

Dungeon Diver: Stealing A Monster's Power

Chapter 691

I walk forward into the silver tower, taking a step up the spiral stairs. There is no railing, as the silver barrier hugs the left side of the stairs all the way up.

They're extremely wide—several hundred meters—enough to fit a full dragon, even in its normal form.

However, Ember stays in his human base form.

The moment we both step onto the first stair, the archway that connected these stairs to the outer room shuts, and the only way we can go is up.

The green threads in the air are very thin, slowly moving in circles. It feels like an energizing breeze as small amounts of them collect in my body and seep toward my core.

I take another step upward. It looks like the higher I climb, the denser the air gets with green threads. It reminds me of when I tried getting close to the green serpent in Celia's construct. However, the density of divine energy at the very top is far too strong for my senses to even perceive.

It is on a whole new level—extremely dark green—and feels like a bottomless well of gravity pressing against my senses.

My curiosity grows as I take more steps, but Ember doesn't move just yet.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, then opens them again to release a large amount of silver threads from his core.

The threads tether throughout his entire body, making him appear as a shimmering silver energy being.

Then, he takes a step forward, and the space where he was standing is now devoid of divine energy.

While the green threads flow through me, and only a small amount sticks within my core after processing, one hundred percent of the threads Ember touches disappear within him.

I turn around with wide eyes, and he grins.

"It isn't as effective as it looks. My core still has to process the threads inside my body. It may be faster to convert my core to green, but it's going to take me a while to save my physical body from fading away... Believe it or not, this is the first time I've attempted to reach the Upper Realm with my physical form intact. I wonder if it's even possible..."

He looks up with a pondering gaze, then meets mine with a face covered in shimmering silver light.

I reply while turning back to the stairs and continuing my slow walk upward.

"What is the Upper Realm? The demons talk about it a lot... Their family lords are all there. Does that mean they've all given up their bodies as well?"

My slow steps turn faster, skipping a few at a time, as the low density of green threads down here isn't affecting me much since I already consumed that orb from the first floor.

Ember follows far behind, not wanting to affect my absorption, and instead sucks up the excess threads below.

"Yes, it's true. The leaders of the Five Great Families live on the higher plane. It's the only way to continue growing stronger. The energy density in the Upper Realm is far higher—no mere Yellow Core could even survive standing under its pressure. The same goes for if a higher lifeform were to descend to this realm. They could cause destruction and overpower those around them, but there are no useful resources to gather. It isn't worth the cost to descend."

We continue upward, and I ponder his words while taking in more and more green threads.

After traveling above five kilometers into the air, the green thread density has tripled, but the rate at which I absorb them is nowhere near what it was when I consumed that orb during our battle. It is still a leisurely activity.

However, I feel the odd sensation of the purple ring around my finger pulling trace amounts of green threads into it, too. Every once in a while, it glows, and the thin barrier around me feels slightly stronger. It raises a few questions, so I turn around and point to my ring.

"Then how come I have this purple ring? Why or how would it come down here? And the beings that were in that construct—the artifact itself that opened up a portal to the construct was cyan. That's above green, isn't it?"

Ember nods, looking at the ring and then back to me.

"While it may look, sound, and feel like a being, that artifact is a dying echo of whatever creator sent it down here into the Lower Realm. Just like the silver threads I use now, it

is a minuscule, sealed portion of its true power. If unaltered purple threads were near us right now, they would easily split this world in two—no—this entire solar system would be demolished by the pressure of its existence alone. I bet it would break through this tower with ease."

He grins, but my eyes widen as I stare at the ring with newfound awe.

"It would break through the tower? But how? Isn't it made from the silver energy of an immortal? An Overseer, right?"

Ember nods as we rise even higher, surpassing ten kilometers, where the green thread density doubles again.

"Even this tower is a sealed artifact from the Upper Realm. Just like I use a thin, lesser version of my silver threads, this isn't the true power of an Overseer. It is merely a tool crafted by one to help its underlings ascend while simultaneously building wealth in the Lower Realm to continue their expansion. There are other ways to ascend—this just happens to be the easiest."

We climb the stairs in silence for a while, as more pieces of this puzzle fall into place.

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

While my mind races, my links of loyalty surpass 200 million.

Outside the tower, the Crimson Army, the Commanders, and the Generals all regroup to celebrate their victory.

Bri and Rodrigo celebrate at the Apex Region's headquarters with all the high-level hunters, while word spreads through Central Headquarters that their manipulative leaders have been killed. Soon, they will be free to venture off of the flaming mountain and out into the real world if they wish.

More and more people in the outer nations who have never heard of the Flame Emperor before today begin creating links of loyalty, eager not to miss out on the stat bonuses and the mind-bending reality of the world they now understand is unfolding before them.

The Four Generals—Raven, Abby, Maria, and Arie—reconnect their live feeds to show the state of the battlefield. Raven takes charge of the narrative, explaining the true state of the world before the system connected and the gravity of the situation that was just resolved. Plus, expands on their plans moving forward.

As time passes and more links of loyalty pile in, each of the Generals speaks to the world, filling new links in on what happened today.

Celebrations erupt all over the Dark Continent, the Eight Great Regions, the Central Capital, and the newly formed nations.

Many were here from the start, while many are only watching now. But it is clear: a new era in this world's history is about to begin.

The tensions and uncertainties of the Great War have finally been dispelled. The entire world is now connected through this mysterious Flame Emperor, who they all see walking up an endless flight of stairs in silence.

I feel the threads' density multiply many times over as I reach a height of over fifty kilometers.

This is when I start to slow down, taking each step one by one while pulling in as much of the ambient green energy around me as I can.

I feel more and more green threads pouring into my True Core, pushing the dense yellow energy in its center down into an increasingly compact ball of bright yellow-white light.

At first, it was still semi-painful to process all of this green energy through my constantly regenerating flesh. But the more compact my True Core gets, the more natural it feels for the green energy to combine with my blood, flesh, and bones.

It all melds together, turning my entire being a shade of green.

My Soul Sword remains dormant—jet-black—floating slowly around me in circles. The ratio of yellow to green threads inside it shifts in perfect sync with my core, as they are linked.

In addition to this, the purple ring around my finger pulses more and more, drawing in large amounts of the green threads now that the air is denser. The barrier around me seems to strengthen, but for some reason, it remains made of purple threads. I can't tell where the excess green energy is going—it's as if it's disappearing inside the ring, like it's being devoured.

I raise the question to Ember in my confusion.

"Celia—I mean, my ring—it's pulling in green threads, but somehow the purple energy it uses is getting slightly stronger. How exactly does that work?"

Ember chuckles.

"That is something you'll learn in the Upper Realm. Red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue—even purple—they're all the same. It's just Divine Energy."

I raise an eyebrow as he continues, and at the same time, I feel the green divine threads in my core crushing my True Core into an even denser form, forcing the brightly glowing yellow ball to shrink to the size of a marble.

"In this Lower Realm, that ring of yours was a tool made for a third-class world like this. The creator framed it as a pocket dimension for free trade of mana, demonic energy, and resources, right?"

I nod, and Ember continues.

"Some of those resources just happened to be Divine Fragments—conveniently compact and digestible in small sizes. It allows lower lifeforms to begin the process of wielding divine power. All of this energy is siphoned from the Upper Realm. If not for the push of that helpful artifact, I doubt there would be enough ambient Divine Energy on this entire planet for even one red core to form."

My eyes widen, and at the same time, I feel the tiny ball of compact yellow energy in my chest begin to shift, showing a pale greenish tint.

Everything clicks.

"That's why you called it such a rudimentary form when you first saw it... Divine threads can be compacted into denser and denser forms. They just appear as different shades of color when they stabilize into a new usable density..."

Ember nods slowly.

"Yes, exactly. While it may look like your ring is making the threads in the air disappear, it is merely recharging its fading existence that has withered away in this Lower Realm. It would be the same as if you absorbed a red fragment right now. The energy would disappear into your core, empowering you a tiny fractional amount—seemingly vanishing—but in reality, it's just Divine Energy making its home in your core."

I turn back around, satisfied with his answer, as I walk up the steps even further, another twenty kilometers into the sky.

The center of my True Core compacts more and more, shifting to an extremely light green with traces of yellow still holding on.

Then, I turn around as another odd question hits me.

"Then, if you were to release divine threads into the atmosphere and spread them out over a massive open area, wouldn't they all revert back to red?"

Ember shakes his head.

"Good assumption, but once a new stable density is reached, it takes immense power to separate Divine Energy from its settled form. I can only assume this purple core you hold is in its current state not only from its age but from the energy exerted in separating parts of its core into digestible smaller fragments. Once you break through to higher stages, it becomes far easier to convert lower energy into the already cycling core within you."

It makes sense. Just as when absorbing fragments, one doesn't remain at the same core color until fully breaking through. However, there are still many unanswered questions.

As I walk deeper and deeper into the green fog of divine energy above, I push these thoughts to the back of my mind.

Once I reach this Upper Realm, I'm sure much more will become clear.

The pressure and gravity up here are intense. Now that I've climbed another thirty kilometers, my body begins to be attacked mercilessly by the threads again. It has to re-adapt as my bones rattle, and my skin feels as though it's peeling from burns and thousands of knife slashes.

Even my eyes, brain, and organs are torn to shreds and rebuilt over and over until I store enough green threads in my core to withstand it naturally.

My body morphs and adapts.

I'm absorbing the same amount of energy I did from that green orb every minute, and the feeling of absolute power surging through me is incredible.

The last remnants of the yellow threads in my chest compress until they are no longer visible.

The entire core in my chest turns bright green, and a pulse of overwhelming gravity ripples out from my eyes, mouth, and green core, setting my new energy standard in stone.

I take deep breaths. Even now, with a dense green Divine Core cycling threads in my chest, my body doesn't want to stay.

Every part of my being becomes super-saturated with green threads, but it still feels unnatural. Half of me is holding on, and my Divine Core continuously adapts, pushing to new limits.

Now that I have a green core, the threads surrounding me are far easier to pull in and process. However, in such a chaotic environment, it's difficult to conceptualize how much stronger I've really become.

The gravity, heat, and pressure rises the higher I climb, but I stay focused and continue upward another fifty kilometers. My core absorbs far more green threads, and the top of this tower begins to feel like it's really within reach. The stairs only stretch another hundred kilometers at most.

However, even now with my upgraded perception, the extremely concentrated well of strange gravity at the top of these stairs feels exactly the same as it did when I was looking at it from the bottom.

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My steps upward are far slower now. While it took less than a single minute to climb multiple kilometers with ease before, it takes me over an hour to climb the next 50.

I'm halfway through the final stretch, but I can feel these last 50 are not going to be easy at all...

The amount of green energy pouring through my core makes the entire orb I consumed earlier seem like a tiny drop in the ocean of power around me.

My core still feels the same, like a True Core cycling in my chest, but the amount of power it can control feels as though it's multiplied by thousands of times...

The jump between green and yellow feels as though they're worlds apart, and it's very apparent as my body continues to reject climbing higher every time the density in the air shifts.

It takes two full hours to climb the next 25 kilometers upward.

The links of loyalty available to me start to slow down, evening out at around 280 million. A few hundred thousand links still roll in every minute, but it's nowhere near the millions per second I felt at the peak of my battle with the demon.

From what I can sense, over half of the system-connected population has signed the mental contract. While I'm not in desperate need of power now, it is still nice to feel new links form.

During the time I've climbed, the Crimson Army and the Inner Circle have made their way back to the Crimson City to be welcomed by tens of thousands of people from neighboring cities all over Sector 2 of the Dark Continent.

Many other nearby and faraway hunters make plans to move to the Dark Continent in hopes of meeting their saviors and searching for a better life.

Bri has already begun sending out calls and orders for expansion and materials to prepare for the massive influx of visitors and new citizens.

However, no work is being done yet anywhere in the world.

Everyone still watches the visual feed of their mysterious leader climbing higher and higher up the silver stairs through the dense green fog.

