

Innkeeper 511

The Innkeeper

Chapter 511: Strategy

Everyone ignored Lex's paltry attempt at cracking a joke. Sure, the timing of the girl bursting into tears and him introducing himself set him up for a gag, but no one felt like entertaining stupid jokes. Or any jokes, for that matter.

That much was clear to Lex, even if he didn't look at the data that everyone revealed in response to his words. But that didn't matter. What was important was to break the environment that the man at the head of the table was trying to create and steal the momentum of the situation.

By having him participate in the game, Lex had lowered his standing in the situation, and while they had not really become equals, since Lex was tied up and the man had the gun, it did bring them closer together.

"Fun?" the man asked, picking up his cards and looking at them. "Sure, I guess that's important, too. While it is not on the same level as living with purpose, there is no reason why you cannot learn to enjoy the difficult moments in life. It'll even make them go by easier."

Slowly and deliberately, the man removed a single one of the cards in his hand and swapped it for the one in the center of the table.

Despite staring as closely as possible to the man's eyes, Lex was unable to determine his emotions in response to the card he picked up.

"You can call me... the Game Master."

The Game Master paused and turned to look at the girl on his left. "You can go next. The round will progress clockwise."

The girl was pale with fear and trembling softly in her seat. There must have been a hit of adrenaline when she realized what situation she was in, but it was already wearing off, leaving her exhausted.

It was clear that she did not have the best physical health, and probably not the best mental health either.

"Relax, just look at your cards and introduce yourself," said Lex. "I don't see how you could make the situation any worse."

The woman with puffy red eyes looked at Lex, then at her cards. She managed to peek at them before she put them back down and whispered, "Paula."

It seemed she was only capable of saying so much and didn't intend to exchange any cards. With the formation of some kind of pattern, the next two managed to introduce themselves as well, and both of them exchanged cards, finally bringing the focus onto Lex, who was next.

All eyes on the table were on him as Lex appeared to be choosing which card to exchange. Lex thought the Game Master might become impatient with Lex's actions, but no such thing happened.

Lex quickly analyzed the man in his head based on the few clues he had picked up. The man was extremely neat and tidy, to the point it became a peculiarity or obsession. He also seemed to have a logic driving his actions, however twisted it might be, but Lex was able to influence him within the realm of his own logic.

He was extremely patient, as not once had he lashed out at Lex for misbehaving, nor had he tried to interfere with any of Lex's actions. He also had a bit of an ego, although he may have confused his own inflated ego for self confidence or perhaps an inherent superiority. Lex was able to derive this based on the condescending manner in which he explained to all his victims why his actions were full of purpose as well as filled with benevolence to the survivors, or as he perceived it, those who had discovered the meaning of having purpose behind their actions.

It seemed that Lex's original plan to make him act out would be unlikely, due to his extreme patience and self confidence. But that did not mean he could not be manipulated. He clearly had very strong emotions regarding his ideology, regardless of how flawed it was. As long as Lex played by the Game Masters rules, he could use his ideology against him.

With a new plan of action decided, Lex's smile widened, just a bit, and he looked the Game Master right in his eyes.

Lex mimicked the way in which the Game Master pulled out one of his cards and began to replace it.

"Although you all already know my name, let me introduce myself a little bit more. I am a very big believer in attaining positive results, and I believe the greatest positive result can better be achieved with quality, rather than quantity."

Lex picked up the card that was facing down and looked at it. The number on the card disappeared, but Lex grinned widely, as if he had gotten exactly what he wanted. A layer of subtlety was added to the game now, as the person who played right before Lex knew exactly what card she had placed. Based on Lex's grin, she began calculating what hand Lex was trying to build to get an advantage. At the same time, whoever would pick up the card after Lex would believe that they would get a hint of the cards Lex did not need.

None of this had anything to do with the Game Master, but it had vast implications on the fluctuating emotions of the group. Lex could not forget them while he tried to manipulate the Game Master, for they were variables as well. Some of them had plans and strategies of their own, and Lex had to make sure to have them work with him instead of against him.

This... was more complicated than he had thought, but Lex decided to continue with the plan he had concocted, and adapt as the situation demanded.

"For example," Lex continued to speak. "After this game ends, there will be four survivors with a new understanding of living with purpose. The world will be changed for it, or at least the worlds of those four people will be changed. But is the value of four people with a new understanding greater... or is one extremely capable and driven person developing a deep and profound appreciation of living with purpose more?"

Instead of looking at the Game Master, Lex looked at the next person in line after him and asked, "What do you think? Which is worth more?"

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Chapter 512: Provoke

The person sitting next to Lex looked him in the eyes. Although he had been scared and panicked when he woke up in his current predicament, he had calmed down enough to think. It was clear to him, and everyone else, that Lex was trying to do something.

Most likely he was trying to escape, which made the most sense. But he honestly saw no way they could get out of the situation. In which case, what he had to do was to make sure he didn't get dragged into any extra trouble.

"I think the more the merrier," the man managed to say without stuttering. "One person alone gaining an appreciation for living with purpose is just one person alone. How can he compete with more people?"

The man didn't know what purpose Lex had, but it seemed like he wanted to assure his own survival in exchange for giving up the rest, so he couldn't agree to what Lex said. But he did not realize that he had reacted exactly how Lex wanted.

"You know what, you're right. I was wrong. I was too caught up in the quality versus quantity thing, but there's no reason why it can't be both."

No matter how weak and hurried it was, Lex wanted to set a precedent for someone changing their views when encountering a better alternative. He did not expect to have the Game Master change his plans by reasoning with his better judgment. No, by doing this, Lex was a seed in the Game Masters subconscious, letting him think that changing his views was an option.

He did not know how much such a thing would help, but he needed to get all the aid he could because his actual plan was a lot more aggressive and could backfire just as easily. Of course, knowing the Game Masters emotions due to the data provided by the trial would make it much easier for him to achieve such a thing.

