

## Innkeeper 501

The Innkeeper

Chapter 501: Better question

Lex could not tell what the figure was thinking, or what it felt about his question. The only thing he had to go determine anything about the figure was its voice. Compared to everything else about the figure, which was quite enigmatic, the figure's voice itself was a very standard masculine voice.

The fact that the figure didn't immediately answer, however, was unusual and created the first real pause in the conversation. Lex didn't think the answer was beyond the figure, since he did not hesitate to talk about systems with Lex. Moreover, he did not really seem all that impressed by the systems either. He so easily talked about the Midnight Inn not being the strongest system, as if even the strongest system was beneath him. Or, maybe, he himself had the strongest system.

Eventually, the silence ended, but instead of providing an answer, the figure sighed.

"Wrong question, boy. But, considering how abruptly all this is happening, I'll do you one more favor and answer a better question. I think the more pertinent question would have been 'what kind of questions should I ask you'. While I can answer whatever questions you have, such as the purpose of the systems, knowing the answer will not in any way improve your situation whatsoever. Instead, you should focus on questions the answer to which will immediately benefit you, either by guiding your actions or saving you from some hazard. Of course, if you still wish to know about the system, ask again. I'll answer this time."

Lex paused for a moment, and thought of all the problems currently plaguing him. There was the quest of discovering the issue with the Crystal realm, the Henali asking for toll payment, his family, information about improving his own system, the Regal Embrace, the...

Lex's eyes widened as he rearranged his priorities very quickly. He could use the figure to help him resolve a lot of problems, sure, but there were many problems he could resolve himself if he were stronger. So, he would receive a greater benefit from increasing his strength!

"How can I overcome the issue with the Regal Embrace?" Lex asked, this time more confident about his question. This was probably the most important issue plaguing him. He could try to resolve it on his own, but his lack of knowledge would be a huge issue.

"Good question! The answer is twofold. The simple answer is, you can resolve the issue using your system. More specifically, the system can give you a reward that will resolve your problem. But just knowing that will not resolve your problem, so let me elaborate.

"I believe currently, the prompt you have been given is that the Regal Embrace has no way of progressing forward, as you have deviated from the path it had developed. That is actually incorrect. A more specific prompt would be that there is a path forward, but based on your current cultivation, you likely have no way of accessing the resources that will be required to pave the way forward. But the Regal Embrace is a self-contained entity, and it has no way of knowing that you can use the system to get resources.

"So now that you know that there indeed is a path forward, the question is, what are the resources you need and how can you get the system to give them to you? It's very simple really, you need to get a minimum of a SSS rank reward for a quest. Trust me, any reward you get from the system of that rank and higher will be exactly what you need to fix the Regal Embrace.

"But, and now this is important, whatever reward you get will evolve the Regal Embrace based on the reward as well as your new current affinity. So, the higher your reward, the better the result will be, so I suggest you put your full effort into this matter."

Lex immediately had a few other questions to follow up, such as what did he mean by the Regal Embrace was a self-contained entity? But he did not ask them. Since his questions were limited, he would not make such an obvious mistake.

He had another question, but he wasn't sure if asking that question would be a waste. He hesitated for a few moments while he debated with himself, but decided to ask anyway.

"What can my Soul sense do? I don't understand it completely."

Although he still could not see the figures true appearance, Lex got the feeling that he smiled.

"Not a bad question. The gist of it is that it can allow you to detect, interact with and influence any soul or soul related item. Heh, once you become adept at it, it won't be an exaggeration to say you can literally rip the soul out of someone's body! You can also change the nature of a soul. Sometimes, souls

have inherent natures and sometimes they are developed, but whatever the case, you can interact with them. Heh, if you had a more... evil inclination, it would be within your capacity to manipulate someone's soul to turn them into your slave forever. Of course, there are other minor things such as detecting the presence of life, being able to detect lies through fluctuations in souls, and communicating directly through souls similar to how spirit sense is used. The difference is, Soul sense is a lot harder to detect as very few races inherently develop it.

"The most relevant thing to you, however, is that if you meet someone with a system, you can remove the system from their souls without harming them! Even if the system merged with their souls, all it would take is a little bit of skill and practice, and you can pull that bad boy right out!"

At this point, the figure started to chuckle.

"Not right now, but once you grow a bit, you can even become a phenomenal doctor, able to dismiss even death. All you'd have to do is move a soul from a dying body to an empty one capable of supporting life. Of course, that's only if the cause of death is physical, and not directly related to the soul. Oh, did I mention you can directly assault souls? Yes, there's that too."

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Chapter 502: Some answers

The figure spent quite a long while detailing exactly how Lex could use the soul sense, and the list was honestly longer than Lex expected. He never really thought about it, but suddenly it made sense that cultivators had such long life spans, because he could not even estimate the number of years it would take him to learn how to fully utilize his soul sense. In fact, a part of him was fairly certain that even the spirit sense was severely underutilized, but at least with that, information was common enough where Lex could investigate on his own.

But based on the fact that the figure had not vanished after answering the question meant that he could still ask more questions. A part of him was really tempted to just ask him the cause of the anomaly in the Crystal realm. Since he was supposed to ask questions that would give him immediate benefits, that was one of the big ones. That was what the logical part of his brain told him.

But whether it was unfortunate or not, there was another voice in his head that stopped him from asking such a question. It was the voice of Lex's pride that he had accumulated so far. It was the voice that said he did not need handouts and easy solutions. Instead, he should look for the tools he needed to improve himself even further. But he had already asked 2 questions related to his cultivation. What else could he ask?

Should he ask what his affinity did? Or maybe a way to improve on arrays? Should he ask about his left eye? Should he...

