

Innkeeper 171

The Innkeeper

Chapter 171: No plot holes here

Moon ran to her room and retrieved a pair of bangles and what looked like a VR headset. Alone, none of these items were anything special, but when worn together, they connected the wearer's consciousness to something called a relay station - a small base hidden in space somewhere within the solar system.

Although Lex's family on Earth were clones of his original family, that did not mean they were connected to the main consciousness of the original body. If the distance between the clone and the original was small enough, they would be, but in the case of interstellar distances, it was all but impossible. The relay station allowed the clones to connect with the consciousness of the main body, but only for a short time. The time duration was a result of the clone being much, much too weak to sustain such pressure for a long time. In Moon's case, the relay station also served a secondary function. It allowed her to utilize her main body's special abilities - abilities that were completely independent of her cultivation.

Arriving in front of Lex's body, she sat on the ground on her knees and put on the equipment and prepared herself to connect to the relay station. This was not a quick procedure. Connecting to the station was the easy part, but then to wait for the station to locate and then connect to her main body was the difficult part. This was also extremely expensive and consumed resources the cultivators of Earth could not even dream of, but they never paid any mind to it.

Nearly three hours later, the connection finally stabilized and Moon gained some of her main body's powers. Not wasting any time, she immediately brought her hands over Lex's forehead and started to scan him.

Considering she was checking Lex's soul, there was a great danger of her discovering the system! This was because, as yet, the system still only existed in the form of the magical treasure that had collided with Lex's body so long ago, and the magical treasure was taking refuge in Lex's soul.

Fortunately, as a result of Moon only being a clone, her ability was greatly weakened and she did not discover the system.

"His soul is... weird," Moon said, in an unsure voice. "It's like it's been changed, but I can't tell how. It's stronger than it should be, so there's no chance of it accidentally disappearing."

If one was observing Belle carefully, they would be able to tell her shoulders relaxed just a little.

"I can sense... I think... it's Purified Wraiths blood. It strengthened Lex's soul, but since his soul was in an unstable state, the increase in strength only increased the instability. I think Lex knew there was something wrong with his soul, and then tried to strengthen it, but that's not fixing the problem at all."

"He may try to do that again unless the issue is fixed. Just use whatever strength you have left to stabilize his soul as much as you can. Whoever taught him how to fix his soul must be an amateur."

If John knew that he had been called an amateur by a couple of kids, who knew how he would react? But fortunately for everyone, no one was around to see this. Liz, the only remaining sister, had at some point appeared in the room and watched in silence while eating ice cream out of a tub.

A few minutes later, Moon collapsed as well. Belle carefully removed the helmet and carried Moon to her room, leaving Lex lying there on the ground.

After a few minutes, when she did not return, Liz sighed in defeat and carried her brother and threw him onto a sofa. It was a good thing his body had improved due to his cultivation, or God knows what condition he would have been in after being handled so roughly.

Liz walked to the kitchen where Belle was perusing through the fridge, eventually pulled out a cold slice of pizza and started eating it directly. If nothing else, the unusual fondness for cold pizza was something Lex shared with this sister of his.

"Do you really have to treat him like that?"

"Like what? Going through the whole drama of acting like I'm in the dark is pointless, I just saved us a lot of time. And besides, I've thought it through. My story is solid, with no plot holes. The reason we know about cultivation is because of the council, and now that I have a job working for the council, our security will be assured. Furthermore, because our bodies are made up of spirit energy, if we try absorbing more, the cloning technique will destabilize and we will die. So now all we need to do is let him know that despite knowing about cultivation, we ourselves cannot cultivate."

"To recap, we know everything about cultivation so he does not need to keep secrets from us, we are safe so he does not need to worry about us, and we cannot cultivate so he does not need to care about resources for us. This will solve all of his problems and he can continue to live his life as he was previously. If he was able to travel from New York and get his hands on something like Purified Wraith's blood, he must have developed some decent connections. Maybe he's following one of the political prisoners mom has sent to the planet. He can now focus on his own growth without worrying about us."

Liz was silent for a few moments, and then eventually said, "You really don't want him to be around, huh?"

Belle looked at her sister and understood what she was actually trying to say.

"He's my little brother, and I'm looking out for him the way I look out for you two. I do not hate him, if that is what you mean. My situation is not his fault... it is simply the result of something as simple as being born a girl instead of a boy. But it is better this way. I do not need someone to hand power to me on a platter, I can take it for myself."

"What you need is a boyfriend," Liz said under her breath as she rolled her eyes at her overly dramatic sister. It was such a burden being the only normal person in a family. No longer paying attention to Belle, Liz went and got some pink nail polish and pulled out a chair in front of Lex. As his beloved younger sister, she had to, of course, make his life miserable in the cutest way possible. When she lifted his hand, she noticed Lex's phone halfway outside his pocket. She picked it up, naturally, to snoop, only to find it dead. She shrugged and put it on charge, before turning back to her beloved brother. He would not wake up till his body adapted to his soul, so she had plenty of time to work.

She recalled once, when they were children, Lex cut her hair while she was sleeping. The result was so bad that she had to get a bob cut. To this day, many years later, she had not forgiven him. Today, for the third time, she would get her revenge.

The hours went by quickly, and the day passed calmly for the Williams family. This was mostly because Moon and Lex were passed out. Moon woke up early the next day, but Lex was still asleep. By now Mary had checked up on Lex, but only thought he was asleep on the couch, so she returned to her duties. The games were progressing with much excitement, and refugees had stopped coming in from Earth. In fact, many of them had even returned now, as things seemed to have calmed down.

The fourth match finally started, this time in a rainforest. The beasts had taken the lead in points during the last match, so this time Alexander felt extremely motivated to regain his place in the front.

At the same time, on Earth, a small diplomatic team was approaching Japan by boat. Most of the team were mortals, with only a single Foundation realm cultivator who had hidden his identity. Unbelievably, they had used a pigeon to deliver a message to the small nation to inform them of their arrival, since there was no other way to communicate at the moment.

The members of the team looked onwards nervously, knowing full well what had happened with all the previous attempts at communication. But this time they came without any hostility, in hopes to simply negotiate, so hopefully things would end differently.

When they arrived at the designated pier, they were surprised to see it completely devoid of other people. There was no movement, no noise, as if they were arriving at a ghost town.

With no other option but to go on, the team disembarked and had only begun discussing how to proceed when they heard a voice.

"Speak, what is it you came here to say."

Startled, the envoys turned to see a handsome Japanese youth, leaning against a nearby building. He was dressed in a gray hakama and stood so perfectly still that up until this moment, he had melded into the background. Even the cultivator had not noticed him, which raised his wariness.

"We are diplomatic envoys from the council, here to meet with the Prime minister and discuss relations between Japan and the rest of the world. We have been unable to communicate with anyone from the country."

"Japan's diplomatic stance is that gaijin are no longer welcome here. You may return with this message."

The envoys looked at one another, then secretly turned to the cultivator. They did not know how to proceed. They did not want to antagonize the locals, but their own bosses weren't people who could be messed with either.

Finally, the cultivator stepped forward and tried to talk to the youth.

"Young man, we are here for an important matter. We cannot..." before the cultivator could continue his words, the youth took a single step forward. His movement was strange, and the diplomats were unable to clearly see what he had done, but the effect was only taking a step forward. Or so it seemed, until the cultivator's head fell clean off his neck.

"I will not repeat myself again after this. You may return with this message."

The envoys were so scared they practically tripped over themselves as they ran back to their boat, hoping this monster would not change his mind. They had not even seen what he had done to cut the cultivator's head off, but it was not something they wanted to know either.

As he watched the gaijin leave, the man revealed his right hand that he had been hiding behind his body to reveal a katana. Slowly, as if he was savoring the action, he returned the weapon to its sheath.

A voice spoke in his head, "quest to kill an enemy with a higher cultivation of one major realm, completed. Hosts authorization of the Samurai System is being raised."

The young man did not respond to the notification, and only watched the water. He was lost in his thoughts.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 172: Something wrong

Waking up was a slow process for Lex, and it was taking a while for his grogginess to clear. Using immense will power he opened a single eye to look around. He did not immediately recognize the place, which filled his still half asleep mind with confusion. But slowly, his memories returned and realized he was in his parents house.

His single eye shut again and it was nearly twenty minutes later that he opened his eyes again, yawning as soon as he did. Despite just waking up, Lex felt incredibly tired, a sensation he hardly felt since he started cultivating. He lay there for a while longer, as the gears of his mind slowly started to turn and he started properly waking up.

The first thing he noticed was the comforting beating of rain drops. He looked outside the window and saw rain. The room that he was in was dark, and slightly chilly, despite the blanket that covered him. Somewhere else, in the background, Lex could hear the muffled noise of a television.

It was strangely peaceful. Lex wanted to continue laying there, so he did. His memories came back to him, and he remembered talking to his elder sister, Belle. She was the same, cold and emotionless yet somehow frustrated at the same time elder sister that he remembered. Somehow, that filled him with relief.

