

## **Innkeeper 691**

### The Innkeeper

#### Chapter 691: Fishrider

Truth be told, Lex felt some pity for Zagan. Obviously he was in a precarious situation, and Lex was here bothering and distracting him. But at the same time, if instead of arguing and fighting back he had simply given the answers he required, he would be halfway done by now.

"Look I understand you don't want interruptions. I also don't want to bother you, nor do I want to continuously bicker. Just give me the answers I want and I will leave you alone."

Zagan did not immediately reply, and showed a disgruntled face. The Farham inducing illusions could sense his distraction, and so immediately increased the potency of the illusion. For a split second, Zagan almost genuinely believed that the illusion he was living was real.

Cold sweat appeared on his brow, and this seemingly easy tribulation was made immeasurably more difficult all with the addition of a simple, single human. Or perhaps... this was also a part of the tribulation! Of course! It suddenly made so much sense!

He was a noble and dignified immortal, working for the mysterious and powerful Midnight Inn. How could his training be casually interrupted? How could some human just waltz up to him? Moreover, how could a weakling utterly ignore his impressive and dangerous aura while he underwent a tribulation? Little did he know, it was impossible for anyone to be harmed by passive aura inside the Inn, for the system neutralized all such auras. It was one of the Inn's original features, which is why Lex and so many others were able to tolerate the aura of Dao Lords without losing complete control.

So this was a part of the tribulation too. More than an illusion tribulation, this should be called a heart tribulation, for only with simple tricks his heart and faith in the noble Midnight Inn was almost shaken. It all made so much sense. He...

The human was poking his face again, though this time Zagan's heart was calm and serene, like a monk praying to Buddha, or an introvert in the safety of their blankets in their room. The knowledge and wisdom he had accumulated over millions of years was showing off now.

"Fret not, human. Since you are a coworker, how could I leave unassisted? From what I recall, you need to move across vast amounts of space quickly. Oh yes, the Trelops Sacred lands. As for the Poloids' new country, I have no idea where that is, but it is not a concern. I can easily resolve this issue for you."

Since Zagan was convinced that everything that was happening was an illusion, he did not hesitate to give his best performance. After all, it wasn't like it would have any real ramifications.

His eyes still closed, Zagan lifted his right hand and showed it to Lex. It was empty. Then, like a magician performing a trick, he swung his hand around, and in it, an oval shaped, sharp, black scale appeared.

"This is my heart scale, meaning the scale that used to cover my heart. It fell out during my lightning tribulation, but a new one will grow once I complete my tribulations so I don't really need it. You can use this scale as a token to prove your identity, and as a sign that you are acting at my behest. The scale should continue to contain my aura for at least another 10,000 years, so you only have that much time.

"But the scale alone will not help you. As a noble immortal, I naturally have many followers and worshippers. One particular follower of mine is quite adept at traversing great distances quickly, though he is not the most intelligent fellow. I will teach you how you can summon him using my scale, and so long as you possess my scale he will obey you. As for how to get him to go where you need, that will be a small challenge you will have to overcome on your own."

Zagan paused for a moment as he collected himself, then began explaining to Lex the process of summoning his subordinate.

Surprisingly, the sequence of events played out in the exact direction Lex had hoped. Although he had no idea this was only because Zagan was under the impression that everything was an illusion, or he would have been extremely hesitant to hand over his heart scale.

But as far as the monster was concerned, in truth, he really did have his heart scale, so he was not worried.

Once Lex got everything he needed, as promised he left Zagan alone to continue his tribulation. He hoped it would end soon, as such a powerful yet submissive worker would be very valuable to him.

The issue he had to face next was who he could have work at his behest in the Crystal realm. If he had not sent away his most reliable workers to the Inn, he would definitely pick one of them. As it was, he could only delegate this task to Rick, the handyman at the tavern.

Rich was in charge of miscellaneous work at the Inn, and could often be seen cleaning dishes, serving guests, making beds, dealing with laundry and anything and everything else that came up. The only job he had not done yet was actually barkeep, which made sense. Roan, the actual bartender of the tavern, was quite possessive of the job.

Anyway, Rick was a simple straightforward worker. He did not talk much, nor did he do much else outside of his assigned tasks. For this particular job, such a person would be best. The more they paid close attention to Lex's instructions, the better this job would go. The only regretful point about him was his almost nonexistent cultivation.

Not delaying the matter further, he used his Remote presence ability and summoned a projection in the tavern. Summoning Rick to a private room, Lex began to carefully instruct him in his following tasks. Just to be sure, he even had Rick repeat his instructions to ensure he had everything memorized correctly.

When the instruction was complete, Lex handed over the scale to Rick, and escorted him to the roof where they would begin to summon Zagan's subordinate. Considering Rick's lack of cultivation, he actually wasn't able to do this on his own, so Big Ben was temporarily recruited to aid in the process.

Up on the roof, Big Ben channeled his spirit into the scale while using the 'spirit technique' he had been handed over by his coworker. The process was... creepy to say the least, and was reminiscent of cult rituals. Fortunately no blood sacrifices were required.

Once he completed his job, Big Ben retreated from the roof, leaving only Rick and Lex's projection.

The duo stood there in awkward silence as they waited. Lex tried to strike up a conversation with Rick, but even his charisma failed to elicit more than one word replies, so they ultimately once again returned to silence.

A few hours passed, and just as Lex was getting impatient, he sensed a change in space. There was a ripple in the air, as if air were water, and from the ripple emerged... a large catfish. The fish which seemed to swim through the air focused all its attention on the scale, and then froze.

It neither looked at the two of them, or tried to do anything else. It simply continued to stare at the scale as if it was its entire world.

"Are you sure you can handle this?" Lex asked hesitantly as he looked at the simple minded fish, and straightforward Rick.

"Yes," he replied, nodding, before he walked to the fish, before discovering it was too high. He lowered the scale to the ground, and the fish similarly descended, its eyes still locked on. Then, without warning, Rick jumped up to try and climb the fish. Unfortunate, as the scale also rose higher when Rick jumped, so too did the fish rise, resulting in an awkward failure.

Completely unperturbed, as if he had not just done something silly, Rick paused for a moment to think. Eventually, he slowly grabbed onto one of the fishes' whiskers, and pulled it down. The fish complied. Finally he was able to climb aboard.

So concerned was Lex that he did not even make any cowboy comparisons as Rick rode off into the sky on his catfish steed. His first destination would be to Toro, to whom he would show the invitation. That was because Toro was the closest Trelop around.

Then, either accompanied or guided by Toro, they would head to the Trellops' Sacred lands to deliver the letter to whichever Trelop was in charge. Upon delivering that letter he would return to the tavern, during which time Lex would search for someone who could guide him to the Poloids new country.

Riding a monster fish that could swim through space, Rick should face no problems. So why then did Lex feel so worried?

The Innkeeper

Chapter 692: Book Club

There was a crisp morning chill in the wind that blew in the Midnight Inn, cooled endlessly no doubt while flowing gently over the untouched snow that covered much of its grounds. The wind felt invigorating, rather than uncomfortable, and was even better than coffee at waking up someone who woke up from a nap.

A clear, perfect 'crunch' could be heard as a figure walked through one such untouched field, leaving behind deep but clear footprints. A few of the trees the figure passed were bare, and some showed a hint of green needle like leaves topped with the white of snow. Most of the trees, though, were quite colorful. The trees with leaves of purple crystal had spread quite fast across the Inn, and remarkably, changed colors with the season. Now, various shades of red, from deep scarlet to blood red, to the soft blend of hues occasionally found in the rising sun, dotted the endless Inn grounds.

The visage was quite picturesque. A figure garbed in all black moved across an ocean of white, with various colors around, some bunched together and some far apart, like an abstract painting of the cosmos.

Parveen, who watched the figure get closer, took another sip of her extremely rich, smoldering hot chocolate. Her thoughts wandered like smoke through the wind, comparing the figure to everything from a solitary hero through a field of pure happiness, brought about from his own noble acts, to a desolate soldier, walking not through lands but through his happy memories moments before he succumbed to the final embrace of death. As an avid reader and perpetual bookworm, she had an overactive imagination and most of her social interactions usually involved her imagining her compatriots in various interesting scenarios.

"Am I late?" the dark figure asked in a gruff voice, unwrapping the gray scarf around his neck. He hated the cold, yet always found himself attracted to it for the pure bliss it delivered in terms of excellent naps.

"A little," Parveen replied. "But don't worry. Everyone is already used to it."

