

Innkeeper 61

The Innkeeper

Chapter 61: Can't catch a break

The first shot hit the Alpha directly in the face, but the Alpha did not even flinch. The shot barely broke its skin, and after a couple of drops of blood the wound completely healed. Lex felt like cursing, but instead focused his fire on the other wolves behind the Alpha while retreating. He had retreated only a few steps when he felt his body tense, his instincts screaming at him to dodge! Lex did not hesitate in throwing himself to the side, but he was still too slow. He felt something hit him on the chest, launching him off to the side. The air left his body and he puked all over the ground as soon as he landed. He did not let that stop him, however, as he reached into his bag and pulled out his last flashbang. He pressed the button on it and started running - or stumbling - away from the wolves.

The ten second delay seemed like infinity, and he kept shooting towards the wolves to try and keep them at a distance. When there were only a couple seconds left he threw the flashbang towards the Alpha and bolted away. He heard a bang behind him, followed by the howling of wounded wolves.

'Bloody hell!' he exclaimed internally as he ran. He had no idea what had hit him, and he just realized that he had lost his grip on his short sword when he was hit. Fortunately the gun was still in his hand, but there was no way he could go back for the sword. Hopefully he bought himself a few-

Lex felt his body tense and immediately rolled to the side, just in time to see a large object fly by where he was just running. He looked back and saw the Alpha standing in the distance, launching some kind of air blast from its mouth towards him. Lex rolled again to dodge, and immediately aimed the Heavy Harley towards the Alpha. He tried to shoot it in the mouth, but he was too disoriented to aim properly and missed all his shots!

'Bloody hell give me a break!' he screamed internally and he threw himself behind a tree to break line of sight with the Alpha, and kept running.

"You have 20 bullets remaining. You should also drink a Botlam Dew in case you have internal injuries," said Mary, but stayed out of his sight to avoid distracting him.

Immediately Lex bought a Botlam Dew mentally and drank it, ignoring the familiar taste. He was in trouble, reloading his magazine took a couple of minutes. He needed to get somewhere he could hide

for a few minutes. But how could the wolves give him any time? The few wolves left that had been accompanying the Alpha ran in front of him, cutting off his escape path as the growling Alpha slowly made its way towards him. Lex backed up against a tree once again, to keep the wolves from attacking him from his back, and focused on the Alpha.

'Never gonna wish for some more excitement ever again,' he said to himself internally. His initial excitement for combat had worn off, but it wasn't fear that replaced it. He was filled with immense focus and determination. It would be a lie to say that he wasn't still nervous, but he had his nerves firmly in control. Right now he was in a tough situation, but not an impossible one. He already felt his body recovering, not to mention he was sure that his body armor had reduced the damage he had taken from the Alphas projectile attack.

When it was about fifteen feet away the Alpha lurched at him, ready to bite his throat off, but Lex was also ready. In one fluid motion Lex raised the Heavy Harley and shot one single bullet straight into its open maw. Before the shot even connected he'd already aimed the gun away, shooting continuously at the other wolves around him. The Alpha was injured and it fell on the ground, but it was far from weak enough for Lex to take advantage.

Lex bolted into the forest once again, his gun finally out of bullets. He removed the magazine and threw the empty one into his backpack, hoping the close proximity to the spirit tokens would work in refilling it while he took out the magazine with the iron ranked low caliber rounds. He really hoped he could find some time to rest, the recoil from these bullets was still too strong for him.

"I think I hear the sound of running water!" Mary exclaimed. "It could be a river, you coils use it to hide. That way," she said, pointing Lex in the right direction. Panting heavily now, Lex forced himself to run where Mary pointed and hoped the wolves would give him some time. But the very next second an angry but somehow gargled howl from behind him let him know that the Alpha had started the chase again. Lex grit his teeth and forced himself to run faster. Fortunately the river was closeby, and Lex reached it quickly. Unfortunately, so was the chasing Alpha and its speed had picked up beyond anything it had shown before.

Its speed really was too fast, and before Lex could aim his gun it was almost on top of him. Lex's body tensed again, and for the first time Lex felt like he was staring death right in the mouth. To be more specific, the open mouth of the wolf that was lunging towards his throat once again. For an instant time seemed to freeze and Lex's thoughts froze as well. He could only see the sharp and bloody teeth of the wolf, each one as big as one of Lex's fingers. He absolutely could not get bitten!

Without planning or realizing, Lex raised his right arm defensively - blocking the wolf from reaching his throat. The angry Alpha chomped down on his arm and Lex felt insane, unbelievable pain as he felt his muscles rip and his bones shatter. The boy and the wolf fell into the raging river, but even as their bodies were carried by the cold, rushing water they did not separate. Angry, incoherent and exhausted, Lex did the only thing he could think of. He fought against the force of the water to bring the gun up to where he assumed the wolf's eyes were and shot!

The recoil hit him like a hammer, and threatened to tear the gun out of his arm but he held on. The pain of his wound, the vertigo of being flung around like a rag doll by the water, the exhaustion of running and fighting all day threatened to knock him unconscious, but he fought to keep himself awake. The wolf, still biting into his arm, flailed its paws around in an attempt to find something to grab onto, to pull itself out of the water but to no avail. Lex brought the gun to the wolf's skull and shot one more time, finally prying its jaw loose and separating the two.

But Lex did not have any time to celebrate, the force of the river was beyond what he had anticipated and he had absolutely no control over his body as it was rushed down river. He moved his one good arm around to try and maneuver himself but there was no luck. Just as he was beginning to lose hope - what little hope he had left - he felt something grab his leg and pull him aside. He felt a tinge of panic, and readied himself to shoot, but then he realized that he was being pulled out of the river! Hallelujah!

It only took a few moments, but felt as if an eternity had passed by the time he was pulled out. He raised his head to see a giant turtle with a horn on its head staring fondly at him.

"Silly humans, why are you always so helpless," Lex heard a soft voice in his head, and almost chuckled despite his condition.

"Stop chuckling and bandage your hand. You're losing a lot of blood, you'll bleed to death!" told Mary, appearing above him.

'Can't catch a break,' he murmured to himself.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 62: Oh dear

Taking a deep breath, Lex forced himself to sit up - a task that was monumental given how exhausted he was. Nonetheless, he pushed himself upright and holstered his gun before taking off his backpack to

search for his mini-medkit. The giant turtle watched him with great interest, as if he were watching a pet perform a trick. Lex withdrew the medkit and took out the gauze to wrap his hand with, but when he took a look at his right arm he was extremely alarmed! There weren't just a few bite holes like he was expecting, his entire right arm was disfigured and ripped in various places. In normal cases a wound like this would require major reconstruction surgery or even amputation. The Recovery Pod should be able to handle it when he gets back to the Inn, but he had to make sure he didn't bleed to death before that.

"That doesn't look like a wound from the river," the giant turtle spoke in Lex's head again, bringing its head closer to his arm for a look. "Oh dear, that does look really bad. Let me help you a bit." The grass from the ground started growing rapidly and started gently wrapping itself around his arm. Lex winced, a sharp pain shot through his entire body, but suddenly he felt a cooling sensation run through his right arm, which was followed by his entire arm going numb.

"Oh dear oh dear, this is very bad. This is very very bad. Let me see what I have." The giant turtle withdrew its head into its shell and made a few mumbling noises, as if talking to itself. Then, unexpectedly, from its shell Lex started hearing the sound of various things being moved around - as if someone were rearranging stuff in a storeroom. Finally it brought its head out again with a large fruit hanging in its mouth. It brought the fruit over Lex's arm and crushed it, letting the juices fall on the cast made of leaves. The leaves greedily sucked all the juices without letting a single drop fall, but Lex felt no difference. His entire right arm was numb, but as long as the bleeding had stopped he was content. He'd let the Recovery Pod handle whatever the injury was.

"How did you ever get yourself into so much trouble," the turtle gently asked, sitting down in front of Lex.

"I was being chased by a pack of wolves. They chased me from the road into the forest. I thought the roads were supposed to be safe."

"Wolves? Oh dear, why would wolves be chasing you? No offense, but you don't look like you could feed even a couple of them."

