

Innkeeper 341

The Innkeeper

Chapter 341: Death Approaching

Mario felt an interesting cocktail of emotions at being so bluntly accused. At first, he felt amused and that this tavern owner was very interesting. He'd been in Babylon for so long that he had pretty much established the list of people who he should not cross, and it had fewer people than one would assume.

Then, however, he felt caution and apprehension. Lex had used some strange method to trap all the troublemakers, and Mario had not been able to sense what it was. But then his experienced mind got to work, and he calmed down, and in fact, looked at Lex in an admiring light.

The very fact that Lex was coming to question him meant that he wasn't sure if Mario was involved in the first place. Otherwise, instead of asking, he would have directly acted. Moreover, if one carefully analyzed the situation, the timing of Mario's arrival was perfectly in time to watch this little performance and it did seem too coincidental. No matter how the situation would have been resolved, it would have given Mario a deeper understanding of this mysterious young man who appeared out of nowhere.

As for the matter of whether Mario really instigated the little situation that developed at the tavern or not, it didn't matter. What mattered was that Lex thought there was a possibility he did, and was now confronting him about it.

What this told Mario was that Lex was a man of means, but he did not let his capability turn him arrogant. It was more beneficial to everyone if he directly confronted Mario and reached a resolution. This could even create room for some kind of cooperation in the future.

"It does look suspicious, I'll admit," Mario said calmly, as if he was in no hurry to explain himself. "But I think, Lex, that you are both overestimating my deviousness, and the reputation of your tavern. I had not heard of this place until my son told me about it, which was this morning. I am only here for a drink, and maybe something to eat. After all, everyone knows, we have a lot of work to do once it gets dark. This town is full of people who require our... protection."

Lex did not respond immediately, and kept looking at Mario. He was trying to decide whether or not to believe this self proclaimed 'protector'. He scanned Mario for some extra information.

Name: Mario Ricci

Age: 283

Sex: Male

Cultivation Details: Nascent mid

Species: Human

Condition: His body has accumulated a lot of injuries over the years that have not fully healed. While it is not a solution, a dip in the hot tub will improve his health

Remarks: The most valuable item on his body is his wedding ring. Such a devoted husband. And a cheapskate - not a target customer.

After reading the remark, Lex took a look at Mario's ring in passing and, almost instantly, decided on his following line of action. His wedding ring was a simple silver band, with a single, small gem infused right in the middle. It did not, in fact, seem like much if one did not pay attention to it. Yet the small, incredibly clear gem was not a diamond. It was the same crystal from which Lex absorbed so much energy.

This was an important clue for Lex on the wealth of this region, for the result of his queries for the past few days told him that there were no valuable resources in the area, and the main lines of trade in the region focused around items and treasures made by the Noel family using some secret family technique.

This did not coincide with the information Lex got from the map. That, along with the fact that such a supposedly resource rich area was under human control, told Lex that there must be something going on in the region in secret.

When he came to that conclusion, he immediately stopped asking such questions openly, lest he attract any unnecessary attention. Now, finally, on Mario's ring he'd seen his first indication of the hidden

wealth of this region. That meant that, regardless of whether Mario was involved in the current situation or not, Lex planned on letting him go. Moreover, he planned on improving relations with the man.

"You're right," Lex finally said, relaxing his stance. "The tavern probably isn't as popular yet as I imagine. So let me do something about that."

He got up from his seat and walked to the bar and, after having a short chat with Roan, came back with a round crystal glass filled with some kind of drink.

"Here, have a glass, on the house," said Lex after putting it on the table. "If you'll excuse me, I have some other matters to attend to."

With that he left, the glass on the table acting as the main attraction at this point. Mario and Elio exchanged a look. They didn't know what Lex had poured, but a thought entered both their minds. What if it was poisoned? Yet, after only a moment, Mario chuckled, and then chugged the glass.

The taste was fruity, and the drink did not have the kick that Mario usually enjoyed. It was not something he would have normally liked, but before he could even make a comment, he felt a cooling sensation spread in his body from his stomach. He couldn't tell what it was doing, but it felt pleasant.

He only nodded and signaled his son and his men to sit alongside him. Since they were already here, and had passed the hurdle of Lex's suspicion, there was no point in missing the upcoming show.

The proceeding wait ended up being much longer than expected, and it was only several hours later that a line of carriages arrived in front of the tavern. Hena and the rest remained frozen this entire time, but Lex had moved them to the middle of the hall to avoid blocking the door. After all, he had a business to run - despite what it seemed, with him constantly giving stuff away for free.

Five men dressed in the most uncomfortably formal suit Lex had ever seen walked into the room, followed closely by a mob of no doubt guards and goons. A quick scan revealed to Lex that the strongest of the group, despite the many followers, were the five men themselves, each in the Nascent realm.

When they saw the frozen Hena, as well as the rest, their expression worsened but they said nothing yet. The entire hall had fallen silent at their entrance, and all eyes had fallen on them. There was a distinct lack of fear in those gazes, which annoyed the five gentlemen, but that was a matter for later.

For now, they all focused on Lex who had been waiting for their arrival. They had their aura on full display, like wild cats raising their hair to warn their enemies. Yet Lex was not bothered in the least, for inside the tavern controlled by the system, he had the blind confidence of a billionaire.

He did not wear his usual amicable smile, and left his face with a neutral expression. Somehow, though, he looked more intimidating than the five men.

The silence continued until one of the men, a tall gentleman with a large and curly mustache, could wait no longer.

"Do you know the trouble you're inviting for yourself, young man?" he asked with a stern voice. "Do you think this is a simple matter that will just go away?"

"I definitely don't think this is a simple matter," Lex said, his voice extremely grave. He pointed at the mustached man and enveloped him in the same room that froze Hena. He then raised the finger, while at the same time controlling the room encasing the gentleman, lifting him up into the air. Then, ignoring the additional layer of shock and silence that had filled the room, he curled the finger towards himself, as if summoning the man. Naturally, he did not forget to control the room, and bring the man directly in front of himself.

The man was actually taller than Lex, but he lowered the man until they could look each other in the eyes.

"I am a simple tavern owner," Lex blatantly lied with an even tone. "We serve food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, and provide lodging to those who need a place to rest. Occasionally we provide entertainment and music, and more often than not we let our guests have a good time. A service we do not provide, however, is one where we let vermin harm the staff. Where I'm from, if a man comes into another man's home and assaults someone, it can be taken as a declaration of war. So that is why I have summoned you here today, to ask you. Shall I take this as an announcement of war?"

Even if the five men wanted to answer, at that moment, they could not, for much like the force strapping Hena, and the force holding the mustached man in front of Lex, there was a force wrapped around their necks, squeezing. In the silence that followed Lex's question, they could hear death approaching.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 342: Solving problems

The question boomed like thunder in the five men's ears, especially because they had no idea why they were so helpless. They felt no pressure of a superior spiritual sense, and the usual resonance and disturbance created by formations was lacking.

How were they supposed to know that the formation provided by the system was vastly superior to anything they had ever encountered, therefore it created no disturbance in the ambient spiritual energy.

Half the spectators got goosebumps all over their bodies when they saw the confrontation, and the other half were giving each other dirty looks and continued drinking.

Lex wasn't paying attention to that, though. He was looking the five men in the eyes. He had raised the stakes now, but it was also up to him to lower them. If he really did end up killing these people, it would create more problems for him - problems that he wanted to avoid.

"Of course the possibility remains that these kids did not come with the intention of starting a war. Maybe they are just spoiled, entitled brats." Lex paused again, and this time, instead of the men, he paid attention to everyone else's reaction to what he was saying. For this next part, how much everyone believed his words were more important than the men he was threatening. Lex had some experience with wild, crazy rumors, and now it was time for him to create some on purpose.

"Maybe they're so used to not being punished for taking advantage of 'commoners' that they never even considered it was anything wrong. Or maybe they know that, no matter what they do, they can get away with it. Speaking of which, it kind of reminds me of the serial killer roaming about."

Suddenly, even the sailors who were laughing at the noble's misfortune, froze, and then turned to Lex to listen to what he had to say. The moment they docked in this town they heard about a crazy killer on the

loose. This was not the kind of place they would want to stay, but considering the darkness, they did not have the opportunity to go elsewhere.

Mario especially paid attention, for the killer had seriously affected him - in more ways than most people realized.

"I heard that no one can catch the killer, and that no one even knows who it is. The killer, who had been killing nonstop everyday, and apparently stopped the last couple of days - maybe to honor the presence of the Noel brothers. The more I think about it, the more it sounds like a bunch of noble kids having fun killing the common folk, and then using their influence to derail before it can point to them."