The dark figure made a sound to acknowledge the statement as he finally finished unwrapping the scarf. The dark, furry face of a Neko, or commonly known as a cat-human, was revealed. As it turned out, the figure was dark not only because of the dark clothes he had worn, but also all the black colored hair his stocky build was covered in.

"There are some new members though. I told you the Midnight Inn would be a good place," Parveen said absent mindedly, her thoughts once again preoccupied with various scenarios as she fueled herself with more hot chocolate.

"I will be the one to judge if there are any new members," Gladius, the Neko, said harshly. He was strangely strict in admitting new members, as he should be. After all, joining his book club was no simple matter.

Silently, the duo retreated into a small clearing in the middle of a few dozen trees. It seemed as if the trees had protected this place from the snow, and somehow the chilly winds did not enter past the furthest tree, forming a safe haven from the elements.

In the middle, there were a number of small huts, some simple log stools and a burning campfire. Alongside the few dozen members of the book club, parrots and peacocks rested there, as if completely unafraid of the nearby gathering.

"You've finally arrived," said a monkey who was seated nearby, a pair of hipster glasses resting on its nose as it read an incredibly thick book. Even as the monkey talked, he could not look away as if the story he was reading had gripped his very soul.

"Keep reading your dictionary and don't talk to me," said Gladius, completely irritated by this member who never seemed to read the correct book.

The monkey, as if unable to detect the irritation in the voice, said "I most definitely will," while murmuring as he tried to pronounce the new word it was reading.

"Be nice," said another member, who similarly had her eyes locked onto her book. She was a demon, a zombie to be exact, who had somehow retained the consciousness of her body before she became a zombie. Having lost almost all of her senses, except the desire to eat meat filled with spiritual energy, preferably raw, she now took all her pleasures from reading.

"I don't want instructions from someone reading the manual for a squatting toilet," murmured Gladius, but not too loudly. For better or for worse, the zombie was pretty powerful and he didn't want to antagonize her.

"Are you the leader?" asked another new potential member, excitement bubbling out from every corner of his being. "How did you discover such excellent books? We must talk after the meeting, you HAVE to give me more recommendations!"

This member was one of the spirits who had survived death by giving up his entire wealth, and now lived permanently at the Inn. It was only in death did he have the time to discover the wonder of books, and he did not want to miss out on a single one!

Gladius interacted with each of the members, or prospective members, before he finally made it to his designated seat in the center. All the others also found their seats and a hush fell over the area as eager eyes all focused on Gladius.

For many here, the book club was the main source of social interaction, but even for the rest it was the one they looked forward to most. After all, it was so hard to find like minded people, let alone an entire club full of various races all dedicated to, and in love with the same thing.

Gladius cleared his throat loudly, as if attracting everyone's attention - though that was unnecessary.

"We have some prospective members here, so let me go over the rules of the Catnip Book Club (CBC). We meet once a week, though attendance every week is not exactly necessary. However, if someone misses four consecutive meetings they will be considered removed from the club until further notice.

"Each week, I provide a list of reading materials. There is one main focus, which we will discuss the following week, and several suggestions that members can discuss amongst themselves..."

Gladius spent a good amount of time explaining the rules, his posture perfect and his voice loud and clear, as if declaring that he was the one in charge. No one really contested his position, because not only did he recommend excellent books, everyone loved to play with his incredibly silky and soft hair. He was the perfect reading companion.

Once he was done explaining the rules, he opened his satchel and from within removed a massive book with an extremely colorful cover, depicting a magnificent hero wielding his sword, ready to take on the universe, and behind him his endless wives. The title of the book: 'Ultimate King Emperor: All the Gods call me Daddy'!

"This... this book..." he said, his voice trembling, though no one could tell if it was from excitement or some other emotion, "was selected last week through popular demand." Gladius paused for a moment to glare at Parveen, the oldest member of his book club, before he continued, "and it was... well it was definitely a unique read. As much as I pride myself as a quick reader, I was only able to read the first thirty one thousand chapters during this past week..." his voice trembled again.

"Before we begin to discuss the book, let's ask everyone how far they've reached, and limit our discussion till the earliest point a member has reached to avoid spoilers."

One by one, the members only said what chapter they had reached, though at some point Gladius became distracted. A notification grabbed his attention.

New notification: Congratulations on gathering 50 members for the Catnip Book Club, and unlocking the achievement - The Budding Book Club.

Reward: The Haunted Book Mark

Excited, Gladius began investigating his new reward, and began checking out the new features of his 'Book Readers Club System'. At the same time, he received a new quest as well.

New Quest: As a budding book club, you should also begin to develop a collection of rare and valuable books to show off your achievements. Find a signed copy of the comic 'The Innkeeper vol. III Love is an ocean of fire and I am the lifeguard' by author 'Rachel'.

Gladius could not keep himself from grinning, though his members mistook his actions as a reaction to the amount of progress they had made in their reading, and felt highly motivated.

The reason he was smiling was because he had heard a rumor that a signed copy of that exact comic would secretly be auctioned deep underground in the reading circles of the Midnight Inn.

The one who told him this rumor was his good friend Velma, and she always had good information so he trusted her deeply. Soon, he could see his book club growing even further.

Without realizing it, Gladius began to purr.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 693: Time skip

Despite Lex's concerns, Rick ended up performing his job well. It helped tremendously that accompanying him was an incredibly strong monster with almost no intelligence at all. The reason why it was 'almost' no intelligence instead of actually none was because he was smart enough to suppress his base instincts to attack mindlessly while in the presence of the aura of its leader.

Moreover, with Toro as a guide, and the awesome might radiating from the invitation, an exception was made and Rick was allowed to enter the Trelop Sacred lands. Moreover, they even promised to help out in delivering the letter to the Poloids.

With his major troubles taken care of, Lex slowly took a backseat and allowed things to progress naturally. With Ash coordinating well with the Phillips family, let alone the tavern, all of Babylon was getting ready for the wedding.

The resources of the Midnight Inn also came into play. Spending a mere 100,000 MP was not an issue for the Noel family or the Phillips family, so both the bride and groom soon reached Prestige level 3, which allowed them to avail the services of Geeves, the tailor.

The Guild was, of course, also made use of and various items that were not easily available in the Crystal realm were being exchanged nonstop.

Due to the sudden increase in wedding related activity, word finally spread at the Inn that some of the guests coming were from a different realm entirely!

When that news spread, there were mixed reactions. Most people did not care. A majority of them would never even leave their home planets, let alone things such as star systems, galaxies or even realms. Why then should such a thing matter to them? Someone from another realm was just as much out of reach for them, as someone from another planet.

Others, however, did not react so simply. Since this time the Henali were already keeping an eye on the Inn, they noticed immediately, and yet another emergency meeting was held about how to react. Bringing in citizens from another realm, while bypassing the Henali protocols, was a severe transgression!

Of course, Lex did not know about that, and there wasn't much he could do about it either. Lately, he had been spending all his time in the library or inside the Henali portal, studying. He was looking up

anything and everything, so as to increase his general knowledge. Of course, if certain things caught his eye, he would pause his general study and focus solely on that topic.

For example, he found the similarity between Talismans, Formations, Arrays and techniques, spiritual or otherwise, quite interesting. While arrays solely relied on the characters and energy to bring about various effects, formations, talismans and techniques all could reproduce the same effects!

Of course, the potency and power that was released by each, assuming all related things were on the same level, was vastly different. Take, for example, an array that produced fire strong enough to harm a Foundation level cultivator. A formation that only used materials and resources at the Foundation level would be able to produce a much stronger flame. A talisman would produce a flame stronger than an array but weaker than a formation, and could be used instantly, but the resources required to make it may be more difficult to find. A spiritual technique could produce a flame that was either weaker or stronger, and the cost would depend entirely on the technique as well as the cultivator using it.

While each had their own advantages and disadvantages, Lex was intrigued by the fact that each one could replace another, to some degree at least. The fact that talismans could be prepared beforehand was actually quite enticing, and Lex almost considered delving into it as well. But, for now at least, he did not have time to take up a new discipline.

While he did not attempt learning anything entirely new, he delved in deep into the capabilities and limitations of everything new he encountered. For example, he was most intrigued by how the major powers got around the language barrier of different planets and races. When he found out it was often through techniques or technology, he studied about them in great detail, as well as the concepts behind them. But he did not study those techniques themselves.