Another three hours pass as I climb another 15 kilometers, but the heat and pressure are becoming unbearable, even as my body adapts.

The purple ring around my finger doesn't pulse anymore; it glows with a consistent light purple glow, and the barrier around my body becomes extremely strong...

It's hard to track, but the ring feels like it's absorbed as much or even more green threads than me.

It acts like an insulator, similar to the technique Ember is using below me.

Green threads pour in, but it is impossible for them to flow out unless I mentally force them to.

I take advantage of this odd phenomenon, speeding up my gathering process even more, but at the same time, it definitely makes it far more difficult and painful.

My blood, flesh, muscle, and bones have been oversaturated and tethered with these threads for so long and under so much pressure that my entire body starts to feel like it's a Divine Core itself.

When I take steps upward, the propulsion of my feet uses divine energy; however, I don't even have to stimulate my True Core. It's as if the nerves in my muscles have tethered so densely with the threads flowing through me that portions of my body can act as their own power sources.

Ember watches with curious eyes, replicating what I do using silver threads to isolate his flesh from the violent green threads when it becomes too much to bear.

My mind is completely focused on reaching the top....

The final 10 kilometers take six full hours. The thread density has increased many times over again, but at this point, it all feels the same. Even with over 290 million links of loyalty powering my footsteps and a green core and divine body pushing me upward, my legs still feel extremely heavy with each new step.

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I have to focus carefully not to succumb to the pressure.

The sun is setting in the Dark Continent as I make the final curving flight of stairs upward to finally see what is creating such an overwhelming well of gravity.

As I walk off the final step, I can see the top of the silver barrier around us.

However, above it, there is still an endless sea of darkness stretching upward in the tower.

That isn't my main focus. The fact that I'm standing on a small circular platform is.

At the far side, a green divine rift hovers before me at eye level.

It looks similar to the blue rift I saw formed from the artifact at the B-Class exams, but the overwhelming pressure that it exudes makes that tiny echo of a dying artifact seem leagues below what I'm staring at now.

Slow plumes of green divine energy float out of the rift, and my gaze gets lost in the endless power within.

Ember's voice shakes me out of my trance as he steps onto the final platform a few seconds later.

"That is certainly the pressure of the Upper Realm. It looks like we made it—"

The moment his words cease, there's a shift that shakes the floor; and all of a sudden, the silver barrier around us begins to vibrate.

It shatters into a silver sparkling display, and at the same time, the stairs that led us all the way up here dissolve into silver energy and reform with the floor below.

We're left floating on a thin sheet of black tower material hundreds of kilometers up in the air.

An ancient echoing voice rings in my ears while silver text tells me that the final round is over.

[Round 2 of 2 Complete.]

[Trial 3: Soul: Complete.]

[Calculating prize based on trial difficulty...]

[Prize Calculated. Congratulations, 19th Vermillion Lord. We shall see you soon in the Upper Realm.]

As the text fades, I raise an eyebrow and turn my head to see Ember let out a laugh.

"Well, considering that demon's strength, the chances of a human on this world actually ascending were basically zero."

I smirk as I understand this artifact was programmed as a training ground and welcome ceremony for their new Lord to enter their ranks.

"Well, it looks like they're in for quite the surprise..."

Two large black boxes fall from the darkness above and land with a thud in front of the green divine rift.

They both open the moment they land, with the same soft white divine ether inside pushing up two items each from within.

In my box, I see a large black orb with dense purple and black energy swirling inside it; while the other item is a circular green object radiating a dense divine glow. It looks like an oversized coin.

I use appraisal on both items, and one reads [Demon Lord's Core] while the other reads [World Token].

My eyes track over to Ember's box, and he already reaches out to store a vial of black liquid into his Ether storage. For some reason, he looks disgusted at the substance, not interested in using it.

However, the other item in his box is the same large green coin as mine, reading [World Token] when I stare at it.

I look back to my prizes and slowly reach out a hand to touch the large black orb.

It sinks into my palm just like the Ascended Core at the bottom of this floor; however, when it reforms in my chest, there are two distinct differences.

The first is that this core is full to the brim with demonic energy ready to be used.

I haven't attempted using this power in quite a long time, but it feels incredibly insidious and strong.

The second difference between this and any of the other cores I've collected before is that it is pulling on the other empty demonic cores in my chest.

Green divine threads tether through them all, but soon the Greater, Arch, and Ascended cores begin falling toward the largest black core.

Once they all collide, the Demon Lord's Core doesn't change in size, but a ripple of strange darkness pulses through my body and a new reading shows up on my status.

[Demon Lord's Core][Hidden Ability] +2510% All Stats

The stat increase rises to a very odd number, and other than increased understanding and efficiency of wielding demonic energy, I'm unsure what this hidden ability is...

Though, my attention turns to the green token floating in front of me before I can ponder too hard about my consolidated cores.

The white divine ether mist dissipates, and as I catch the green token, the black boxes that gave us these prizes disappear too.

It feels warm to the touch, and just like my Soul Sword, the instant I make contact with it, it feels as though our core strength has linked.

On both the front and back of the blank-faced coin, a number [1] erupts from its surface by a few millimeters.

I curiously look at it, letting go and feeling the coin hover above my palm and slowly spin.

Then, before my eyes, the coin sinks into my palm just like the Demon's Core did moments ago.

Ember is doing the same exact thing right next to me, and we both watch the coins fall into our bodies.

A faint number [1] in dark green text flashes right where it sank in, then I hear a ringing in my inner ear while the links of loyalty attached to me surge upward from just under 295 million past 500 million in less than a second.

[Congratulations! Rising Emperor's Domain Milestone Reached!]

[1/1 World Claimed]

[New Perk Unlocked: Rising Emperor's World Domination]

Info:

All beings connected to the system will now automatically become a link of loyalty to their planet ruler.

All Links of loyalty may now access the [World Wide Connectivity System Interface][i].

The Rising Emperor may now borrow an additional 10% of all Base Stat Points and Mana Control efficiency from all subordinates under the allegiance of the Rising Emperor.

The caster may only borrow or share exclusively; both actions cannot be performed simultaneously.

Members affected by this perk are not required to be within range of the Rising Emperor's Domain.

This buff stacks with the [Imperial Reach] perk, [Expansion] perk, [Dominance] perk, [Authority] perk, [Power Holder] perk, and [Ruler's Gaze] perk if used simultaneously.

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My gaze sweeps over my new buff, and I feel my stats automatically increase by a massive amount. Not only have I gained over 200 million new links of loyalty in an instant, but the amount of stats I can borrow in total has risen to 50%.

At the same time, I feel a new wave of perception explode out from the tower and wrap around the entire globe.

Not only can I feel and see every single human connected to the system on the planet, but now I feel connected to all 21,480 dungeons covering the globe. There are five labyrinths that hit my senses as well... three of which are not ranked up, all below the threshold that the one in the Crimson City achieved.

However, there is one large labyrinth in Central City that is on the same rank as the one I've been building from the leftover mana in the artificial mountain range.

This sudden rush of information sends hundreds of thousands of notifications into my consciousness.

My personal certificates of ownership for all of these mana constructs are the first things I see, but the vast majority of the notifications I receive are contracts that are linked to these dungeons. The individuals' names flash through my mind, but I don't recognize anyone on the list to match the over 500 million human names I have access to on this world.

I wonder if they're old contracts from before the great war, or if these names are from beings on other worlds...

It's quite the information overload, but the notifications in my ears don't stop there.

For some reason, the voice that reads them aloud is different, more proper and elegant. The text before me shimmers with dense green threads.

[Analyzing New Lord of World M3-99051...]

[Prepayment For 1 Set of Premium Avatars Detected, No Further Resources Required...]

[Mana-Qi Soul Energy Core Detected...]

[Pure Demon Lord's Core Detected...]

[Fully Formed Green True Core Detected...]

[1.20001 Low Quality Ether Detected...]

I feel green divine energy ripple through my body. At first, Celia's barrier blocks it, but I witness Ember allowing the light to probe him, so I relax and do the same.

Once it finishes and disappears a few seconds later, a perfect body double of myself forms a few meters in front of me; however, it is made completely of mana, and there are three empty cores in its chest.

The same cloning design is being made in front of Ember's body too, and when they finish, a final text option appears before me.

[Assimilate With Avatar]

[Re-Synchronize]

Ember grins and walks right past the lifelike designs in front of us.

"We're not going to need these."

He allows the silver light that's been shimmering around him to retract back into his chest, and I see a bright green True Core cycling the threads he absorbed on the walk up emit a dense pressure on our surroundings.

Trace amounts of silver threads vibrate in his flesh in microscopic areas that haven't yet fully adapted, but seconds later a wave of white energy washes over his whole body to completely mask all of the silver threads from my gaze.

He turns back and raises a hand to motion for me.

"Come on, those avatars were for that Vermillion Family Demon. There's no point in claiming a fake body if we have our own real ones."

I look at him, then back at the floating image of myself. Then, I grin and walk past it too.

"I guess you're right."

We cross the disk of black material floating in the tower, and the whole world watches.

I speak up to the 517,230,991 Links of Loyalty still watching.

"We did it. This world belongs to the humans, and it will remain that way."

I simultaneously feel the [World Wide Connectivity System Interface] activate in my mind, showing panels to share live videos through anyone's eyes peer to peer, text broadcasts to the whole world, and even information and item trading marketplace interfaces rushing through my mind.

Users have already begun using this, as the moment I accepted the [World Token], everyone gained access.

Private groups can be created, instant transmissions enabled, protected sales initiated, and even quest creation features activated where a random link of loyalty anywhere in the world can ask for anything they need, and anyone connected to the network can accept.

My mind rushes through hundreds of other features, even virtual combat training showing all of the Rising Emperor's skills and imagery of me using them in combat scenarios in the past. Plus, request options to borrow those skills, all handled and moderated by generals, commanders, and knights in real time.

The resources that are now instantly available to this planet are quite impressive. I can think of thousands of ways new hunters have far more opportunity to succeed in this new world, but I push this to the back of my mind while continuing to walk forward and speak.

"I will be leaving for the Upper Realm. I suspect my victory against the demon that sought to claim this world won't go over well with their leaders. It will be my job to protect the world above, and your job to become stronger and work together below for when I return. We are humans, rulers of our own world, and soon, many more. Become strong, enjoy your lives, and make me proud."

I smirk, turning off my spectate mode while turning to Ember, then stopping a few meters in front of the dense green Divine Rift.

Stolen story; please report.

"This is safe to jump through? We're not falling right into the demon's territory full of their Green-Cored Lords, are we?"

He laughs.

"No. All these green rifts lead to highly regulated zones. We will be in no danger for quite a while once we arrive. Well—then again—I've never attempted entering the Upper Realm without an avatar. It should be fine... as long as you can handle the pressure..."

I raise an eyebrow, but he just shrugs and continues.

"It's all new territory for me, but I say it's worth a try. Your body has adapted so far, it'll do it again. You certainly don't like doing things the easy way, but that ring of yours should help."

My heartbeat starts to rise as I look back at the rift. I can't see through it at all.

The slow clouds of green threads coming out are incredibly dense, to the point where I'm still struggling to stand properly without using a large amount of strength and concentration.

Right on cue, like my ring was listening in this whole time, I feel a warm ripple of happiness come out from the purple artifact, and feel the sensation of the thin barrier around my body hardening like an unbreakable shell.

No more green threads in the atmosphere hit me at all, and I hear a soft woman's voice echo in my inner ears.

"You made it. I didn't think I'd ever reach this place again. I've regained enough strength to help you like I promised. An ascended human keeping his body in the Upper Realm. You are quite odd..."

She chuckles in my inner ear until her voice fades, and I lose connection with her conscious mind. All I'm left with is her strengthened barrier around me that simultaneously blocks all threads from hitting me, but also limits me from growing and adapting.

However, Ember seems to agree with Celia's decision.

"Good. You won't die the second we walk through the rift."

He steps forward and disappears before my eyes without another word.