Lex paused again to let his words settle in. This time he was no longer choking the 5 men, simply keeping them from speaking, but the dread they felt was the same. No matter what they did or how influential they became, they absolutely could not cross the Noel family. If word spread that they were using their authority to randomly kill people in the lands under the Noel family's protection, they would not survive!

The sailors who at this point were intoxicated, high or exhausted from work or just plain dumb, did not think for even a second deeper and accepted this new information as truth. Some were suddenly afraid of being silenced and started to leave, while others looked at the nobles with anger.

The five gentlemen never considered the common folk as a threat, for they themselves were nascent realm cultivators. While such a realm was far more common here than on a planet like Earth, it was still not something casually reached. In this entire town, besides the five of them, who were only living here temporarily due to the darkness, only the mayor and Mario were in the nascent realm.

"So which is it? Are you here for war or are you just so used to keeling over whenever you want that you never even considered that I might actually take issue with being your latest victim?"

At this point, he released the five gentlemen from his hold, allowing them the opportunity to respond. The mustached man nearly fell to his knees when the force holding him up disappeared, but he recovered quickly and took a few steps back, to join his cohorts.

The men were rubbing their neck, as if loosening their ties, and looked at Lex with newfound caution. This matter needed to be handled delicately.

"God damnit" roared Anakin as he fell to his knees, cursing the very skies, and even the Gods if they existed. He returned to the Inn just in time to hear the latest rumor: because of suspicious behavior on the part of the husband of the woman running the Lady Cosmos competition, a certain Brandon Morrison, the bikini portion of the competition had been canceled.

Then he cried, along with many other men, and even women, yet their dream would remain a dream. Even the happiness of his newfound wealth could not console him as he walked listlessly around the Inn.

He knew not where he was going, nor where he was. He only knew the name of his enemy: surname Morrison, first name Brandon.

It was amidst his mindless wanderings that he ended up in an almost entirely remote area of the Inn, save a group of three boys who sat around a circle table silently, their expressions grave.

Suddenly he felt that they too knew his pain, and that if they shared with one another the stories of their idols, maybe the pain would be lessened.

"Fret not, those who have dared to love," he said dramatically as he approached the three men. "Though our dreams have been sabotaged this time, there is always hope next year."

He looked with gleaming eyes, expecting understanding and recognition amongst his fellow men. Instead, all he received were curious stares and silence, at least until one of them said, "He's lying. He probably has no hope for next year either."

As if his heart had been pierced by an arrow, Anakin collapsed onto the ground. Indeed, his heart was cynical, and he did not believe there would be bikinis next time either.

Rafael and Larry both looked towards Noman with anger and frustration. Were it not for the rules of the Inn, they would have murdered Noman a hundred times over.

This human lie detector didn't know was pretty much an idiot, but for reasons they could not explain, he was immediately able to tell when someone around him lied. Moreover, every time he heard a lie, he would mumble as much under his breath, as if cultivators didn't have hearing sharp enough to pick up on it!

The truth had yet to be revealed, but Rafeal was completely unable to build a connection with Larry when they first met because Noman kept revealing his lies. At the same time, Larry felt frustrated because people kept trying to approach him, and Noman apparently knew more than he revealed, but only pointed out when others lied. In fact, even when Larry casually lied, Noman picked it up.

Larry and Rafael both had secrets that could not be revealed to the world, and they needed to know how much Noman knew. But he never admitted to anything, yet kept pointing out lies.

It was frustrating the hell out of them. It actually came to the point that the two of them, despite not knowing each other much, felt a sense of camaraderie in their hate for Noman.

"Alright, alright. I can see you all are having an important meeting and don't care about Lady Cosmos," said Anakin. "I'll get out of your way and let you continue. After all, I'm just an ordinary, completely average person. It's all the same no matter where I go."

Before Anakin could even turn around, however, he heard the same boy mumble, "he's lying."

The wary Larry and Rafael suddenly looked towards Anakin, who was also looking suspiciously at Noman.

Why did the situation keep getting worse?

"Hey hey, what do you mean, I'm lying? You're lying! Your mother is lying! I never lie!"

"He's lying again," he mumbled, before speaking out loud, "hey there's no need to bring my mother into this, although she did indeed lie a lot."

Instead of getting annoyed or frustrated, the way the other two did, Anakin stared at Nomaan for a moment before he got a brilliant idea.

"The sky is green," he said.

"He's lying," Noman mumbled.

"My name is James Pot."

"He's lying."

"I have an excellent business idea."

"He's actually telling the truth. I wonder what it is."

Anakin grinned and patted Noman on the back.

"My friend, you and I are going to make a lot of money together."

Anakin tried to lead Noman away, but Larry and Rafael immediately stopped him.

"Not so fast there buddy. He's not going anywhere until we solve our... situation."

The extremely perceptive Anakin immediately guessed the intricacies between what happened with the three of them. With Noman's disposition, he was bound to create problems if left unmonitored. A part of him wondered how Noman had survived so long outside the Inn. All of that was for later. For now...

"Why of course, first come first serve. Let me introduce myself. My name is Anakin Indiana McClane, and in the field of solving problems, I am a master."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 343: Reparations

"I believe there has been a misunderstanding," one of the men said, taking off his top hat. "Perhaps we could discuss this matter privately."

Of the five men, this one showed the most composure and was likely the leader of the group. Lex simply nodded and led them to one of his two private rooms on the ground floor. So long as they were in the tavern, he did not mind wherever they talked. But, at the same time, he could not let them know that his confidence was limited to the tavern.

While Lex himself maintained a psychological advantage, in the few short moments it took them to enter the room, the rest of the men also regained their composure. They were not inexperienced, nor did they share their children's spoilt and skewed world views. If they lacked aplomb, then they simply would not have made it this far in life.

The only reason their mindset was disturbed earlier on in the first place was because they were facing something new and unexpected. Lex compared their mindsets to the original 5 Nascent cultivators who ruled Earth. Other than Brandon, whose mental state could not be gauged using normal means, the rest were severely lacking.

"I believe we have not yet been introduced," said the leader, his voice calm and dignified. "My name is Reginald Maud, head of the Shipwrights Association, owner of most of the shipyards in the locale and founder of the Naval Research and Engineering facility."

The rest also introduced themselves, one by one, as well as their occupations. They truly did have the right to be arrogant, for the industries under their command were both numerous and expansive. From construction to agriculture to medicine and more, every facet of a normal people's life in Babylon was directly or indirectly controlled by these men. Moreover, they did not fail to imply that they were not the only nobles in the area, just the nobles close to Babylon when the darkness arrived, causing them to take shelter here.

Based on how one viewed it, their statement could be taken as a threat. Lex, however, was of the mind that he could use these 5 nobles to gain access to the rest. This was important to his plans, for while the Inn was one way of gathering energy, he did not want to give up what he established in the Crystal realm either.

He could use them to gain a deeper understanding of the region and develop a network of his own. There were many uses he could think of off the top of his head.

"I am Lex, the owner of the Midnight Tavern," he said simply. In this situation, a mysterious background was to his advantage.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lex. It is very unfortunate that our meeting was under such troubled circumstances, but I assure you that the intentions behind the 'incident' were not so nefarious as they appear. It is with great dismay that I must confess that our children are somewhat... unaccustomed to the ways of the world. But, at the end of the day, they are still just children, so it is not too late to educate them on proper decorum. I'm sure that between us, we can work something out to put this matter behind us, and look forward to a better working relationship."

Lex did not respond immediately, and spent some time evaluating Reginald. The man was definitely formidable. Not everyone who achieved great success could so quickly adapt to being threatened, and even look for a way to resolve the situation without getting even for the threat.

Naturally, there was still the possibility that Reginald was waiting till they saved the kids before plotting some revenge, but Lex didn't think it was likely. There was nothing to gain, and a lot to risk by further offending Lex. A business minded man like Reginald would not do something that offered him no profit while leveraging his safety and stability.

"If it really was just a simple mistake, and you are sincere in your attempt to make amends, then I see a simple solution that will satisfy everyone," said Lex slowly, as if testing them out. "You see, I have only recently opened this tavern, and am sorely understaffed. You, on the other hand, need your children to expand their worldviews, while at the same time disciplining them. This presents an opportunity for both of us. Everyone who was involved can come and work at my tavern for one week. The principal offender, of course, needs to be punished more than the rest, so he can work here for a month. This can both be a humbling experience for them, as well as reparations for their misbehavior. If you find this agreeable, they can start tomorrow."