"Mary, what's going on at the Inn?" he asked in his mind, not bothering to get up.

"The fourth match is going on, and should end in a few hours. A lot of guests from Earth have returned to their planet, but other than that, nothing majorly significant. On a level more relevant to you, your friend Larry has fully recovered. It was quite fortunate that he qualified as a refugee, otherwise he would not have been able to pay the Inn to stay there, all his assets on Earth have been seized. He was able to pay for a few days using some artifacts that he happened to have when he arrived at the Inn, but then he ran into Marlo who's paid for a long stay on Larry's behalf."

Lex nodded, taking a mental note to meet up with Larry soon and find out what happened. For now, he finally got up from his sofa and stumbled in the dark to turn on the lights.

The first thing he saw when the lights came on, on his outstretched hand, were pink nails. Lex froze in horror. He had experienced incidents like this before. He quickly ran to the bathroom to look in the mirror and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw there was nothing on his face. He forcefully scraped the polish off his nails, before exiting and yelling, "is anyone home?"

Upon receiving no reply, he walked towards the sound of the television, and found his youngest sister, Moon, watching a video with headphones on in the dark.

"Hey," Lex casually greeted her as he flicked her headphones off.

"Hey hey hey I'm watching something," she yelled, quickly pulling her headphones back, but then turned and looked at Lex. She paused her video and turned to look at her brother. For a moment they only looked at one another, before Moon finally said, "What's up with the gun? You been watching too many American rap videos?"

Lex immediately facepalmed.

"It's dangerous these days, it's for protection."

"Yeah, must be tough, a lone boy living in the big city in America. Not at all like three girls living together in London, pretty safe here."

Lex's lips twitched, but chose to divert the subject.

"Where are mom and dad?"

"Bangladesh."

"Bangladesh? What are they doing in Bangladesh? Where even is Bangladesh?" As startled as he was, he should have expected his parents to be off in some other country. But how was he supposed to check up on them? Ask Will again for another transport?

"Where is Bangladesh' he asks. You've been to Bangladesh, idiot. How can you not remember? We talked to mom and dad yesterday, after you dozed off, so no need to go gunslinging off to SOUTH ASIA, they're perfectly fine."

Lex relaxed a little, and smiled at his sister. He didn't bother asking how they were able to contact their parents, Moon wouldn't lie to him, all that mattered was that they were fine.

"Speaking of which, what happened yesterday? I don't remember going to sleep."

"I dunno, you were on the couch when I got home."

"What about Liz and Belle? Are they home?"

"Belle went out to work, Liz went out to do groceries. Speaking of which, follow me."

Moon got up and quickly led Lex to the kitchen. She pulled a pot out of the fridge and put it on the stove and started to heat it.

"Liz made you soup and Belle left a few messages for you."

She pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket and read off of it.

"My new job has a lot of security so tell that idiot not to worry, and that he should quickly go back to New York because one of mom and dad's friends in Bangladesh has taught them way too much about arranged marriage and they've started looking at girls for Lex..." at that point Moon burst into laughter and dropped the paper.

Lex's lips twitched as he watched his sister laugh at him. He understood Belle well enough, though she never said things up front, she must have understood that Lex had to go through unusual means to come and check up on them and wanted to assure him they were alright. It was well enough, now that he knew they were alright he could return to the Inn to take care of things there. To top it all off, he didn't really need to return to New York and could go to the Inn directly from London. But since he was here, he might as well spend some time before he left.

He pulled out a couple of bowls and laid a table, and caught up with Moon. He asked her about school and life here, and about any... boys she might be interested in. When Moon only took the names of various celebrities Lex secretly breathed a sigh of relief. If she was really interested in someone she would tell him. Despite their large gap in age, they were close to one another and Moon was incapable of keeping secrets from him - as far as he knew. If she really was interested in someone, he wanted to play the role of the cool brother who was okay with it, but secretly it stressed him out.

They exchanged stories for a long time, and eventually the topic of cultivation came up once again. Moon explained how some people from Belle's new work came and told them about cultivation and tested them out. Apparently all of them shared a genetic defect that made them unable to cultivate. Lex had a few doubts, but he buried them deep in his heart. It wasn't as if he didn't have secrets of his own, and one day when he raised the level of the Inn high enough where he could treat any kind of malady, he would bring his family to the Inn. So until that day came, he would choose to believe his sister's words.

The hours passed, and Mary let him know that the forth game had ended. Liz finally came home, but Belle never showed up. The three siblings spent more time together, chatting and making fun of one another. Liz showed him the changes she had made to the Heavy Harley. Last night she decided to paint his gun instead of his face, and so a purple butterfly was painted on the handle of his gun.

Eventually, when it was getting late at night, Lex decided it was time for him to leave. Now that he had checked up on his family, he could focus on the Inn without any worries. Not to mention, even if he did get worried, he could secretly check up on them since he was not planning on leaving London.

After a long, drawn out goodbye, Lex finally left. He told them he would check up on them from time to time, but both his sisters had already stopped paying attention to him as he crossed the door.

Unsure of how to react to his siblings, Lex simply continued walking. After walking a short distance, his smile slowly turned into a frown. As a fledgling cultivator, his instincts had sharpened, and as much as he wanted to ignore it, he had a strong feeling something was wrong. He instinctively overlooked his family, as if there could be nothing suspicious about them, but could not figure out what it was.

He was about to ask Mary what was happening at the Inn when two men walked up in front of him and stopped.

Lex's mind clicked, as if understanding that this is what his instincts were warning him about, and his hand hovered over the handle of his gun, ready to reach for it at a moment's notice.

"Can I help you?" Lex asked, his tone slightly aggressive. Even an idiot would not expect friendly intentions from random strangers so late at night.

"Hello, my name is Ben, I work for INTERPOL," one of the men said, and pulled out a badge for Lex to see. At a glance the badge looked real, but Lex had no way of knowing for sure.

"We're conducting an investigation connected to terrorist organization and have reason to believe you have been in contact with some suspicious characters. Tell me, do you recognize this man?"

Ben flashed Lex a picture of Larry on his phone, and despite trying to be cautious, Lex could not help being startled at seeing his friend's picture.

"I suspected as much," Ben said upon seeing Lex's reaction. He then played a video of Lex walking out of Larry's apartment building and asked, "Is that you?"

Instead of answering, Lex asked, "What is this about?"

"Larry Dershaw is a protected citizen, affiliated with various influential people and organizations. Shortly after your visit," Ben pointed at the video of Lex walking out of the building, "we believe there was an assassination attempt on Larry, after which he disappeared. We need to bring you in for questioning."

Lex suddenly did not know how to respond. It was indeed a fact that Larry had shown up at the Inn, wounded and bloody shortly after his visit, but Lex had not had an opportunity to ask him yet what had happened. These agents seemed to be real, in which case he should cooperate, right?

In the distance, a man was watching the interaction using a pair of binoculars.

"Tell the client we can only hold the target for a few hours, after which we'll have to let him go. If he wants to get his hands on the target, he'll have to do it himself," the man said on a phone call.

"Understood. In the meantime, find out what he knows about the Larry kid. A proper interrogation before we get our hands on him might be helpful."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 173: Return to the Inn

For a moment Lex hesitated, considering following the two officers. But the whole incident was weird. How did they find him? Why did they have a video of him leaving Larry's house? The video did not look like it was from a security footage, the video was shot from street level. This meant that they had agents present at the time. If that was the case, how could they have allowed Larry to be attacked?

Most of all, he knew that Larry was struggling. If Larry had connections that could lead an investigation to follow him across the world, at a time where cross continental communication was compromised, then he would not have a job at a club where he gets beat up for a living.

His hesitation disappeared and he looked at the officer directly in the eyes, his hand practically touching his gun now. Should they make any sudden movements, he would be ready.

"I am sorry, but I am a US citizen, I don't believe you can just randomly take me in for questioning. I am going to the embassy, if you have any concerns you can contact me there."

Bringing up the embassy was a strong deterrent in Lex's mind, as according to some convention on international Diplomatic relations embassies were immune to local law enforcement - or at least, something along those lines according to some tv show Lex had once seen. Moreover, embassies were usually very protective of their citizens.

Not that Lex needed any protection. He had his gun, and if the worst came to worst, he would retreat to the Inn. The reason he brought it up was because he wanted to see what reaction these 'agents' would have. That would let him know if this was normal procedure or there was something more going on.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that," Ben said as his partner slowly moved to corner Lex from another side. "You need to follow us for some questioning. I assure you, you will be let go in a few hours at most. Please cooperate, it is for your own good."

To this, Lex did not reply. He kept his eyes trained on Ben, ignoring the other agent who was circling to get behind him. Though he remained silent, his stance as well as the aggression on his face let Ben know Lex had no intentions of cooperating.

Since the situation had progressed as such, Ben reached out aggressively to grab Lex. But who was Lex? Even without his identity as the Innkeeper, he was someone who had fought his way out of hordes of zombies and survived being hunted by hundreds of wolves. He was not a person that could be casually messed with.