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and look at the whole world, then send a private message to all of my generals, commanders, knights, Bri, and Rodrigo.

"See you soon. We'll stay in touch."

Then, I step through myself, feeling the strong, invisible purple barrier that covers my body heat up with intense energy, like I'm walking into the sun.

My vision turns completely green, but I feel my feet hit a hard surface below, so I continue walking forward.

I can still sense the human world, but I'm positive I'm no longer on it.

It feels as though it's floating in a dark black void in my mind, and wherever I'm headed right now is on a whole different plane of existence.

My slow steps continue forward until I see an archway with white Divine Ether Mist pouring out of it.

I'm standing on a nonexistent floor in a sea of green Divine Energy.

I can't sense Ember or much of anything in my surroundings, but the comments of the Order members speaking of a final door replay in my mind as I continue taking steps forward, then eventually walk right through.

My vision goes completely white, then green text appears in front of me, as the same voice from within the tower speaks to me.

[Welcome, New Lord!]

[Check In At A Citadel Required!]

[Nearest Citadel: Ellipsia]

[High-Speed Travel Time: 0.5 Hours]

[Accept] [YES]

I choose [YES], but there is no other option to click.

The text fades, and so does the white light all around me.

It feels as though I'm not moving, but when I turn my head back, I watch a bright cloud of white Divine Ether disappear into the distance. When I turn my head back, I'm sent flying into a dense dark green cloud of divine threads.

All around me, I see the clouds pass at extremely fast speeds.

I'm standing inside a small white orb, made of the same translucent glowing Ether material as the cloud I left.

However, the reason I can't sense anything isn't because of this protective orb; it's because of Celia's barrier.

Plumes of green threads move right through the orb I'm being transported in at extremely fast speeds, but my body isn't making contact with them. The thick green clouds just move around me, and trace amounts are absorbed by the purple ring.

Ember's voice rings in my ears.

"You're headed to the Ellipsia Citadel, right?"

Still confused about pretty much every single thing that's going on, I reply through our Rising Emperor link, not needing to physically sense him to communicate.

"Yes, I am, but..."

I'm captivated by the endless sea of green clouds all around me, and my words fade off.

"Good. See you soon. Enjoy the ride," he replies in an amused tone.

Minutes pass, and I press my hands up against the side of the transparent orb with wide eyes to see the vastness of the realm I'm being rocketed through.

If I could sense anything, I can only imagine it'd be even more amazing...

Far off in the distance, the imagery of thousands of tall green towers floating above the clouds comes into my sight.

It looks like an enormous city, hundreds of kilometers wide if the buildings were the same size as normal skyscrapers on the human world...

However, as the minutes continue to pass, the buildings I approach get larger and larger; but I feel as though I'm not getting any closer to the city.

I start to see millions of windows and floor markers far off in the distance, and the true enormity of these structures become clear.

The impossibly large towers are actually hundreds of kilometers wide each, and tens of thousands of kilometers high. The city itself begins to stretch past the distance my peripherals can keep up with as I continue to get closer and closer.

The towering structures look like palaces created for gods...

Then again, when I think about what kind of beings live here, this statement might not be far from the truth.

A new textbox rings in my ears.

[Level 1 Surveillance Zone Reached: Stated Cargo: World M3-99051 Lord]

[Analyzing Cargo...]

Green light from high up in the sky comes raining down on me, scanning every inch of my body, but not making it through Celia's barrier at all.

It stops a few seconds later, and another textbox with the same voice appears.

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

The green light covers me again, but the same result occurs.

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

It happens a few more times, and my heart speeds up each time it does.

I re-open my link with Ember and tell him exactly what's happening while the process continues.

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

"Not good... Try to open up your barrier and let it scan your body. I managed to make it through, but I have an Ether Cloak on my silver threads. This zone is too well-surveilled for me to come over and help."

I do as he's instructed and lighten the airtight seal that Celia has created, as our minds and emotions are linked.

However, the instant I even make the barrier waver, I gasp for air and reflexively fall to my knees.

My senses are overwhelmed by a divine pressure that makes the tower we just climbed feel like child's play.

Not only is the thread count in the air mind bending, the gravity that pushes down on me is far too strong to withstand when Celia isn't supporting my body like an exo-skeleton.

The incredibly dense green clouds of threads tear through my saturated body and almost evaporate every last physical cell I have left in mere fractions of a second.

The remaining flesh is forced to press against the bottom of the Ether Orb.

I seal the barrier back up and begin writhing in pain on the bottom of this clear orb, continuously regenerating my flesh while processing the new green threads in my core for over a full minute.

The green light from above catches this momentary glimpse of my being.

[Hold Still: World Token Detected]

[Detection Lost]

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

As I stand to my feet and try again, the same process repeats, and I fall again, unable to even withstand a drop of the pressure outside this protective orb.

[Hold Still: World Token Detected]

[Detection Lost]

[No Cargo Found: Re-Analyzing...]

It's impossible for me to even use any normal mana or skills, as doing so opens up a small portion of the purple barrier and exposes me to the outside world.

I'm stuck in quite the odd scenario...

When I stand up again, a new notification hits my ears.

[Level 2 Surveillance Zone Reached: No Valid Cargo Detected]

[Following Safety Protocol: Eject Unauthorized Load]

The white orb sending me flying through the sky toward this massive floating city stops moving.

Then, it completely disappears into thin air.

The sensation of falling takes over as my vision turns green again while I plunge into the depths of the endless clouds below.

Chapter 694

At the top of a tower in the heart of the Ellipsia Citadel, three green-cored demons sit around a large table, overlooking the city below.

Glowing green transmission blocks project holograms of fifteen other demons based in other citadels across the Upper Realm.

One of the holograms of a Lord is far larger than the rest, leading their meeting. He happens to be the Vermillion Family Head.

His voice echoes for all his subordinates to hear.

"That wraps up our monthly profits meeting. Up 7% on mana, up 1% on demonic energy, and an 11% increase in low-quality ether stores. And congrats, Andras, on your expected Duel Victory. Acquiring that 1-Class world and four 2nd-Class worlds will certainly increase profits in next month's report."

Andras Vermillion stands up from his seat and bows his head, with the Ellipsia Citadel in all its glory behind him, showing off a beautiful view from the large penthouse estate of the tallest building in the center of the grand city.

"Of course, as requested, taking a few planets from one of the 1st-Class Blue Ogres was not a problem. Their influence was growing again too fast. We own this Citadel now. Those creatures are stuck in the past. We must continue to remind them that we are in charge. That will set them back a few centuries."

The Family Head grins.

"Yes, very good work. Now, moving on to more interesting business... A 19th Lord shall be joining us soon. The Vermillion Family grows stronger yet again."

One of the holograms ripples from a foreign Citadel, projecting a voice in response.

"I was reading over the future plan reports, but they weren't fully updated. It was a third-class world, right? We have more of those than we know what to do with... Using resources for a throne barely gives us a doubled return over a few decades. Wouldn't it have been far more worthwhile to use a throne on a 1st or at least a 2nd-class world? We only get access to new throne artifacts from the Overseer every few hundred years. What was so special about this world?"

A few voices murmur in discussion, but the Family Head dispels their concern with a wave of his hand.

"Quiet. Have I led us wrong yet? In the last 12,000 years, we've grown from a laughingstock in the Demonic Realm to an official family in the council of rulers. This new member of our Family Lords is from a Noble Grade World. We could have waited a few hundred years for a new first-class world to connect to the system in our sector, but a perfect mana-rich world came onto the radar just as this specimen awakened his True Core. It's better we bring him up here now than risk missing the mortal window of those yellow cores in the lower realm."

More discussion continues among the holograms, and the demon who objected earlier speaks again.

"Understood, Family Head. If you would like me to greet him when he arrives, I would be honored to meet a Noble you've handpicked. We only have two other Nobles in our family branch in this realm."

The Family Head stands up from his throne and walks over to the window, gazing out across the city toward the endless sky.

"Yes, the selection test for Nobles is strict on purpose. We do not want untalented warriors sullyng our brand in this Upper Realm. The other four families have far stronger footings even here in the green zone. Quality is far more important than quantity now that we have their respect and a foothold... I believe being greeted by a fellow Noble will only be fair to our future powerhouse. The closest Citadel registration point to that ascension sector should be Ellipsia."

The Family Head's hologram pauses, then speaks again.

"Andras, you're the stationed Lord of Ellipsia. Please personally bring him into our ranks once he is flagged by the surveillance system. With his raw talent, it shouldn't take more than another month to assimilate with the throne. Show him around and transfer him a few hundred 3rd Class worlds to get moved up into the Citadel Rankings. I'll have two pure Low-Quality Ether packages shipped to your residence—one to give to Drako Vermillion once he arrives, and another as a reward for your exceptional work in your duel. We'll have a new face here during our next monthly profit meeting."

"I thank you, Royal Vermillion Family Head." Andras replies.

Discussions peak again, while the Vermillion Family Head turns off his holographic transmission.

Andras turns his hologram off as well, then turns to stare out the window with his arms crossed.

Three dragons sleep at the far back of the room, undisturbed as their demonic pairs carry on with business as usual.

Down below, two ether orbs rocket toward the Ellipsia Citadel from a lower-realm transport point.

The first orb easily passes through the two security layers and halts at one of the city's access points, designed for visitors to sign in and for newly ascended beings to register.

Ember steps off his ether orb onto a large green platform in front of the city.

The access point is positioned between two massive towers, with a smaller archway—only 10 kilometers high—leading into a street that runs to the center of the citadel, flanked by countless other towers.

Notifications ring in Ember's inner ear as he walks forward, but a more alarming telepathic message captures his attention.

"It ejected me! This orb really just dropped me into the clouds..."

Ember can't help but grin at the absurdity of the claim ringing through his inner ear but replies in a semi-serious manner.

"Never a dull moment with you, is it? It probably couldn't get a full scan on your world token. You tried opening up that ring's barrier, right?"

"Yes! Twice. The pressure and gravity are way too strong. It's going to take me longer than just a few minutes to get used to this."

Ember considers some options for a few seconds, but another message comes blaring into his mind.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"Still falling, by the way..."

"It must be a result of keeping your physical body instead of a weightless energy form. It's going to be much harder to adapt."

A long sigh comes before the next reply.

"That makes sense. I'll just have to become strong enough to withstand the pressure with my real body. Where do these clouds even lead? Is it safe down here to train?"

"I'm not sure what's below the citadels anymore, to be honest. However, it should be fine, it's not like you'll fall out of the Upper Realm. If you're truly in a bind, I can follow you down there. But if I release too much power, we'll gain attention from the Overseer—or, at the very least, the local Citadel Lord."

There's no response for a few seconds, but a voice from below the clouds hits Ember's inner ear again.

"Alright... That wouldn't be good. I'll figure this out myself and message you with updates. Don't have too much fun while I'm away."

Ember grins while walking up to the green archway, raising both hands to be analyzed by rays of green light.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll scout the place out and keep a low profile until you arrive. I have a few errands to run anyway."

The wireless transmission ceases, and Ember raises the World Token from his palm.

However, instead of showing the surveillance arrays his un-altered body and World Token details, silver threads and waves of Ether manipulate everything these high-tech arrays see. Notifications echo through his mind as he walks right through the archway into the city.

[Welcome, New Lord!]

[Race: Human]

[Worlds Claimed: 1]

[Classification: 5th Class]

[Fast Travel to nearest Human Embassy][Free]

[Fast Travel to Your Selected Location]

Ember smirks and thinks to himself, 'A human from a world not even up to the standards of the Demon classification system. This should be low-profile enough.'

He clicks the bottom option on the green floating text before him.

A large holographic map of the city materializes, and he zooms into an intersection between four streets just a few blocks from the center of the city.

A few blocks in this massive city is still over a thousand kilometers, and from the access point he's standing at now, tens of thousands of kilometers away.

[Ashen Blue District Selected!]