Lex looked at the harmless looking giant turtle in front of him, and suddenly became slightly wary. It had saved him, and even helped him, but did it truly have no ulterior motives? Whether it did or did not, Lex was in a bad condition right now. He was in no shape to protect himself.

He reached his left hand into his backpack and bought a Golden key from the Inn, pulling it out for the turtle to see.

"They were chasing me because they wanted this piece of treasure I found." He held it up so the turtle could take a good look at it. "As thanks for saving me, I'd like to give it to you."

The turtle looked strangely at the key, and for a moment seemed attracted to it, but as soon as the moment passed it returned to normal.

"Oh dear little human, I don't want your treasure. I was only asking why you got in trouble. You humans are so interesting. You're always running around doing different things. All I ever do is tend to the forest. Meeting you humans adds a little color to my life."

Lex was taken aback at the fact that the turtle resisted the temptation of the key, based on his understanding it should be very attractive to anyone who sees it. But still, since he had already bought the key there was no point in wasting it.

"No please, I insist. You should take it. If I keep it with me, the wolves will come back for me."

The turtle was silent for a while and stared at him.

"I know you are just saying that so I accept the gift. Oh dear oh dear. You are such a kind human. I suppose I can accept your treasure. But I have no use for treasures anyway. I only like to stay in the forest and take care of my plants."

The turtle reached forward and picked the key up with its mouth before retracting its head back into its shell, placing the key somewhere in there. When its head came back out the turtle was smiling.

"Why don't you come with me, I will take you somewhere safe. The wolves won't find you there and you can eat some food. When you're feeling better you can leave, I know you humans don't like staying too long in the forest."

Without waiting for Lex to reply the turtle lifted Lex off the ground with its mouth and placed him gently on its shell. The turtle then lifted itself off the ground and slowly started making its way into the forest. It was still dark and Lex had lost his night vision glasses somewhere in the river, but his eyesight had acclimatized enough for him to be able to vaguely see around himself.

"This is free territory, no one can claim the land right next to the river. But right after this is my garden. I let the rabbits and owls live in my garden, and they take care of my things for me. It's a little trouble keeping the rabbits safe though, they're so mischievous..." The turtle began telling Lex about the forest and the creatures that lived in it. The turtle seemed to have a good relationship with all of them, and treated all of them as children. Lex tried to keep listening, but found the turtle's voice carried a certain charm that was making him drowsy. Eventually he could not help himself and dozed off.

The turtle, as if unaware, kept talking as it slowly made its way deeper into the forest. Eventually it reached a treehouse built on a large Oak tree and lifted Lex up, placing him inside one of the rooms through a window. Then the turtle continued its stroll through the woods, still softly talking even with no one around.

Lex slept soundly through the night and woke up the following noon to the sound of a notification from the Inn.

Quest update: Quest Complete! The host has helped the carrier of the will of Nibiru complete her task. The Host's reward is being calculated:

Quest completed in 26 hours

Host influenced the carrier's personality

Host has influenced certain events, affecting the trajectory of Nibiru's development

Reward Rank: B+

Reward: Mystery trials! 10,000 MP!

Lex was pleasantly surprised, the quest was already completed! To be honest he never doubted that Tiffany would be safe. She carried the will of the entire planet - although Lex did not know what that exactly meant, he could at least guess that she was extremely lucky. The way she had escaped her pursuers when she was alone was already very telling, not to mention the fact that Lex teleported

directly in her path when he reached the planet. He was sure that this was by no means a coincidence. Still, he wondered how she was able to complete the quest so quickly.

"Hey Mary, what are these Mystery trails?" he asked, in a good mood. His right arm was still numb, and he was grateful for it as he assumed otherwise he would be in excruciating pain.

The tiny floating assistant appeared before him, but she didn't immediately answer. She stared at the young man with a very serious look, as if contemplating something.

"Lex, let me ask you a question. Why did you fight the wolves?"

"Huh? Because I was confident in myself, not to mention all the preparations I made beforehand. Didn't everything turn out fine?"

"No, based on your personality you would never take such a huge risk like that. Since you've gotten the Inn, your first priority has always been protecting yourself. Your cultivation is based on defense and you've even registered for self defense lessons instead of direct combat training. Taking such a huge risk doesn't match your habits."

Lex was stunned. What she said did make sense, but he was free to decide to do things differently whenever he wanted. Just because he did things a certain way previously didn't mean he couldn't do them differently in the future.

"I have a feeling...but it's best to be sure. Why don't you check your status first, just to be sure."

Lex shrugged and pulled up his status.

Name: Lex Williams

Age: 23

Sex: Male

Cultivation Level: Regal Embrace Body Tempering Stage 1

Health: Suboptimal (enlarged brain tumor), crippled right hand, bruised torso, bruised legs

Midnight Points: 17,961

Midnight Inn Level: 3

Inventory: Bathroom Slippers, Self Defense Butter Knife, Host Attire

When Lex saw the tab about his health he froze. He was not concerned about the hand or his body, the Recovery Pod could take care of that. He was focused on the part that said enlarged brain tumor. It had grown!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 63: Mystery Trials

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After recovering from his shock, Lex focused on his health tab for more details.

Health:

Enlarged Brain Tumor:

After growing a certain amount, it has started affecting the hosts' decision making capabilities. It may result in headaches, blackouts, mood swings, impaired decision making, memory loss and more.

"It says my brain tumor has grown and will affect my decision making process," Lex told Mary seriously. "Is this what you thought when you told me to check my status?"

"It's what I was afraid of. This might be an inadvertent effect of the first procedure whilst cultivating Regal Embrace, which causes all your bodily functions to become more optimized. It even optimized the growth of your tumor. The problem should still be solved once you complete all four procedures, but just to be on the safe side you should do your best to make sure you cultivate as quickly as possible."

Lex tensed up in frustration, but after a few moments let out a sigh and relaxed. There was no point dwelling on things he could not affect. He would focus on other things.

"So what's this Mystery trial?" he asked again.

"It's an upgrade for the Inn. Guests can enter and undergo a trial based on their cultivation as well as their personalities. The 'mystery' in its name comes from the fact that no one can know what kind of trial they will encounter. So a soldier or someone who enjoys fighting will have a combat trial, but someone who likes carpentry will have a trial based on building or fixing something. The trial allows you to discover your flaws and grow your skills, and if you succeed then there are even small prizes. The prizes however are only a minor focus, and the growth of your skills and abilities is the real focus of the Mystery Trials."

Lex and Mary kept talking, as Lex was in no mood to explore the planet further and was simply waiting till he could return to the Inn. Hopefully it won't be much longer.

Hugo Laurant left his room, and for the first time in many years felt a sense of contentment. He had reached the Peak Foundation realm and even stabilized his cultivation in only a few days. For the first time in years he saw hope in his future. Although far off, his cultivation was going smoothly enough now that he imagined that he would be able to enter Golden Core sometime in the future. Once that happened, even if the Bentham family could not help him find his enemies, he would have enough influence to find out on his own.

A part of him wanted to continue cultivating in this place, but his soul contract mildly influenced him to let him know that he should either continue investigating or return to old man Will with his information as quickly as possible. Still he was content with his gains. He was planning on visiting the Gift Shop once and then returning to Earth, but as soon as he ventured outside he noticed that the area surrounding the Inn seemed to have changed. Not only did it seem bigger and fuller, but a few hills appeared in the distance. He went to Gerard to ask about it, and was pleasantly surprised to discover that a Meditation room had been built on the hills in the distance, which aided one in cultivation!

Still, as much as he wanted to go test out the new addition, his soul contract kept reminding him to focus on what was important. He went directly to the Gift Shop and carefully went through all the items, memorizing their effects. He only bought a bottle of Botlam's Dew however, as he assumed that it could be useful to the old man. When he received it in card form he was extremely shocked and impressed. If he could learn how to store items in cards it would be immensely useful to him.

With that done, Hugo left the building to explore the rest of the Inn. He saw a new guest sitting in the garden, a young girl. At first Hugo was tempted to go talk to her, but then remembering that he was armed to the teeth he thought it might not be such a good idea. He explored the grounds and then ventured towards the hills. When he finally reached the Meditation room he took his time to admire it, but ultimately resisted his urge to venture in. Making sure he had seen everything at least once and remembered all the details, he summoned Gerard and asked him if the Innkeeper was available. He wanted to say his farewell before leaving, but unfortunately was told that the Innkeeper was away on some business.