This was not a time sensitive issue, since the figure did not tell Lex he had to hurry, but he did not think it was wise to waste too much time, nonetheless. Unable to decide what exactly to prioritize, Lex decided to change his approach.

"What are some things you think I need to know?" he asked, hoping this question wouldn't be a waste.

"Heh, see, you're getting better already. That's why I like you. You started off not so bright, let me tell you, but you've been improving nonstop. Now let's see. What are things you need to know? Let's start with the fact that time travel is completely possible. You can travel from the present to the future. But travel in any other direction is impossible. Don't even think about it. There is no level of power you can reach where such a thing is possible. You don't even want to know the kind of punishment those who try end up suffering.

"I'm telling you this not because I think you'll want to time travel. I'm telling you this because, statistically speaking, you'll come across a situation where you'll need to make a decision. One will be a smart decision, and the other will be a decision you will regret not making forever. When that time comes, child, just keep this in mind. There is no remedy for regret.

"Next, there's a chatroom for system users, created by someone who has a system for chat rooms. Sooner or later you'll receive an invite. You'll be tempted to join it. It's completely safe, and no one can track you just because you use it, not even the original system wielder. Don't join it.

"Since we're on the topic of systems, all systems operate under a certain number of rules. Some of them are common, some of them are different, but regardless, try to understand the rules of your own system. Nothing is as random or meaningless as it may seem.

"Another thing, once you're confident enough, travel to as many realms as possible, trust me. The younger the realm, the better. You'll find unexpected surprises waiting for you.

"But you know, all of these things are very generic and boring pieces of advice. What's something interesting?"

The figure moved about, as if it was looking left and right, searching for something.

"Ah yes, here we go! Alright, remember this. In the Origin realm, there is a galaxy called Suera. In that galaxy there is a belt of rogue planets just traveling through space, no star to center them or guide their motion. Within that belt lies an extremely valuable item that will be greatly beneficial to you. But you have approximately 6 months before someone else finds it. It could be sooner or later, but not by much."

The figure paused, as if to think for a moment, and then said, "Yeah, that should about cover it. Think of this as a bonus reward for entertaining me a bit. If you're ever able to do something on the same level as surpass the Regal Embrace and attract my attention again, I might visit you another time. But, frankly speaking, it's unlikely, so there's a good chance this is the last time we meet. Also, don't suddenly be scared that anyone can intrude in your Inn the way I did. There's not a lot of beings in the universe at my level, if any..."

Before the figure's voice disappeared, Lex jerked awake, and found himself lying in his bed shirtless. He looked around left and right, but found everything was perfectly normal in his apartment.

Was it just a dream?

Lex snorted at the idea and jumped out of bed. He was perfectly capable of differentiating reality from a dream, so he knew full well that everything he had experienced was not a creation of his subconscious brain. He entered the meditation room and sat down in a meditation pose, calming his mind.

When he was ready, he manipulated his soul sense - something that had become much easier since he learnt to control his spirit sense since the premise was the same.

He wrapped his body in his soul sense, and delved within till he saw the familiar golden shine of the system hidden within himself.

Then, using his soul sense, he touched it, and pulled it out of his body and into his hand. For the first time, Lex laid eyes on the thing that had given him so much. At the same time, he had confirmed at least some of what the figure had told him.

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### Chapter 503: Doppelganger

Lex looked at the treasure responsible for giving him the system. Although he had many suspicions about what its purpose was, he had no real negative feelings for it. After all, Lex's current life was brought around by the system, and it had been responsible for so many amazing things happening to him. He just wished he could trust it.

Lex let go of his soul sense and allowed the treasure to return inside his body. Lex no longer felt like sleeping so, after scanning the Inn once to ensure there were no problems, he spent some time cultivating.

He expected that he would make little to no progress in his cultivation, due to the fact that he had entered a new, higher realm and that should have made it harder. But cultivating in a 2.5 star rank environment was really too much of a cheat. He literally felt the energy itself was eager to increase his cultivation.

Once he was done with that, he retreated to his office to mull over everything the figure had told him. One of the most interesting things he told him was about the chatroom for system wielders. It was something... he honestly never even imagined. Time travel... he honestly never even considered it. The whole hassle with changing timelines was too confusing.

He also had no interest in traveling to other realms at the moment. So the only two things left to do were to study the patterns and rules of the system, and get that treasure.

That would be an issue on its own. How was he supposed to get to a specific galaxy, and to a specific place in that galaxy? Even if he used tickets, the options he would get from them were random.

This would take some planning. Moreover, he could see through scans that many people were close to discovering some of the entrances to the Minor realms. That would also require a lot of his attention, for he really didn't know where those Minor realms led to.

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Larry Dershaw was in a great mood, or as good as he could be. Although he had gotten a hint about who was hunting him, he thought it would take a long time to actually track them down. But just a short while ago, Rafael had reached out to him to let him know that his father was sick of waiting, and was planning on taking matters into his own hands.

No matter how things were resolved, one thing was certain: someone was about to get hurt.

Other than that, his girlfriend, Irene, was having a few problems of her own as well, back on X-142. But, for reasons no one knew, the family that controlled the planet had suddenly started recruiting cultivators from civilians. She had been selected as well, not for military purposes but for her expertise in the pharmaceutical industry. Suffice to say, she had started earning really well lately, which had resolved a lot of problems for her.

So, with things going well in his own life, as well as his girlfriend's, Larry had every reason to be happy. The sun was shining, the wind was blowing, the rare metal ores were flowing in and...

From the corner of his eye, Larry saw his good friend, Lex, sitting in the Midnight manor with a group of strangers.