[Fast Travel Time:

[Cost: 0.005 Low-Quality Ether] [Pay Now]

Ember raises his finger, and it begins to glow white as he's about to send his payment, but more notifications ring in his ears.

[Danger! Area not Recommended for Lords Below 2nd Class!]

[Danger! Area not Recommended for Human Lords!]

Ember brushes these alerts out of his consciousness and taps the text to pay.

The instant the transaction goes through, an orb of translucent white light wraps around him. He rises about a kilometer above the street's surface and zips through the streets in an instant.

Tens of thousands of kilometers go by in minutes, and the streets below become far more packed and lively as the orb brings him closer to the center of the Citadel.

Thousands of other fast-travel transport orbs zip by above, below, and beside Ember's orb.

Outlines of all kinds of riders flash past. Some appear to be humanoid, while others have long wings, clawed arms and legs, feathers, multiple heads, or forms that defy recognition entirely.

Ember doesn't care to look around, crossing his arms while the orb speeds up, the buildings blurring past.

Eventually, it stops with an abrupt halt and descends to street level in an instant.

[Arrived! Ashen Blue District!]

Ember steps onto the green city sidewalk in front of a shop built into the side of a building.

Looking left and right, he sees thousands of shops lining every building down here on the street level. They all fork off from this four-lane intersection.

Monsters of all kinds roam the streets—walking, flying with their wings, floating through the air, or disappearing from the square while activating fast travel.

He walks right into a shop whose name has faded from its old solid metal sign. Below it are far newer ads, some even digitized with moving green divine energy text, reading:

[Buy/Sell Dungeon Contracts]

[Ether - Mana - Item Trade]

[Un-Bonded Soul Weapons]

It's clear whoever owns the shop leaves their name faded on purpose.

As Ember walks through the large 20-meter-tall front doors, a single head at the back of the shop looks down at him with an angry expression.

Ember, appearing as the long red-haired human walks forward, letting the massive door swing closed behind him, his eyes scanning the walls. Green divine force fields display chunks of mana, white crystals, and even un-bonded Soul Weapon frames. Everything for sale floats and slowly spins like paintings neatly fitted on the walls.

Staring at one for over a second reveals detailed descriptions of what kinds of contracts are necessary for the dungeon being programmed, how much mana and ether is being sold, and the special abilities of the Soul Weapon frames.

Ember nods slowly, not stopping despite the ominous pressure radiating off the 15-meter-tall Blue Ogre at the back of the shop.

It finally speaks in an echoing, resounding tone.

"Your kind isn't welcome here. I don't do business with 5th-Class Lords, and certainly not human Lords. None of you ever make it past a thousand years old. I don't deal with short-term clients."

Ember grins and keeps walking forward, unfazed by the green pressure the ogre emits.

"Oh, come on, Torvak. You've grown soft, haven't you? I'd expect you to kill a weakling like me the moment I walked through the front door."

The ogre has three short black horns pointing out of its forehead and a pale blue skin tone barely containing the enormous muscles and veins bulging all over its avatar.

Its True Green Core burns far brighter than Ember's, but that isn't what sends the majority of the pressure his way. Most of the aura comes from the glowing green [826] on its palm.

It speaks again, quite confused how this weak human hasn't fallen to its knees yet.

"Who are you? State your name."

The ogre presses a security protocol on its status feed, creating an additional layer of green divine shielding around all the merchandise in the shop, even sealing the exit doors.

Ember reaches into his Ether storage and pulls out a marble-sized white gem glowing brighter than everything else in the shop. He tosses it across the room toward the Blue Ogre.

Its eyes widen the moment it sees the quality of the Ether being thrown its way. The moment it catches the gem, Ember speaks again.

"I'm not sure how long you've been keeping my goods in storage. Time moves by quite differently hopping between Realms, but that should be enough to cover it."

The Blue Ogre stops exuding such a domineering pressure and stares down at the Ether Crystal, then back at Ember.

"That's far more than necessary. You're definitely not actually a human... Wait... The only being who would throw around items like this back in the day was—"

His words are cut short as Ember waves his hand to show a ripple of silver light masked by a thick cloud of white Ether.

Then, he speaks as the Ogre's face is frozen in shock.

"Ember. My new name is Ember in this life. I need to lay low for a while, and yes, the cover I've chosen is a human skin. I'm in need of some 3rd-Class bodyguards and simple employment to play the part before surveillance catches any inconsistencies. I want to be in the middle of the action. The more I can listen in and understand the new culture of the Citadel, the better."

The Ogre shows a smile, revealing two sharp white tusks from its lower jaw.

"Of course, sir... Ember. To answer your question, I believe it has been over 15,000 years since we last met. I have a property six blocks over you can take charge of for as long as you'd like—it's even more lively than even this part of town. While humans aren't well-liked in the Volterra District either, with two of my men as guards, there won't be trouble. Even though we lost control of the Citadel, our influence in the streets hasn't dwindled to zero."

Ember's eyes track down to the Blue Ogre's world count glowing on its palm.

"That explains your severe drop in claimed planets..." He pauses after this comment but looks back at the ogre.

"Very well. I'm glad you survived. Do me this favor, and I'll see what I can do about your demon problem."

Ember grins as Torvak looks shocked again.

"It is the demons, isn't it?"

Torvak nods quickly, opening his status feed to deactivate the security system.

"Yes... Yes, it is. As you wish, I'll have my men come to pick you up and get you situated right away. As for those goods that you left with me, I'll retrieve them and have them hand delivered to your residence in less than 2 days."

Ember crosses his arms and nods.

"Good. Have the guards you send believe I'm just a human too. So far, you're the only soul in the Upper Realm that knows I've returned. For now, I'd like to keep it that way."

Chapter 695

A transmission is sent to a district six blocks away while Ember and Torvak continue to speak for a few minutes, catching up on current events in the lower and upper realms.

"Yes, even in the Lower Realm, the Demon's influence is spreading. Their newest fifth royal family branch popped up about a dozen lifetimes ago. I managed to bond with the Vermillion's Demons a few times, and in one life I bonded with the Morvale Family, but their selection process is even tougher—and information is airtight. No one speaks of the Upper Realm down there anymore."

Torvak nods, staring straight ahead at the door.

"Makes sense. They've taken control of all of the Citadels in the Green Zone. It all started about 12,000 years back; mine was the last to fall just 4,000 years ago. The Wyverns, High Orcs, a Berserker King Race, and, of course, the Ogre Conglomeration still hold enough higher-grade worlds to hold on, but the Demon Families continue chipping away at us, keeping us just out of reach from fighting back."

Ember nods slowly, thinking to himself with his eyes closed.

"If it's that bad even here, the Grand Citadel and higher Zones must be far worse..."

Silence fills the room before Torvak replies.

"One can only assume. We rarely get updates from our higher reps; you know how much it costs to even send transmissions down."

Before Ember thinks of a reply, the doors of the shop shimmer green, and a light chiming sound echoes through the shop to notify those inside that there are visitors.

Ember smiles and turns his attention to this. "Very well, that is more than enough of a broad update. I'd like to see things for myself to get a true feel of the action."

The doors then open, and two eight-meter-tall Red Ogres walk in. One has two silver horns, while the other has one black horn. Both have a bright green [50] on their palms.

The black-horned Red Ogre, with a bit more muscle on his avatar, speaks up as the doors shut.

"Randel and Syl, at your service, Lord Torvak. You put up a job offer for a bodyguard gig needed for an indefinite time frame in the Volterra District? Fifty Low Quality Ether upfront and ten Ether per month is too great an offer to even try negotiating higher."

Torvak smiles.

"Indeed. Good to see you, Randel."

He turns to the silver-horned slimmer, more feminine looking Red Ogre.

"Good to see you too, Syl. I'd like to introduce you to the new manager and consultant at our Dungeon Trade Palace. I want you two to show him around and guard him if he's ever talking with customers. Humans aren't well respected in our territories, but make sure people know he is off-limits for duels or exploitation."

Both of the Red Ogres look down toward the overly confident human between them and want to burst out laughing on instinct, but don't. If Torvak is being this respectful with a human, it must mean he is really someone they don't want to mess with.

There must be something in it for him that far outweighs the stigma and short timeframe of this deal.

The human puts out a hand to shake.

"The name is Ember. I look forward to working with you."

Both of the Ogres shake Ember's hand, confused even further that, even while making contact with them and the clear glowing [1] on his palm, he hasn't fallen from the pressure of Second-Class beings like themselves.

This only makes them more respectful while sharing niceties.

Ember casually walks to the side of the room afterward while Torvak and the two guards sign contracts and transfer pure Low Quality Ether through their system interfaces.

All three of them leave the shop soon after, and the Blue Ogre walks back behind the counter with a serious stare, though the corners of his lips are turned up as this kind of good luck couldn't have come at a better time. 'Maybe we're not destined to die out after all,' he thinks to himself while Syl purchases a three-person fast travel Orb, and they zip off further away from the heart of the Citadel. r

[Danger! Area Not Recommended for Lords Below Third Class!]

[Danger! Area Not Recommended for Human Lords!]

Ember brushes away these notifications and stares forward as the scenery around them changes again.

The smaller, more private shops at ground level and corporate buildings not open to the public in the district they just left begin to fade from prominence as the Orb travels farther out.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

More and more large shops become visible on higher and higher floors of the massive building. Green energy bridges connecting the buildings across streets make the massive shopping centers easier to access.

Even larger varieties of monsters are visible shopping and interacting in this district.

The Orb halts in the center of the massive bustling district, about ten kilometers above ground level, at the entrance of an enormous open shop with lettering over a kilometer wide reading [World Dungeon Trade Palace] Blasts of fresh, cool air pour into the streets, and access points to all of the stores left, right, above, and below all lead to this incredible storefront.

Its ceilings are over 200 meters high per floor to accommodate all monster races, and the walls are lined with items just like those inside Torvak's small store. Although, they are of a bit lower quality with many duplicates to sell to the masses.

There is at least one Red Ogre present on every floor, and many High Ogres and regular Ogres wander about with a palace logo on their avatars, helping customers of all kinds as they read status notifications for Ether, Mana, Soul Weapon, and Dungeon Contract prices.

In any given hour, over a million Citadel citizens whiz through, fast-traveling or window shopping.

As Ember and the two Red Ogres touch down on the top floor of the trade palace and begin walking toward the back, many employees recognize the bodyguards and greet them with respectful bows and professional smiles.

Randel speaks up again as they walk past some of the glowing displays.

"Torvak said you may need a rundown on the facilities, which, for a new manager and consultant, I find quite odd..."

Ember grins as his gaze falls on a row of bright green glowing doors numbered 1-20 on the back wall of the room.

"Yes, I'm quite a fast learner."

The black-horned Ogre follows his gaze and replies.

"These are our new dungeon contract facilities. As you must know, we don't only sell completed and fully programmed dungeons but also buy Lords' fighting data to use on new Luminite Blocks. Maybe you can take a crack at it, humans don't come around here much."

Syl grins and adds to his statement.

"Human combat data sells best in the level 1-10 range. They're a great starter mob for the Fourth and Fifth Class worlds. Most of those world bids never have enough energy on them to reach past the level 100 range, lots of lost potential profits for the other 900 levels on standard luminite blocks. So we mainly deal in Third-Class worlds and above."

Just as she says that, one of the doors swings open, and a High Orc comes walking out with a satisfied smile on his face as Ether is credited to his account.

Ember gets close enough to see some of the pop-ups above the doors.

[Cyclops Combat Data Needed!] [Lv. 110-120][i]

[Griffin Combat Data Needed!] [Lv. 330-340][i]

[Wyvern Combat Data Needed!] [Lv. 740-750][i]

Various payout options detail how many virtual combat sessions are needed to gain enough data for each race. It also outlines whether participants would like to sell their training to the Lord who made the contract bid directly or receive no payment now and be paid in dividends once it is deployed on a world.

Syl adds in to comment again once Ember loses interest in the stats.