With nothing left to do, he thought about returning - the way Gerard told him he could leave - and felt himself being transported away. Slowly his surroundings faded away and he found himself back in the hall in Will's house. He found a couple people waiting for him in the room, and as soon as he appeared they rushed to him to ensure that he was alright. After making sure that he was hurt anywhere, one of the staff members ran off to report to Will while the other led Hugo to a clinic. Even though he said he was unhurt, tests needed to be conducted to be sure.

A team of doctors was ready waiting for him when he arrived. They took blood samples, conducted X-rays, MRI's, eyesight tests, psychological tests to determine his mental state and many more. Hugo went along with all these as he had already been through them once before he ventured to the Inn, so that the doctors would have his baseline. Eventually, while he was still being tested, Will was brought into the room on a wheelchair.

His skin had paled even beyond what it was before, and he looked incredibly weak. He was wearing an oxygen mask and it was clear that his situation had deteriorated drastically while Hugo was gone. This could also explain why his soul contract had been prompting him to hurry so much lately.

The old man didn't speak, but he looked at the mercenary with hopeful eyes.

"I believe you'll be very happy to hear what I have to report," Hugo told the old man as he kneeled before him. He handed the old man the Golden Key he had received when he returned from the Inn, and began his tale.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 64: Spirit Energy poisoning

It only took a few more hours, but the connection to Nibiru was complete. Lex did not wait any longer and immediately chose to return to the Inn. He had a few things he wanted to do, but the first and foremost was recovering. When went to the Recovery room he found that Marlo was still in his chamber, eating up his MP, not any better than before. Well technically his vitality and spirit had recovered a lot, but was not fully healed. It seemed like it would take much longer than Lex guessed to heal the man. It could be because of the Recovery rooms' low level and Marlo's high cultivation, but Lex paid no mind to that for now.

Without hesitation he lay himself down in a Recovery Pod and allowed the healing process for his arm to begin.

"Hey Mary, how come the Recovery room or Recovery Pod can't fix my tumor?" he asked mentally.

"While they both have strong healing capabilities, they only provide basic healing. There are many kinds of wounds that they cannot heal. Your tumor, for example, is something that needs to be removed from your body, so it does not come under the purview of this kind of healing. Similar to how they could not directly remove the poison from Helen's body, or the zombie mutagen from Marlo. Once you start dealing with higher leveled cultivators, their injuries will carry a hostile spirit energy which is again not something these rooms can heal. For something like that you would have to look out for talented doctors or healers across the universe and hire them. In that case, the benefits the Inn provides will improve their inherent capabilities, but can never replace them. Hiring such people will elevate the services you can provide and increase the prestige of the Inn as well."

Lex nodded, understanding that hiring a worthy staff was an important part of running the Inn. Lex closed his eyes and allowed himself to fall asleep while his hand was being fixed. At some point the numb feeling had faded, but instead of pain Lex felt hollow and drained. He was too afraid to remove his grass bandages to actually look at the condition of his hand, but fortunately it would not be a concern much longer.

A few hours later he was woken up to the notification that his hand had been fixed. He jumped out of the Pod and squeezed the fingers on his right hand, feeling his strength. It still felt a little tired, but at least he was better now. Then another problem occurred to him. The Recovery Pods were right in the recovery room, and anyone could see who was being healed. If a customer ever saw him recovering it would mar his image. He needed to make a few changes, to keep the privacy of his customers as well. For example, Alexander had seen Marlo and recognized him. That was all well, but what if the next person to recognize him was not on friendly terms. He went into the Design Interface and began making changes. Each Pod was put in an individual room, the small change costing him 200 MP. While he was making changes, he might as well add the Mystery Trail as well. While all the additions he'd made to the Inn so far were far away from the main building, he decided to add the Mystery Trial close to it. He flew to the back of the Inn's building and chose a suitable place five hundred meters away.

When he selected the spot for the Mystery Trial, a mound of earth rose up from the ground fifteen meters high and ten meters in diameter. A large, metallic double faced door was fixed on the side of the mound facing the Inn. The door gave off an ancient feeling, as if it had withstood the flow of time for eons, undisturbed and unaffected. Lex frowned a little, and used the interface to make the mound of earth a little neater, and then chose to grow some grass over it. He didn't understand why the door had to be connected to the mound, but he could not remove it.

"How much does the mystery trial cost?" he asked. He had to decide how much to charge his guests.

"For any guest who has used any of the Inn's services, the first entry is free and costs you nothing either. Each consecutive use will cost you 500MP. The Mystery Trial is unique, and you will not be able to buy more of those from the Inn in the future. Its level is also linked to the level of the Inn, so as the level of the Inn increases the trial will give better feedback to its users as well as better rewards. For those whose trials include combat, if they die in the trial they won't actually die in real life so that is an added benefit for those who want to train in combat."

"I understand," he said, turning his attention to the next matter. From Nibiru he had brought back a bunch of seeds. Although he was sure many or all of them may have died tussling about in his backpack while he fought, this might be a good time to set up the greenhouse. There was one catch however. While he was not planting anything too precious right now, he wanted to keep the greenhouse somewhere secure so that guests would not barge in. What if they stole or damaged his goods? He was planning on using or selling whatever he grew, he could not afford to leave them out in the open.

Before he could make any decisions however, he felt someone using a Golden key to enter the Inn. Lex smiled, made sure he looked presentable, and appeared at the entrance of the Inn awaiting his new guest.

From a flash of light two guests appeared, and Lex was surprised to see a familiar face. But before Lex could greet the guest he came to a horrible, awkward realization! He was standing at the entrance of the Inn, right at the end of the stairs that led up to the Inn. His familiar guest, Hugo Laurent, was standing at the foot of the staircase. The problem was, in front of Hugo the second guest was sitting in a wheelchair WITH NO WAY UP THE STAIRS! This was also when Lex realized that most of his guest rooms were above the ground floor AND A PERSON IN A WHEELCHAIR WOULD HAVE NO WAY OF GETTING TO THEM!

It was a good thing that the Host Attire kept his image calm and presentable, otherwise his guests would be exposed to the visage of him blushing in embarrassment.

Still, Lex recovered quickly. Before Hugo had a chance to say anything, Lex quickly accessed the Design Interface and waved his right hand as he willed a ramp to appear beside the stairs, giving the image that he had made the change himself. Hugo froze, shocked by the sudden change, which gave Lex the chance to quickly mentally add an elevator inside the Inn right beside the stairs for guests to use. From the outside no one was able to tell anything had changed at all, and no one was able to see the image of a tiny, floating Mary giggling at Lex's embarrassment. Or at least, the guests weren't able to.

"Welcome back Hugo. I see you've brought someone with you this time, I'm glad the Midnight Inn is able to get your recommendation."

Hugo, who snapped out of his surprise, smiled at the mysterious Innkeeper. "Of course! Your Inn is impressive beyond all of my expectations, even beyond all of my wildest dreams. Who wouldn't want to go on vacation, heal from their old wounds and even elevate their cultivation level while they were at it? There's nothing that can compare.

"In fact, that's why I've brought my boss this time as well. He's been suffering from a disease for a long time, I was hoping that he would be able to be healed as well."

Lex turned his attention to the man in the wheelchair and indeed his condition didn't look good at all. In fact, it could be said that he was almost at death's door. He checked the man's status.

Name: William Bentham

Age: 59

Sex: Male

Cultivation Details: Initial Foundation realm

Species: Human

Midnight Inn Prestige Level: Not yet available

Conditions:

Fatal Spirit Energy poisoning

Report:

The patient is cultivating spirit energy with an affinity that directly clashes with his body's affinity. The more spirit energy he absorbs, the faster the rate of poisoning! The only way to treat the patient is to completely dissolve his Foundation realm and then use the Recovery Pod to slowly heal him. It is recommended that the patient also drinks Botlam's Dew immediately following the dissolution of his Foundation to prevent dying before recovery can begin! Patient is on the verge of death, immediate treatment is recommended!

