to leap long distances and far into the air. Yet, unlike a frog, this Beast was around four feet in length and three feet in height. Its body was covered in violet hexagonal scales that reflected light in an unusual way. Lex had never encountered light that he had to describe as 'dark', but that was the only description he could think of at the moment.

Near the neck of the Beast, colorful feathers started emerging from within the scales and covered its forelegs and shoulder blades. It did not seem enough to allow the Beast to fly, but Lex imagined that the Beast could glide great distances. Yet as the stage provided was not big enough, the two Beasts were not gliding, but seemed to be doing a dance. They would leap towards one another from the ends of the stage and twirled effortlessly in the air.

Its shining scales, bright feathers and intricate moves enamored the viewers, making them completely oblivious to how lethal its moves exactly were.

As the Beasts approached one another they did not collide, but somersaulted in the air and clapped their hind legs against each others. Then, pushing against one another, they leaped higher into the air, all the while not forgetting to twirl. Once they reached the peak of the jump, and had no other platform to push against, they spread their forelegs and formed thin wings akin to the gliders used by humans. Moving counterclockwise, they glided down in the air, dancing in the air, near one another.

It was a spectacular show indeed, and Lex was very impressed by the visuals. It was unfortunate then that his wonder was completely deflated when he overheard another Beasts saying that they were displaying their mating ritual. He supposed exhibitionism transcended species and even worlds.

Lex quickly moved away from the stage before he saw something he would regret.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 128: Ballerina

While Lex was strolling through the various stages, taking on the role of a tourist, he was completely unaware that seeds of chaos had been planted on the three planets, and were getting ready to sprout. On Earth, the rebel forces started rearranging their forces with a little more aggression. They only had a limited amount of time where they could get ready, and they had to take chances at getting caught to ensure they were ready when the second portion of the games started.

The combat portion of the games, when the various military forces the five families had taken with them would be committed, would be the beacon that lights the beginning of their revolution.

How their movements remained undetected by not only the forces of the families but the ICPA's, which were supposed to be independent organizations, was a total mystery. Even if they somehow managed to take control of the Earth before the return of the Nascants and their forces, how they would deal with the raw power of the five strongest humans on Earth was another mystery that yet had no answer.

While on Earth the chaos was only on the edge, hiding from the view of potential informants, on Nibiru there was no such case. Various territories had been brought to war by sudden invasions from their neighbors. The absence of the territory leader, such as Igishima, or of a large chunk of combatants, made the territories vulnerable.

In Red Nation, a lazy looking brown fox stood, or rather, lay groggily at the head of the invading forces. The real villain behind the scenes, the enigmatic head of the Iron Mountain, was as of yet absent. Though despite his own absence, his forces were definitely present.

Yet, even without Igishima present to command its Beasts, Red Nation, which was heavily reliant on human management, had an organized army which managed to hold off the invading forces.

Even the 13-year-old Tiffany, who had been awarded a strengthening fruit for her brave actions of delivering the letter, fought valiantly at the front lines. She had assumed her good friend Lex had died so that she could escape, which filled her with a sorrow and anger she had never felt before in her life. It was even worse than when Father Henry was captured, because at least she still knew he was alive.

It must be pointed out that eating a strengthening fruit did not technically count as cultivation, which is why it did not adhere to the general rule that humans cannot cultivate before the age of 15.

Even then, the rule that one cannot cultivate until they were 15 was not a hard and fast rule. Can you imagine someone waiting arduously for their fifteenth birthday, and then on their birthday they have to wait for some specific hour, such as 2 pm, because that was the exact hour they were born in? The moment the clock hit 2 pm, that person would start cultivating - only to fail miserably. Turns out they were born in a different time zone and needed to wait a few more hours till they were exactly 15.

No, the 15 year old age limit was more of a guideline, because that is the age by which a human body would have developed enough to withstand the arduous journey which was cultivation. Using special treatments to strengthen the body was one of the ways a person could get ready to cultivate in advance. It just so happened, eating strengthening fruits was one of those ways.

On Vegus Minima the Devils really started treating the planet if they were about to lose it, and sent all their zombie hordes to attack human settlements. They also deployed a special kind of demon known as Grubber worms, which specialized in recovery. The worms recovered not only the dead zombies, but the dead humans as well. What they intended with those bodies, besides the zombie cores, was as yet unknown.