"The level of the monster doesn't matter. You could be over level ten thousand for all we care. It would just take far less time to run the machine learning trial—maybe only a few minutes. An identical monster race running simulations inside at level 100 might take a few days to gather the same data."

Ember nods and turns around to look at the entire shop.

"Yes, yes. Not much has changed. You all work in the world exchange business too, don't you? What is the exchange rate for worlds these days?"

His gaze falls down to the [50]s on their palms, and Randel replies.

"Yes, of course, we trade worlds. It's mostly Fifth to Third Class in this building. One to three Low Quality Ether for a Fifth Class, and up to 100 for a Third Class; it really depends on how much of the world's resources have already been farmed. While higher grade dungeon contracts are processed here, selling full Second Class or higher Worlds

is handled with the bosses in the Ashen Blue District directly. This is more of our flashy consumer front."

"Understood. Well, I won't be a tough client to protect. If there's a back room with a view of the marketplace, that will be perfect. Plus, the sales figures for as far back as you can get them. I'd like to get a deep dive into how this trade business has been running the last few millennia."

Both of the Ogres look at each other, then turn to the other side of the back room with a few other doors, some unmarked while others have [Duel Area] marked above them.

Syl comments.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like a Tour of our dueling rooms, or the Mana, Ether, and open air World exchanges on the lower floors?"

He shakes his head. "No, I think this is self explanatory enough. I'll request access to more area's if I have any additional questions after looking at your sales figures."

On this note, Ember is led back into one of the unmarked office rooms that brings him to a floor above, where he overlooks the entire shopping district as requested.

The two Second-Class Red Ogres stand outside his door and guard it, awaiting new requests as the day goes on.

Meanwhile, at the top of the Vermillion Tower in the center of the Citadel, Andras turns to his two subordinates with a smile.

"Looks like I won't be the only Noble Demon in town starting this month. Maybe we'll have enough power to finally push those pesky gangs out of the center of the city for good."

One of the other green-cored Demons nods, looking out the window as well.

"Yes, but we still need confirmation from the upper families that we're in the clear to take them out. Angering the wrong race that still has power in even a Cyan Zone could set us back millennia if we're not careful."

Andras sighs.

"Yes, yes, I know. I'm just looking forward to the inevitable future. We might as well give them a scare and kick them while they're down. Go sell off that stockpile of trash Fourth and Fifth Class worlds at the palace run by those Ogres ten blocks over. Even throw in

some nearly drained Third-Class worlds if you have some. I want to use the profits to buy a few Second-Class worlds as a personal welcome present for our newest Lord."

He lets out a chuckle while his rows of sharp teeth show, and the bright white horns jutting out of his forehead match their Ether imbued glow.

"There isn't enough mana on them for us to trigger labyrinth contracts, but we can still use them as leverage. I want double the price for all of them just to rub in my duel victory against their Leader. Don't leave that mall until you get what you're asking for."

The Noble Demon's subordinate stands from his seat and bows.

"Of course. I'll have it done by the end of the day."

Chapter 696

Far below the thriving businesses in the Ellipsia Citadel, dense green clouds made of divine threads fly by while I continue to plummet downward.

Every few minutes, I try opening up my purple barrier to let as few threads inside as possible.

However, each time, no matter how little the opening is, I'm struck by the same unfathomably painful and instant attack on my physical form.

These passing minutes turn into hours, and it feels as though I'm making no progress at all.

Even with 50% of my world's stats still surging through me, I still feel as weak as an unawakened human in this high pressure environment.

I feel large amounts of green threads assimilate with my body and core each time, growing my True Core's power, but it doesn't change the fact that my physical form is just far too heavy for this realm.

My speed moving downward gets faster and faster, and the thickness of the clouds only increases.

It makes me need to wait longer between each barrier opening, to the point where, between every single exposure, I need almost half an hour to fully process the new threads.

On a positive note, the purple ring around my finger is having a field day devouring as many green threads as it can. Its absorption rate is almost ten times as fast as mine, and it can stay constantly absorbing, effortlessly converting them to its sealed version of purple threads.

This makes the exoskeleton barrier around me far stronger as I fall, but it doesn't make me feel any better, as the difficulty of the work ahead of me only gets tougher and tougher with every minute that passes.

By the time it takes over an hour to process all of the threads, the density of green clouds around me hits their peak.

I'm unable to send a wave of perception out, even in the tiny fractions of a second I get while opening my barrier, as my total concentration is locked on not being devoured by my environment.

However, the fact that the threads aren't getting denser is almost equally as concerning as if they were...

Very soon after this realization comes over me, I see the air below me turn darker green, then fade to black.

I know very well what an abyss looks like; and this isn't it. Even without my maxed-out perception or aura to probe my surroundings, my eyesight is still far better than average.

There must be a ground below.

With no way to eject mana, demonic energy, or even divine power without my certain demise, I just brace for impact.

A heavy thud echoes throughout the desolate area, and intense vibrations rattle through my body.

While they aren't nearly as painful as being torn apart by divine threads, the pain is quite unexpected.

I thought my barrier would take the entirety of the force, but the immense amount of weight my body has paired with the speed of impact somehow pushes pressure through the barrier on the impact zone.

Even Celia's emotions ripple through our emotional link, showing confusion at this turn of events, as her skin-tight exo-suit should have absorbed the entire impact.

Nevertheless, all around me, shards of dark black rock fly upward as my body makes a crater in the floor beneath the green clouds.

Surprisingly, not many rocks at all are upset by my impact either; I've only created a hole ten meters deep and double the distance wide at most.

Most of the jet-black shards are extremely heavy, and most aren't larger than the size of my palm.

They appear to be devoid of all energy; even the divine threads around just flow by and not through the odd black stones.

As I let out a groan, sit up, then get to my feet to walk out of the crater I've made, in all directions as far as I can see, the landscape is made of these dark black rocks.

With the dense green clouds moving by even down here, and the rising and falling rock piles making hills and small valleys, I can hardly see more than 200 meters in any given direction.

From having entire planets in my sights just hours ago to now being thrust into such a strange and limiting environment, I'm immediately put on edge.

My gaze stays sharp as I slowly turn around in circles surveying the area and weighing my options, then start walking in the direction of the Citadel where I was traveling last.

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Every footstep I take crunches through these dark rocks, some of them as small as a marble, while others are as finely ground as dust.

These crunches are the only bit of sound that echoes through these obsidian wastelands.

While falling through the air, I felt safe enough to absorb threads; down here, it feels like I'm being watched. So I trust my instincts and put off training any further until I figure out what this place really is...

While I walk between two large piles of black stones, about a kilometer away, two small green creatures with pointed ears and poorly made stone weapons crafted from the

black stones we're standing on hide behind a small pile of rocks, watching me wander through the barren lands.

They both watched me fall from the sky and have been whispering to each other for minutes as I unknowingly walk in their direction.

"Troy, it's a human..." whispers the small creature with roughly fitted brass knuckles made of black rock around both his clenched fists.

The other, with a short sword about half a meter long, replies, "Yeah, Rain, and look at his palm. He's still a Lord..."

Rain looks down at his own palm to see a lightly glowing [0], then gazes over to Troy, seeing the same marking, before staring up into the endless green sky of clouds above.

A third, even smaller creature pokes his head in between the two with an innocent, curious look.

"Where did he come from...? -And what a weird avatar..."

As I walk forward, unaware of where or what eyes are truly watching me, Rain whispers to the little one between them.

"We'll hold him off. Go run and get the leader from the mines, fast."

The tiny green creature nods, still wide-eyed with innocence, and skips away into the green fog.

I hear other footsteps trailing away in front of me and think about retrieving my Soul Weapon, but upon visualizing what opening my storage and taking the time exposed to this pressure would do to me, preparing without it is the better option right now.

I pause my steps and put up my hands to fight, still scanning the endless black wasteland, unsure what that sound was or if it was even an enemy.

Whatever it was, it was running away. Even if this is a trap, whatever was lurking in the fog has certainly already seen me. Giving it any more information won't hurt...

"Hello...? I—come in peace, as long as you do..."

My footsteps forward continue, but I hold my breath in order to use my other senses to the best of their ability, even without using excess energy outside my barrier.

No more footsteps can be heard, and I walk forward for another few minutes, right past another massive mound of black rocks. However, this one catches my attention.

For some reason, in the back of my mind, a warm pressure leans toward a small isolated area on the mound.

I give in to the feeling, similar to when I felt that small white pill of low-quality Ether rush into my body during the trials.

I shove my hands into the pile of rocks and begin throwing dozens of them behind me until I find the one that drew my senses in.

It feels warm in my hands, and there are small fractures on its surface that glow with a faint white light.

My eyes widen at the discovery, but simultaneously, I feel two more of these warm pressures moving toward me from the opposite direction, from behind another large rockpile stacking tens of meters high.

I don't bother trying to keep the glowing stone; whatever is coming my way is more of a threat. So I get back into a fighting stance and turn their way just as they jump out from behind the adjacent rock structure.

My eyes fall on two goblins no more than half my height, gripping black stone weapons like their lives depend on it.

One, with obsidian colored brass knuckles, matches my stance, grits his teeth, and yells out in a scratchy high-pitched tone.

"We'll both die before we let you take our mine!"

The other, with a jagged self-made short sword, points it my way.

"Surrender now, or—or—"

I can see his hands shaking as he stutters, but the goblin stays staring me in the eyes while finishing.

"Or I'll stab you! So—leave before we have to!"

My mouth is left wide open, and all of my worries of having to fight mysterious powerful green cored beings leave.

I want to let out a laugh, but I decide to just play along and take a step back, putting my hands up.

"Fine, fine. I'll go the other way. My bad."

Then I grin while leaning down to pick up the interesting rock I dropped before.

Both of the goblins look equally relieved at my decision not to be hostile, but their eyes widen at the rock I grab from the ground.

I hear gulps from each of them and watch their eyes track the stone, but as I take a few steps back, it's clear they're not going to risk their lives for it.

However, an extremely loud and angry woman's voice comes echoing out from the endless green mist behind them.

"Not so fast! Just because you can intimidate my underlings doesn't mean I'll let you rob us blind!"

Out from the fog, accompanied by heavy and fast footsteps, I see the figure of a creature about the same size as myself.

There's a faint warm pull from the Ether Sense in my mind that signals the approaching monster's direction, but I can't fully make it out until it jumps off a raised area of rocks over 30 meters away. Then I see a Hobgoblin gripping a massive black hammer in both of her palms.

She has a feminine figure but is covered in muscles, striations, veins, and a skin tight glossy black armor near vital areas. With a bright green True Core glowing in her chest, this is clearly a dangerous monster.

So much down here makes no sense at all...

Her speed coming down toward me is far faster than my unenhanced eyes can track, and without the mana skill boosts, I can't dodge or jump away fast enough.

The only thing to do is block, so that's what I do, raising both my arms into a cross in front of my head. I feel the massive hammer smash down on me.

The initial physical impact feels like nothing at all, as Celia's barrier absorbs the force just like the gravity and pressure around me with no issue.

However, when a warm white light flows through the Hobgoblin woman, into her hammer, and pulses into me, I feel it send me flying backward with a strange force that I have no idea how to block.

The white energy ripples through me ignoring Celia's barrier entirely. I'm sent flying back over 100 meters until hitting a pile of black rocks, then the faint white light disperses out as quickly as it came.

I could feel it even attack my mind as it washed through me, but the same warm pressure that was thoroughly trained inside the first round of the Mind trial in the tower easily protected me from its pressure.

The only damage I'm feeling now is a little tingling all over, but it doesn't hurt. I'm more so shocked at what I just witnessed.

However, excitement fills my eyes as the enemy comes running my way with her massive glowing hammer, as I'll get to see that strange attack in action again.

Chapter 697

The hobgoblin comes my way again with even more speed than before, and the hot radiation coming off her hammer slams against my right arm as I block just in time.

The exact same sensation washes over me.

Upon impact, Celia's barrier blocks the entirety of the blow's force, but once the wave of white energy washes into me, an immense pressure sends me flying backward again.