Speaking of techniques, as the days went by and slowly turned into weeks, and Lex waited in anticipation for the wedding, he also took some time to study various techniques. His focus, up until now, had always been combat oriented. It was only once he began to explore other avenues that he realized how much he was really missing out on.

There were techniques to help in singing, there were techniques for skin care, there were techniques for art, for calligraphy, for better sleep, for body odor, and so much more. There was a technique that allowed Lex to copy every video game character in history, and 'double jump', meaning he could jump once more while already in the air.

There were extremely intriguing illusion techniques that attracted his interest for the endless applications that they had. There were techniques that could be used in aid in farming and cattle raising. Fishing, incidentally, was also an area which seemed to have an endless number of techniques.

Since Lex was looking at relatively low level techniques, such as the Foundation realm and below, it was easy for him to quickly master the techniques if he really wished.

The area that Lex had been neglecting most, but should have been an obvious first choice of techniques, or at least second, was healing and medicinal techniques. While most techniques that he encountered were focused on simple ailments and diseases, there were some that could be used to heal others.

For himself, Lex already had the most ideal techniques which boosted his healing while he slept. But being able to easily diagnose or perhaps treat others, even if it was emergency aid, was not something to be overlooked.

During this time, while he occupied himself with his studies and overlooked the Inn, as the wedding got even closer, he was once again asked for help by Alexander. Since he wasn't rushing anywhere, and things seemed to be going well, he decided to pop over and help.

There were still a little over two weeks to the wedding, so he didn't think it was an issue.

He was also determined to continue thinking this way until one day he proved that death flags weren't a thing, and he wasn't inviting trouble for himself just by thinking about it. It just didn't make sense. He had to be right... he had to be!

When he teleported over to Polebitvy, he was greeted with the sight of an extremely worn out Alexander. He did not look weak or injured, but just extremely sleep deprived, which was not an easy state to achieve at his cultivation level.

"You look horrible," Lex said, not bothering to feign courtesy.

"All out war has broken out on the planet," Alexander answered. "Only areas protected directly by Jotun are safe. We are almost 100% certain that the war is being instigated by the organization backing Jeffery. There are already over 300,000 casualties, and we are expecting a lot worse yet to come."

Lex's smile faded as he looked at Alexander seriously. He once again reminded himself that he could not be the hero to every suffering person in the universe. He knew this the day he inherited the Inn. But it wasn't as if he would ignore a friend in need.

"What do you need from me?" he asked seriously.

Alexander rubbed his forehead as he suppressed a headache and motioned Lex to follow him as he walked into a briefing room.

"The crown you gave me has really helped out," Alexander stated. "I've been studying all the data we have, and all our leads, and I believe I've discovered something. The reason Jeffery is on this planet is because he wants to target some VIP, that much we've been able to confirm. But I'm having some disagreements with my team over who the VIP might be."

"What do you mean?"

"What is a VIP? To a villager, the village head is a VIP. To the village head, the mayor of a city is a VIP. To the mayor, a provincial governor is a VIP, and to the governor it is the King. So who is a VIP to a terrorist organization capable of orchestrating chaos across an entire galaxy?"

"My team lead, Valkyrie, seems to think it is the family head of the family which controls this star system. But I don't think so. There's nothing too great about this star system that would get them to target it specifically. Why then should they care about the family head? Sure, they might spread more chaos and mayhem. But I feel like it's a waste of resources. The ramifications of war here aren't great, since this planet has suffered through so many wars in its recent history.

"No... I think something else is afoot, and that we haven't identified the real VIP who is the target yet. And that's where you come in."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 694: Investigation

"What do you need me to do?" Lex asked, once again. All the tales Alexander shared were incredibly grave, and quite concerning. Since they both were technically citizens of the Jotun empire, any

disruption to the empire, especially by terrorists, should have been a grave concern for both of them. For Alexander, it surely was. But for Lex, who was preparing to leave the Origin realm, this was more or less just one more war he was avoiding.

Living and owning an entirely separate realm freed him from so many restraints, and though he might have been called irresponsible for running away from the war on earth and now being mostly uninterested in the deteriorating situation in the empire, he was truly looking out for his own. Lex was not responsible for earth, but was definitely responsible for the Midnight Inn, so that was always his priority.

Still, helping out Alexander so long as it was within his capabilities was something he intended on doing. It was not just because he could potentially profit in the future if Alexander continued his meteorical growth. It was also because there were few people left who he, with his identity of Lex, could call friends and still relate and associate with. Although he had many identities, he never forgot that at the end of the day, he was still Lex.

"I need your help in conducting an investigation. I have some leads that could possibly reveal Jeffery's plan. The problem is, I'm fairly certain my identity is more or less compromised, and I don't know how much I can trust my teammates, even if their identities somehow weren't compromised either. Even if I can trust them, they don't really believe me so I doubt they'd be willing to help. You on the other hand are unknown to all the players in this game, so you should have no trouble investigating undetected."

"I don't have much experience as a detective besides what I've seen on television, but I'll do what I can. I just want to remind you, however, that I still have my own matters ongoing. I can only give you so much time."

Alexander grimaced. He wanted to question Lex on the grounds of morality. What could possibly be more important than preventing even more death and bloodshed? But he did not have the right to ask. After all, Lex was willing to help him out without any form of compensation, for now at least. He could not be blamed for giving priority to his own matters.

"Sometimes ignorance can be good. If you have the formal training of a detective, your means may more easily arouse suspicion. Instead, if you snoop around like an amateur, no one will take you seriously even if you are discovered. In this case, being underestimated means that the targets are less likely to hide or erase their tracks."

Moving on as if he had not just called Lex an amateur, Alexander turned on a screen which showed an extensively detailed map of their surroundings. The center of the map showed the area governed by the Jotun empire, which was shaded in green. The rest of the map was divided in two, either shaded blue or red.

"The blue areas are occupied by the official owners of this star system, while the red ones indicate areas where the rebels have managed to capture. Don't let the colors or titles fool you, both sides in this conflict are equally cruel and merciless, but that is not our concern for now.

"The terrorists don't seem to be supporting any one side in particular, and act independently where they can spread the most chaos. But I don't believe they can achieve all this without any ground support either.

"Your first target is here, in the refugee camp set up by the rebels. One of the leaders of the camp, which also doubles as a siege fortress, is someone who is highly suspicious. He has 'coincidentally' benefited greatly from multiple terrorist attacks which, in one way or another, greatly aided covert operations he happened to be conducting at the time.

"I'll pass all the relevant information to you, about the rebels as well as the nominal owners of this star system, so you get a better understanding of the conflict. What you're looking out for..."

The two spent many hours in the room as Alexander thoroughly briefed Lex on the situation. If anything unexpected were to happen while he was investigating, he would need a comprehensive understanding of things if he was to make the best decision.

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In an ominously dark yet bare room sat five figures on the floor, hunched over a mound of glowing embers. The room was not cold, and the embers did not radiate heat, so the sight was unusual. The silence in the room was deafening and was filled with an aura of oppression.

Each of the five men had their gazes fixed on the orange glowing coal, as if looking at it was the only salvation they had in that muted room. Let alone look away, they did not even dare to breathe, as if the rising and falling of their chests would break the careful equilibrium that had been established.

Everything in that room was perfectly still. Everything, except for time. Nothing they did could stop the merciless march of time, and so, even without any external stimulus, the serenity of the room was eventually broken.

A deep, reverberating sigh filled the room as Jotun Marcus Sephore could no longer ignore the harsh reality that was confronting them. All the brothers knew it, but none wanted to face it.

The true severity of the chaos spreading through their empire was something only they, from the very top, could see. One simple metric through which the severity of the situation could be determined was the economic output of their empire. Overall, the empire's ability to generate wealth from its vast resources had diminished by 1%.

This 1% could not be underestimated, for it encapsulated the resources of over 20 galaxies. Jotun himself could not cover the area covered by so many galaxies, let alone the distance between each galaxy itself, even if he lived for a million more years. It was only through the use of techniques and technology that such a thing was possible.

More importantly, as one of the most favored agents of the Henali, they had relied heavily on the help of the Henali in establishing and running the empire. While they never acted themselves in the matter, the resources they had could manage the entire realm let alone a few galaxies so it should not have been a problem.

Now that there was a problem, it was an indication of a much larger issue. While Jotun was not qualified to comment on the activities of the Henali, as a human and as an emperor, he had to consider all possibilities and look out for the best interest of his people. An issue with the governance of the empire, which relied heavily on the logistical and technological aid of the Henali, most likely meant that there was an issue with the Henali themselves.