For the rest of the round, Lex did not speak, and maintained a casual, yet confident smile. The remaining players introduced themselves and exchanged some cards, not saying anything unnecessary.

When it was once again the Game Master's turn, he turned to look at Lex, as if to see if he had anything to say. Without averting his gaze, the man picked up the deck and in a familiar, fluid motion, slid one more card to each person.

"Can you feel your heart beating?" the Game Master asked. He was likely addressing the whole group, but his eyes never left Lex.

"Is the weight of your decision haunting your every thought? Do you feel... alive? But are you really living with purpose, and making decisions for that purpose, or are you still just... existing? Is it just enough to pick up cards and hope you have the best hand? What about... messing with others to influence what they do? For example, what would you think if I tell you, I only need one more King, and I'll be all but certain of passing the round."

Many expressions across the table suddenly changed, and one of the contestants even pulled his cards closer together. But his sudden and obvious movement drew a lot of attention, and he suddenly realized that he had revealed at least one of his cards to the group. The semblance of calmness that Lex had managed to create earlier was already gone.

"Now why would you do that, I wonder?" mused Lex aloud, not even bothering to look at his new card. "What is the purpose behind your action? Is it to make the game more aligned with the unpredictable nature of the world, or is it just to provide a tinge of pleasure to a small man with a wounded ego and inferiority complex?"

Everyone turned to look at Lex with horror in their eyes. He had been vocal from before, but he had never insulted the Game Master like that. He was just asking for death!

"What about you?" asked the Game Master, his voice perfectly calm still. "What purpose is guiding your actions? Do you want to provoke me? Do you think you can somehow escape the inevitable show of hands at the end if you find some other way out?"

The Game Master picked up the new card he had given to himself and nodded, before adding it to the ones in his hand.

"Do I even need to provoke you?" Lex asked, shaking his head. "It won't matter if I do. For someone who speaks so much about living with purpose instead of just existing, it is fairly obvious that you're also merely existing within your own prison."

"Existing? I am not existing!" the Game Master said with enthusiasm bordering on aggression. This was the first time he showed any emotion other than absolute calm.

"I am breaking every norm, every convenience, every rule just to follow my purpose! My existence itself is reeked with purpose."

"Sure you are," said Lex in a sarcastic tone. "I am the one living with purpose, not you. You may think that you are, because how out of the ordinary your actions seem, but I can see right through you. You don't believe in 'purpose'. You just believe in indulging your mental illness.

"And no, I'm not referring to kidnapping and threatening people as mental illness. No, I'm referring to the part of your brain that defined the perfect rules you have to live by. The part that perfectly defined what 'purpose' is. The part of your mind that told you doing things a certain way is 'living with conscious intention' instead of a sickness. The part of your brain that carefully designed each stage of this game we're playing. I bet you even have a few ways to make the 'game' more interesting, already planned. At the relevant round, you'll slowly introduce more and more complications, all the while telling yourself that you're just adding more layers to the game to promote the players to live with 'purpose'

"I bet it's not even limited to that is it? I bet your 'purpose' has infiltrated every facet of your life."

Lex chuckled as he noticed the Game Master softly trembling beneath his mask, though the numbers above his head clearly let Lex know how the man was feeling. He continued to press on.

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Chapter 513: On purpose

The room was very still and not even the sound of breathing could be heard. Everyone held even their breaths as they silently listened to Lex, but dared to not even look at him. This guy was about to die, they were sure of it!

"It's a strange thing, isn't it, to be a prisoner of your own mind, but have the illusion that you are free. I bet you always do everything exactly the same way and think that you've designed the most efficient system, but the truth is, you have to do things exactly the way your mind likes it.

"You're holding your cards in your left hand, but you always pick them out with your right. I'm guessing when you're putting on gloves, you always put on the one on your right hand first."

For the first time, there were rapid fluctuations in the numbers above the Game Masters head, and Lex knew he was on the right path. He had to push him, just enough.

"I bet it's even more than that. I bet you get dressed in the exact same order every time, but you probably don't even realize it. Let me guess, pants first, then the shirt. Are you... dressing up like that on purpose, or are you just existing within the prison that is your mind?"

Lex stared intently at the numbers atop the Game Master, and knew it was time to stop. He had primed the man, but he couldn't immediately begin the next stage of the plan. Everything had to be done systematically.

Leaning back in his chair, Lex made eye contact with the person whose turn it was next and gave her a subtle nod. She hesitated, but seeing how no one was speaking or doing anything, she picked up her cards and chose not to exchange anything.

Although her actions were minimal, the chains that had wrapped her legs clinked with every movement she made. It was not a silent affair even though she did almost nothing, and the tense atmosphere amplified the noise tenfold. But neither Lex said anything, nor did the Game Master.

The next person, however, did not choose to mimic her predecessor's actions. Not only did she exchange her turn by saying, "I have two kings."

Everyone in the room turned to look at her, Lex and the Game Master included. There was no way to determine if she was telling the truth, but her choice of statement was a spark on a bed of dry leaves.

Lex chuckled and said, "what a coincidence, I have a king as well."

"Are you just taking every possible opportunity to try and tick me off?" the Game Master asked, hiding his irritation well.

"Unlike you, who is bound by the rules and has no freedom to do what he wants, I can do whatever suits my needs. But you... you can't hurt me even if you want to, because that goes against the rules for the game, doesn't it? I mean, you could try to prove that your actions follow your purpose by killing me, and

not some invisible rules that hold you in a prison, but then it'll just seem to everyone like you're just trying to vent. No one will believe you.

"And after that, the whole point of this exercise will be moot. Everyone will follow along with your rules and play your game. But they won't be learning to have their actions be motivated by purpose. No, they'll just be learning to silence any and all complaints and just follow the invisible rules holding them in place. They'll be the perfect puppets for society."

