

Dungeon Diver: Stealing A Monster's Power

Chapter 701

Ember speaks up in the silence of the lobby, still crossing his arms and looking up at the arrogant purple-horned demon that just accepted his duel without knowing the terms.

"How about we go all or nothing? You put up all the planets you've come to sell..."

Ember's gaze shifts to the black-horned demon, then he holds up both of their escrow accounts.

"That means your planets too."

He flips the holograms around for the demons and all spectators to see:

[2914 5th Class Worlds] - [4371.0 Low Quality Ether Offer][1.5 Average Per World]

[821 4th Class Worlds] - [7389.0 Low Quality Ether Offer][9.0 Average Per World]

[49 3rd Class Worlds] - [0.0 Low Quality Ether Offer][0.0 Average Per World]

These are the offers made by the sales clerks earlier, already at market price. If purchased, the Ogre Conglomeration wouldn't even be making a profit. It would be a break-even deal to appease the demons.

He continues to speak.

"In exchange, I have the Ogre Conglomeration put up the Ether you've claimed your planets are worth. 5 Ether each for the 5th Class, 25 each for the 4th, and 200 each for the 3rd Class worlds... A total of..."

He pauses as he mentally calculates the price, and the room sees how absurd their price difference is.

"44,895 Low Quality Ether. That's a solid yearly quarter's worth of profits for this entire trade center. If you win our duel, this is the price we'll pay to purchase your worthless worlds."

He looks Myron in the eyes, pulling a third escrow status device from the sales clerk's counter and draining company funds on hand to fill it up to the desired amount.

"Is this the kind of duel you're willing to accept? We have plenty of open rooms on our top floor to have the match right now."

Myron laughs so loud that some of the nearby 3rd Class clients fall to their knees, and even a few 2nd Class Ogres become lightheaded at the scene playing out.

Randel and Syl come briskly walking over to stand behind Ember, and Syl whispers in his ear.

"We cannot protect you in a duel... and our company funds..."

All of the sales reps look even more nervous than the customers in the lobby, but Ember murmurs back with a confident undertone.

"You trust in Torvak, don't you? I was delegated to this position to bring you all out of the hole you're in. Don't worry. If I'm injured, you're not to blame."

Myron finally looks down and speaks back after his arrogant laughs have finished.

"Deal. Let's head up to the duel rooms right now. You stupid human, now I can shatter that avatar of yours with no repercussions from the overseer, and profit while doing so. You decided this fate for yourself."

—

His laughs continue all the way up to the top floor, and crowds of people hear it echoing through the levels.

Many customers nervously spread the word, some even leaving the shopping center, which only makes more people interested all over the Volterra District.

"A human challenged a demon to a duel..."

"They're betting with the Ogre Conglomeration's funds!"

"A 5th Class dares to step foot in this district?"

"It's real, at the trade palace!"

"It's an open market; their duels are visible to the public."

"Do you think this is related to the Citadel Lord's duel against the Blue Ogre leader last week?"

"No... it's probably just a delusional human that ascended and believes they're an invincible god."

"Who cares, this is going to be a good one to watch!"

These whispers spread like wildfire all over the shopping district, prompting hundreds of thousands of interested Lords to gather, packing the building.

Security has to begin limiting the number of Lords allowed on the top floor by the time the two demons, Ember, and four Red Ogres stand in front of one of the dueling rooms Ember passed by when he first entered the building.

The two sales workers from the bottom floor hold the worlds and Ether, typing on a control panel at the front of the dueling room.

Ember stands between his bodyguards while the two demons stare down at them.

Myron can't help but continue laughing and spewing insults, while his more logical counterpart quietly assesses the situation.

Over ten thousand spectators are watching them on this massive floor alone, and hundreds of thousands await the duel's live feed to update on the lower floors so they can see what's going on.

As it is, none of this makes any sense; and despite Myron's lack of critical thinking, he is more adept in every way than this small, feeble human before him.

Ember speaks up again in a confident voice directed at Myron, but Leonard inwardly flinches at the possible implications.

"Shall we set some ground rules? Fighting a basic avatar like mine with your Premium skin would be unfair, don't you think?"

Myron smirks and looks down, crossing his arms to mimic Ember's stance.

"What? You trying to back out now? We already have half the district watching. Are you saying the Ogre Conglomeration hires managers who go back on their word once the stakes are high?"

He laughs, while Leonard lets out a sigh, beginning to believe he might just be overly cautious.

Ember shakes his head and smirks back.

"No, of course not. If anything, this shows that even the 1st Class Vermillion Demons are willing to pick on 5th Class basic avatar prey because that's all they're good for. Even their Noble Citadel Lord picks on the 2nd and 1st Class Lords below him. Surely the other four Great Families don't stoop this low to build their fortunes..."

He pauses while the crowd gasps at his words but continues as Myron begins to boil with rage.

"Then again, you're right. I'm just a human. I couldn't have been there when your family was established in this Realm. You must have all fought with nobility and pride back then, and now you just pick on the weak for fun. That must be it."

Myron erupts with a demonic presence filled with white wisps of Ether.

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"Do not drag our family name with false allegations just because you want to save your own life and company's fortune!"

Ember shrugs, even as 2nd Class Lords fall to their knees around them, and replies while the demon gets close to his face.

"I never said I wanted to drop out of the duel. I just believe we should fight on more equal footing. It would be a proper duel and prove to all watching that you're not just picking on a weak human with a lower-grade avatar."

There are loud dings that echo through the room as the sales workers link the escrow accounts to the dueling room, showing the pool of thousands of worlds and Ether floating together. All that's left is for the two competitors to scan their status in and choose the duel settings.

Ember points to the large holographic censor in front of the 50-meter-tall dueling room doors.

"Let's forget about our physical forms. We can just buy new avatars if they're crushed. Reaction speed and physical power are all a matter of how much you can purchase. A true Lord's strength is shown through their mind, right?"

Both demons' eyes widen as they realize what this human is proposing.

Myron replies, "You want to do a mental pressure duel? No avatar damage allowed? Just when I thought a human couldn't become any dumber... You—"

He laughs so loudly, the room feels like it's shaking as he walks over to the scanning panel and continues, "Deal. Bring it on. Easiest Ether I'll ever make, and you'll be lucky if you can recover from this in your entire measly lifetime!"

The doors open with another ding as Myron selects his challenge details and walks through.

Not another word is said in the entire room as Ember walks in after him, standing still while the scanner ripples through him with an intense green divine light. Questions ring

in his ears that he mentally answers to confirm all his challenge settings match what his opponent has chosen.

Another loud chime echoes through the room as Ember walks forward into the open doors.

"Duel Initiated. Full Palace Visual Access Available," echoes through the shopping center's systems, and a crystal-clear holographic display of the massive white room the two stand in is now transmitted to the center of every floor of the building.

Duels are initiated here a few times a day, usually to settle small price disputes. The option to open up the spectator view is available on every floor, but it usually doesn't draw such a crowd.

Avatars in the Upper Realm are costly, but for wealthy Lords, especially those who spend their time in world trade centers like this one, even a Premium Avatar could be just a fraction of the cost of an entire trade deal.

They only cost a few dozen Low Quality Ether. Even some 3rd Class Lords can afford Premium Avatars if they work for a few decades, or drain enough of their home planet's resources.

So, a battle to the death over a few hundred Ether is common; after the duel, any damage dealt can be fixed by purchasing another Premium Avatar.

However, mental duels are a taboo that have aged out of style long ago. It is known that this is just a cruel way to torture a weaker opponent and might as well be akin to fighting in the Lower Realm with such crude tactics.

Unlike physical avatar replacements, one can't simply replace a mind that is bound to a soul.

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Ember stands at the back of his side of the room, still keeping his arms crossed and looking up at the demon about 200 meters away while it speaks to the crowd watching them.

"This is what you get when you go against the Vermillion Family. This human challenged us on behalf of the Ogre Conglomeration. I've been gracious enough to offer an avatar duel, but he insists on a battle of the mind. Misinformation is not tolerated, and the stupidity of humans will be shown again today. Please, everyone, enjoy the show."

While all the Lords piling into the shopping center would love to see their oppressors get crushed, they know that won't happen. It is clear as day that the odds are well-stacked

against this human. Even the distribution of prizes floating above the hologram is clearly unbalanced.

Everyone can sift through the planets up for bid and see that anything of value has already been drained from these worlds.

It's clear this is a public humiliation, just to rub it in the district's face after their Blue Ogre leader was beaten badly last week.

Yet, no one can look away.

The red-haired human watches the demon with indifferent eyes, withstanding its pressure while it rants and flings insults his way.

A system's voice rings through the competitors' ears, audible to the entire World Trading Center as well.

[60-Second Duel - Unlimited Rounds - Mental Battle]

"Round 1 will begin in 10... 9... 8..."

The room erupts into even more conversation, and the demon continues yelling insults, ignoring the human below him and speaking directly to the crowd.

"You will all witness what life will be like under our new rule. All of you lower lifeforms believe you're special... outliers in our society of Lords... you are merely inferior beings. Just a single digit number of demons is powerful enough to control billions on this Citadel!"

It laughs louder as Ember stares forward with a bored look, and the counter keeps dropping.

Outside the dueling area's doors, Leonard stares at the hologram with a clenched jaw but an outwardly indifferent expression.

All his logical senses tell him this will be a blowout. There's no way this human can win. This is just another day in the life—gaining resources and controlling the masses. There is still a fraction of doubt that lingers in his mind, but Myron is a battle hungry 1st Class Demon. His mental resilience can even stand up against Noble Demons for a few minutes in practice spars.

No matter how strong this human's trump card may be, it won't matter.

Even the sales workers know this much Ether lost will be a big hit to their company branch. An even bigger hit will be psychological once the public sees their defiance against the Citadel Lords' men.

All the workers are sweating, trying to keep the public from going too crazy. The two taking it the worst stand less than 20 meters away from Leonard.

Randel and Syl both look so pale, they're almost pink.

Despite Ember's words about trusting in Torvak's choices, they can't bear to watch the client they've been tasked to protect be mentally tortured in front of their entire company. It will surely damage their reputation as bodyguards, but challenging the demons to stop this is out of the realm of possibilities.

"3... 2... 1... 0..."

At the end of the countdown, the entire shopping center goes quiet, waiting to see how fast this human will fall on his face with a mutilated mind.

"Round 1 of the Duel Now Begins. You have 60 seconds..."

This is all the system says before Myron lets out a murderous roar, taking the opportunity to show off by unsealing his 1st Class Bloodline and growing his avatar to over 100 meters in height.

His eyes burst with white light, and all the stored Ether within his body begins to ripple out in waves.

Any physical use of mana, demonic energy, qi, or even divine threads are physical forces that can damage an avatar.

Pure Ether, however, can be limited by using the Avatar's system to only target a user's mind and soul. The first to give up or become unable to select "Yes" to move on to the next round will be declared the loser.

Waves of Ether blast through the room, their physical manifestations displayed holographically so the crowds can visualize what is happening before them.

Ember doesn't move. Arms crossed, breathing steady, and eyes locked on the massive demon, he takes the attack head-on.

From the depths of his mind, he summons Ether that has been lying stagnant, unused for millennia, and not even properly filtered to be used in this body and era of reincarnation.

Even so, just trace amounts are more than enough to open storage portals, heal incurable wounds, and brace for mental attacks in the Lower Realm that shouldn't be possible to block. Some latent essence is summoned to shield his conscious mind from the barrage of pure filtered Upper Realm Ether attacking his psyche.

The dense, warm pressure covers his mind and holds his soul tight, while his indifferent expression to the outside world causes the crowds to break their silence and begin erupting with cheers and yells throughout the entire shopping center.

After just a few seconds, the fact that the human's eyes haven't glossed over or his avatar fallen to the floor infuriates the demon even more.

"Not possible! This must be a rigged dueling room!"

It yells and continues letting out immense amounts of mental pressure, while Leonard watches the hologram show the building pressure inside Ember's head, visualizing for the outside world how much force he is withstanding.

Once the pressure readings shift from defense to offense, Leonard's eyes widen further as he realizes his intuition was correct all along. He shouts words, "Forfeit! Leave the duel now!" but they go unheard within the chamber. By the time it's too late, the pressure within Ember erupts in a single, focused beam.

The instant it collides with the unsealed demon's forehead, it's as if his mind is placed on pause.

A mental flash of blinding white light and overwhelming ringing washes over his conscious mind.

There isn't even time to react or brace for impact.

The demon's mind simply stops processing thoughts, and its avatar falls backward, slamming rigidly against the back wall of the dueling room before tumbling to the floor.

As visuals of the demon's aura of mental pressure cease, and Ember's attack proves far too fast for many to track, Ember still doesn't budge.

He watches the demon fall to the floor while the timer for the round continues to count down.