On the surface it seemed like Lex was letting the kids get away with a mild punishment as a favor to the five gentlemen, but in truth, by increasing the amount of contact they had, Lex was hoping to develop a deeper relationship. At the same time, by letting the kids return once, he showed them that he was not afraid of them reneging on the deal, thus making it seem that Lex's confidence was inherent, and had nothing to do with the tavern itself.

During this time, Lex would also let the kids 'accidentally' witness some of the more profound aspects of the tavern for them to report to their parents, further increasing the mystery behind Lex.

Reginald did not delay, and immediately accepted Lex's offer. Lex unfroze the kids, allowing their parents to take them back home. This would give them time to recover and give the parents an opportunity to properly interview them about what actually happened.

The serial killer licked the blood off his blade, relishing in the excitement of his latest kill. The darkness made it easier for him to perform his deeds in secret, but it would also speed up the decaying process. Soon people would discover the odd smell coming from the houses in this area, so he would have to find a new hunting ground.

Maybe he should make use of the dark and attempt a more difficult hunt. He chuckled as he walked out of the house, wondering where to go next. He was already bored of the poverty stricken portions of Babylon. Next, he would see if the rich bled differently from the poor.

Midnight Inn, The Village

Miranda took in a deep breath as she looked through the curtains at the massive crowd in the auditorium. The turn out was good, but she didn't know if the results would be satisfactory either. The Earth Expo would last a month, and if they could get some solid backing or funding from some interstellar source, it would greatly speed up Earth's development.

The number of cultivators had grown exponentially lately, but even with the new Minor realm open, they could not hope to meet the demand for resources. Moreover, the Minor realm would only remain open for another 6 months, after which they would have to be self-sufficient. Colonizing the rest of the planets in the solar system would greatly help in this endeavor. For that, though, they need better technology and resources.

"Are you nervous?" asked Bernard, who stood behind her. He was one of the leaders of the Council of New Order, and was one of the main instigators behind deposing the previous five heads of the world.

"I just hope we have something to offer. The more time I spend at the Inn, the more I realize how insignificant Earth really is."

"So insignificant that a single beauty pageant from Earth has several planets completely hooked," he said in an amused voice. Bernard had a unique way of always finding opportunities in even the more dire circumstances. He was the one who kept the council from collapsing when the holographic woman Fernanda appeared, and the one who gained permission for this event from Fernando in the first place.

"Do not fret," he said, his voice as calm as ever. "We have overcome many challenges, and will continue to do so. Our destiny cannot be contained by Earth. It is simply the launching pad for our stories. Next, we will find a way to repair your meridians, and then you can start to cultivate once again. With your lifespan expanded, you won't need to worry about the speed of our progress. We will have all the time in the universe."

Hope and excitement flickered in her eyes, but she did not let it show on her face. When Miranda had work to do, she could not let anything else distract her. Currently, she had an Expo to begin, and then only a month to secure everything they needed.

Suppressing her excitement, as well as her nervousness, she walked through the curtain and onto the center stage. The opening ceremony for the first ever interstellar Earth Expo had begun.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 344: Pvarti Party

Lex thought his problems would be over once the noblemen and their children left. But a new, unexpected problem cropped up.

Big Ben, the newly engaged man who had spent the last few days sleeping, finally woke up. He was healthier and more energetic than he had ever been in his life, but he did not celebrate his newfound health for long. It did not take long for him to find out the crew he previously worked with had been disbanded, and since he was asleep at the time, he was not amongst the few who were immediately taken into employment by his previous captain's debtors.

This was technically not Lex's problem, but he felt guilty for putting Big Ben in that state. Moreover, he was looking for workers, anyway. So he ended up hiring the big guy as his security.

Big Ben seemed quite sociable and knew almost everyone who visited the tavern by name. While this was not a trait that made him intimidating, like Lex had imagined for his bouncer, sometimes this would work out even better. Besides, who said Lex was limited to a single guard? He could hire more if he found someone suitable.

The one extremely important rule for his employment was that he couldn't drink while working. It was not Big Ben's fault, but in Lex's mind, he'd developed a reputation for knocking himself out a lot.

The rest of the day passed calmly, and due to the darkness, Lex had Big Ben walk the triplets home. They insisted that they didn't need the escort, but Lex didn't change his mind.

That night, Lex spent another few hours practicing arrays in the meditation room before eventually taking a break to watch some Lady Cosmos.

It was the top 30 now and Lex was fairly surprised to find a familiar face amongst them. It was Alissa Harmony, the youtuber who had won the Midnight Games. She was the only remaining contestant from Earth and had the backing of the entire planet. The remaining contestants weren't any weaker in terms of support, either.

One in particular, Lex noticed, seemed to get a lot of support from the Midnight Inn staff members. Her name was Hailey, and her charm seemed to have infected quite a few. Well, Lex couldn't exactly say he didn't understand the appeal of a beautiful woman with wings. As someone who had watched a lot of anime, he knew that she may have even stolen some supporters from Earth.

He asked Mary and learnt that the Inns barber, Harry Styles, had developed a relationship with her. They had left many things unsaid, and had not made anything official, as for now, both of them were completely focused on the competition. Regardless, all the staff from the Midnight Inn silently supported the duo. In fact, they had to be extra careful about supporting her silently, because if word spread that the Inn's staff had a favorite, it might influence others.

Lex was at first surprised when he heard the news. Then he sighed. It seemed more and more couples would be coming to the Inn, while he had more or less firmly cemented his position as forever alone. He

briefly recalled his last girlfriend, who also happened to be his first girlfriend. He was not madly in love with her or anything, nor did he miss her, but watching his staff start dating while the noble Innkeeper himself remained single...

Egh. Lex ruffled his hair and quickly shook off such thoughts. After that, Lex totally did not go to the bar and pour himself a drink. It was even more impossible that he directly chugged the bottle and quickly threw himself in bed, leaving the poured glass on the countertop. It was simply false if one were to say that the following night Lex suffered from countless nightmares.

In the morning, for reasons completely unrelated to anything that had happened the prior day, Lex had a ridiculous headache. Fortunately, he had the perfect solution.

He took a dip in the hot tub and allowed himself to relax while he scanned the Inn. Either consciously or unconsciously, he avoided the Lady Cosmos competition in his scan.

Eventually, his curiosity landed on his new workers for the greenhouse, the rabbits. He scanned a random one to see what he could learn.

Name: Maradona Leopold Agnieszka

Age: 0

Sex: Male

Cultivation Details: Qi training

Species: Nibiruian Rabbits

Bloodline: Wild Root Ravager

Condition: A newborn rabbit that was born at the Inn. It is a pure creature born without malice, but should malice enter its heart, its bloodline will mutate.

Remarks: Prepare yourself for a rabbit infestation.

Lex told Mary to inquire about the details of the bloodline and let him know what was special about it. If it had attracted the turtles attention, then it probably was pretty good.

Done with that, he went to the main hall. It was still dark out, which meant that besides the sailors who were living at the tavern, no one else had come. Even they had limited what they ordered, and only stuck to ordering meals, for no one knew how long they would have to live in the dark.

Lex didn't mind though, for the margins on his more common drinks and food were so ridiculously low that it effectively made no real contribution towards his total MP. It was just enough to break even and pay all his employees.

The real source of income for the tavern would be the more exotic drinks, and when he could occasionally let guests into the backyard. Unfortunately, as much as he wanted to let people into the backyard randomly, the services were not cheap and could not be afforded by everyone.

It was while Lex was ruminating on the tavern's finances that the main hall door opened, revealing Lex's latest workers. With Hena in the lead, all the troublemakers from yesterday walked in one by one.

The clothes they wore were very simple, with no frills or patterns of any kind, though the fabric was still the best. Still, you could tell how self-conscious they all were with their tiny, uncertain steps and the way they dared to only look down, and refused to examine the room. It was already a large contrast from yesterday.

Lex, however, did not take too long to observe them, and completely treated them like actual new employees.

"So tell me, what kind of experience do you have so that I can assign you the appropriate tasks? I take it that none of you know how to cook, am I right? What about scrubbing? Has anyone scrubbed the floor before?"

With a weak, almost inaudible sigh, Pvarti stepped out of the Noel manor. There was no carriage for him to take, nor were there any servants following him this time around. His father's reaction could have been said to be mild this time around, for there was no screaming, yelling, or throwing him to join the armies to fight off the abominations of the dark.

At the same time, it could be said to be extremely severe. All he said was that Pvarti was a man now, and obviously had his own thoughts on how he should live his life. As such, he should no longer burden himself with the responsibilities and expectations that came with the Noel name.