Whether they were aware of it or not, and whether they were doing something about it or not were all things they were not in a position to guess.

"Since no one wants to say it, I will. Our family has survived the turbulence of one chaotic realm, so another is not a problem. What we need to do now is decide on how to move should the situation deteriorate in the future. William, I hate to put you in this position, but we'll be depending on you for this."

William, who looked identical to Lex, could not help but sigh. In the end, he could not hide from his responsibilities.

"If you need me to use Gelid Anima to its full capacity, we will need to cure my disease first. It's already been so long, yet we have made no progress on that front."

"Make a list of the items you need. I will see if the Midnight Inn or the Infinity Emporium can help us find the items. If they can't, I'll have no choice but to redeem them from the Henali. Although redeeming such precious items will lock me into more tasks for the foreseeable future, it can't be helped."

As if he was already prepared, William handed Jotun a long list filled with names of exceedingly rare items. Blood of a Heavenly Deity, Petulant grass, which only grew on the surfaces of a few massive stars, and Absolute Crystal, a kind of ice that was colder than the supposed 'absolute zero', were just some of the items listed on the list.

"Until that is done, I'll at least start using a diminished version of my ability..." William said, talking more to himself than the others. Instantly, he entered a state quite similar to Lex's flow state, yet somehow different, and began muttering.

"We need to cut ties with rebel forces, allow heavy casualties to those who don't align themselves properly, fan the flames for pirates in the territories we give up..."

Just like that, with every word he spoke, the lives of hundreds of billions of creatures were condemned...

The Innkeeper

Chapter 695: Background

Dressed in the local attire of Polebitvy, which looked awfully similar to the arabic thobe back from earth, Lex was casually strolling through some hills. Since he was supposed to be conducting an investigation, it was obvious that he needed a local identity and cover. Fortunately, the rebels did not have a comprehensive list of the citizens in the areas under their control, so making up an identity was not really much of an issue. All Lex needed to do was memorize some information about his place of origin and pick up some general information about the planet. Then he just needed a good explanation for his whereabouts during the most recent conflicts.

Alexander had already taken care of all of that and just provided Lex with a dossier that he had just memorized. Moreover, he had been smuggled into the rebel territory, and then dropped off. Now, all he needed to do was make his way to the refugee camp, and then he could slowly begin his investigation.

Despite the utter seriousness of the matter at hand, Lex was actually having a lot of fun. Dressed in a foreign and exotic way, he was undertaking a covert mission with a secret identity. He had to investigate conspirators and unveil the grand design behind all the chaos that was spreading across the planet.

He felt like he was in a detective show. Or, if he went by the standards of the books he read, he was acting as a member of Jianghu. Out in the wilderness, with nothing to rely on but his own strength and abilities, he sought to bring change through the consequences of his actions. It felt like an adventure.

Sure, there had been no shortage of adventures in his life before this either, but back then, he was always too weak to focus on enjoyment. Now, at least, he knew it wasn't so easy for him to die. That self confidence allowed him to take pleasure in even the simple things during this adventure.

He 'walked' through changing sceneries, taking in the beauty and harmony of nature. The landscape, even here far from habitation, showed signs of war and combat. Long and deep ugly scars marred the topographies he crossed, though admittedly the wounds to the lands were healing. Grasses and various trees had begun to grow in them, or natural lakes had formed filling them. Soon, it would be forgotten that a brutal war had been fought here, only if the actual war eventually finished.

After traveling as such for nearly a day, Lex eventually reached his destination: a massive fort built directly into the side of a particularly large hill. All the greenery from that particular hill had been removed, as anyone approaching the hill would be easily identified from far away.

This, for Lex, was not an issue, as there were lines of people coming in and going out. As if it was something he did all the time, Lex joined the line to enter the fort quite casually. There was a noticeable difference in the demeanor of the locals and of Lex. More specifically, all the people around him seemed worn and beaten, or as if they were undergoing some incredible trial that put an immense amount of mental strain on them. Lex, on the other hand, looked like he was having a great day, and was out for a stroll in the lovely weather.

Not only were his clothes noticeably cleaner and newer, but even the aura near his person was fresh and invigorating.

Standing out like this might not have been the best idea, as it would prompt an investigation, but that was something Lex had opted for, and specifically told Alexander to tailor his cover story accordingly.

The cover he had was of someone who had just come out of a cultivation retreat. He would claim to be cultivating in a secret location for his breakthrough into the Golden core realm. His realm was new enough for that to be a convincing ploy.

The sense of energy and his good mood could also be explained from his recent breakthrough, not to mention that he would have missed out on all the fighting due to the fact that he was in retreat.

By having himself investigated beforehand, he was creating a psychological barrier where anyone who would be curious about him would directly turn to the most recent report on him. Since he had already been investigated once, no one would think to look into his past again and more deeply.

Of course, if Lex did something too suspicious, someone might want a more thorough report. This was where Lex's own planning fell short, mostly because the time he spent in the cultivation world was still too short. Even though he had been increasing his general knowledge, it was not as if he had a specific curriculum to follow, so he could only grope about randomly.

At higher levels, which he was now reaching, background search and investigations were not limited to the simple clue and hint hunting followed by reasonable and logical deduction. More mystical aspects came into play, such as divination, auguring, and the use of various other investigative techniques.

For the most part, Alexander took care of such things as the Jotun empire already had many mechanisms in place to counter such methods. But the tools at their disposal were ultimately limited. He was warned that a more thorough or skilled search would overcome their means.

He especially told Lex never to let anyone get ahold of his blood, and in fact hinted that Lex should learn a technique that would automatically destroy any blood that fell out of his body.

This was because if someone had his blood, it would make Lex vulnerable, and not just to simple investigation.

But regardless, for now, Lex had his identity in place and was not concerned about a simple search. As predicted, when he reached the gate, the guards singled him out and called him aside for further questioning.

At the same time, countless machines and formations scanned him. Alexander had already briefed him on the use of these procedures. He was mainly being checked for dangerous weapons, or any connection to the 'Tyrant rulers' and the rebels labeled them.

Though his smiling face drew a lot of suspicion, he ultimately passed all the tests and was allowed to proceed. He knew that he would probably be followed for a while, and that his previous claims were probably being investigated.

That is why he would not begin his own search immediately, either. His objective was not one that could be rushed, and first Lex had to immerse himself in the local environment. If he had been a true refugee, he would have headed towards the free housing, thus effectively turning himself over to the rebels' disposal.

But he was not one, nor did his cover claim him as one. Thus, he made his way to a local Inn and got himself a room, paying for his stay in advance. He ordered himself some food, and in the meantime, made small talk with some locals as he understood the situation in the area.

His questions weren't targeting anyone specifically, and seemed perfectly in line with the curiosity of someone who had moved to the fortress for the foreseeable future. Questions like how safe the fortress really was, and what were the chances of being pulled into a draft if he stayed in the camp?

The situation, predictably, was not so great as the rebel and official forces fought nearly everyday. There was no way to promise that the fight wouldn't be dragged over to the fortress, and in fact it was even likely as the whole point of the fortress was to provide protection.

Of course, he didn't actually care about that. By asking these questions, he was indirectly gathering information on the situation. Whether there would be drafts or not depended on the strength in numbers of the rebels, and whether they would be involved in a fight told whether the rebels were attacking or defending as the current trend.

From this information he could roughly guess the actions of the rebel leaders or make certain predictions. The more detailed information he had, the more accurate his predictions would be. Thus, it was when certain actions fell completely out of the scope of his predictions hinted that there was some information he lacked, and that would be the direction of his search initially.

Just recently he had played the role of a King, so he had a good understanding of the mentality of leaders. Now he could use that to his advantage, and guess reasonably what the general trend was. Of course, he could also try to create some disruptions to create opportunities for closer observation.

For the sake of it, he began planning out how he could theoretically topple the rebels from the inside. But when his plan started to take shape, and it began feeling like it was entirely plausible, he had to suddenly stop himself.

"I am not some secret villain," he reminded himself as he wiped the imaginary sweat off his brow. He really believed he was the good guy, so why then did the prospect of playing with the rebels to death excite him so much?

## The Innkeeper

### Chapter 696: Anomalies and oddities

Lex quickly realigned his mentality with his normal thoughts and vanquished any lingering impulses to manipulate everyone into self destruction. As a mortal, his random yet dangerous impulsive thoughts were along the lines of leaping off when at high place, putting his hand into a beautiful fire, or maybe walking into ongoing traffic. These were, of course, things he did not actually want to do, but random thoughts that would pop into his mind from time to time.