Lex leaned forward, as much as he could, and looked at the Game Master dead in the eyes.

"The truth is, buddy, of all of us here, you're the one living with the least amount of purpose. I might be the one in chains, but you're the real prisoner. Because the worst comes to worst, I'll die. But you... you can either die from your own game, a prisoner to the rules that your mind created, or you'll survive, and continue to live as a prisoner."

Lex paused for a moment, to let his words sink in, before leaning back once again. "Unless that is, you prove once and for all, you're not the prisoner. No, you're the one choosing your own actions, even if your brain, your captor, is telling you otherwise. Break the rules of the game completely. Take control of your own life - by ending your own life."

Lex was looking at the Game Master with eager eyes. He could see the numbers above everyone and he knew the emotions that were running rampant in the room. He also knew that his final delivery had been a little too premature, and that the Game Master wouldn't end up doing it. But he had done that on purpose. Lex no longer cared about completing the Mystery trial. No, he wanted to go through the same trial again and again, learning how everyone reacted to his different approaches. This time, he played the Game Master, and he knew that if he had done things just slightly differently, he would have won. Next time, he wanted to see if he could get one of the other captors to give up on the game on purpose.

His greatest skill, as it turned out, was reading people and having them do exactly what he wanted. Perhaps this was a skill he always had, or something he had learnt while dealing with so many precarious situations at the Inn. Regardless, he was having fun now, and he wasn't going to stop anytime soon.

Back at the Midnight Inn, Larry ended up leaving William and his brothers because his girlfriend had finally arrived. What he didn't know was that after he left, William disappeared from the Inn.

It would be impossible for him to reach the William family home planet within a few years minimum because he was in a different galaxy, but that didn't mean he couldn't contact them from where he was.

Using a special formation, he allowed a projection of himself to appear within a sacred temple, guarded by his family's most trustworthy and prominent members.

"Ancestor!" one of them immediately exclaimed in alarm. This was the first time he had made an appearance in that guard's lifetime, but he didn't care about such things.

"Find all the information we have on a planet called Earth. And get the family registry while you're at it. I want to know if I have a descendant called Lex Williams."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 514: Family

Damian Arban William, Lex's grandfather, was filled with both excitement and fear as he hurried to the Ancestor Temple! He was excited, for their family had been ignored by their ancestor for too long, not that he could blame him. Even with his prestigious position in the family, he himself was only an Earth Immortal. That meant any common general in the Jotun Army was stronger than him based on cultivation alone.

Naturally, just because he was an Earth Immortal, it did not mean that was the peak strength of their family - far from it. But it was generally accepted that they were only equal to a normal noble family of the Empire, and not one of the top four like they should have been.

So, he harbored a great hope that their ancestors' attention would spark the fire of their family's growth.

But the tinge of fear in his heart was not without cause as well. He had heard that the ancestor had asked about Lex - his grandson who he knew absolutely nothing about.

His greatest fear was that his son had done something to cause the ancestors ire. After their last meeting, his son and his wife had completely disappeared. Let alone him, even his three granddaughters did not know where they had gone.

But there was no point in guessing. He took a moment to straighten himself out, before he hurriedly entered the temple.

The ancestor's projection was standing with his hands held behind his back, an impassive look on his face. He did not recognize Damian, for it had been too long since he interacted with the family.

"Great ancestor, my name is Damian, the current presiding family head. I have retrieved all the information you desired."

"Tell me about earth," William said directly, not displaying any of the friendliness he did around his brothers.

"It's a planet that falls under the William family territory in the Milky Way, and is deep inside a Dead zone. At the behest of the empire, a prisoner, Bastet, had been kept on the planet as it was one of the few inhabited planets in the deadzone. Due to the lacking spiritual presence on the planet, the prisoner could not recover enough strength to leave without the aid of technology. It..."

"Forget that. What I want to know is, are there any members of the William family on earth? The 'Lex Williams', I mentioned, is he a descendant?"

Damian smiled awkwardly, but did not hide anything.

"There... was a descendant living on Earth, my son, Leon. He got married to someone from that planet and started a family there. I believe... Lex is his son."

"Started a family on earth? Why did he start a family in the deadzone?" William was genuinely confused. There was no real benefit to such a thing. There were a few rumors that cultivating in an area lacking spirit energy strengthened the cultivation as it was forced to do more work for the same results, but there was no actual proof.

Damian cleared his throat, but reported the situation honestly and without adding any bias to make himself look good or bad.

William listened silently, without expressing any approval or disapproval. He was the last person qualified to comment on family drama. Instead, his focus remained on Lex for two very specific reasons.

One was obviously the fact that they had a similar appearance. That in itself should not have mattered, except that he had originally suspected a similar appearance was a sign of him unlocking the bloodline William had created. The second was the name on the top of the Guest Registry. He still did not think his descendant had any real connection to the person whose name was atop the list, but there was no harm in investigating.

As for the bloodline matter...

"Your suspicion about him awakening the bloodline is probably incomplete. If his mother really is as skilled as you say, and was able to give her 3 daughters all exceptional skills, then it's likely that not only did Lex unlock his bloodline, it may have undergone a mutation."

Damian was startled, for he had not even considered such a thing. Successful bloodline mutations were exceedingly rare because any mutation would usually result in the death of whoever had it. A successful mutation meant an evolution of a bloodline... that his incredibly powerful ancestor was able to make. Such a thing... it was impossible, right?

"Make a file, list down every major thing that has happened in the family in the last few thousand years. I'll be coming back soon."

The hologram disappeared, and Damian breathed a sigh of relief that the ancestor did not blame him. But his mind quickly went to the matter about Lex. Even if it was a bloodline evolution, there was no need to hide Lex from them. He suspected the matter was even more complicated than that.

Adrus was on top of the world! From the moment he had AI take over his cultivation technique, his real progress had been amazing! He suspected it would take a couple of days at most to enter the next realm.