His family name was stripped from him, and he was made to leave with nothing but the clothes on his back. The only glimmer of hope he was given to return was that if he made some exceptional contributions to the family, he would be allowed to appeal his expulsion.

Such a punishment was already severe enough, but out in the dark, he would be exposed to the harshest evils that the Crystal realm had until he found the refuge of another settlement. But one should not assume that the manor was nearby to other towns, based on how quickly they arrived from Babylon. Not only was the carriage special, so was the beast pulling it.

To make matters worse, Pvarti didn't really know the way to any of the nearby towns either. After all, he always traveled by carriage, so why would he need to learn the routes?

The pale man chuckled to himself as he started walking. In the manor, his brother, sister and mother watched him walk out of sight. As much as they wanted to protest, they could not. Pvarti truly had been too willful this time around, and it was not just a matter of honor or disgrace anymore. The family his former fiance was from was too formidable. If they didn't satisfy them by punishing Pvarti sufficiently, then the entire Noel family would be threatened.

Pvarti, who somewhat expected a harsh outcome, quickly regained his energy for a few minutes. He forced himself to smile and said loudly, "from now on, my name is Pvarti Party."

After a few moments, he groaned, and gave up that idea. He had to think of a better name.

"I need a drink," he said, as his hand pierced through the head of a creature beginning to take form from mist.

Suddenly he recalled the tavern he had recently visited, and decided to go there. There was just one problem. He recalled neither the name of the tavern, or the town it was in. This would take a while.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 345: More guests

There was an awkward silence in the hall, following Lex's questions. Well, this much was to be expected. He more or less knew that these noble born kids who had been spoiled rotten would have never even perceived that they would ever need to do such things.

However, what Lex didn't know was that he still overestimated them. Let alone have experience in them, this was the first time they had ever heard of such chores? Scrub the floor? Clean windows? Wash... dirty dishes? Were these things that actually had to be done?

"I have a lot of experience overseeing groceries. I can help with that," said one of them weakly. Only he knew that the extent of his experience was borrowing from his father's warehouses without showing any discrepancies. Unfortunately for him, that was one of the departments that the system handled for Lex, and since he had more or less given up pretending to be ordinary, he did not need to put up that front.

"I... I've hosted a few orchestras. I can probably arrange good entertainment," said another.

"I can probably source excellent wine."

"I can..."

"I have..."

"I..."

Once they started, they went on a roll, but almost all of their experiences were utterly useless to Lex. In the end, Lex decided to give them the absolutely most basic jobs, making it more difficult for them to mess up.

"Stop, all of you, just stop," Lex said, hushing their attempts to list their 'skills and experience'. "I'll give you all simple tasks, but I doubt you'll be able to master them, so we will treat today as training. Training days won't count towards your week long punishment, so I suggest you pick up your tasks as soon as possible."

All of them, except the one who knew an orchestra, and the original offender who assaulted Nini, were tasked with various cleaning duties, from cleaning rooms, taking out trash, making the bed, clearing the kitchen, washing dishes, and more. The triplets and Rick were tasked with teaching them and overseeing their duty.

He had to say, he was actually quite satisfied with how hard the girls worked, and was actually planning on increasing their salary right from the beginning. Currently, they were each being paid 1 silver coin each for a week's work, and he planned on doubling it.

As for the two remaining miscreants, Lex was actually quite interested in arranging a musician to visit the tavern regularly, so he tasked the one who arranged orchestras to find him a musician willing to play at his tavern. Lex would then see how well the musician performed. As for the guy who tried assaulting Nini, Lex had him scrubbing the main hall floor - with nothing but a towel rag. That would be his only duty for the entire week, and Lex had no intentions of letting him take breaks or clean half heartedly.

Besides that, today Betty, Big Ben's wife, would be in charge of the cooking. She applied for the position when Big Ben was hired here, and Lex said that he would decide based on her performance. A few others were also scheduled to come today to interview for various positions. It would be a full day.

Although it was not cold, Anakin folded his cashmere scarf - one of the times he stole - inside his velvet coat and buttoned up. He picked the gold embossed smoking pipe from his mouth and blew out some smoke into the wind. With his free hand, he reached into his coat pocket and lifted the jewel encrusted pocket watch and checked the time.

His latest business associates were late, and he could not really tell by how much because his pocket watch had no batteries in it, which annoyed him. He slid the watch back in his pocket, put the pipe back in his mouth and continued to smoke.

He did not mind his associates being late, for the Lady Cosmos competition was on break. The contestants needed to replenish their strength and be completely rejuvenated for the last portion of the event. Therefore, he really had nothing else to do.

It was not his intention, but circumstances forced him to relax in decadent luxury.

He did not have to wait much longer though, as the three men he was waiting for quickly entered his sight. To be specific, they didn't really agree to work with him, but he told them where to find him when they could not figure out a solution on their own.

Eventually, despite their reluctance, they ended up coming here. To be clear, Noman had no issue he wanted to resolve, but no one else dared let him roam free and unsupervised. After all, if he truly knew their secrets, or at least some of them, they would have too much to lose. He was, however, mildly interested in the business opportunity Anakin mentioned, for he wasn't lying when he said it.

"Gentlemen, I see you finally decided to avail my services," Anakin said in an extremely practiced manner. "Before I tell you the solution to your problems, and guide you through them, I have prepared a small contract. I believe we'll be able to enact it through the Guild room. You can read it at your leisure. It's just the basics, really. I'll accept a 1000 MP payment from each of you, up front, and you'll share any expenses incurred during the resolution process on my behalf."

The three men glared at him angrily, but Anakin was immune to any such looks. He was a self-made man, so even when he gained a lot of wealth, he kept an eye out for more opportunities.

"What assurance do we have that you'll actually resolve the problem?" asked Rafael. "Moreover, how will you ensure that this one never interferes with my business again?" He asked, pointing towards Noman. "Even if the problem is resolved now, if he keeps going around spouting nonsense around me, it'll affect my business."

"For the resolution, you have no choice but to trust me. As for future encounters, I believe Mr. Butt and I will be business partners in the near future, so you won't need to worry. I'll make sure he no longer shares his gift with anyone for free."

The rest grumbled but, eventually, gave in and signed the contract. Pleased with the small fortune he just made for himself, Anakin took a moment to dwell in his accomplishment, before he became serious.

He had the trio follow him until he brought them to a building at the Inn they'd never seen before.

"Gentlemen, the building behind me is like none other. It is an exclusive feature of the Midnight Inn and is known as the Chamber of Secrets. Within it, you can deposit any knowledge you have to store, effectively removing it from your brain. Moreover, at the time of the deposit, you can set the required conditions to reclaim the secrets.

"So, to resolve your situation, you can openly ask each other any questions you need to relieve your concerns. Once you're convinced, everyone in the know can go into the chamber and directly deposit all sensitive information related to each other, with the condition that it cannot be retrieved unless all three of you agree. Naturally, you can skip the sharing process and directly go and deposit the secrets, but where's the fun in that?"

For a moment, everyone was dumbstruck. Did they just pay 1000MP... to learn about something they could have found out for free? No wonder there was a no refund clause in the contract.

Lex was in the kitchen trying the soup Betty made, which was really very good, when a sudden ruckus from the main hall attracted his attention. There were multiple voices yelling and a woman screaming desperately above them all. Lex's heart dropped, and he suddenly thought of the serial killer on the loose.

He bolted to the hall, ready for a fight, but the sight that awaited him was not of a murder, but of a family with many small children.

The mother, who had a baby strapped to her chest and was holding several bags, kept the main door open using her body while four prepubescent children ran in the hall. A couple of older kids, teenagers seemingly, trudged in as well, over encumbered with bags and boxes, barely able to see where they were going.

Outside, there were a series of carriages and more families disembarking. There were numerous kids, the source of most of the yelling, and several mothers as well, trying to reign in the kids.

"Excuse me," a man yelled over the noise, finally attracting Lex's attention. The man looked battle weary, though maybe that was just the result of the many kids.

"Do you have any rooms available? If you do, we'll take them all. We got lost in the darkness and barely made it to town. Most of the other places we've run across so far are full up, with everyone waiting for the darkness to pass. If you can fit us all in, I'll pay extra."

Before Lex could reply to the man, one of the kids ran headfirst into the bar and started crying, attracting the man's attention. Then another one puked.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 346: Day care

Lex had seen the hell of battle, but this was a kind of anarchy he had never beheld. If only things had ended with one kid crying and one vomiting, it would not have been so bad. But, as if inspired by the first child, every kid in the vicinity started crying. Some kids who were still outside, and had not yet entered the tavern, also began to cry.