Of the three planets, Vegus Minima was the most chaotic, yet somehow it was also the one dealing with the situation best. But the chaos had only just begun, and there were many opportunities to make mistakes.

Lex, the person who could be said to have indirectly caused all three situations, was completely unaware. He had seen various performances already, but there were many more left to go. Fortunately, the first part of the cultural event would go on all day, and the second part would only begin the next day.

At a certain point, Lex decided to depart, and come back in his Leo persona. He noticed quickly that any time he would approach a stage as the Innkeeper people would either move away or hush up, scared to offend him.

When Lex, or rather Leo, returned his attention was caught by a stage where he saw a single ballerina dancing. So far Lex had enjoyed the Beasts performances more, but maybe that was because those were novel sights, whereas he had some knowledge of Earth's culture already. Yet this ballerina was different.

Suffice to say, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Lex felt a little shallow, thinking that the first thing that caught his attention was her looks, especially when her performance was extraordinary. Yet at the same time, he would be a hypocrite if he did not admit that the best and most apt description of this woman could be summarized in a single word: beautiful.

Lex was not paying attention to her gorgeous phoenix eyes, her thin pink lips, her sleek jaw, her smooth cheeks or her flowing brown hair. No, he was mesmerized by her entire visage.

The various silk layers of her tutu flowed in the air like dancing birds as she twirled on a string so thin it was invisible to the naked eye. The gray see through cape she wore sparkled, leaving behind a trail of images of dancing butterflies, following her wherever she went.

Lex had never seen a ballet before and so did not have an understanding of what it was supposed to entail, but he was pretty sure that the enrapturing performance being put on by this one woman was only possible because of her ridiculously high cultivation of Peak Golden core!

Yes, unexpectedly, this woman was a soldier from Vegus Minima! Maybe Lex should not have been so surprised, as even soldiers were human, but he was just not expecting such a spectacular display from a soldier.

It took a while for Lex to wake from his trance. At this point, the ballerina was no longer simply dancing on an impossibly thin string. She was dancing vertically and horizontally as the strings went in every direction. At some points, she even danced upside down. This was an experience he would have missed had he been wearing the Host Attire as it would have prevented him from fully falling into a trance.

Finally, when Lex started feeling embarrassed from staring at the beautiful woman for too long, he decided to leave. Instead of heading towards another display, this time he walked towards the Empire's recruitment stall. He was very curious about what their intentions were, and wanted to experience it for himself. The Inn was not facilitating transport from one planet to another en masse yet, and Earth was determined to stay hidden, so what were their intentions?

What Lex did not know was that Ragnar had completely dropped all of his plans and intentions for Earth after discovering that it had some secret. He did not want to get involved, nor did he care enough to distract himself from his mission.

Still, when Lex arrived at the stall there was a small line. At the forefront was the smallest beast Lex had seen so far. Generally, once beasts started cultivating their size would grow. This one was roughly the size of a hamster. It had six legs, a scaly body and a face that looked like a dog's. What it was, Lex had no idea, but it was in the Golden core realm, so it definitely wasn't weak.

Lex was unable to hear the discussion between the Beast and the soldiers, a result of a small formation they set up on their own. Yet from the looks of it, they both were very satisfied by the result.

A few people were ahead of him in line, but Lex waited patiently. When it was finally his turn he spoke first, not giving them a chance.

"What kind of performance are you guys doing? How come your stage is different from the rest?"

"Ours is not a performance," one of the soldiers said amicably. "We're here representing the Jotun Empire, the largest human force in the universe. Our job here is to provide you with information not just about the universe, but about how to grow individually as well as bring growth to your own society. After all, the prosperity and growth of humans is in both of our interests."

"Oh, how so?" Lex asked, completely ready for the upcoming barrage of propaganda.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 129: Civilization ranks

The soldiers studied Lex for a moment, with him still being in his Leo persona, and quickly judged him to be an inexperienced youth. This did not put him at ease, as he had not intended to fool Lex to begin with. He was just disappointed that the effectiveness of their instructional course would drop.

"There are a few things to keep note of about the universe. According to our notes, your civilization has not achieved interstellar travel nor has it been contacted by external civilizations, so it is unlikely you will need this information, but life is unpredictable, so you should memorize it anyway.