I'm sent skidding across the rocks and don't stop flying backward for another 200 meters until I hit another pile that halts my momentum.

As it washes through my mind, the same subconscious, experienced defenses kick in, and the entirety of the blow escapes my body like wind passing through.

It hardly leaves a trace, other than the same tingling sensation vibrating all over my flesh.

It fades within a few seconds, except in the center of my forearms, where I was hit. The tingling lingers.

I raise that same arm again to block the third incoming hammer strike and am thrown flying in another direction, helpless to stop myself until I hit more piles of black stone capable of halting my momentum.

As the warm white energy fades again, my forearm tingles and stays warm even longer than before.

I'm too slow to block the next exchange, and I'm hit directly in the stomach.

There is no difference, other than the tingling, warm feeling staying in the place of contact even longer.

The feminine hobgoblin's voice rings out as I get up from the ground after this hit.

"Who are you? A new tax collector from the Lord?"

Before I can even answer, I'm hit again, but I block it with both of my crossed arms this time.

Her voice echoes through the green fog before I even land.

"We still have three days before our payment is due, and he doesn't make deals with humans, so I'm inclined to believe you're from another faction!"

I'm struck again, and my momentum shifts straight down into the ground.

Extremely dense pressure pushes down on my chest, and I'm unable to stand as I see the green-skinned woman standing over me with her hammer pressed against my chest.

A stream of hot white Ether comes out from the weapon and holds me down.

The energy disperses out the sides of my body, but my chest becomes hotter and hotter while the hobgoblin's sharp amber-colored eyes stare into mine.

"You should be dead by now... what kind of Avatar is this...?"

All it feels like to me is a hot pressure pushing me down. My mind is completely protected, not even registering this as an attack.

My constant self regeneration, and pure density of my actual body in this upper realm makes the thin pulses of ether radiating through my actual flesh negligible as well. *R*

While the force she's exerting is too intense for me to move freely, I could lie here all day if needed...

I finally reply in a calm tone.

"I have no idea what you're talking about... I was on my way to the Citadel, and I fell down here. Whatever you're accusing me of, I'm sure we can talk this out and clear it up."

In the back of my mind, I prepare to open up my telepathy link with Ember, as if this monster on top of me has any other plans. And if there is a Lord stronger than her they say they're following, I may actually need help...

The constant flow of hot white pressure stops coming from her hammer, and my body is instantly able to move again.

I reflexively sit up when she pulls the hammer from my chest, and the warmth flowing through me dissipates, leaving only a tingling rectangle where her hammer was last.

This time, it takes far longer for the tingling to leave...

I feel an odd pulling sensation from my subconscious to hyper-focus on the area, and the sensation of warm energy in my body pooling up from seemingly nowhere covers the area full of residue.

A thin wave of white energy washes over my chest beneath my barrier, then flows back into seemingly nowhere.

All of the tingling stops, and I question whether I just imagined that or not.

A blaring voice rings in my ears while a hammer is pointed at my face.

"Don't play with me! State your name, faction affiliation, and your business here before I make you wish you never tried to steal from our mines."

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My mind is still occupied by the internal energy I just summoned and the similarities of it to the times Ember has created undetectable pockets of space to pull random items out. Also, he has used healing magic that doesn't give off any mana or divine aura.

Before I can connect the dots any further, I'm hit in the chest by another hammer blow.

"Are you even listening to me? I've got a quota to meet, I don't have all day. I don't care if you're a Lord—if you don't state your faction affiliation, I have every right to kill you right here."

As I'm sent flying back again, I replicate the same feeling I used to heal right after I was hit by this hammer, and before I even smash into a rock pile 70 meters away, I'm completely healed and my body is totally rid of the foreign white energy.

It triggers an idea in my mind while I see the hammer coming for me again.

As I turn to block, I let the warm flowing feeling cover my arm as if I were trying to heal a nonexistent tingling sensation.

The faint white glow summons in a raw form, washing over my forearm at the moment the hobgoblin's hammer makes contact.

While I was expecting something interesting to happen, the heavy hammer slams against my purple barrier all the same, and an intense wave of white energy overpowers the white glow I produced with ease.

I'm sent flying back just like any other strike but have a wide smile across my face, as I've instantly healed the contact point, and it feels as though the warm energy I summoned is still present in my arm.

With even more time before the next attack comes, I take a deep breath and focus, trying to summon even more using the same subconscious, instinctive feeling.

When I'm struck, an even denser layer of white energy covers my arm, but it still isn't enough to do much.

Despite this, I'm positive I'm onto something here.

She yells at me while raising her hammer.

"Last chance! You can surrender and leave us alone, or die with your stubborn silence!"

While I could easily do as she says and leave, I'm on the brink of a breakthrough and can't pass up being hit by this hammer just a few more times.

I don't say a word and focus on summoning even more wisps of faint, warm Ether from the depths of my consciousness to cover my right forearm and block her next strike with over three times what I did before.

On impact, I feel the dense warmth in my arm pulse, and a tight pressure allows me to consciously brace for impact.

Even so, the intensity of the hobgoblin's hit is too strong.

I'm sent flying back again and again, over half a dozen more times, over a full kilometer back from where our fight started.

"This was your doing! It's a shame to kill a Lord with a planet of their own. Your people will be without a ruler, but I must protect my own..."

She yells while colliding with me again.

Now, when her hammer hits my arm, with almost ten layers of my Ether covering it, a dense white vibration of colliding pressures ripples through me on contact.

The Ether doesn't even make it to my mind, nor the rest of my body. It is solely concentrated on the single point I've spent time protecting.

Yet, I'm still overpowered and flung back into the endless green fog.

I expect to collide with another rock pile, but instead, I feel the sensation of weightlessness again.

She really meant it when she said this was her last warning.

I'm sent flying over a deep circular pit.

I couldn't see or sense it before, as it was too far away, but now that I've been pushed into it, I can't sense the floor and realize it's a long way down...

Not only that, but I see the angry green woman following me with a faint streak of white light coming off her hammer, chasing me down.

Images of her pinning me to the floor earlier come to mind, and if she gets me in that position again, it will most likely be far tougher to get out.

Plus, the fact that she jumped in after me makes me believe the bottom isn't too far away.

I grit my teeth and concentrate on the only defense I have, allowing as many wisps of warm white energy in my consciousness to cover my armored arm as I can.

By the time I hit the ground with an echoing thud, my mind has gone completely into a focused state, trying to channel and remember everything I've felt of this strange divine Ether substance.

I think about the times during this battle I've used it, and also the mental pressure I've employed back on the human world to subconsciously block intimidation attacks.

The warm sensation that flows like a wave out from an invisible space in my mind flows out to cover my arm in a silky white energy far denser than it was when I started to fall.

I have fractions of a second to brace myself on the floor of this pit, another 500 meters below the surface, but raise my arm to block. When I do, the black rocks beneath my feet rattle as a crater is formed, similar to when I fell from the sky.

I feel the impact ripple throughout my whole body, but also feel the Ether defenses I've created pulse and ripple back.

My eyes widen with excitement as I see the hobgoblin stuck in midair above me, slamming down with both hands grasping her hammer tightly.

Her expression turns from anger to surprise extremely quickly too, as I'm not the only one sent flying back from this attack.

Both of us receive equal blowback after this collision.

I'm forced deeper into the impact crater below, and she's pushed back, flying across the rocky ground.

I can't help but let out a laugh while watching her fly back. Simultaneously, the raw, unstable white energy barrier around my arm disperses outward off my body and into the atmosphere.

Now, with a moment to breathe, my Ether senses pick up over a dozen more hot energy signatures in my general vicinity, deep under the black rock we're standing on. One of them is less than 10 meters in front of me.

Breathing heavily, I climb out of the small crater and walk forward toward the hobgoblin who is equally out of breath but still looking at me with eyes ready to kill.

While I could continue to fight, my initial curiosity is satiated. Now, if I want any friendly relations with this clearly intelligent monster, it's time for damage control.

I raise both my hands.

"Hey, hey. I give up. Let's call it a draw, alright."

She doesn't look convinced, as the last time I said something similar, we started fighting again seconds later.

However, I stop walking after a few steps and begin digging through the heavy piles of black rocks on the floor, throwing the useless ones behind me.

"This is what you're so angry about, right? I didn't mean to steal anything; I didn't know anyone even lived down here..."

I let out a sigh as I grab another one of those black stones, about half the size of my palm, with tiny white cracks in it, leaking trace amounts of Ether.

Then, I raise it in front of myself, showing the monster that is still charging up her hammer for another attack.

"There are tons of these things down here. I don't know why you'd even be so pissed off about me taking one in the first place. Here, all yours."

I toss her the rock I just pulled from about a full meter below ground level, and it falls right in front of her.

The eyes of anger, confusion, and battle-ready focus turn to shock when she takes them off me and looks down at the stone I've thrown her way.

There is silence between us for a full five seconds before she looks back up at me.

"How...? How did you find that Ether Stone so easily...?"

I raise an eyebrow, as right now, I'm positive there are many more all around us.

"What do you mean...? You can't sense them?"

Chapter 698

"What do you mean, sense them?" the hobgoblin replies, picking up the black stone glowing with a faint white light.

As I open my mouth to reply, I witness the entire rock she holds become enveloped in a portion of her green aura. Then, all the Ether within it pulses and is sucked out, disappearing into her hand and settling evenly throughout her being.

The instinctual sensor in the back of my mind registers her body as slightly warmer than before, and the rock she's holding becomes undetectable.

It is lifeless and black when she drops it back onto the ground and speaks again, holding her hammer up, ready to fight.

"Come on, answer me. You're telling me you can see where Ether Stones are? Is that some kind of new feature? Not even the Lords with High-Grade Avatars can do that... Do you have a Premium Avatar or something?"

I don't speak again. Clearly, I'm even more out of my element than I thought.

With my hands raised, I shrug and turn to my left, slowly walking 20 meters from where I started in silence as the hobgoblin's eyes track my every movement.

I'm unable to detect the exact positioning of each Ether Stone, but a strange pull in my mind gets hotter the closer I get to ones nearby. The rough direction of about a dozen stones in a hundred-meter radius floats in my subconscious, directing my footsteps.

I stop in place and dig through the loose black stones again, burrowing about two meters beneath the surface until I grab another black rock glowing with a faint white mist.

Then, I jump out of the pit I've dug and hold it up.

"Like this... they're everywhere. It's not like I tried to rob you of a rare resource."

She looks even more suspicious now, yelling from a distance.

"I don't trust you! That could be a fake so you have time to run away. Throw it here so I can scan it."

I let out a sigh and toss it her way. The stone is clearly glowing bright white, unlike all the others around here. I'm unsure how I'd fake it, but I just do as she says.

Once it tumbles to her feet, she bends down and looks at the stone for a few seconds. Her eyes widen as she picks it up.


The same green divine aura expands around the stone, and in the exact machine-like process, the stone is drained of its Ether, which evenly distributes throughout her body.

She looks up at me with excitement.

"What kind of Premium feature is that? Are there command contracts available to acquire sonar skills now? All my avatar grants me is that high-speed shielding technique—same as yours—and, of course, the Soul Weapon Assimilation to use Ether in my hammer attacks..."

Again, her words make no sense to me, but I begin to piece things together based on what I've seen so far.

Clearly, my ability to sense where Ether Stones are is special.

However, she believes it must be a Premium Avatar feature. I remember, back inside the throne, I was scanned, and it showed my available mana core, demon core, divine core, and Ether Stores. 

It makes sense that a demon with a Noble Bloodline would get a Premium Avatar, which appears to be top of the line in this realm. But the thing is, I don't even have an Avatar... This is my real body, so all her logical guesses only confuse me more.

I decide to go along with what she already believes. Telling her this is my real body would be even harder to explain.

"Yeah, it's something like that... a Premium Avatar. Like I told you before, I fell down here on my way to the Ellipsia Citadel. I'm not here to steal from your mines. If anything, I'd gladly pay you to help me get back above the clouds to meet back up with my soul-bonded pair, if you know a way."