- Chapter 702

Chapter 702

Less than ten seconds have passed since the first round's timer began counting down, but an unsealed 1st Class Demon now lies unconscious on the dueling room floor while a human stares forward with an unchanged expression.

The entirety of the trading center's uproar and cheers that started when the match began ceases.

Just like the tension before this duel began, the unease has returned...

It doesn't make any sense.

A 5th Class human defeating a 1st Class demon in one attack—and it being a mental duel.

It is common knowledge that demons are the most resilient, both in physical strength and mental fortitude, in the Upper Realm.

Unlike other races, who allow anyone capable of ascending to claim their worlds and come to the Upper Realm, demons are far different.

The only way to ascend is to join one of the 5 Great Families and use their thrones.

Demons notoriously hoard high-grade worlds and discard low-grade and drained worlds to everyone else.

The same goes for their kin—only the strongest, the top of their era in the Lower Realm, are allowed to ascend. With this being said, all demons that ascend are capable of controlling the masses with no equals in their World Classes.

What has occurred in front of everyone today is an impossible feat, and only a select few scattered among the crowd in the trading palace truly witnessed what happened.

The 1st Class Demon, Leonard, is one of these few, as he whispers under his breath, "That technique, I've only seen the family head's avatar use it. How could a human be granted access to a command like that... and with a basic-grade avatar..."

This demon is shocked, as even their Premium-Grade Avatars don't allow them to concentrate their Ether so finely, with such speed and accuracy, as he just witnessed.

A few very skilled 2nd Class beings in the crowd understand the significance of what just occurred but keep their mouths shut as they haven't seen attacks like that used in tens of thousands of years.

The rest of the lords who fill the building are oblivious, and after a few seconds of silence, they start cheering and roaring with excitement again.

"No way... the human won!"

"It must have been rigged. The Ogre Conglomeration wanted payback and set a trap!"

"These dueling rooms are inspected and maintained by the Citadel Lord—there's no way it would be rigged!"

"Then how... you don't think this demon betrayed the Citadel Lord?"

"Maybe this human is just a hidden master in a counterfeit avatar."

"Yeah, maybe that's it!"

"No way, look at the dueling room statistics—all of the visual data is here for anyone to scan. He's really a 5th Class human."

"Then what happened? Are demons not as strong as we thought?"

"Who cares? That was awesome!"

"True... to be honest, humans never come around this district. I haven't seen one in decades. Maybe they're the ones we're underestimating..."

"This might be the only time we can publicly root against the demons. Let's make the best of it..."

"Humans! Humans! Humans!"

Everyone begins spewing their theories and showing their anger or excitement in all kinds of ways.

The entire shopping center vibrates with the sheer amount of beings hopping about while the timer on the dueling chamber continues counting down.

The demon's unsealed greater form shrinks in size back to its base Avatar form. All that is left to be seen are the demon's blank eyes and open mouth staring up at the ceiling as the time passes.

Randel and Syl are most shocked, as they thought they would have to lie low for a few hundred years before getting any solid employment again—but now things seem to be very different.

More lords are still flying in Ether Orbs from around the district as they hear the news from friends or business partners, but the security outside won't let any more in—they're at maximum capacity.

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

Even if they were let in, all of the action is already over...

The timer ticks all the way down to 0, and notifications ring in both duelers' inner ears.

Ember doesn't budge but mentally accepts to continue on to the next round, while his opponent is in no state to do so.

Another 10-second timer counts down to 0, and a loud ding chimes throughout all the floors of the shopping center.

[Duel Complete. Winner Takes All.]

Visuals of the 3,784 planets and 44,895 Low-Quality Ether are displayed in all their glory, transferred to the Ogre Conglomeration's business account where the Ether was originally taken.

Both of the demon's palms now show their planet count dip below 19,000, and Ember finally grins while speaking to the crowd watching as he still has their attention.

"The Ogre Conglomeration is having a flash sale. All planets won in this duel are going for 50% off market price. Three planets max per lord. Talk to your nearest sales associate to get them before they run out!"

The crowd's perception of this duel shifts again...

While these planets are not of the highest quality, even getting a single 5th Class world at half price can be sold to any neighboring shop for a sizable profit that could last any individual a few years...

Not to mention the opportunity to buy 3rd Class worlds.

For a business, the planets the demons offered are quite worthless. With over 95% of their mana drained, most of the populations on these planets have dwindled so much that they don't even bother delving into dungeons anymore.

It would be near impossible to profit from long term dungeon contracts, and labyrinths are unable to be formed because of the lack of mana remaining on the planet. To bring a dungeon to the level 1000 breakthrough threshold, mana would need to be brought from off world.

All of the demons in the Lower Realm that ruled them have left to the next planet, following their lord's orders and leaving the worthless planets to rot or be scavenged by 4th or 5th Class lords trying their hands at picking up the breadcrumbs of profit.

However, there is another reason some lower-class lords buy drained 3rd Class planets—and that is for status.

Even if the planet is drained, owning a 3rd Class world unlocks greater benefits in the Avatar Ability Shops and also gets you access to sections of the city or business meetings that you wouldn't normally have.

Even 3rd Class lords sometimes buy up a few extra drained 3rd Class worlds as a status symbol to show they aren't ordinary 3rd Class Single Planet lords.

The 2nd Class and above in the crowd aren't interested in these dead planets, as having even one 2nd Class world under your control is enough to pass down generational wealth. However, there is never an excuse to pass up a great business opportunity when it's in front of their eyes. Scooping up a few 4th Class worlds to resell for a quick doubling of their Ether would be illogical to pass up.

—

As the doors of the dueling room open, Leonard runs forward while Ember calmly walks out.

The demon yells in a controlled tone as he passes.

"You may believe you've won today, but a single lost lord in a demon family will do far more than set a single citadel on fire. You've doomed all of the humans in the Upper Realm—not only this Ogre's Conglomeration."

Ember shrugs.

"Oh, calm down. I went easy on him. Your partner should be awake in a few days..."

Relief washes over the confused demon, but the internal conflict of emotions is overwhelming.

All of his life experiences and learned knowledge with humans conflict with the reality in front of him.

Even now, the human says it held back, and there is no doubt in his mind this human is far more dangerous than any opponent he's ever faced before.

His unwavering confidence and nonchalant attitude throughout all of their interactions now make crystal-clear sense in hindsight. Even the fact that he is the new head of the organization that the Citadel Lord challenged last week didn't make any sense, but the fact that an ancient Blue Ogre outsmarted him this easily without even being in the building makes him believe there must be even more to this ruse.

If he was so wrong initially about one thing, this demon must think things through very carefully and avoid making any more wrong moves.

To save his integrity, the demon yells out inside the dueling chamber for all to hear in the center.

"I shall honor the duel. However, the Citadel Lord will be hearing of this. You've won a single petty battle, but the Demon's do not lose wars. This is what you've declared, so prepare yourselves."

He grits his teeth and picks up his partner, then turns around to leave the dueling area and find the nearest fast-travel port to get out of here before anything else goes wrong.

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Meanwhile, thousands of worlds that were just won in the duel are added to the World Trade Palace bank, made available for transfer on any floor by sales reps; and lords nearby flock to them faster than Ember can even make his way out of the dueling room.

Thousands of pure profit Low-Quality Ether are deposited into the company account, and with tens of thousands of lords on every floor with nothing else to do but talk with those around them about the display they just saw, business talks and unrelated transactions begin taking place with a large increase in sales volume.

All of this simultaneously makes the trading center almost a month's worth of profit in a matter of minutes, while also plastering a massive ad across a large portion of the Volterra District. It silently shouts to all that the Ogre Conglomeration still has strong allies, and they're willing to fight back against the demons and do business with anyone—even humans—as long as they have something to offer.

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While this commotion spreads throughout the district, Ember quietly makes his way through the crowds. He ignores all the random lords asking questions, and both Randel and Syl do their job walking beside him to fend off interested parties.

However, Ember doesn't even speak back to the two Red Ogres when they ask him questions.

He calmly walks through the empty hall, into the room overlooking the district he was given, and closes the doors behind him.

Once alone, a drop of crimson blood leaks from his nose.

Instantly, he pulls up his status and sends a voice transmission to Torvak, a few blocks away.

"I've begun my plan to bring the Ogre Conglomeration back to its former glory. However, it could end faster than it even started. I need that package taken out from long-term storage in the Grand Citadel as fast as possible... I've grown weaker than I thought. A Two days' wait might be cutting things close."

Chapter 703

Beneath the Citadel, my training and mining sessions with Ava carry on. search the website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

I begin using the same instinctual ether summoning I did to block her attacks, but this time, I cover my fists in the warm white glow.

My footwork and movements are slow, and I can't land a single attack on the hobgoblin's body. However, she lets me practice my punches, slowing her movement speed to block with her hammer instead of going fully on offense during our sparring sessions.

After three hours pass, and 30 more ether stones are collected from two other mining pits, it's clear I've improved a lot.

I'm able to block all of her attacks, summoning ether extremely quickly to cover the areas on my body where she makes contact.

Before, I was lucky to stop one out of ten attacks, but now I can block every single one.

I'm even able to imbue my footsteps with warm streams of ether to dodge and counter; however, Ava is able to do the same with much greater efficiency.

Using this lower ether setting, our attack power is identical, but every time I have a breakthrough with my speed, she manages to outmaneuver me.

She speaks up, breathing heavily after we finish our latest session. "Not bad... Looks like you're getting used to your Ether Commands. Your natural fighting instincts are extremely sharp, maybe even sharper than mine. It's just that Premium Avatar of yours. Your level threshold when you ascended must not have been very high. Your speed and strength are similar to the non-ranked-up goblins."

I think to myself that this is only because I'm being held back by my weight and the constraints of the purple exo-suit I'm wearing.

"Yeah... hopefully, I can overcome this soon..."

We climb out of the mining pit we're in, as all the surface stones have been taken out, and head further into the green divine fog in the direction of the Citadel.

After about a kilometer of walking, stopping sporadically to dig out ether stones from the surface, we pick up nine more in no time. However, as we continue walking forward, I feel an extremely warm sensation pulling at my consciousness, urging me further in the direction we're already heading.

It's far hotter than any of the stones we've found so far, but Ava calls out from my side before I even get the time to point it out.

"We're approaching the outer limit of our mining territory. My exile contract won't let me pass this point. We'll have to turn back and check out some of the other old pits. There are quite a few left."

I raise an eyebrow and point in the direction we're heading.

"Let me check this out first. I can sense a few stones just up ahead, no more than 100 meters."

Ava stops in place, looking down at the ground in front of her, then up at me while I keep walking forward. Her eyes widen.

"You can pass through the borders...? But how? Your avatar should have automatically created an exile contract the moment you entered our zone..."

Her confusion mirrors my own, as I have no idea what border she speaks of or what these exile contracts really are. The burning sensation in my mind only gets hotter the more steps I take, so I reply while continuing forward.

"Right, I don't know. I'll be back in a minute."

I run off toward the ether stones, leaving Ava behind to disappear into the green mist.

As I move forward, fewer mounds of black rocks pile up around me, and the surface becomes completely flat.

It's as if no stones have been moved here by living hands. Everything looks like it has naturally settled, and the bright white glows all around hit my senses.

Within 20 meters, I feel over a dozen identical stones to the ones that previously required kilometers of area to sense.

However, I don't stop to grab any of them. The burning hot sensation is still ahead, growing stronger.

I walk past the dimly glowing white stones littering the area and approach a single, extremely bright glowing white rock.

When I bend down to grab it, it feels almost hot. Just from the physical contact, I feel more ether pouring into my body in seconds than I've ever managed in thirty minutes of concentrating on draining the dimmer stones.

My head turns slightly to the right as another burning hot sensation floods into my mind. I run toward it without a second thought.

Just 100 meters later, I find another extremely saturated stone identical to the one I'm holding. Then, another pops into my senses.

"They're everywhere..." I whisper to myself, running deeper into the fog, closer to the Citadel and farther away from Ava. I pass hundreds of dim stones, eventually holding seven brightly glowing white stones bundled in my arms before turning back.

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"This should be good for now..."

I head straight back in the direction I came. If I wander too far, I might get lost.

When I return and see Ava's curvy silhouette in the fog, a wave of relief washes over me, and the worried look on her face vanishes too.

"You're an odd one..."

I shrug and walk through the zone border, invisible to my senses, then drop the bright white glowing stones on the floor between us.

"These are surely rare. I can tell each one is worth more than ten of those dimmer stones."

Ava questions my words, picks one up to scan, and her expression turns to shock as she looks back at me.

"Are these all 4th Class Stones...?"

She uses the same instant absorption technique to drain the white ether into her avatar, then speaks again.

"They are... A tenth of a low-quality ether in a single stone. That's a full month's quota for our entire mining squad..."

My eyebrows raise, not only because of the amount of ether she's stated they contain, but also because of the terminology she's using.

"A 4th Class stone? What do you mean by that—or—actually, what exactly are ether stones?"