To celebrate, he had come to the Midnight Inn, and upon the insistence of a few friends, entered the Henali Portal. Apparently, its VR was ultra realistic and would allow him to feel like he was exploring the universe!

But unbeknownst to him, the moment he entered the portal, a hidden signal was sent out. Protected by the system, his location at the Inn had been hidden, but his origin on Earth could not be protected.

But nothing else happened afterwards. Adrus continued to enjoy the portal, and his cultivation technique kept running in the background. Several hours later, when he exited the portal, he had a lavish meal with a few other friends and decided to partake in the Inns festival.

Life had never been this good for him, and it was bound to only get better in the future.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 515: Something new

Lex exited the Mystery trial 8 hours later, finally having completed the trial. It was a genuinely interesting experience, and he learnt a lot. Moreover, he would call the 'reward' anything but small or insignificant. Although he had yet to try it out, he gained a 6th sense for detecting people's emotions in reaction to something he said.

Well, to be fair, the actual 6th sense was very vague and weak, but it was drastically amplified by Lex's intuition. But even without the gift, Lex had gained a whole new perspective about his ability to influence people with his words. In the end, he had completed the trial by convincing the Game Master that the only way to actually prove that he was motivated by purpose was to break his own rules and set them free.

He had tried a few other tactics which did not contribute towards the trial, but did provide him with unique experiences. After all, he would never harm an innocent person in real life.

Lex was wondering if he should go try out his ability or spend some more time enjoying himself when he, unexpectedly, heard a familiar sound.

New notification:

System upgrade complete! System status updated:

System: Midnight Inn

System Grade: Divine (broken ~ SSS - B+)

System Owner: Lex Williams

System functionality: 14%

System self-repair time: 33,310 billion years

New Notification:

New features unlocked. New features include:

Desert Farm

Well of Invigoration

The system was back online! In a single day!

Lex was surprised, but after looking at his notification he realized that it was probably because the system he absorbed was too weak. His system functionality had only improved 2% and the self-repair time had also only gone down by 2 billion. The system grade hadn't even changed.

Shaking his head, Lex turned and looked at the two new features of the Inn.

Desert Farm

A farm where desert plants can be grown, in addition to any other plants. None desert plants undergo an unpredictable mutation to grow in this farm. All plants that grow in the desert farm have additional medicinal, nutritional or spiritual properties.

Well of Invigoration

A well with water that has special properties which speeds up plants growth without causing any adverse effects. It also has mild medicinal properties if drunk directly, and can heal hidden injuries within the body.

There were only two new features, but Lex liked them a lot more than the ones he got from the Murder System! Moreover this would be more beneficial to the day to day operations of the Inn. Lex was already dissatisfied with the kind of ingredients the Inn had, as they could not provide him any nutrition now that he was in the Golden Core realm. With this, he now had the opportunity to grow ingredients of a high enough level to satisfy himself now, and in the future as well.

Of course, it wasn't as if he wasn't planting crops that targeted Golden core cultivators even now. But the difference was, their maturity period was phenomenally long. Even with all the advantages the Inn provided, it would take well over a year for them to mature. Maybe now, with the water from the well, that period could be sped up.

Lex smiled and disappeared, teleporting to the turtle in his Host Attire. The turtle had buried itself in the ground, with only its head above the ground. Lex did not even try to question what bizarre thing the turtle was doing now, and instead got right to the point.

"I'm opening up a new farm, but it will be in a desert environment. It can cause mutations to normal plants, and provides a huge boost to plants that grow in a desert environment to begin with. I also have a new well that can boost the speed of plant growth. I thought it would interest you to know."

For a moment, the turtle did not react, but then it turned to look at Lex.

"Oh dear, oh dear. That sounds lovely, but I have run into a small little bit of a problem."

Even as the Innkeeper, Lex raised an eyebrow as he looked at the turtle in curiosity. The turtle had... run into a problem? This was a first.

"After all my time at the Inn, I have grown a lot. I am ready to grow to the next cultivation level. But my age is too young, my body has not grown enough yet. I will need to eat a few Shining Irisberry fruits to allow my body to grow. If I don't get them soon... I will fall asleep for a few hundred years until my body is ready to grow."

That was indeed a huge problem. He could not afford to allow the turtle to fall asleep, he was extremely dependent on it.

"I'll take care of it," said Lex, and teleported away. He immediately thought of the Infinity Emporium, as it was his best bet at getting it quickly. But he decided to check out the fruit on the Henali portal first to get an idea of how rare it was.

Yet when he teleported to the portal, he paused and turned his head in a certain direction. His intuition was acting up, telling him something major was about to happen! Unable to identify the cause, he scanned the Inn, and noticed something odd. Ragnar was standing alone in his abode, wearing nothing but a cotton tunic. This was the first time Lex saw the man without his armor, and discovered that the previously seemingly buff man had actually just been wearing very thick armor. In actuality, he had a very toned physique.

But the general changing out of his armor was not enough to alarm Lex's intuition. No, it was the dark cloud that was forming above his head that attracted Lex's attention. Unlike all the previous tribulations Lex had seen, this one was different. Black lightning streaked around the cloud, building up its strength.

Lex had no idea what kind of tribulation Ragnar was about to encounter, but it was definitely much more dangerous than the ones he had seen before. Yet the man was not using a tribulation room.

With nothing but his courage supporting him, the general looked up into the sky. There was no hesitation in his eyes.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 516: The back that will never bend

It was not just Lex whose attention was attracted towards the unusual tribulation cloud. Most of the demons who had already passed through their tribulation and survived looked over. Hundreds of beasts looked up in fear as their strong instincts were kicking up. Jotun, who was having an important meeting with his wife, was also alarmed, and quickly exited the manor and flew up into the air. The guard who had replaced the griffin looked there as well, though it did not display the same shock as the others.