Her confusion, unease, and shock turn to a smile, and a laugh erupts from her as she puts her hammer down, dropping the offensive stance.

"No way... You're a bonded Co-Lord? That means you must have used one of those ascension thrones..."

Her gaze tightens, but the smile across her face doesn't leave.

"But you're a human... That means you killed a demon to get up here. What Class World are you from?"

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I hesitate, as from the few words I've spoken, she's already siphoned even more information out of me. But I decide to tell the truth.

"A 3rd Class."

She reflexively looks down at her right hand, and my eyes follow to see a [0] glowing faintly in green light.

Then, she looks back up and responds in a saddened tone.

"I was a 3rd Class too..."

We stand in awkward silence for a few seconds. Neither of us knows if the other is telling the full truth or if we're about to attack once we fully let our guards down.

So, I speak my mind.

"If you don't know how to get back up to the Citadel, I'll leave, and you'll never see me again. Promise. However, if you can help me, I definitely have a skill that can help you. You mentioned before that you have quotas to meet, and I'm quite competent at finding the stones you need to mine, right?" Search the novelFire.net website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Her eyes flicker with excitement again, but soon after, they dull as she thinks about something and responds, stepping closer to me.

"I know a way back... but if the strength you showed me right now was everything you have, you can't even make it out of the Hollow District. The Lord that owns these mines will kill you before you blink twice. You're his property now"

All of her motivation fades as she considers things more logically.

"Even if falling down here was an accident, you're in the same boat as us exiles. There is no surveillance down here. It's a lawless land. The strong make the rules, and the weak follow them."

She lets out a sigh and stops a few meters in front of me.

"So, it would be pointless to even try. We'd need to make another deal if you want to create a soul contract. I can't fulfill that request."

I raise an eyebrow at her honesty but assume this soul contract must be customary when using Avatars—maybe some kind of foolproof agreement. She knows my current strength better than anyone, and if she believes this so-called Lord of the Hollow District can kill me this easily, I'm even more intrigued... This just means I need to get stronger before meeting them.

"Well, then how about we make another deal? I find you Ether Stones, and in return... let's say every ten stones I find, you spar with me for an hour."

I pause, thinking about my own offer, then add another point before she can respond.

"Oh—and let me keep one for every ten I find. I want to try and absorb a few."

The hobgoblin looks perplexed at my nonchalant attitude of the situation I'm in, and the horrible deal I've just offered; but after a few seconds, she shakes herself out of it and nods quickly.

"Yes, deal. If that's really all you want, I'll make up the soul contract right now."

I shake my head and smile, putting out a hand to shake.

"No contract is needed. Let's just shake on it. I'm Jay, by the way."

The hobgoblin looks down at my hand in confusion for a few seconds, then the light of recollection shines in her eyes.

"Right... a human ritual, signifying trust."

Her eyes go back to being suspicious and ready to battle, but I speak up, my hand still outstretched.

"I'll find your stones first. You can help me practice fighting after. I'm just old-fashioned—first day with an Avatar and all."

She sighs, then hesitantly puts her hand out and shakes mine while gripping her hammer tight with the other.

"I'm Ava. I guess we have a deal..."

—

Over the next half hour, I walk around the entire bottom of the massive pit we're in, picking out Ether Stones one by one with pinpoint accuracy.

Some are right near ground level, while others are up to five meters deep.

Ava helps me dig through the loose black rock to find each one, and every time I hand them over, she absorbs them in the exact same mechanical way through her palm.

I notice that every time I hand her a stone, it takes her a moment to register that the rock is an Ether Stone. It's as if she's scanning it to confirm it's real.

Considering this, and the fact that the stones are tens of meters apart at varying depths, I can see how it would take someone without Ether Sense a long time to find them.

By the time we hit the tenth stone, Ava is still equally surprised every time I pull one from the ground. She speaks up with an excited tone while pulling the Ether out of it.

"That would have taken my mining squad and me a few days to complete... no, maybe even more. We could catch up to this month's remaining quotas in just a few hours at this rate."

She stares up into the endless green fog above and whispers to herself, "We won't have to keep digging these pointless pits either... surface-spot mining will be even more efficient."

While she murmurs, I find another stone lodged just half a meter into one of the sloped walls of the pit and dig it out with ease.

The glowing stone rests in my hands as she looks my way.

"Go for it. This is an old pit mine anyway. We never would have found any of the stones you just pulled up. This is all undocumented profit."

I nod and close my eyes, feeling the small warmth emanating from the stone.

The imagery of Ava draining the other stones replays in my mind as I try to replicate the process.

An instinctual flow pulls in the silky Ether that permeates through my purple barrier, but it's extremely slow and weak.

Just like when I tried to form a barrier around my arm, this isn't going to be simple.

I feel small warm flows seep into me, dispersing and disappearing into the invisible Ether Stores within my consciousness. However, a large amount of Ether remains, glowing almost as brightly as when I started.

I move the stone around in my hands, trying to cover it with as much physical contact as possible, but the absorption rate remains slow...

It is certainly working, but it's not seamless or machine-like, as Ava's process is. Plus, I can't just eat this rock like I ate that pure Low-Quality Ether pill inside the throne's trials.

I let out a sigh and look up at the confused hobgoblin. "One moment. This is going to take a while..."

I sit down, take a deep breath, and fully concentrate on the stone, allowing slow-moving white energy to trickle out from the rock in my palms.

It doesn't get easier; in fact, it only gets harder as less Ether remains in the stone. The flow slows the longer I work at it.

After 30 minutes, I manage to pull out over two-thirds of the Ether, but the final amount glows so faintly and flows so slowly that it feels like it'll take hours to empty the rest.

On top of that, I don't feel any different. The tiny amount of Ether I managed to absorb is minuscule compared to what's already in my body.

I stand up, toss the used stone to Ava, and speak.

"The rest is yours if you want it. Let's just get to sparring. That's much more important to me than a little extra Ether anyway. I only have three days to master this before the Lord of this mine arrives, right?"

Chapter 699

Ava raises her massive hammer, and it glows with a faint white light; nowhere near as bright as it was when she was trying to kill me.

"Alright, let's spar. I'll be activating the lowest setting for my attacks; otherwise, an hour of fighting will use up more Ether than I can extract from ten stones."

She picks up the last stone from which I had absorbed the majority of its Ether, inspects it, and her expression changes to confusion while extracting the rest of it and throwing it to the floor.

I can tell she wants to ask more questions but instead grips her hammer with both hands and readies herself.

While I'd love to face her at full power, going easy at first is probably better for me too. I can't argue with her logic either; if sparring would cost more Ether than we mine, it wouldn't be worth her time.

"Sure," I reply while raising my hands to fight, taking deep breaths to summon Ether from the depths of my consciousness.

—

Over the next hour, we spar at the bottom of the abandoned mining pit.

I use the same technique to summon waves of translucent white energy over portions of my body to block Ava's incoming strikes.

She's far faster than me, both in reflexes and attack speed.

Every time her hammer swings, I watch an identical machine-like rush of Ether come out of her avatar and pool inside the hammer's base.

Instead of the many layers I needed to block her attacks before, just one small wisp of Ether from my consciousness is enough to combat the attack's Ether force.

However, even though it's enough to block, Ava doesn't hold back and uses her superior speed to hit me all over, landing blows that aren't covered by Ether at all.

For the first half of our spar, I'm thrown around like a rag doll, similar to our real duel before.

No physical damage is dealt. My purple barrier completely blocks all blunt force and even the mana and divine energy force produced from Ava's avatar. The only energy that makes it through to hit my flesh is the Ether itself.

Now, these small hits just make my skin tingle a bit; it's nowhere near as intense of a reaction as the full-powered blows from before.

This constant stream of non-lethal attacks allows me to concentrate on what really matters: my own Ether summoning speed.

Over the last half hour of our spar, I get hit in unguarded areas more often.

Not only am I getting accustomed to Ava's attack patterns, but also the instinctual feeling of summoning my Ether out of thin air becomes much more natural.

I don't have to close my eyes and focus on my breathing for almost a full second each time; I'm able to start summoning wisps of hot white energy at a moment's notice.

By the last few minutes of our session, every three exchanges, equal force blocks echo out as her hammer hits my arms, legs, and even torso, covered in dense areas of white energy.

Each time Ether is used, both in my defensive shields and in Ava's hammer, it dissipates from both of our bodies out into the air.

It's still hard to conceptualize exactly how much Ether is being used each time because it feels like I have an unlimited pool to drain from. However, I do have the knowledge to compare; the total amount used in our spar is less than the ten Ether stones we mined before.

We finish our spar when Ava speaks up and puts her warhammer down by her side.

"That's it. One hour paid. Now let's gather more stones."

I smile, breathing a little heavy, and put down my fists to agree.

"Alright, there are a few left in this pit, but I think we'll have to go back up to the surface to find more... unless you want to start digging way deeper."

"That makes sense," she replies, and we get right back to work, following through with my side of the deal.

—

One by one, I sense the stones remaining in the pit and pull them from the ground to let Ava absorb them.

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One of the pit's walls is more slanted than the rest, and there is a poorly dug-out stairway in its side that looks as though it was built for the small goblins I ran into when I first made contact down here. †

We walk up this path to the surface, giving ourselves a wider search area rather than a narrow pit, and continue walking through the thick green divine fog for another twenty minutes to find and dig out four more Ether stones. Search the website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

A question comes to mind as we make our way to the eleventh one, and I sit down to give another shot at absorbing the Ether inside.

"Why are the stones so much more spread out up here? They were far more abundant below the surface."

Ava watches me with confusion as I sit on the ground, gripping the faintly glowing stone just like I did before, but replies with a shrug.

"These mines have been active for long before I became an exile, and no one ever finds every stone. The deeper down you dig, the more likely generations of exiles haven't searched that layer of the blackrock."

She looks away from me, up to the green sky again with a sad gaze; so I decide not to pry any further and absorb two-thirds of the stone.

While I drain the white energy into my being, a familiar feeling of being watched washes over me, and I'm brought out of my concentration by Ava's voice, but not directed at me.

"Come out, you two!"

My eyes open, and I stand to my feet, tossing Ava the leftover stone, commenting, "All yours," while I try to make out who she's talking to.

Once she catches the stone and drains its remaining Ether, I see two small goblins emerge from the green fog from behind one of the large mounds of black rocks.

"Ms. Ava... Is this human one of the Lord's new collectors?"

A goblin with crudely made black brass knuckles that I recognize is the first to speak.

The hobgoblin smiles and shakes her head.

"No, Rain. He's a new exile, just like us. Don't worry, we're not in trouble. Far from it, actually."

The other smaller goblin gripping his short sword still looks up at me with fear, but Ava looks down at him next while he stutters out more words.

"B-But, I heard you two fighting... for a long time... how do we know he doesn't have you under mind control—or something—"

Ava laughs, walking over to the smaller goblin and patting him on the head with a heavy hand.

"Troy, put away that blade and stop imagining the worst out of everything. He's our ally and is going to help us meet our quota that we were on track to miss this month."

The smaller goblin's eyes widen. "R-Really?"

As Ava nods, he puts his sword down, and both goblins look at me with wide eyes of admiration.

They're acting like little kids, addressing this hobgoblin as their leader, even a motherly figure, it seems.

Before I can say another word, both of them bow in front of me and apologize for their hostile attitude before turning around and running away into the green fog, out of sight.

Ava chuckles and waves them off. "Tell the others to take the rest of the day off. I'll meet you all back at base camp once I'm finished up here."

"Yes, Ms. Ava!" echoes out of the fog, then their Ether presence disappears from my mind once they're out of range.

Ava moves her gaze toward me and smirks.

"They're all from fifth-class worlds, almost two dozen back at camp. Barely any of them reached level 100 before they ascended with exile agreements already confirmed. Either they work for Ether, or their planets are drained completely dry of resources."