Chapter 65: Old man Will

Lex frowned as he read the report on Will. Spiritual affinity was something he'd never heard of before, he wasn't exactly sure what that meant. He was also confused by what the system meant by saying 'dissolve the Foundation'. Was a person's cultivation realm something they could just give up?

He asked Mary about the details.

"Originally this is something I did not know, but as you've elevated your authority by a few levels I have received the answer from the system. Spiritual energy originally is neutral, but it can gain affinities. For example, if a person is using a cultivation technique that is based on fire, or relies on heated environments or natural treasures that have the fire element, then when that person absorbs spiritual energy, his cultivation technique will give it a fire affinity. That means the spiritual energy that person has stored in his body will have the characteristics of fire, and he can use spiritual attacks based on fire.

"The case with Will is similar. The cultivation technique he is using is based on fire, but his body inherently has an affinity for water. Not everyone has natural affinities, and people who have them can be considered to have special constitutions. As a result of Will's natural affinity clashing with the affinity of the spirit energy he is absorbing, instead of becoming stronger he is being poisoned.

"As for dissolving his Foundation, that is an easy way of describing it. To understand, let me explain to you how the different levels of cultivation work. Body Tempering strengthens the body to absorb spiritual energy within it without being hurt by it.

"Qi training, which also has nine realms, involves absorbing spiritual energy in the body, and then pushing the limits of how much energy the body can store. Each time a cultivator breaks through a subrealm in Qi training their capacity for spiritual energy is increased. But where in the body is this energy being stored? Later, in the Golden Core realm, the energy is stored in the core, however before that the energy is stored in the muscles, tissues and organs of the body.

"In simple words, Qi training only focuses on the quantity of spirit energy that the body can hold. It forces the body to absorb as much energy as possible. Suffice to say, the better the cultivation technique or the talent of the cultivator, the more energy they can absorb. However, this changes in the Foundation realm. The spirit energy that has so far been absorbed by the body is neutral, and of very low quality. In fact, if spiritual energy that is purer or higher in concentration can actually harm the cultivator. The Foundation realm starts building a foundation in the body to sustain higher concentrations as well as quality of spiritual energy. One of the steps involved in this naturally changes the neutral spiritual energy in the body to that of one with an affinity.

"How that works is irrelevant to you right now, what you need to know right now is what 'dissolving the foundation' means. It's a nice way of putting it, but basically if all the muscles and tissue in the body simultaneously sustain enough damage - without directly killing the cultivator - then the spiritual energy in the body will be released and the cultivation realm of the person will drop. Usually, if a person survives such an ordeal, their body is so damaged that they can never cultivate again.

"You should be able to avoid that happening by immediately putting him in the Recovery Pod so that his body heals correctly. However the old man is weak, I don't know if he can survive such a shock. Also, even weak, he's in the Foundation realm and you're in the body tempering. There's no way you can help him 'dissolve his Foundation'. You'll have to get Hugo to do it."

That was a lot of information to absorb, and he had silently been staring at the old man for a bit now. Hugo was starting to get worried, but just as he was about to ask a question the Innkeeper spoke up.

"His condition is complicated. Whether he can be healed or not depends on whether or not you trust me, and are willing to take a risk."

Hugo looked down at the old man with a questioning gaze. Even though he himself had a higher cultivation than Will, the old man's family had been in the cultivation world for centuries and had a lot of influence. Hugo needed his help to find his families murderers, so he really hoped that Will could be healed.

Will, who had been silent so far, removed the oxygen mask from his face and gave the mysterious Innkeeper a weak smile. For some reason, Will felt like he could trust the old man unconditionally. If he wasn't in unbearable pain, he would have liked to have a chat with him. For now though, he would trust his gut and put his life in the mysterious man's hands.

"I have nothing left to lose. We'll do whatever you say."

Lex nodded at the old man's determination. Then he explained Will's problem, exactly as he read about it in the report. He did not know if affinities were common knowledge, and would only explain if asked.

When the old man heard what the issue was, he suddenly came to a realization. It's as if the pains of his entire life suddenly made sense to him, as well as why his condition had suddenly deteriorated. Originally he was going to wait for Hugo to return and see if there was a way for him to heal, but after feeling spirit energy from the key he thought maybe he was getting better and tried to absorb energy from a medium spirit stone. His condition had drastically gotten worse since. He chuckled to himself. He did know about affinities, as well as special constitutions. Who could have guessed that he was someone countless people considered a genius, but he made a mistake right at the first step and chose the wrong cultivation technique.

Lex explained the procedure that Will needed to undergo, and while Hugo was startled Will did not have much of a reaction. He was too exhausted, mentally and physically, at this point. Since Hugo had already bought a bottle of Botlam's Dew, they went directly to the room with a Recovery Pod (RP).

"Eh, are you sure you want me to dissolve his cultivation? Wouldn't it be better if you did it?" asked Hugo, reluctant to hurt Will. He didn't want to use too much strength and accidentally kill him.

Lex shook his head and answered, "I apologize, but I cannot harm a guest - even to help them - unless they break a rule of the Midnight Inn. It will have to be you."

That was the excuse Lex had thought up, and though it was flimsy it would have to do.

Will lay down in the Recovery Pod and Hugo put his hand over the old man's chest. Slowly and carefully he channeled his spirit energy all over the old man's body, till a thin layer of it covered him. Looking in the eyes of Will one last time Hugo gave him a nod, to let him know he was about to do it, and then let his spirit energy attack Will.

In an instant the old man went from being pale and trembling to covered in blood and completely still. Using his fastest speed Hugo chugged the bottle of Botlam's Dew down his throat and closed the lid for the RP.

The RP started working immediately, but the old man lay still and unresponsive. He looked like a corpse being poked and prodded, but Lex could use the system to monitor his status. The old man went to within an inch of his life. To be more exact, his heart stopped beating for a few moments and his brain activity started to decrease, but the Botlam's Dew kept him from completely dying for a few critical seconds. Just because he was in the Pod did not mean he could not die, as was the case with Marlo as well, but fortunately after a couple of minutes he went out being in a critical condition.

At this point the spirit energy was leaking out of his body, his cultivation falling, and the RP was more focused on keeping him alive than healing him. The Botam's Dew, which normally took a long time to show its full effect, had already been used up in keeping him alive long enough for the RP to take over. If nothing unexpected happened, he would survive, though he most likely would have to start cultivating from Qi training again.

"It's okay. He's passed the critical stage. He should be fine."

Hugo let out a breath of relief. He thought he had killed the old man.

Lex left the two alone, the healing process would take a long time and no doubt Hugo wanted to stay with Will a bit longer to ensure he was okay. But instead of returning to previous activity of improving the Inn and considering where to add the greenhouse, he walked in a particular direction. He remembered that he had another guest at his Inn, and he had previously sent her a Saturn Cake. Lex wanted to check up on her, and if the opportunity presented itself learn more about her famous friend - Alexander.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 66: Spendthrift

"Velma, has Helen's mood improved at all while I was gone?" Lex asked as he walked towards the hills that carried the meditation room. His Host Attire which was in sync with the Inn let him know where all his guests were at all times, so he had no problem locating her in the large area of the Inn. But while normally he teleported directly wherever he wanted, this time he chose to walk. Firstly it was because he was considering a good place to place his greenhouse, and secondly he wanted to understand how his guests felt walking around.

"Her mood did seem to improve when she had the cake, and instead of sulking in one place she's been wandering around the grounds of the Inn. Still, she hasn't interacted with Gerard or I much, and hasn't eaten much food."

Lex nodded as he continued to stroll through the Inn. For now the grounds around the Inn weren't too big, just a few acres in fact, which meant you could see end to end easily. However, walking from one corner to another, such as the Recovery room to the Meditation room, still took a bit of time.

It was fine for him, but he had to keep in mind that not all of his guests could traverse the area easily - such as Will. He twitched his lips, but mentally bought a golf cart from the Midnight market that he parked beside the manor. He then instructed his A.I. to offer to drive his guests around whenever they saw them walking to a specific destination.