But the crying was independent of running, as they continued to do both actions separately. Even the kids who vomited started crying and running, leaving tracks behind him.

"George, make them stop," yelled a woman from outside.

"I'm trying," responded the man who had been talking to Lex. But between checking up on one kid's wound and tapping another on the back, trying to calm them down, he was incapable of reaching the one, leaving a trail across the hall.

The teenagers ran after that one kid, but he seemed adept at dodging, and navigated the hall like a battlefield, narrowly avoiding capture.

But all was not lost, for in the moment right before the mother collapsed, like angels sent from the heavens for salvation, the triplets swept in. With a practiced hand, Naki grabbed the evasion expert directly by the ear, though she did not pull, and only used it as a threat to hold him in place. Nami used a napkin to cover the wounded child's bleeding nose, and started complimenting him on his bravery. Nani rubbed her cold hand across a crying child's neck and massaged him. The cold hand grasped the child's attention, and the massage soothed it.

Showing the prowess of sisters with many siblings, they pacified the hurricane into a gentle wind.

"We only have two rooms remaining," Lex informed the weary man.

Before even responding to Lex, he looked towards the exit and yelled, "Two families disembark! The rest, keep searching."

He waited a moment for confirmation, before he turned towards Lex and began listing his requirements.

"We're going to need mattresses in both rooms, and extra blankets and pillows. Also a hot shower if you have it, and food, for 16 people. Also, if you can send someone for a doctor, some of us have injuries. Also, if you have someone to carry the luggage. Also, we'll take the food in our rooms. Also, can you send someone for the news? We've been in the wilderness for too long."

The man paused, as if to question if he had forgotten anything, and then asked, "oh yeah, how much for the rooms?"

"1 MP per night," Lex responded, taking the man by surprise.

"That's a little expensive for a tavern, isn't it? You taking advantage of the fact that it's dark out? You know, that's illegal. If I report you, you can get in trouble."

"That's the price, whether it's light out or dark. Our prices are fixed, they never change."

The man was skeptical, but he couldn't take the risk of losing these rooms, so he simply accepted it.

Lex had his latest workers, the miscreants who were causing trouble at the tavern, to carry all the bags up to the last two remaining rooms, which happened to be on the highest floor. Betty began preparing meals for the new families, and Lex sent out Rick to find a doctor, as well as Roland to bring the latest news.

Lex himself temporarily retired to his own room during this because he had something indescribably important to do.

"Mary, we need to start a daycare service," Lex said very gravely.

"What?" she asked, confused. She had been preoccupied with other things, and it took her a moment to absorb what Lex said.

"A daycare service? Why?"

"Just trust me on this," he said, as he recalled the look in the eyes of the parents he just saw. "This is imperative, and will take priority for now. I want the entire planning team to come together and design a place for kids. Design it keeping various age ranges in mind, and provide a large range of activities.

"In fact, I want you to work with them as well. You're familiar with my authority and all that I can do now, so take full advantage of it while designing it. Make it so that not only are we taking care of the kids, we're helping them in some way too.

"It's fine if you have to design different areas for different races, but I want it to be great. We can even use some of those rabbits working at the greenhouse as caretakers, they seem friendly enough.

"Give me an update when you've made some progress."

"Sure," she replied, still confused about how Lex was behaving.

Only after she gave an affirmative response did Lex allow himself to relax. Yes, the tavern really was a good idea. It was giving him new perspectives already, and would be good exposure for him on the finer details of hospitality.

He thought about returning to the hall, but he trembled, and decided to cultivate instead. Recently, he had discovered a new way to cultivate that would speed up the process.

Back when he was in Qi training, he rubbed a special oil all over his body to help with cultivation. For the foundation realm, he came up with a method on his own.

He went to the bathroom attached to the room he made for himself and approached the bathtub. He summoned a bottle of expensive chilled tea, and began pouring it in the tub. A single bottle was 150 MP, a skyhigh price for the average Foundation realm cultivator.

It was, however, worth it because this tea was very rich in spiritual energy which was extremely easy to absorb. As a true path cultivator, Lex's requirements for energy were much higher, so the benefit from drinking it wasn't so obvious. So he planned on submerging himself in it, and then cultivating. Theoretically, it should boost his cultivation speed.

He had to spend nearly 23,000 MP before he filled the bathtub completely. Lex quickly stripped before submerging himself, as if the tea warmed up it would lose much of its effects.

He closed his eyes and began cultivating. Hopefully this would work, or else he'd have to use even more expensive stuff.

The town of Babylon, like many other towns and cities, had a very extensive formation in place to light it up whenever the darkness fell. Maintaining and protecting this formation was extremely important, as it was linked to the very survival of the town. After all, periods of darkness could last anywhere from a few days to weeks, months or even, sometimes, years.

The formation lit up not only the boundary wall, as well as the lighthouse near the harbor, but every street, building and any other area within the town. It was so extensive, that, functionally speaking, the town was just as well lit during the dark as it was when there was light.

Only looking up into the empty sky would remind them that it was still dark, and dangers were all about. Such thorough preparations were absolutely essential, though, for the town's survival. While it was filled with cultivators, if they had to rely on themselves, the town would be able to survive at most one week before enemies became too powerful.

That wasn't to say the town would be completely destroyed after that, but a majority of the people who were weak, relatively speaking, would most likely die.

This deadline was something that had been tried and tested over thousands of years, so everyone was familiar with it. Now, it had already been a few days since darkness fell, and it was approaching a week. The longer this went on, the more severe and serious the protection and surveillance on the formation there would be.

But even the strongest protection was only as strong as its weakest part. The serial killer, who was sitting on top of a pile of corpses, was reading a document that described in detail the light formation, and all the important parts of it that needed extra protection.

It was only natural that one of his victims should have such a document, for he was the deputy head of the constables in Babylon. He had been relentless in his search for the killer, so the killer decided to pay him a house call.

This time, though, he had killed using poison. He had no other choice, as the targets this time were too strong for him to confront head on. The fact that he was able to get his hands on poison strong enough to deal with the deputy spoke of his resourcefulness.

But while he filled his kill quota for the day, being unable to cut living flesh or taste the blood of his prey left him unsatisfied. After all, he was crazy, but not stupid. He wouldn't drink poisoned blood.

But his lust for blood had not been quenched, and that put him in an irritable mood. But that was okay, for this document had given him a new idea. He was really enjoying this darkness, and he wanted more of it.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 347: Waves of pleasure

It was well into the night when Lex finished his cultivation session. His body felt slightly bloated, but that was excusable when one considered that he had basically absorbed a tub worth of tea into his body. Or, more specifically, he had absorbed the energy contained within that tea into his body.

The sense of bloating was both good and bad. It was good because it basically meant that Lex' estimate about using this particular tea was accurate, and all he needed to do was slightly reduce the amount of tea he used the next time.

It was bad because cultivation was not a mindless process of absorbing energy. Each and every realm served a specific purpose, and cultivating within that realm had to adhere to the logic upon which that purpose was dictated. Qi training, for example, strengthened the body by absorbing Qi, and prepared it to be able to absorb a stream of spiritual energy rather than individual strands of it. The Foundation realm absorbed spiritual energy and, instead of strengthening the body, fused with it.

The fusion process of spiritual energy with the cultivator's body was roughly divided into three different realms, which made the beginning, middle and late stage of the Foundation realm.

The first stage was fusing spiritual energy in all the muscles, tissue, blood, fat and other, relatively simpler parts of the body. The middle stage was fusing energy with the bones, and the final was fusing with all the organs.

In essence, it was as simple as that. There was no higher or deeper meaning to it at all. At least, that was the case if your only purpose was to simply advance your base cultivation. As Lex had taken some courses teaching the basics of cultivation, he had a deeper understanding of it than what the Regal Embrace informed him of. After all, that was only a cultivation technique, and would not contain the deeper, more sophisticated intricacies of cultivation.

A very simple explanation of this was that the process described previously only entailed the changes that took place in spiritual cultivation, and not in body and soul cultivation, as well as in the true path. Moreover, from the Foundation realm onwards, cultivation began to be influenced by the sentience of the being cultivating.

The explanation of cultivation was beginning to get abstract, and would continue to get even more complex with each successive realm so comprehending exactly what it entailed correctly was very important.

Simply stated, the purpose of the Foundation realm was to build a foundation for the cultivator to be able to achieve higher realms of cultivation. By having the body fuse with spirit energy, it used the body itself as a foundation for a higher, more concentrated energy used during higher realms.

Similarly, in body cultivation, it strengthened the vitality of the body itself to be able to accommodate a body that would be drastically stronger, maybe even larger, and much more complex.