Moving with a burst of speed, Lex grabbed Ben's arm and twisted it, so that Lex appeared behind Ben with his arm firmly pressed against his back. It was at this point that Lex realized that while these agents were cultivators, their strength was not much greater than him. Lex kicked Ben on the back of his knee, causing the man to buckle and fall onto the ground.

This was just in time to see Ben's partner leaping towards Lex, trying to tackle him. Despite the strength of his plunge, Lex felt the man's move amateurish. Not even moving from his spot, Lex turned in one

smooth motion and kicked up into the air. The lunging agent's face practically flew into Lex's kick on its own, and the man fell to the ground, unconscious.

With both attackers defeated, Lex was momentarily stunned. He was so used to getting beaten up that he was expecting a difficult fight. The only reason he hadn't used his gun was that he knew the sound would have attracted a lot of attention in the silence of the night. But apparently, he did not even need it.

"I think you broke my arm," Ben said with a grimace, as he tried to pick himself up from the ground. But how could Lex allow him to so easily get up?

Lex turned the man onto his back and stepped on his chest, to prevent him from getting up.

"I'm only going to be polite once. Tell me what you're really after, and no one will get hurt."

"I told you, I'm with INTERPOL, we..."

Lex did not bother wasting more time listening to him. He withdrew his gun, making sure to let Ben get a good look at it, then aimed it at Ben.

"I said, I'll only be polite once. Every time you waste your breath, I'll progressively ruder with you. So now, tell me, what do you want?"

Ben did not reply immediately, as he was frozen on the ground in fear. What he had experienced did not match Lex's report. He was supposed to be an inexperienced, new cultivator, not a battle hardened fighter!

Realizing that Ben was shocked, Lex waved his gun to attract his attention and said, "I'm not known for being patient. Now, what do you want?"

Ben grit his teeth, but then promptly gave up. He wasn't an idiot to risk his life over an unofficial assignment.

"Okay look, I'll tell you! But I really am from INTERPOL! I got an assignment to interrogate you about Larry, and hold you for a few hours before letting you go! That's all I know!"

Lex frowned, then kicked Ben on the head, knocking him unconscious. He looked around to make sure no one was watching, and then quickly left the area. He jogged for about twenty minutes, constantly checking to see if he was being followed, before he found a secluded corner and teleported back to the Inn.

A short while later, Ben finally woke up, groggy and in pain. First he checked up on his partner who, fortunately, was still alive. Then he made a call to report the situation. Whoever Larry was or why anyone was interested in was completely irrelevant to him. What he cared about was that Lex's cultivation and strength did not match his files at all. He was too strong. Something like that would always attract someone's attention.

At the Inn, Lex was sitting at his study table, wondering about what had just happened. Larry was a complicated guy, but now his troubles had involved him as well. Lex needed to find out what was actually happening, but a sweep of the Inn told him that Larry was currently asleep in his room. He would wait till morning to talk to him, so until then Lex decided to focus on the Inn.

His additions were a huge hit, and guests lined the mountain and filled the forest and lake. But the problems that Lex did not even consider came just as quickly. More than one guest had slipped or tripped off the mountain. Though they were cultivators, had it not been for Lex's guards quickly catching them, they would have been seriously hurt. In the lake, unexpectedly, it was not a case of drowning that caused an issue, but a swimming human bumping into a swimming beast.

Lex had to say beast because he had never seen any animal on Earth that could match this beast's appearance; it had a lot of limbs and a lot of heads connected to what looked like a ball of play-dough but was hard as steel. The bump seriously injured the human, but since it was an accident Lex could not blame either party.

The forest had more predictable issues. Some people decided to camp out in the forest, but ran into some beasts who had a similar idea in the middle of the night. Suffice to say, the humans were greatly frightened. How was he even supposed to fix an issue like that?

Truth be told, it was not something that could be fixed. But he could reduce the scary atmosphere in the forest. Lex released tens of thousands of fireflies into the first and told the Galactic Sovereign turtle to feed them something that would promote their cultivation just a bit. With the soft yet natural light they gave off, the forest should not be as scary in the darkness.

The lake was also somewhat of an easy solution. He just expanded the lake, and divided the areas into humans and beasts. This was not a permanent solution, but would work for now.

The mountain was slightly tougher to deal with, so for now, he added various railings on the trails. But to deal with the situation properly, he told his A.I. staff to hike the mountain trails and take note of every climb that seemed dangerous to him. He would fix them one by one.

But that was not all. While talking to Moon, he had a few ideas of how he could fill in the empty land in the Inn meaningfully. One that he particularly liked and was currently planning was a lazy river! But, because of the freedom that the system allowed, he could take things even farther.

In front of him he had a hologram of the Inn opened, and he was slowly planning its path.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 174: Breakfast buffet

A Lazy river is a water ride often found in water parks, recreation centers and other places that attract a lot of tourists and visitors. Usually, it would consist of a relatively shallow and narrow pool spread across a large area, with a gentle current flowing in one direction which would carry anyone floating in the water along with it.

To Lex, this was an amazing idea because he could incorporate a few more features into it. Firstly, the Lazy river provided Lex with another way to get around the Inn, though not as urgently as Gerards golf cart crew. Whoever would enter the river would be able to receive a small plastic raft in which they could lie and be carried along by the current. Another option would be to ride a gondola, a few of which Lex would have his AI's control in the river.

But if Lex left it like that, it would be too ordinary. While Lex was testing out the river, and planning what he would do with it, an option that was as of yet grayed out suddenly became viable. For any guest riding along the river in the gondola, there was a chance for them to encounter a thick fog. Once they entered the fog, they would be transported and, for a short time, take a ride while viewing sights from a

world they were not originally from! The gondola would be transported to another world, and should a resident of the world be lucky enough, they would be able to see the outline of a gondola going by in a spontaneously appearing veil of fog. Of course, guests would be prevented from leaving the gondola by the system, and residents of the world would be blocked from climbing the gondola. But Lex had been inspired; in the future, he planned to have a ship that would travel from world to world, and anyone lucky enough to climb aboard would be brought to the Inn.

For now, though, Lex was focused on the river and the gondola. After a short, picturesque trip to another world, the gondola would return to the river. There were a couple of issues Lex was having with the Lazy river, though. First of all was the path! How large the river should be, and what parts of the Inn it should circle were important to decide because Lex would have to give bridges over the parts that were divided by the river, not to mention build railings so anyone wouldn't accidentally fall in. He would be effectively cutting off those parts of the Inn from being entered besides the built paths.

The second issue was of lifeguards and the kind of staff he wanted. The lake, regardless of its size, was in one fixed position and could be viewed in its entirety from one place. The river, however, was long and narrow, and would require various staff members to keep an eye out for the sake of security for his guests. Hiring staff in itself was not the issue, Lex was earning enough on a daily basis to cover that. The issue was, for the river, as well as for the lake, he wanted to hire a different kind of staff.

"Mary, can I hire AIs that are not human? For example, can I use one of the species I've seen in Nibiru? Or a random one I can think of, like mermaids, for example?"

"Yes, you can hire AIs that are a different species. But there are a few constraints. Unlike what you may imagine, the Artificial Intelligent beings that the Inn provides are actual, living breathing beings who have been provided with intelligence artificially, so that in addition to whatever biological inclinations they may have, they give priority to the Inn and the Innkeeper.

"So, for the system to create an AI of a different species, you must first submit some DNA of the species you wish to choose. There are certain things you may also want to take note of, that while these AI are birthed with the information relevant to serving the Inn, their personalities are formed naturally and cannot be controlled. So, in the scenario that you choose a species with a strong inclination for hunting, for example, you may want to use them in an environment where they do not mistake a guest for prey. Also, any species created by the system will always be at the mortal realm, even if the original species normally started out at a much higher cultivation realm."

This information opened up a whole new array of options for Lex, but also limited him. Some time ago he remembered hearing one of his guests say something about mermaids, though he did not remember what, and thought they would make the perfect AI for his water based attractions.

He worked on the Lazy river for a while longer, before deciding to take a break. He did not need to decide everything in one sitting. After a round of meditation, Lex did some exercise, showered, and then got dressed. Larry had woken up some time ago, and Lex was about to enter the Inn for the first time using his original identity.

After making sure everything was in order, Lex appeared in front of Midnight manor as himself for the first time. He looked around, imagining what first time guests must feel like. It occurred to him that, compared to the rest of the Inn which had expanded rapidly, the manor was still relatively small.

Shaking his head and not worrying about it for now, he asked Mary to guide him towards where Larry was.

After a short walk, Lex found himself behind the manor and in front of an array of lawn chairs and an outdoor breakfast buffet, where he identified Larry piling his plates with waffles.

"Those must be good," Lex said, casually stepping beside him and grabbing a plate. "But I prefer pancakes."

"Lex!" Larry exclaimed, nearly dropping his plate. "You old dog, I've finally understood why you never paid attention to any of the girls I pointed out," he said while laughing. "It's because you've been coming to this little slice of heaven."