Ava looks at me with a dazed expression, unable to believe what's coming out of my mouth. Then, she smiles and looks up at the sky with a glint of hope in her eyes.

"Maybe it will be possible to leave this place someday after all..."

She looks back at me.

"Ether stones are the remnants of old worlds, of course. Once a world is drained of its resources and no more Lords care to claim it in the Upper Realm, their connection tokens are processed in the Citadel Power Plants, that's why they all take a similar physical shape here. This is basic knowledge... You are truly oblivious to how things work..."

She turns around and tosses the now-drained black stone onto the ground, pointing at the endless piles and pits of black rocks with open palms.

"These were all once world tokens. You can try to scan each one, only the ones with trace amounts of resources remaining will show anything on your status. From billions of years ago until now, it's impossible to know how long some of the severed and drained tokens have been resting here. Worlds aren't usually processed until all life on them has left or ceased, and their original Lord has been long forgotten. Ether is interwoven with the very essence of life. All planets that once thrived have some. Even after their deaths, they can be farmed one last time. However, a Lord can never claim the worlds again once they're discarded down here."

We both stand in silence as I try to grasp the reality of her words.

My senses can barely move past a few hundred meters, but I saw how far those endless clouds stretched and visualized the enormous Citadel for myself. These mines must be at least that large...

Then again, they must be more massive than I can even imagine. The depth these black stones go down is completely unknown to me as well.

Ava speaks up again.

"The Citadels are built around divine artifacts gifted to this realm by the Overseer. It acts as a power plant, accepting discarded worlds. High amounts of their Mana and Demonic Energy can be siphoned out, and a majority of the Ether too; but there are always flickers of life remaining that slip between the cracks. Where there is profit to be made, business will spawn. Many powerful families and organizations help lower-class worlds ascend from the lower realm. In return, the Lord's keep their world hostage until they fulfill a nearly unattainable mining quota down here in the exile zones."

I stare down at the six remaining Ether Stones with newfound awe as Ava's words sink in. Then, I bend down and grab one. Its excess ether seeps into my skin through the purple barrier as I reply.

"So the Lord that controls this zone has your planet and all of your mining squad's as well... That's why your world tokens show zeros?"

Ava nods as the gears in my mind spin.

"So, if I can go outside the border and find enough of these stones, your exile contract will be voided, right? And we could make it back to the Citadel?"

Her eyes widen again.

"It's... well... I don't know... Theoretically, it's possible, but—"

I cut her off. "Then that's the new plan."

I sit down with the white stone in my hand and begin absorbing as much Ether as I can from it while murmuring a new offer.

"We split these and spar again, this time at a higher setting than that minimum you've been holding back with. I need to get stronger, and you want to be free. What do you say? We split what I find until you meet your final quota's needs."

She reaches down to grab another 4th Class Ether stone, scanning it and then staring down at me in awe for a few seconds before activating the automatic ether drain and replying.

"There is no reason to say no... Deal."

—

Over the next hour, I work on draining pure ether from four of the stones, bringing them down to about two-thirds of the way drained before it gets harder to pull the remaining amount out.

With such an abundant supply of stones within my reach, I feel the most time-efficient approach is to let Ava drain the rest for herself.

With a far larger amount of Ether being absorbed each time, I can visualize and feel the energy flowing into the stores within my consciousness.

An odd filtering sensation washes over me, as though the raw Ether being drained from these stones is being altered the instant it falls into my stores. I get the instinctual feeling this isn't normal, and my mind flashes back to a white leaf I touched within the Demon's Throne. Ember called it a low-quality Ether cleansing herb.

I have no direct evidence of this, but the Ether entering my system feels as though it's being filtered or cleansed in some way before making its way into my mind.

When I stand to my feet again, taking a deep breath in and out, I try to summon more energy from my Ether stores to cover my fists. It still feels as though I have an endless pool to draw from, but the speed at which my mind gains access to the Ether is slightly faster.

I look over to Ava, who drained the last remains of my fourth stone. She speaks up.

"Even your Ether draining technique is weird... Is that a Premium Avatar trait too?"

I shrug.

"Something like that... It's slower, but I believe it's a superior technique."

Then I smirk and put my fists up.

"Come on, let's spar. You have more than enough excess Ether now to use the power level in our battle when you were trying to kill me, right?"

She raises her hammer and chuckles.

"Fine, I'll stop prying. And yeah, one of these stones is more than enough."

Then, I watch her hammer glow ten times brighter than before, just as it did in our first battle. I concentrate and try to layer the Ether like I did before in order to block.

However, I'm nowhere near fast enough yet.

Even with the small increase in reaction and summoning speed I believed I had, before I can even register what's happened, I'm helplessly sent flying backward tens of meters before hitting a pile of black rocks, tingling all over.

Ava flies my way, grinning, and Ether-stepping with every stride. She's begun planning another attack before I can even heal the tingling in my chest from her first hit.

"You want to get stronger, right? Now that I don't have to limit my Ether usage, I'll go all out!"

Chapter 704

A burning hot white hammer slams into me, sending me flying into another pile of rocks before I can even heal from our first collision.

My body feels as though it's covered with pins and needles, and the third attack is coming my way faster than I can react.

Ava's voice rings out as she slams me across the black stone landscape again.

"Say the word and I'll take it down a notch, but I can keep this up all day!"

Half my mind is concentrated on summoning wisps of Ether to flood into the impact zones, but I yell back, "Don't hold back. Fight as if you're trying to kill me... we only have two and a half days until that District Lord comes back, right? I want to be prepared for the worst."

Before my words finish, I'm hit with her hammer again. "As you wish!"

There is no direct physical pain or damage to my body. The divine barrier around me absorbs all of the pressure, but massive amounts of Ether seep into my being after every hit.

Ava's hammer is glowing just as white-hot as in our first battle, but so are her feet. I watch white Ether strengthen her hamstrings, quads, and even arms when she swings.

Her entire body is glowing hot with Ether, and every single time I try to predict her movements and add layers to certain areas of my body, it's far too late.

The next hour results in me being bashed around the abandoned mines like a ragdoll.

While that's what it looks like from the outside, I am gathering very valuable data and actively trying to improve after every single exchange we have.

Over three hundred exchanges pass, and all of them end with me being hit in a new place on my body.

It's a familiar sensation; in our last spars, I was hit hundreds of times as well, but these hits permeate deep into my being.

On the lower setting, these lingering tingles didn't last as long, and I didn't have to summon as much Ether to heal myself.

Now, I'm using just as much Ether to heal as I am to block and throw attacks. While throwing more attacks makes it easier to summon Ether faster, healing tingling areas of my body becomes second nature the more I do it.

My entire body glows bright white as tens of impact points are being simultaneously healed by the time Ava speaks up after slamming me into another rock structure.

"All right, that's time. Let's load up on more Ether. I've already burned through 20% of what I just absorbed. I think that's the most Ether I've ever used in a single session in my entire life. I'd say you're crazy, but you managed to improve before... so I guess premium avatars just have a learning curve to them..."

Ava is breathing as heavily as I am, and she's smiling ear to ear.

If the 20% number she mentioned is true, and I used the same amount of Ether as she did, that's roughly 0.1 gone, maybe more.

I remember the throne stating I had about 1.2 Ether in my body. Whether that was all from the pill, or some from the herb, I'm not entirely sure.

My guess is I managed to pull around 0.3 from the four Ether stones earlier, but it still feels like I'm pulling from an endless pool. There's no status reading that tells me how much Ether I have.

I reply, still glowing white all over in my perception. "Good idea. If we keep this up, I'll definitely get the hang of it soon..."

She laughs as I fall on my back, smiling and breathing heavily while I finish healing the remaining tingling wounds all over my body.

It takes almost a full minute to rid myself of all the foreign Ether damage, but once my body is completely back to its natural state, I feel as though my senses are sharper.

We make our way back to the mining zone's border and travel along its edge until another hot sensation hits my senses about 200 meters away from the point where I crossed this invisible border before.

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I venture out into the untouched land of black rocks, just like before, powering my footsteps with Ether while running this time.

My movements feel crisp and exhilarating.

I still have to physically think and summon each wisp beneath my feet, but it's beginning to feel more instinctual.

While I collect 12 more fourth-class Ether stones, I play through the long sparring session I just had in my head, visualizing each of Ava's movements over and over.

They were all machine-like, exactly like her Ether-draining technique.

Clearly, these avatars have functions that help newly ascended individuals use this new power source in the Upper Realm. While this means activation time is faster and there's no room for failure, it feels quite limiting.

If there are maximum settings and specific commands that need to be selected, there is no freedom to reach higher heights or create unique techniques. Not to mention, being physically limited to select locations.

The instinctual need I acted on to keep my body when moving up Realms may have far larger implications than I ever imagined.

Whether it will end up making things easier or harder for me in the long run is still a mystery...

—

When I make it back to Ava and drop the Ether stones on the ground between us, the bright childlike joy on her face when she scans one is just the same as with the first rock from my last hunt.

I take seven and drain the majority of their Ether, giving Ava the rest to drain after she pulls all the energy from five

It roughly evens out, and this time, when I cover my fists with a layer of white energy to signify I'm ready to spar, I feel a bit of a difference in my Ether stores.

I can't visualize the full pool, but with more to pull from, I can summon the same amount of Ether much faster than before, as it's a smaller percent of the total available to me.

—

My theory is tested for the next 24 hours as we spar over and over while we move along the zone's border. I collect an average of 10 fourth-class Ether stones each time for us to increase our Ether stores.

My absorption speed of the stones increases at a similar rate to my summoning speed.

Getting battered by Ava's Soul Hammer for hours on end improves my healing and blocking speed to an immense degree. I've taken thousands of hits, and there's no spot on my body that hasn't been attacked.

The instinctual patterns of healing become easy to perform in the background while I focus on powering my footsteps and covering my fists in a hot white glow.

It isn't until our eighth sparring session that I finally manage to get the hang of things and block one of her hammer strikes with a coated arm, just like I did in our first battle.

Another four intense sparring sessions pass after this instance, with sporadic blocks and even a few dodges becoming more common, until I finally outmaneuver Ava. I block her incoming hammer with a single arm while Ether-stepping to the side and punching her in the stomach.

I watch a layer of white energy ripple all over the contact point in her avatar. There is an instant shielding summoned, but it isn't fast enough, as her full attention is on the hammer. For once, she's the one sent flying backward, leaving me standing with two fists covered in hot Ether and a smile across my face.

"I did it..." I whisper as a thud hits a nearby pile of stones.

I stare down at my hands, as they continue to burn bright white, allowing even more Ether to pour into them, making them brighter and brighter.

From the constant Ether draining we've been doing between sparring matches, I've been keeping rough track and assume my stores have risen to around 5.0 low-quality Ether.

However, my punches, movement speed, and healing speed feel like they've increased in strength far more than just 5x.

I can feel that this is just the start. Every time I use Ether, it's like old knowledge and experience are coming back to me from my subconscious. Memories of Ember explaining how I was processing Ether in the depths of my mind for over 900 thousand years during the second trial come to mind.

I'm unsure if this is the reason for my rapid growth or the fact that I'm not held back by the constraints of an avatar. I come to the conclusion that it's a mixture of both.

All my theories are pushed to the back of my mind, and the Ether around my fists dissipates into the atmosphere once I hear Ava's voice call out from the distance.

"Let's stop there for today..." Her words sound like she's in pain.

When I walk over and see the wound on her side still radiating with dense white energy and the hobgoblin holding the side of her head with her free hand, my eyes widen.

"Are you okay?"

She pushes herself up from the ground with her hammer and replies after a light chuckle.

"I'm fine. Your punch sure packs a force..." She grits her teeth and holds her head again. "I don't know if you meant to activate a mental attack in that blow, but when we spar again, you should turn it off. My basic avatar doesn't have advanced mental defense commands. If I didn't block the majority of that hit, I could have been knocked out cold..."

My eyes widen, but I don't reply just yet.

I certainly didn't try to send a mental attack, but I pushed as much Ether as I could into the force of the blow. This is yet another mystery I'm at a dead end with.

She speaks up once she sees my worried face.

"Don't worry, I can heal the physical hit with a command in a matter of minutes. The ringing in my head will go away on its own in a few hours. I've been hit much harder than that by the Lord before, trust me. I'd know if it was bad."

I raise an eyebrow to reply.

"In that case, no more sparring... There isn't much time left before the Lord in question arrives. If you're up to walking, I'd like to continue moving along the borders to absorb as much Ether as possible."

Chapter 705

We walk the border for hours, stopping to absorb piles of 4th class Ether Stones that litter the landscape outside the border of this mining zone.

We cover tens of kilometers of ground, curving around the outside of the zone, and with every stone I absorb, the process of pulling in ether gets faster and easier.

While collecting stones, I practice activating my footsteps, and occasionally, between absorption sessions, I ask Ava to hit me with her hammer.