"Hey Lex, guess what?" Larry said as he walked up to the group, but the look he got back from Lex was an unusual one. He couldn't decipher what that look was supposed to mean.

"It's a good thing I found you, I was just about to message you anyway. Do you think we could talk for a moment?"

'Lex' looked at Larry for a moment, before looking at the group of guys around him.

"Excuse me," he said to his group after a moment and stood up, following Larry to the side.

"What's with your accent?" Larry asked, confused for a moment. But he didn't wait long enough to get a reply. "Well, it doesn't matter. You should prepare yourself, even though we had a plan, what we didn't account for was Marlo. Although you might have talked to him before, he doesn't want to wait any longer. I'll be joining him when he makes his move, and so will many of the others. I wanted to let you know in case you wanted to come as well, since you're the one who provided the lead."

'Lex' did not respond for a moment, and just continued to observe Larry. Just as Larry was beginning to suspect that there might be some issue, 'Lex' spoke.

"I think there has been some kind of misunderstanding, my name is William, not Lex. I didn't mean to listen in on your conversation though, you just didn't give me a chance to explain."

Larry was startled, and looked again, but the man standing in front of him was completely identical to Lex in every way. The only difference was the accent, which Larry suddenly realized was a result of the Inns universal translator converting some foreign language to english.

"I am very curious about this Lex you're talking about. If you mistook me for him, I'm assuming we share some resemblance. If possible, do you think you could introduce me? I think it would be quite interesting to meet a doppelganger."

Larry, despite himself, took a step back and looked at William up and down. What the hell just happened?

"I can understand why you'd be defensive, you think I cheated you," said William casually. "Why don't you join me for a bit, I was sitting with my brothers. You can see for yourself if you think I'm trustworthy. Besides, we're at the Inn. There couldn't be a safer place."

Larry turned to look at the group of guys William had been sitting with before, and they waved at him.

They all looked young, maybe a couple years older than him at most. With his own increased strength as of late, he doubted they'd be a match for him. That thought allowed him to relax considerably, and he decided to join him. Besides, he was also curious about why this guy looked exactly like Lex.

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Chapter 504: Brothers

"Sure, I have some free time, though I'll be meeting my girlfriend here soon," said Larry, as he decided to accompany William. Although he had put on his familiar grin and seemed like a carefree guy, he was cognizant of the fact that he had just revealed some sensitive information to William. Most likely, that

information wouldn't mean anything to them, especially if they weren't from earth, but it was a variable nonetheless.

"I didn't catch your name," said William as they walked back.

"Larry."

"Well Larry, there are my brothers, Jotun, Nisar, Batu and Henry."

The group all waved to Larry from their seats, not bothering to get up. Their casual attire and the various interesting drinks around them really made them seem like a group of guys simply hanging out.

"Guys, this is Larry. Apparently, his friend looks a lot like me. I've never met a doppelgänger before, so I invited him over. It'll be quite exciting."

"Is your friends' name Lex?" Henry asked, looking slightly curious. "Have you seen the Guest Registry? The top name in that is also Lex."

"Oh yeah, I've seen that. I was really surprised since they have the same name, but it's impossible to be my friend. After all, he's even weaker than me."

Larry spoke with full confidence, having completely forgotten Lex was Leo due to the Chamber of Secrets.

Henry just shrugged, as if it was expected.

"What about that Marlo guy you mentioned?" William asked. "Any chance he might be the one from the registry? That guy is in the top 100."

This time... Larry hesitated.

"He... might be, honestly, but I still have my doubts. After all, we're from the same planet. Although he's very powerful on our planet, he only recently reached the Nascent realm. I don't see how he could reach the top 100 on that list. I mean, I myself am not even in the top 20,000 but I'm just one cultivation realm below him. How big could the gap be?"

"It's an achievement list, not a strength list. Anything could happen. Hey, you want a drink?" asked Batu, who himself was sipping what looked like some kind of fruit juice.

"Guys, Larry has to meet his girlfriend soon, so don't fill him up with drinks! We don't want to make a bad impression," said William. Turning to Larry, William said, "If these guys try to goad you, ignore them. Other than Jotun, everyone here is a bachelor, so they get jealous."

"Named after such a prosperous empire, it's no wonder you were able to get a girlfriend so easily," said Larry, completely unaware that it was actually the opposite of what he said. The empire had been named after him, not the other way around.

"Not a girlfriend, a wife," Jotun clarified with a stern face. "Never let her hear you say that, or we're all dead."

"Never let me hear what?" asked a woman loudly who suddenly appeared behind Jotun. Larry's eyes constricted a little when he looked at the woman. It was not her astounding beauty that actually got to Larry, but her mature looks. Jotun had actually managed to marry an older woman. Secretly, he gave Jotun a thumbs up.

How was he supposed to know the woman was actually several hundred thousand years younger than Jotun?

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While Larry sat amongst a group of truly ancient humans, another ancient being who was formerly human looked at her baby with an endearing look. They were in the make-shift prison beside the greenhouse where the prisoners who once attacked the Inn long ago were being kept captive.

Many of the pillagers who accompanied them had already become fertilizer, but Lex couldn't bring it to himself to kill prisoners, so he just left them here. It wasn't as if he forgot about them, but since he couldn't think of another solution, he just left them here for the time being.

These pillagers were truly the scum of the universe, who took pleasure in looting and killing, and killed more for fun than to steal treasures or wealth.

They had only been locked up, and not tortured, but even such a thing had managed to create some level of despair amongst them. It was exactly that despair that was being fed to the Cthulhu baby right now. But while it was barely enough to feed the child, it would not do long term.

"You'll have to take it out of the Inn from time to time. This place is not conducive to the baby's growth. You don't even need to go to any war zones for now, just taking it to any random slum used by any race should be more than enough to feed it during its early days." said Abroar, the spirit.