As much as Lex would have wished Larry was talking about the environment, his longing gaze towards one of the nearby AI staff let Lex know exactly what was on his mind.

"Let alone here, even if I handed you a key to the underworld, you'd find some girls to gaze at."

"Of course," Larry said, laughing even harder. "Don't you know what kind of girls would end up in the underworld? I'd go there every weekend if I could."

Lex smiled as he looked at Larry. The man was ever in a good mood, or at least, the front he put up was phenomenal. Lex did not think he'd be able to even pretend to be this jolly if he had suffered such a serious assassination attempt.

"Come, fill your plate and let's find a seat. I'm glad I ran into you here, I have something to talk to you about."

"Is it about Sophia?" he asked in an excited whisper. "It's about her, isn't it? That old geezer Marlo, he's having a honeymoon here with his wife and no one even knew!"

Lex listened to the little gossip as they filled their plates with an unflattering amount of food and then found a table to sit at.

"I'd like to talk privately," Lex said to Mary, who then summoned a tinted glass dome around the duo.

"Wow, how did you do that?" Larry asked, surprised.

"If you ask your personal hologram, in case of small stuff like this, they can help you out."

"No way! Hey little fella, what else can you do?" Larry asked, summoning his own personal holographic assistant.

But before he got engrossed in an unrelated conversation, Lex said, "I gave you the key in case you even ran into trouble, so the fact that you're here should mean you ran into trouble, right?"

Larry's smiled skewed. He knew this conversation was coming, but he didn't want to involve his friend. His troubles were more serious than they seemed. Before he could think of how to answer, though, Lex continued.

"Actually, I know for a fact that you ran into some trouble, because just last night I was intercepted by INTERPOL agents who wanted to take me into custody and question me about you."

At this, Larry froze. He did not expect that Lex had already been involved. But, as unfortunate as it was, the timing of their last interaction automatically brought attention to Lex for anyone that may have been watching Larry.

"After I... questioned, shall we say, those agents, they revealed that someone had tasked them to hold me in interrogation long enough for them to arrive on scene. They were very interested in learning more about you, by hook or by crook."

Finally, Larry sighed, and his smile withered off his face.

"The situation is pretty bad. I guess I better explain."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 175: Seized assets

"Do you remember Matilda? She was with us in our self-defense class at the start?" Larry asked, as he cut into his waffles.

"Yeah, I remember."

"It all started with her, sometime ago. You remember around the time some thugs came to your apartment and roughed things up? Around the same time, some people came to harass Matilda and me as well. But with Matilda... things went much, much farther. A lot of people ended up dead, and Bluebird got involved."

Larry paused for a moment as he chewed his food. It seemed to Lex that he was considering his next words carefully.

"I don't know if you caught on since you visited my apartment, but I'm really good with computers. Like, really, REALLY good. I uh... let's say I fudged with the authority level on my Bluebird token, logged onto their network and found out everything that happened with her. I don't know if I got lucky, or if the agents at Bluebird just overlooked things, but I quickly found Matilda's trail. She was hiding out in a 24 hour gym, and seemed badly hurt. I don't know why, but... I couldn't just leave her like that. I deleted her trail and then went and found her."

At this point, Larry let out a sigh.

"I must say, she is an extremely formidable woman. Did you know she's already in the Qi training realm? In just a little more than a month! The Body tempering realm is not necessarily one that takes too long, but, damn!

"Anyway, after I convinced her that I wasn't an enemy, I secretly brought her back to my apartment and helped her heal. We spent some time together after that... that's when I learnt a secret that's pretty mind-blowing.

"You know the war that suddenly broke out? The one that overtook the world? I've spent a few days here at the Inn, and learnt a lot of things I didn't know before. You remember you once asked me, if the ICPA's keep normal cultivators in line, who keeps them in line? Well, apparently, Earth was being ruled by five families - the Morrisons being one of them. The ICPAs used to answer to them. To be more specific, they answered to the five family heads.

"But for a while now, they've secretly been planning to revolt against the family heads. They've been gathering allies, and getting rid of those who were too loyal to the family heads. Apparently, Matilda's older brother, the one who died and passed on his cultivation technique to her, was one of the people that had been 'silenced' for his loyalty. Matilda felt like she was being hunted because her hunters were afraid that her brother had given her too much information, which indeed, he had."

Larry paused for a moment, and he stared at his hands with desperate eyes.

"But even if she knew the truth, who could she tell? There was no way for her to get in contact with anyone that mattered, so all she focused on was getting stronger and getting revenge. I was incredibly moved by her story, and promised to help her hide her tracks.

"But as much as I wanted to help her, her story also got me thinking about what happened to my own family... About how, we went from being one of the richest, most powerful families, to being nearly wiped out, framed, and then exiled. Could my family have also been... one of the families that was 'silenced' for being too loyal? I mean, if they had been planning this revolution for years, they had to have their agents in all the right places. How could they leave a family that ran one of the banks of the cultivation world out of their plans? And if, for whatever reason, my family chose not to cooperate, they could have wiped out anyone who knew the truth and banished the nonconsequential ones. Once I got the idea in my head... I couldn't let go of it.

"I asked Matilda if she knew anything about this, but her brother never mentioned my family. That's when I started digging. That's when I started hacking into different companies' databases and looking for some answers. I thought I was hiding my trail well, but the day those guys came for me, I knew I must have messed up.

"They wanted me to follow them. They weren't really there to kill me, at least not yet. But I resisted, and a fight broke out. I got shot too many times... if I didn't have the key you gave me, I probably would have died."

For a moment, Lex took in everything that Larry had told him. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, a part of him really wondered if the world war really happened because of him - because he'd held the Midnight games and managed to get all the family heads to leave Earth. But if things really were the way Larry told him, they had been planning for this for a long time, and if they hadn't discovered a relatively easy way to handle the family heads, when the war ultimately broke out, it may have been much, much worse!

Finally, Lex said, "I remember you once telling me that you've met Alexander Morrison before when you were kids. Is that true?"

"Of course, back then, my family was connected to all the big shots."

"Well, if you've been here a while, you probably know about the Midnight Games. Then you should also know about the fact that Alexander is also here, with his family. Maybe you could go to him and let him know about your suspicions. If your family really was killed for being loyal, then chances are, a lot of their other supporters were secretly silenced. Even if they don't want to help you, and even if they've lost a lot of influence on Earth, to protect themselves in the future, there's no way they won't investigate this. Or, even if they won't investigate, maybe they'll help you and Matilda out."

"Heh, what am I supposed to say? Hey Alexander, remember me? I'm a nobody right now, but when I was a kid our families used to work together? They have enough problems of their own to handle. They don't have time to help anyone else, not to mention I don't have anything worth them spending time on, anyway."

"Hmm, maybe that's true. But you're already being hunted, so asking for help can't make things worse. I can't stay here for too long. I have a few things I need to take care of, but I'll be back sometime tonight. I'll talk to you then, maybe we can figure something else out."

"Yeah, sure," replied Larry, and watched as Lex disappeared. After a few moments of frowning, his wide smile returned to his face, and he started gulping down his breakfast while enjoying the beautiful scenery known as women in uniform.

Lex left the meeting abruptly, not only because he got the information he wanted, but because he got two very significant notifications from the system that required his attention.

Quest Complete: The World War has ended. Calculating hosts performance:

Reward upgraded for over 1000 refugees

Reward rank: C-

Reward: Detective's Magnifying glass

Lex was pleasantly surprised that the world war had already ended, but at the same time relieved. He had no love for the council or their shady business, but if the war was over, that hopefully meant the situation had stabilized and that all fighting had ended. He looked at his next notification.

New notification: Guest with level 1 prestige is unable to pay for services. Please cater to the guest urgently. Focus on the notification for further details on payment blockage.

When Lex focused on the notification he was greatly amused, and despite the awkward situation of a guest being unable to pay, looked forward to their reaction when he told them.

Quickly dining his Host Attire, Lex teleported directly in front of the Meditation room where a now, only slightly abnormally large man was standing.

"Marlo," the Innkeeper said in a warm, pleasant voice, "we meet again. I hope you have been well."

"Much better now," he said, wearing his signature mad grin. "It took me years to build up all that muscle previously, but with the help of spirit food, I expect I'll be able to return to my former glory quickly."

"I wish you the very best on your journey. But I foresee a small obstacle on your journey, which is why I'm here to inform you of it."

"Oh? I'm all ears."

"It appears that... your bank accounts have been frozen and your assets have been seized, which is why the Midnight Inn is unable to process your payment to use the Meditation room. You've already paid in advance for your stay, as well as your son's treatment, so that should not be an issue, but if you wish to buy spirit food or use the Meditation room, this may be an issue you want to address."

Marlo stood there frozen, his grin still stuck on his face, mostly because he was too shocked to even react! He couldn't... pay? When was the last time he, Hanson Marlo Bravi IV, was unable to pay for something? He honestly couldn't remember.