For the soul, it was even simpler, making it stronger in every sense, lessening its dependence on the body, and allowing the cultivator to tap into more soul energy.

The true path achieved all of these in a more comprehensive and unified manner, ensuring that the changes all complemented one another.

But that left the question of what role sentience played in all this. In theory and in practice, this was all that was needed for a human to raise his or her cultivation. If that was the case, and the act of cultivation was so simple as to simply follow a set pattern of actions to achieve ascendance, then surely sentience didn't matter at all.

In fact, one could use various technologies or techniques to put an unlimited number of humans into suspended animation, and then have their bodies perform the required actions. That way, it would be like going to sleep, and when you wake up, your cultivation would be much higher, without requiring you to put in any effort.

Not only was this something many scientists had theorized, many organizations had put it into practice. Even the Raskals that attacked the Inn had gone through a similar process to some extent.

But while on paper, this achieved results, the end product would always be cultivators who would always be the weakest within their own realm. No amount of resources would ever make them apex predators within the same realm. They would only be good for hunting lower level enemies.

This was precisely because, from the Foundation realm onwards, it was not just the cultivation technique that determined your strength, but you as a person. While the cultivation technique established the foundation for higher realms, the cultivator himself had to set the foundation for what kind of cultivator he or she wanted to be.

What exactly that meant was something Lex had not been taught. All he was told was that it touched upon certain traits of cultivation that were best he did not dwell on for now. He had, however, been guided on how he could develop his foundation as a cultivator. It was fairly simple.

It was to select one, or a few fields which interested him and spend considerable time on it until he achieved what he considered decent progress. There was no metric for this other than his own self evaluation. For example, a painter could paint, a writer could write, a marksman could practice his aim, a fighter could refine his technique, and so on.

For himself, predictably, Lex had chosen to practice arrays.

Anyway, Lex's thoughts had gone on a tangent. In summary, the reason why feeling bloated was not good was that he could not force his foundation to form. It had to be a natural process, and any excessive pressure could end up having the opposite effects.

Lex took a warm shower once he was done, and decided to check up on the Inn and tavern. To his surprise, despite the late hour, there were still a few people sitting in the hall. Specifically, it was all the adults from the 2 families that had moved in today. They were not talking, or eating, or even drinking. They were simply sitting in silence, allowing their weary bodies and minds to slowly recover.

It was not just the kids that had caused them endless exertion, and drove them to the edge of sanity. It was the few days they spent in the darkness. Were it not for the fact that they had roads to follow, they would have never found a way to any town. During that time they could not rest for even a moment, as they had to protect the carriages. Their families as well as the beasts pulling the carriages.

Moreover, they were all in the Foundation realm, so they weren't exceptionally strong either. They were just a group of families who had timed their vacation poorly.

Upon observing their exhausted faces, a sense of pity filled Lex's heart. He decided instantly to welcome his first guests into the tavern's backyard.

Silently, and without attracting any attention, a new door appeared in one of the walls of the hall, very close to where the families sat.

At first, nothing happened, for no one noticed anything at all. But, after a few minutes, the man who had previously talked to Lex, George, noticed something amiss. He looked beside him and saw a door he hadn't noticed before.

For a moment he was confused, for he didn't recall there being a door here. But he attributed it to him being too tired or distracted to notice. But then, his wife saw him staring to the side and took a look as well.

"Was this always here?" she asked as soon as the thought occurred in her head, bringing everyone's attention to it.

"I... don't remember... but it must have been, right?" replied George.

"I wasn't paying attention. I'm still reeling from that medicine the doctor gave me. My stomach is still burning."

"I don't recall it, but then again, I wasn't paying attention."

The conversation repeated itself a few times before George's wife stood up, deciding to sate her curiosity.

"Don't," said George. "What if it's someone's room?"

"I'll apologize," she replied offhandedly, and opened the door. What she saw caused her to tremble and weaken in the knees.

A small, cozy wooden room with a couple of changing sectionals on the side appeared before her eyes. But what really caught her attention was the hot tub right in the center. Steamy mist was floating up the bubbling water, inviting her in to rest her weary bones, while a relaxing, soothing scent oozed out the door.

The darkness had brought with it cold as well, but just the warm gush of wind that escaped the door seemed to drive the cold right out of his body.

Mesmerized, she forgot to inform George. She even forgot to change her clothes. Before she knew what she was doing, she dipped herself in and a long, deep moan escaped her lips.

She closed her eyes and rested her head on the edge of the tub. What husband? What kids? Right now, she forgot all of it and simply savored the waves of pleasure, washing through her body.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 348: Sharing secrets

"Honey?" George called out, confused. From his angle, he couldn't see into the room very well, so all he knew was that she simply entered the room with a look of reverence. He exchanged looks with the other couple, who were just as confused.

Synchronously, they got up and walked towards the door, intrigued, and the moment they smelled the scent wafting through, they entered a trance almost. Their tired bodies, aching muscles, exhausted mind all gave in at the same time, and surrendered to the pleasant aroma.

When they arrived, they didn't go through the same surprise as George's wife, mainly because they were already hooked. They did not notice at all when the door closed on its own behind them, and the entrance from the hall mysteriously vanished.

Absentmindedly, they approached the hot tub, and all got in, one by one, all forgetting to remove their clothes.

A collective groan could be heard as they all got in, and the hot, healing water began working on their injured bodies. The two families could not be blamed for their state. They had just exited an incredibly high stress period, so not only were they high strung, but their bodies had undergone exertion they were completely not used to.

The only reason the situation was not worse, and they had suffered no fatalities, was because the foul creatures formed early in the darkness were weak - relatively speaking.

Moreover, this was no ordinary hot tub. How could it be, when this was one of the services offered by the system?

The hot tub was not a replacement for the recovery room or recovery pod, but it would definitely help the body relax and speed up its natural recovery. Moreover, the waters were mixed with healing and soothing concoctions that not only helped the body, but the spirit as well.

The waves of pleasure that were washing over them was actually all the knots in their muscles being untied, and their bodies rapidly recovering. While this would not drastically help them recover, for example, it won't fix broken bones, but it would bring the body into the optimal state to recover on its own.

As if that wasn't enough, small dark waste started washing out of their pores, instantly evaporating under the waters purifying effects. While it could not perform the process thoroughly, the hot tub could purify the toxins they had accumulated in their bodies throughout their life. Once they were done, not only would their health improve, so would their cultivation.

For one hour, the two families sat in the water in silence, letting their bodies be nourished by the magic waters. They reached a point, however, when they all suddenly felt that whatever process had been happening was complete, and staying in the water any longer would no longer help them.

It was a subconscious thought, and they could not source where it had originated from, but they all had it at the same time.

One by one, they exited the hot tub and took short, wobbly steps towards the door. Their wet clothes dried in a few steps, the water evaporating magically, as if it could not exist too far from the hot tub.

When they exited the room, both the couples somehow exited into their respective rooms. It was magical, but for some reason, at the moment, none of them questioned it. The gentle aroma of the hot tub room seeped into their bed rooms, relaxing the numerous kids sleeping on mattresses, and pushing them into a deeper sleep.

The parents, once again without changing, climbed into bed - amongst the youngest of their children, and fell asleep instantly. It was a deep and dreamless sleep, letting their mind and body recover.

The hot tub room disappeared as magically as it appeared, and there was no indication on whether the families would even remember it or just consider it a strange dream they all shared.

In front of the chamber of secrets, Anakin, Larry, Rafael and Noman once again gathered. Although Anakin had informed them about the function of the chamber, they were not completely satisfied.

Each of them tested the room by depositing and recollecting small, inconsequential memories and testing each other on it. Once all of them had tried it out, and were satisfied with it, they decided on forming an agreement via the guild room that they would honestly answer each other's questions, and then deposit each other's secrets in the chamber, leaving only the memory of the surety that their own secrets or matters were secure.

That left the matter for why Anakin was still amongst them. While he had no secret to share, for he truly was just an ordinary person adept at finding and using opportunities, he had convinced Noman that he would benefit greatly by following Anakin from then onwards.

How he had done it was unknown to the rest, but Noman completely believed Anakin, and involved him in this matter as well.

Thus the four of them signed the agreement and arrived at the chamber. Since it was so secure, they decided to exchange their secrets right inside the chamber. First up was Noman.

Everyone was staring at him intently, making him slightly uncomfortable. He was also nervous because he had never shared his secret with anyone before, but at the same time, it also filled him with a strange sense of relief.