"Why should I take it to a slum?" Anita asked, her beauty looking completely out of place in the dungeon.

"Before I got pregnant with my own children, I had plenty of dungeons back home. Qawain will take him there and feed him properly. I have to serve only the best to my child."

None of the prisoners were actually harmed in the feeding process, but the sight of the baby monster had left them scared out of their wits.

Once the baby had been fed, Anita had her undead carry it back into its massive stroller, and took it out of the prison.

Little Blue had been waiting outside, alongside Fenrir, Young McDonald and Zen. By hierarchy of the Inn, the baby was the junior most member of their group, with Little Blue the senior most.

Sensing their familiar yet annoying presence, the baby opened its eyes and tried to use its powers on them to scare them away. But its attempts failed miserably. As the youngest brother of the group, the horrid nightmare from the depths of the universe was destined to be the cutest.

After all, when Z had been reading a light novel to them all earlier, he clearly told them that when brothers got together, they each had a role based on their seniority.

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Lex was in his study when Mary appeared suddenly and said, "a guest wants to see you. It's one of the guests you told me to keep an eye on."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 505: Social anxiety

"Who is it?" Lex asked as he got up and rubbed his eyes. He had been writing down every major interaction he had with the system as best as he could recall to try and understand what its rules were. There were many things he could explain, but the insistent death threats by the system in his early days and their sudden disappearance was one of the biggest changes he couldn't properly explain.

He had a few theories, of course, such as reinforcing the behavior of doing quests. Or perhaps it was just the standard operating procedure for systems. After all, Lex's quests had to do with the Inn, but what if he had the Murder system? There is no way Lex would have randomly done a quest that involved murder - not unless his own life was on the line.

But regardless of what it was or why it stopped, it was certain that giving such quests were the exact reason Lex had such distrust of systems.

"It is the guest named Alysha, the one who spends all her time with the Krab-man, John."

"Oh?" Lex was genuinely surprised. He had been thinking of a good way of approaching her, but who knew she would reach out to him first.

It was a good thing Lex told Mary to keep an eye on her, or else he would have never even known that she was trying to reach out to him. That was because there were countless guests who would try to meet the Innkeeper. Occasionally Lex would take some time and meet some of the guests randomly, but with millions of guests at the Inn, it really wasn't feasible to meet everyone.

Mary would only ever let Lex know about guests requesting meetings if either Lex had been paying special attention to them, they had genuine concerns that only Lex could resolve or their identity was special. Of course, Mary had no way of guessing someone's identity just like that, but usually it was easy to find out.

"Send her to my office," Lex said as he teleported there.

"She's already outside."

Once again Lex was taken aback. It seemed the matter was quite serious. But while Alysha was outside Lex's office, it was actually quite difficult for her to make it to Lex. This was because the pressure radiated by the reception hall made it very difficult for her to cross. It was only her sheer desperation that allowed her to cross the room.

Lex himself felt quite bad about forcing her through such a situation, especially since he himself wanted to meet her, but the specific functions of buildings given by the system were things he had no control over.

He made a mental note not to meet certain guests at the office.

Right outside Lex's office, Alysha took a moment to fix her ragged appearance, as best as she could under the circumstances, and then entered the room.

"Welcome guest," he said, wearing a gentle, warm smile. "I hope I did not keep you waiting for too long."

"No... not at all!" she said, her voice barely audible. It was not that she was shy - which she was - but that she had spent so much time alone, she had become unused to speaking, and so had become very soft spoken.

"Excellent. Please, have a seat."

Alysha only barely nodded before she scurried to sit in front of the Innkeeper, her eyes looking down at her feet. Once upon a time, she wasn't so socially awkward, but now she had become like this.

Upon seeing that Alysha herself wasn't about to start the conversation, Lex didn't wait for an awkward silence to fall, and asked, "How can I help you today? Is there something you need?"

At the same time, he chastised himself a bit. With Alysha he had gotten straight to the heart of the topic, while with the emperor he had so much small talk because he wanted to get more information on William.

"I uh... no I mean... yes, actually..." Alysha tried to find the words, but the more she messed up, the more she got confused about what to say. From the corner of her eye she peeked at the Innkeeper, but found him attentively listening to her ramblings, a warm smile still on his face. He did not seem impatient at all, and was content to let her finish in her own time.

A strand of confidence filled her as she paused talking, planned out her sentence in her head, and then said it out loud.

"The Inn has been gate... No, I mean great! The Inn has been great. But I thought... I wondered... I mean, there's another problem that I had, and I wondered if you might be able to help me, actually. Since, you know, the Inn, and it's so big, and cool, and powerful. I mean, you're powerful, not the Inn!"

Lex let out a soft chuckle, and spoke slowly, so as to not alarm her. "It is no trouble at all, though I do not know if I can help you yet. Why don't you tell me what you need, and I'll see if I can find a way to help you out."

"I uhh... you see, I have this thing in my head. No wait, not in my head, like it's not my imagination, it's real, but I can see it in my head. I mean, I can't see inside my head, but I can control it with my thoughts, but it's very real. And it's given me a deadline, and I was able to meet the deadline due to the Guild room, but now it's giving me more quests and... I promise you, this is all real. It's not my imagination. It's..."

"Please, guest, calm down," said Lex when he noticed Alysha becoming frantic. His smile was just a little bit larger, but he couldn't help it. He had been looking for ways to broach this topic, but Alysha had done it on her own.

"You're talking about your system, right? I believe you. Calm down and tell me everything from the beginning."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 506: Deal

Alysha was startled to hear the Innkeeper directly mention her system, but then she looked at him with wonder and praise in her eyes. As expected from someone who could run the Midnight Inn. Even though she never mentioned her secret, he already knew.