Then, his eyes went red with fury he was completely unable to hold in any longer, and he disappeared from the Innkeepers sight, promptly returning to Earth.

Lex chuckled, secretly hoping it was people from the council who froze his accounts. Whoever it was, they were about to receive Marlo's special care.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 176: The flower that blooms in spring

Larry let out a sigh filled with amazement as he finished his breakfast and slowly leaned back into his chair with a clear bulge evident under his shirt. It had been a long time since he'd eaten food that he didn't cook for himself, and to be able to eat so luxuriously was a splendor he had been divorced from for a long time. Fortunately, Marlo had paid for his stay for the next few days, so he should be able to enjoy this for a while longer.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the gentle winds as it whispered in his ear. But along with the whistling wind, Larry was also listening to the conversations of the surrounding people. Lex had told him how to prevent their conversation from being overheard, but it appeared not many others knew about such features. Larry was learning a lot during his stay here, and it was important that he kept increasing his knowledge. The more information he had, the easier it would be for him to plan for things in the future because, contrary to what Lex thought, by going to Alexander for help, Larry's situation could get a lot worse.

When he told Lex that he suspected his family was hunted for being loyal to the family heads, he was not lying. But at the same time, he was not telling the entire truth. There was a secret he kept close to his heart, and one that might have been the real reason for his family's demise. It was also the reason why, although he could not cultivate originally, he was able to cultivate now. Not to mention, it was also the reason why he could absorb spiritual metals.

But the depth of his secret went a lot farther than that, and as much as he trusted and appreciated Lex, some secrets were better left unshared. His secret, along with this Midnight Inn, gave him the opportunity of a lifetime.

If anyone paid attention to his right hand, they would notice that he was playing with a golden coin in between his fingers. As the coin danced in the palm of his hands, one might have been able to see the signature MI engraved on it, since it was the commemorative Midnight Games coin that Lex had made. It was supposed to be made from an extremely resilient metal, and could supposedly last the test of time, but the coin in Larry's hand already looked dull, as if it had suffered the wear and tear of a million years.

If someone used their spiritual sense to observe him, they would notice every few hours, the smallest conceivable portion of the coin was absorbed by Larry into his body. They would also notice that each time he absorbed a bit of the coin, his cultivation would rise. At this rate, before the day was over, he would break into the Qi training realm.

"Excuse me, is it alright if I clear up the table?" a soft and gentle voice asked Larry, prompting him to open his eyes. It was one of the AI staff, a young woman with blonde hair and spectacular green eyes.

"Haven't I told you before? How can I let you clean up after me? The most wonderful thing you can do for me is not to pick up my plates, but to allow me to accompany you."

The waitress blushed and looked away, unable to maintain eye contact with Larry.

"Little Z says that... you are a bad man, and that I should stay away from you."

"Oh?" Larry said with amusement in his voice. "And what does your heart say?"

"My heart?" she repeated for a moment, before getting lost in thought. Finally she said, "My heart says... that the Innkeeper is a lot more handsome than you."

The waitress quickly picked up Larry's plates and rushed away, leaving the man there wondering whether he should laugh or cry.

When Marlo left, Lex also returned to his room. Now that he had some time, he thought about his future. Someone was hunting him on Earth, but that didn't matter to him because he could simply choose not to return to the Earth. He knew his family would be safe, with Belle having a job with the council, so he could focus entirely on his own tasks.

The Inn had gotten a lot of exposure, so he no longer needed to return to the days of desperately looking for guests to scrounge up some MP. What he needed to do now was develop it. He also needed to raise his own cultivation.

He had decided to blatantly use whatever loopholes he could discover, so he started planning for that as well. He asked the Galactic Sovereign turtle what plants could aid in the cultivation of a Qi training cultivator, but the turtle did not have such specific knowledge. In the end, he asked the turtle to plant whatever plants it could think of that aided in cultivation. But then the issue of seeds came up. Lex could only buy them if the system gave the option, but if it didn't he would have to manually search for them. To cater to this problem, the turtle returned to Nibiru for a while to search for some plants it knew that could provide aid.

The next thing Lex needed to do was expand more and build more rooms, something he was putting off until the games ended. He did not like the feeling of all his rooms being booked - this was an indicator that, despite such a cheat, he could not keep up with demand. But he would have a better idea for how many rooms he required when the extra rush because of the games disappeared. He had already

thought of various ways to add more rooms: on the ground, underground, underwater and even in the air - all options were available to him.

Yet another issue was, though he did not need to, he felt bad having his AI work without pay. But at the same time, he could not afford to pay them a lot as he needed to keep expanding which required a massive consumption of MP. He needed to spend some time on the math to analyze his latest earning trend, and create some projection charts for anticipated income growth and expenses to ultimately decide how much he could afford as fixed expenses in terms of salaries.

This was absolutely not some technical vocabulary usage just to avoid thinking of paying his employees, not at all!

Lex groaned. He had too much work to do, and he felt like doing none of it. Suddenly, he felt like taking care of his guests. In the beginning, he used to take care of his guests personally, but lately his staff had been handling everything and he rarely got to engage with any of his guests. He missed the feeling of being a host, and watching his guests amazement first hand.

Suddenly, he decided to put his work away and search for some guests to cater to. He scanned the Inn a few times, trying to see if anyone was doing something interesting. That's when he happened to see a guest that he hadn't seen in a long time, and smiled. He really should welcome his old guests personally.

In front of the Midnight Manor, Blane looked at the changed scenery, holding his girlfriend's hand. The first time he'd come here, he had been dragged in by a zombie along with his brother in arms, Chen. The both of them had their wounds treated by the Innkeeper, and had somehow survived.

He'd had a long journey after that, and ultimately split with Chen to go search for his girlfriend, Iris, who had been taken off planet. It had taken some time, but he finally tracked her down and, after contacting her and letting her know he was alive, had to go through a very long process to be transported onto the same space ship as her.

Today, after so many days, they had finally reunited. Since he first came to the Inn, he had been wanting to bring Iris here, and finally he had the opportunity. But while some things remained the same, the world of the Inn had also changed tremendously.

"The air smells so nice here," said Iris, bewildered. One might have expected that the girlfriend Blane was so in love with was a world shakingly beautiful, but on Vegas Minima there were no fair maidens, only warriors.

The woman who stood beside Blane was extremely muscular, and was garbed in battle gear, despite their change in environment. He had an eyepatch - to help with healing while her body got accustomed to a new implant. Before the implant, she wore the eyepatch to protect her dead eye.

A few lines marked her forehead, and her age showed around her eyes, but none of that mattered to Blane. To him, she was the flower that bloomed in spring, and the honey that tasted sweeter than most resplendent spiritual fruit. He had brought her here because to him, after her embrace, this was the place that brought him the most happiness, and he wanted to share it with her.

"Welcome guest," said the Innkeeper with a fond and warm voice, as he stepped out a shining light. "It has been a while since I saw you last, I hope you have been well."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 177: Penetration

"I hope you understand, Mr Marlo," the man said as he pulled on his collar with one finger, loosening it. "I am only here on behalf of my client. None of these things are my doing, I'm just delivering a message."

Despite the smile on the man's face, his nervousness could be seen by the amount he was sweating.

"Please, enlighten me as to what your client wants to convey," Marlo said, as he leaned back in his chair. He was not sitting in the luxurious furniture he had picked out for himself in his apartment. No, he was currently sitting in the seat of the Regional Director for Bluebird in the main Bluebird office.

The lawyer did not know how, or why, the man could so casually sit upon such an important seat, and why no one else in the building seemed to be saying anything to the man, but it was too late to change the plan.

"It's like this, Mr. Marlo. You have built up a lot of prestige for yourself over the years, but at the same time, everyone also knows that you are gravely injured. You could probably put up a good fight against other Golden Core experts, but that fight would be your last. And with your recent disappearance,

everyone is suspecting that your old wounds have made your situation worse. I mean, your students were harassed so much, one of them even quit your class and yet you did nothing. Your reputation has taken a hit."

The more the lawyer spoke, the wider Marlo's grin grew, but for some reason, it only made the lawyer more nervous.

"Having said that, my client deeply respects you and does not want to cause you any trouble. We only need Larry Dershaws whereabouts. So long as you tell us where he is, your bank accounts will be restored and all your businesses will once again run normally."

Instead of replying, Marlo started laughing. But the harder he laughed, the louder his voice became, the more pressure the lawyer felt. He was only at the beginning of the Foundation realm, so even Marlo's regular aura would easily suppress him, let alone his rising aura now.

The more Marlo laughed, the angrier he got. Until, suddenly, something in his body clicked. His new form of cultivation, that had been suppressed on the verge of completion for so long, was finally complete. He was no longer a cultivator. He now walked the path of a Prime.

With his breakthrough complete, Marlo's aura exploded outwards with a strength Earth had rarely witnessed. Had any of the five family heads, previously the strongest humans on the planet, been here, even they would have been suppressed.