But now, as a cultivator, his random yet dangerous impulsive thoughts involved toppling organizations and manipulating the masses. Of course, there was still the odd impulse to walk into ongoing traffic, but even that was now more dangerous to those in cars than himself. Truly having power changes a man.

With his thoughts returning to normalcy, Lex went out for a stroll after the meal to familiarize himself with the fort. The entire fort covered around 40 acres, so it was quite large, but Lex soon found that the places he could go were very limited.

There was the tent housing for the refugees, a small town which housed the locals who lived inside the fort permanently. Basically, it was where the workers and soldiers normally stationed inside the fort

lived. That is also where Lex was staying, since it also had the local tavern, grocery stores, various trade workers and all in all anything involving one's general needs.

Besides that there were some free areas where one could explore or walk, but everywhere else was restricted, allowing only authorized personnel. Besides the normal amount of curiosity, Lex did not pay much attention to those places as if they weren't of any consequence to him.

Eventually Lex made his way to the local apothecary and bought some pills to help him 'stabilize' his new realm, and made some friendly conversation with the guy as well. His shop was the busiest, which was predictable given it was a time of war. But he did not spend too much time there, and eventually returned to his room and began to cultivate.

He spent the next few days maintaining an ordinary routine, while slowly building a relationship with the locals and gathering information covertly to the best of his abilities.

One night, while Lex was cultivating, he suddenly opened his eyes as a gleam flashed through them. Whoever was 'spying' or monitoring him had left, and he had passed the initial stage where everyone suspected him.

Now, he could truly begin his investigation. But he didn't act immediately, and continued to cultivate. In the morning, the first thing he did was reflect on all the information he had gathered. The target Alexander wanted him to investigate was called Fernando, and while he was not the highest authority in the fort, he was up there. As such, learning his whereabouts from the common folk was nigh impossible.

But even if he did, Lex did not plan on sneaking to him and following him around anyway. Lex did not have the stealth capabilities for that, nor would that be helpful. Lex's greatest tool at his disposal were his abnormally sharp senses.

From the comfort of his room, he focused on the thought of discovering the abnormalities in the fort, and then allowed his instincts to take over. To his great surprise, he immediately discovered not one or two, but three extremely significant abnormalities. While two of them were inside the fort, deep within the restricted areas, one of them was at the fort wall.

Lex frowned. Unlike the forts of mortals, forts used by cultivators had hidden complexities that were the real reason forts could be used as strongholds. The walls would not only be much stronger than that of

normal forts, but would also mark the edges of the protective formation in place, and protect its vulnerable parts.

As such, not only were walls kept well repaired, they were frequently monitored and checked in case an issue with the formation should appear. This was what he had recently learned. So how could an abnormality appear on the wall?

It was unlikely that this had anything to do with the motives of the terrorists, but it could still be a lead of some kind. Who knew if the terrorists weren't pretending to support Fernando, only to fatten him up and then reap the rewards when they were ready. The foundations of the rebels hold on this entire territory rest in the steadiness of the fort. If it was compromised, this would soon become another spot of heated conflict.

With many possibilities arising from this abnormality, Lex decided to scrutinize it first. It also helped that it was the easiest to access. If Fenrir would finish his task in the tower, then such investigations would be much easier. But since he was still busy, Lex had to make do.

He exited the tavern, extending casual greetings to some of the regulars he saw on the way. As if all was normal, he embarked on his daily stroll through the fort. More than once he had shared with his most recent acquaintances that walking around helps him clear his mind since he had spent so long in retreat. As such, many people had become accustomed to his roaming.

He followed the path he usually took on his strolls, which allowed him to cover all the areas which did not require special clearance, when he encountered something unexpected! Among the droves of people he crossed he suddenly passed someone who was awfully familiar to him, so that he was sure they had met, but he could not recognize her.

Ordinarily, this was a normal thing. In fact, Lex often forgot people after meeting them, leading to awkward encounters later. Yet with how his memory had improved after cultivating, this was no longer an issue.

He could always perfectly recognize people, yet this time he failed. If it weren't for his instincts confirming that he had just crossed someone familiar, he would think that he was imagining things.

Unwilling to draw attention to himself, he turned and glanced at the person who had crossed him. It was a lady, as far as he could tell, though he could see none of her features from the back as she was garbed in the conservative clothes that were the norm on Polebitvy. Beside her though were two kids that Lex recognized. He had seen them the first time he had arrived on Polebitvy, and they had been staying in the room adjacent to him.

He tried to imagine what kids who could live in the protected area of the Jotun would be doing in the rebel refugee fort. The instance was too mundane, and he did not find anything suspicious about it other than the fact that he did not recognize the woman.

Still, he took note of it and made a mental note to remember that they may be somehow involved in this messy situation. But since he felt no threat from them, and his instincts noted nothing else of interest other than their familiarity, he decided to stick to his plan.

But the portion of the wall he needed to investigate was a part of the restricted areas, so to access it he had to do so from the outside. He exited the fort and seemed to head in some far off direction. Once he was out of sight, he immediately picked up speed and began running in a different direction. After spending twenty minutes running to and fro, Lex felt confident that he was no longer being supervised or followed. Although he did not sense any followers even beforehand, he had enough spy books to know one was always supposed to ensure they were not being followed.

Then, finally, he stealthily made his way back to the fort. Although Lex was not adept in stealth, he still tried his best as he approached the wall. Since the hill was bare there was no way he could merely walk up without being noticed, so he cast an illusion technique around himself to make him blend in with the scenery.

Such a technique would not survive close scrutiny, but fortunately Lex did not plan on coming too close to the wall. Once he was half way up the wall, he used the In-Law effect to directly teleport to the place he felt an anomaly.

Aware of his own shortcomings in this field, he did not try to devise an unnecessarily complex plan. Instead, he relied completely on his instincts to guide him, and let him know where and when to teleport.

Although he felt relying solely on his instincts was not the best practice, sometimes he would have to make do.

When he reappeared, he was inside a dark and narrow tunnel directly below the wall. Unlike what one would expect, this was not a service tunnel used to maintain the formations. Instead, it was a tunnel dug right through the dirt and stone below the wall, and it was filled with unmarked wooden barrels.

Sensing extreme danger, Lex froze.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 697: Injured

The extreme and sharp sensation of mortal peril gripped Lex's heart, causing him to freeze lest a single movement provoke an irredeemable accident. Let alone move, he even halted his breathing and subdued his own heartbeat so that his presence would cause menial changes to the environment.

For the first time in a long, long time Lex felt the scent of death surrounding him. Whatever was in those barrels was exceedingly dangerous, and even the slightest exposure would outright kill him! There would be no steady decline, no time for retreat and treatment. It would be instant death. At least, that is what his instincts were telling him.

In fact, even sealed in those unassuming wooden barrels, whatever was inside seemed to be affecting Lex's health already. He felt his stomach lurch and grumble and an unbearable pain began to develop in his lungs.

But while the situation had suddenly turned extreme, Lex did not allow his thoughts to fall into disarray, nor did he panic. Calmly, as if he was in no jeopardy at all, he assessed the situation.

Other than the overseer from the Jotun empire and the head of the family controlling Polebitvy, there should be no Earth Immortals on the planet at all. Even then, both those immortals were restricted from freely displaying their power. As such, the general peak of this planet was considered the Nascent realm.

The fort, correspondingly, should also be of the Nascent realm, with formations, spirit tech and other treasures to ensure security. If that was the case, Lex was absolutely sure that whatever was in these barrels was overkill.

If the purpose of whoever prepared this trap was merely to destroy the fortress walls, he need not prepare such a deadly weapon. If this was meant to destroy the whole fortress, and not just the wall... Lex still felt like it was too much. There had to be some other purpose behind this tunnel.

Unable to gain any significant information, Lex used his spatial bangle and put on his Fancy Contact lenses in hopes that its database had some information. To his pleasant surprise, it was able to reveal something to him, though it was not as much information as he had hoped.

It had identified the wood used to make the barrels as Void wood. Void wood, according to the lenses' elaboration, was a generic term used for any kind of wood gained from trees that grew in the vacuum of space. The most common kind of void wood was from a species of trees that flew on comets and meteors and was resistant to high temperatures and radiation.

This kind of wood was extremely resilient, and was often used to store extremely hazardous materials, as it could even prevent the permeation of higher forms of spiritual energy.