"From... from the beginning, yes. I used to live with my older sister, Sebiline, on a planet called X-144. She used to work as a seamstress and I used to go to school and help her out in my free time. But, one day, everything changed. I was in a flea market, and an old man was selling an old necklace. It wasn't that pretty, but I thought it would look nice if I polished it, so I ended up buying it with the money I had saved up.

"When I went home and tried to polish it, the necklace accidentally broke. That's when the system first appeared. It called itself the Desert Farming system, and concluded that I wasn't in a desert, and so it teleported me to one. I... I was trapped..." Alysha suddenly found it hard to speak as she recalled that time, tears welling up in her eyes.

Feeling awkward, Lex offered her a handkerchief, though he did not interrupt her. She gladly took it and, after wiping her eyes, managed to continue the story..

"I was trapped in the desert with no way back. I had no food, no water, no shelter. I thought I was going to die. But fortunately, the system provided me with some water, and seeds that could germinate in the desert, and gave me a quest to grow them. Every day, it only gave me a limited amount of water, some seeds, and instructions on how to grow them.

"I... I didn't know what else to do, so I used to eat some of the seeds and plant the rest. I don't know how long it took, days, weeks, maybe years, who knows, but I was able to grow my first plant. Then I got more and more quests. With no way out and nothing else to do, I continued to plant and grow things in the desert - at least that way I had some food to eat rather than seeds. That is until... I got the quest to sell the grown vegetables. I failed that quest, because I had no one to sell it to. Then I failed the next one. Then the next one. Then... then the system said I have to sell the vegetables, and the quest failure would lead to death."

Alysha trembled as she recalled the moment when she read that quest for the first time. It was... a very difficult day.

"It was by luck that I ran into John, who gave me a key and brought me to the Inn! Here, I was able to sell the vegetables in the Guild room and finally fulfilled the quest. But now, I have another quest, and the punishment for failure is death again."

Alysha looked at the Innkeeper, tears once again swelling in her eyes. "I... I don't want to die. I just want to go back to my sister... I just..."

Alysha wasn't able to continue speaking as she broke down sobbing. Lex didn't move to stop her, and allowed her to vent her feelings as multiple thoughts ran through his mind. First of all, the way in which she got her system was far too different from Lex.

Lex was literally attacked by a shooting star while she got it out of an old necklace. Another difference was that her first few quests didn't threaten death, and only when she repeatedly failed quests did the death threats begin.

He also thought about her planet. X-144 wasn't a planet he had ever been to, but he knew about it. It was in the same star system as X-142. When he linked X-142 to the Inn, he received an option to link all the planets in the star system with the Inn, so long as he paid with MP. He had this option for his other planets as well.

He recalled back when he had only a couple planets linked, he thought about purchasing a link to the earth's moon, which would have cost him around 10,000 MP. Back then, that was an astronomical amount that he could not afford.

The issue now, though, wasn't with the planet X-144, but rather...

"This is indeed a matter I can help you with, but there are a couple of issues we need to address first."

The girl looked up at the Innkeeper with expectant eyes.

"The first thing we need to know is... was the desert you were teleported to on the same planet that you were on, or another planet entirely? Because even if I remove the system, and give you a way to leave the desert, if you're on some unknown, hostile planet, it could cause problems."

"I... I... I don't know. I'd never even left my town before."

Lex paused for a minute as he genuinely thought of a solution, as he didn't want to just leave her hanging. Fortunately, compared to all the problems he had been facing lately, this was an extremely easy one to resolve.

"Alright, I've thought of a solution. I can assign a mission in the Guild room for someone to find your sister and bring her to the Inn. That way, at least for the moment, you two will be reunited. As for your location, we can slowly work on resolving that as well. But first, I have a question for you. Regardless of whatever method we use, you will have to spend some time at the Inn. I can sponsor your time here, but I can also offer you a job, and allow you to become a worker at the Inn. What do you think?"

"Before you answer, though, there is something you need to know. I am not doing all of this out of charity. I can safely remove your system, but in exchange, I will keep the system, and you will have to follow me to the Chamber of Secrets to remove all memory of the system. Is that acceptable to you?"

For once, tears of happiness filled Alysha's eyes and she was unable to stop herself from hugging the Innkeeper! Of course, considering that she had climbed over his table to do so, it left Lex standing quite awkwardly, but she didn't think about that at the moment. In her mind, the only thing she could think of was that she was finally about to be free from that accursed system!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 507: The test

Alysha trembled a little when the Innkeeper held her hand, but she quickly steeled herself. Back at his office, after she had recovered, they had hashed out the details of what to do. Alysha would first try to become an employee of the Inn, for she felt this place was much safer, as well as more interesting than her town back home. If she became an employee, her sister could live with her as well. The two of them would live happily ever after here.

If she couldn't become an employee of the Inn, the Innkeeper would sponsor her stay long enough for her to raise her cultivation, so that when she returned to the desert, she could easily escape on her own.

Moreover, the Innkeeper informed her that he had already placed a request for someone to find 'Sebiline' based on her information about her planet and town. Regardless of what happened with her job, she would soon be reunited with her sister.

So that only left the matter of removing the system from her. To be honest, now that she was about to lose the system, she was able to admit that there were parts of it she would have missed - if she kept her memories. If things had been even slightly different, such as if the system allowed her to teleport to the desert and then back home, she might have actually relished it.

But there was no might when it came to these things. Despite the delicious food it gave her, and the water which, to be honest, was also quite delicious, it was not worth everything it took from her.