The lawyer fell out of his chair as he looked at the madman, roaring with laughter.

Midnight Manor, The Midnight Inn

"Innkeeper!" Blane exclaimed in excitement, "it has definitely been a while! But I'm great! I finally got to reunite with my girlfriend, Iris!" Blane looked towards the girls whose hand he had firmly gripped, and the wide grin on his face could not be more pure.

The last time Lex had seen Blane, and even to this day when he saw Chen, the duo was usually very submissive in front of Lex. After all, they had met Falak, and seen how even he was respectful to the Innkeeper. But now, Blane was radiating endless joy and excitement, nothing else.

Lex observed the heroic woman that caused Blane's heart to swoon and read her status.

Name: Iris

Age: 24

Sex: Female

Cultivation Details: Qi training 4th level

Species: Human

Midnight Inn Prestige Level: 1

Condition: Has suffered grave injuries and can no longer cultivate or undergo severe exertion! Her lungs have been severely injured, and can only be treated to reduce pain, but cannot fully be healed. Multiple small wounds across her body were detected. Patient suffers from greatly depleted vitality!

Remarks: She has lived the life of a warrior, but managed to escape the death of one. Definitely deserves a soft onesie!

Lex did not let it show on his face, but her condition let him know just how difficult a life she had lived. It made sense, since living on Vegus Minima was all but hell until recently.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Lex said to Iris, his voice filled with sincerity.

"No, no, the pleasure is mine," Iris said, as she bowed towards Lex. "Blane told me how you saved his and Chen's life. I had almost given up on everything when I thought he was dead. I can't tell you how relieved I was when he contacted me! Please, accept my thanks."

Though she managed to keep her tears from falling, how could Lex not notice her watery eyes?

"It is my duty, and my privilege. Please, stand up straight. Would you like me to show you around? Chen and Lily are also at the Inn, so if you like, I could take you to them as well."

"We'll get around to meeting Brother Chen," Blane said, "but first I thought I'd show Iris around. The place has changed so much, it seems like I'll have to explore it again as well."

"Then please, by all means, enjoy yourselves. If you need anything, your personal holographic assistant is always available."

Lex let the happy couple explore on their own, as it was perfectly clear that Blane wanted to spend some time alone with her. But, right before they left, Lex sent him a mental message knowing that Iris, though not completely healable, would benefit greatly from visiting the Recovery room.

He took this time to interact with a few more of his guests, until the fifth Midnight Game began. This time, the terrain seemed difficult to determine. Everyone appeared in tunnels, some wide and some small, and were split into various groups.

Before any of them could begin to explore, however, the surprise challenge for this round was announced immediately! All the contestants could use whatever points they had accumulated so far to increase their strength! The more points they spent, the greater the increase. But at the same time, the increase was also temporary, so it had to be timed perfectly!

This was a huge risk. By utilizing their points, they could gain a lead on the other world in destroying the node, but if too many participants used too many points, the gain in points from destroying a node would be outweighed by the points lost. To top it all off, since the contestants were so split up, they could not plan properly either.

The crowds watching the match went crazy, and the anticipation was at an all-time high. Blane and Iris had gotten seats in the Coliseum, and for the first time enjoyed a cheering crowd.

But Lex was distracted by a notification he received. Apparently, one of the skills he'd entered into the Mystery trial that he was looking for, had been found.

The skill he had discovered was assassination, and the person who had it happened to already work for him: John. This was interesting, the man seemed so amicable, Lex would have guessed he was an assassin. But that was likely what made him good at it.

Lex decided to observe him for a while, and then decide how he was going to ask him for what Lex had planned. And no, Lex was not planning on carrying out assassinations.

In the IT field on Earth, there was a certain job called Penetration Testing. It was when someone checked a software, a business, a building, anything really, for vulnerabilities. For example, if security was weak at a data center, regardless of how secure the firewalls were, they could not prevent them from being physically accessed. If a software had obvious flaws, it could easily be hacked. If a business was not taking precautions, it could be taken advantage of.

Following this line of thought, Lex thought of offering a form of penetration testing as a service, up to a certain level, of course. The client would hire a tester, who would then try to infiltrate or 'assassinate' the client, then provide a detailed report on whatever weaknesses or flaws they encountered. Considering how dangerous the universe probably was, Lex thought it was a good idea.

Now all he needed to do was get a good idea of how skilled John really was, and what his cultivation level was. To be honest, he had some doubts about John. Apparently, he had been to the Mystery trial numerous times, but had not solved it yet. Was he really any good? Then again, to be fair, so far no one had completed the Mystery trial.

In his room above the Battle Ax, John sat on a sofa as he considered his gains for the day. Today, finally, for the first time, he had made some progress towards solving the Mystery trial. So far, each and every assassination he had attempted had been planned and provided guidance from by his own Assassination System. Each time, however, he failed.

Out of frustration, this time John did not wait for his system to guide him and used his own instincts to attack, and finally made some progress! Though he still failed, he figured something out. If he wanted to pass the trial, he could not rely on his system.

But instead of relief and finding a breakthrough, John was filled with fear. How could the trial differentiate between when he used the system and when he didn't? And if the trial could do so, did that mean... the Innkeeper had also seen through his system?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 178: Space Pirates

Far out in the vast universe, a small spaceship was flying through the expanse. The crew consisted of only four men, since the ship itself was too small to accommodate more. Though not exactly routine, their mission was not exactly unheard of either. Aboard a ship designed to be covert and quick, they were personally tasked by Ragnar to deliver a batch of goods to the nearest Jotun operational planet. Their cargo included various rare metals, some extremely rare demonic resources, a few plants, and some documents. What they were unaware of was a small box full of hundreds of Golden keys that had been secretly placed alongside the cargo.

This was one of a dozen such ships that had been sent out, but what made this one unique was that three of the crew members were dead and the remaining member seemed to be casually eating a meal and waiting for something. Soon, the ship was intercepted by a much larger vessel. As much as the crewmember would have liked to stop the ship himself, he could not control the ship, so rougher means were required.

Once the ship's engines were disabled, the Jotun ship was pulled into the cargo hold of the larger ship which, upon closer inspection, bore the insignia of some random space pirates.

"You wasted a cover you've held for seven years," said one of the pirates that welcomed the remaining crew member. "I hope it was worth it."

"Oh ho, you have no idea. There's a whole batch of high leveled demonic resources! We're going to be rich!"

The pirate was startled at the news, but suddenly started laughing with excitement! Indeed, they were about to get rich!

Lex secretly watched John for a while, but the man did nothing except pace around his room. This would not get him any results. Lex had to think of a different way to determine John's abilities. He could think of only two ways: either he sent John on a trial, the way he had sent Marlo, and analyze his skills that way, or he set a condition for John to pass the mystery trial.

They both came with their own problems, however. Lex had no way of knowing John's cultivation level, and so any trial he could come up with might not be accurate. The Mystery trial itself had never been finished, and it was unknown what the difficulty level for that was.

After considering his options for a while, Lex still decided to stick to the Mystery trial. Its difficulty was a form of quality control, and Lex was in no particular rush.

Furthermore, there was another very important issue with giving John a trial. The only information Lex had received from John's status was that his cultivation was sealed, and finding a way to fix that issue would also be an important factor in having him do his second job, so more time was a good thing.

He appeared in Battle Axes lobby, and asked Doe, John's AI assistant, to let John know that the Innkeeper wished to speak to him. Doe dutifully hurried to inform John, whose expression stilled when he heard the news. Instead of letting panic take over, John settled his emotions and receded into a state of suppressing his emotions. His previous occupation put him in a lot of difficult situations and he would not be able to survive if he lost control so easily.

Furthermore, even if the Innkeeper knew something about the system, there was no guarantee that he would even be interested in it.

John entered the lobby with a smile and welcomed the Innkeeper inside, as he observed the Innkeeper. He was as warm and genial as ever, and John was unable to garner any other information about him at all. Even his finely honed instincts only told him that in front of him was a regular human with no cultivation, which was impossible!

"How have you been doing, John? It seems you've adjusted well to the Inn."

As ever, John was dressed like a biker from Earth. His leather jacket and jeans combination had made him easily identifiable to the many guests, and he always wore his aviator glasses, even indoors. Of course, everyone knew those glasses could hide one's appearance and identity, many guests wore them, but no one commented on them.

"I have been doing very well, Innkeeper. The work is rewarding, the environment is safe and relaxing, and there is always something interesting happening to keep me entertained. I have earned quite a bit of MP betting on a particular beast during the games, and I'm very hopeful about its performance."

"Oh, which one?" Lex asked, curious about who his employee supported.

John waved to pull up a screen that automatically focused on one of the participants. But at viewing the scene, Lex quietly looked away and John went pale. The beast he had bet on was dead! He was broke again!

Lex coughed, waking John from his misery, allowing him to dismiss the window.

"I also get to meet a lot of interesting people," he said, smiling weakly.

"Yes, it's a diverse crowd here at the Inn. I'm glad to know you're getting along fine. But I wonder, have you thought about your future?"