Which specific kind of tree this Void wood was from was not mentioned, as the lenses could not detect it. If the specific tree was determined, then Lex could accurately gauge the danger level of this substance contained in the barrels, as the wood from different trees had differing resilience.

For a moment, he considered daring to take one of the barrels with him. If he stored it in his spatial bangle, it should stay safe, right? That way he could transport it to be identified later.

But he ultimately decided against it.

Spatial equipment all contained a small, relatively stable space in which items could be stored. But relatively stable was not the same as completely stable, or else even living beings would be able to enter spatial equipment.

Endless thoughts were running through his mind as he considered and discarded one plan after another, when he realized something. His left eye's ability, which he had gotten so used to ignoring, picked up on something.

Yet as exactly one second passed, Lex felt the urge to cough. He suppressed it to the best of his abilities, but he could feel the sensation building up like a volcano. With his health deteriorating fast, Lex decided to withdraw as quickly as possible.

Once again he used the In-Law effect and teleported away. Since he no longer needed precision in his teleportation, he teleported far away from the hill so he no longer needed to concern himself with hiding.

Finally he allowed himself to cough, but that brought only pain instead of relief. He merely coughed out some blood at first, but then the situation only got worse until he felt something rip inside his chest, and he coughed out a piece of his lung!

For a moment the gruesome sight of his innards haunted him, until the sight became even more horrific. All the blood he had coughed out turned green, and the piece of his lung began to rot right before his eyes. In seconds, nothing was left except for ash.

Fortunately, the feeling of illness faded, and Lex no longer needed to cough. He felt weak, as if all the energy in his body had been drained in the fight against some disease.

Whatever was going on, it was a lot more dangerous than Lex had assumed. Only a few days ago he was walking freely and confidently, thinking that he would not be hurt so easily, and yet today he nearly died inexplicably.

He recalled what he had seen from his left eye. Some green particles were escaping from the barrels, yet neither his normal eyesight, his spirit sense or the contact lenses had been able to detect them. But the source of his sickness made sense at least.

He looked down once more at the place he had coughed out his lung. There was nothing left, or he might have tried to bring it with him so that the cause could be diagnosed.

Lex checked his surroundings and made his way to a relatively hidden place in the wilderness before teleporting back to the Midnight Inn.

While he had promised to help Alexander, he also needed to ensure he was in good health for the upcoming wedding. If all went well, he would once again resume his investigation after the wedding was over.

Moreover, he and Alexander had an agreement. Alexander would check in at the Inn every 20 hours in case Lex needed to make an emergency report. This way they could easily communicate without carrying any communication talismans or devices, which if discovered could cause problems.

As soon as he arrived at the Inn, Lex informed Mary to deliver his message to Alexander while he himself teleported to a Recovery Pod. To Alexander he had not mentioned much, and instead asked him to find Lex in the pod so they could talk face to face. His investigation had been short lived, and not so exciting, but at least he discovered something that might be useful.

He also checked his own status to see if the Inn could provide some information on his condition. Unfortunately, other than mentioning that he had an injured lung, it mentioned nothing else..

With not much else to do, he lay down in the pod and went to sleep. Since he had a technique that would boost his recovery while he slept, this would be the best way to spend his time.

Sleep came to him instantly. It felt as if only a bare moment had passed, and Lex had only just closed his eyes, when he was roused to the sight of an anxious Alexander standing above him.

"What happened?" Alexander asked, imagining the worst. "Were you discovered? Did they attack you?"

"Nothing of the sort, though I don't know if that's good or bad," he said weakly. He was not sure how long he slept, but his recovery had barely begun. He still felt weak and exhausted, and in fact his body felt almost frail now.

Perhaps earlier it was the adrenaline from the situation that kept Lex from feeling the full extent of his injuries.

Lex explained exactly what had happened, giving special emphasis to the only two matters worth regaling. The first was the mysterious woman, and the second was the incredibly dangerous and

hazardous material stored under the wall. If Lex had to venture a guess, he would say that those materials were prepared to target an immortal, at the very least.

Since his condition was so serious even without any actual exposure, he couldn't even begin to guess how deadly the actual stuff was.

Alexander frowned. This was not exactly what he hoped Lex would find, but at least it was a start.

"While keeping your identity a secret, I'll share your report of the hazardous materials under the wall. If they truly are dangerous even to immortals, then we have to approach without arousing any attention. We cannot just go ahead and start digging, lest the culprit detonate it beforehand.

"I'll update you on any progress we make. Are you able to return once you've healed?"

"It'll have to wait a bit," informed Lex. "My own task is at hand."

With the wedding so close now, guests had already started to arrive in Babylon, and pre-wedding events had already begun. It was time he turned his attention to his most important quest yet!

The Innkeeper

Chapter 698: Rousing from slumber

Five days before the wedding, Lex was woken up from his slumber by Mary, who had been instructed by Lex to do so. To his dismay, upon waking, he did not feel reinvigorated and refreshed. Instead, the dull pain in his chest indicated his injury to his lung was still persistent.

While the feeling of exhaustion was greatly relieved, it was not at the level he had hoped. Was it too much to ask for to heal completely to full health and strength after an encounter in a quick and concise manner? After all, video game characters did it so often. Why couldn't reality be as convenient?

Shaking his head, Lex slowly got out of his Recovery Pod. In truth, he knew his thoughts were a tad unreasonable. This was a flaw of his spirit being merged with his body. Whenever he suffered a wound, it would affect his spirit as well. With a compromised spirit, it was natural that Lex had odd or unusual thoughts.

The matter was not too serious, and would only become a serious hindrance if his wounds were drastically greater than they were now.

While he recovered from his drowsiness, Lex reflected on his short period of acting as a spy. In his own opinion, his performance was subpar. It seems he had become too relaxed lately. He seriously needed to upgrade his repertoire of techniques. Sure, it was understandable that offensive techniques would be a weak point for him, but was it too much to ask for to have completely unsurpassed stealth skills, investigative skills, limitless knowledge on all matters he might encounter and other useful techniques?

It seemed that Lex was suddenly feeling dissatisfied with Evisceration, his remarkable versatility due to his mastery of arrays, his unsurpassed defenses and potentially limitless options to accumulate various techniques.

Or perhaps it was the knowledge that the pup Fenrir surpassed him in stealth that was truly irritating him in his mentally vulnerable state.

Stifling a yawn, Lex got up and stretched his arms far apart as he loosened his body up. For a moment, he wondered if he should go back to that tower the Jotun empire was protecting. Passing a few more levels should help him grow, right?

Ultimately, he decided to do so later. No matter how random his thoughts were, he knew that he had to prioritize the wedding.

"Anything I need to pay attention to at the Inn?" he asked, even as he teleported to his office.

"Alexander delivered a message. Initially there were some issues convincing his team to get involved in the matter you discovered. No one wanted to get their hands dirty with the war. Eventually, though, they relented and investigated. So far there has been no concrete discovery, for anyone who has entered the chamber under the wall has lost contact, without exception. Even Nascent realm cultivators were no different."

Lex frowned, but did not comment.

"Besides that, for now, there is nothing too major. There are a few applications from several guests who wish to hold some events at the Inn that you need to review. The most significant one, at least from what I can tell, is the one being hosted by Vera Joel. She's using almost all the MP she got from you to host a Prophets Convention."

Lex raised an eyebrow out of curiosity and looked at the application. The event was planned for a couple of months later. The curious thing was that to attend the event, an attendee would need to first deliver the correct password. Yet the marketing for the event, as well as the password, were only to be published a day after the event was already over. He supposed only those who were able to divine out the event beforehand could attend, thereby automatically proving their abilities.

There were a few more events that guests had applied to host at the Inn, but none were as interesting. They mostly included birthday parties, weddings and the like. He approved them and forwarded the details to the relevant departments to begin planning.

He scanned the Inn once just to ensure that all was well, before diverting all his attention to the Crystal realm. Using his Remote Presence ability, a projection of him appeared at the tavern.

The mood in the main hall was drastically different from what it normally was, and there were no sailors for traders occupying the tables today. Instead, a host of refined ladies and gentlemen sat comfortably in their seats and talked in soft voices. On the small stage in the corner, a number of tiny fairies played soothing and relaxing music.

It felt more like he had entered the parlor for an exclusive country club rather than a local tavern, but it only made sense. The richest and most prestigious people from across the Hum nation were to arrive in Babylon, and the tavern was the central location where they would gather.