"The first thing to take note of are civilization levels. The first and most basic level is identified by a civilization that has been unable to leave their home world. That is called a Ground level civilization. The next is one that has inhabited all the other planets, or in the process of inhabiting the planets in its solar system, which is identified at the Sky level. The next is known as Star level, in which a civilization has the means to be able to travel from one star to the next within a reasonably short amount of time.

"This is varied, as civilizations that are creating their own technology usually have a teething period where travel between stars starts out taking centuries, but eventually gets whittled down to a few decades. But that is not enough to earn the Star rank as a civilization. If the average distance between two stars is considered to be 5 light years, then the travel between them must take no longer than 10 years minimum to earn the Star rank.

"The Jotun Empire is one rank higher than that, which is known as the Galactic rank. The minimum requirement for that is to be able to travel between two galaxies in a minimum of a century.

"If you're wondering whether there are levels above even that, then the answer is most definitely yes. What those levels are, even I do not know, so you definitely don't need to worry about it.

"I won't go into detail about the average civilization rank distribution, as that knowledge won't serve you with any purpose. What you need to know, however, is identify if a given force is neutral or friendly towards you. In the known universe, the qualification for a 'neutral' or 'friendly' force is very difficult to get, with a lot of qualifications that need to be met.

"Among other requirements, these forces or civilizations must maintain their neutrality to everyone. For friendly forces, they have to have a long history of cooperation and friendly relations with your associated force.

"Whether a force is neutral or friendly towards you, there is a very simple way to identify either. You can log onto the Henali portal and check the forces affiliation there. As for what the Henali portal is, it's a digital platform with a live connection throughout most of the known universe. A force that claims 'neutral' status without having its status confirmed on the portal is most likely unreliable. There is no real consequence for doing so, but only when its status can be confirmed on the portal will it be completely neutral and trustworthy."

"Wait, are you saying there's a universe wide internet? How is that even possible?" Lex asked, genuinely shocked!

"No, not universe wide. I said it covers most of the known universe, not all of it. That's not to mention that there are clear borders to the unknown, or as yet unexplored, universe. The portal is maintained by all forces that are a part of the Henali alliance, such as the Jotun Empire. The empire is responsible for building and maintaining connector planets throughout its territory."

"How do I log onto the portal?" Lex asked curiously. The Earth probably wasn't a part of the portal, but he was definitely interested in checking it out. Since he traveled to multiple planets, there was no doubt he'd get a chance to log on at some point.

"The first time you log on, it has to be at a registration point. However, once you've finished registration, you can log on using simple verbal commands that will prompt the minimum interface required to use basic functions. The verbal commands will work no matter where you are in the universe, so long as a connection is available. Naturally, the connection can be blocked using technology or formations, otherwise there would be a serious threat of invasion of privacy. For more detailed interactions, you would obviously need to purchase a login device. Those can be anything from a simple smartwatch to an entire body immersive VR chamber. For the purpose of identifying a force's status, the verbal commands should be enough.

"Still, as dangerous and treacherous as the universe is, some simple safety precautions will get you a long way. Your biggest threat is, and always will be, the demons!"

At this point, the soldiers wore a terrible grimace and exuded a killing intent so powerful Lex could physically feel it pressing up against his body. It was like a feeling of being submerged in water, but instead of your skin getting wet, it was constantly being pricked by tiny little needles. Lex had to constantly look at himself to ensure he wasn't actually bleeding.

"If you had been here at the meeting, a few days before the Games started, you would have had a chance to see them for yourself. They are nothing but vile, ravenous monsters that want nothing more than to destroy everything they touch and consume anything that has life. But you don't need to take my word for it, every force in the universe is hostile against them! This is a war you have no way of staying away from, even if you want to. The moment you see a demon, you will have to judge if you can fight it. If you can't, then you must run. They will kill you every chance they get!"

At this point, the soldiers spiraled into a long barrage about the evils of demonic beings, how they were the sin of existence, the bane of all that was pure, etc. etc. The soldier gave Lex a lot of information before he began peddling his propaganda, although Lex agreed that the demons were most likely a threat to most people. But he had seen them obey the Devils, not to mention he had seen them become progressively smarter as they grew stronger. There was definitely more to it than what the soldier said, yet Lex had no interest in investigating on his own.

He looked forward to the information that would help him 'grow' not only as an individual but also his society. Yet it was nothing more than a lot of rhetoric about helping the whole rather than the individual, the greater good over personal gain, etc. He was honestly expecting more, since they specifically asked for a recruitment stall, but maybe they had their own plans. Lex would watch a replay of things later on to see if they did something he missed, but for now, his interest waned. Little did he know, their original seminar was supposed to be very different.