Somewhere in the crowd of guests, Booty looked up into the sky. Every time he saw lightning, he felt nervous. The captain of the Iron heart pirates was about to enter the Immortal realm, but he had already seen too many fail in their tribulations. Every time he saw one more, he felt his heart tremble.

For a time, the entire Inn came to a standstill as they looked up at the ominous black lightning.

Lex, who was also watching the spectacle closely, however, did not just sit and watch. His intuition was warning him that whatever protection he had given the abode was not enough, and so silently, he began arranging more formations around Ragnar's abode.

The formations were not to protect Ragnar from the tribulations, since the man himself had opted not to enter the tribulation room. Instead, it was to contain the damage within the confines of the abode itself. But the thing was... he added one formation, then 10, then 50, but the warning from his intuition never ceased.

The level of formations available to Lex, even with the extra capabilities of the event panel, were not enough to contain the danger of this lightning.

As the sound of rolling thunder swept across the Inn, Lex suddenly began to panic. Without thinking too much, Lex directly spent 10 billion MP on smashing as many formations down as possible!

But he did not have time to evaluate if that was enough. The sound of the thunder changed, as if the heaven itself was releasing a growl aimed at Ragnar. Dozens of formations around the abode were thoroughly crushed just from the sound.

But the process was not slow as all this happened faster even than anyone, immortals and mortals alike, could understand. Then the lightning struck, a single black bolt aiming directly for Ragnar.

If he had wanted to defend, he should have done so already, for it was too late now even for him.

The black lightning bearing the wrath of heaven and hell bore down on the lone man. Existence itself seemed to fracture where the lightning passed, leaving behind a trail of miniscule cracks in space. At that moment, the air ceased to exist, and all light was destroyed. Despite the intense power and heat of the lightning, there were no flames in its aftermath, for the very existence of fire had been destroyed.

In that moment, despite the protection of the Inn, everyone, the emperor, devils and even Lex included, suffered from a hallucination. For a moment, they saw an impossible tide of darkness swallowing up the universe itself, filled with righteous fury. But in front of that darkness that swallowed everything, there was a single, miniscule speck that remained undeterred. It was not the flame of hope, nor the prayers of a trillion meditating monks, nor the blessing of some deity that remained unmoving in front of that invading abyss.

No, it was a man in a simple cotton tunic. Even as the world faded into nothingness, even as the emotions of everyone watching faded, even at the very end of things, his back did not bend.

The hallucination changed. They saw a young man standing side by side with a billion soldiers. They saw war. They saw death. They saw defeat. They saw a sea of endless demon corpses, and they saw a young recruit alive, crying because he was buried under the bodies of his comrades, who had given up everything to let him live.

The scene changed. They saw retreating spaceships. They saw bleeding soldiers. They felt the endless silence of space, and in it, they saw demons in the form of space worms chasing after them. They saw an escape vessel heading towards the demons while the other ships escaped, and a skinny, injured soldier with nothing but a blaster and a broken sword.

They saw a fight that should have been suicide. Then they saw another. Then they saw a hundred more.

They saw a skinny, fragile back slowly gain muscle and grow stronger. They saw one impossible tide of death crash against a lone soldier again and again, only to be the one to retreat itself.

Then the hallucination, which had seemed millennia long but had not even been a fraction of a second, ended. Most did not see what happened next. Even Lex's mind was not fast enough to process what happened. But due to the feedback from the Inn, the image of what happened was imprinted in his mind!

Ragnar did not flinch, nor did he look away. The black lightning struck him in the face, resulting in an explosion that completely decimated the abode around him.

Though Lex had long stopped trying to depend on luck, somehow, his luck had held that day as all the formations he had put up had been destroyed, save the very last one.

The cloud above the abode dissipated, as if it had never been there, and the ominous pressure that Lex had been feeling disappeared.

In its wake, it had left behind a site of utter destruction. There was not even a cloud of smoke covering the area, for everything in that space had been utterly destroyed, from dust to the very air molecules.

Well, it had destroyed almost everything, for Ragnar still stood there, his posture completely unchanged. There was not a single rip on his tunic, and though his face was covered in blood, there wasn't even the slightest indication of pain on his face. His eyes were so calm that he may as well have taken a stroll in the park.

After a couple of seconds, he finally reacted by cracking his neck. Then he walked out of the confines of what had been the abode, silently admiring the fact that the scope of destruction had been strictly restricted to his abode. The Innkeeper was indeed impressive.

He summoned his personal hologram and said, "please deliver my message to the Innkeeper. There was a devil who was challenging me before my tribulation. I would like to challenge him in the Murder Grounds."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 517: Ambition

The festive mood at the Inn had come to a pause. There was no fear that filled the air, but everyone had to take some time to settle their emotions after what they had just experienced.

While everyone had experienced the same hallucination, and they could guess that it had been caused by the black lightning, they had no idea who that person they had hallucinated about was or if what they saw was even true. But regardless of those details, there was no one who could deny that the vision had their blood boiling.

Everyone was suddenly in the mood to train or fight intense battles and somehow vent their raging emotions. There were very few who actually knew that the person in the hallucinations was actually Ragnar, mostly because they recognized him from pictures of his youth.

Alexander was one of them, and while he displayed no outward emotion, inside he was filled with a burning passion. He did not want to just be strong, he wanted to be the strongest! Only by learning from such a man could he achieve that dream.

Marlo too felt his blood boiling, but he easily suppressed it. What was going through his head was completely unknown, even to his wife. All anyone could see him doing was sitting laxly on a sofa, twiddling his thumbs. But although he looked completely relaxed, the fire in his eyes spoke otherwise. There was a plan brewing in his mind.

"Who was that?" asked the empress as she flew to Jotun, her voice hiding bits of praise and admiration.

"Our future son-in-law," Jotun replied with a casual smile.