"My future?"

"Yes, I mean. Do you want to stay here at the Inn, working at the Battle Ax? Are there other things you are interested in? Or perhaps, do you want to leave the Inn one day? Something along those lines."

John was silent for a moment, before saying, "Since you've brought this up, do you have something in mind?"

At this point, he was all but sure that this matter had to do with his system, but he would never admit it unless the cards were laid on the table.

"Indeed, I do, actually. I have an opportunity for you, if you can grasp it. I was looking for someone with the skills of an assassin and thought you would be a good fit."

"Innkeeper, there must be some mistake. I am no assassin."

The Innkeeper gave John a knowing smile before saying, "Haha no John, I never said I was looking for an assassin, nor am I interested in having anyone assassinated. I said I was interested in someone with the skills of an assassin for a job. No need for any concern. I don't mean to harm anyone - quite the opposite, in fact."

"But I won't speak more on it for now. If you are interested in grasping the opportunity, there are still things you need to do to qualify. But I won't make it too difficult for you. How about you successfully complete the Mystery trial and unseal your cultivation. Once you've done that, you can come find me for the other job."

Without giving John any time to respond, Lex left. By letting John take care of his own sealed cultivation, he was reducing a burden on Lex's shoulders and elevating Lex's image in John's mind. And if he took too long to do either of those conditions, Lex could just look for another candidate. Then John would have no one else to blame but himself.

With that taken care of, Lex considered watching the ongoing game. He really hadn't been following the games too closely and was surprised to find that the Beasts had taken the lead in points.

But, just as he was deciding on what to do, he felt something strange happen to his body. It was the feeling of relief one got when they cracked their bones after sitting still all day, but... the feeling wasn't coming from his bones. It was coming from something deeper...

Lex teleported to his apartment and then pulled up his status to see if anything changed, especially with his tumor, but what he saw surprised him greatly.

Name: Lex Williams

Age: 23

Sex: Male

Cultivation Level: Regal Embrace Body Tempering Stage 3 Complete

He was too stunned to view the rest of his status as his gaze was fixed on his cultivation. The third stage was already complete?

"Hey Mary, I think my third stage is... complete," in equal parts confusion and excitement.

"In that case, I suggest you either complete the fourth stage right now, or after the event ends, as this process should take 2 to 3 days."

Lex hesitated for a moment, but his excitement got the better of him. He had 6 days before the event ended, so he could make it in time for the closing ceremony, even if the procedure took a little longer.

"In that case, Mary, take care of things while I'm away."

Not waiting any longer, Lex immediately began the fourth process. Once again, teleported to the familiar white room, Lex lay down comfortably on the bed and fell asleep. This time, his body was no longer injected with anything, and it appeared as if he was just sleeping. But if anyone else were to enter that room, if their cultivation was not strong enough, they would explode under enormous pressure.

Slowly, his body, spirit and soul were being melded into one completely new entity, never before seen in this universe. At the same time, in his Inn, a group of drunk space pirates stumbled through a bright light, completely unaware of what happened.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 179: King

Mary's projection floated over Lex's sleeping body, utterly confused. His soul had stabilized way too quickly, right? But, whatever. There was a saying on Earth that went like, 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth'. She had no idea who would gift someone a horse, but the idea was all that mattered.

Before she could ponder more about the metaphors and phrases from Earth, she was notified about an issue. A bunch of new guests had shown up, and had started a fight. The problem was, they were fighting amongst one another, so the guards weren't sure if they needed to stop them and so they contacted her.

Mary disappeared to take care of the issue, only to find most of them were already asleep or unconscious on her arrival. A few were fighting amongst themselves, but shortly after pulling them apart, they too fell asleep. Now Mary really was lost, they had never taken care of drunk guests before. But perhaps it would be too much to punish them just for this, so she had the guards carry them somewhere secluded where they could nap out in the field. She would deal with them when they woke up.

Just like that, Mary was putting out fires all over the Inn while the Innkeeper slept like a baby. The hours passed and the final game for the Foundation experts finally ended. Of the 1000 soldiers that had followed Alexander, only 600 were in fighting condition by the end. Almost 200 of them died while the rest were gravely wounded. The casualties for the rest were drastic as well, though the Jotuns only had casualties because of Pramod's surprise attack.

Surprising everyone, the Beasts had taken the lead in points during the last two matches, and Earth had fallen far behind both. This was because, split up as they were, many soldiers ended up using their points for extra strength whenever they were in precarious situations.

The next day, the sixth match, and the first of the Golden Core experts, would begin. The zombies, the Jotuns and the beasts had armies ready and waiting, but the Earthlings only managed only 800 Golden Core experts of their 5000 quota. This was because, to begin with, Golden Core cultivators were rare on Earth, and the ones that managed to reach that realm often were not fighters.

Of those 800, only 10 were Brandon Morrisons followers. The Morrison family had decided not to participate heavily in this section of the games, as they no longer had much to gain. The only reason these 10 were even going was because they wanted to follow Brandon. As for the reason Brandon wanted to go, he claimed he needed the exertion to help him breakthrough the Nascent realm.

"You performed well," Brandon said to his son, who was busy recovering from his latest wounds, "but you took on too many wounds. Your combat style is immature. Compare yourself to the Jotun soldiers, who suffered almost no casualties and few wounds under normal circumstances. Think on how you can improve, and if you need inspiration, watch my match tomorrow."

Brandon was always extremely serious, a large contrast to his own father, but he was also extremely remarkable. Despite the fact that Ragnar was the Nascent realm cultivator of their family, Brandon was the one that had built up their strength and raised their armies. Alexander had never seen his father fight properly, so he was looking forward to it.

In a different part of the Inn, Blane had taken Iris to the Recovery room to heal. Behind him stood Chen and Lily. Blane was completely broke, since he had spent his time looking for Iris and had not worked at all in that time, so he had to ask Chen for a loan to heal Iris.

Yet again, in another part of the Inn, Little Blue was searching for its father, the Galactic Sovereign turtle. But the turtle had gone back to its planet temporarily, and so the whale was unable to find him, which caused it a lot of distress. Unaware of what else to do, the whale went towards Main street to find Z. Unknowingly, somehow this reclusive and anime obsessed AI had become the support system for many of the Inns permanent residents.

As night fell and the pirates finally woke up, Mary quickly appeared and had the guards reproach them heavily. Confused, scared, but mostly hungover, the pirates got a vague understanding of things before promptly returning to wherever they came from.

In a different place, Larry was waiting for Lex, who had said he would return at night. But as the hours passed and Lex never showed up, Larry began to worry. His thoughts, however, were hidden well behind his smile and constant flirting.

The night passed, and the next day the first match for the Golden Core experts began. Some people found it strange that the Innkeeper didn't make an appearance, but things continued as usual.

Harriot Shelby Ruby Selma Jane, the zombie leader whose name only Lex knew, did not behave as pragmatically as Pramod when the first match started. Since the zombies and the Jotun empire spawned in the same place, she instantly ordered a fight to the death.

Unlike the fight with Foundation realm experts, which somewhat resembled a fight between mortal armies in terms of formation and weapons, a fight between Golden Core experts was vastly different. The spiritual techniques were of another realm, and the repercussions of the fight could be felt across the current map. Speaking of which, the environment was actually underwater! They were literally fighting against not only each other, but the ocean currents as well!

Brandon made a beeline for the ongoing fight while the Beasts headed towards the node. Compared to their somewhat mediocre performance in the previous rounds, this time, the Beasts were a lot more aggressive.

A lot of viewers had their eyes on Brandon, despite so many other options, as a lot of bets had been placed on him. As the father of such a well-performing candidate, Alexander, the crowd expected nothing less from him. And, true to the Morrison name, Brandon was extremely lethal on the field.

If Alexander's performance could be described as explosive, then Brandon was steady. In less than an hour, he killed over a dozen Golden Core zombies, and was involved in a direct clash against Harriot. To be more exact, he was fighting the third body Harriot inhabited! Every time he killed the zombie, even crushing the zombie core to dust once, Harriot would somehow take over another zombie. Were Lex watching this match, he would recall that Harriot suffered from a condition the system described as a failed artificial animation, and would wonder if this had anything to do with how she kept coming back.

If she had been smart, Brandon would have had no way of knowing that she had taken over another zombie, but each time she would start cursing and screaming at him, even going so far as saying she was immortal and that she would not rest until she took over Brandon's body in revenge!

If the situation bothered him, no one could tell, as Brandon's expression did not change even a little throughout the game. Even when the game ended in only four hours because the beasts had somehow decimated the zombie army defending the node, Brandon was unperturbed.

Like that, Brandon became a fan favorite, even more than Alexander, and quite a few ladies tried to court him. It was unfortunate for them that he treated them with the same indifference as the zombies that he killed. The very same indifference he kept when Harriot herself courted him between matches.