However, my healing speed and summoning proficiency have grown so drastically over these last 24 hours that her highest power attack just leaves a tingling sensation for fractions of a second.

While I estimate my ether stores have grown to about 15.0 Low Quality Ether, the growth I've shown since we stopped sparring is far more than just 3x.

Even though Ava has drained a similar amount of Ether as me, her Avatar's settings seem to be holding her back from progressing like I am. They're naturally hard-capped.

I have no good way to practice further, so I focus on just collecting as much Ether as possible.

She speaks up after a while.

"This is about the time the Lord comes back every month. We should head back to base camp. I have enough to satisfy our squad's mining quota and can pay off 150 years' worth of exile contract time with the Ether we've managed to gather. In just a few weeks, my entire lifetime quota could be filled."

I do some quick calculations after her statement but see a smile on her face as she looks up to the sky while I reply.

"You were exiled down here to work for over a thousand years...?"

She sighs and looks back at me.

"Yes. My contract has roughly 1200 years remaining. Even for an Ascended, that's basically a full life. But in the end, my world will be safe and free. That is our duty as Lords, isn't it?"

I look down at my palm with a glowing [1], feel the planet floating in a black void in the depths of my mind, and reply.

"Yes, that is our duty."

Then, we leave the border and head back into the center of the mining zone, passing abandoned pits left and right.

My senses of our surroundings have increased drastically. While my visibility through the green divine fog is the same—100-200 meters at most—my Ether senses have increased over tenfold. I can sense the dimly glowing 5th class Ether Stones all around us for about a kilometer on all sides.

I can feel a grouping of beings with very low ether stores clustered together as we walk for about 20 minutes, paired with Ava speaking up.

"All right, we're almost here. I doubt any of them have ever seen a human before, other than in dungeons on their old worlds... So, just don't frighten them. I'll approach first."

I chuckle under my breath, trying to imagine what a dungeon with humans as the monsters would look like, but nod and reply while taking a step back.

"Sure, take the lead."

We walk forward into the mist, and I let Ava move farther and farther ahead until she disappears. All I can hear are her footsteps, and I use my ether sense to tell where she is.

Her voice calls out.

"I'm back, and there's no need to worry about your contracts expiring. We've met this month's quota just in time!"

The warm blobs of ether clumped together move toward the Hobgoblin holding her hammer over her shoulder. High-pitched and coarse voices, much like the two goblins I met by chance before, reply to her. R

"Ms. Ava! We were worried! Troy said you fought a human!"

"Ms. Ava! You're back!"

"Really? The quota is really met? We won't be punished again?"

"Ms. Ava! Ms. Ava!"

More and more voices ring out from roughly two dozen goblins less than half Ava's size. I lose track of them all as Ava bends down and greets each one personally.

Her reassuring words calm the goblins, but she doesn't mention me at all. So I stop moving forward, standing behind a pile of black rocks less than 300 meters away.

As I concentrate, I can vaguely make out green dome-like structures in rows in the fog. There are over 50 of them, all symmetrical, and they resemble the coloring and texture of the Citadel's buildings I glimpsed before falling down here.

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My guess is they are some kind of shelter for the mining workers, but there are far more domes than miners.

The group of goblins backs up from Ava, and she turns around in the direction we came.

"Now, there's a reason we managed to meet our quota this month, and that's because we got some help from—"

Her words cut off mid-sentence, and at the same time, I feel the ground start to vibrate.

Slow crashing sounds echo from the distance, and Ava's tone changes completely. She looks in my direction, her eyes widening. I take it to mean me meeting the goblins is no longer part of the plan.

Ava looks back down and speaks firmly.

"The Lord is coming... Get in position. I'll do the talking, like usual."

The goblins stiffen with fear, but in seconds they scatter, standing in front of various domes with arms at their sides and eyes staring at the ground.

Ava swings her hammer down from her shoulder, letting it thud to the ground by her side. She waits in the center of the base camp as the footsteps grow louder.

A burning-hot ether source sets off alarms in my psyche as the approaching Lord enters my ether senses. However, I cannot see its makeup; the dense green clouds block any mana perception skills.

Coming forward now would only make things worse. I watch from the shadows behind a pile of mined Ether Stones as the figure gets closer.

While the goblins tremble with fear, I am not scared. Instead, I feel curious and excited to see what makes these pounding footsteps and to learn more about these exile mines.

Ava stands tall, staring forward as a massive shadow emerges from the fog.

I see a wide humanoid silhouette with a rounded head, broad shoulders, and thick, muscular arms and legs, standing at least 6 meters tall. The outline of a massive battle axe is visible through the fog, resting on its shoulder. A large, spiked accessory stands out around the Lord's neck.

Even when it stops in front of Ava, towering over her at three times her height and width, she doesn't budge. But from this distance, it's still tough to make out the Lord's exact appearance.

The only additional detail I catch next is the low, resounding voice of the Lord.

"Monthly quotas are due. Pay up, or you'll be punished again."

The massive figure charges its axe with white energy, blindingly bright in my mind's eye, and swings it down to cleave through the rocks beside Ava. She doesn't flinch, simply extending her right hand with the [0] on her palm.

"It's all there. We found enough stones this month to hit the 0.1 Ether zone quota."

A grunt emanates from the massive creature as it puts out its palm to touch Ava's. I watch Ether transfer between their Avatars.

Then, the shadowy Lord speaks again in a low, echoing tone.

"Good. To hit that quota in this zone, you must have been working non-stop. As you should. You've learned from your mistakes..."

It reaches for its axe, but Ava speaks again before it grabs hold.

"I'd like to make some extra progress toward my exile contract. There was additional Ether mined this month."

The towering Lord halts, grunting again.

"How much extra?" it says, resentfully.

Ava doesn't reply for a few seconds but finally musters her words. "Fifteen Low Quality Ether..."

The Lord's hand, initially meant for the axe, moves toward Ava instead. It tightly grips her neck, lifting her into the air.

"Fifteen Low Quality Ether? I must not have heard you correctly... Please say that number again."

"Fif...teen..." Ava chokes out as the massive figure laughs in a menacing, low tone that echoes through the entire zone.

A crushing pressure radiates from its being, and while I assume it's mana or divine energy, all I see are wisps of Ether flowing out. Many of the goblins collapse, passing out from the oppressive force.

The Lord yells again, "Impossible. In a single month? I could rent this whole zone out for 3 centuries with that much Ether. You must have found a secret ether vein to keep for yourself, and have been hoarding resources for years..."

Its grip around her neck tightens further, choking off any reply.

The Lord laughs again. "I can find a new struggling world like yours on the unascended market whenever I want. These contracts last your entire lifespan because you're meant to work until you die."

Its grip tightens more as it turns to address the terrified goblins.

"You hear that? Your leader has been hoarding Ether from you this whole time. Those I killed last month didn't have to die if you just paid the full month's quota... What do you say? Should I kill her right here and now for not paying out everything she mines, as outlined in our contracts?"

My eyes widen as the warrior I trained with for days is being strangled before me with such ease.

Anger ripples through me as this hobgoblin's kind actions are twisted against her, trapping her in a contract designed to be unfulfillable. If she mines too little, she's punished; if she mines extra, these Lords must return the worlds they've stolen early.

I make the decision. Charging out from behind the rock pile, I summon Ether to coat my fists and feet in burning energy, sprinting toward the mining zone's center.

While I could leave the zone and head to the Citadel, without Ava, I wouldn't have progressed so quickly in such a short time.

Thinking of the way the goblins looked up to her moments ago and recalling the countless sparring sessions and laughs we shared over the last few days, I leap into the air, landing a searing fist into the back of the massive Lord as it displays Ava's struggling body to its underlings, spreading lies.

The impact triggers an instant defensive shield, but as with my sparring matches with Ava, it isn't fast enough, and some of the blow connects.

A loud grunt turns into a roar as the massive creature's body is sent flying forward about ten meters. Its grip on Ava loosens, and she drops to the rocky ground between two of the green domes, where goblins lie trembling in fear.

The monster spins around, yelling, "Who dares strike the Goblin King?!"

As it turns, I see features unlike any creature I've encountered in dungeons or labyrinths. With a face resembling a goblin's, the muscles of a cyclops, and the stature of an enormous berserker king, I witness what the goblin race can evolve into.

Its bulky muscles, veins, and green skin pop with bright vitality as it yells again.

"A human? In a zone this close to the Citadel? How did you infiltrate this place? Speak now and I'll make your death painless!"

Its voice rumbles through the zone, knocking out all the remaining conscious goblins with its overwhelming aura.

One of its fists instantly becomes covered in bright white light and rockets toward me, but my Ether-powered footsteps allow me to dodge just in time.

However, as I pivot to counter, I see it lunging for its axe rather than trying to grab me.

The Goblin King moves with speed and agility faster than my own. Bright white Ether glows throughout its entire avatar, making me believe it definitely could have hit me if I was its intended target.

It reveals a [166] glowing bright green on its palm as it flies by and tightly grips the massive Soul Weapon.

Chapter 706

[~1 hour ago. Just before the Goblin King arrived in the Hollow District Exile Zone.]

Ember watches the World Trading Palace from his top-floor office, just as he has for days, taking in the view of the nearby streets, awaiting a guest after receiving a transmission from Torvak that he finally picked up the package he requested.

Randel and Syl's surprised greeting to their employer can be heard as the door automatically opens, and Ember turns from his desk.

He finished reading all of the sales reports just over two days ago, the night after his victory against the Demon. Since then, he has been collecting intel and healing the

mental damage he took after sending out an attack far too advanced for his current state.

A massive Blue Ogre walks through the door to greet Ember. The moment it slides closed and they're out of view of the surveillance systems, he opens up an Ether storage portal and takes out a black crate with wisps of Ether slowly seeping out of it.

"They still have that place locked down.

He walks over and sets the crate down next to Ember. Ember replies, "The Demons haven't retaliated yet. It seems even though you're late, the timing has worked out."

"Hey, it's the best I could do. It can take over a year to get long term storage contracts broken early. I had to use over half of that Average Grade Ether stone just in bribes to gain access in the time I did."

Ember chuckles at the thought, then taps the box with a glowing white finger and its top opens up to reveal eight corked flasks with a clear substance inside.

Torvak continues speaking, "-And news of what you did basically spread across the entire Citadel. Some don't believe it, but the fact that almost four thousand worlds were sold for half off definitely made an impact regardless. Queries from old partners came in for second-class worlds. We don't move much of those anymore, but I managed to sell six of them—all over market price."

Ember smirks while pulling three of the glass flasks from the black box.

"Profits in the center here are up over 50% the normal daily turnout. The bulk of the profit is mostly dungeon contracts, but the volume of lower-class worlds from fourth- and fifth-class Lords that would normally steer clear of this district has skyrocketed."

Ember seals the top of the black crate with its original cover, then throws one of the glasses to Torvak while opening one of the two remaining on the table and lifting it to his mouth.

As the Blue Ogre sees the priceless flask flying his way, his eyes widen, but Ember continues speaking.

"But come on, this small spike in profits isn't what this meeting is about. This low-quality restoration elixir has been aging in the Grand Citadel for almost twenty thousand years. I bet it's got quite the kick to it."

Ember drinks the whole bottle of clear elixir, and Torvak catches the one thrown to him.

A translucent wave of light ripples through Ember, seeping deep into the depths of his consciousness that hasn't been altered in dozens of reincarnations, activating and

cleansing layers of low-quality Ether that have been lying stagnant since the last time he was in the Upper Realm.

Ember lets out a satisfying sigh as his entire body ripples with dense waves of energy, and all of the fatigue and built-up stress from his battle with Myron vanishes.

Torvak replies in a surprised tone, "Really...? Wouldn't it be a waste for me to drink one of these...?"

Ember laughs, stretching his arms and feeling the rejuvenated dormant power finally flowing through his body, spreading euphoria through his senses.

"It's a gift. Drink up. I'm sure after all these years, some of your Ether stores that aren't confined by that Avatar have grown stagnant. Plus, even the raw Ether in this zone can be refined much further. If all goes as planned, I'll never have to use one of those elixirs again; so don't worry about wasting it. It's better if you're in good shape to face a demon if needed, you can't afford to lose to another one now that I've angered them."

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

Ember pauses.

"And neither can I... I'm lucky I only ran into a first-class."

His eyes track down to the last flask still on the desk, and he picks it up and tosses it into his Ether stores.

Torvak looks curious but has been in business long enough to know not to ask questions.

Ember turns to sit back down at his desk and overlook the city, then replies, "If you're curious, it's for a visitor that should be making his way up here soon. Don't worry about it."

Torvak pops off the cork in his flask and replies, "Understood. Thank you."

Then, he drinks the whole bottle of clear liquid, and his body ripples with the same translucent light seeping into his consciousness and even vibrating through the Ether stores in his Avatar.

He stares out the wide-open window, and the two watch the Volterra District go on as if it is any other day.