Thanking the soldiers, he left before turning his attention to the Devil's stall. He was curious about what they were doing. Maybe he had a bias, but he did not believe for even a second that they did not have any ulterior motives. He also wanted to know their stance on this 'Henali' term that kept coming up repeatedly. He tried asking the soldier if it meant or represented something special, but got no real reply.

Strolling casually, as if he was watching the different stages and looking for something interesting, he made his way to the Devil's stall. As much as he expected this stall to be barren and despondent, it was quite crowded and lively. Humans and Beasts alike stood in line, waiting their turn to get an opportunity.

There was no way the soldiers would line up, so these humans must be from Earth. They should already have been informed to stay away from the Devils, or provided some basic information about what happened at the meeting, but it seemed they did not care.

"Hey, what's the deal with this stall?" Lex asked one of the men in line, and received a questioning gaze instead. Once the other man had made sure that Lex was not trying to cut in line he said, "My brother

told me about this place. Apparently, they help you raise your cultivation level! He's already returned back to Earth, and he's getting ready to break into the Foundation realm! Can you believe it?"

No, Lex could not believe it. Unlike the man in line who had a huge grin, Lex was frowning. There was no free lunch in the world. The devils must definitely be taking advantage of everyone somehow. He needed to figure out what they were doing immediately, lest they damage the reputation of his Inn!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 130: Future coworkers

Lex's first instinct was to leave and watch a replay of what the Devils were doing with his guests. He felt kinda stupid, he should have kept an eye on the Devils from the very getgo. Even though he kept it as a priority in his mind, keeping an eye on so many various aspects of the event, it was understandable that Lex overlooked it for a while. But comparing his performance to when he was in the 'flow' definitely shone a light on his shortcomings.

Still, he was only human. He would learn from his mistakes. Resisting his urge to watch a replay, Lex decided to continue waiting in line and see things for himself first hand. Besides, it would seem odd if he left right after being told he could have a breakthrough in his cultivation.

Lex waited patiently in line and chatted with the guy. His name was Batsa Acharya and was from a cultivation family in Nepal. Due to suffering from a lack of resources, he and his elder brother joined the ICPA policing the region and, over the course of many years, rose up in ranks.

Still, their positions weren't really high enough to be on the list of people who got an invitation to the Inn. He was a victim of the classic in the right place at the right time - his boss worked closely with one of the five ruling families and got an invitation and since Batsa was there as well, his boss brought him along. Batsa pulled some strings and brought his brother along as well.

Since they were chatting, and Lex was using his Leo persona, he had to introduce himself as well. But that was fine, Lex had already decided on a backstory for Leo. It went a little something like 'I am from Earth' and then provided no more details whatsoever. He avoided talking about himself by talking about random things he liked on Earth, such as movies, games, etc.

Eventually, as they chatted, the line moved along until it was Batsa's turn, who went ahead excitedly. Like the other recruitment stall, this one was surrounded by a formation to prevent sound from getting

out. But there was no obstruction to sight, and Lex could see Batsa talking with animated excitement with the Devils.

Speaking of Devils, Lex turned his attention to the two but did not recognize them. These must be different from the ones that came in the first party. It was unfortunate that Lex could not view their statuses since he was not wearing the Host Attire. Although it was irritating that so many of his abilities in the Inn were linked to the suit, it made sense from a logical standpoint.

Lex's own individual cultivation was weak, and so to use abilities that came with a higher cultivation, he would need an intermediary. Rather than saying it was unfortunate that he needed the suit to use the Inn powers completely, it should be said he was lucky to get the suit in the first place. The only reason the suit had any power at all to begin with was because it was tapping into the systems control over the Inns territory to give Lex those abilities. It was a good beginners item as without it, Lex would not have performed nearly as well.

Turning his attention back to the Devils, he noticed that these two looked particularly young. On Earth, they would have qualified as teenagers - at most. Cultivation slowing down aging made it difficult to guess their actual age, but Lex bet they were relatively very young. The only alternative was that their cultivation was very, VERY high and that seemed unlikely.