While everyone was experiencing different things, Lex's mind was like a tumultuous sea. First and foremost, he needed to learn about that tribulation! What the hell was that? If he had to spend 10 billion MP per strike of that black lightning, and a few more people underwent a similar tribulation, he would once again be completely broke!

His current wealth was at 70 billion MP. He had earned quite a bit during the festival, and lately he had especially been earning a lot from the 1% transaction fee in the Guild room. He thought it was swimming in cash, but it appeared far from the truth.

But Lex quickly calmed down. The advantage was still with him. If he wanted to boost his earnings...

With a wave of his hand, all the hidden entrances to the various Minor realms in the Inn became easier to find. He speculated it would take just a few more hours at most for people to find the first one. Moreover, the Grand Prix was coming soon. If past experiences had been anything to go by, Lex would be earning a lot soon enough.

It was then that Mary informed him about Ragnar's request for a challenge in the Murder Ground, and a capitalistic gleam flashed through Lex's eyes. He just spent 10 billion on the man. It should be okay if he earned a little something back, right?

In the spaceship above the Inn, all the children were going absolutely wild! It was not fear that had gripped them, although for the younger ones that had initially been the case. But as they recovered from the hallucination and recalled where they were, something else happened. They began playing a game of war!

Since the children had formed various gangs and factions, and had marked certain playgrounds as their home bases within the ship, they were now fighting a relentless war with pool noodles as their weapons.

But not all kids were participating in the game. As it so happened, all the leaders of the various factions the kids had formed were sitting together in a conference room.

Some were sipping apple juice, and some were eating chocolate pudding, while others still were fiddling with fidget spinners. But while some of them had become victims to their short attention spans, most of them were paying close attention to the person sitting at the head of the conference table.

Like them, he was a kid, but his vision, his ambition, and most of all, his ingenious ideas had captivated them. He was not waiting for them to grow up before doing big things. No, he was building a network right now. The most expansive, secret and diverse information network in the Origin realm was beginning to take shape, and at its head sat Roland.

Previously, he had sold newspapers in the Crystal realm. At the Midnight Inn he had joined the Midnight newsroom. But after spending some time here, and upon noticing the vast resources available at the Inn, his hidden passion had been flamed awake.

Since he was in the news business, he should take advantage of the biggest and most unsuspecting resource available, children. Everyone openly revealed their secrets in front of kids, because who would ever expect them to interfere, or even remember? It was not even their own parents they could spy on, but everyone they came across.

"So, we are in agreement?" Roland asked, tapping his fingers on the table in an easy rhythm.

A series of ayes, yes' and yeahs filled the room as all the kids became super excited.

"In that case, I would like to announce officially the beginning of operation 'Secret Base' and operation 'Secret Agents'. Remember, don't tell your faction members everything. Get the information from them, and pass it along. They must think they're the only ones doing this, and that it's a secret. Or else they won't feel like spies."

"And you remember that you're not the only one who will have access to all the information," said Layla. Jimmy was standing dutifully behind her and giving a challenging look to Roland. Sure, Roland was much older than the two of them, but they led one of the strongest factions of children - the Peacock Warriors. They feared no one and nothing.

"Of course," replied Roland. "Prove yourselves, and I'll help you become secret members of the Newsroom. That way you'll all be able to access the information."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 518: Casual conversation

Lex was momentarily driven by thoughts of raking in a ton of MP selling tickets to watch the fight between Ragnar and the devil. He could use the attention Ragnar had gained with the Inn-wide hallucination to attract attention, but it was not meant to be.

The devil, as he learned, was locked within his abode, cultivating, with no knowledge of what was happening outside. Many guests, Lex had noticed, despite being at high realms ended up simply cultivating after experiencing the star upgrade, such as the griffin, and did not encounter any tribulations. Maybe they were simply making progress without making any strides across any large thresholds. Regardless, Lex sent a response letting Ragnar know that at the moment the devil was unable to respond, but he would let him know of the answer.

With that small interlude passed, Lex turned his attention back to the portal to investigate the Shining Irisberry Fruit for the turtle.

Ragnar was slightly disappointed when he heard the response, but it was probably for the best. Despite what it had seemed like, his emotions had gotten the best of him and that devil really had managed to rile him up. Although it seemed like he had only suffered a mild injury from that bolt of lightning, that was not really the case.

After stabilizing his increased cultivation, he would have to return to his Command carrier, for the Recovery pods would not be able to help him in his current condition. He would require some exceptionally rare and valuable medicine that had been stored back on his ship.

But his plan to return was suddenly stalled when he saw two humans descending towards him from the sky. As awkward as it might be, he recognized the lady first.

It was her majesty Elinor, the current empress of the Jotun empire! The reason Ragnar recognized her first was because the image of the emperor was not actually that widely spread. It was for that very reason that even the emperor had been surprised when he was recognized by a common soldier.

But the moment Ragnar recognized her, his eyes flashed to the man beside her and realization dawned on him. It wasn't as if he had never seen the emperor, but that the picture he had seen portrayed the

man in full royal armor with a halo of incredible power around him. Right now, the emperor looked nothing like his picture and instead looked like a random youth.

Ragnar was not one to suffer from the common mistake of judging someone by their appearance, as in the cultivation world appearances were the most deceiving. Instead, he usually gauged people by the intensity of their spiritual aura. Yet the emperor had restrained his aura completely when he came to the Inn, so he could even be mistaken for a mortal if one didn't know better.

"Your highness!" Ragnar exclaimed as he gave a military salute, finally adding a single crease to his, as of yet, completely pristine tunic.

"At ease, general," Jotun said. "That was an impressive display. Tell me, how long have you been a Heaven Immortal?"

"A little under 100 years, majesty."

"Less than a 100 years and you've already passed through the first mark. Very impressive young man. I dare say there are few in the history of the entire empire who can compete with you."

"It is still below your achievements, majesty."