Eventually, even with his slow pace, he reached the hills and found Helen sitting in the grass with a couple of rabbits playing around her. She also had one in her lap that she was gently stroking, her gaze off into the distance. She was brought back from her thoughts by the sound of someone approaching, and looked to see the Innkeeper. She had seen him when she had just arrived at the Inn, but since then the mysterious man had disappeared. She had been too preoccupied with her thoughts and had completely forgotten about him.

"Good afternoon," the Innkeeper greeted her, his voice smooth as butter. "I hope your stay here has been satisfactory."

"Yes, it has been great. I wanted to thank you for the cake, it was delicious."

"You're very welcome, it is a delicacy from the Jotun System that is fairly popular. I plan on opening up a patisserie for my guests in the future, but until then it should hold them over."

The Innkeeper spoke softly and calmly, with a warm and easy going presence. He sat down in the grass nearby, and a few rabbits hopped on over to him, as if attracted by his aura. He gently petted them, as if he were meeting an old friend after a long time.

"If you don't mind my mentioning," he said, turning his gaze from the fluffy animal to her, "my staff told me that you haven't eaten much. Although you have been healed from your poisoned state, it has extracted a lot of strength from your body. If you do not take care of yourself then you will fall ill."

Helen blushed, and for the first time in a long time she felt like an admonished child. She felt like she had been behaving like a spoiled little girl, throwing a tantrum at being treated unfairly.

"I will take better care of myself," she said meekly. Helen was not a meek woman - she was confident and strong, and while she gave respect to her superiors, it was not out of weakness but from her upbringing. As someone being raised for political marriage, she was not raised to be only a pretty face but a strong asset and ally for whoever she ended up with.

She was extremely capable and was always treated as such. Even Alexander, who generally treated her very well, knew that she was more reliable than most and so treated her as someone strong and someone who did not need to be looked after. After all, treating someone strong with delicacy was not care but disrespectful.

However, for some reason, she did not seem to mind it when this mysterious man was looking out for her like this.

"I'm glad to hear it," the man said, a smile appearing on his handsome face. "If you have any other troubles, feel free to talk to me about them. Maybe I won't be able to offer you any direct help, but as someone who has been to many worlds and seen many cultures across the universe my perspective is probably different from anyone you've met."

Various thoughts ran across her mind as the Innkeeper made his offer. She was not having a small crisis but one that overturned her whole life. Even though she knew she was being raised for a purpose, she loved her family dearly. Yet she had been thrown aside, and there was nowhere left for her on Earth unless she returned with a new identity. And even if she returned, what would she do? She had lost her direction in life. She did not want revenge, but she also did not know what she did want.

"Thank you for the offer," she said shaking her head, "but this is something I must figure out on my own."

"I understand," the Innkeeper said, getting up. "If you need me, feel free to reach out through one of my staff. If you get bored during your stay, I recommend you try out the Mystery Trial behind the manor - it is something I just added to the Inn. First try is free for guests, so you have nothing to lose and the trials are perfectly safe."

The Innkeeper smiled at her one more time and then disappeared. Helen felt a sense of loss when he left, but she picked herself up and started walking back to the manor. She would eat something, and

then she would continue to think. Moping was not her style, but she needed to figure out her new direction in life before she would feel better.

Lex was slightly disappointed when the girl refused to confide in him, but he could not insist on getting her to talk. He had to maintain his mystique. He reappeared at the northernmost point of the Inn and prepared himself for some heavy spending. Spending 5000 MP in the Midnight Market, he bought himself a relatively powerful array that was arranged from trees. As soon as he made the purchase pine trees started growing around, and ultimately covered an entire acre of land around him. Then in the center of the new forest, he chose to purchase the greenhouse for another 425 MP, transforming the land five thousand square feet around him into arable land. After all his expenditure he was left with 11,836 MP. That was still quite a lot, but did it really allow him to spend his MP so randomly?

The answer was, this was not a random purchase. The forest array served an important purpose, which was that it would redirect anyone who entered away from the center without letting them realize. The effect was very simple and did not harm anyone in any way, but it was exactly for that reason that the array could affect even those of a very high cultivation level. This way his greenhouse which was directly in the center of the forest would be out of reach for the guests. Of course, as the owner and controller of the array Lex could choose to allow someone to pass through if he wanted.

What was an array exactly? Similar to how spirit techniques used spirit energy to give rise to different effects, and talismans used spirit energy as well as the complex science of spirit engineering to give birth to seemingly magical results, arrays used natural treasures and spirit treasures to have different effects over a certain piece of land. By arranging treasures, or array flags (spirit treasures that served a single, very specific purpose) in a complex design one could arrange an array that served various purposes. It could be a protective array that stopped incoming enemies or attacks from entering an area. It could be an attacking array that attacked enemies with it. It could even be a spirit gathering array that gathered spirit energy from the atmosphere and filled the area of the array with concentrated spirit energy - a boon for cultivation. In short, it could have various effects and all depended on the user's purpose.

With that out of the way, Lex spent another 2000MP to purchase a permanent A.I. worker for the greenhouse. Despite the heavy cost, the A.I.'s that Lex purchased could only be human shaped and could have no special abilities, only a certain amount of knowledge regarding certain fields. Lex didn't name this A.I. and instead decided to just call him the gardener, to keep it simple and easy to remember.

He handed The Gardener all the seeds and cuttings he brought from Nibiru and told him to begin planting them, and try to save as many of them as he could. As he watched the gardener begin to work, he came to the painful realization that he may have to hire an actual living person with an affinity or ability for raising plants as the Inn let him know of the various special needs of each plant that was being planted, and they were not simple to say the least.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 67: Protagonist Halo

Lex watched silently as the gardener carefully started digging potholes for the cuttings he had brought. The greenhouse had few special features that greatly aided in the growth of plants. Firstly the soil was filled with concentrated spirit energy, which would not only increase the speed of growth of plants it would also improve their quality. Even common plants grown here would absorb spirit energy. Secondly, the chances of transported plants or plant cuttings dying was reduced drastically.

However this was only the first level of the Greenhouse and the benefits it could provide were limited. It pained him to learn that for more valuable plants, such as those that granted humans extra strength back on Nibiru, he would need to provide special fertilizers and spirit water. Both of those things would cost him a lot of MP. Fortunately, for now he could make do without them.

He told the gardener that he wanted him to focus on growing a lot of the vine Tiffany's treasure. Using the system he could get the proper name for the plant, but he'd decided to stick to the name the little girl had told him.

He was just about to leave the garden when he received another notification.

New Quest: With a garden available in your backyard, it's time to improve the quality of your food. Grow spiritual vegetables for the Inns kitchen

Quest time limit: 2 weeks

Quest Reward: Rare plant seeds

Quest failure punishment: -1000MP

Remarks: In certain parts of the world common farmers have abs, but you even as a cultivator only have flab! Roll up your sleeves and put some work in!

Lex was incensed! He had abs okay! Maybe not to the level of Instagram models, but he was getting there! Anyway, he ignored the ignorant, insensitive system for now and focused on the time limit. 2 weeks! It was too short, could he grow anything in this time?

"You don't need to worry and just plant normal seeds, they will grow quickly enough. You don't need to even have a large variety at the moment. Even if just a couple of ingredients in a dish are spiritual then it will have a completely different result. Just look for whatever is easily available."

Lex nodded, and decided to make this his first priority. This was a relatively easy quest, he wanted the quickest reward he could get, along with hopefully some upgrades!

He returned to his apartment, already planning on getting seeds with same day delivery, but the moment he returned all thoughts of vegetables were thrown out the window. He was standing in his room, but everything had been overturned. His mattress had been ripped up, his things were cluttered on the floor and his clothes thrown out of his closet. Warily he crept outside his room to find the rest of his apartment in the same state. His first thought was robbery, but that didn't make sense. His tv and gaming consoles, the easiest items to steal, were still there - they were just broken. His furniture was either broken into pieces or ripped through with daggers. Someone had clearly ransacked the place.

He was standing still, trying to figure out what the most appropriate reaction should be. He couldn't report this incident to Bluebird, his token was at home but he was not there during the incident. That could only mean that he had left his apartment without the token. Whether Bluebird would be able to find the culprit was an entirely different matter, they would most likely prosecute him first. For the same reason he couldn't go to the police.