It had barely been a minute since the Innkeeper took her hand, and Alysha hadn't even had time to complete her musings, when he took his hand back. A small, shining speck appeared on the tip of his finger, barely larger than a grain of sand.

"Is... is that it?" she asked, mesmerized by the sight. How could something so small have caused her so many problems?

"Indeed, it is," said the Innkeeper, his eyes fixed not at the spec, but at something in the distance. How was Alysha supposed to know that he was reading a system notification of his own?

But the next moment, the speck disappeared from his hand and the Innkeeper looked back at her.

"When you leave this place, you will lose all memory of the system. You will remember your time spent in the desert, and everything else you did there, but the system's involvement will all be erased from your mind. This is for your own protection."

"I... I think it's better like this anyway," she said, looking down at her feet.

"Good luck on your test. You may find me again if you need anything else."

The Innkeeper disappeared, leaving a platinum key in Alysha's hand. For a moment, she found it hard to believe she was free of the system and its endless quests. She tried to pull up its panel, but nothing appeared. She tried again, and only when she was certain it was gone, a smile grew on her face. She crushed the key and disappeared.

When she appeared again, she was standing in what looked like a small guest room. For some reason, she had forgotten everything about her previous life. She forgot her system, the Inn, the Innkeeper, John, her sister, and everything else. But she also did not notice that she had lost her memories.

The next moment, a man stumbled into the room, bloody and injured. Whether it was by design or luck, the man fell right into a nearby chair.

"Guest, you're hurt," she said, alarmed, and quickly walked up to him to inspect his injuries.

As if by magic, a towel, a bottle of water, a sewing needle, and some thread appeared beside her right hand. By her left hand appeared a bell, which she could ring to call her. Behind her appeared a door - a bloody man walking into a room could be scary, and prompt some to escape based on fear of any danger they might bring. Right above her head appeared an ax, poised and ready to chop the man's head off - even in his present condition, Alysha could see some of the jewelry he was wearing. It was worth more money than she'd had her entire life.

Though she did not look around, she instinctively knew all the items that surrounded her and their purposes. Yet she did not hesitate to grab the towel and pressed it against the man's bleeding wound. She took the bottle of water and used it to wash off the other bits of his body covered in blood so she could get a better look to see if there were any more injuries. She was so occupied, she didn't notice that the rest of the items in the room disappeared, besides the sewing needle. She had, miraculously, also forgotten that she was originally very shy and timid.

"Let me be, woman," the man said gruffly. "I'll be fine."

"You're injured and bleeding, with possible concussions. So hold still and do what I say. Keep talking, tell me your name. How did you end up like this?"

The man struggled to get out of her grip, but despite his inhumane strength, for some reason, he was unable to escape her hold. Eventually he gave up, and listened to her.

"My name is Zagan. Some people came into my house and showed a severe lack of decorum. A fight broke out, one thing led to another, and now I'm on a quest for some magic beans that'll lead me to a realm of wonder."

"Your arm is dislocated," interrupted Alysha. "I'll have to pop it back. Here, bite this." She bunched up the towel where it was clean and shoved it into the man's mouth. Before he had an opportunity to protest, she had already popped his joint back in its place.

The man did not release the scream, or even the groan she expected. Instead, he was looking at her with an irritated look.

She shrugged and grabbed the needle and put the thread through it. A strong tolerance meant he wouldn't squirm when she stitched him up.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 508: Seesaw

Lex teleported back to his office filled with impatience! He'd gotten his hands on a system much quicker than he expected, but then he was suddenly hit with a reminder. While his system upgrades, it would be unavailable to him!

That... that could be problematic. Should he delay the upgrade? No, there would never be a good time for that. He just had to start the upgrade and deal with the situation as best he could.

For that, it was best he then go somewhere he did not need to teleport out of. He also took off his host attire and didn't even bother with putting his Clark Kent glasses on.

It'd be okay if he spent some time as himself, right? He scanned the Inn and discovered that William and his group were still at the Midnight manor. For whatever reason, they had not left the manor since they had arrived at the Inn, so all he would have to do was avoid them.

But, even if he didn't, what did it matter? Chances were, William would be just as surprised to see him as he had been.

Pushing aside unnecessary thoughts, Lex once again looked towards the system notification he had been reading earlier.

System notification: New system detected! Analyzing the secondary system. Desert Farming system grade G- detected. Begin assimilation? Y/N.

System notification: Desert Farming system detected. The ignorant assume that a desert is not suitable for farming, but they simply lack the skills. Only the toughest and most valuable plants can grow in the harshest of environments. Whether it is the glaring heat, harsh sunlight, tough soil or loose sand, scarce spirit energy, and severe lack of water, they all allow only the most versatile vegetation to grow, and such vegetation yields the greatest benefits! Shake the cultivation world, and plant cacti that can replace spirit stones, dates that can revive the mortally wounded and shrubs with more energy than a star!

The grade was a lot lower than the previous system Lex had encountered, so hopefully the assimilation would be a lot quicker as well. As for the description... Lex began to suspect that systems also had personalities of their own, and the description came from the systems personality.

"Hey Mary, I'm about to upgrade the system so I'm going to lose connection with it. Will everything at the Inn be alright?"

"Yes, don't worry. Everything existing will continue to operate as usual. If it's anything like last time, the only thing that will be affected is your ability to give new orders, temporarily."

"And I can't teleport to other planets during this time either, right?"

"No, unfortunately not."

"Hmm, in that case, you know what to do. There shouldn't be any problems, considering all our preparations. If anyone wants to meet me, just tell them I'm away. Everything else should continue as normal."

"Understood."