She sighs and looks down at her [0].

"Same for me, kind of... At least I managed a major rank up to get this hobgoblin form... and I did have some freedom in the sky above for a few years."

Then she tightens her grip on her hammer and points it up toward me.

"Anyway, sorry. Not like you should care. It doesn't matter. Let us spar and continue our agreement."

My gaze locks with hers, and I wonder what her words mean.

The mining squad she spoke of earlier was referring to a group of goblins, and apparently, they all ascended from different worlds.

However, the fact that she says some are just level 100 doesn't make much sense. It's unlikely a weak being like that could go through the same process I did to get to the upper realm, and with my knowledge from the Vermillion family, I'm certain a demon's throne would never touch down on a fifth-class world.

It seems goblins and hobgoblins are the same race but different ranked-up forms.

From what I'm seeing, it's clear she's helping them at her own expense.

Even the fact that there are more than just human and demon planets is still a bit mind-blowing to me, but I reply with a nod, wanting to focus on the important task at hand here.

"Admirable. I hope our deal helps you all."

I raise both hands and summon Ether into my fists.

"Let's spar. I want to try going on the offensive this round."

—

I start my next round of sparring, concentrating on holding Ether in my fists while punching, and even pushing wisps of Ether beneath my feet to power my steps, moving faster to keep up with Ava's naturally fast movements.

The consideration of how this would affect my speed and power without the purple barrier and real body's weight limiting me crosses my mind, but every time I consider the implications of opening it up and facing the horrific pressure down here, I forget about it.

With less than three days until the owner of these mines is supposed to come, I'm going to focus all of my efforts on honing the skill that actually may give me a chance of fighting back. Once I'm safe and back with Ember, I'll consider resuming my divine energy acclimation.

—

Meanwhile, in the Citadel high up above the green clouds and desolate black rock mines below, Ember watches over the Volterra District with his feet up on a desk while swiping through data provided to him by Torvak. It shows all of the sales and purchases of the Ogre conglomeration over the last 15,000 years.

Many more holograms cover all of the walls in this room, showing surveillance systems of the shopping center he's been silently monitoring all day.

Not much out of the ordinary has happened, and Ember has grasped a basic understanding of how the Ogre's decline and power struggle in this citadel has gotten to the point it's in now thanks to the sales numbers. However, there are still a few key pieces of information lacking.

The dragon's crimson eyes turn away from the sales data once two figures walk into the bottom floor of the open-air world trading market.

The presence of two first-class demons walking through the front doors makes all of the other guests nearby scatter, not wanting to get involved. Even the Red Ogre sales reps look nervous as the Demons approach and ask to get a large bundle of 5th, 4th, and 3rd Class worlds appraised.

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Ember gets up from his seat and walks out of the private room's massive doors to be greeted by Randel and Syl.

"You've completed your assessment of the documents we had transferred over already?" Syl comments.

Ember shakes his head and begins walking down the narrow hall to make his way back to the main shopping center.

"No, not yet. There seem to be some unique guests selling worlds down on the first floor. I believe they're going to cause some trouble. I'd like to be there when it happens."

The two Red Ogres look at each other with confused expressions but follow the long-haired human they've been tasked to protect into the main hall and down into the transport elevator to bring them to ground level.

Once the door clicks open and the three walk out, with the Ogres ahead first, the tense atmosphere in the room is very apparent. The lack of active shoppers points the two bodyguards' heads to the left.

Two 9-meter-tall 1st Class Demon Lords exude an ominous pressure, standing with their arms crossed and white eyes locked on a moving status screen, while one of the

2nd Class Red Ogres below them diligently scrolls through the worlds they've provided, giving quotes for how much Ether they can purchase them for outright, one by one.

The sweating Red Ogre looks up from his status and stutters to the Demon before him with a single purple horn jutting from his forehead.

"Myron Vermillion, your excellence. I... I can't agree with this pricing. It's double the market's price."

Myron lets out a domineering pressure, rippling with Demonic Energy, a Green True Core, and waves of Ether radiating off his entire Premium Avatar. He turns to the Demon beside him, who has two jet-black horns curving out from his head.

"Leonard. Shall I teach them a lesson?"

The more well-composed Demon stood behind him smirks, looking to another sales rep and waving him over.

"I have a similar-sized bundle of worlds to sell in bulk too. 1,410 5th Class, 434 4th Class, and another 21 3rd Class."

Ember spots the [19,882] on his palm as he turns back to the purple-horned hothead and whispers under his breath, "Don't worry, they'll submit before we have to make a mess..."

Then, turning back to the Red Ogre salesman, he accepts the worlds into an escrow status device to be appraised of their total energy as a spectator only.

The Demon looks down on the worker and speaks up for the entire lobby to hear.

"I want 5 Low Quality Ether apiece for the 5th Class, 25 for the 4th, and a minimum of 200 each for the 3rds. We're not accepting no for an answer..."

Ember and his bodyguards stop about 30 meters from the commotion, standing out like a sore thumb as no other passersby dare to intervene.

Even the bodyguards whisper to Ember as they halt.

"Are you sure about this, Sir? If they decide to become hostile, we cannot defend against the Vermillion Lords..."

"Yes, it's fine. I'm the new manager, after all. I can't watch us be ripped off this badly on my first day on the job," he replies, walking through the two guards and making his way over right behind the Demons who tower over the salesmen, continuing to plead that these prices are unreasonable.

The newest salesman who just accepted Leonard's worlds replies to his words in a cowardly manner.

"Impossible. The best I can do is 1.5 Ether average cost for these 5th Class worlds. And... maybe 9 Ether apiece for the 4th Class you've brought. These 3rd Class... they're completely drained of their mana, and populations are declining rapidly on all of them. Dungeon contracts would be impossible to form on these. They're... worthless... This price is impossible." f

The Demon laughs and takes a step closer to the worker.

"I wasn't asking. It's an order..."

The hotheaded purple-horned Demon steps in, finishing his black-horned partner's words after letting out a degrading laugh.

"You should be happy I'm even giving you any worlds in return. We have a new Noble joining our ranks this month. This entire conglomeration will finally be crushed. This zone of the Upper Realm is already property of the Vermillion family, and everyone knows it."

Many customers look down at the floor, and some even run out of the center, not wanting to be dragged into this mess. However, a human's voice echoes through the room, shocking all of the remaining customers and salesworkers left.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

"What seems to be the problem here? I would be happy to be of assistance."

The purple-horned Demon's sharp teeth grind as he turns around and lets out an anger-filled aura. Its [20,062] worlds glowing bright on its palm are visible for the lobby to see while it glares down at the human with a [1] dimly glowing on his palm.

"How dare you address me while I take care of important family business? A mere human shouldn't even lay eyes on a 1st Class Demon like me..."

As the Lord takes a full step forward, Ember's indifferent expression while he replies makes it even more mad.

"Unfortunately for you, the Ogre Conglomeration still holds some prestige and connections with the Wyverns, High Orcs, and Berserker Kings in neighboring districts of this Citadel. I am the general manager and sales consultant of this World Trade branch. If you are trying to force new market prices upon us, I will have to decline your offer and begin spreading the word."

The sharp grinding of the Demon's teeth makes the entire room shiver, but the more level-headed Demon behind him turns and takes a step in Ember's direction to speak up.

"Is that a threat? Our family is backed by far more than just this Citadel. It is not wise for a human to be poking their nose into the business of higher-class beings."

The black-horned Demon sifts through his status, scanning the confident red-haired human before him, then rolls his eyes.

"A 5th Class at that... Just because you've managed to make a few connections and have an eye for the market does not mean you know the history of the Upper Realm. You could live your full life and die in the time a single cultivation session of mine passes... Do you wish to make an enemy of us?"

Ember shrugs.

"You already extorted a 1st Class world and a handful of 2nd Class from our conglomeration head earlier this week. If this continues and we allow it, we've already died. You're the ones who have made an enemy of us."

The Demon's eyes narrow, as its simple tactic of intimidation on a mere 5th Class human should have been more than enough for them to scatter or bow down.

While it is true that the Vermillion Family has the greatest influence in the City right now, if they made an enemy of all the major trading hubs and gangs that have long-standing loyalty to the prior Citadel Lord, a dispute could very well set them back thousands of years.

Waiting until their new Noble arrives would be the safest move, but saving their honor is almost as equally important.

Both of the 1st Class Demons know this, but the purple-horned hothead interjects, making it clear they're not taking no for an answer.

"That's right, we're being merciful Lords by allowing you all to live on under our rule. You will pay us what we ask and be thankful your head still stays connected to your shoulders."

The Red Ogre guards that brought Ember down are wide-eyed in fear, their stomachs twisting and their hearts dropping to the floor once they hear the red-haired human's reply.

"No. We will pay 30% below the market price for bulk orders like this so there is still room to resell to individuals. Your ask for 200% of the average market price is absurd and clearly an abuse of power."

The Red Ogres now understand very well why their bodyguard contract price paid out the equivalent of a 4th Class world in profits each per month now... Their client is insane.

Myron steps closer, less than 3 meters in front of Ember, towering over him.

"You'll pay the price we set and beg for your life."

Ember looks up with his arms crossed.

"No."

Leonard watches them with confusion racing through his mind, as in the 18,000 years he's been following his Lord, even before they were established as one of the 5 Great Families, he's never seen a human even look a Demon in the eyes.

This was meant to be a simple task. Overcharging for a few thousand 5th and 4th Class worlds, plus getting rid of some junk 3rd Class worlds, might only set the trade center back a few months' worth of profit.

It's a simple hit any logical owner would take not to anger the Citadel Lord.

However, this new human in charge is willing to set the entire city on fire just to prove a point...

He whispers under his breath, "So short-sighted... then again, what else would I expect from a human..."

As Myron is about to burst with anger and cause an even bigger scene, Leonard believes this is exactly what the Ogre Conglomeration wants.

He steps forward and pushes a hand in front of his hotheaded partner to save some dignity.

"It is a negotiation, after all. This is the largest public trading center in the district. It's only right to challenge the market prices and see if we can get a good deal, isn't it?"

Ember grins and walks right in between the two Demons, ignoring their domineering presence. Search the [novel_Fire.net](http://novel_fire.net) website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Standing in front of the salesman who initially took their planets to trade, he peers into the holograms floating above the escrow status devices to look at the worlds in question for himself.

Ember swipes through the worlds, replying to the Demons, forcing them to turn around to be spoken to.

"The prices my salesmen gave were already at the market. If anything, I'd offer even lower. They were already being courteous."

Myron yells out, equally mad at his partner for holding him back and at this human disrespecting him.

"You do not understand who you are dealing with. I should crush your avatar right now, shatter your soul to pieces, and wipe this shopping center off the face of the Citadel for your insolence!"

Ember raises an eyebrow, and speaks with a sarcastic undertone.

"Oh? Was that a declaration of war? Against me? Or the Ogre Conglomeration? Or this entire district? Or all of our trade allies? I'm just a human. It's hard to understand the hidden meaning behind your words..."

The black-horned Demon, unable to stop his counterpart, wishes he came to this shopping center alone today, dreading telling Andras of this blunder and being outwitted by a human.

However, Ember's next words make both of the Demons' eyes widen in shock.

"How about we settle things with a duel? This is a simple dispute of prices, isn't it? No reason to set the Realm on fire over a few thousand Low Quality Ether, right?"

The hotheaded Demon lets out a murderous laugh, taking a step forward and yelling back.

"Humans are even more stupid than I ever believed they'd be! Duel accepted! Come on, let's go right now!"

His laugh continues to echo throughout the floor, while Leonard is hit with both a wave of relief and worry mixing together.

This human had them right where he wanted them, then gave up any chance of leverage without batting an eye.

The black-horned Demon scans Ember over and over with his system, but nothing out of the ordinary comes back.

He is merely a 5th Class human lord... It should be impossible for a being like him to even stay conscious while standing in their presence.

Something isn't quite right about all of this. However, Myron already publicly accepted their duel, so there is no backing out now.