"I was born with a special power," he said, scratching his cheek. "Whenever I hear or read a lie, I can instantly detect it. That is not to say that I automatically know or understand the truth. It just means that whenever I come across anything that has the intention to communicate anything so that it is perceived as anything but the truth, I can detect it.

"For example, if a person named Harry says to you that you can call him Adam, he is not lying. You, indeed, can call him Adam. But, if in saying that, his intention is not to say that you can call him that, but to make you believe his name is Adam, I can tell that he is lying.

"This ability of mine has no restrictions. It can detect lies in any format, and it does not matter how high or low someone's cultivation is. I have yet to see anyone who can hide from my ability."

His short and simple dictation was followed by utter silence, as everyone absorbed the weight of everything he had just said. His ability was... absolutely broken. Being able to detect lies, regardless of cultivation. In the right hands, or maybe even the wrong hands, this ability could wreak havoc.

Of course, the premise was that it had to be someone smart enough to use the ability effectively. Anakin's eyes were gleaming as various thoughts ran through his mind, though his expression revealed nothing.

Larry went next. He had none of the nervousness of Noman, and directly began his tale.

"My family was an extremely wealthy family back on Earth, and owned several spirit stone mines. That made me extremely lucky, but I was also extremely unlucky because I was born without the ability to cultivate. Even the tiniest bit of spiritual energy would be poison to me, so regardless of the method or type of cultivation, I could not use it.

"But my fate changed one day when, in one of my family's mines, a unique treasure was born. The birth of the treasure caused a major disturbance in the spiritual energy of the region, and attracted a lot of attention. Many people attacked my family in secret, trying to uncover whatever was found. Many of my family members died to protect it.

"But, the treasure ended up being completely inane to everyone other than me. As such, I got it, and after an expensive and dangerous surgery, my father had the treasure merge with my spine.

"It took a few years, but when my body finally acclimatized to it, I gained the ability to cultivate. But it was no longer ordinary cultivation. I could cultivate by absorbing new and various kinds of metals into my body. The rarer the metal, the greater it would boost my cultivation. But at the same time, the more I absorbed one kind of metal, the less it boosted my cultivation.

"At the same time, my body has developed an incredibly high affinity for metals, to the point where it's almost impossible to harm me with a metal weapon. A while back, I was being hunted on Earth, and I fell into an ambush. Someone shot me in the head. That should have been the end of my life, but instead of

my brain blowing up from the bullet, it simply absorbed the bullet. I was still hurt a little, because I couldn't absorb the bullet fast enough, but the more metals I absorb, the stronger my body becomes. I was able to survive the shot, and quickly killed the ambusher.

"But I suspect someone knew, or somehow learned, about this unique treasure, and began targeting my family for it. They ignored me at first, because I was simply a mortal, but eventually they must have realized something was wrong.

"I have been looking into this matter for a long time, but I cannot find out who the person hunting me is. At first, I thought it was someone from the Council of New Order, for only they would have the ability to target my family. But the matter seems more complicated than that."

Everyone looked at Larry with interest and curiosity, but it could not garner the level of attention of Noman's secret. Larry did not regret this, for he was not competing for who had the deeper secret. Moreover, no one other than him understood how amazing his ability to cultivate using metals really was. Soon, he would enter the Nascent level. Then he would return to Earth and get his revenge, on whoever it was that was hunting them.

Then, finally, they all looked at Rafael. It was his turn to share.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 349: The future

Now that Larry knew the truth behind Noman's random murmurs, he was truly anticipating what Rafael had to say. After all, he was extremely suspicious of anyone who tried to approach him randomly, and there was definitely some ulterior motive behind Rafael trying to befriend him.

The man in question, Rafael, kept his cool. He was thinking exactly what and how much to share, as his secret was much wider, and had much more immediate repercussions than either of the other two.

"Before I begin, don't you think you should share a little something as well. If you have no secret to hide, how about a little about your life."

Rafael was looking towards the nonchalant Anakin and, after his words registered, the rest looked towards him as well. It did seem a little unfair if he was the only one who shared nothing.

Anakin only chuckled in response, but did not delay.

"My life is pretty straight forward. I grew up in a town called Springfield. My dad was a plumber and my mom worked at the local post office. We had a pretty good house my dad bought with some of his savings and money he inherited from my grandpa, so we had no debt to speak of - the American dream. I did pretty well on my SATs and even got a scholarship for college. Life was swell... and boring.

"That's when things got messed up. The Council of New Order appeared, the world became strange, cultivators appeared, and I found a golden key to the Inn. Well, since then, I've never looked back. It's an interesting life for me, or nothing at all. Oh and uhh, one day randomly in my dream, some random old dude appeared and claimed I have a great affinity for the dark side- no eh, I mean, I have great affinity for darkness and gave me a cultivation technique which I'm currently cultivating."

"He's telling the truth," Noman murmured absentmindedly.

Anakin's history was both surprising and unimpressive. Rafael had not heard of him in his previous life, so it was likely he never made any great achievements back then. But things were too different this time around, so it was hard to tell if it would be the same.

Not bothering to comment on his story, Rafael cleared his throat and began.

"My name is Rafael Carter Bravi and many years ago, I was struck by an accident. It destroyed my entire body. But that is only what happened on the surface, the truth of the matter is entirely different."

He paused for a moment, as he thought back on the memories of his previous life. He remembered everything so vividly; every emotion, every ache, every hope, every moment of despair, all of it. It was that level of clarity that brought some doubt, for none of his other memories were so clear. The truth... was something he would most likely never know, nor that it mattered, but for the first time, he could voice his suspicions.

"The truth is, I've actually traveled back in time from the future. My original life... my original timeline was vastly different from this one, yet at the same time, it was so similar. Everyone who existed in my original life exists now, and I was able to live and witness the history of Earth for a total of 134 years.

"The Earth in my original life was very different, and the war between the Council of New Order and the five Nascent heads was also very different. When all was said and done, Earth was almost destroyed, and humans were brought to a fraction of their current population."

He paused again, this time paying attention to Larry's disbelieving reaction. He waited for the subtle 'he's telling the truth' murmur before he continued.

"So far, many of the things that were supposed to happen in my original timeline have already changed. Although I don't know why they changed, I strongly suspect it has something to do with the appearance of the golden keys for the Midnight Inn on Earth. But, while immediate disasters have been averted, there are more dangers ahead. I've already checked by various means that this timeline is mostly identical to my original one, and so I strongly believe that the troubles that lay ahead will still come, especially since they don't originate from Earth itself.

"So, to fight against these dangers and prepare for the worst, it has been my goal to find the strongest people in the future, and band them together so that we can work together to solve the situation. That is why I approached Larry, because he is supposed to become one of the strongest people on Earth in the future."

He finally stopped, for the amount he had shared was enough to cover the contract they had signed. But, he knew, or rather, anticipated something, and it happened immediately in the next moment.

"He's telling the truth, but he's also hiding something. The truth is incomplete," said Noman, his voice filled with genuine wonder. Even with his vast experience, this was beyond anything he had ever encountered.

Rafael sighed and said, "Well, actually, the thing is, I've been having some doubts lately - though whether they are true or not changes nothing, for now. I am not so sure if I actually traveled back in time, or just had a vision of the future. At first, I thought I had traveled back, but there are certain things that make me think that instead of me traveling back in time, I just had visions of the future. As for what those things are, and why I think that, I believe I don't need to share them as our contract doesn't cover it. I've already revealed the matters that pertained to Larry and why I was searching for him."

Everyone looked towards Noman, who simply nodded to confirm he was telling the truth. They were all reeling from what they heard, but neither of them was more devastated than Anakin. Because of how

apocalyptic the future Rafael witnessed was, he had no opportunity to learn any lottery numbers or know the leading stocks! Valuable investment opportunities were lost! The shame! Oh, the shame!

What he did not know was that he should have been rejoicing that the future was different from what Rafael knew, for Anakin had been one of the many casualties in the war that had covered the globe. That was why he never had a chance to reveal his stunning skills and capabilities in that future.

"There's no need to share more..." Larry said slowly. "At least according to the old contract. But we can make a new deal. If you can answer some of my questions about the future, I'd be willing to help you out in whatever you need."

Rafael took a moment to think, but then shook his head.

"There's no need for another contract. I'll tell you what you want to know, since you'll already remove the important bits of my secret from your memory."

Actually, Rafael was taking a risk. He was betting that while Larry would forget other things, he would not forget his sense of goodwill developed by him answering honestly, because there was no reason to deposit that.

"In the future you saw... did I have a family?" he asked, barely keeping his voice from wavering.

Rafael shook his head.

"I didn't know you personally, so I don't know the details of your life. I did, however, know that you didn't seem to have any family or friends."