—

Ten blocks away, in the center of the Citadel, a purple-horned Demon finally wakes up from its unconscious state.

Leonard has been overseeing a few servants of varying races from 4th and 5th-class worlds that come and go from his room, giving him pure Ether injections and soaking him in unrefined Demonic Energy to speed up his natural healing process.

The Demon wakes up in a daze but slowly comes to realize he's been defeated by a human—and publicly humiliated at that.

It takes the destruction of eleven servant Avatars and a full hour of angry yelling before the Demon can come out of his room to follow Leonard to meet their Citadel Lord.

The Noble Demon paces back and forth, looking deep into the city, staring right at the Volterra District where all of this took place, cursing under his breath.

"We should have just forfeited those worlds and sent them off to the Exiles... It would have drained enough Ether and Mana to buy a decent quality second-grade world..."

Andras Vermillion turns to the back of the room to see Leonard standing at attention with Myron a few steps behind him.

"Speak."

He nods at the Citadel Lord's words and does so. "Myron is awake, and there seems to be no long-term damage to the Avatar or his mind. He can give you his side of the report if you wish."

Andras shakes his head and uncrosses his arms to make a waving motion. "There is no need for a report. I watched the footage and studied the dueling room's data. We still control and maintain those rooms... I do not fault you for your actions. It was within reason of what I ordered."

He looks back out the window, sighs, and turns back to the two 1st Class Demons.

"While sentiment in the streets for the Ogre Conglomeration is growing, this is not a complete loss. It's an opportunity to show those who think they can fight back that they are sorely mistaken."

The black-horned Demon still has that red-haired human's confident grin stuck in his mind, and the eerie feeling that he was always a step ahead can't be shaken away.

However, if a Noble Demon says he reviewed the fight data and has a plan to deal with this, there is no reason to question his wisdom and power.

"I have new orders for both of you. I want that human dead, and that Blue Ogre, Torvak. I want him publicly defeated, and drain all of his companies down to nothing over the next few weeks before Drako arrives."

He pauses for a few seconds, thinking to himself, then continues.

"I don't need to show my face to the public again, that is now above us Vermillions. We must send the message that a Noble Demon does not have to stoop down to bother with public affairs anymore. This is because our 1st Class Lords are strong enough to crush anyone who defies us. I've purchased Avatar upgrades for both of you; your mental defenses can now both defend against that ancient mental technique. It used to be available on old avatars before our family was even founded. An arrogant human must have gotten their hands on an illegal copy."

Leonard's eyes widen and relief washes over him, as this human's actions finally make sense. He was bluffing all along, and managed to manipulate his hot headed partner into challenging him in the one duel-type he had the advantage in.

Andras Vermillion Continues.

"I want you to challenge both of them to an all-out duel, no limitations. The Citadel-Wide public surveillance systems just showed the Ogre Conglomeration's head taking a fast travel Orb to the Volterra District. Accept these new Avatar upgrades and go down there to spread a final message before this gets out of hand. Do not bother thinking about the negative consequences or foreign gang retaliation; that will be handled. I want them dealt with publicly and brutally before the family head catches wind of this disgrace. It is better that we are perceived as unreasonable rather than weak."

—

Ember and Torvak continue watching the city outside.

The rejuvenation process in Torvak's Avatar takes far longer than the simple process inside his mind, but Ember patiently waits for it to be over.

Once the process ends, Ember speaks up again while peering at the nearest wall of the room that has status screens of surveillance systems all over it. A familiar image of two first class demons walking into their lobby and customers scattering is shown.

"Looks like they saw you come to meet me, and that Demon I knocked out recovered just fine."

Ember's eyes narrow, and the corners of his lips turn up. However, Torvak shivers.

"They're going to want revenge."

Ember gets up and starts walking toward the door.

"They sure will. Come on, it's time to put on another show. The Ogre Conglomeration's profits aren't going to stop going up, and maybe if we beat them badly enough I'll manage to get myself a meeting with the Citadel Lord."

Chapter 707

The two Demons walk into the center of the lobby with their arms crossed, glancing up at the ceiling while frightened sales workers and customers scatter.

Neither says a word as they enter the elevator to ascend to the trade center's top floor.

A flurry of transmissions ripple throughout the Volterra district, even reaching neighboring lower-class districts. Those on the bottom floor who witnessed their arrival recall the events of days past and understand that whatever is happening now will be even bigger.

As the elevator dings, opening to the top floor, a red-haired human and a massive blue Ogre stand in front of the dueling rooms at the back of the hall, awaiting their guests.

The employees and customers on this floor, however, are not as prepared. The domineering pressure spreading through the room makes even the 2nd Class Red Ogres queasy from hundreds of meters away. Visiting 4th and 3rd Class Lords collapse under the crushing presence of these newly upgraded Avatars.

The tension escalates when a familiar laugh from a purple-horned Demon echoes through the room.

Leonard, the black-horned Demon, speaks as his partner's cackles continue.

"So you have realized your fate. It was nothing but a petty attempt at making the Demons look bad before your very existence was inevitably erased..."

The two walk slowly through the massive hall, and everyone holds their breath, unwilling to shift the focus of this confrontation.

Torvak and Ember stand with indifferent expressions, watching the pair approach.

Myron yells over his cool-headed partner's words.

"That's right! You cheated! Anyone could pull off a cheap shot with an illegal Avatar!"

The two stop directly in front of the human and the Ogre. Leonard grins, shifting his gaze toward Ember.

"You pulled off quite the impressive bluff for a mere human. But I'm sorry to deliver this news personally—today is the day you die..."

Red Ogres shuffle behind them, preparing two of the dueling rooms. Ember responds in a calm tone.

"Is that so? I'm bluffing?"

He cracks a faint smile, just enough for both Demons to see, and then shrugs.

"Go ahead, give us the rundown. I know you have orders to follow."

Ember makes a provoking motion with his hand, then glances toward the ceiling where general surveillance systems capture all video and audio in public areas.

Leonard maintains his composure despite the blatant disrespect, but Myron isn't so level-headed. He yells down at the human.

"These aren't mere orders! What I'm doing today is my duty! The public must know the truth—and fear the Demons in this Citadel once and for all! I challenge you to an all-out duel! Mental, physical, no rules, real deaths, and soul damage allowed!"

His teeth grind as an eerie aura emanates from him, his eyes locked on Ember, who keeps a straight face but inwardly grins.

Leonard steps up to the silent blue Ogre, meeting the 1st Class monster eye-to-eye.

"Your Ogre Conglomeration will no longer be a thorn in our side. The Citadel Lord has declared you an enemy worthy of subjugation. You will not leave this trade center until you accept a duel on my terms."

Without hesitation, the human and Ogre nod, replying in unison.

"Pick your terms. I accept your duel. Let us settle this."

Shaking Red Ogres with escrow account devices approach.

All parties involved press their hands onto the devices, inputting 1.0 Low-Quality Ether. Mental commands and terms for the fight rush through the participants' minds, and they agree on no-limitation terms before stepping through the dueling room doors.

This is clearly not a fight for profit; it's about honor, dominance, and public perception.

The doors close, and the two dueling rooms are displayed in crystal-clear holograms across all floors of the trading center.

The Red Ogres outside the dueling rooms begin tapping away at the trading center's data displays. Outside the building, enormous 3D models light up, visible from across the street and as far as a block away.

The magnitude of the event, paired with the system's voice announcing the duels, triggers far more commotion than the initial transmissions from the bottom floor.

Fast Travel Ether Orbs multiply exponentially as tens of thousands of Lords arrive per second from all over the Volterra District, determined not to miss out like last time.

Many watchers of the first event return, and word spreads rapidly. Half the Citadel is soon aware that a second duel between the human and Vermillion's Demon is underway.

High above in the Citadel's central tower, Andras calmly observes the public surveillance systems, which broadcast the duels in perfect clarity.

Leonard faces off against the Blue Ogre in a massive white room. He speaks to everyone watching.

"I'm sure you've all heard rumors of a human besting one of the Vermillion Family Demons. However, today, you'll understand the consequences of such actions."

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The black-horned Demon reaches into a green-and-white system storage portal, pulling out a massive longsword, almost as large as his entire body.

He spins it around, Ether flowing from his hands, illuminating the 3D holograms for all to see as the weapon glows brighter and brighter. He spins it above his head once more and points the blade's sharp end at Torvak.

"This here is the mastermind behind that simple ruse: the Ogre Conglomeration's head. It was nothing but a petty retaliation after our Citadel Lord fairly challenged him to a duel last week—and won a prized 1st Class World."

The Demon paces back and forth, shaking his head.

"Our Lord is above such menial tasks now. A Noble Demon shall never walk the same grounds as you lower life forms again. Your puny minds cannot fathom their power, so you've resorted to such lows."

Torvak nods in a professional manner and replies.

"Your words are not fact, but in the Upper Realm, those who are strong decide reality. I shall face you on your terms. As the Ogre Conglomeration head, I must uphold my honor."

His hand disappears into a pure white Ether storage, and a six-meter-long spiked club emerges—obsidian black with glimmers of blue matching his skin tone deep within it.

He pours Ether into the soul weapon, using his Premium Avatar's commands, mixed with excess Ether refined out of its dormant state mere minutes ago.

Simultaneously, a sight to behold is taking place in the dueling area next door. Myron, brimming with anger at the sight of the human who humiliated him, yells out for all to see in holographic form.

"That's right! A 5th Class human used an illegal Avatar smuggled into our Citadel by the Ogres. Such deeds will not go unpunished. Today, you will witness what happens when you fail to respect those who hold undeniable power. Today, you die for your stupidity."

The Demon reaches into green-and-white storage portals himself and pulls out two curved blades, about the length of short swords.

His eyes pulse with Ether at the same intensity as it courses out of his Avatar into the soul weapons.

Ember replies, keeping his hands by his sides.

"All right. If you truly wish to kill me, be prepared to face equal consequences."

The Demon's laugh echoes throughout the chamber as he sees no proper stance or soul weapons drawn to face him.

All his anger and embarrassment fade, replaced by excitement, as the system notice rings outside, showing a 60-second countdown for the first rounds of both matches.

The floors of the Trading Center fill again, and the streets outside become increasingly crowded.

Three eruptions of divine energy and Ether burst from the two Demons and Torvak as they waste no time entering their highest forms.

The two Demons' Avatars grow, nearing 100 meters in height, as they unseal their bloodlines.

Torvak's body vibrates, and a green divine energy-tethered, mana-based Greater Form rises to match the Demons' stature in his dueling room.

Ember, however, stands with his arms crossed, still in his base human form, taking the waves of Ether-infused intimidation head-on.

In response, he tests the waters, sending out an identical highly focused mental attack at the Demon's psyche.

However, when it strikes, the attack surrounds the Demon's head as though the Ether is being dispersed like water. It flows down its shoulders and around the outside of his Avatar, ejected through the Demon's feet.

The Demon laughs, pointing his two enormous curved soul weapons at Ember.

"That trick of yours isn't going to cut it anymore! All your schemes will come to light, and my reputation will be restored!"

Ember whispers under his breath, "A Full Guard Avatar... I haven't seen one of those before. I thought they went extinct too... This might not be as simple as I thought."

He moves his hands into a fighting position, watching as one of the massive curved blades swings down toward him.

Hundreds of possible fighting combinations rush through Ember's mind. However, taking action on any of them would draw too much attention to the possibility of his true identity.

While it is better than dying, exposing himself would make navigating the Upper Realm increasingly difficult if the Overseer caught wind of this so soon.

Ember takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and summons massive amounts of newly refined Ether into his right palm—so much that it shines as brightly as the massive blade in the holograms displayed to the crowds outside.

When the two collide, a similar clash occurs between the enormous demonic longsword and Blue Ogre's club in the room beside them.

Over a million Lords are watching this live—some inside the trade center, but most outside, filling the streets in the heart of the Volterra district, with more flashing Fast Travel Orbs zipping in from all over the Citadel.

Leonard's eyes widen at the fact that the Blue Ogre he's challenged has somehow blocked his attack.

They stand at a stalemate, waves of natural intimidation radiating from both their Avatars.

However, even though Blue Ogres are one of the dominant 1st Class races, a 1st Class Demon should still be leagues above in natural strength.

Torvak's buffs are well-documented over the millennia, and his overall strength does not increase with additional planets any more than other Lords with the standard stat multiplier applied through Avatars.

This Demon has upward of twenty times the planets, with a mix of 3rd and 2nd grade worlds as his base, and a handful of 1st Class worlds similar to Torvak's.

Their strength shouldn't be equal, the Demon is meant to have the advantage in every way. Yet, the Blue Ogre's stoic face stares back at him, bulging blue veins visible beneath his green Greater Form.

The soul weapon in his grasp glows brighter and brighter white, holding off the overwhelming natural strength of the superior Demon Lord who challenged him. Their evenly matched clash elicits gasps that ripple through blocks of the Citadel.