One of the Devils had two sabertooth-like fangs sticking out of his mouth that extended even below his chin. His hair was golden brown, and with his fair skin and green eyes, a good description of him was devilishly handsome. The other Devil looked like he could actually be human - one of those humans who joined hardcore gangs, covered his skin in various tattoos and even tattooed the whites of his eyes black, but human nonetheless.

The 'tattoos' that covered this Devil's skin seemed to be some kind of writing Lex did not recognize. It was unfortunate that his universal translator was limited to speech and not writing, but he could purchase one of those for himself later.

When Batsa was finished, he directly teleported out of the Inn, impatient to begin his cultivation no doubt. There was no doubt that the various shows were interesting, but they meant little to Batsa.

Quickly forgetting about his new Nepali friend, Lex looked towards the Devils, who were patiently waiting for him. It was strange. Not that he was the kind of guy who judged a book by its cover, but the Devils really did not look like they would have a demure demeanor. Yet they welcome him with bright, albeit scary looking, smiles as he walked up to them.

"Hello, I was told you were helping people breakthrough in their cultivation here?" Lex said, putting on his best 'innocent face'. He had decided that Leo's personality would be a happy-go-lucky, naive and innocent one. That would make it easy for him to broach difficult subjects and ask questions people would rather avoid.

For a short moment, he considered making Leo's personality very secretive and hidden, so no one would ever be able to discern what his true intentions were as he secretly controlled things behind the scenes. It was only for a moment, though. He did not have the patience or the temperament to do that kind of thing, nor was he such a good actor. Simple and straightforward would work best for him.

"Quick to the chase, huh?" the Devil with the dark eyes said, chuckling. "Indeed, we're helping those we come across. But whether you can achieve a breakthrough or not is entirely up to you. We are simply giving out gifts to celebrate our first meeting. An introductory gift, if you will."

"First meeting? Are you planning another meeting?"

"Yes, the environment is very enjoyable here. We've decided to come to the Inn often to relax - life can be stressful, you know. And because of the reputation of Devils, it's not easy to make new friends. So we thought about giving out gifts. Everyone likes gifts, right? By the way, my name is Creel."

"And my name is Ahjour," said the Devil with sabertooth fangs.

"Oh, right! My name is Leo! I should have introduced myself first."

"Leo? You wouldn't happen to be the Leo that runs the Gamer's Den, would you?" asked Creel.

"Indeed, the one and the same. I'm surprised you recognized me."

"Haha, naturally we did," Creel said, becoming more animated all of a sudden. He truly looked like he was over the moon at meeting Leo. "I told you, we really enjoyed the Inn. We've met all the others from the Inn. Harry's promised to give me a haircut - when his cultivation increases. His cultivation was dependent on his soul, so for our meeting gift we gave him a little something to help his soul. He was really excited about that. John..." Creel gave out a defeated smile. "He was not so excited about the gifts

and didn't seem to want to be friends. It is truly unfortunate. Still, although we did not get a chance to meet before, we heard your name from Z. It is truly a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise. I like making friends, let me know whenever you come by! Or if I'm not around, which is most of the time unfortunately, you can leave a message with Z. I would love to learn more about the 'Devils'."

"Likewise, I would love to chat with you some more. I'm very interested in learning how you became an employee. Who knows, maybe in the future we could be coworkers! Unfortunately, I can't spend too much time right now. The line is quite long," he said, pointing towards the guests waiting in line behind Lex.

"Who knows, I don't mind more coworkers, but you have to get the Innkeepers' approval."

"I'll bet that's not easy to do. But we can discuss that later. Tell me, what kind of gift would you like?"

This gift was one Lex would not miss out on, as he wanted to test it for potential traps.

"I need stuff to strengthen my soul as well. I've even put a commission for it in the Guild room. So if you have any more of the stuff you gave to Harry, something along those lines would be great."

Creel smiled, and with a wave of his hand, an opaque bottle appeared in the air.

"Drink this all in one go. It'll put you to sleep for some time, but when you wake up, your soul should be stronger."

"Thank you very much. Let me know when you have free time. I'm looking forward to seeing you again."

"Likewise."

Their conversation ended with that pleasant exchange, but as Lex turned to leave, his previous smile disappeared and he stared at the bottle heatedly - the exact look that the Devils were giving him.

Lex didn't know this, but his conversation had prompted the Devils into thinking that a requirement to become an employee at the Inn was a strong soul. They started analyzing this little detail to the best of their efforts, trying to look into what it could mean. None of them expected that it was a simple misunderstanding.