Like that, two more days passed by, and nothing too out of the ordinary happened. The Beasts had an irrecoverable lead now, as they continued to destroy the nodes on their own in the following two matches. At this point, even the Jotun army had changed their strategy from trying to destroy the node to keeping the pressure off the beasts. All they cared about was reclaiming the planet, so if they did not win the final prize, it was alright.

It had to be noted that only 200 of the Golden Core cultivators from Earth were still participating. The casualties they had suffered in the first match had been extremely heavy, and most of the survivors

refused to participate anymore. The only ones still fighting were like Brandon, wanting to ready themselves for a potential breakthrough in the future. With access to the Midnight Inn, the Golden Core realm was not the end of the path for them and their buried ambitions had been rekindled.

It was on the morning of the ninth Midnight game, and the second last match, that something unusual happened - at least for those who came from Earth.

New York had been declared an independent country as well as a monarchy, under the rule of its first King, Hanson Marlo Bravi IV, as recognized by the Council of New Order. No one saw this coming, and everyone was extremely confused by what had happened. Though Marlo had a reputation, it was not as if everyone on Earth knew him, so many were wondering who this random upstart was that had somehow obtained recognition from the council.

Only a very few people knew that it wasn't Marlo receiving their recognition, but him sparing their lives for provoking him in the first place. Based on his personality, he could not be threatened the same way the other family heads were, and they had not planned for a sudden new powerhouse either. In fact, he was not even too interested in taking over New York, but the council had already offered it to him to placate him, and he did quite like the sound of King.

What they didn't know was that it was not Marlo's lack of ambition that saved them. He was too worried about his son's condition to care about measly titles. In fact, if someone from the council hadn't specifically provoked him, he would never have even bothered with them at all. As for what happened after his son recovered... that remained to be seen.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 180: Body Tempering Stage 4

Although Marlo had declared himself King, and New York had gone from being a state to an independent country, practically there were no changes in the way things operated. No laws were changed, no new government bodies were created, and no one got any special privileges.

Still, for the people of Earth, such a change overnight was too drastic to accept. Riots and protests erupted the very next day and filled the streets of Manhattan. Instead of dispersing them, though, the police only maintained the peace. At the end of the day, the Governor of New York made an announcement that, in summary, stated whether the people accepted or rejected the truth made no difference. The whole world was changing, let alone New York, and they could accept the changes or test their luck.

Perhaps once he had dealt with his private matters, Marlo would turn his attention back to New York or even all of Earth, but neither the council nor the politicians in New York had any way of knowing what would happen.

Of course, the council was not going to leave this threat hanging over their head, and while Marlo returned to the Inn, they already began taking precautions. How effective the precautions would be could not yet be determined. The council considered him a normal Nascent cultivator, and did not have a concept of what it meant to be a Prime. Who could blame them? Few in the entire universe did.

Sometime later that day, Lex finally woke up. Unlike his previous procedures, it was not a gradual process. One moment he was asleep, the next he was completely and fully awake. Even without moving, or opening his eyes, Lex felt a tremendous difference! It was not just his strength that had increased, but the fluidity with which his thoughts flowed was unprecedented. It was like he had been wearing shackles that were keeping him in place, but had finally broken free of them.

Still lying in bed, without opening his eyes, Lex called up his status.

Name: Lex Williams

Age: 23

Sex: Male

Cultivation Level: Regal Embrace Body Tempering Stage 4 Complete

Health: Optimal

Midnight Points: 9,730,745

Midnight Inn Level: 3

Remarks: Even hibernating bears aren't as irresponsible as you! Go take care of your guests!

A relieved smile crept onto Lex's face. As he had learnt, oh so long ago, by completing all four stages of the Regal Embrace, his tumor had been removed. He was in perfect physical and mental condition, and for the first time in a long time, Lex felt like himself again. He felt like that guy who had made video games in his spare time, like the guy who had negotiated a \$7,000,000 deal, like the guy who had graduated with honors by pulling off nothing but last-minute all-nighters.

"Mary," he called out, as he slowly sat up. He was slow, not because he needed to relearn how to control his strength. No, despite the massive increase in strength, he felt like he could control himself even better now. He got up slowly, because he was preoccupied with thoughts of how his journey had begun.

He thought back to that night when he felt so restless in his home that he went to a park in the middle of the night. He thought of the shooting star he saw. He thought of the wish he made. He thought of the first time he heard Mary's voice, and thought himself crazy.

"You're finally done," Mary appeared in front of him with a smile. She was suited up, similar to Lex, and her red hair was tied up into a neat bun. Lex remembered when they had met, she had taken on the appearance of Mary Jane, and was named after her too, but now somehow he felt like she had subtly changed.

"Yeah, I am. Finally." He smiled warmly at her, but didn't move, and didn't say anything else. After a couple of moments, Mary looked at him with a confused look.

"Is anything the matter?"

"No no, nothing's the matter. I was just thinking back on everything I've done with the Inn so far. I've been to different worlds. I've fought zombies and I've fought wolves. I've had guests from different species and different galaxies, maybe even realms. I hired some AI, got a barber, made a small lake then a big one. I hired a gardener and then hired a turtle to garden. Everything was so... so random. I guess having a tumor made it hard for me to focus on one thing for too long."

He flashed Mary a smile, who responded with a weak smile of her own. Lex's words and tone did not seem to match. The words sounded like he should be happy, but his tone sounded scrutinizing.

"But I guess life's random sometimes, huh? As random as a system falling out of the sky. A system that can transport people from across the universe, but somehow lagged and fell into me while scanning Earth."

At this point, Mary definitely understood that Lex was suspicious, and not just about the system, or else he would not have been giving her such a strange look.

"Yes, I suppose that's how it is. Life's as random as an 'augmented reality avatar provided by the Midnight Inn for my acclimation'. Those were your exact words, right? God, you talked a lot like a robot back then, though that changed pretty quickly."

Mary let out a defeated sigh and said, "You can just ask what you want to ask, there's no need to be so sassy. I can't lie to you, anyway."

Lex chuckled, his previous critical demeanor gone, and he was back to his usual self. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I just felt a little dramatic. But even if I ask, I'm pretty sure I already know the answers. Something about my authority not being enough. But, let's try anyway. Who knows, maybe I have enough authority for a hint."

Now, Lex was just being cheeky and Mary looked at him with annoyance in her eyes.

"Let's get reacquainted, shall we? Where did the system come from?"

"As of right now, your authority is insufficient to know the origin of the system."

"Alright, guessed as much. Next question, are there other systems out there?"

Mary let out a defeated smile. It seemed the disappearance of the tumor had affected Lex greatly, and some things that were hidden in plain sight could no longer fool Lex.

"As of right now, your authority is insufficient to know such a question."

"Why did I get the system?"

"It was coincidental. The system lagged, and you happened to be in its path."

"Yes, yes, a system that can literally create AIs out of nothing lagged while flying over my head. I thought you said you couldn't lie."

"I cannot, this is the answer provided to me by the system."

Lex rubbed his chin as he observed Mary, trying to decide whether he believed her or not. Truthfully, he trusted her. But there was a lot of ambiguity about the system that just made him feel unsettled.

"Alright moving on. The system talks to me using 'remarks'. Does that mean the system is alive?"

"As of right now, your authority is insufficient to know such details about the system."

"Predictable, predictable. But it remains a fact that the system can talk to me, since it does so in the form of remarks. But you, Mary, are not the system itself, correct?"

"Yes, I am an assistant provided by the system to help the host."

"See now, I find it strange that the system gave me such a good helper. I can't seem to understand the purpose of the system. From the beginning, when I opened the starter pack, the system has made a point not to help me out and let me do things on my own. It did not help with my cultivation, it did not help with information about the universe, it did not give me the option to keep out hostile guests. It was complete, dumb luck that I ended up getting the Regal Embrace. It even went as far as threatening death in its first few quests, when I was at my most vulnerable and most likely to fail. With everything about the system designed to make me do stuff on my own, and give me a tough time while doing it, why would it give me such a helpful assistant? It feels... contradictory."

"If you are asking the purpose of the system, it is to host the greatest and grandest Inn in the universe, without any comparison."

"Ahan, and why is that?"

"As of right now, your authority is insufficient to know the reasoning behind the system. You know, for someone who benefited a lot from the system himself, you sure are sounding ungrateful."

Lex laughed at Mary's accusation.

"I don't mean to be ungrateful, honestly. The system is amazing, and has improved my life in a million different ways, not to mention it literally saved my life by removing a tumor I would not have even known about without the system. I just feel like things aren't as simple as I was assuming them to be."

While talking to Mary, Lex was also adjusting his emotions. When he got the system, he'd accepted such a massive change way too easily, probably under the influence of his tumor. Now that he was free to think properly, he was just processing the shock that probably should have hit him right on the first day.

"Right, last question. And you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

At this, Mary raised an eyebrow. This new and improved Lex was... way too thorough.

"Before the Midnight Games, before I even got the quest, you told me to ace the next quest. I don't think the system would let you give me hints even before it gave me a quest. So, what was that about?"