Lex tried to tune into his intuition, to determine if it could give him any warnings about whether he should wait. But it was not responding, which either meant everything was okay, or that in matters related to systems, it didn't work so well.

Not one to keep things waiting, Lex chose to begin the assimilation.

His system interface disappeared, and instead was replaced by a single word: updating.

Lex felt a sense of satisfaction, knowing that his system was about to be upgraded. He wondered what new functions it would get. Considering the low grade of the absorbed system, he might not get so many. Whatever it was, he hoped it would be suitable for an Inn.

But, with his system interface gone, Lex was suddenly out of things to do. Well, not completely. There was one more thing he had been thinking about doing for a long time, one which did not require his identity as the Innkeeper or the functionality of the system.

Cracking his knuckles, Lex began to walk in a certain direction. He calculated how much free time he had. The Grand Prix would be held in two more days, and though he did not expect the system to come back online by then, he should at least be done with his current task. After all, how long would it take?

Instead of taking a golf cart, Lex took his time and casually strolled through the Inn, taking in all the sights. But it did not take long for his stroll to end, for he reached his destination: the Mystery trial.

Since Lex had gotten this unique reward from the system, he had been thinking about trying it out, yet he was always too preoccupied to try. Now was the perfect time.

From what he recalled, the Mystery trial would give each person who entered a different trial based on their skills. The main purpose of the trial was to improve their skills, though when someone completed the trial, they would also get a small reward.

The first entry was free for everyone, and every subsequent entry would cost 500 MP. Lex was slightly curious what his trial would be, but there was no point in wondering. It was much easier to just enter and find out.

Lex walked into the trial and was enveloped in darkness. It seemed like only a moment, but when the darkness retreated, he found himself in one of 7 seats around a rectangular table. Five other people sat around him, and a man in a very iconic mask was sitting at the head of the table, a revolver placed right in front of him.

Lex immediately tried to get up, considering the fact that he had a strong feeling towards where this was heading, yet he could not move. He looked down and saw that his legs were chained to the chair, which had been bolted to the ground.

He looked up once again at the man with the white mask. Fake hair came out from beside the mask, and red circles were drawn on each cheek. Though the red painted lips of the mask did not move, a sound came from behind it.

"Would you like to play a game?" the man asked, his creepy voice giving each person on the table chills.

The mask was from the famous horror movie SeeSaw!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 509: Purpose

Lex looked at the five others who were chained to their chairs as well, but did not recognize any of them. He tried to use his spirit sense to see if he could learn anything else, but discovered that not only did his spirit sense not exist, he had none of his cultivation, either. He was back to being a mortal human.

The revelation did not scare Lex, though it did make him realize the peril of his predicament. He could not just shrug away a shot from that gun, like he had assumed. But since Lex knew death in the Mystery trial would not translate to death in real life, he was not worried. All this meant was that Lex would have to play by the rules of the trial.

Suddenly, another thought occurred to him. Other than polishing whatever skill the trial thought Lex had, this was actually pretty fun. It was like playing a video game, but with ultra realism.

Of course, Lex could only think so because he had long become immune to feeling fear in such situations. Any normal person would be highly intimidated even if they knew the trial would not harm them in real life, because regardless of anything else, it felt real.

"Who are you? What the hell is happening? Do you know who I am? Do you know who my father is?" yelled one of the people tied to the chair with equal measures of anger and fear in his voice.

The others also started struggling to get out of their chairs as panic set in. Yet the man at the head of the table seemed unperturbed. Calmly, he picked up the revolver from the table, and fired a single round into the air, causing everyone to freeze and stare at him in fear.

The tension that filled the room was palpable, and Lex calmly took everything in as he tried to understand the objective of the trial. A faint smell of burnt gunpowder reached him, before it was overpowered by a more revolting smell: the smell of fear. Someone at the opposite end of the table had wet themselves. If it had been someone on Lex's side, he would have at least seen it.

Trying not to let the smell bother him, Lex diverted his attention from the masked man to the other people present. There were three guys and three girls, all of various ages and ethnicities. There did not seem to be a pattern in their selection.

"Good. Now that everyone has calmed down, we can focus on the truly important things."

The man placed his revolver down on the table, and reached into his pocket to pull out a new deck of cards.

"Although, that in itself is such an obtuse statement, is it not? What really is important in life?"

The man talked slowly, emphasizing his pronunciation of each word, as if he could not tolerate a single mistake. Upon noticing that, Lex began noticing other details of the man. His clothes, although not new, were finely pressed without a single crease in them. He was wearing fine, black leather gloves that had the faint indication of use, but remained neat and tidy.

"We hear in the media that it's important to enjoy the small things in life, the little moments. To stop and smell the roses, enjoy the journey along the way, and such."

He neatly unwrapped the plastic, sealing the case for the cards, before taking the cards out and removing the two jokers. Then he began shuffling.

"I have my own theory about what's important in life, though. I think, in life, it's important to live, rather than just exist."

His technique in shuffling formed an even rhythm, the sound of new cards smoothly sliding over one another, forming a soft din in the silence between the man's words.

"But what does that even mean - to live? It's philosophical, but at the same time, I think it's rather simple. It means to do things with purpose. To wake up early when you can sleep in, for you have a direction. To wear a certain set of clothes over another, because they will serve you better in different circumstances. To have each and every action filled with meaning, all working towards a specific goal."

Lex wondered if the monologue was for him to hear specifically, or it was just the character of the man at the head of the table. He still could not exactly determine what his trial's purpose was.

"But in the mundane life, we often confuse simply existing with having purpose. We wake up early to go to work to earn money to eat food to continue living so that at some given interval of life you may experience pleasure. There are a lot of actions there, and they all give the illusion of purpose, but ultimately, it is just an illusion.