"Pft, don't compare yourself with me. That's unfair to your hard work. News of your achievements have made it to my ear, Ragnar. Considering I'm barely ever in the empire, that is already an impressive feat. But when the Innkeeper himself told me I should give you an audience, I was genuinely taken aback. I wonder what you have to share with me."

Surprise flashed through Ragnar's eyes, but he quickly calmed down. Although they did not meet often, it seemed like he really had developed a good relationship with the Innkeeper. After all, there was no need for him to mention Ragnar to the emperor. Even Ragnar himself had never spoken of such a request, so for the Innkeeper to do it on his own initiative was a show of good faith. Moreover, it was one that he sorely needed. Although he had set up a task at the Inn to find someone capable of following the Jorlam's trail, there was no guarantee that things would not go horribly wrong before that opportunity could even be availed. Moreover, there was the matter of the aura he collected from the devil Loretta.

"I have a room, majesty. Perhaps we should talk there."

"Lead the way."

Ragnar did not hesitate to lead the way, not to any of the rooms he had recently rented, but the one he rented so long ago, inside the Midnight manor.

The emperor and empress followed him without putting up any pretenses, but when they entered the room and saw a small cylinder sitting in the center, their attention was completely diverted to it.

"Your highness, this seal contains the traces of aura I collected from the devil known as Loretta. Although I suspect the aura has been altered heavily, it should still be useful."

"Why have you stored it here instead of submitting it to the empire?" asked the empress, though she made no attempts to inspect the seal.

Ragnar paused, as if he was ashamed to voice his words, which ultimately attracted the emperor's attention even more than the seal.

"Speak up, what is it?"

"Highness, I apologize if my words sound like blasphemy but... I suspect there are traitors in the empire. There are many things that have happened recently that do not make sense, and... I have suspicions that someone is sending me to my death."

The empress was alarmed by the sudden revelation, but Jotun did not seem too surprised.

"You do not need to worry about the veracity of your words. Even the Innkeeper has hinted at the fact that the long absence of my brothers and I from the empire has caused the relations between our families to sour."

"Jotun what... what are you saying?" Elinor asked, genuinely shocked by what she was hearing. Although it may seem as if he had said something casual, he had said in very simple words that a rebellion was brewing... likely spurred by their own descendants!

But Jotun did not answer. Instead, he looked directly at Ragnar and asked, "general, tell me honestly, where do your loyalties lie?"

Ragnar looked down at the ground in shame. Standing before him was the strongest human alive. A flick of his finger would be enough to decimate Ragnar, so it was all but impossible to lie to him. He had to be honest.

"Forgive me, majesty, but my loyalty lies not with the empire, but with the human race."

Silence fell in the room as Elinor and Ragnar both waited for Jotun to reply. For a general of the empire to speak such words...

"Tell me, Ragnar, are you married?" Jotun asked.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 519: Being responsible

Ragnar was startled by the question, as that was not what he was expecting. "Your majesty... I... marriage, I..."

"Alright, alright, forget about it. Let's focus on other things. I admire your strength of character, child, but that's all you really have at the moment. Don't let your successful tribulation get to your head. You're too weak to be talking about the good or bad of the human race. These are things you're not yet qualified to even think about, so let's focus on something else. Tell me, why do you think you're being sent to your death?"

A hint of shame flashed through Ragnar's mind. It had been a very long time since he felt like a child being admonished by an adult, but before the emperor, that is what he truly was. Like the emperor said, there were too many things he was unqualified to know. But what he did know was that, despite the miniscule size of the empire compared to the origin realm, it was not just the humans of the empire who were being supported by the emperor.

Currently, the devils used the humans to farm their demons openly, but not many other races acted so blatantly despite feeling superior to humans. But this had not always been the case. As an immortal, Ragnar had access to a higher level authority on the Henali portal, and so he had read the history of the human race, as scarcely recorded as it was.

The human race was one of the most popular races to have as slaves realm-wide simply because they started out in the mortal realm, and unless they actively cultivated, they were unable to resist their superiors. As such, by restricting their ability to cultivate, most races took advantage of them. They had the intellect and mobility to be perfect slaves.

Back then, there were truly very few human forces worthy of note in the entire realm. Other than the Sephore family, there were only the Paladins, the Beast masters and the Merfolk. By the time the emperor rose to power, and single-handedly raised the prestige of the human race, the Merfolk had already been driven to the point of extinction due to the unique threat their bloodlines posed.

Although Ragnar was not exactly clear on what the emperor had done that changed so much, he knew that he himself was far from reaching such a level. He focused his thoughts and began listing everything that had raised his suspicions.

What greatly surprised him was that... even the emperor himself was shocked to learn of the Jorlam! It seemed the gap in communication in the empire was bigger than it had seemed. To some degree, it was expected. After all, the empire spanned galaxies. Not all places had access to the Henali portal equally. But something like this...

What Ragnar didn't know was that Jotun was genuinely much more alarmed that he let on. A growing Jorlam was not a rebellion against the empire, it was a rebellion against the Henali!

After doing his research at the portal, Lex was relieved that the fruit he needed was not exceptionally rare. At least compared to the ore Lex needed to strengthen his own body, it was not a big deal.

Not wanting to waste any time, he teleported over to the Emporium and placed his order, while also collecting his latest batch of techniques for the library. They did not have the fruit in stock but they could get it soon enough, considering Lex's high customer level.

If Lex hadn't been suspicious that the Emporium was actually the result of a system, he would have directly given them a key and invited them to open a store at the Inn. It would be so convenient for the Inn.

When Lex returned to the Inn, he already had a list of tasks planned out for himself but two notifications made him pause. The first one was expected - someone had finally discovered the first Minor realm. Once the discovery had been made, the entrance to the Minor realm became a lot more evident and took the shape of a single wooden door. About a thousand guests had already entered the realm in the short few minutes Lex was gone to the emporium, and more were continuously entering. As for what was on the other end, there was no news yet.