Even the Noble Lord in his tower is surprised by this turn of events. However, the sight in the second dueling room sets his mind at ease.

Ember blocks the incoming Demon's sword with his palm, but the energy difference is overwhelming.

It doesn't break through his flesh, but the rippling impact of the Ether pushes Ember back, sending him flying into the back wall of the dueling room.

Landing on the center of the wall feet first, he mimics the Full Guard technique the Demon used moments ago, letting the offensive attack ripple through him and dissipate into the wall.

The Demon wastes no time and lunges forward, swinging his second curved sword at Ember. The red-haired human remains calm.

Mental simulations of the battle's outcomes replay in Ember's mind. While he could block these hits endlessly, it would waste large amounts of cleansed and refined Low Quality Ether.

His body, held together by microscopic silver threads, moves similarly to the purple barrier. Most of his energy is consumed by merely existing. Releasing more power into

a dragon form or unleashing his astral form would surely complicate matters further. These are not techniques even an illegal avatar can recreate.

As Ember blocks the second sword swing with his left palm, he isn't just sent flying; he's pinned against the back wall of the room, a 20-meter-long curved sword imbued with the Demon's Ether crashing into him.

The Demon spams his soul weapon's attack command, sending wave after wave of Ether at Ember repeatedly without having to swing again. Ember holds him back with nothing more than his palm and Ether-filled feet pressed against the wall.

The Demon shouts with a crazed smile. "You're dead now! No matter what illegal commands you've managed to buy! No matter how strong you think you are! The Demons are always stronger! Ellipsia Citadel, I know you're watching! This is what happens when you challenge the Vermillions. You are utterly defeated! Always!"

Ember lets his arm bend under the immense pressure of the Demon's attack.

It truly is on a tier of its own among the 1st Class Demon Lords.

Ember is using his full strength. Even using the 50% shared links of loyalty stat gains from half a billion beings on the human world, he and this Demon are nearly equal in power.

If this exact duel had taken place three days prior, his unrefined dormant Ether alone would not have been anywhere near enough to block the attacks.

Even now, it seems this unrelenting targeted attack may become hard to fend off or dodge eloquently if it lasts much longer. Ember contemplates ways to win without exposing his silver threads. However, mid-thought, his question is answered by a surprising status message coming from below the Citadel in the Exile Zones.

Chapter 708

The glowing [166] flashes by my eyes as the Goblin King's hand, almost the size of my entire body, misses me by less than a meter and grabs its massive battle axe resting in the ground of black stones.

It shimmers with green divine energy and pulses with white Ether once the Lord picks it up and turns my way, yelling again.

"Answer me, human! You're not permitted to be in this Zone! It shouldn't even be possible."

The massive battle axe, with its blade easily twice as tall as myself, is pointed my way as the monster awaits a response.

My gaze moves around to see all the goblins knocked out cold by its aura, and even Ava is struggling to stand to her feet about 20 meters away.

The Goblin King's axe glows brighter, and it yells out again.

"I command you to speak now. A 2nd Class Lord has asked you a question. Why are you here...?"

I stay silent for another full second, remembering how unreasonable this Lord was with Ava. I doubt any words I say will diffuse this mess.

Instead, I focus on summoning Ether around my arms and legs to increase my speed and attack power.

My decision is soon proven to be the correct one, as the Goblin King doesn't wait for a response and lunges forward.

"You know what? You're dead. Whatever Lord sent you here knows the consequences of unauthorized visits. I was in the middle of something here, and you've ruined my fun."

Its speed is impressive.

Just like when it lunged forward to grab its axe before, my eyes can barely catch up; and even as I kick off the ground with Ether to dodge, it's clear even my reflexes aren't enough to deal with raw power.

Before I even move half a meter off the ground, the white axe collides with my chest.

An absurdly loud twang echoes through the Zone, and if not for my purple barrier, that attack would have split any human in my place in two.

All physical divine energy and mana-infused damage has been deflected, but my entire body shines bright with Ether as I'm sent flying backward toward the rock pile I was hiding behind before interfering in this duel.

Ava's worried eyes watching me fly, and the angered Goblin King chasing after me, is all I see as my body is overwhelmed by tingling that turns into pins and needles, soon feeling as though my very essence is being boiled in a sea of Ether.

My whole body vibrates, and it feels as though my very soul is being attacked.

After days' worth of sparring matches, my instincts kick in to begin the healing process, but it is like trying to build a dam brick by brick while an entire river is flowing through.

The boiling sensations all over seem to only get stronger and stronger until my back hits the pile of rocks over a hundred meters away.

The only thing left that I can feel is a small pocket of space in my mind, shielded with a dense subconscious aura, and it is the only reason I'm able to still feel my body and visualize what's going on. ❖

Again, in this moment, I feel as though I'm brought back in time to the mind trial within the tower, and years of experience flow into my mind, remembering how I slowly processed Ether for what seemed to be an eternity.

I gasp for breath once I fall to the ground in front of the rock pile, and a ripple of understanding washes over me from the epicenter of my unaltered mind. It enhances the healing properties of my body on autopilot, but I still feel as though I've only touched the surface of what lies dormant in my consciousness.

The boiling in my body stops getting hotter, but it hasn't begun reversing its effects yet.

Through the pain and confusion, I still raise my hands to face the incoming axe striking my side.

"Not bad! That avatar of yours is still in one piece! No wonder they let a human exile this close to the citadel, you must be a special one!" is all I hear as I'm sent flying in another random direction.

The sensation of my body being filled with boiling Ether returns, and I didn't believe it would be possible, but it is even worse than the first time.

I let out a verbal yell to give myself a false sense of pain relief while slamming into another pile of black stones.

The pocket of guarded mental space pulses again, and as I fall to my face on the black rock ground, losing feeling in my body, I feel my ability to heal and summon Ether increase drastically again.

As the heavy footsteps of the Goblin King approach, I lift my head and begin pushing myself out of the ground, laughing as slight feeling in my appendages begins to return.

The strength gap between us is unfathomably larger than I thought it would be. However, no matter how hard I'm hit, this monster cannot hurt me; this is what is so funny.

Its voice echoes out as I'm hit right in the chest again by its axe with an uppercut swing before I can even fully lift myself off the ground.

I feel another wave of boiling hot Ether coat through me, and I'm sent flying up into the air.

However, before I even begin my descent, another ripple of understanding is violently rattled out of my subconscious mind, and my arms and legs regain feeling even before I hit the ground back in the center of the goblins' mining base.

I'm already on my feet by the time I see the Goblin King's outline and glowing white axe approaching through the green divine fog.

Ava has made her way back to her hammer nearby, and seeing her face again reminds me of something she said to me during our spars after I managed to land a hit on her.

She said that the punch I hit her with was infused with some kind of mental attack.

I was completely unaware of what I was doing then, and as I see the Goblin King ready to swing its axe my way again, I feel as though I still don't fully understand it.

However, there is certainly something unique happening in the depths of my mind every time I'm hit. Even though I can't fully understand it, I can attempt to tap into it.

As the glowing axe comes my way, I don't try to dodge, run, or create a barrier to limit the force of the strike.

I use all of my mental capacity to cover my right fist in Ether and punch against the sharp side of the axe coming down on me.

For a moment, we're stopped in place.

Instead of trying to make the hottest and densest sheet of protection, I focus on the small part of my mind that was unaffected by the prior attacks and channel only that unique kind of Ether to be released through my knuckles and into the axe.

Stolen content warning: this tale belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences elsewhere.

I feel it stream from my head, down my arm, and through my hand.

Yet, only a tiny amount of this strange compact Ether pushes its way through. I would have been able to push more, but the force of the Goblin King's blow catches up to me, and I'm sent flying across the floor of the mining base.

Dozens of green domes fly by on both sides as my body skids across the hard black rocky ground, and another wave of overwhelming, boiling Ether floods into my being.

As it reaches my mind this time, I feel the barriers hold it back easily, and another outburst of understanding washes over me, but it's far less intense than the last three. The shock of this attack is not as visceral on my senses, and I believe it is not pushing my mind to its limits as before, so I don't get as much understanding back from it.

My summoned Ether begins to attack the foreign energy in my body, and at the same time, I smirk, seeing the Goblin King hesitate to run forward.

My feet dig into the rocky ground, bringing me to a halt, and the 2nd Class Lord yells out in pain.

"W-What have you done to me?!"

There's a thud as it drops its axe, holding both of its hands to its head while letting out an incoherent monstrous roar.

I whisper under my breath as all the hot areas of my body sizzle away back to their natural state, and I feel the used-up Ether dissipate into the atmosphere.

"Looks like it worked..." At the same time, I flood Ether into my feet and palms with a density over ten times as potent as at the start of this battle.

I take a deep breath in and out, as finally, my mind and body are clear again, and I can use the new Ether I've been storing up for the last day with Ava around the borders of this zone.

'Let's see how far I can push it,' I think while running forward at the Goblin King, roaring in agony.

Its vision is blurred, and a searing hot pain just crushed through its mind; however, it is not entirely blind.

As I quickly close the gap between us, its instincts kick in, and it makes use of its clear natural advantage in speed and power.

"A cheap mental attack! I'll make you and this entire mining zone feel that pain a thousand times over while I kill you all! I have been a Lord of these mines in the Hollow District for over 2 thousand years! A cowardly human won't defeat me!"

It lurches forward, now with wide eyes filled with pure rage, grabbing its axe and running my way.

My heartbeat speeds up as we get closer and closer and collide again.

This time, the Goblin King sidesteps, using one of the goblin's huts to kick off of and change its trajectory to hit me in the side.

I'm sent flying back and don't land my hit, but the greed of this Lord takes over, and it follows me in the air even before I land.

A downward two-handed axe slam is what it tries to follow through with, but this is the worst mistake it could have made.

I block the downward momentum with my right hand again.

Even though I'm caught beneath its axe, pinned to the rocky floor upon impact, I manage to send another shockwave of highly condensed Ether through my fist into its soul weapon.

This time, I have nowhere to be propelled to and spend over four times as long in contact with its blade, sending a dangerous surge into its psyche.

While my body is flooded with a wave of Ether filled with hot murderous intent, it does feel like I'm being cooked alive, but no physical damage or mental effects take place.

The 2nd Class Lord, on the other hand, yells out in agony, and I see the last remaining signs of sanity leave his eyes.

It's as if madness is coursing into the monster's mind, and the only escape from it is to shut off all conscious thoughts and submit.

The massive Goblin King's grip on its axe loosens, and it falls forward, right on top of me.

I would move away, but my body is numb again, as the power from its last attack was far greater than any of its previous ones.

I can't move or feel my limbs, and another wave of strange dense energy is being unlocked within me as it seems like a barrier is being melted away to allow me to access more locked-away instinctual knowledge.

Almost half a minute passes before I hear footsteps running my way, and a familiar womanly voice calling my name.

"Jay...? J-Jay, are you here?"

I charge my fists and feet with Ether again and push upward to lift the unconscious Goblin King and his now dormant Soul Weapon off me. I reply, turning to my left to see the hobgoblin with shocked eyes gripping her hammer.

"Yeah... I'm here. But the job isn't done."

My gaze turns to the Lord that just tried to kill both of us, and I walk toward it with a fist glowing hotter and hotter with Ether, but Ava's words call out and stop me in my tracks.

"No! You can't kill him... If a Zone Lord dies, all of their planets will go unclaimed, back into the unascended market. Or, even open and ready for anyone in the Lower Realm to claim them for their own. Sending messages down is extremely pricey; it would cost more than a fully saturated 4th Class world to do so. It... would make our work as Exiles meaningless..."

I look at the Goblin King for a few seconds, remembering him holding Ava by the neck and his ruthless attacks toward me that were each meant to kill.

Then, I look back to her.

"And if I let him live, he'll try to kill you and me again the moment his eyes open... You heard him. The moment he saw the fact that you might be able to pay out your exile contract early, he tried to turn all of your workers against you... It's either I kill him now, or I kill him later when he tries to fight us again."

Ava's hands grasp her hammer tighter out of instinct, and it's clear there's no good outcome to all this, so I speak again.

"I have some strong allies in the Lower Realm... And I don't believe the cost for contacting them will be an issue. We'll save your world one way or another."

Deep down, I have a theory brewing in the back of my mind, but I want to comfort Ava before testing it.

She gulps and just nods. "Right... I can't protect my world if I'm dead... I can find another way."

Then, I grin and walk over to the massive green avatar that lies with eyes wide open and a blank mind.

Before thinking any further, I begin punching its chest with everything I've got.

My divine energy, demon core, and soul energy core's power is locked away behind my purple barrier that is saving me from the pressure.

All I can do is strike this monster with pure Ether. Search the novelFire.net website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Ava looks away as I pummel the Goblin King over and over, sending mental attacks deep into his already fractured psyche, breaking it more and more with every punch.