He was still thinking of what to do when he heard his ringtone, and traced the sound to his phone which had fallen underneath his bed. A glance he was able to tell that he had missed a few calls, all from Larry. He picked up and heard an urgent voice from the other end, "Lex? Lex! Is that you? Are you alright? I've been trying to reach you for hours."

"I'm fine," he replied. "But something tells me that you think I shouldn't be."

"I ran into some goons from Ultimate Fighting Fortress, and suffice to say they roughed me up. So did Matilda, and that ended really badly. She's in Bluebird custody right now, and I heard quite a few people were sent to the CCU in a hospital. When you weren't picking up I feared the worst, but I'm being monitored so there's no way I could come to you."

Lex frowned. What did Ultimate Fighting Fortress want with them? Their fight should be with Marlo, and he hasn't even been on Earth in a while.

"I just got back to my apartment, and the place has been completely trashed. I was wondering what happened, it looks like they paid me a visit as well. Do you know what they want?"

"I looked into it. Apparently Marlo has disappeared, and that's caused some people to worry. When he didn't reappear after the Alexander incident in Egypt, some of his enemies started worrying that he was planning a move against him. They picked a fight with his family as well, and I heard there was even an incident with his mother. Someone is trying to provoke him into reappearing. You, Matilda and I are just collateral damage."

"So what now? Won't the Bluebird do anything?"

"You don't understand. He's a very high leveled cultivator, his sudden disappearance makes all the ICPA's nervous as well. They won't directly act against him, but as long as no one goes too overboard, they won't interfere in this matter."

"But God only knows how long Marlo will be gone," Lex said exasperated, for more than one reason. Everyday that former giant stayed away cost Lex MP!

"What are we supposed to do in the meantime? I can't get pulled into a fight like this, I..." before Lex could continue someone kicked in his door and three shady looking men walked into his apartment.

"Well well well, look who's finally returned," said the short man who was in the lead. He was wearing a tracksuit and a few chains and was covered in tattoos. Lex didn't mean to stereotype, but the guy definitely looked like trouble.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Lex asked forcefully. Deep down, he really wanted to avoid trouble. Earth was supposed to be the place where he layed low, without attracting any attention. He didn't mind getting into trouble in other places, but his family was on Earth! He absolutely could not risk them. Before the man could reply, Lex reached into his backpack and pulled out the Heavy Harley. He did not aim it at anyone, but the threat was evident.

The three men stopped in their tracks when they saw the gun, but didn't leave. The short man let out a whistle as he admired the weapon.

"You know, it's pretty hard to get a carry permit for one of those in New York. You must have friends in high places. But that's okay, we just want to be friends too."

Lex eyed the three, still a little hesitant. He wanted to avoid a confrontation if possible. He put the phone back to his ear and said, "Let Bluebird know I have a few guests in my apartment."

He shut the phone and threw it away, his stance still hostile towards the three.

"I'll ask again, who are you and what do you want? The authorities will be here soon, and I'm sure it'll be in everyone's interest if you're not here when they arrive."

The short man was still looking at the gun. "You know, I vaguely recall that Marlo registered one of these guns recently. That's a pretty strange thing, that he would do it himself. He's a big man, he has secretaries for stuff like that - even minions. I wonder, could it be your gun that he registered? You guys must be close."

The short man was smirking now, and looking at Lex with eager eyes.

"I sold him a treasure, in exchange he gave me a weapon. However, that's none of your business. Please leave, before I get agitated. My finger starts twitching when I'm nervous."

"Hey, alright alright. We're leaving," the man said, signaling his men to slowly back out. "But I believe we got off on the wrong foot. We only want to be friends, and have a little chat if at all possible. You know what, I'll give you a call sometime. We'll meet outside, somewhere in public, so you don't need to be nervous. I believe it'll be in your interest as well. After all, you don't want rumors spreading around about yourself. You know the internet is a crazy place, people love cooking up conspiracies about illegitimate children and what not."

"Buddy I don't know if you're saying that I have kids, or that I'm someone's illegitimate child. But someone broke my TV and I'm pissed, so if you don't get out of here right now I think I might decide to keep you till Bluebird shows up."

This time, Lex aimed the gun directly towards the man. The man didn't retort, and left the apartment, giving Lex a wink right before he left. Lex waited a while, and then checked the hallway outside to find it empty. He let out a sigh. Was this the famous 'get into trouble for no reason' protagonist halo he'd read in so many novels?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 68: Marital problems

A tall, beautiful lady sat with her legs crossed on a sofa, her long blonde hair falling over her shoulders. She was wearing a suit but had taken off her shoes, but the casual look did nothing to diminish her overwhelming charm. She was sitting in a private lounge, the table before filled with various sushi dishes. She was listening to a man making a report and she leaned forward and grabbed a California roll with her chopsticks and ate. Guards were standing in the corners of the room, all extremely serious.

The setting right now seemed quite harmonious, but everyone knew that the truth was contrary to how it appeared. The woman's name was Sophia Ramos, formerly known as Sophia Bravi - Marlo's wife! Officially the two were still married, but their separation had been quite public, and in the original sense of the word, epic. No one knew the exact reason for their separation, but the consequences were so drastic that multiple ICPA's had to get involved. A small town had been destroyed in their fight, and the officials had to report it to the public as a sudden earthquake. It was said that when they were together no one had ever been in as much love as Sophia was with her husband, and when they separated no one could hate someone the way she did.

Like her husband, she was a Golden Core cultivator. She was also the head of one of the largest and most influential cultivator families in Europe, the Ramos family. However, she did not live in Spain, where her family's strength was focused. She lived in New York, where she could keep a close eye on her 'dear husband'.

Some time ago, the man disappeared from the public eye. It was not surprising as he was one of the strongest members, if not the strongest member, of the Bravi family. Although he had long since paid back whatever he owed that family, there were times when the family requested him to use his specific skills. This was not to mention that Marlo himself ran multiple enterprises, and sometimes they would require him to handle sensitive matters. But matters became different after the Egypt incident. Even ignoring the serious political waves the incident brought throughout the cultivation world, Marlo himself had a relationship with the Morrison family. An incident of that scale did not simply finish, there were

repercussions that would last years if not decades. Everyone would have to make their stance clear, alliances had to be made or broken, forces strengthened, protections and precautions had to be taken. Yet the man still had no response. Even the Bravi family was alarmed by his absence, and quietly started looking for him. If he kept his silence for too long, and did not reappear, people might even begin to suspect that that he was directly involved in the assassination attempt, as he had disappeared right before it.

Whether other people were beginning to be suspicious of his actions or not was still unclear, but Ultimate Fighting Fortress, Sophia's personal organization, was very open in their search for him. When traces of him could not be found using official methods, they started getting aggressive. A distant observer might think that perhaps the wife was concerned about him, that he needed to clear his name before the Morrison family took notice, but at least the people standing in this room did not think so.

A phone rang, breaking the subtle peace in the room, but everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they saw Sophia picking her own up and answering.

"Any updates?"

"We've finished looking up all of his recent students. He's had a closer relationship with two of them, a Matilda Ross and a Lex William. The scope of his extra interactions with them has not been too unusual, but it's still a lead. A background check of Lex revealed to be quite ordinary, but Matilda's background is clearly forged. She also sent some of our men to the hospital. We're looking further into her, but the latest report said that she disappeared from Bluebird custody."

"Were you able to extract any information from them?"

"His other students said he gave them a week off before leaving, but they don't know anything else. Matilda attacked our men as soon as they tried to intimidate her, and Lex pulled out a gun as soon as he made contact. Both of them showed a very aggressive response, which does not reflect their social standing or cultivation level. Although at the moment we do not believe Lex was related to his disappearance, for several hours our men were unable to locate him as he had gone without his Bluebird token, which is why he's still under suspicion."

"Keep investigating. Also, send my dear mother-in-law some flowers, and invite her over for some coffee."

"Understood," said the man at the other end of the phone before hanging up.

For a few moments Sophia was still, as if thinking, before her face warped into a grimace and she crushed the phone in her hand. She threw the broken pieces across the room before screaming, "THAT SCUM IS CHEATING ON ME! I KNOW IT!"