The second news was unexpected. He had been sent a warning from Larry via the hologram. Apparently, there was someone identical to him at the Inn called William. The warning was not because they looked identical, or that William had expressed curiosity towards Lex once he found out about him. That was only a natural reaction someone would have once they learned someone looked similar or identical to them.

Instead, William and his brothers had displayed an interest in earth that unsettled Larry. Other than asking about Lex, they also asked a lot of questions about Marlo. They had explained the source of their curiosity was the fact that Marlo's name was high in the guest registry, and while that was a reasonable explanation for their curiosity, Larry felt extremely wary. He then also shared the news that Marlo was about to make a move against the prisoners on earth by himself and that Larry was intending on joining him. He invited Lex to join, if he was interested.

Lex sighed. The issue with William was a real headache, and in the back of his mind he had been considering returning to earth to confront his family. While he had been angry originally, he suppressed his anger and decided not to jump to conclusions until he heard their explanation. He also didn't want too much trouble caused on earth, as he still had lingering attachment to the planet he grew up on.

Yet there was also a part of him that wanted to forget all of that, and just stay at the Inn. It would be so easy to give up on those problems. But Lex had been trying to be more responsible lately, so he knew he couldn't just give up on it.

Lex sent him a letter telling Larry that he'd avoid William, and that he'd join him on earth. As for the repercussions... well, he couldn't control the whole universe. He would do what he could, but he held no expectations of becoming some random hero that protects the planet from every disaster.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 520: Retreat

Things at the Midnight Inn were going great. The festival was a great success and in the span of a few hours five different Minor realms had been discovered. Nearly a hundred thousand guests had already entered the realms, except for one which apparently had an age restriction. Only those below 20 years of age could enter that realm, for whatever reason.

While that dissuaded ordinary guests from trying to enter, as humans, beasts and other races alike were usually still very weak at that age, several sects were greatly interested.

The Evil Diplo sect were the first to gather at the portal and sent countless members of their sects, alongside their slaves below the age limit.

But while they were the first to act, they were not the only ones who had such an idea. Soon dozens of other sects who had unexpectedly arrived at the Inn during the festival also began sending their younger generation inside, including even the Paladins.

That one Minor realm became a confrontational ground for the various sects, especially since they were banned from fighting at the inn. It wasn't as if they hadn't tried, but the Inn was a lot stricter now with such a situation. The guards would immediately capture whoever started a confrontation and exile them from the Inn, irrespective of their excuse.

Being banned from the Inn was too major a loss for these sects who had just discovered this excellent holy land. But the Inn had given specific disclaimers that its protection did not extend to the Minor realms, so everyone should only proceed at their own discretion. While that represented danger, it also represented an opportunity to compete for unclaimed resources. The sects would never give up such an opportunity.

Lex sat in his office, monitoring the situation. The Minor realms had increased his MP earnings because many would come back in need of Recovery pods, or would put up the treasures they obtained for sale at the Guild room.

This was exactly the kind of progress he liked to see. He could tell that the Minor realms would bring in even more guests soon enough, and that even the village would become too crowded. He would need to build yet another settlement, so he once again began working with the planning division.

He had Main street, which had some of the Inn's unique attractions but also handled less of the crowds. The village was where most of the guests spent their time because that's where most of the attractions and entertainment were located. The third settlement would have to be focused around the Minor realms.

Watching the Inn grow was exciting, but he was in a rush because the Grand Prix would start the next day and he was participating in that. He wanted the new settlement to already be in place before that began, as the race would be the perfect opportunity to bring attention to it by having the track pass through it.

But while Lex was busy with expanding the Inn, there was something else going on that had escaped his attention. With the Host Attire and his office chair making him in sync with the Inn it wasn't as if he hadn't been exposed to it, but with the number of things going on at the Inn, this really was not worth giving any extra attention to.

While the numerous guests and even staff underwent a growth period due to the latest star rating increase, many of the normal animals at the Inn had only barely benefited from it. Such was the case with the many Magikarpet that Lex had brought to the Inn. Their vitality had increased and their colors grew more lustrous.

One of them, however, was experiencing something very unusual. It had fallen into a slumber, allowing its body to fall to the bottom of the lake where the fish lived. As if the unusually long slumber was not odd enough, in recent days its body had started to emit a soft glow.

A dim but clear light was emitted from between the Magikarpets scales, but as the days went by, the light began to get brighter and brighter. Eventually the light became so bright that it started to attract attention, not only of its fellow Magikarpet, but of the various guests who were swimming in the lake.

Thinking they had discovered another entrance to a Minor realm many swarmed towards the light but, before they could actually approach the Magikarpet, its shape began to change!

A storm of spirit energy appeared over the fish, similar to the one that had encompassed Lex during his breakthrough, and its body began growing rapidly. From just a few feet in size, it rapidly grew to a dozen feet, then to twenty before it began slowing down until it reached around twenty-five feet (7.6 meters) in length.

A heavy, intimidating aura enveloped its still shining body, resulting in all the guests retreating in alarm! The light continued to envelop the shape for a few more minutes as its body changed further, but when the light faded, it revealed a new monstrosity.

No longer did it have the soft and cute round eyes of the Magikarp, and no longer did it have warm, red scales that made one want to cuddle with it.

No, Magikarp had mutated into a ferocious creature with each and every fiber of its being radiating a savage aura. Its strength was not from a growth in spiritual cultivation, but rather its body packed strength that could shake the very seas.

The various Magikarps in the lake slowly swam to the new being to observe it, and then began swimming around it as if carrying out some ritual.

But the creature was not paying attention to any of that. As a being that belonged to the Inn, the moment it grew and gained sentience, it automatically became an Inn employee. So its attention was completely diverted to a screen that had appeared in front of it, with words written on it that the beast could somehow read.

The screen read: 'For the first annual Inn employee retreat, please list down any dietary restrictions. Also, please confirm whether you would like dancing lessons before the retreat.'