My physical attacks begin causing some damage as well, tearing through the thick, realistic flesh of this monster's avatar and digging deep into its chest to find its Green Divine True Core cycling energy.

As I punch against it, loud twangs and vibrations of rock moving below us echo out, and I can feel my fist creating microfractures and disruptions in the fully unguarded divine core in front of me.

Minutes pass as I massacre this creature, making soup out of its mind and shattering its divine core.

The moment I land the final hit, I watch the green threads that have been cycling in its chest move toward me, clump up around my fist, then cover my arm, and eventually surround my entire body.

Even the Ether within this being starts to flow out of its broken mind and toward me. This isn't stopped by the purple barrier, however; it flows in with ease, making my Ether stores fill with far more than I had before.

At this feeling, I can tell this being is really dead, and the energy that is surrounding me, exerting extreme pressure on my barrier, is all of the excess divine energy that my True Core's absorption ability is trying to consume.

In the past, the energy from beings I've killed floods into my core without the need to be processed. It automatically integrates... The only problem will be opening up my barrier.

Even if I gain more divine threads, I'm still going to be exposed to this immense pressure.

I turn back to Ava, whose eyes are even wider at the sight before her, and I follow her gaze down to the corpse's world token, which now states zero.

In the same moment, I mentally trigger my divine barrier to open, and for all of the dense energy around me to force itself in.

I feel an overwhelming burst of both satisfying new power entering my core and also the weight of the green clouds seeping into me again, tearing through my flesh and body instantly, forcing me to fall to my knees.

However, I catch a glimpse of my own palm and see **[167]** in bright green text as a stream of notifications ring in my ears, two of which float to the forefront of my mind.

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

[167/5 Worlds Claimed]

[New Perk Unlocked: World Collector]

Info:

All Generals may now borrow an additional 1% of stats.

Additional one time daily use Permanent Buffs for all links of loyalty have been granted [i].

The Rising Emperor may now borrow an additional 5% 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 [World Domination] perk, [Imperial Reach] perk, [Expansion] perk, [Dominance] perk, [Authority] perk, [Power Holder] perk, and [Ruler's Gaze] perk if used simultaneously.

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

[167/100 Worlds Claimed]

[New Perk Unlocked: Ruler of Worlds]

Info:

[World Wide Connectivity System Interface][i] Update! All Worlds under the Rising Emperor's rule may now access additional perks.

All Lords that pledge loyalty to the Rising Emperor will become Co-Owners of all worlds under their control. The Rising Emperor has superiority over the base stats of their citizens.

The Rising Emperor may now borrow an additional 5% 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 [World Collector] perk, [World Domination] perk, [Imperial Reach] perk, [Expansion] perk, [Dominance] perk, [Authority] perk, [Power Holder] perk, and [Ruler's Gaze] perk if used simultaneously.

Chapter 709

More notifications stream into my mind, ranging from a massive MCP absorption option, an upgrade option for my [Extreme Strength] skill to [Divine Grade], and 166 notifications for the transfer of worlds into my possession. However, there are no level ups.

In the deep sea of darkness within my mind, where the 3rd Class human world lies, tons of new planets begin flowing into my consciousness. Billions of links of loyalty, along with a full expansive view of their worlds down to the last mana particle, become visible to me—crystal clear in my mind.

While this overstimulation of information is immense, so many more things are happening at the same time.

The Goblin King's memories start to flow in, just like Drako Vermillion's, and my mind temporarily blanks out while thousands of years of information play out as if I'm witnessing them in real time.

—

Vivid images of a small green goblin being born into a village in the mountains rush into my mind.

Their leader is an old hobgoblin that holds power over many villages in this isolated mountain range. Many dungeons form all around this wilderness, regulated and maintained by small societies of a few hundred goblins at a time.

Their technology is not advanced at all, relying on hunting the local wildlife for sustenance and using weapons found in dungeon drops to level up.

It is fascinating to see the early memories of this goblin flash by, as it trains in lower-grade dungeons against human mobs with nothing more than swordsmanship and body hardening as their skills.

About a decade passes, and the goblin grows used to this simple life. It becomes stronger, leveling past the mid-200s to 300s, and begins its journey in learning to gather mana and refine its energy control. Not only does it become stronger in being, but in society too, becoming a local leader of a village run by the hobgoblin elder that controls them all.

That is, until one fateful day, their peaceful mountain grouping of villages are attacked by a rogue clan for resources.

Their army of goblins outnumbers this peaceful village clan ten to one, and their front lines are filled with dozens of hobgoblins of varying strengths.

Some goblins awaken their hobgoblin forms at level 500, while others achieve this feat at level 1000. Just as with humans and their energy forms and special buffs, it is a culmination of fighting style, life experiences, and some luck of the draw.

The goblin's mountainous home is decimated by the overwhelming forces. It manages to fend off some of the lower-leveled goblin hordes, but watching the hobgoblins kill its leader with a single energy slash from kilometers away—and decimate over 90% of the goblins on this mountain in minutes—makes it realize it is weak.

The goblin runs away and never looks back.

What it thought was a stable life was swept away from under its feet. Its reality is forever changed.

That day, it realized the only way to survive was to become stronger than others.

Images of this goblin's long and arduous life flash by as more decades pass. The goblin travels to many mountainous villages like its home, working as a mercenary and seeking out the strongest dungeons while honing its mana control, slow and steady.

Without a single skill other than extreme strength, its mana control increases far slower than humans with elemental skills.

This is clear as, at age 47, the goblin finally hits level 500 and receives a buff called [Heavy Strike]. It allows it to pool all of its mana stores into any weapon in its grasp. This increases its growth speed significantly, giving it new hope.

Merciless training in the shadows continues, never showing its power to others, replaying the destruction of everything it ever knew and loved from its childhood in the back of its mind.

This speeds its travels and ambitions up, never spending more than a few months in any small village, searching for what other goblins and old hobgoblin elders call the Golden City.

After five years, this goblin finds what it is looking for.

A massive civilization surrounds a great lake, with millions of goblins living together and countless dungeons to farm.

Their two suns—bright yellow orbs in the sky—rise to reflect off the massive source of water, shining a golden light upon their civilization every morning.

Just 13 years later, at the age of 65, the goblin hits level 1000 in a central clan's labyrinth, highly regulated by a council of Goblin Kings at the heart of the city.

The many years that pass go by in a blur as this goblin joins the central army and leads many battles in the world's vast wilderness to subjugate smaller clans that are growing too fast, bringing the dungeon resources and goblin women back to the Golden City for the Kings. ❖

Countless battles, ruthless killings, and endless training flash by as the hobgoblin carries out the bidding of his kings to gain rewards of access to the labyrinths, slowly leveling up higher and higher—reaching level 10,000 at the age of 173.

This Goblin King gains access to the council of kings, being granted his Goblin King form from his 3rd rank-up, now giving orders to new promising hobgoblins that visit the Golden City.

The council of kings are the only beings on their known world that cultivate divine energy. They have made agreements not to fight for power, as they already rule their world in harmony.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

At the age of 411, this Goblin King becomes the first to achieve a True Core in the history of their world, now being the oldest king left, welcoming new loyal kings to their council when they are granted access to the ranked-up labyrinths capable of producing level 10,000 monsters to train with.

Their greatest labyrinth, only accessible by the kings, has been stalled at 199 floors.

It has consumed a large amount of their 2nd Class world's resources to reach this point. The Noble Bloodline Demon and Dragon within it are on less-than-good terms with the Goblin Kings that have been keeping it for centuries, just one level away from completing its final vetting test.

The kings are able to train and bring their levels just below 24,900 max.

Another 200 years pass, as the new age council of kings takes over the daily tasks. This Goblin King goes into closed cultivation to attempt reaching a realm above what they believed was the limit.

Using all of the farmed Divine Energy from their entire world, as it continues to fly through space and collect more threads from the stars and clusters of divine threads in the unknown, enough consolidated energy has been trapped for their One True King to use in a final push to ascend past the known limits.

Many of the new kings appointed to the Golden City's council have never seen this King in person; they have only heard rumors of his existence.

In silence, one day, with only a handful of kings understanding the significance of the rumbling beneath their city, the Goblin King manages to fully saturate its True Core and compress it into the next stage: creating green divine energy.

Its body is eaten away and destroyed by the pressure, and the shockwave breaks the shielding in the old bunker, creating a sinkhole that destroys a portion of the Golden City.

However, system notifications fill this Goblin King's ears, and a green rift opens before him, notifying this Lord that he now owns a world and has the option to accept a free basic avatar.

More of these memories flash by even faster now, showing the Goblin King arriving in the Ellipsia Citadel, learning of what dungeon contracts really are, and optimizing his world's dungeons for maximum profit.

Looking down at the world below him in his world token, images of the battle that destroyed everything he ever knew still plague his mind.

The Goblin King trades contracts and invests wisely in other worlds, using the machine learning fighting pods to have his avatar sent out to many other worlds as Boss Room monsters.

However, his efforts do not make him rich. They actually bring far lower than average results despite following the local guides and tactics meticulously.

He must face the reality that goblins are a weak race in the Upper Realm.

Even as a 2nd Class Lord, three times ranked up, with a green True Core, he still stands no chance against some ogres, high orcs, wyverns, and berserker kings that come from 3rd Class worlds.

Most of all, he fears the demons.

There are so few races that this Goblin King can feel superior to: humans, some wolf races, slimes, and the occasional horned boar or other unintelligent awakened beings from 4th and 5th Class worlds.

Even humans sometimes make this goblin feel insignificant, as their battle IQ and general intelligence range higher than goblins'.

After 500 years of work on the Citadel, the Goblin King has managed to get nowhere, barely making it by in the Upper Realm, feeling as though he is merely ordinary.

I see vivid imagery of the Goblin King looking up into the endless green sky, with two massive towers on either side of him in the Divine City run by demons, feeling as though he is nothing but an ant.

Feelings of insignificance wash through this King as he realizes this climb for endless power to feel safe will never end.

This is when the Goblin King decides to put away its desires for glory and becoming the strongest. He makes a deal with a criminal group of other 2nd Class Goblin Kings and lower-class orcs far in the outer ring of the Citadel.

They work in businesses like acquiring illegal avatars and forced exile subjugation for worlds on the unascended market.

The most profitable long term scheme is in renting Exile Zones beneath the Citadel and buying slaves to do labor with predatory contracts once worlds are forcefully subjugated. Their appointed Lords are brought up from the Lower Realm with minimal knowledge, and thrown into the mines.

For the pure resources alone, the cost of acquiring an artifact to open a green rift on low class worlds is not worth it at all, but hundreds of years in the Ether mines can make a hefty profit if done right.

This Goblin King goes all in, renting a few zone plots far from the Citadel's center, with mostly human and unintelligent beast slaves from 5th Class worlds as his first investment.

Many of the workers die after a few hundred years, and none ever make it to the end of their exile terms, as designed.

The Goblin King profits a few dozen ether and, in turn, gets to live out his twisted fantasy of killing whoever he wishes and forcing labor in the mines.

Things begin to dull after some time, as worlds die out, and the King starts renting larger zones closer to the Citadel, acquiring the occasional 4th and 3rd Class worlds to speed up the Ether profits.

This Goblin King's memories of its home world gradually fade away as 2000 years pass.

The reason it ascended to this realm becomes a mystery, and it lives out the rest of its days bullying and killing lower lifeforms of its own race, surveying its zones, and swinging around its Soul Weapon that it proudly purchased with its first thousand years of profit.

That is, until one day, the mindless tasks of surveying its slaves take an unfathomable turn for the worst.

A human breaks into its zone.

All humans are good for is labor and solving fancy puzzles. None of them can ever defeat a Goblin King in a fight...

However, on this day, in mere minutes, thousands of years of domination are brought to an end by a pair of hot fists and a human whose skin can't be pierced.

After millennia of mindless agony, inflicting pain on others because it knows it will never reach its ultimate goal, the Goblin King's mental torment is finally burned away.

Everything goes white.

—

My head sears with the blow-by-blow memories of the mental attack I sent forth on this Goblin King. I let out yells as my physical senses are battered by green divine threads with so much weight and pressure I feel like I too will be crushed into nothingness if I don't act fast in the next few milliseconds.

In the vastness of my mind, the 167 planets float before me with all their glory.

The Goblin King's home world floats right beside my human world. These two planets have the most prominent and abundant life on them.

Both have a similar number of awakened, roughly half a billion. However, the strength of the average awakened on this goblin world is over five times, making the average overall level about 250.

My inner gaze shifts to the other seven 3rd Class worlds now floating behind these two.

Four of them have prominent life on them as well, all of them goblin civilizations. They range from 50 to 300 million links of loyalty each. Their average awakened strength is close to the human world I come from, with the average of all awakened being about level 50.

Three of the other 3rd Class worlds are in utter decline, with less than 10 million links each remaining.

There are 22 4th Class worlds, with only half of them having significant life on them, averaging 100 million links each on their thriving worlds, with level 15 average awakened. There are single-digit awakened beings on these planets that ever surpass level 500.