Of course, due to the small size of the tavern, only the most essential parts of the wedding would take place here, which would be limited to the most important guests. That meant the less important guests would have to use the few days prior to take in the prestigious yet rustic aura of the tavern.

Surprisingly, even the most particular and spoiled of these nobles did not make a fuss, for the tavern had truly seen numerous upgrades after the star rank upgrade. It was not just the Dribble Oak wood, which kept the air in the tavern fresh and filled the air with a reinvigorating scent, that kept these nobles humble. Each nail holding down the floor planks, each window, each utensil and everything else

imaginable used in this tavern absolutely screamed opulence, while retaining a humble and simple aesthetic.

The grandeur was overwhelming, yet the blatant indifference to cosmetics and extravagance was a new experience for them, allowing them to enjoy it even further. In fact, the more astute guests at the tavern could already predict that a new trend of extremely valuable items disguised as everyday, mundane items was about to sweep the empire.

By being at the source of this new trend, they could gain ideas and inspiration, and be first to profit from it.

Others simply took this as a novel experience, and allowed themselves to live out their fantasies of traveling the lands and rubbing shoulders with the common folk.

Of course, there were always trouble makers. Naki, Nami and Nani, the triplet waitresses at the tavern, were always popular. Moreover, their budding extroverted personalities did not allow them to hide much of themselves. As such, their low-born origins were immediately picked up on by many guests.

Not many minded, and some in fact thought that they had been purposefully employed to add realism to this experience of living like a commoner. Some, however, decided to take them home for one evening. This had happened while Lex was asleep.

Naturally, since Lex's sleep was not disturbed by Mary, the situation was resolved without needing his assistance. To be specific, the personal guards of the Phillips family intervened before anything happened to escort the guest away from the town.

Jolene had strongly impressed upon her husband how important the tavern and Lex were, and that they should use every opportunity to ingratiate themselves. Although they were more than certain that the tavern could have handled the situation without their aid, they were all too eager to help. So now everyone knew not to mess with the tavern staff.

Of course, that was before Rick returned from his travels with the monster catfish in tow. Lex was not sure how he had done it, considering that monsters had a very aggressive nature, but Rick had somehow... tamed the catfish monster.

The monster at the peak of Nascent realm was hard to ignore, especially when it followed Rick around like a loyal puppy... eh, no, like a loyal monster fish. To fit into the tavern, the monster even shrunk its size. Considering that Rick had returned Zagan's scale, Lex was not aware of how he managed to tame it. He would look into it, but later.

For now, Lex first checked up on all the floors of the tavern, ensuring that it was alright, before sending someone to call the Noel and Phillips families. He had to brief them on the fact that some 'important' guests will also be attending the wedding, so that they could be prepared.

Moreover, he had to make preparations in case the situation developed negatively. His experience with the Crystal race was enough to wake him up to the fact that things wouldn't always go according to his plans. He had to make contingencies.

Fortunately, Zagan's scale would allow him to muster up a force consisting of monsters. Still, considering that the elite of the entire realm were coming, his emergency measures had to be adequate. Since he himself could not travel freely in the Crystal realm at the moment, he had to make use of others.

More specifically, he had to make use of all the secrets the Noel family had buried under Babylon.

The Innkeeper

Chapter 699: Talk Privately

Under the cold, white light of the spaceship, Z found himself walking through a busy corridor. All around him were various races with hardly any humans around, though a majority of the races were humanoid - or elvish as it was referred to as here. Some were the staff and crew of the ship he was aboard, but majority were either soldiers and mercenaries, doctors, engineers, or from any other profession that would in some way aid in battle.

The warriors were in the greatest number, obviously, but the most reverence received on this ship was by medical professionals. Not all doctors had the courage to treat patients inside an active war zone - though admittedly not all who were here had come by their own choice. Followed by doctors were the formation architects, and engineers. They would be sent down to various strongholds on planets where battles were taking place, and they would construct either incredible formations or build amazing spirit tech which would greatly help the soldiers.

Comparatively, it was the soldiers themselves who were at the bottom of the food chain in terms of reverence and respect.

Of course, the Midnight Battalion was the exception to that rule, as were all those who stood out from the masses. The secret stares and ogles he received as he walked to his room dictated just how much the fame of the battalion had spread. They had been at war for a few months now, and were already moving towards their third battlefield.

They were evacuated from the first battlefield after the entire planet became unstable, although they managed to conclude the fight. On the second planet the war was much fiercer and they were unable to change the tide on their own, but their hard earned merits had made them quite popular as a result.

They had played a significant role in turning the tide of battle as they protected a crucial stronghold from a never ending siege. It was only once the tide had turned, and their role completed that they were pulled from that planet, and were now being sent to the third planet.

Z didn't mind. To him, all fights were the same. They were hard and hot, and extremely uncomfortable. He was not ashamed to admit that they were also very dangerous, and that if it weren't for the suits provided to them by the Innkeeper many of them would have already fallen in battle.

But in life, there was no such thing as 'what if' and only 'what is'. The Innkeeper had given them a formidable uniform, and through its assistance, not only had they all survived, many of them were growing stronger rapidly.

Z himself was a prime example, as his lethality had shot through the roof, and now he no longer considered anyone in the Foundation realm his foe. Unless, of course, they were also members of the Midnight Inn. After all, Luthor had also grown incredibly strong after gaining a mysterious ability to control fire, and his flames were not in the least normal.

Many others had also grown much stronger under the trial of war, either unlocking latent abilities or encountering unusual treasures that gave them extraordinary powers. Suddenly Z was reminded of a particular Inn member who had recently begun to shine, and blushed. Her name was Sandra, and she was positively electric! Literally!

During battle she encountered a strange enemy, and upon killing him she somehow absorbed a mysterious stone from within his body. Since then, she had unlocked the ability to control electricity, or lightning. Moreover, because she had spent so much time observing the lightning tribulations at the Inn, her compatibility with the ability was phenomenal, and she was quickly becoming incredibly strong. She also had pretty eyes.

Lost in his own thoughts, Z eventually made it to his own room and lay in bed, looking out at the cosmic cloud they were traveling in. When they had started out, they were still at the periphery of the cosmic cloud, but as their battlefields changed, incidentally, they were moving deeper and deeper within.

The deeper within the cloud they progressed, the more dangerous it became to traverse, so it would take a while before they reached their destination. Somehow, they had gotten a break from all the fighting, and everyone was taking their time to rest.

Z was still lost in his thoughts, still playing with the space bubbles above his fingers as had become a habit. But because he was doing it absentmindedly, he failed to notice that the bubble sometimes failed to form a perfect sphere, and became slightly deformed. The occurrence was only one out of a hundred though.

A few days later, when they reached their third battlefield, and had progressed deeper in the cloud, the rate of the sphere deforming became one out of ninety nine.

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Pvarti Noel, Joseph Noel (Pvarti's father), Jess Phillips and Jolene Philips all sat in a private room with Lex, who wore a warm and cordial smile. Yet he was the only one smiling. This was the first time they were meeting in a group like this, and they came with the intention of sharing some last minute details with Lex.

Due to the increased intensity of the Kraven war, the scale of the wedding had been drastically reduced. Moreover, many of the initially planned VIP guests would no longer be able to make it as almost all of the immortals in the empire were being summoned. The previously festive mood had been killed thoroughly, for all except Jess who was still madly pining over Pvarti.

Instead, what awaited them was Lex sharing with them the news that not only would the wedding serve as a front for a secret meeting between the royal families of all the top races in the realm, but that the topic of their discussion was the very fate of their realm!

To say that they were shocked to their core was an understatement. Everyone of them was extremely stressed due to the war, and the fact that they did not even know if they themselves would survive. Now, faced with this sudden bombshell, they were not able to cope quickly enough.

The fact that even Jolene was not instantly maneuvering the situation for political gain was a testament to how dire the situation really was.

As if to add credence to his statement, Lex also had Rick bring in one of the invitations and present it to the families. The aura of the Innkeepers words gripped their currently fragile hearts, and they became dazed.

"My apologies for extending invitations to the wedding without consulting you. I thought the leaders of the races won't exactly be unwelcome at the event," said Lex casually.

"Also a representative of the monsters," Rick quickly added, with no noticeable change in his expression, as if he were talking about something mundane, like the weather.

Even Lex was surprised to hear that last statement, but he did not show it. He made a mental note to interview Rick thoroughly later. Originally he was worried about Rick's competency while undertaking this task, who knew he would perform a few extra-credit tasks!