The men in the room trembled, but said nothing. Marlo himself had a fearsome reputation, but Sophia was the name people used to scare their children at night.

Lex propped his broken door against the entrance where it used to reside and returned to his apartment. He took a look around before saying, "Mary I don't trust my judgment right now. I need some advice."

"I can't tell you what to do, but I can give you a few suggestions based on what you want to do. What are you thinking?"

"I need to decide how to respond to this. I really don't want to get involved in any trouble on Earth, but I'm also really pissed at those people for trashing my apartment."

"Hmm that's too vague. Let me ask you another question, what are your top priorities right now?"

Lex thought for a while before answering, "Raising my cultivation, developing my Inn and keeping my family safe."

"In that case, you should plan according to what you want. Although originally a self defense class was not a bad idea, right now it has caused you problems. Drop out of the class immediately, and then figure out the easiest way to get out of the public eye. Focus only on your cultivation and the Inn. In fact, you should know that the Inn will allow you to have your own home in a separate space from the Inn. You should complete quests till you unlock that, and then completely move away from Earth until your cultivation is strong enough. There is no reason to put yourself in unnecessary danger. As for your family, simply introduce them to the cultivation world, and then tell them to remain lowkey as well. There's no need to keep cultivation a secret from them, it serves no purpose."

"Dropping out? Don't you think that's a little drastic?"

"Let me guess," Mary said with a knowing look, "you don't want to drop out because you'll feel guilty or because you don't want to compromise your relationship with Marlo. Is that right?"

Lex didn't answer immediately, but eventually gave a reluctant nod.

"Lex you can't risk yourself for such a stupid reason. You may like Marlo but his complicated life has directly caused you to be in danger, or at least some trouble. You have to get your priorities straight and act accordingly. With the system and the Inn you can grow so much stronger and be exposed to so much, but that doesn't mean you're immortal or won't die. The system may feel like a cheat or a shortcut, but if it's not used properly then that's on you. Even the best cheat can't help you if you don't use it well and keep getting distracted."

Lex felt like he was getting scolded, but ultimately agreed with the tiny floating projection. He was making things more complicated than they needed to be. He should focus on the Inn and his cultivation, and once he was as strong or even stronger than Marlo, he could do whatever he wanted on Earth and he would have no worries.

Just as Lex made his decision there was a knock on his broken door, before someone moved it aside and entered his apartment. Lex, to his great surprise, saw his old boss Jessica entering his apartment followed by a few men. She was dressed formally, in a beige dress, but the men behind her were in police uniforms.

"Are you okay? We were told there were intruders," she said with some concern in her voice. Lex however was not buying it. Even if she worked for Bluebird, it was too coincidental that the one person he knew answered his distress call. Larry told him that even Bluebird was concerned about Marlo's whereabouts, and it seemed they wanted to try and see if they could get any answers from him.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 69: Capitalistic mentality

"Of course there were intruders! Does this look like the kind of redecoration I would do?" Lex said between barred teeth. Someone had come in and trashed his entire apartment, and then came once again to threaten him, but Bluebird delayed their response to find Jessica because she had a connection

to him. He was feeling pissed at Ultimate Fighting Fortress (UFF) and annoyed at Bluebird, and it was coming out right now.

"Lex calm down, you're being too aggressive," Mary told him. "You need to maintain a good relationship with the authorities."

Lex realized his words and tone were too strong. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, holding it in for a few seconds before breathing out.

"I apologize," he said looking at Jessica again. "I was a bit emotional. I am not used to this kind of thing."

"It's completely understandable," Jessica replied, looking around the apartment. To be honest, handling incidents of cultivator violence was not her domain in Bluebird. Her work was more logistical, and she rarely ever entered the field. It was true, however, that she was called on an emergency basis to handle this case because of her connection with Lex. She had been on a date that had to be cut short which annoyed her, but she maintained her professionalism. She had been briefed that other than handling the immediate incident, she should try to investigate Lex's relationship with Marlo as well as if he had any information on him. No one expected Lex to know, but there was no harm in being thorough.

"Before anything else, are you hurt? Do you require any medical attention?"

"No, no I'm fine."

"Then can you walk me through what happened?"

As the two of them talked, the two police officers were looking around the apartment to get a clear idea of the scope of the incident. There wasn't a single part of the apartment that hadn't seen some damage.

"Three guys broke into my apartment and started trashing the place. I tried to ask them what they wanted but they were very forceful." Lex lied through his teeth flawlessly, as if the truth was exactly as he described. He didn't want Bluebird to know he was gone for a while and the apartment was destroyed behind his back. "They seemed to be looking for something. When they couldn't find it, they came for me. Fortunately I have this for self defense," he said, pulling out the Heavy Harley. "As soon as

I took out the gun I threatened them to leave. Maybe I could have told them to wait till you guys appeared but I didn't want to take a chance."

Jessica took a look at the gun and said, "Yes, we saw that you had a registered weapon. But you should be more careful, if they had weapons as well it could have turned into a confrontation. Do you have any idea what they were after?"

"No clue, they weren't exactly chatty and I wasn't in the mood to ask."

Although Lex was trying to control himself, it was apparent that he was agitated, though no one thought that was unusual as he had just been through a traumatic experience. Jessica asked him a few more questions, but Lex would always answer that he did not know anything. He did not know who these people were, why they were after him or what they were looking for. He was completely attempting to distance himself from the situation.

Finally, with no actual information on hand and no way to lead the conversation Jessica had to ask the question she was wondering up front. "It says on your profile that you've registered for self defense classes, but your trainer took a leave. Do you know anything about that?"

"No not much, he just gave us a week off...wait, was this because of him? Did these people find me because they were looking for him?" Lex asked, feigning his shock and anger extremely well.

"No, of course not. I just thought that if he were around you could ask him what to do in a breakin situation. Having a direct confrontation against three intruders is not a smart idea." Jessica covered herself really well, but Lex showed a doubtful look. They asked him a few more questions, until they finally left. They told him they'd contact him again if they made any progress on the investigation, and asked him if he wanted to follow them to a safe house. Lex naturally declined to follow them as he had other plans.

He took Mary's suggestion and decided he was going to drop out of Marlo's class and leave for a while. As for his family...he decided that he'd tell them about cultivation whenever he met them personally next time. Actually there was a Bluebird program that helped new cultivators explain to their immediate families about the cultivation world. This was so that there would be a bit of credibility when these people talked to their families, and to avoid accidents. However Lex didn't want to think about that right now. Dealing with family was always complicated, he wanted to avoid thinking about it.

Leaving Marlo's class was not normally an easy procedure, as it was in his contract that once you started you could not stop or you would be prosecuted. It was an unusual clause, but in this situation Lex had an easy out as he could claim his life had been endangered because of Marlo. He wrote up an email and sent it to the official email attached to the self defense class before he left his apartment. He only grabbed his phone, wallet, Bluebird token and Heavy Harley that he stored in his backpack, nothing else in the apartment was worth putting any effort into. He hailed a taxi and told the driver an address he'd looked up online. He arrived at a skyscraper and quickly made his way in. At the reception he showed his token and said, "I'm here to register at Ballor's castle."

The receptionist scanned the token, and after checking if everything was in order, told him to take the elevator to the 20th level. Of course, the 20th level she was referring to was the basement level, not the floors in the highrise. Lex, already used to this system by now, and directly went underground.

The reason why he was so decisive about coming here was because he'd done a lot of research on Ballor's castle since Larry told him about it. They took their role of protection quite seriously, and had a very positive reputation in the cultivator community. He would relocate using their help, and also finally gain an affiliation with an organization on Earth. Although he wanted to avoid doing so, it couldn't be helped. At least this one was not so demanding of its members.

When he reached the floor he was greeted with a bold 'Ballor's Castle' imprinted on the wall, along with various images of its leading members. Lex only glanced at it before heading towards the reception on this level.

Joining an organization was not as quick and straightforward as he had seen so many characters do in books. After scanning his token and checking his profile on the Bluebird database, they checked his criminal history. Once they were done with that, they checked his social media to check if he had any extremist views or dubious connections. Then came the paperwork. Oh lord, there was so much paperwork!