Finally, the 5th Class worlds—136 of them—float behind all of the others. Only one-third still have abundant life on them, but their links of loyalty range from 100 to 300 million per planet. The average level on these worlds is about level 5. It is extremely rare to see any beings on these planets surpass level 100.

—

With all this information surging into my mind, and my body rapidly deteriorating, I make the split decision to forcefully use my Rising Emperor's Domain and steal 60% of all the stats available to me on these worlds.

Chapter 710

As green threads assimilate with my core and body, with these newfound stats increasing all of my being, the gravity pressing down around me lessens just slightly; and the process of healing speeds up faster than my deterioration.

—

Simultaneously, high up above in the Citadel, Ember reaps the benefits of my rewards as well.

We share levels, stats, and worlds.

The green glowing [1] on his palm, blocking the Demon's Ether-infused blade, ticks up to a [167], and his whole body erupts with an aura of mana control and strength far surpassing what it was moments prior.

All of the vibrating silver threads holding the body of this dragon together retract even further back closer to his core, and far less Ether is needed to conceal them from outsiders.

Ember laughs out loud, doing nothing more than pushing his palm forward, and a hand-shaped blast of white light pushes the Demon's curved blade back.

While the red-haired human slips out of the way, Myron's eyes widen as he's pushed back several dozen meters, only skidding to a halt when he uses his second curved Soul Sword to press back against the strange palm-shaped Ether attack.

It yells out and slices forward, cutting through the white hand with an X formation, making it explode and disperse; but in doing so, its attention elsewhere opens up its side for Ember to land a punch.

The automatic defensive features activate to block this blow, but the force is too great to absorb entirely.

Ripples of Ether flow through the Demon's Premium Grade Avatar with the Full Guard Upgrade package. [search the website](#) to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Over 90% of the Ether used in this attack is handled properly, spreading out the impact all over the Demon's body and dispersing the dangerous energy through its feet.

However, the attack was followed through with such precision, and so quickly, that some Ether slipped through the barriers, surpassing the limits a 1st Grade Demon's Premium Avatar commands.

Its side grows hot, with a pain that stings like fire, unlike any Ether attack its ever felt before.

Next, Tingling pain bursts through its left side deep into its avatar, and a demonic roar escapes the monster's toothy mouth while it's sent flying across the Dueling Room hopelessly, slamming against the back wall.

Backup protocols in its Full Guard Avatar activate, and a second shield of mental defenses is placed up once the first barrier is breached.

None of Ember's concentrated mental attacks reach the Demon's psyche, but that's not to say when it stands back on its feet and stares the puny human down across the room, it doesn't feel embarrassed; it knows the world and its Noble Citadel Lord are watching.

A furious roar and waves of demonic energy course out from the massive 100-meter-tall unsealed avatar as it activates its supreme-grade demonic energy manipulation and shadow step skills to disappear into thin air.

Ember grins, turning to his right as he senses the two demonic blades appear out of nowhere, sending Ether-infused demonic crescents his way.

—

The crowds that fill the tower erupt in roars of surprise, fear, and excitement all bundled together.

"That human... he just landed a hit on that Demon..."

"No way. Are there humans that are actually strong? I've never met one."

"Ha! I told you this would be good!"

"Quick, send out more transmissions. The fight isn't going to be over in less than a second like I thought!"

"See! I told you it was going to be good. I was here a few days ago when they first fought. This human is an odd one..."

"Just a lucky shot! He's dead in the next move, I'm calling it here."

"Wanna bet? I think this human's going to last at least a full round!"

Chatter fills the air, and tens of thousands of transmissions are sent out from the Volterra District, even reaching small human and goblin factions on the far edges of the Citadel. ◆

Almost every Lord is aware of the news, and more and more fast-travel orbs fill the streets.

Other local shopping centers tap into the public transmission feed, and Red Ogre sales workers begin licensing out the fight visuals to play in their shops too; as a critical mass for the number of Lords in one place is nearing its limit outside the trading palace.

—

In the center of the Citadel, Andras, the only Noble Bloodline Demon around for hundreds of thousands of kilometers, curses at the holograms playing in front of his eyes.

From the moment it happened, he's been playing a small section of video on repeat, zoomed in.

It shows Ember's world token shift from 1 to 167 instantly.

"He has outside help... Who could have transferred him worlds of high enough caliber to make up the difference in strength? They must all be 1st Class to give the avatar that much of a boost all at once... Not even the Ogre Conglomeration has that many left..."

The Noble Demon looks away from his screens and begins pacing about with three sleeping dragons behind him in the penthouse suite.

—

As excitement grows for Ember's match, equally interested eyes watch a black-horned Demon's unsealed form clash with the greater energy form of a three-time ranked-up Blue Ogre.

The massive longsword and club of both monsters clash together, sending waves of hot Ether to collide against the walls of the room, making Leonard speak up.

"Impossible. We ran simulations of your max strength during your duel with the Citadel Lord... Where is this power coming from?"

Stolen content alert: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

Torvak smirks, channeling large amounts of the newly refined Ether from his dormant stores that he hasn't tapped into since he was a Citadel Lord back in the day.

The Vermillion Family Head personally subjugated many of the citadels around the Grand Citadel and appointed strong leaders to each of them.

While losing hundreds of 1st Class worlds over the millennia has weakened the stat gains granted by his Avatar, his real power—his Ether—faded with time as it wasn't simulated or refined with high-grade elixirs.

The strength being shown today is a peek into the past, and even Andras Vermillion sees the readings in the holographic replays now, showing secretive techniques he has only ever seen the Family Head use.

Leonard is oblivious to this fact: that he is fighting an ancient Blue Ogre with fighting knowledge far surpassing anything he's ever seen before. To him, he is just a gang leader that their Citadel Lord stole worlds from every once in a while.

He activates his Divine Grade Body Double skill in response, making five copies of his Avatar with equal strength surround the Blue Ogre, yelling through all of them.

"No matter! You've pulled a few tricks of your own when you see your life is on the line. I will bring you to your knees and make you understand that the Vermillions are not to be messed with."

The main body of the demon releases its sword from the standstill they've been locked in and uses the body-swapping perk to rotate between all of the doubles now closing in on Torvak from all sides.

While this Blue Ogre can launch very powerful attacks and imbue his Soul Weapon with enough Ether to block this Demon's blade, it is still true that his Avatar is far weaker than a 1st Class unsealed Demon with over 20x more worlds in its possession.

However, Torvak's grin doesn't leave his face.

He whispers as all six blades get within a meter of piercing his vitals on all sides.

"That is a very nice technique. It might have worked on me 50,000 years ago..."

Then, static forms all over the Ogre's Avatar, and Torvak releases the full power of his Supreme Grade Lightning Summoning, infused with dense green threads of Divine energy. At the core of each arc of electricity are dense, compact mental attacks, each capable of melting this Demon's mind.

The whole Dueling Room erupts with electricity, and it keeps flowing out with no stop in sight.

The bright green arcs of light bounce off the walls, disintegrating the five doubles in milliseconds and causing the remaining real Avatar of the 1st Class Demon to yell out in agony.

Hundreds of miniature Ether barriers are formed all over its Full Guard Avatar, sending pulses of Ether into the ground to disperse.

The first few happen easily, and backup mental walls are formed all over the Demon's psyche, managing to keep out the electrically charged compact Ether attacks.

However, it doesn't stop.

A few turn into a few dozen, and that turns into hundreds.

In a matter of seconds, over a thousand highly concentrated lightning strikes collide with this Demon; and a single zap finally seeps through the backup mental barrier.

This turns its screams into mindless roaring agony, as one attack slipping through opens the floodgates for more.

—

The crowds of Lords outside don't stop growing, and words of this exciting second match fill the public discourse.

"That's the Leader of the Ogre Conglomeration, isn't it?"

"I didn't know he ever showed his face in this District..."

"I heard he used to be the Citadel Lord."

"Yeah, no wonder! Did these Demons really think they would've stood a chance...?"

"He's like a lightning god... That's a really rare affinity, isn't it?"

"So cool!!!"

"That's our boss! I knew he wouldn't lose to a mere 1st Class Demon!"

"Yeah! Their Noble Lord got way too cocky, to think the Ogre Conglomeration head would roll over and take it! Ha!"

Everyone begins rooting for the electrified Blue Ogre, and the fear of the Demons in this Citadel begins to waver as they feel maybe they've been manipulated into believing these creatures are stronger than they are.

—

These thoughts are even more heavily reinforced when the purple-horned Demon facing Ember changes its tone from arrogance to fear.

"W-What? What is happening? What did you just do?"

These words come out just after Ember easily dodges the two incoming demonic slashes cloaked in its shadow step, and the Demon feels a horrible burning sensation in its side, right where it was hit moments ago by Ember's fist.

Ember doesn't bother to answer, kicking off the wall and spinning to land a kick against the Demon's opposite side.

This kick sends the Demon flying backward again, with eyes full of fear and worry as it catches a glimpse of the nearly translucent flames flickering on Ember's hands and feet.

Then, as a resounding thud vibrates through the Demon's body when it hits the wall, it looks down at the two wounds on either side of its torso and sees these same barely visible clear flames burning into its body.

Plumes of Demonic Energy and Ether healing commands surge into the affected areas, but the Demon's heartbeat speeds up and its stomach twists, making it unable to speak.

The translucent flames aren't going out, and they're only spreading faster the more it tries to heal them.

Ember grins and yells while running toward the terrified Demon.

"What? You thought I didn't have a skill or two of my own? Demons sure are simple-minded creatures. How'd a group of amateurs like you ever take charge of a Citadel?"

The Demon attempts to dodge and block as Ember jumps upward, covered in translucent flames.

A loud twang echoes through the room as the red-haired human collides with the intersection of Myron's crossed blades.

Ember lets his supreme-grade fire summoning, melded with his soul energy and pure Ether, loose, spreading the corroding waves of fire over both of the soul weapons tight in the Demon's grasp.

They melt away, creating an open pathway for Ember to strike the Demon directly in the chest where its Divine Core and Demon Lord's Core lie.

Another shockwave of Ether-infused soul energy flames collides with the Full Guard defenses.

The Demon attempts to slash at Ember, but its blades are gone, down to their handles, and the Demon is frightened even more.

Its throat is shut with fear, and it tries to run away with its shadow step technique, but Ember follows, sending fists and kicks at the Demon to corrode more and more of its upgraded Avatar's special defenses.

—

Sometimes being the strongest isn't always a good thing for one's life progression.

Being given worlds, nurtured by unbeaten Demonic Lords, and trained to believe that there are no stronger races than the Demons does, in fact, breed self-confidence to the highest degree.

However, the result of this reality being shattered makes it seem as though a veil of lies is being lifted away from this Demon's eyes.

—

Its words finally muster out a weak, "A... human? Impossible. How are you this strong? You are our slaves—all of you—you're a means to the end goal... where we can make the Family Head proud... and one day... meet the Overseer... It was a lie..."

Ember's calm expression, with a slight grin, doesn't change at all as he beats this Demon senseless.

Its broken soul weapons fall to the ground of the dueling room, and patches of its Avatar melt away to become defenseless. This is more than enough open space for Ember to send pulses of his compact mental attacks inward.

With far more refined Ether than their first duel, sending multiple of these attacks per second does not take the same toll of mental and physical fatigue that it did before.

The Demon disgraces the Vermillion Family name by running from a battle, and its final wall of mental defenses is mercilessly attacked by Ember's onslaught.

The Full Guard Avatars are quite strong, gifted to Andras Vermillion by the Family Head over 10,000 years ago in case of emergencies. However, they are no match for the abuse being put on them now.

After over 300 highly targeted mental attacks, finally, one breaks through; and just like Torvak's lightning, this allows a clear path for Ember's next strike.

Myron's mind goes white, and Ember does not stop or slow his brutal onslaught for a second.

—

Both of the Dueling Rooms are lit up by two Demons' Avatars slowly being torn apart by fire and lightning.

The minds of the Demons within both, long gone, stare into a white abyss, unable to feel their bodies or know what they even are anymore.

Their limbs dissolve, and their soul weapons are melted away by flames and shattered to pieces by thousands of lightning strikes.

Nothing remains of the two Demons other than a faint green glow of their World Tokens, their cores in their chests that are being battered and on the verge of collapse, and the scrambled minds within their skulls.

—

However, at the peak of excitement rolling through all of the nearby districts, and the ear-piercing roars and cheers around the trading palace, an odd action takes place...

Both the Human and Ogre cease their attacks just seconds before killing their opponents.

The shattered and fried avatars fall to the dueling room floors, and the obliterated minds of both Demons see nothing but white.

The crowds watching all go silent, unable to understand why this duel was cut off right before the grand finale.

However, the Noble Demon Lord watching from the center of the Citadel grits its teeth in anger as it knows exactly why...