"Of course, we cannot openly share this information, for security purposes. So externally, everything will appear to be as per usual. Some of the... guests might arrive a little early, though I expect most will only reveal themselves on the actual day of the event."

"Lex... no, Mr. Lex, I think you should have kept such details to yourself," said Joseph weakly. "Even we are not qualified to know about such matters. Our weakness may compromise the meeting."

"Impossible. You see, the invitation officially invites everyone to the wedding. What kind of wedding guests would they be if they did not at least extend their greetings to the bride and groom? There's also

the wedding presents. To be honest, if the presents they give are unremarkable, I'll be quite disappointed personally."

Everyone looked at Lex dumbfounded. They did not know what to say. Was wedding presents really the thing that needed to be focused on right now?

"Of course, as the host, I still need to make some preparations for their arrival. Joseph, I have some questions for you regarding Babylon. Perhaps we should continue this meeting in private, as it might touch upon some sensitive matters."

Joseph shook his head and said, "you can ask me questions right here. I have no secrets from my children, and I see no point in keeping a secret from my future family either."

He glanced at Jolene as if acknowledging her.

Lex smiled, knowingly, and then asked, "well in that case, I wanted to ask you if there are any more unstable factors underneath Babylon. The last time you gave me the Blue Crystal Essence which was being fostered under Babylon. If there are more such crystals, or other unstable or volatile factors underneath or near the city, can you share them with me? I am not greedy for your resources, I just need to prepare sufficient security so nothing unexpected happens."

Joseph suddenly coughed and said, "perhaps we should talk privately."

The Innkeeper

Chapter 700: Edward Pattinfather

A shellshocked Jolene, alongside a lovestruck Jasmine, left the tavern once the meeting was concluded, both with very different mindsets. Jasmine was once again bubbling with excitement. Previously, when she found out that the scale of the wedding would have to be reduced she was somewhat disappointed. The wedding didn't matter as much as the marriage, obviously, but which one of her siblings didn't have a lavish and exquisite wedding? She could really be blamed for having high expectations.

Jolene, on the other hand, was struggling between moral issues. More specifically, given the current situation, her upbringing and training dictated that she consider the greatest political benefits. Given the

current global climate, the greatest benefit they could receive was to not be involved in the war efforts against the immortal Kraven army. Her entire family could be destroyed if they partook in that.

Yet at the same time, she could not bring herself to completely remove her family from the war either. Centuries of brainwashing by King Cornelius made it so that every citizen saw it as their most basic duty as humans to fight for the survival of their race against the Kraven. Caught between the selfish desire for survival and the duty to her race, she could not think too clearly. Ultimately, she decided to consult her husband and defer to his decision.

Jess, Jolene's daughter who had been coordinating between the tavern and their family, was also accompanying them back. Although it was unlikely that she knew anything, Jolene decided it was best to interview her thoroughly as well.

Inside the tavern, Joseph and Pvarti were left with Lex as they continued their discussion. Since Pvarti had reentered the Noel family, there was no reason to keep these secrets from him.

Normally, Joseph would not communicate these secrets with anyone, for his family was acting on behalf of the royal family by mining and harvesting these resources. But as someone backed by the Midnight Inn, Lex was least likely to be interested in their resources. Moreover, they recalled the deep relationship shared by Aegis, the crown prince, and Lex.

To Lex's great and utter disappointment, besides the Blue Crystal Essence which had been absorbed by the Lotus on his back and himself, nothing else was of too significant value.

But as it turned out, the excuse Lex had used was quite valid. Some of the resources hidden deep underneath Babylon were extremely volatile and were protected by numerous formations.

Should an accident happen... all of Babylon was at risk of being decimated by the blowout.

After the conversation ended, the Noel family left. Lex's plan to use their resources as a hidden backhand had failed, but through this meeting Lex came to realize another avenue he could pursue.

"So tell me exactly how it is that you ended up sending an invitation to a 'representative of the monsters'," Lex asked in a more of a curious tone rather than interrogative one. He did not know

whether to feel impressed or surprised by Rick's feats and honestly he felt a bit of both. In hindsight, he should have considered inviting the monsters as well, but due to the fact that they have a naturally aggressive nature he had not even considered them. Yet it was true that they were also citizens of the Crystal race. The destruction of the realm affected them just as much as the others.

"We assumed that the fish monster that was summoned was profoundly dumb, and thus easily controlled by the scale you gave me. Yet, as it turned out, it was not as dumb as it seemed. Although it still obeyed my every command, and never tried to harm me, it also took a detour while we traveled.

"Naturally, as we traveled through the folds of space, I could not tell about the detour at all until we arrived at the destination. By then it was too late to do anything anyway. I was faced with a massive monster that spoke directly into my mind. It asked me where I got the scale, and would the owner of it give it to me. I had nothing to hide, so naturally I told him that I was given the scale by you, and my purpose was to deliver invitations to the royal families of some nations. Since the monster was pretty powerful, I showed him one of the invitations as well.

"The monster was already interested in coming to the tavern and meeting you after I told him I got the scale from you, but once he saw the invitation... well, he suddenly became very polite and asked if it was alright he attended as well. Naturally, I told him that it was not up to me, and that he would have to ask you.

"Afterwards, we spent some time talking, and as it turns out, we share many of the same interests. We became good friends, so then I gave him a few tips about what to do when he attends a wedding. He should be arriving a day before the event starts."

"You two... share similar interests?" Lex asked, his voice betraying his disbelief. What could Rick, the handyman, and an ever living monster of immeasurable power... have in common?

"Yes," Rick said, reaffirming his statement as if he had said the most reasonable thing. "When Edward Pattinfather, the monster, gained enlightenment, meaning he gained sentience, he spent a few hundred years masquerading as a human teenager. Every few years he'd move to a town and live there, attending the local academy so that he could learn about the world. As it happens, human teenagers often got part time jobs, so Edward often worked as a handyman at different places. He is a master at the trade, and I learnt much from him."

Lex was dumbfounded, and did not know how to respond to Rick. Rick, however, took Lex's silence as an indication that he should elaborate more on the topic.

"While Edward masqueraded as a human teenager, he formed many friends and often got involved in unreal adventures. One time he took part in a tribal war between two of the tribes living in a local Trelops territory. The war between wolves and bats was a fierce one, or at least it was for the human he was pretending to be.

"Another time, he pretended to fall in love with another human girl, only to be caught up in a teenage drama when another teenager from their local academy similarly declared his love for the same human girl. Later, he discovered that like him, the other teenager was also a monster pretending to be human. It was quite the emotional rollercoaster, as the girl was eventually revealed to be a daughter of the human king, who immediately recognized the two monsters and attacked them, causing them both to flee in terror.

"Once..."

"Alright, alright, I get it. You two are good friends. I'm glad you're expanding your social circle," Lex interrupted Rick. He felt like the list of unbelievable stories was actually quite long, so he did not want to get caught up in them.

After having dismissed Rick, Lex could not help but feel a little morose that ultimately, he was unable to invite the progenitor of the Sol and Frio birds. After all, everyone else had already seemingly been invited. The only major race besides them that remained uninformed about this was the Kraven.

But it was what it was, he didn't want to go to the Crystal race territory again. Not to mention, there were only a few days left, there was no time.

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Deep in the dark and barren lands controlled by the Kraven was a massive citadel built seemingly out of a single, massive spirit stone! But of course that was impossible. Such a massive spirit stone could not be formed in a realm as young as the Crystal realm.

This was, instead, the result of the ingenious engineering of the Kraven. Their means and methods were sorely underestimated by everyone on these lands, and that served the purpose of the Kraven well.

Inside a library where the shelves were made of bone, and the books consisted of skulls of various races, fitted with a strange crystal, a particularly lean and petite Kraven was reading. Among the Kraven, size was usually proportional to strength, but for some reason this smaller Kraven seemed to defy that rule.

"My liege," said a hooded, humanoid figure that entered the room. "There is a command from home."

"Oh? What do they want?" the Kraven asked, genuinely curious.

"You have been instructed to go to the Midnight Tavern in four days. No other information was shared."

The Kraven nodded, as if just that was enough. The humanoid figure also departed the library, without sharing anything else.

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Upon a tower that pierced the sky and far surpassed the atmosphere, two massive birds were resting in a nest made of the purest energy Crystal. Suddenly, the divine energy in their bodies stirred, and a revelation came to them in the form of a name and time. It was the Midnight Tavern, in four days.