"So then, we now identify another aspect of life that is important. To try to differentiate between living with purpose and just existing. But for beginners, it can be difficult. So let's try something simple, hmm? The purpose right now is to survive, and the action is to play a game. So, in summary, let's play a game with the very important purpose of survival."

The man quickly began sliding cards to each of the people chained up to the chair, his actions fluid and precise. Even though Lex was at the far end of the table, three cards smoothly slid across the table to him, stopping just within the limited reach of his chained hands.

Various thoughts went through Lex's mind as he absorbed everything that was happening around him, from the softly sobbing girls to the hyperventilating old man. But, most of all, Lex was observing the actions of the man at the head of the table. Though he had not yet discovered the purpose of the trial, he decided to stop observing silently and try to participate. After all, he doubted his special skill was just playing games.

Before the man was able to put away the deck and continue his speech, Lex spoke.

"Didn't you just say we should live life with purpose? So why are you depriving yourself of the purpose you're providing us? Deal some cards for yourself and join us. Or else, how will you know if you're simply existing as a dealer, or actually living life?"

A few things changed as soon as Lex spoke, and he immediately understood what the purpose of the trial was.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 510: Bond

Various graphs and numbers appeared above the heads of everyone else at the table and looking at them, Lex was able to clearly determine the mental condition of everyone there. Suffice to say that almost everyone was doing horribly - or so it seemed on the surface.

Other than Lex and the man at the head of the table, both of whom were relatively calm, there were two other people with surprising emotions. One was the old man who was hyperventilating.

Although it seemed like his condition was terrible, in fact, he was quite calm internally. He was using his age and his condition to try to draw sympathy from the group, for he could see no other advantage he could gain at the moment. The other was a girl who was sitting directly opposite to Lex.

She was as pale as a ghost and trembling like she had a cold, but internally she was paying close attention to everyone. Unlike the old man who was only trying to gain sympathy, she was filled with a cold and calculating calm, ready to pull down anyone else to save herself. And if she couldn't be saved... she would bring down everyone with her.

But while the graphs and numbers appeared suddenly as he spoke, and even changed when he was done speaking, a few seconds later, they disappeared. It seemed that Lex would only be able to determine their mental state as a reaction to things he said. In which case it was evident that the trial had something to do with Lex's ability to speak, or perhaps maneuver the situation based on what he said. But he was not clear of what the objective was.

Was it to somehow simply survive, or was it to keep the entire group alive as well?

Lex could not see the man's expression due to it being hidden behind the mask, but from the fact that he had stopped for a few seconds and continued to stare at Lex was also a clue. He had to have a clear idea of what was going through the other's head if he was going to manipulate him.

Due to the continued silence, fear filled the hearts of those sitting on the table, and everyone looked towards Lex with hearts filled with anger and grievance, but Lex maintained his casual demeanor.

"You are not wrong," the man finally said, dealing himself three cards as well. Since everyone's cards were upside down, no one could tell what they were, and since the pack was new, there was no tell or indicators on the cards at all.

"Why should I deprive myself of glorious purpose? We should all go through this journey together. Let me explain the rules to everyone. This is a special game, made just for us. You see, since we're learning about life, I had to emulate it as well. Some people are born with more luck than others, while others use the hand dealt to them and turn things around.

"So, like life, you all have been dealt a hand. The game will consist of three rounds. In each round, you may look at your cards and trade one."

The man took the top card from the deck and slid it to the center of the table, still upside down.

"The only premise is, you cannot look at the card you're trading for. Starting with someone random, everyone will take a turn to either trade for the card in the center of the table, or pass. If you trade, you put a card upside down, and take the card at the center of the table. What you get... will once again be dependent on luck. Once everyone has had a turn, the second round will start, and I will give everyone one more card. Like this, we will do a total of 3 rounds.

"At the end of the 3 rounds, everyone reveals their hand, and we move on to the next aspect of life: survival of the fittest. We'll use poker rules to determine which hand is the best, but instead of looking for the best, we'll be looking for the person with the weakest hand. Whoever has the weakest hand will... recuse themselves from future games, lets say. Since we're repeating the number 3 so many times, let's say we'll play a total of 3 games.

"How does that sound? Previously, everyone had about a 50% chance to survive, which made the game feel pretty intense. But, since I've been asked to join the game, I'm sure it will be even more interesting. Let's hope I'm not the first one to lose, leaving you all tied to your chairs, unable to get out."

The entire group collectively gave Lex a death stare, but the man himself didn't seem to be too bothered by it. Instead, his gaze was stuck on the cards he had received. Originally, he was wondering what strategy to use, which is why he picked up his cards. But mere seconds after he picked up his cards, the numbers on them disappeared.

It was evident what the trial was telling him. He would not escape this predicament using cards. He had to rely on his words to manipulate the situation, and somehow free himself and the others.

This was... actually quite exciting. With a smile, Lex put down his cards and looked the man at the head of the table in the eyes.

"That's quite the game," he said warmly. "Should we introduce ourselves? No fun in playing with strangers."

The moment he said those words, information appeared in his head about his identity and back story for this trial.

"The name's Bond. Covalent Bond," said Lex, with a smile that was much too unusual for the given situation.

One of the girls at the table burst into tears the moment Lex introduced himself, making the tense situation feel awkward.

"I don't know her, I swear," said Lex once again.

The first thing he had to do was take the masked man's power away. Psychotic people who would do such a thing would love the feeling of being in control, so Lex had to first take that control away from him. Lex was confident that the man wouldn't break his own rules and harm Lex prematurely.

But Lex also knew he only had 1 game to get out of this predicament. After all, with blank cards, he couldn't really hope to win the game normally.