Lex felt like he'd spent hours filling out forms, answering questions, and then redoing some parts that the receptionist told him he did wrong. They wanted to know everything about him, from his academic records to his professional experience, his medical history to his political affiliations if he had any. When it came to his cultivation, it was mandatory to list his level as well as how long he had been cultivating for, followed by optional questions where he could write down the details of his cultivation technique. Lex left all the optional questions and then submitted the paperwork and began waiting for the final process, the personal interview. Under normal circumstances he was told that the interview would be scheduled in a few weeks, but he told them that he was in an emergency, after which they revealed to him the option to pay for an express interview. He didn't know if he should be cursing or grateful for the capitalistic mentality.

Naturally he paid the \$5000 express fee and was led to the interview room where he waited silently for his interview to begin. To be honest, he was surprised by how thorough the organization was in its joining process. He assumed it would have been easier and more straightforward. The receptionist then told him that because Ballor's castle took their role so seriously, they were also very selective in who they allowed in. Criminals or people with potential ulterior motives were not allowed to join. He supposed that was good for him, as long as his interview went smoothly and he could join. For now, all he could do was wait.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 70: Teenagers

Two men and a woman entered the room, all holding folders Lex assumed held information about him. They all looked relatively relaxed and gave off friendly vibes that made Lex feel more confident about his chances. They sat down across from him and after and introduced themselves before diving right into the interview.

"Mr. Lex, can you tell me what interested you about Ballor's castle?"

"The freedom and safety," Lex answered promptly, "especially the safety part. Since I accidentally learned about the cultivation world, the strongest impression I've gotten is that it is very unsafe. I spent a lot of time researching various organizations, but Ballor's castle is the one I felt could best safeguard me and my interests."

"Well we would like to thank you for your confidence in us. We try our best to uphold our standards to the best of our abilities. Have you tried joining any organization before, and if so which ones?"

"No, I haven't tried joining any organization before. I am very new to the cultivation world, and considering how dangerous it seems I've tried to minimize my contact with other cultivators as much as I can. I did take a self defense class for cultivators, but even then I have kept mostly to myself."

"Mr. Lex, you've mentioned a few times that you are concerned about your safety. Do you have any enemies?"

"No of course not! Why would I have any enemies?"

"Mr. Lex, I hope you don't mind but it is standard procedure to run background checks on our applicants. According to our research, there was an incident report at your apartment just a few hours ago. Could you tell us about that?"

"There was a breakin at my apartment. They completely destroyed everything I own and even threatened me. That is what prompted me to come here, I realized that I wasn't safe on my own."

"Yes, of course, I can understand how such an incident can be traumatic and make one want to protect oneself. But tell me, do you have any idea why you were targeted?"

"No, I've never seen them before and have no relation with them."

"Mr. Lex, I don't know if you're aware, but the cultivator community in New York is very tight knit. Rumors get around quickly, and rumor is that a lot of people have been investigating your self defense instructor, Mr. Marlo. Do you think you could have been targeted because of your connection to him?"

"He is my instructor, and other than that I have no connection to him. I don't know why I would be targeted because of him."

The three investigators looked at one another, before pulling out a picture to show Lex. As soon as Lex saw his lips twitched - it was a picture of him when he was going to Marlo's apartment right after returning from Vegas Minima. He was battered and bruised and completely covered in dry blood. Suddenly he felt his chances in this interview had dropped drastically.

"Mr. Lex this picture was pulled from security footage of you entering Mr. Marlo's building some time ago. Having no context about this picture at all, it does not seem to me that your relationship with Mr. Marlo is simple."

Lex gulped as quickly started thinking of a good excuse.

Velma was standing silently in the Gift shop. She was an A.I. that worked at the Midnight Inn, however that did not mean that she was an emotionless and cold machine. It just meant that she was created and given intelligence artificially, and not born in the usual way. Although technically her age was less than a month old, she was mentally around seventeen. She was extremely disciplined and obeyed orders so her mental age never compromised her work at the Inn, but when she had no work to do she felt extremely bored. Gerard had the mental age of a fifty year old man, so the two of them could not relate very much at all. The new addition to the Inn, the Gardener, was very boorish and Velma did not get along with him at all. All he wanted to do was dig and dig and dig.

Her 2nd boss, the tiny floating projection called Mary, was a little more fun. She would occasionally gossip with Velma about her first boss, the Innkeeper. Speaking of whom, the Innkeeper was incredibly handsome and Velma always felt very shy around him. A few times she wanted to strike up a conversation with him, but every time she wanted to she could not make herself do it.

She let out a sigh, she was really bored. But right then her 2nd boss appeared before her.

"Velma, the Innkeeper is busy and some new guests are entering the Inn. Receive them."

"Immediately," she answered as she disappeared, reappearing at the entrance. From a bright light a young man ran out, holding the hand of a young woman. The pair of teenagers looked very troubled.

"Haris, where are we?" asked the young woman, panting.

"I have no idea Ayesha, but I think we've lost them for now," the teenager replied, wiping the imaginary sweat off his brow.

Ayesha, who was relieved to hear that they had lost their pursuers, threw herself into Haris' arms and started sobbing.

"Oh Haris, what are we going to do? They're never going to let us be together! Your family will move away across the oceans and I'll never see you again!"

"Then I will swim the oceans if I have to. Nothing can separate me from you!"

The two lovers continued to talk to one another, professing their love and imagining the various struggles the world would throw their way, denying them the one thing that they both wanted - love. It was as if it was predestined that they were not to be, their difficulties far beyond the petty hurdles of Romeo and Juliet.

Velma, who was waiting for a chance to introduce them to the Inn, completely forgot her purpose, and was listening to their sweet nothings with glowing eyes. Since there was no television, or basically any kind of media available at the Inn, this was the first time the young A.I. was getting a taste of teen romance and she was hooked.

"But long distance never works," said Ayesha, breaking free from his arms and looking away. "You'll go to college and make new friends and fall in love with some blonde bimbo, and I'll be left alone, with nothing but a memory of a time I was happy, if only for a moment." Their extremely cheesy lines and over the top emotions held Velma in a vice, and at the thought that the two lovers would be separated Velma suddenly remembered her job, and along with that she came up with an idea.

"Welcome guests," she said loudly, interrupting Haris' monologue about slaying all the bimbos that would stand between the two, "to the Midnight Inn, the universe's best rendezvous for estranged lovers."

The two teenagers turned their attention to Velma with a frown, but then suddenly realized that they were not alone. Ayesha quickly pulled herself out of Haris' arms - he had hugged her once again - and quickly straightened her clothes, as if removing all proof or memory of the lovers embrace.

"Our humble Inn caters to people from across the universe, wherever they may be. It brings lovers together so that they can spend time with one another, walking in our gardens, climbing our hills, making memories free from pursuit or judgment."

"Across the universe you say?" asked Haris, intrigued. He accepted Velma's words quickly, as if traveling the universe were the most natural thing, and started rubbing his chin as if he were coming up with a plan.

"So this is like a dating spot?" Ayesha asked, curious. "How scandalous, I love it."

Velma lost a bit of her composure when she heard the Inn being called a dating spot - if her bosses ever found out she'd be too embarrassed!

"Uh, well, no the Inn doesn't cater to just lovers. Anyone who wants to enjoy our services can come. But lovers, especially lovers who have been separated, can come to the Inn to enjoy their time together, so that their love can overcome all adversity." Poor Velma did not know that to some people what she was saying could be taken as the description of a 'Love Hotel' that charged by the hour. It truly was a good thing that neither Mary nor Lex were here to hear this.

Ayesha's eyes started to glow as she looked at Haris excitedly. The both shared a look, and it was as if they both had found the solution to their problem.

"Why don't you show us around," said Haris with a smile. "I feel like we'll be coming here a lot."

"Please follow me, I believe you'll like what we have to offer." Just as she began to lead the two towards the Inn, she came close to Haris and whispered, "You should buy her a Saturn cake, trust me. I'll show it to you later." The three 'teenagers' excitedly made their way into the manor, all of them thinking of their exciting futures.