He paused, to let him absorb that information, and then continued.

"Since three of us are all from Earth, I'll share a bit more with all of you. After all, it has to do with our futures, and I'm hoping we can work together on this. After all, even if you remove your memories, the sense of belief or trust should still stay, so I'm hoping you'll help me."

Anakin and Larry both nodded, though Larry was visibly upset right now. Anakin, though not taking things too seriously, did, after all, live on Earth, so he wanted to know what was going to happen.

"Earth has a huge secret that no one knows, though many suspect. If you've heard of the original 5 Nascent cultivators who used to rule Earth, you might be familiar with the fact that one of them went from being a mortal to a Nascent cultivator overnight. Larry himself found an incredible treasure, and I encountered something that allowed me to view the future. Anakin had dreams telling him about cultivation techniques. There are many, many more examples of people becoming way too lucky on Earth. You may think that it's all just coincidence, but if a coincidence repeats too often, it starts to seem suspicious.

"And the truth is, it really isn't a coincidence. Earth... Earth is not as it seems. The planet is actually a prison for an evil goddess named Bastet, and many others. This is because Earth, and its surrounding region in space, are in what is known as a deadzone in the universe. I don't know much about these, just that they are severely suffocated of spiritual energy. But I do know that in the year 2025 something happens, and the deadzone changes, and Earth, along with the solar system, becomes flooded with spiritual energy much more concentrated than the normal universe.

"The flood of spiritual energy causes the goddess to break free of her restraints, and that's when..."

There was pin drop silence as everyone listened to Rafael very seriously, even Noman. This was because... he had heard of Bastet before.

Origin realm, Planet Hozath

The entire world was filled with a deathly silence as every living being, from single-celled organisms to sentient lifeforms, were under the coercion of a black furred cat.

"I have returned, you wretched traitors," her voice echoed over the planet. "Know this, and live in fear. The moment I break through my shackles, your end shall be nigh."

There was nothing more that Bastet wanted than to decimate this entire planet, but as someone who had touched upon the Dao, she was under heavy restrictions. Even she did not dare flaunt Henali's rules, but hopefully soon, that would no longer be a concern.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 350: Blanket of darkness

Lex was extremely pleased with how satisfied his guests were with the hot tub room. They only woke up around 2 pm the next day, and when they came down to the hall, they were extremely refreshed. And hungry.

They were so energetic that they were having no trouble handling their kids, and for once, they sat at a few tables like a civilized family, chatting and laughing together.

Betty was hard at work in the kitchen, making sure they didn't run short of food, and his delinquent helpers were also hard at work, doing whatever they could. Strangely enough, though, the triplets had not shown up to work as of yet.

Considering their disciplined behavior so far, Lex was a little concerned at their absence and sent Big Ben over to investigate. He had been gone a while now, and should be back any time now. In the meantime, Lex leaned back in his chair and listened to the new musician he had temporarily hired. His performance and popularity would determine if Lex kept him, but so far he and his accordion had delivered a splendid performance.

A short while later, Big Ben returned with the three girls, but the expressions on their faces warned of grave news. Lex quickly got up and checked if the girls were alright before asking what happened.

"Their neighbors were killed," said Big Ben gravely. "Almost all of them. It was the serial killer. The bodies were discovered last night by accident. The constables suspected their family, since they were unharmed amidst all that, and arrested them. But the entire family works, so they all had alibis and had to be let go."

The hair on Lex's back stood up as he imagined discovering all your neighbors had been killed in their own homes. That was genuinely horrific, especially when one considered that it could easily have been them instead of their neighbors who had been murdered.

"Where's your family? Do they have a place to stay? If not, bring them to the tavern and we'll figure something out."

"They're at the town shelter, along with Dino and his wife. They lived nearby as well, and they're too scared to go back."

Lex hesitated, but then nodded. He didn't know what the town shelter was like, but at least it would be more secure since it was being overseen by the town. He told the girls again that they could bring their family to the tavern if needed and offered them a holiday. But the girls refused and said that they were fine and wanted to work.

They tried their best to seem normal, but anyone could see the absence of the usual mirth they carried with them.

Lex, too, was perturbed by the situation. He had been taking the serial killer lightly, as he completely expected that he or she would be caught soon. But the situation was becoming drastically worse, and the constables seemed incapable of handling the situation. The security here was worse than he expected.

He sent someone to find and call Roland over. He really wanted to see what the news had to say about the discovered murders. Everything was happening contrary to common sense. He could still accept that this region, which was supposed to be one of the richest in the realm, showed no opulence. He could credit it to the excellent management of the Noel family. But if their management and control over this region was excellent, why were so many murders going unimpeded? This was especially the case when the Noel brothers themselves passed through the town as well.

Unless it was the Noel family itself behind the murders for whatever reason. Whatever the case, Lex started to get a bad feeling. He needed to prepare in case things got worse.

Babylon Town, 800 meters below the ground

The murderer licked the blood off the blade, his body trembling as he savored his kills. He was currently in the underground chambers that housed the formation encompassing Babylon. Even if someone knew the supposed 'weaknesses' of the formation, it was not so straightforward to reach it. Weakness was only a relative term, as no expenses were spared. After all, the lives of all the townspeople depended on this formation.

Providing light to the town was only one of the many functions of the formation, amongst a low level spiritual gathering function, a barrier function to lock down the town, and others.

With the importance of the formation, it can easily be guessed how difficult it would be to reach it, yet the killer strolled carelessly through the hall.

"System, how many points do I need to get something that can override this formation?" asked a surprisingly charming and energetic voice.

"No points required. Host has already received a reward for a previous quest that can both upgrade and override the formation."

"How lucky," the killer replied, wearing a handsome grin. "How very lucky."

His system did not comment on his remark, so the only remaining sound was that of steady footsteps walking through the chambers, leaving a trail of bloody footprints behind.

"Try this, it's called hot chocolate. It's perfect for cold weather," said Lex as he slid a mug across the counter to Roland. The young businessman went nowhere without his entourage, and this time it was larger than last, consisting of 15 other kids.

It couldn't be helped, as even though the city was well lit even in the dark, they were, after all, children. They would use 100 excuses to hide it, but they were afraid of the horrors of the dark. Even though they had experienced a period of darkness well over 20 times in their short lives without incident, the promise of monsters hiding in the dark never failed to strike fear.

"I can't. I'm on a budget. Dark times are always bad for business."

Lex shrugged and took a sip from the mug himself. He was tempted to offer it for free, but he had noticed during his daily meditations that he was becoming more and more comfortable giving out things for free. It was a habit he needed to curb, lest it seep into other areas of his life.

"When do you expect to get the latest news?" Lex asked, wiping the whipped cream from his upper lip.

"Like I said, business is bad during dark times. They only compile newscrystals once a week rather than daily, because less happens during dark times. You'll have to wait for 3 more days."

"Well, just make sure to have it delivered to the tavern when it's ready. Treat me like a fixed client, I'll even get a few for some of my tenants so bring a few."

"No problem. Consider it done. But, I'm not here today to talk about that. I have a business proposal for you. You ever get tired of running errands through the town? Of sending someone out every time you need to grab a delivery, send a message, or find someone? Of wasting valuable time on petty chores? Well, with our errand boy service, with a subscription of only 2 silver coins a week..."

Lex was listening to Roland's pitch with amusement when goosebumps covered his body, and his instincts acted up. But the feeling of danger vanished just as quickly as it came. Lex was momentarily confused, not understanding what his instincts were trying to warn him of when he noticed the hall looked just a bit dimmer.

That was strange, none of the lights in the hall had gone out. What could... he looked out the window and looked at Bakers street. It was dark.

Some light was still falling onto the street from the windows of the various buildings, but the various street lights that kept the town as bright as Times Square had gone out.

Ignoring Roland who had not noticed and was still delivering a pitch, Lex quickly rushed to the window and took a look outside.

All the lights on the street that had been put up by the town had shut down, leaving only those being used by people privately. Even that would not last for long, as the people would eventually run out of spirit stones to power the lights endlessly.

Roland and some of the folks in the hall noticed Lex's odd behavior and looked outside as well, trying to discover what happened. The first thought everyone had was another murder, so they didn't immediately notice the darkness as they were looking for bodies. Soon, though, people started to notice the oddity.

But by then, Lex was already gone. Swiftly, he climbed the stairs and reached the rooftop terrace to get a good look at the town. Sadly, the situation was just as he expected. A blanket of darkness had covered Babylon, with faint lights twinkling in the dark like fireflies in the distance.

Lex let out a sigh as his mind started racing. He had a decision to make.